

# **Voices of Transformation: Unveiling Whiteness, Cultivating Equity, and Fostering Dialogue in Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper delves into the concept of collegial conversation within the context of education, emphasizing the need for a transformative dialogue among educators. This paper highlights the value of engaging in substantive conversations that are voluntary, rooted in shared understanding, and knowledge of how they evolve over time. Following the narrative shifts to a collegial conversation between two graduate studies professionals, Gurkirat and Prilly, this paper is focused on the experiences of racialized educators and students in the Ontario K-12 education system. The dialogue unveils the stark underrepresentation of racialized teachers, particularly in the context of the Peel District School Board (PDSB). The authors explore the impact of whiteness on both racialized students and educators, examining systemic issues within education that perpetuate racial oppression. Gurkirat reflects on his journey as a French teacher, exposing the challenges of conforming to Eurocentric standards, while Prilly underscores the detrimental effects of a curriculum centered around white ideologies. The conversation advocates for a shift in responsibility from blaming families to addressing institutional inequities, ultimately emphasizing the crucial role of collegial conversations in fostering genuine understanding and dismantling systemic racism in education.

**Keywords:** *collegial conversations, culturally responsive pedagogy, racialized teacher, and student experience, and white supremacy*

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## **Introduction**

In the landscape of education, the concept of collegial conversation emerges as a transformative force, shaping the discourse among educators. This non-traditional paper moves away from Eurocentric paradigms in education. The focus shifts to a poignant collegial conversation between two graduate students- Gurkirat (Gurki) and Prilly- exploring the experiences of racialized educators and students in the current Ontario K-12 education system. The notable lack of racially diverse educators, particularly within major boards in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) like the Peel District School Board (PDSB), exposes entrenched systemic barriers that perpetuate racial injustice. Gurki shares insights into the struggles faced as a French teacher navigating Eurocentric norms, while Prilly underscores the negative impacts of a curriculum centered on white ideals. This dialogue advocates for confronting institutional injustices and emphasizes the pivotal role of collegial conversation in dismantling systemic racism.

### ***Key Terms***

Throughout this conversation, we employ the terms 'spaces' and 'environments' interchangeably to refer to settings where the cultivation of student and teacher interactions occur within an educational context. These encompass, but are not confined to, the classroom, professional development sessions, curriculum design, exchanges with fellow educators, discussions with administration regarding programming, teacher training initiatives, and courses offered by teachers' colleges.

### ***Culturally Responsive Teaching***

In 1994, Ladson-Billings introduced the ground-breaking concept of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), which champions instructional approaches that seamlessly integrate students'

prior experiences, cultural backgrounds, and community context into the curriculum. At its core, CRP revolves around three pivotal principles: establishing elevated expectations for all students, cultivating cultural competence, and fostering a critical cultural consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Gay (2000) and Villegas and Lucas (2002) similarly advocate for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, emphasizing a teaching framework attuned to diverse learning styles intricately connected to students' individual backgrounds, language, family dynamics, and cultural identity. Unlike superficial cultural acknowledgments or traditional multiculturalism, CRP strives for a nuanced understanding of diversity. While the *Multiculturalism Act (1988)* in Canada recognized multiculturalism, scholars such as Thobani (2007) contend that it inadvertently reinforced Eurocentric dominance. CRP transcends surface-level celebrations of diversity, compelling educators to forge meaningful connections between learning experiences and students' lives, thereby validating their cultural knowledge. The pursuit of cultural congruence endeavors to align classroom learning with the rich tapestry of students' home and community experiences. This transformative shift challenges Eurocentric perspectives in education, acknowledging and addressing the societal privileges associated with the white<sup>1</sup> middle-class group.

In the realm of culturally responsive teaching, educators assume a pivotal role in decentering Eurocentric norms. They recognize the profound impact of these norms on students and their families, undertaking a reflective examination of their own beliefs to confront and dismantle prejudices within today's educational landscape.

### ***What is a Collegial Conversation?***

Educators are not only expected to strive for ongoing improvement in their teaching practice and overall teaching quality but are also presumed to actively participate in the valuable

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper we deliberately decided to write "white" in lowercase letters as a means of decentering whiteness and centering Blackness and Brownness throughout our conversation

process of self-reflection. This same sentiment could be applied to graduate studies professionals. To underscore the limited efficacy of conventional professional development methods, such as one-time workshops or guest speaker sessions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Grimshaw, 1989), it is imperative to acknowledge that emerging approaches must be attuned to the dynamic, dialogic, situated, and complex nature of educators' learning, aligning with broader educational principles (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). A spectrum of tools designed to foster critical reflection is available, ranging from personal tools like journals and portfolios to shared platforms such as school portfolios and collaborative presentations (Selkrig et al., 2015). While engaging in a dialogue with colleagues may initially appear straightforward, it is crucial to recognize the presence of various barriers that can impede effective communication. Moreover, the complexity and success of these interactions are often shaped by the nature of the topics, as individuals bring varying levels of comfort, knowledge, and experience to conversations.

