Original Paper

Examining Systemic Racism in K-12 Education through a Decolonizing, Anti-Racist and Human Rights Lens

Shezadi Khushal¹*

¹ PhD student, Educational Leadership & Policy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada
² E-mail: shelly.khushal@mail.utoronto.ca

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Abstract
This paper seeks to explore how human rights, decolonizing and anti-racist education converge in combatting systemic racism, bias and discrimination in K-12 schooling and education. Colonization is a major part of our country's history. Because colonization is present in day-to-day attitudes, actions, systems and institutions, not addressing it hinders the ability to make change and further perpetuates marginalization, which then becomes normalized. Understanding human rights is important because acknowledging and respecting one another is fundamental. Human rights are a set of principles concerned with equality, fairness, dignity and respect. Key elements of human rights are freedom, choice, power and voice. I do not propose to embed human rights as a standalone framework, but rather, to align human rights principles with ongoing decolonizing and anti-racist work.

Keywords
Systemic racism, K-12 schools, Decolonization, Human rights, Anti-Racist education

Historical Framing
I am a South Asian, African-born woman. My country, Tanzania was first colonized by the Germans (1880 to 1919), and then by the British (1919 to 1961) until Independence in 1961. Even after colonization, Tanzania continued to be infiltrated by European hegemony, mainly, British and Italian influences. Colonialism played a significant role in Africa. European economic policies severely affected the colonies, which impacted Africa economically, politically, and culturally. Further, the British colonial philosophy disregarded African indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices, and colonial powers imposed their own education system and language on the local population. The impact of colonialism therefore, shapes my worldview, my experiences, and the social / political lens
with which I engage with this work.

**Positionality Statement**

I am committed to the principles of fairness, inclusivity, diversity, equity and justice. My academic, professional, and personal trajectories have led me to work on various projects in the United Nations in New York, NGOs in Pakistan and Indonesia, and the Ontario Public Service. I currently work in the Human Rights Office for one of Ontario’s largest school boards, addressing matters of the highest forms of discrimination and harassment. I am also in my first year of doctoral studies in the Educational, Leadership and Policy program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). Working in policy, law and human rights combined has provided me a specific lens with which to examine microaggressions, unconscious biases and injustices. Human rights is a right enjoyed by all. It is inherent, and the dignity of human beings must be at the forefront of what we do.

**Examining Systemic Racism in K-12 Education through a Decolonizing, Anti-racist and Human Rights Lens**

**Introduction and Rationale**

Our education system is not broken; it was built this way. This statement is based on the premise that the education system was intentionally designed to serve some and marginalize others. Systemic discrimination operates at all levels, including individual, institutional and societal. It also dominates political and policymaking spheres, creating gross injustices. The legacy of colonialism is reflected in the continued presence of structural racism in educational practices (Lopez, 2020). “Schools continue to position Western education as the centre of legitimate knowledge, and any other knowledge as insignificant. Eurocentric curriculums teach racialized students that their lives and the lives of their ancestors are not worth learning about, while simultaneously teaching White students that they are highly valued in spaces of knowledge and power” (Ugwuegbula, 2020). “Our curriculum and teaching practices are embedded within hierarchical epistemic structures that are legacies of colonialist and European intellectual traditions” (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018). By excluding already marginalized students through the omission of their epistemologies and ontologies, we are in fact contributing to further social marginalization, impacting self-esteem, sense of belonging and identity, student engagement and academic performance. Other obstacles present in Western Eurocentric schooling includes streaming, standardized testing, achievement gaps, governance structures, racism, and lack of racialized teachers, who can serve as role models and mentors.

Decolonizing education through a human rights lens demands that leaders respond to the growing calls for equity and social justice in schools, and challenges leaders to (1) engage with coloniality in order to understand how it manifests in education; (2) deconstruct colonial ways of knowing that are embedded within education and schooling; and (3) be intentional and deliberate about disrupting Eurocentric epistemologies (Lopez, 2020).

In this paper, I seek to interrogate systemic racism in K-12 schools in the continued perpetuation of injustices derived from coloniality, both in systems as well as in the colonization of the mind. I unpack
these considerations in the following ways: (1) emphasize the growing need and importance of incorporating non-dominant knowledges in curriculum, pedagogy and instruction (2) explore the critical role of leaders in effectuating change (3) highlight the urgency of understanding and incorporating human rights principles in classrooms at the elementary school level and (4) offer strategies for achieving sustainable education for all students, as well as questions for deeper reflection on how we can make real and meaningful change.

The rationale for selecting this topic is to underscore the underlying injustices and systemic racism prevalent in education in K-12 schools, and highlight the pivotal role of leaders (a) in supporting the process of decolonization in schools, (b) in influencing student outcomes, and (3) in meeting their legal and moral obligation to uphold human rights.

**What is Human Rights?**

Human rights are defined as “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion and any other status” (United Nations, 2020). In Canada, human rights are protected by Canada’s Constitution and by federal, provincial and territorial legislation (Human Rights in Canada, 2021). Derived from Hans Kelsen and Max Weber juridical-political framework (i.e. concept formations in legal positivism, sociology of law, the State, political science, modernity, legal rationality, legal theory, authority, legitimacy and legality), the aspect of learning about human rights draws our attention to facts, laws, procedures and institutions. Through asking, “what happened, where, how, why, and by whom, we come to understand how legal and political issues affect the rights of individuals and communities, and what possible actions can be taken to expose violations” (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018). Exercising human rights is a deliberate, participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups, and communities through fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized principles. “Its goal is to build a culture of respect for an action in the defence and promotion of human rights for all” (Bajaj, 2011).

