

Communicating Across the Tracks: Challenges for Anti-Racist Educators in Ontario Today

George J. Sefa Dei



All oppressions have certain things in common. They operate within structures, are intended to establish material advantage, and create an “Othering” process between the self and the other.

As an educator and community worker I have tremendous respect for every school teacher and educational practitioner in this province. Like many, I want to share in the love and the successes of teaching. But in order to build on our success, it is important that we maintain a “critical gaze” on our work—otherwise we won’t come to understand why, despite our good intentions, we continue to see in the faces of many minority parents and students a concern about schooling. The educator in Ontario today has a responsibility to address these concerns especially as the government appears to have abandoned its obligations to its diverse population.

CATCHING UP TO THE DEMOGRAPHICS

Countless number of studies point to Canada’s multiracial and multiethnic diversity, particularly in urban centres (see Canadian Council on Social Development, 2002; Galabuzi, 2001; Ornstein, 2000). New data from the Canada Census, reported in the *Toronto Star*, show that 4 in every 10 people in Toronto have neither English nor French as their first language. Within the public high school system,

A key tenet is that educators must begin to understand their students through the lens of race. . .

over one-third of students are born in approximately 174 countries outside of Canada; over 52% of high school students and 47% of elementary school students speak a mother tongue other than English (see Carey, 2002, p. A3). TDSB numbers show almost 1 in 3 students live in poverty, 1 in 10 are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, and 1 in 10 have an identified physical, psychological, or learning disability (Speakout4@hotmail.com, 2003).

These differences in the student population must be considered in the broader context of differential academic performance and schooling experiences of students. For example, research on education and performance shows the severity of issues for certain student bodies. Despite the successes, Black/African-Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals, and

Portuguese Canadians have higher drop-out rates than the general student population. Research in the 1990s revealed that in very disproportionate numbers students from these groups are enrolled in special education and non-university stream programs (see Brown, 1993; Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1993; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Cheng & Yau, 1999). Beyond the figures there is a human dimension to the story of minority youth’s disengagement from school.

HELPING MINORITY STUDENTS

Anti-racist education is proactive educational practice intended to address all forms of racism and the intersections of social difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability). Anti-racism is more than a discourse. It is a form of education that makes very explicit the intended outcomes to subvert the status quo and bring about change. It is political education whose credibility rests in action.

Anti-racism highlights the material and experiential realities of minorities in dealing with the school system. A key tenet is that edu-

ANTI-RACISM POLICY IN ONTARIO, PAST AND PRESENT

We can trace the history of anti-racism policy in Ontario to the Yonge Street Riots of May 1992 when the then NDP government commissioned the Stephen Lewis report. Lewis correctly identified the problem as “anti-Black racism” although there were class and gender dimensions to the disturbance. Many of the report’s recommendations dealt with the police (see Lewis, 1992). The report called for the reconstitution of the Race Relations and Policing Task Force to assess the status and current implementation of recommendations that had been made over the years.

It also recommended a systematic audit of Police Race Relations policies across the province. There was a recommendation for a strengthened Police Complaints Commissioner and Special Investigations

Unit, a requirement that police be required to file reports whenever guns were drawn. The report also specifically asked for beefed-up race relations training and an investigation into racism in other aspects of the criminal justice system, including the judiciary and detention centres.

It is worth noting that the Stephen Lewis report acknowledged the government’s “disappointing” record on employment equity and recommended the passage of employment equity legislation without delay. The report called for the upgrading of the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat, the establishment of a Cabinet Committee on Race Relations to meet with representatives of visible minority communities at least four times a year, and funding for community development projects to deal with health, social service and employment problems faced by minority communities. To its credit, the NDP government moved on a number of the recommendations.

In the specific area of education the government issued a policy directive, Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, “Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Anti-Racism and Ethnocultural Equity” which required all boards to develop a race relations policy and outlined the parameters of these policies. All policies were to be vetted by the Race and Ethnocultural Equity Unit within the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. In fact, after the Tories took over, this particular legislation was one of the few pieces of NDP legislation that was not repealed and eventually served as the basis for the TDSB equity policy. In later years,

the policy was expanded to cover other aspects like anti-homophobia, socio-economic status, gender, and disability through an anti-oppression prism (see Toronto District School Board, 2000). The NDP also passed employment equity legislation and as large employers all school boards were expected to develop goals and timetables for the hiring and promotion of visible/racial minorities, women, Aboriginals, and the disabled. Most boards abandoned these efforts when the Tories repealed the legislation in 1995. Since

1995 there has been a gradual decline of anti-racism initiatives at government/ministerial levels in Ontario.