While conversation is often regarded as a fundamental mode of communication, Clark (2001) highlights key attributes that elevate it to the realm of quality dialogue. According to Clark (2001), meaningful conversations are voluntary, encompass handling substantial content, eschew rigid confines, and thrive on common ground within an environment of safety, trust, and care. Furthermore, Clark (2001) emphasizes their evolutionary nature over time, rooted in a shared history and ability to look toward a shared future. Conversations typically employ tactics to sidestep fault lines, conflicts, and uphold the prevailing normalcy or status quo (Selkrig et al., 2015; Grimshaw, 1989). They often revolve around broad discussions about instructional practices and assertions (Selkrig et al., 2015). In contrast, collegial conversations embrace forthright communication, carry substantial consequences, and necessitate a willingness to take risks and foster trust. Rogers (2002) mentions, engaging in dialogue involves the challenge of expressing

oneself to others in a manner that ensures a genuine understanding of one's ideas, thereby laying bare both the strengths and vulnerabilities in one's thinking. According to Brookfield (1995), meaningful and self-reflective dialogues emerge only when participants bring specific attitudes and predispositions to the table. One crucial predisposition is the active pursuit of assumptions, where individuals intentionally seek diverse perspectives to re-evaluate their own practices. This process hinges on cultivating an inquiry-driven mindset and fostering an environment grounded in mutual respect (Selkrig et al., 2015; Grimshaw, 1989). Interactions of this nature with our peers open the door to profound, collegial discussions, as opposed to mere congenial exchanges (Selkrig et al., 2015). Further, this method of writing decenters traditional notions of what research should look and sound like, as it moves away from conventional styles and structures of academic writing. Hence, through this work, we give importance to collegial conversations as a ground to have meaningful conversations in academia, and share opinions with colleagues, to reflect and better understand various perspectives in education.

### ***Collegial Conversation: The Discussion***

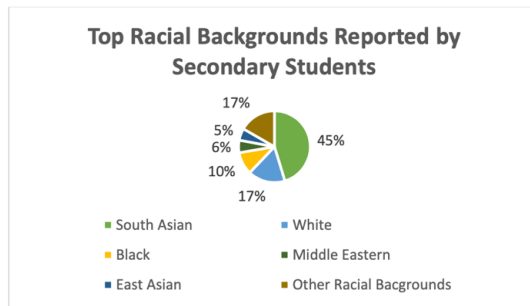
**Gurki:** Hi Prilly, thank you for agreeing to share our reflections in the form of a conversation. Throughout our graduate studies, we both took interest in the experiences of racialized educators and students and how they experience and navigate through spaces in the education system. Together, we decided to explore two aspects for this conversation, the first, understanding how whiteness operates throughout the experiences of racialized teachers in various forms of domination throughout their careers. The second, the importance of orality and narrativization for Black students as a pedagogical approach to learning in the classroom. Thus, this conversation allows us to go through the social process of telling our stories as racialized

people in education, re-imagining our experiences and exploring uncertainties, doubts, and possibilities.

While today's students have been considered the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse generation, that data is not reflected in teachers today (Dilworth, 2018). As a result, many students go through schooling without ever having a racialized educator. With the closing of many non-white schools during de-segregation in North America, many non-white teachers were forced out of the professions (Kohli, 2014, p.372). Thus, schools became products of white supremacy that were not built to consider racialized students. The effects of these inequitable legacies, like *Brown versus the Board of Education*, linger in school boards today. In the 2020 Ministry of Education review of the Peel District School Board, the following two graphs were openly shared.

**Figure 1:**

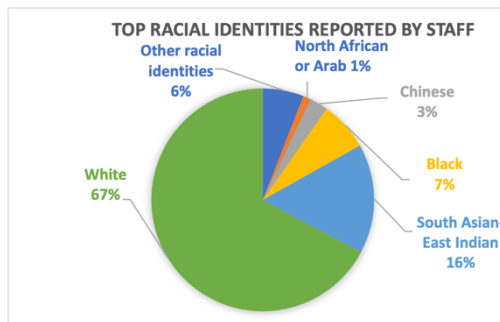
*Top Racial Background Reported by Secondary Students*



<sup>2</sup> Peel District School Board. (2019). *Student census 2018: Secondary school report (grades 9 to 12)*. Mississauga, Ontario: Peel District School Board.