**Historical Context of Human Rights**

Federally, human rights laws include the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. Provincially, human rights laws include the *Human Rights Code*. The Code is not meant to be an oversight of the *Education Act*. The Code and the *Education Act* stand in their own domains. However, when there is a conflict, the Code have primacy over the *Education Act*. Laws such as the *Canadian Bill of Rights*, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* have been enacted to provide protection against racism and racial discrimination. The Code is considered an anti-discrimination law, in that it is designed to prevent discrimination and “prevent the violation of human dignity and freedom through the imposition of disadvantage, stereotyping or political or social prejudice” (OHRC, 2021).

Domestic human rights law is inspired by International human rights. One of the great achievements of the United Nations is the creation of a comprehensive body of human rights law - a universal and internationally protected code to which all nations can subscribe and all people aspire. The United
Nations has defined a broad range of internationally accepted rights, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. It has also established mechanisms to promote and protect these rights and to assist states in carrying out their responsibilities. (United Nations, 2020).

**Human Rights and Education**

The basic tenet of the Ontario Human Rights system as it pertains to education, is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn with dignity and have equal access to services and opportunities without discrimination or harassment on the grounds of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status, or disability (Carleton University, 2021). Human rights in education fosters “learners’ ability to speak up and act in the face of injustices”. UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres affirms that the position of the United Nations on racism is crystal clear, that is, “it violates the United Nations Charter and debases our core values. Every day, in our work across the world, we strive to do our part to promote inclusion, justice, dignity and combat racism in all its manifestations” (Barbieri & Ferede, 2020). Incorporating a human rights approach into our curriculum therefore, teaches students to think critically, be active role models for global thinking and actively contribute to developing a democratic moral perspective of human rights in the classroom, community, and society at large (Courey & LePage, 2013).

Human rights are the international instruments for holding governments accountable for providing equal access to educational and employment opportunities, justice, goods and services for all members of a multicultural democracy (Osler & Starkey, 2010). As such, “it is through education that we can inform young children in classrooms, and their parents in communities, and relatives beyond the local community” (Courey & LePage, 2013). “Though human rights are intrinsic to the individual human being, they are not intrinsically understood or realized” (Courey & LePage, 2013).

**How a Human Rights Framework intersects with other Anti-Oppressions Frameworks**

Human rights works in cooperation with other anti-oppression frameworks to further promote the urgency for developing tools for inclusion, diversity and social justice. For purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus on two anti-oppressive frameworks: anti-racist education and decolonizing education.

Decolonizing education means:

- Removal of colonialist thought and Eurocentric Western Imperial epistemologies in educational policies and practices
- Creating spaces and resources for dialogue where all students can participate
- Centering non-dominant voices
- Envisioning all cultures and knowledges into the curriculum
- Helping racialized students to see and connect with their identities, histories, experiences, and reclaiming and valuing those experiences
- Embedding knowledge in history into curriculum so it informs part of the knowledge base
Anti-Racist education means:
- Lessons that go in depth about communities of colour
- Learning about oppression and how students can advocate for themselves
- Giving students choice to choice to find what they love to read
- Empowering students through the power of voice

Incorporating a Human Rights lens means focusing on:
- Relationships - treating others with respect and fostering a community in which everyone feels safe
- Social and cultural inclusion - the value of living in an inclusive society
- Active and participatory citizenship - the value of engagement, expressing voice and action
- Environmental sustainability - the value of living for today without compromising the needs of future
- Making legal language more accessible
- Inviting action
- Fostering attitudes of tolerance, respect, solidarity, and responsibility
- Developing an awareness of how human rights can be translated into social and political reality
- Developing skills for the protection of human rights of all students

By using human rights as a foundation for anti-racist and decolonial pedagogy, students learn not only content about their country’s history and its connection with the rest of the world, but teachers better understand racialized students and are able to adequately incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into classroom practices. Teachers are also are able to discuss moral and legal rights associated with policies and decision-making (Courey & LePage, 2013).

**Education as Colonial**

We must be aware of the events of the past in order to address contemporary manifestations of racial discrimination, racism and coloniality in present day. Providing this historical overview of education in Canada sets the stage for understanding the discriminatory practices deeply entrenched in the education system today. “Settler colonialism invaded communities resulting in epistemic violence on Indigenous and colonized people everywhere. This was done through education by destroying the ways of knowing and culture of those they colonized” (Lopez, 2020). One of the primary goals of colonial schooling and its contemporary manifestations was to eliminate or marginalize Indigenous knowledge and ways of being in the world (Deloria, 2004; Lomawaima, 2000; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). “Colonial schools played a pivotal role in normalizing Western epistemologies and inferiorizing Indigeneity; schools were primary sites for colonial expansion and control” (Khalifa et al., 2019).