Changes in internal governmental structures may provide a useful reference point for discussion of the history of

anti-racism in Ontario. Just as the Ontario Anti-Racism Secretariat was dismantled soon after the election in 1995, the Anti-Racism, Access and Equity Division in the Ministry of Education and Training ceased to exist. An Anti-Racism and Equal Opportunity Branch was put in place briefly within the Elementary/Secondary Operations & French Language Education Division. In a later reorganization, the Division was removed. In fact, in terms of concrete achievements it is not an overstatement to say that the entire Anti-Racism and Equal Opportunity Branch has not survived past 1997.

At the school board level, one could briefly applaud the fact that the Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 is still in place. But it is difficult to assess what this memorandum has accomplished in practice and what effects it continues to have (if any) in the current climate. By and large the policy has been toothless except, perhaps, in individual cases where school boards have strong commitments to anti-racism.

But one cannot say all is lost. For example, the inquiry of the Ontario Human Rights Commission into racial profiling and the discussion paper it released September, 2002 on an intersectional approach to discrimination may hold some promise for change. Regarding racial profiling, it is quite possible that some court decisions which acknowledge systemic racism are going to compel anti-racism efforts. The Board’s court decision may be significant because it references the Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System, a commission established by the NDP government.

At the school board level, one could briefly applaud the fact that the Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119 is still in place.

ators must begin to understand their students through the lens of race as a salient part of their myriad identities. But in fact, the serious consequences of race are often denied both because racism is an unsettling issue for most Canadians and because it is a very complex concept. Just as seeing one’s identity in terms of race can be oppressive, the denial of race also constitutes an oppressive act (see Taylor, 1994, p. 25). We must be careful that our use of the concept is not rigid or monolithic. We must work with ambivalence, contention, conflict, and conjunction around the term of race. But we cannot afford to be immobilized by this complexity and say, “Let us discard race, because it is meaningless.” Race has powerful material, political, symbolic and spiritual consequences, and it serves no purpose to those who are disadvantaged by race to deny its salience.

I do not underestimate the daunting challenge of ensuring that genuine educational reform addresses questions of equity and justice. As a student teacher noted when speaking about obstacles at his school, “The sheer volume leaves administrators floundering in paperwork rather than focussing on school community, and real leadership for social change and educational justice.”

However, I believe there are many levels of doing anti-racist work. Asking critical questions is a start. For example, why do we see magnificent new public schools with state of the art science labs and banks of computers in wealthy suburban areas and not in the inner cities or low income neighbourhoods? Why are we creating a two-tier system in our communities?

Another place to start anti-racist work is by assuring all students that they are welcome in the class and that each has the right and the responsibility to have a voice that must be heard. Learning happens from developing humility for each other’s knowledge and appreciating the student’s contributions. The fear of not meeting expectations and/or failing is genuine, collectively shared, and must be addressed in a highly competitive society. A teacher can start in the classroom by letting students know through the humility of teaching practice that if learners are humble in their claim to know they will always leave a classroom setting knowing more than they came in with.

Within North American society race demarcates life chances more profoundly than any other form of difference.



ENTRY POINTS FOR ANTI-RACIST WORK

For the classroom teacher, an “entry point” for anti-racist work is one’s personal experience. For example, an anti-racist would ask: How do some whites perpetuate racism and employ a powerful racist ideology without ever feeling that they have abandoned the liberal democratic ideals and values of social justice for all? It is important to note that not all whites are indicted here as racists; however, there needs to be a recognition of how one is helped or hindered by such a system. Starting with the self means the white anti-racist educator must acknowledge his or her dominance and allow other whites to see their privilege by virtue of a white identity.

All oppressions have certain things in common. They operate within structures, are intended to establish material advantage, and create an “Othering” process between the self and the other. Nevertheless, oppressions are not equal since they differ in their consequences. A rethinking of anti-racist practice requires that we work with the idea of situational and contextual variations in intensities of oppressions. It also requires a recognition of the relative salencies of different identities. For example, while all students may have to contend with the problem of school disengagement, we know that the problem of “dropping out” from school is more acute among First Nations/Aboriginal, African-Canadian, and Portuguese students. We also know that with-

in North American society race demarcates life chances more profoundly than any other form of difference. In effect, in a highly racialized society, anti-racism must work with the ideas of both severity and saliency of different oppressions.