The first graph demonstrates that approximately 83% percent of PDSB secondary school students identified as racialized, and more than 6.5% of secondary school students self-identified with multiple racial backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2020).

**Figure 2:** *Top Racial Identities Reported by Staff*



Data source: Peel District School Board (2017). *Count Me in Peel! 2016 workforce census*. Mississauga, Ontario: Peel District School Board.

The second figure highlights the absence of demographic diversity amongst school staff and the overrepresentation of white teachers at the PDSB, a significant problem that manifests across various school boards in the province (Ministry of Education, 2020).

By examining these graphs, it is evident that very little has been done to recruit and retain teachers of diverse backgrounds. The lack of representation within schools negatively affects racialized students, as they do not see school community members who share their identity in successful positions of power and responsibility (Kohli, 2018). Research shows the potential for racialized teachers to counter racial disparities in schools (Kohli, 2008, 2014, 2018). Racialized teachers can culturally match with students, serve as cultural brokers in the community, and are more likely to have faced similar racial experiences in their upbringing (Kohli, 2018). Black, Indigenous, and other racialized students are often subjected to oppressive practices, such as being deliberately streamed into locally developed or special education classes, labeled as aggressive and removed from classrooms, deemed unfit for school, and having their cultural differences ignored or reduced to negative stereotypes (Raza, 2022; James & Turner, 2017). These experiences create a sense of exclusion from public education, where culturally relevant and responsive

educators are not made available to provide them with a holistic and authentic learning experiences.

Research conducted at Johns Hopkins University revealed that economically disadvantaged Black students experience a marked increase in high school graduation rates when exposed to at least one Black teacher during their elementary school years (Rosen, 2017). The findings indicated a 39% decrease in the likelihood of dropping out of high school and a 29% rise in enthusiasm for pursuing post-secondary education among students who had a Black teacher (Gershenson et al., 2017, as cited in, James & Turner, 2017). Thus, schools are spaces that serve white economic interests rather than preparing all students for success (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As a result, racialized students face different learning outcomes than their white peers. Both schools and society are quick to blame racialized bodies for their unsuccessful results in school. This blame lands on their families, cultures, and connection to materials, rather than systemic racism and the dominance of white supremacy, language, and values in education today (Kohli, 2008; Love, 2019). Through the lens of critical race theory, school systems can be described as systems that perpetuate racial oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The use of a Eurocentric curriculum, authors who lack lived experience in the stories they write about, who often stereotype and misrepresent the racialized cultures they write about, and the absence of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, continually disadvantage racialized students by failing to authentically represent their complete identities within the learning environment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). Racialized students begin to lose a sense of agency and interest in the education system, as their identities are often left out of textbook narratives or misrepresented through a western narrative, which results in a minority achievement gap in the education system (Nieto, 2005; James & Turner, 2017; Law-Marin, 2021).



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As a South Asian Punjabi male, I recognize the importance of my presence in schools today as an educator. My goal is to foster brave spaces<sup>2</sup> where my students can recognize differences and hold one another accountable; to do the work of sharing experiences and unlearning past discriminatory practices and ideologies. I came into the profession to provide my students with a more positive experience than what I was exposed to in my schooling. I move beyond focusing just on academic outcomes in my courses, but also the long-term social experiences of being in a space that is culturally relevant to my students. It is through cultural synchronicity that my students can better connect with me, seek advice from me, and confide in me when needed. In this way, I can build a sense of community in my classroom that allows learners to reflect, heal and successfully dismantle legacies of racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and other forms of oppression that make their way into classrooms.

In our previous conversations, Prilly, we extensively discussed the opportunity gap as a form of educational debt owed to racialized students. This should be a vital goal of public schooling as it must try to repay racialized students by addressing the inequities that exist in and out of schooling. Instead of placing the blame on school communities, administrative policies, and boards, the focus is shifted onto racialized people and families for the assumed lack of effort they are putting into school. Throughout our work, graduate school experience and inquiry, we have explored countless ways systems like schools have disadvantaged racialized students. We have advocated for the responsibility to be placed on institutions for their lack of equity work. Through the disproportionate streaming of Black students, colour blindness as a means of arguing for

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<sup>2</sup> A brave space in education is a learning environment intentionally cultivated to encourage open dialogue, vulnerability, and the exploration of diverse perspectives, where students feel supported in sharing their thoughts and challenging ideas without fear of judgment. It fosters a culture of respect, empathy, and constructive engagement, promoting a deeper understanding of complex issues (Graham, 2021).

fairness, the discounting of racial barriers, lack of support for ESL and ELL learners and many more examples, schools are cesspools of inequity that must recognize their abuse on racialized students and their experiences in Ontario schools.