Sheila Cote-Meek and Taima Moeké-Pickering’s book, *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Education in Canada* highlights the damaging impact of colonialism on current practices in education, and seeks to right the wrongs of colonist practices by incorporating Indigenous histories, knowledges and pedagogies into present day curriculum. By highlighting the impact of history and colonialism on
preserving inequities, this book speaks to a critical issue of discriminatory practices deeply entrenched in the education system. The authors make the strong claim that anti-oppressive strategies associated with decolonization and Indigenization is the key to reciprocal and respectful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In order for change to be realized, it requires first, a recognition that colonial practices are embedded in education and second, that Indigenous knowledges and worldviews be incorporated into education.

Sheila Carr-Stewarts’ book, *Knowing the Past, Facing the Future: Indigenous Education in Canada* reveals the colonial landscape of education, including the treaty right to education in the establishment of residential and industrial schools. 130 residential schools operated in Canada ran from the period 1880’s until 1996. 150,000 students attended residential schools and 6,000 children died at the hands of the church and the Canadian government. There were two primary objectives of the residential school system (1) to remove and isolate children from their homes and families and (2) to assimilate them into the dominant Western culture. “Children often spent 10 years in residential schools, where they were given new clothes and names, separated from their parents and siblings, forbidden to speak anything but English; resistance was often met with excessive punishment and physical abuse” (Carr-Stewart, 2019).

Tanya Talaga’s, *All our Relations: Finding the Path Forward*, further elaborates on the horrific treatment of Indigenous peoples at the hands of the church and the purposefully omitted Indigenous history in current education. She states:

The state education system has purposefully kept the general population ignorant of the physical, cultural, and spiritual genocide Indigenous peoples have endured for centuries. Further, lawmakers, judges, politicians, the deep thinkers of modern western society all grew up without the benefit of knowing the true history of their countries. So, their understanding, which shaped the policies, rules, and programs of democratic Nations, was flawed from the start. As a result, non-Indigenous people have struggled to understand the cause for justice and equity by the leaders of these Nations (Talaga, 2018).

Schools have and continue to serve as sites of colonial oppression and control (Carnoy, 1974; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

**The Dangers of Deficit Thinking**

Deficit ideology is an individual or group stereotype; a stereotype which is symptomatic of systemic oppression. It is the process by which educators, if not careful, are susceptible to becoming vessels for perpetuating class-based stereotypes. It utilizes cognitive and sociopolitical functions of stereotyping to create assumptions about certain groups of people (mainly, low-income and racialized). These common stereotypes then shape class discourses in the education milieu and in directing or misdirecting policy and practice related to education (García and Guerra, 2004). “These intricacies in the relationships between stereotypes and sociopolitical framing are important, not only because of their interpersonal implications but also because stereotypes, in the way they inform how individuals process information,
affect perceptions about the viability, fairness, and effectiveness (or potential effectiveness) of public policy” (Burns & Gimpel, 2000). Deficit ideology therefore is dangerous. What is most disturbing is how deeply deficit thinking permeates society, and how schools and teachers mirror those beliefs. Ladson-Billings (2006) says it is easier to explain students’ failure by looking at something internal to the student, rather than to explore how societal factors create school failure. García and Guerra (2004) expand on this thinking by suggesting that teachers often do not see themselves as the problem, thereby creating barriers. For example, teacher perceptions and attitudes can influence teaching practices, which in turn creates a direct impact on student learning. When teachers lack cultural awareness, they are unable to implement equitable practices. Addressing teacher beliefs therefore, is critical to student outcomes. Some of the ways in which school leaders can address deficit thinking include: (1) helping teachers to understand that power and privilege are at the center of deficit thinking (2) moving past the individual level to explore the root causes which are at systemic and societal levels (3) illustrate to teachers how their deficit thinking impacts student outcomes (4) integrate culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, programs and activities in which students can see themselves reflected in; and (5) ensure all staff engage in mandatory training around issues of race, unconscious bias and cultural competency.

**Urgency of Decolonizing Education**

Decolonizing education means the presence of colonialist thought and Eurocentric Western Imperial epistemologies in educational policies and practices. It is the denial of cultures and the knowledge that is produced from it. Decolonizing education is not merely about de-Westernizing educational policies, practices and approaches; it is about reasserting non-dominant epistemologies at the centre of knowledge, discovery, validation and dissemination. Creating this space is imperative to having an inclusive curriculum. Further, for decolonization in education to occur, all stakeholders must resist Eurocentric Western paradigms deeply rooted in systems, structures, policies and actions.

Neoliberalism is a new form of colonialism in education. It is important to interrogate conventional ways of knowledge production as it plays a significant role in how capitalism and racism work within social formations to inform schooling and education. Since decolonization is a deeply rooted practice, a focus on accountability, quality, standards, excellence and competencies in education promote colonial education in the context of global capitalism (Afful-Broni, 2021).

**Role of Leaders**

In this paper, leaders are defined as teachers, teacher leads, educators, practitioners and school administration.

