


# EDUCATION WITHOUT OPPRESSION



LIBERATING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**THE ATKINSON**  
JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD



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Teacher Kenisha Bynoe helps student Abbas Al-Sadie put Kente cloth on people cutouts at the TDSB's Africentric summer learning camp for kindergarten children held at Nelson Mandela Park Public School in Toronto, July 16, 2014. PHOTOGRAPH MARTA IWANEK/TORONTO STAR

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## ABOUT SHREE PARADKAR

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### **SHREE PARADKAR**

2018-2019 ATKINSON FELLOW IN PUBLIC POLICY

Shree Paradkar is a journalist who has worked in Bangalore, Mumbai, Singapore, and Toronto. She is a columnist covering issues around race and gender at the Toronto Star, and the author of *Betrayed: My cousin's wrongful conviction for the murder of her daughter, Aarushi*. You can follow her on Twitter [@ShreeParadkar](https://twitter.com/ShreeParadkar).

As the 2018-2019 Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy, Shree examined the continuing marginalization of Black and Indigenous students in Canada. On a journey across Canada and the world, she analyzed the challenges in education equity and the breakthroughs that show how education without oppression can benefit everyone.

The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy awards a seasoned Canadian journalist the opportunity to pursue a yearlong investigation into a current policy issue. The fellowship is a collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the Toronto Star.

READ THE FULL SERIES AT

<https://www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries.html>

## INTRODUCTION

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There is something special in storytelling, when the right person tackles the right story at the right time. When Shree Paradkar pitched examining approaches to decolonizing education for the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy in 2018, we knew this was one of those moments.

The failure of Canada's public education system to deliver equitable outcomes for Black and Indigenous students is well documented. With her record of powerful and fearless writing, Shree offered a unique approach. Travelling across Canada and indeed around the world, she shared stories of educators and students working to get at the root causes of inequity in education and ensure student and community success. From Hawke's Bay to Baltimore to Edmonton to Lucknow, Shree showed that change is necessary and possible when we follow those who are doing the work on the ground.

This principle guides our work at the Atkinson Foundation. For over 75 years, we've worked in the space between "what is" and "what could or should be." We take inspiration from Joseph Atkinson, who was the first publisher of the Toronto Star. He used this position to shine a light on the challenges that workers faced across the country and advocated for decent wages and working conditions, pensions, unemployment insurance, and a quality education.

We still have a long way to go on all these fronts. At the Atkinson Foundation, we continue this legacy, through supporting organizations and people on the ground, who are mobilizing for a more just future for workers, their families and communities.

Shree's work has shone a light on approaches that alter classrooms, curriculums, and school systems to centre children who continue be excluded, in particular Black and Indigenous children. The evidence comes through not only in the metrics, but also in the stories from students, educators, parents, and community members.

This series is an important contribution to education policy in Canada. We compiled these articles because they deserve to be shared widely and to embolden more people. The next steps are up to all of us. As Shree writes in her final article in *Education Without Oppression*, "We have the wealth to make this happen. We have the know-how. All we need is the will — and a bit of courage."



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colette Murphy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Colette Murphy  
ATKINSON FOUNDATION  
JANUARY 2020



## TEACHING NEEDS A TRANSFORMATION

For Indigenous kids with a history of heartache,  
these small changes led to big gains

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 5, 2019 | EDMONTON

“Education is what got us into this mess,  
but education is the key to reconciliation.”

— JUSTICE MURRAY SINCLAIR

If the activist Cindy Blackstock were to have her way — and she did have her way on this one — Peter Henderson Bryce would be hailed as a Canadian hero.

Bryce, a white man, was a doctor-turned-whistleblower on residential schools whose deeds stand in defiance of common wisdom that the racism in Canada’s past was simply a reflection of values prevalent at that time.

Bryce was the federal chief medical officer who raised the alarm on the disastrous state of residential schools in 1907 when he found the schools had child mortality rates ranging from 25

Students relax in the Braided Journeys room at Archbishop O’Leary High School in Edmonton. The award-winning program has helped increase graduation rates for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



to 69 per cent. His findings were ignored by the government. He continued to criticize the Department of Indian Affairs and went on to publish his findings in the *Evening Citizen* (now the *Ottawa Citizen*). Funding for his research was withdrawn, and eventually, he was forced out of public service.

