

It was an interesting Summer, a time where I have felt uncomfortable, sad and angry, and not because of COVID-19. I have been sickened to learn about so many people – George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake in the US; Chantel Moore, Rodney Levi and Ejaz Ahmed Choudry in Canada – being killed by police. I attended a rally in my community, and I have done a lot of reading about racism and anti-racism in these past months. I know that my perspective is limited, I may make mistakes and need further education, but I want to start a dialogue. I recognize that I work within an imperfect system, and that trying to change that system may be a challenge.

I may sound somewhat negative about the public education system, but that is not the case. I am grateful to connect with parents, teachers, education assistants and senior leadership as we discuss racism. I am proud to work in a system that – while flawed – will “get us out of this mess” to paraphrase the words of Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Murray Sinclair. While we still have miles to go, our curricular documents integrate Indigenous Ways of Knowing into all aspects of our curriculum; students in BC can take English 12 First Peoples as an equivalent to English 12; and my own 10-year-old son knows more words in Hul’qumi’num than I do. I see all of this work as part of the long road towards reconciliation and I am grateful to work in a school district where we can speak openly about racism.

Here are some lessons that I am learning.

Lesson 1: Awareness

As a person, and a Principal, I acknowledge that I have grown up with the privilege of white skin, and have much to learn about the injustices that many Canadians experience because of their cultural heritage or the colour of their skin. I recognize that there are lived experiences within my own community that I cannot see because of my privilege.

With the publication of the *Calls to Action* by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the *Final Report on the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, and the ongoing news reports of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) who continue to be murdered and incarcerated in high numbers in Canada, it is obvious that there are inequities and systemic barriers that negatively impact the children in my province and country. As an educator, I must acknowledge that the education system is part of those inequalities, and that systemic barriers continue to exist for children and families. The education system was founded on colonialism, and there are structures that linger and perpetuate the inequity that we see reflected in these publications and reports.

My BIPOC friends have taught me two important things:

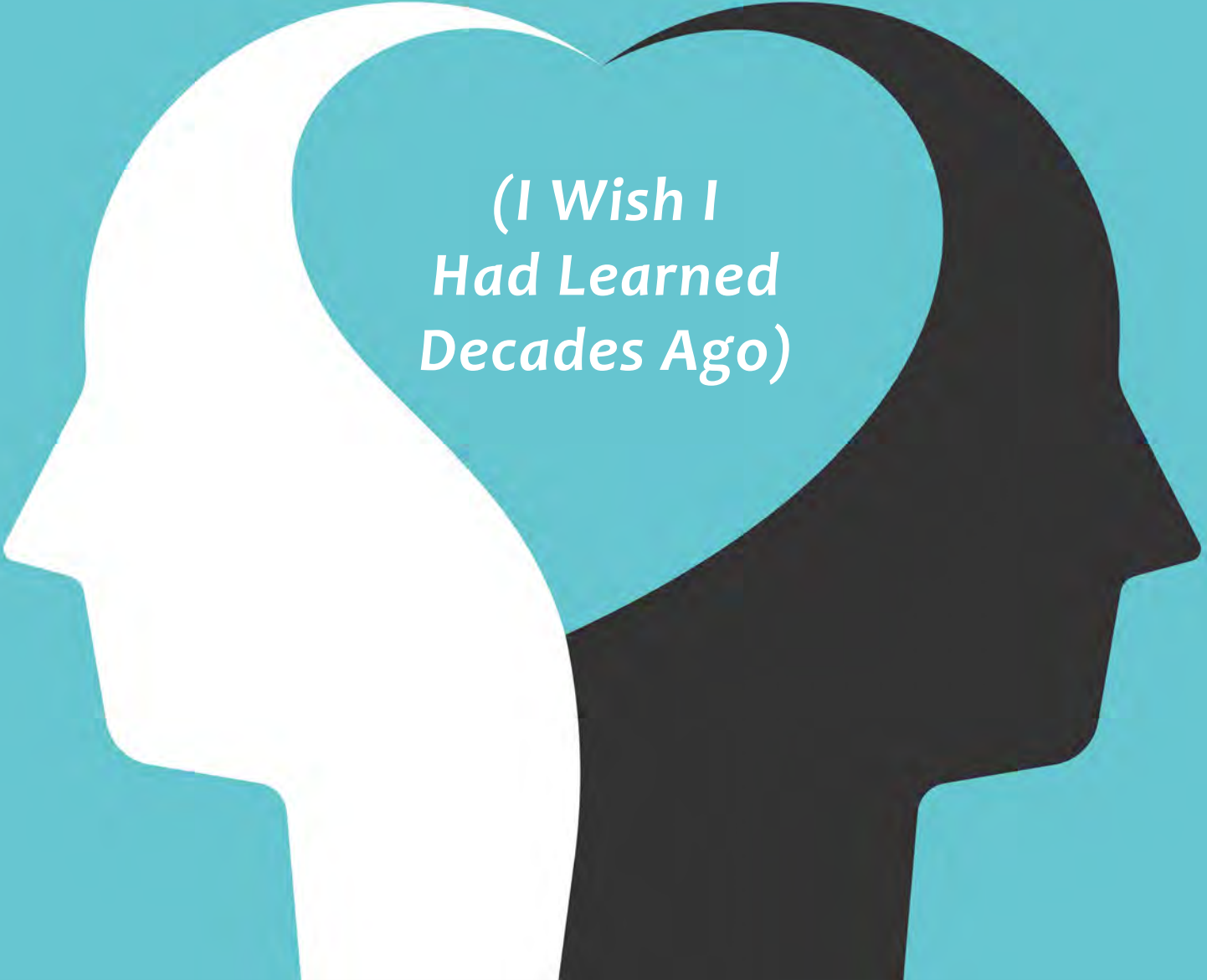
- 1) **That it’s not about me:** the discomfort I feel is nothing in comparison to the discomfort that they have felt at times growing up in Canada.
- 2) **That it’s a time to listen and learn,** not to publicly express my own outrage and guilt which may have some unintended consequences for those who are more vulnerable.