Educational institutions have a responsibility in addressing and eliminating racism. Equally, school leaders have a moral, ethical and legal responsibility to those they serve and lead. To meet the challenges of twenty-first century education, address inequities, systemic racism and other forms of oppression, understanding, naming and addressing coloniality is key (Lopez, 2020). Our goal should be to cultivate a “decolonizing philosophy that guides action” (Lopez, 2020). To do this, we must first
place the onus on educational leaders to engage in critical self-reflection, which includes examining their own racial location and identity (including individual biases, prejudices and deficit ideologies), and understanding the power and privilege they carry. This is important because without the understanding of one’s biases and gaps in knowledge, leaders are unable to adequately address issues of race in schools. This means, examining assumptions, decisions, actions, interactions and the assumptions underpinning organizational policies and practices and the intentional and unintentional impacts. “Leaders must recognize that schools are a microcosm of society that replicates and reproduces dominant values, beliefs and assumptions” (Davis & Armstrong, 2012), and therefore, leaders must develop knowledge about how to change racist norms, I wonder, *How often do leaders engage in critical self-reflection? What tools do they use to gauge their biases and prejudices? What strategies do they use in building and understanding their school community? Who holds them accountable?*

Leaders must have an understanding of themselves and their own racial location and identity (Carr & Lund, 2009; Evans, 2007; Solomon, 2002; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). They need to develop knowledge about how to change racist norms, and understand how these practices impact racialized students (Davis & Armstrong, 2012). Leaders need to create a climate where culture is welcomed. They must be intentional and deliberate about making space for other ways of knowing, being and doing. Finally, leaders must model the change the want to see (Davis & Armstrong, 2012).

**Theoretical Framework**

This analysis establishes itself in critical race theory (in demystifying racial stereotypes, racial inequities, sexism, classism, and xenophobic practices); anti-racist and anti-oppressive frameworks (in identifying, addressing and changing the structures, policies, attitudes and practices that contribute to discrimination); and decolonizing theory (as a pedagogical tool to question, inform, and push against the persistence of colonial schooling). A human rights framework is used as a means to empower others to know and claim their rights, and holds individuals and institutions accountable for respecting, protecting and fulfilling those rights. A human rights approach is rooted in principles of human dignity, fairness, equality and justice.

**Key Scholars shaping and influencing this work**

Decolonial theory was developed by Latin American theorists including Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo and others, “who view colonialism as an ongoing process that did not end when colonies around the world successfully struggled for the right of self-determination. Instead, decolonial theorists contend that another form of colonialism continued - that of Eurocentric domination of culture and knowledge, ways of thinking and organizing that knowledge, which needs, creates, and reproduces hierarchies of race, gender, sex, ethnicity and economy that result in subjugation and exploitation” (De Lissovoy, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

The following scholars shaped and influenced my research, and sparked my interest in decolonial thinking: Anthony Afful-Broni underscores the importance decolonizing the school curriculum and asks
leaders to consider how they can challenge colonizing and imperializing epistemologies, and how school curricula can adopt an inclusive approach through teaching, research and multi-centric ways of knowing. He also introduces the notion of Spirituality in education, which I find particularly fascinating. Muhammad Khalifa focuses on self-determination and on the power of voice, and believes in collectivism, connection and communication between the people and their leaders. Dr. Ann Lopez believes that decolonizing approaches create space for students and educators to draw on their histories, anchor themselves in their stories, and use this knowledge for their educational advancement. Acknowledging colonization in the current model of education is imperative, and educational leadership is crucial in bringing about this socio-cultural shift.

Key anti-racist and social scholars, authors and educational leaders include Ibram X. Kendi, Robin DeAngelo, George Sefa Dei, Sarah Diem and Anjalé D. Welton, who recognize the role that race, ethnicity, income, ability, gender, and sexual orientation play in the outcome of student success. Through fostering inclusive environments, these leaders engage in critical self-reflection and commit to examining and addressing systemic racism. Anti-racist scholars contend that there are no neutral spaces in the work of equity, racial justice, advocacy, and activism; either we are working towards anti-racism or we are working against it (Diem & Welton, 2020).

Key thinkers in human rights include Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Aristotle, who drew deeply from the notion of natural rights as being intrinsic, i.e., the idea that all humans possess human rights simply by existing and that these rights cannot be taken away from them are direct descendants of natural rights. They were also the pioneers in fighting against for class hierarchy, gender inequality and patriarchy.

**Extant Literature**

Here, I make connections to eight books relating to this research, specifically as it pertains to the importance of understanding history and colonization and its impact on education, the urgent need to change and challenge curriculum, instruction and pedagogy, and the growing role and importance of educational leaders in effectuating change for staff and students.

1. *Africanizing the School Curriculum: Promoting Inclusive, Decolonial Education in African Contexts* by Anthony Afful-Broni (2021). Stemming from discomfort derived by the current educational landscape pertaining to Black and African education, Africanizing the School Curriculum takes us through a journey of first understanding the meaning of Africanization, Indigenization and decolonization before moving to how colonialization impacts students on a day to day basis, and the strategies and solutions to overcome them. Through narratives of lived experiences, the contributors highlight the complexities of decolonization, but also offer possibilities for building new relationships and harnessing local and global community connections. The book challenges readers to think about actively resisting colonial paradigms. By asking readers to think critically about the relationship between colonization and capitalism, and its impact on education, the book serves as a call to action.

2. *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Education in Canada* by Sheila Cote-Meek and Taima
Moeke-Pickering (2020) emphasizes incorporating Indigenous knowledges and worldviews in education and its impact on self-determination. The authors also engage in conversations that challenge colonialism and neoliberalism in education, and highlight the colonial violence that continues to exist in current structures, systems and practices.