Rethinking anti-racism is also to become aware of the dangers of the mere acknowledging of difference without responding to difference. For example, it is important for an educator not simply to note that there are differences but to ask about what it means to respond to these differences. Responding to difference may mean acting to address inequities. In this practice we cannot simply collapse anti-racist work into the “human/social relations” paradigm (e.g., liberal notion of “social justice for all”). Embedded in this is the danger of equating oppressions in the undifferentiated notion of sameness. Effective anti-racist work requires that in dealing with the multiple oppressions and their intersections we simultaneously acknowledge the severity of certain forms of oppression.

Similarly, a rethinking of anti-racist discourse entails developing an ability to name “race” and “privilege.” Naming is always the first act of colonization. The power to name oneself and self-define is also a form of resistance and part of the process of decolonization of the mind and soul. In order to deal with race and difference we must be able to speak about race and not avoid it. For example, as argued earlier, educators cannot simply wish race away.

Working with allies and building coalitions in progressive politics at school sites is always welcome provided the issues of power are addressed within these movements. Anti-racist educators must be careful about the intellectual and political paralysis of labouring in “parallel tracks” rather than communicating “across tracks,” while also noting that the collective quest for solidarity in anti-oppression work can mask some underlying tensions and ambivalences.

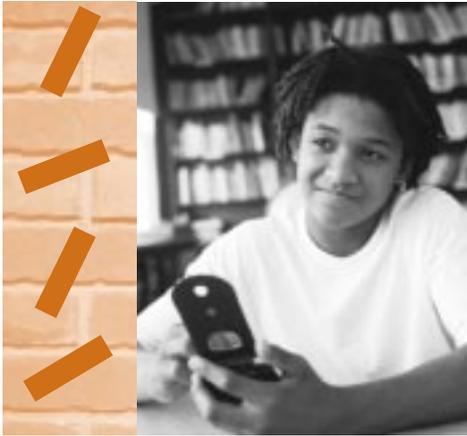
ASKING NEW QUESTIONS

Schools have a responsibility to help students make sense of their identities, to build the confidence of all students, and remove the fear of conforming to lowered expectations. It is also important for an educator to know that the needs of students extend beyond the material

to emotional, social, and psychological concerns. To assist society in dealing with these issues educators cannot extend a helping hand from a distance. We must assist all students to “come to voice,” to challenge the normalized order of things and, in particular, the constitution of dominance in Western knowledge production. The prevailing notions of “reason,” “normalcy,” and “truth” are essential to the structuring of asymmetrical power relations in Euro-Canadian society.

The individuation of school success or failure allows some educators to see homes, families, and communities as the sources of schooling problems instead of critically examining what schools do or fail to do in enhancing and supporting academic excellence for all students. We fail to examine how the principle of meritocracy itself can be a way of denying the access to institutions by certain groups. What constitutes merit is culturally, ideologically, and politically defined, as well as context bound. Unfortunately this observation is vehemently denied or challenged by a large segment of our society. In fact, this critique does not mean we abandon merit or standards. What it means is a critical examination of what has conventionally stood for merit, meritocracy, excellence, and particularly how our definitions have excluded other ways of knowing or doing things. By working with limited definitions and understandings, we all contribute to limit the chances and ability of disadvantaged groups to participate in and obtain a fair share of the valued social and economic goods of society.

There must be more to success at school than grade point averages, test scores, and placement in higher level classes. Academic success must be coupled with social success to produce excellence broadly defined. For anti-racist educators the question is how do we ensure that such excellence is not simply accessible but also equitable? Excellence emerges from our diversity and from addressing the issues of equity. For many students, particularly minority youth, the fear of failing school emerges from the idea and practice of “thinking in hierarchies” rather than “thinking in circles.” Thinking in circles is valuing each other’s contributions. The establishment of intellectual hierarchies has worked to abrogate “knowing” to certain segments of our popula-



*The power to name oneself and
self-define is also a form of resistance
and part of the process of
decolonization of the mind and soul.*

SUSTAINING OURSELVES

I agree we cannot be politically paralyzed or immobilized by the daunting task of ensuring change. But we must sustain ourselves emotionally, spiritually, and materially if anti-racist practice is to go ahead. So, for me, the key question today is not really to ask who can do anti-racist work. Rather it is for each of us to ask whether we are prepared to face the risks and consequences that come with doing such work. For it is going to get even nastier and harsher.