Considering those points, I am conflicted about whether I should be writing about what I am learning, but my purpose is to underscore what those of us with privilege can do to better support the children and families experiencing barriers within the system and in our communities. I do so with an acute awareness of my privilege. As Desmond Cole, Tanya Talaga and others have stated, there are two Canadas. It’s important for us – as educators – to be aware of this.

Lesson 2: Denial

When I bring up the topic of racism with others, I often hear the phrase, “Well, at least Canada isn’t

lessons about racism



*(I Wish I
Had Learned
Decades Ago)*

by

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as bad as what's happening in the US." This is one of the many ways that we deny the racism that people experience in Canada.

In an interview with Brené Brown about his book, **How to be an Antiracist**, Ibrim X. Kendi stated, "The heartbeat of racism is denial... to deny one's policies... and one's nation... is racist... Anti-racism is the willingness to be vulnerable, to be willing to diagnose oneself and our country and our ideas and our policies..."

There are several ways in which Canadians deny the presence of racism in the education system. I will list two here:

Denial #1: *I am not racist, my school is not racist, our district is not racist, our province/country is not racist, etc.*

Kendi points out that "the word 'racist' is not... a *pejorative*... it is *descriptive* and the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it and then dismantle it. The attempt to turn this usefully descriptive word into an almost unusable slur is... designed to freeze us into inaction." In other words, we are not racist or antiracist, but our *behaviour* at one point in time can be racist, and two minutes later be antiracist. We should not be afraid to describe racist actions and policies as what they are, instead of hiding behind a 'mask of neutrality' pretending that racism doesn't exist.

Kendi says that racism is "the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities." For example, we know from data that Indigenous children in our province are not graduating at the same rate as other children in our province. Unless we subscribe to the deplorable racist idea that certain children are somehow inferior to other racial groups, then we must conclude that there are racist policies in our province and country. It then becomes important for us to identify those policies and ideas, and work to change them. In this case, it would mean that all children from different racial

groups graduate at approximately the same rate. This is exactly what the BC Ministry of Education is doing with the Equity Scan, a tool to allow districts to self-assess and engage in meaningful dialogue about the experience of Indigenous students in the public school system, and to respond in ways that create the conditions of success.

In **Decolonizing the Classroom**, Michael Seward states, "Those interested in decolonizing the classroom must take a first, crucial step: a personal commitment to political change. To deny the racial nature of politics (and power) — both inside of and surrounding the classroom — is to perpetuate the inequities created by colonization."

While it is uncomfortable to admit that there may be ideas and policies at work that perpetuate racial inequalities, we cannot pretend that we, or the society we live in, are neutral. We are either racist or antiracist — there are no other choices. As Jo-Anne L. Chrona in **Continuing our Learning Journey: Indigenous Education in BC** suggests, "The work doesn't begin with classroom resources... it begins with an examination of our own knowledge, values, and perspectives."

Denial #2: *If we focus on a multicultural approach to education, we can do the work of Indigenous Education (or Black Canadian education, etc.)*

In **Avoiding Racial Equity Detours**, Paul Gorski warns that "celebrating diversity" is crafted to help "white students learn about diversity" and that this could "create the illusion of diversity appreciation while entrenching inequity... Requiring students of colour to participate in diversity spectacles while failing to attend adequately to inequity can be exploitive."