3. **Settler Colonialism, Race and the Law: Why Structural Racism Persists** by Natsu Taylor Saito (2020) explores the ways in which education continues to be a colonial project in the manifestations of settler colonialism, present in school practices, revealing that racialization and colonization work hand-in-hand. Without developing tools and strategies of resistance, transformation will be difficult to achieve.

4. **A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge** by Jennifer Wemigwans (2018) brings to the fore Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s 25 projects to support Indigenous research in ethical and responsive ways, and talks about the long-standing exclusion and delegitimization of Indigenous Knowledge and cultural norms.

5. **Knowing the Past, Facing the Future: Indigenous Education in Canada** by Sheila Carr-Stewart (2019) underscores how the current Canadian education system gives preference to Eurocentric thinking. It is an urgent call to incorporate decolonial practices into the education system in order for students to succeed. As schools serve as a site for colonization and assimilation, the book emphasizes the need for understanding history is in order to understand current day manifestations of injustices and inequities.

6. **Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality** by Erica O. Turner (2020) speaks to a critical issue of deeply rooted discriminatory practices in schools in two school districts in Wisconsin, United States. Through the lens of policy-making, leadership and colour-blind managerialism, Turner delves deep into the multiple challenges schools face with respect to structural racism, poverty, demographic changes, increasing diversity in schools, social and political shifts and educational inequalities in student learning and achievement. She calls on school leaders to bring about equity and social justice in schools. The book also reveals additional challenges to the education system, such as neoliberal policies, standardization, scripted curricula, political agenda, lack of resources, lack of training, lack of race-based data, goal setting and data monitoring. This begs the question, **How can educators and leaders use their professional and cultural capital to gain agency and support capacity building at the micro-level to support educational reform?** (Khushal, 2021).

7. **How to Be an Antiracist** by Ibram X. Kendi (2019) conceptualizes a world where change is possible. The author contends that we are either complicit in the reproduction of inequities and injustices, or we can work toward rectifying it, and urges us to extricate ourselves from Euro-colonial modernity and continue to resist dominant and colonizing knowledges and knowledge production.

8. **Anti-Racist Educational Leadership and Policy: Addressing Racism in Public Education** by Sarah Diem and Anjalé D. Welton (2020) accentuate how colonialism and capitalism continue to perpetuate racism and structures of oppression in the education systems, structures, practices and
attitudes, and calls for a radical restructuring of the educational system. The main intention of the book is to encourage educational leaders to become racially aware of how color-evasive, market-driven educational policies and practices operate in school systems. The authors emphasize that White supremacy, anti-Blackness, xenophobia, and hate are intensifying, and that in order for school leaders to promote racial equity, they must move away from the notion of colour-blindness, and toward race-consciousness. The authors place great responsibility on the part of leaders to (1) be cognizant of the realities of racial injustice in education (2) have a willingness to acknowledge how policies negatively impact how they lead (3) use an ant-racist lens to counter neo-liberalism policies and practices in education, and (4) be intentional about using their power and position to challenge the status quo.

Implications for Practice

There are many implications of this research on day-to-day practices, and on how practitioners might use this knowledge to guide their thinking, actions, attitudes and behaviours. I have narrowed it down to four key areas: (1) Assessment; (2) Identity; (3) Organizational Practice and Policy; and (4) Partnerships and Engaging Communities.

(1) Assessment, Curriculum and Educational Reform

Educational practices are rooted in colonialism, so a revisiting of curriculum to include history and colonization is key. We must be critical of what and how we teach students, creating a curriculum that is developed at the local level and which allows for a holistic, reflective, reflexive, experiential, and relational view, embedding memory, history, and story (Chrona n.d.). We must also explore the conditions that need to exist in order for educational reform to have a positive and lasting change (Association of Canadian Deans of Education, 2010). Curriculum must include a pedagogy in which all students feel that they belong, that they are seen and heard, that they matter, and that they are respected and represented in education practices. Power, inequality, and ideological orientation drive content, pedagogy. Because issues of equity are central to students’ experiences in education, there must be critical approaches to assessment, exposing the inequities in programs and services (Prince & Levy, 2017).

In June 2021, the province revealed a new de-streamed Grade 9 math curriculum containing a preamble that stated, “Mathematics has been used to normalize racism and marginalization of non-Eurocentric mathematical knowledges. Incorporating anti-racism into math education involves providing students with context about how math has been used to perpetuate racism and giving students an opportunity to apply math in real-life scenarios that encourage equity” (Okwuosa, 2021). “Ontario’s new Grade 9 math course, which will be the first to eliminate the practice of ‘streaming’, will involve more real-life applications of the subject and include lessons on financial literacy and coding. Students were previously streamed into ‘academic’ or ‘applied’ math courses in Grade 9, a practice that opponents said discriminated against students from marginalized communities” (McKenzie-Sutter, 2021). Whether intentional or not, racism can be present in a curriculum in myriad ways. Some examples
include: (a) showing up in standards and test questions that center white colonial narratives (b) the lack of racially diverse authors on reading lists and library shelves (c) the way historical events are framed and whose perspectives are considered (d) the amount of time students have to explore their own identities and those of others (e) the extent to which students and teachers do or do not engage in discussions about racial justice and how racism plays out in society today (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). “When a curriculum leaves out perspectives and narratives, all students miss out on building context and meaning around the role that racism has and continues to play across our systems. And for Black, Indigenous, and students of color in particular, engaging in learning that diminishes, misrepresents, or fails to address the complexities of their histories and lived experiences can be painful, and in some cases, cause emotional trauma” (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020).