There is the emotional and psychological harm, and the “spirit injury” to constantly confront racism. But we must be bold to face and address the risks and the injuries so that we are always whole and healed when we pursue anti-racist work. Traditionally anti-racist workers have not shied away from bringing passion and emotion to our work. What is needed now is an articulation of our individual and collective sense of spirituality that will help heal and rejuvenate the soul as we continue to pursue anti-racism. Situating spiritual knowing into anti-racist practice should itself be seen as a form of resistance to both the continued damage of our souls but also to the dominant ways of constructing knowledge about ourselves and our communities.

The mandate of anti-racist education, while affirming the salience of cultural diversity with the official Canadian policy of multiculturalism, is also to strive for conditions of equity and excellence for all students. In this era of conservative educational and fiscal policies in Ontario, the challenge becomes one of transgressing a system of differential rewards and punishments. In so doing, the masks of standardization and centralization of educational autonomy may be revealed as sources of inequity and denied excellence for our students and school communities.

tion and there is a pressure to perform to meet expectations. The fear of failure is rife and it avoids a critical examination of the ways we produce and validate knowledge. Anti-racism destabilizes this thinking and argues for acknowledging strength and power in difference and diversity.

All students learn from their peers who are different from themselves and it is this knowledge that creates excellence. It is such knowledge that can compel action. But in order for such excellence to be equitable there must be opportunities for all students to have access to schooling, education, and knowledge. No one must be left outside the school door. This places a huge obligation on teachers to ensure that their knowledges reach all students, that they do not simply avoid problems by creating artificial boundaries between schools and communities and not pathologize local/minoritized communities in accounting for student failures while schools take credit for the success of students. Racial minority communities, despite conventional assertions, have high aspirations for their children’s success at school and make the effort to ensure such success. Like other parents, they care deeply about their children’s academic achievement. It is problematic, for example, to infer that because some minoritized students may lag behind in homework completion these students are not interested in school. Critical anti-racist education would shift the gaze on to the schools themselves (of course, not in isolation from the communities), and argue that the processes of schooling, the distribution of available educational resources (human and material), teacher expectations, and the economics of schooling are cardinal to students’ success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank Meredith Lordan of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies (OISE/UT) for reading and commenting on a draft of this paper. Rick Sin of OISE/UT also shared some ideas with me in a personal conversation.

REFERENCES:

- Brathwaite, K., & James, C. (1996). (Eds.). *Educating African Canadians*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Co.
- Brown, R.S. (1993). *A follow-up of the grade 9 cohort of 1987 every secondary student survey participants*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, Research Services, Report No. 207.
- Brown, R.S., Cheng, M., Yau, M., & Ziegler, S. (1992). *The 1991 every secondary student survey participants*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education. Research Services. Report No. 200.
- Canadian Council on Social Development. (1991). *Stay in School Supplement: Social Development Overview*. 1(7), 14.
- Canadian Council on Social Development, (2002). *Census, 2002*. Ottawa.
- Carey, E. (2002). Toronto: Canada’s Linguistic Capital. *Toronto Star*. December 11, 2002, p. A3.
- Cheng, M. & Yau, M. 1998. The 1997 every secondary student survey: Preliminary findings. Toronto District School Board. Academic Accountability Office. Report No. 204.
- Cheng, M. & Yau, M. (1999). The 1997 every secondary student survey: Detailed findings. Toronto District School Board. Academic Accountability Office. Report No. 227.
- Dei, G.J.S, Mazzuca, J., McIsaac, E., & Zine, J. (1997). *Reconstructing ‘dropout’: Understanding the dynamics of black students’ disengagement from school*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dei, G.J.S., & Karumanchery, L. (1999). School reforms in Ontario: The ‘marketization of education’ and the resulting silence on equity. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 45(2), 111–131.
- Galabuzi, G. (2001). *Canada creeping economic apartheid: The economic segregation and social marginalization of racialised groups*. Centre for Social Justice Foundation for Research and Education, Toronto.
- Henry F., & Tator, C. (1994). The ideology of racism—‘democratic racism.’ *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 26(2), 1–14.
- Lewis, S. (1992). *Letter to the Premier: Report on Race Relations in Ontario*. Toronto: Publications Ontario.
- Ornstein, M. (2000). *Ethno-Racial Inequality in the City of Toronto: An Analysis of the 1996 Census*. City of Toronto and CERIS.
- Speakout4@hotmail.com. (2003). *The loss of equity in Toronto schools, an e-mail correspondence*, February.
- Taylor, C. (1994). The Politics of Recognition. In A. Guttman (Ed.). *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. (pp. 25–74). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

GEORGE DEI is Guest Editor of this *Orbit* issue with Njoki Wane.