People sometimes wonder why the BC Curriculum puts a strong emphasis on Indigenous Perspectives. With so many different cultures represented in Canada, why is there such a strong emphasis on First Nations, Inuit, and Metis cultures? Chrona points out that many of the diverse cultures

represented in Canada are thriving in other places in the world – their language, customs, culture, arts, and spiritual practices are being passed on to future generations. This is not so for Indigenous cultures in Canada. She states that it is imperative to teach the languages, unique histories and cultural practices of our Indigenous peoples because “this is the only place on earth where these languages have grown from, where this knowledge is connected to, where these literatures grow from... if we don’t teach about Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives that reflect Indigenous Peoples here, it does not get learned anywhere else on the planet.”

Stating that we will take a multicultural approach without focusing on awareness of white privilege and racism is akin to saying, ‘All Lives Matter’. We are, of course, a multicultural country that celebrates diversity, but we also have extreme racial disparity. Ignoring this perpetuates the problem. Instead, we need to teach students not just about multiculturalism, but also about how racism has operated for centuries in our country, and how to be antiracist.

Lesson 3: Fix the System, Not the People

In his essay, Gorski points out two other ways that we avoid dealing with racism in schools: ‘pacing for privilege’, and ‘deficit ideology’.

When we ‘pace for privilege’, the “pace of equity progress prioritizes the comfort and interests of the people who have the least interest in that progress.” If we only meet people where they feel comfortable, we are letting those with privilege determine the pace at which we work for change. “Students, families and educators experiencing racism cannot afford to wait... for all white educators to ease into racial equity commitments at a pace of our choosing.” ¹

‘Deficit ideology’ warrants some unpacking, as it comes up repeatedly in the literature on racism.

Kendi recounts a painful experience where he gave

a racist speech toward the end of his final year at high school, when he pointed out what he saw as the faults and problems with the Black youth of the day ². What he now knows, is that he was duped into seeing “the ongoing struggles of Black People... and decided that Black People themselves were the problem. This is the consistent function of racist ideas – to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem instead of the policies that ensnare them.” ³

Gorski describes it this way: if we use equity efforts to “‘fix’ students of colour by fortifying their grittiness, modifying their mindsets, adjusting their emotions” then we are placing the source of the educational inequities within the students rather than ignoring the role of racism. “It shifts the onus of responsibility away from the schools and onto the very youth who are cheated out of equitable opportunity – and who, due to this cheating, often tend to be quite resilient. It can obscure structural conditions with which marginalized communities contend.” ⁴ He later points out, “what good is grit against... inequitable school policy... or... trauma informed practices... for students whose primary source of trauma is the racism they experience at school?”

I remember reviewing the files of some students I was concerned about when I was a high school Vice-Principal. I found that they all had ‘Kindergarten readiness’ reports, which indicated whether they could do things like identify numbers and letters, write their name, or even hop on one foot. It really hit home for me when Chrona stated in her video series that we should not ask, “How are the learners ready for school when they come into the education system?” but instead, “How are schools ready to receive the learners that come into our education system?” I reflect on the ‘school readiness’ conversations that I have had over the years with regret for the missed opportunities to examine the school’s readiness for the child, rather than the child’s readiness for the school.



Lesson 4: Action

I'm a fairly typical Principal, someone who likes to 'fix things', 'find solutions' and 'move to action'. But before 'action', I recognize that I have more to learn about racism and the inequities that are impacting students and families in my community.

Gorski cautions us against a "common impulse in education to grasp for simple strategies to address challenges that are more about ideology and will, than about strategy."

When I attended the anti-racism rally in my community, there were many speakers calling for improvement to curriculum, and different learning resources. While textbooks and lesson plans are part of the change that needs to be made, complex issues require complex solutions. Shifts in ideology and perspective are neither simple nor straightforward.

School districts across Canada are engaging in complex actions that go beyond textbooks and lesson plans. A few I have heard about include examining suspension and expulsion data, examining educational programs that promote academic streaming, delving into achievement data to look for disparities, and creating committees to look into policies and procedures to ensure that they are equitable for all students.

As I write this, I find myself wishing that I could jump straight to 'action'. In my mind, I imagine an easy list of steps that I can implement in my school to enact a process of making our school more socially just. But there are no shortcuts. Rather than coming up with a plan of action that may miss the mark, I am committed to the hard and slow work. It's my responsibility to continue my own learning and to make sure that my students, and my own boys, don't find their own education about racism lacking.

I will continue reading about racism, and I will continue talking about racism. I can start with small actions within my own sphere of influence

as I continue to learn. It will be part of my staff meeting conversations. I will examine the imagery in our school to ensure that BIPOC students are represented. I will continue to seek out professional development and learning resources that are culturally relevant, and address anti-racism education directly. I hope that within our districts and within our membership, that we can have meaningful dialogue.

Every journey starts somewhere. I wish I had learned these lessons decades ago, but I'm grateful that my learning has begun.

References:

¹ p.58, Avoiding Racial Equity Detours

² p.7, How to be an Antiracist

³ p.8, How to be an Antiracist

⁴ p.59, Avoiding Racial Equity Detours

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