Despite systemic racism being so deeply rooted in our history, culture and institutions, discussions of racism are typically not part of our curriculum. “Because racism is complex and contentious, many of us are afraid to even broach the subject…To advance real solutions, we need to create space to talk about race. But they need to be thoughtfully created, planned and managed” (Racial Justice in Education, n.d.). Finally, we have choices when addressing matters of race. We have the choice to **unconsciously and passively perpetuate racism** or to **consciously and actively pursue racial equity** (Racial Justice in Education, n.d.).

(2) **Identity**

“Identity work is an important part of helping students unpack the complexity of different identities and create meaningful dialogue across lines of difference and power in the classroom” (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). School leaders must embed racial identity into curriculum in order to build student self-confidence about their own identities, deconstruct false racist notions of what it means to be a Black, Indigenous, or person of color, and gain language and skills for having courageous conversations about power, privilege, and oppression (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). Identity work builds students’ resilience when they are confronted with racist stereotypes and helps them deepen their sense of belonging in school. Affirming identities isn’t just about children celebrating culture and learning about each other; it builds resiliency that students can tap into in the future when confronting complex situations, and teaches students to think reflectively about their identity (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020).

I am moved by the definition of inclusion from Afful-Broni’s Africanizing the School Curriculum, where he powerfully articulates that “inclusion is not merely being granted entry, but being given the power to shape what happens in the classroom” (Afful-Broni, 2020).

Inclusion represents difference and does not seek homogeneity by sweeping differences among student populations under the carpet. Inclusion recognizes the power of heterogeneity, and requires the school system to take difference into account and reject an ideology of sameness. Inclusivity is bringing every learner into the fold. Inclusion is addressing the racial/ethnic class, gender, sexual, disability and
religions differences among learners and seeing these differences as strengths rather than weaknesses. Inclusion addresses issues of power, transparency and accountability, and further shifts the emphasis to transforming an entire school system to speak pointedly to questions of social difference and power. Inclusion is not special education or helping “deficit learners”. Inclusion acknowledges the limits of the “adding-to-what-already-exists approach” (Afful-Broni, 2020).

(3) Organizational Practice and Policy

To better align and institutionalize racial equity into the work and practices of an organization, it is important to understand the connection of racial justice to the organization’s vision, core values and strategic framework (Racial Justice in Education, (n.d.). There must be a commitment to implement policies that can effectively foster systemic change. The organization must work to advance racial justice in education in the following ways:

![Figure 1. Racial Justice in Education: Resource Guide (n.d.)](image)

The following diagram depicts a formula toward achieving racial justice. Awareness - through fostering an understanding of key concepts, such as institutional and systemic racism, implicit bias, racial equity and multiracial systemic solutions. Shared knowledge and conceptual clarity helps normalize explicit and constructive conversations about race. Capacity Building - equip members, leaders, staff and partners with the skills, tools, strategies, resources and relationships to be effective leaders and advocates in the fight for racial justice in education. Action - engage and activate members, leaders and stakeholders in on the ground efforts to combat institutional racism and advance racial justice. (Racial Justice in Education, (n.d.). Here, I replace capacity “building” with capacity “development”, as presented by Dr. Lopez in her book, Decolonizing Educational Leadership: Exploring Alternative Approaches to Leading Schools. This shift from “building” to “development” is to illustrate that we are not in fact building something that didn’t exist; it was there; it already existed, and colonization stripped it away. So, this notion of restoration stems from reclaiming what was taken away - the cultures, the stories, the history. (Lopez, 2020).

We need to ensure policies take local contexts into account and strive to achieve a balance between policy and the unique needs of the student population. There should more engagement with, and possibly a revisiting of, policies such as the Education Act, the Anti-Racism Act, Ontario’s Equity and
Inclusive Education Strategy, the Indian Act, Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

(4) Partnerships and Engaging Communities

Partnerships between all educational stakeholders are key. They include parents, educators, school staff, and communities. While schools have a vital role in their capacity to manage change, it must be supported by collaborative engagement and alignment with communities. Communities are inextricably linked to the schooling process, and leadership transcends beyond schools to include the wider community it serves (Lopez, 2020). In this section, I propose some of the ways in which leaders can engage communities:

- If everyone is to meet the challenges associated with inclusion, educating the whole school community (administrators, teachers, students, parents) is important (Ryan, 2006).
- Engaging school community members can lead to consensus and securing allies (Dufour et al., 2006).
- Engaging in broad based consultations geared toward accomplishing mutually developed goals are proactive ways to develop inclusive and sustainable schools (McMahon & Armstrong, 2010).
- The voices and experiences of parents must be embedded in deep and meaningful ways (Lopez, 2020).
- Communities must be involved in the school decision-making process (Lopez, 2020).
- Leadership should be of service to communities…and educational leaders must be willing to learn from the community (Lopez, 2020).
- Parents need to help educators learn about themselves and their communities (Ryan, 2006).