When I reflect on my career as a French teacher with the knowledge I have gained throughout graduate studies in Education, I realize the various inequities I have faced throughout my interactions in French spaces, and in learning this white colonial language. A major goal of mine as a French teacher was to build student interest in French, and teach the language in fun, creative ways. However, I did not realize how challenging this process was going to be. Throughout my experience and the experience of many other racialized French educators, it is evident that whiteness operates through the bodies of racially oppressed teachers in various forms of domination throughout our careers. From our Bachelors in French up until our own classrooms, racialized French educators constantly experience the institutionalization of whiteness and white privilege through its historical, social, political, and economic systems and structures that contribute to its continued dominance in French education (Peek & Shah, 2020). In beginning to conceptualize my experience through this work, it became apparent that the effects of whiteness as a product in education not only harm the racialized student, but also limit the racialized educator. Thus, whiteness, when imposed on racialized students, becomes alienating. This also applies to the expectations placed on racialized teachers in their professional performance. When I reflect on my experience, in the teacher education program I remember consistent corrections from my mentor teacher for not sounding “French enough” and being encouraged to change my lessons as they did not have enough French European culture. Even now as a teacher, I see this behaviour mimicked in my colleagues at a micro-level, from the books being taught in French classrooms, or the videos being shown. This is a clear example of how I was punished and continuously

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punished for my lack of conformity to whiteness and cultural practices. Where my accent and unauthorized conceptions of knowledge deviated from white norms, rendering white property as alienable (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). Now, as a teacher, I find myself conforming to this behaviour by constantly correcting students for their lack of conformity to the European French accent and pronunciation. What I realize now is that French is spoken in countless countries across the world, La Francophonie<sup>3</sup>, with many of these countries being predominantly racialized countries with various native accents. As a result, I have reflected and changed my teaching practice, as I recognized through my experiences of internalized racism, I was unknowingly replicating racial hierarchies within schools. Thus, it is important for us to look at the process in which racialized teachers can unlearn internalized racism in their journeys towards being equitable educators (Kohli, 2014).

**Prilly:** Gurki, thank you for your thoughtful insights into racialized teachers in education. One crucial aspect that you address is the underrepresentation of racialized teachers, exemplified by the graph from the Ministry of Education review of the PDSB (see Figure 2). The stark contrast between the racial diversity of students and the predominantly white teaching staff underscores the systemic disparities within educational institutions. This underrepresentation is not merely a matter of demographics; it translates into a tangible absence of diverse role models in positions of authority, shaping the experiences and aspirations of racialized students. Your exploration of this statistical gap compels us to confront the systemic roots of inequality within educational structures. I contend that there continues to be underrepresentation (both educators and students) even in post-

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<sup>3</sup> La Francophonie is an international organization of countries and regions where French is a first, official, or culturally significant language. Nations included in La Francophonie promote the French language and cultural diversity. It includes 88 member states and governments, with a total population of over 300 million people. It is a brotherhood of international nations, regions and states that have been colonized and influenced by France (Cummings, 2003)

secondary. I appreciate your focus on the importance of racialized educators in the classroom. My academic focus is primarily on racialized students and their academic outcomes and experiences in the classroom, however, learning outcomes and experiences can be linked directly to the curriculum that educators employ and the knowledge production this generates. As you made clear, the underrepresentation of racialized teachers leads to negative student experiences and outcomes in the classroom.

I have often examined anti-Black racism in Canadian schools as it pertains to knowledge production and student experience. Your discussion of the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum is another vital contribution to understanding the pervasive impact of whiteness in education. By pointing out how the curriculum often reflects a Western gaze, omitting or distorting the histories, and contributions of racialized communities, you highlight the deep-seated biases embedded in our educational materials. The Eurocentric focus reinforces a skewed perspective that alienates racialized students, leaving them with a curriculum that does not resonate with their lived experiences. This misalignment not only diminishes the richness of education but also reinforces the marginalization of non-white voices. During this conversation, we have hinted at how our curriculum in the education system is centred around white, patriarchal, heterosexual ideologies that alienate, marginalize, and oppress racialized bodies (Peek & Shah, 2020). Throughout graduate studies the conversation of how Canada, a racist nation, is concealed under the trope of “multiculturalism”. This multiculturalism is a way to reconfigure race as culture, cultural identity becoming solidified as a political identity while the nation-state maintains its whiteness (Garneau, 2018). This trope is used to conceal structural inequalities and racism, and underrepresentation in our schools. The persistent trope of multiculturalism within our schools is problematic as it has unintentional consequences which denies equity and equality to racialized students.

