



Fight Racism Starting With School

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Racial discrimination does exist in Canada, and, it follows at school. This sad reality is indelibly written on to the daily agenda of every Black Asian and Native pupil who, as notes Daniel Hill is systematically subjected to an education "based on the knowledge, the culture and the values of White and mainly urban middle class".(1)

This pupil is thus exposed to clearly discriminatory educational practices which, like "a multitude of tireless voices tell him loudly and softly that he is intellectually, emotionally, physically and morally inferior".(2)

And so, it behooves us to take a strong stand against ever-present racism, as affirmed recently by Chief David Ahenahew of the Assembly of First Nations.

We must first recognize the existence of racism. Limiting ourselves to expressions of compassion for the victims of racism without taking a stand or making a commitment to stem it is tantamount to skirting the problem. Limiting ourselves to feeling sorry for the victims of racism without denouncing it and seeking ways to eliminate it, is tantamount to dodging the issue. Pretending to be colour-blind in the face of the hardships encountered by young Asian, Native and Black youngsters and professing not to perceive any difference in treatment, is still tantamount to side-stepping the problem.

Racist Labels

The refusal to recognize racism is part and parcel of a "willful blindness" which also spurs us on to execute some veritable gymnastic feats of the mind, all aimed, once again, at avoiding the problem. Thus we have run off a whole series of labels which, upon examination, turn out to be mere cover-ups for out-dated and cloying prejudices.

Expressions such as "culturally deprived", "culturally disadvantaged" and "culturally inferior" are clearly disparaging. They presuppose that there exists only one unique code of ethics to which everyone should subscribe-that of the White middle class. The Haitian, Cree, or Vietnamese

child, who obviously does not fit into this group, is perceived as being abnormal, different.

When we use the term "non-White", the underlying norm is "White". The word "immigrant" refers to certain individuals relegated to the bottom rung of our social scale. An "immigrant" is different and his difference is a stamp of inferiority.

When we speak of "minorities" or "minority groups", we are alluding to those who "violate" the norm, those who live on the fringe of true society.

The term "ethnic group" or the more familiar expression, "the Ethnics", conveys the same biased message. Each one of us comes from an identifiable ethnic group. However, we so skillfully extricate ourselves from this rather dubious and cynical classification that we only look in those whom we deem "different" from us.

As for "Cultural Communities", that elegant, chic and trendy term, one needs to ask who is included? Or rather, who is excluded?

In short, despite our good intentions the terms with which we describe the problems of racial discrimination embody the same discriminatory concepts and values, and legitimize the very injustices and inequalities that they are trying to eradicate. Our terminological tools need therefore to be re-evaluated and corrected

The Role of Educators

Our attitudes and our behaviour also. Up until today, have they helped to eliminate, or to reinforce racial discrimination?

And from today onwards, what will be my attitude toward the end of the afternoon, in the staff room, when a group of my colleagues are goofing around and exchanging racial jokes?

As a librarian, will I seek to identify those books which contain prejudices harmful to the development of a healthy self-concept in Black Native Canadian and Asian youngsters?

As a member of my School Council what kinds of training in Race Relations will I propose when we are planning our Professional Development days?

In my capacity as a school principal how will I react to a sharp difference of opinion between a White teacher and a Black teacher over the work of a classic author? Will I merely label the problem as a "personality conflict"?

As a literature teacher, will I consider my professional authority flouted if a Grade XI student refuses to read Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, or objects vociferously to my use of the word "nigger"? What am I to do when one of my Black, Native Canadian, or Asian pupils hands me a letter from his parents forbidding me to subject him or her to a story such as *Les yeux bleus* (*The Blue Eyes*), or one of the Tintin adventures and asks me to assign him other reading matter in its stead?

On duty in the school cafeteria, will I look askance or not upon clusterings of Native Canadians, Haitians, Vietnamese, Jamaicans or Pakistanis?

What must I say to the young Third Grade Black girl who comes up to me in tears to complain that the other pupils are teasing her, are looking at her all the time, are poking fun at her, are calling her names, are excluding her from their group games, are uttering insults about her mother, are besmirching her desk with melted chocolate, are shoving her...? Should I send her back to her seat with these words, "Don't pay them any mind, they don't mean anything?"

When a Native Canadian, Chinese or Guyanese pupil does not seem to be able to get into a work team, should I immediately conclude that this is admissible proof of his ineptness and stream him into the Remedial Class?

When Pakistani parents come crying racial discrimination, will I try to get rid of them as quickly as possible?

As a guidance counsellor, what will be my reaction in the face of the Amerindian or Trinidadian High School student, who, clearly confused, wishes to consult me concerning his future? On what path will I track him for the rest of his life?

Professor in a Faculty of Education will I be able to justify the training we dispense to our future teachers as being the kind that will endow them with all the skills necessary in order to respond to their pupils' needs?

Federal civil servant, in charge of the funding of educational projects what criteria should I observe, in respect to Race Relations, when grants are doled out?

Head of the monthly publications of a public or para-public agency, how will I go about contracting a study on racism? By public solicitation among members of the source communities involved? Or by automatically awarding the contract to a free-lancer who is "used to working for us?"

And, as a publisher of school material, how do I perceive my social responsibility in the field of Race Relations?

Whatever our profession- minister, civil servant, administrator, professor, building superintendant, publisher-each of us has an important role to play in the fight against racism and racial discrimination.

The public and private institutions-Ministry, School Board, School Education Faculty, Union Publishing House-have far weightier responsibilities to shoulder and they need must adopt and enforce strict anti-racist policies. This pre-supposes five pre-requisites:

1. Recognize and treat the problem

Racism does exist in our society and, it follows in our schools. Let us stop looking for explanations that justify isolated, deviations of individual behaviour.

2. Wake up and be aware

It is a matter of determining the degree of personal and institutional participation which contributes to reinforcing racism. A critical assessment of attitude, behaviour and institutional practices, both individual and collective, is essential.

3. See and spell out racism in its true-to-life forms

Let us not skirt the issue of racism by utilizing an incorrect vocabulary, by trying to reduce it to a problem of being "socio-economically deprived" or by minimizing it in placing racial discrimination on the same footing as discrimination based on language, religion cultural etc...

4. Guarantee an active and sustained participation of the victims at important decision-making levels

Time and time again Native, Asian and Black Communities complain that consultations and studies are carried out, committees are set up, seminars are held, and spokesmen are named, without any involvement, direct or indirect, on their part and even when their own interests are at stake. They wonder how policies that truly take their needs into account can be formulated?

5. Be rigorously consistent

We must be consistent. The adoption of an anti-racist policy implies putting in place a mechanism that will include rules, guidelines, financial material and human resources, committees, methods of progressive and continuous evaluation, and strategies which recognize the existence of racism and which are geared to wiping it out.

In conclusion, we must recognize that in the face of racism, collectively and individually, we have our share of responsibility to fulfill the obligations of our social contract. Every single one of our acts is determinant on helping either to reinforce or wipe out racism.

Let us take action with unshakeable determination!

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References:

Daniel Hill, Human Rights in Canada Focus On Racism, Ottawa Canadian Labour of Congress 1977 Final Report on the Aspirations and Expectations of the Quebec Black Community Concerning Education, submitted to the Quebec Superior Council of Education in Montreal: July 1978, p. 20.



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