Critical Praxis: Moving from Theory to Action

Critical praxis involves a constant path of evaluating thought with action, and theory with practice. Moving from theory to practice, I offer the following suggestions for striving toward meaningful and lasting change. The areas I have chosen to focus on include (1) The role of leaders (2) teachers, teaching practices and curriculum (3) recruitment, hiring practices and professional development and (4) student voice.

The Role of Leadership in Implementing Change

Leaders play a pivotal role in the social, emotional and academic well-being of students, and provide the conditions and processes for students to succeed or fail. They also hold great power in transforming educational institutions. Here are some recommendations for leaders in moving from theory to practice:

- Engage in critical self-reflection to gauge biases and perceptions; be truthful about gaps in knowledge and model behaviours of empathy, active listening and open dialogue
- Challenge deficit thinking that serve to maintain and reproduce injustices
- Acknowledge own racial location and biases, admit own gaps in knowledge
- Review policies and practices that have an impact on racialized students
- Read literature on the impacts of colonization. Read books authored by racialized
scholars. Encourage senior leadership to engage in book reviews and discussions

- Participate in workshops and seminars
- Use legitimate and approved Resources, then encourage teachers to implement in class
- Reporting, monitoring and tracking data can help in understanding where progress is being made and where the deficiencies lie
- Provide space and time for educators to engage in difficult conversations

**The Power of Teachers, Teaching Practices, Curriculum & Pedagogy**

Teachers hold great power in shaping and transforming student’s minds and mental well-being. Here are some recommendations for teachers in moving from theory to practice:

- Teachers must also engage in critical self-reflection
- Challenge deficit thinking
- Challenge bias in parent-teacher engagement (also plays into deficit thinking)
- Focus on cultural competence and racial awareness, which requires a recognition that there are multiple ways of perceiving reality and that these ways are influenced by one’s location in the social order
- Co-create new methods and curriculum content with diverse learner voices. Such an approach will involve inevitable challenges, conflict and messiness and ideally no endpoint, but an ongoing evolving with redistribution of knowledge and power, and in keeping with this, evolving forms of pedagogical practice, practices that remain influx (Gibson, 2015)
- Consider alternate forms of learning - sharing circles, story-telling photo essay, performance, reflective writing
- Be honest with students about the Canadian history that was left out of the curriculum through age appropriate books and videos
- Use racialized authors and resources then encourage students to do a book report to demonstrate findings
- Bring in racialized artists and storytellers into many areas of the curriculum and classrooms
- Acknowledge and validate the contributions of racialized groups in both the past and within contemporary society, and ensure the contributions include a wealth of current knowledge and successful endeavors across a wide range of fields (e.g. environment, architecture, agriculture, government, medicine, art, music and theatre) (YRDSB Working Document, 2017)
- Include positive contemporary role-models and achievements (YRDSB Working Document, 2017)
- Celebrating cultures monthly should have more meaning by embedding the learnings within teaching and curriculum
- “It is not about adding more content to the existing curriculum; it is about developing a mind-set that values content and character development” (Courey & LePage, 2013)
Recruitment, Hiring Practices and Professional Development

Changes to recruitment and hiring practices require a complete culture shift. Human resource leaders and employers need to look beyond narrow job classifications in order to transfer lived experiences and knowledges of BIPOC into the workplace. Here are some concrete examples:

- Develop plans to recruit and retain BIPOC
- Institute mandatory anti-racism, cultural competency and diversity training; training must contextualize BIPOC perspectives and epistemologies
- Training must action-oriented
- Ensure staff read one book regarding settler colonialism, human rights and anti-oppressive frameworks (annually) - counts towards their organization training record
- Build into training modules unconscious bias and bring in racialized authors/scholars to share narratives and lived experience

To go beyond diversity and basic equity training, key elements of effective anti-racism and human rights training should be include:

- The analysis of racism as an individual, cultural, systemic, and institutional problem of power that goes beyond personal prejudice. Racism should be contextualized with the historical development of systemic racism in institutions generally, and the educational system specifically, with consideration of the link between racism and other forms of oppression;
- Masterfully guided self-reflection about personal investment in racist structures and the actions individuals take to uphold these structures followed with skills to interrupt old patterns and inequitable practices that limit access and exclude some people of color;
- Effective methodology for facilitating productive conversations about race, including methods to build trust and clear communication and to make decisions based on multiple perspectives, especially those of people of color; and
- An examination of the ongoing realities of racism, including the identity-shaping power that racism has on people of color and white people (Anti-Racism Education in the California Community Colleges, 2020).

Student Voice

When students are able to unpack the inequitable systems that shape their school and the world around them, they are not only able to see themselves as powerful changemakers, but they able to find their voice and become advocates for themselves and others. (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). “Equipping students with the knowledge they need to succeed in the real world outside of school means ensuring a curriculum includes the diversity of perspectives that are found in that real world. It also means naming the unjust systems and historical oppression against marginalized communities” (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). Rather than focusing on learning that prioritizes following procedures and compliance, students should be taught complex critical thinking and decision-making, which will eventually lead to developing the skills required for
leadership roles. Further, students who are given opportunities to engage in more specific discussions across subject areas can develop skills to consider different points of view, build on previous knowledge, come up with solutions, and incorporate feedback (Examining Learning Through an Anti-Racist Lens, 2020). Collectively, this serves to empower beyond just academics.