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The trope of multiculturalism is used in a particular way that organizes racialized people so that they can be politically identifiable by their cultural backgrounds instead of race. Canada has always been represented as a peaceful, non-racist, ‘melting pot’. Under the concealment of “multiculturalism” Canada has been able to re-write their violent past by creating narratives that overlook its racist and genocidal histories which is central to racialized identities and how it negatively impacts racialized bodies through stratification practices which are employed through practices and curriculum. This curriculum is then legitimated and perpetuated in higher education and wider society. Our education system claims to be objective and liberal while it sustains a normalized system of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia inside the classrooms, further marginalizing and alienating students who are not white, upper-class, or cis-gendered. Another issue with the underrepresentation of racialized teachers is how current approaches to teaching employed by conventional western methods disregards and obliterates the history of racialized students through the knowledge production of literature in the existing curriculum. Gurki, I found your point about “cultural synchronicity” so in line with culturally relevant and responsive curriculum because the current erasure of history fails to acknowledge the significance of racialized students' historical and cultural knowledge production in the academy. Without racialized educators in the classroom there is a removal of the histories, experiences, cultural and intellectual production. You also highlighted an important point about the oppressive judgments that racialized students often face, such as being conditioned to believe they do not belong in public education. This often leads to marginalization and alienation of racialized students making them feel devalued and irrelevant - curtailing their academic success. There is a clear historical significance of revealing white hegemony in our curriculum and the institutional practices—such as siring practices—in our schools. There’s often a misconception that teachers are fair and

impartial agents of scholarship and academic excellence irrespective of race, especially in a country that prides itself on its self-proclaimed ‘melting-pot’, however, they tend to reinforce whiteness through the lack of representation amongst the teachers and curriculum. This is particularly evident in the graphs that you presented showing the underrepresentation of racialized teachers in PDSB.

Gurki, you mentioned that the blame has shifted to families with regards to opportunities and educational outcomes for racialized students. I suggest that we shift this blame back to schools. To address the perpetuation of a dominant white, heteronormative culture in schools, accountability measures must be implemented to address the negative impact on racialized educators and students. There are two issues that need to be addressed: the everyday experiences and lived reality of racialized students who feel ‘othered’ in a perceived ‘multicultural’ liberal education system, and the persistent Canadian hegemony that reinforces whiteness through structural practices and discourses. These inevitably inform the practices, policies, and programs of our schools. The everyday experiences of these individuals, marked by microaggressions and discrimination, necessitate the creation of safe reporting spaces and mandatory cultural competency training for educators to eliminate biases in teaching. Concurrently, dismantling Canadian hegemony and challenging structural practices requires diverse representation in school leadership and regular policy reviews to eradicate any that disproportionately affect racialized students. Engaging community members in curriculum development ensures a comprehensive representation of diverse cultures and histories, fostering an inclusive learning environment. We must first implement anti-racist & decolonizing curriculum and practices in the classroom. Moreover, fostering parent and community engagement establishes collaborative channels, while transparent reporting mechanisms hold schools accountable for addressing incidents of

discrimination promptly. Establishing mentorship programs for racialized educators and providing culturally sensitive counseling services for students acknowledges the unique challenges they face. By systematically addressing these issues, schools can actively dismantle structures that reinforce a dominant culture, cultivating an educational environment that is truly equitable, inclusive, and supportive.

### **Conclusion**

In the pursuit of fostering equity and dismantling systemic racism in education, collegial conversations emerge as powerful tools. The dialogues between us underscore the urgent need for addressing underrepresentation of racialized teachers and unveiling the impact of whiteness on both educators and students. The examination of systemic issues within education reveals the importance of shifting blame from families to institutional inequities. Our dialogue calls for a transformative shift, challenging Eurocentric perspectives and acknowledging the social justice issues. Culturally responsive pedagogy and meaningful collegial conversations are identified as crucial elements in this transformative journey, advocating for a curriculum that validates diverse cultural knowledge. Our dialogue is an effort to reshape the educational landscape for racialized educators and students.

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