Reflection

In my quest to understand why justice and oppression continue to persist, I reflect on what it is that must change - in schooling, in leadership, in ourselves. In schooling, a whole school approach to reform is necessary. All stakeholders, from leaders to educators to students to parents to communities, must actively and intentionally resist Eurocentric Western paradigms deeply rooted in systems, structures and policies. As I have demonstrated in this paper, re-imaging education and schooling cannot be done without examining the role of the educator, their context and social position (Afifl-Broni, 2020). Leaders must accept and acknowledge that coloniality is not a thing of the past; rather, it is ongoing and ever-present in day-to-day practices, in books, standards for academic performance and cultural patterns. Leaders must examine their own positionality and power in order to challenge the status quo. To do this, leaders must engage in critical questioning and self-reflection to determine how perceptions can influence decision-making. Rejecting dominant forms of knowledge as the only form of knowledge is essential, as there is value in our own tools, ontologies and epistemologies. Leaders must advocate for a shift from deficit thinking to asset thinking, and they must implement mandatory training in human rights, anti-racist, decolonizing and cultural competencies (that is action-oriented). Only then can leaders begin to create a culture of diversity and inclusion. I also contemplate what my own decolonizing philosophy is, and what I can do, in my capacity as an emerging scholar, to ensure the curriculum values diversity of approaches and ensure multiple perspectives and viewpoints are considered. I ask myself, what can I do to intentionally disrupt programs, processes and practices to create spaces for diversity; how I can incorporate the protection of human rights into the fabric of school systems, and more importantly, into thinking and mindsets, and finally, how can I encourage leaders to understand the importance of disrupting, dismantling, unlearning, re-learning and rebuilding?

Conclusion

The legacy of colonialism is reflected in the continued presence of structural racism in educational practices. White supremacy, colonialism, and racism have been woven into the fabric of school board policies and practices, as well as individual attitudes towards particular marginalized groups. It is clear that "educational spaces are not neutral and are rooted in Eurocentric ideology… and without concerted effort and attention to pedagogy and curriculum, coloniality will continue to detrimentally shape education" (Aldawood, 2020). Human rights is one avenue to achieving racial justice. School leaders have a key role in play in ensuring students can access, participate and benefit from all aspects of the educational experience. Through their moral and legal obligation, school leaders are responsible and accountable to uphold human rights in schools. To do so, school leaders must: advocate for changes to
harmful school practices; use inclusive language; ensure that equity, anti-racism, social justice and culturally relevant materials are embedded in professional development training initiatives; create safe and brave spaces to have respectful and reciprocal dialogue; challenge beliefs about racism; ensure all students are heard and feel welcome; develop partnerships with racialized communities to ensure alignment; and develop action plans. Collectively, these contribute to building the tools necessary to creating equitable and inclusive school environments, and to ensure the human dignity remain at the centre of student success.

In this paper, I touched on concepts of positionality and power, the importance of self-reflexivity, accountability, ethics, and relationships for school leaders and the pivotal role they play in the social, emotional and academic lives of students. I also explored the impacts of colonization on education and how education is rooted in neo-liberal policies. Finally, I illustrated how decolonizing, anti-racist and human rights frameworks converge to combat racism in K-12 schools. Through bringing this challenging and complex topic to the forefront, it is my intention that educational stakeholders meet their ethical obligations and responsibilities in ensuring that education remain a right for all students.

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**Appendix A: Human Rights Timelines**

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights Timeline**

1689 English philosopher John Locke sets forth the notion of natural rights and defines them as the rights to “life, liberty and property”

1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau publishes his philosophical tract *The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right*. In it Rousseau argues that government must heed the general will of society, and that the needs of society as a whole come before the specific needs of the individual

1776 The US Declaration of Independence, authored by Thomas Jefferson and others, is adopted by Congress. It presents the rationale for American independence from Britain on the basis that “all men are created equal” and endowed with rights that cannot be taken from them, including the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness

1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen is adopted during the early stage of the French Revolution. This document proclaims the end of the monarchy and the rights of all citizens to liberty, property, security, and the resistance to oppression

1791 Containing the first ten amendments to the US Constitution, the US Bill of Rights extends citizens’ rights to include freedom of speech, of the press, and to a fair trial, among others

1919 The League of Nations—a peacekeeping international organization—is formed

1942 The Declaration of the United Nations is signed by the Allied Powers who pledged to form a peacekeeping organization by that name, on the basis of the Atlantic Charter
1946  The Commission on Human Rights is established by the United Nations. Eleanor Roosevelt is selected by the General Assembly to be its chairperson. The committee would later draft a declaration of human rights

1948  December 9, UN General Assembly adopts the Convention for the Punishment and Prevention of Genocide
December 10, UN General Assembly adopts the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as proposed by the Commission on Human Rights.

1961  Amnesty International, an international organization devoted to the monitoring and protection of human rights, is established

**Domestic Human Rights Timeline (Canada)**

International human rights law impacted domestic law, as is demonstrated in the timeline below:

1961  Ontario Human Rights Commission is created
1962  Ontario Human Rights Code enacted
1977  Canadian Human Rights Act
1979  Canadian Bill of Rights
1982  The Charter of Rights and Freedoms entrenched in the Constitution of Canada