In 1922, Bryce wrote a book, titled *The Story of a National Crime: Being a Record of the Health Conditions of the Indians of Canada from 1904 to 1921*.

When he died 10 years later, he was buried in a nondescript grave at Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa.

In April, while speaking to a First Nations, Métis and Inuit education gathering in Edmonton, or Treaty Six territory, Blackstock contrasted Bryce's "moral courage" with the "moral cowardice" of his nemesis, Duncan

Campbell Scott. Scott, the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs, not only dismissed Bryce's findings but in 1920 made attendance at residential schools compulsory. Scott was bestowed the title of "Person of National Significance" and was awarded honorary doctorates from two universities.

Scott was buried in the same cemetery as Bryce, but his grave is marked with a large monument and flourishing praise on the plaque.

Blackstock was instrumental in bringing a correction to their graves. While Scott's plaque notes he was a Canadian confederation poet, it reads, "he is also notorious for his 52-year career in the Department of Indian Affairs. As deputy superintendent, Scott oversaw the assimilationist Indian residential school system for Aboriginal children, stating his goal was 'to get rid of the Indian problem.' In its 2015 report, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission said that the Indian residential school system amounted to cultural genocide."

A historical monument was erected in 2015 to recognize Bryce's commitment to the health, safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children.

"Dr. Bryce's grave is now the most visited grave in Beechwood Cemetery," Blackstock said to cheers from the audience of Alberta educators.

She told them in her keynote address: "You have a chance to raise more Bryces and raise a lot fewer Duncan Campbell Scotts."

"The wounds of history are still bleeding," Cathleen Anne Tenning, a member of the Stz'uminus First Nation on Vancouver Island, said at Canada's History Forum in Ottawa in 2016.

**Dr. Peter Bryce with his granddaughter Ellie. Bryce was the federal chief medical officer who raised the alarm on the disastrous state of residential schools in 1907. His findings were ignored by the government. PHOTOGRAPH BRYCE FAMILY**

This, she said, was evidenced not only in Indigenous graduation rates “but in other devastating realities that can no longer be ignored.”

According to the [2011 National Household Survey](#): 29 per cent of Indigenous people (age 25 to 64) had not completed high school, compared with 12 per cent of non-Indigenous people.

Tenning, who received the 2008 Governor General’s Award for excellence in teaching Canadian history, [included in those realities](#) the high number of Indigenous children in care, families still living in poverty, the ongoing cycles of violence and addiction and the rate at which Indigenous youth are taking their lives through suicide.

First Nations youth experience suicide rates [five to seven times higher](#) than non-Indigenous youth, and Inuit youth are at 11 times the national average, according to Indigenous Services Canada.

Shelly Hamelin is a supervisor of student services at Northland School Division in Alberta. Four years ago, when she was the principal of a school in the tiny community of Fort Chipewyan, she came across a student in the hallway, having a rough day, not going into class. Hamelin said she tried to persuade the girl to go back, explaining why learning how to read was important and how she would grow up one day and run her own home.

“And the child said, ‘No, I’m not. I’m not gonna grow up. I’m not going to be here. I’m going to be dead by 15.’ ”

She was 10.

“And she looked out the window and pointed to the graveyard across from the school and said, ‘That’s where I’ll be.’ ”

“It was devastating,” said Hamelin, who quickly sought mental health support for the girl. Although Hamelin is not in the same school today, she still keeps tabs on her. “We’re one year away from when she said she would not be here.”

At the Edmonton gathering, Justice Murray Sinclair, chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and now a senator, asked educators to hold up phones with photos of their favourite child or grandchild aged 5, 6, 7 or thereabouts.

“Now imagine,” he said, “that the government took that child away for no reason other than wanting the child to not be like you.”

The residential schools run by the government and Christian churches that operated from 1831 to 1996 were the cornerstone of colonial policies that included war, starvation, disease and relocation designed to “assimilate” native peoples into European societies so Europe could claim ownership over the land and its resources.

There was no secrecy around Canada’s [intention of assimilation](#), or eradication of native ways of living.

“The residential schools run by the government and Christian churches that operated from 1831 to 1996 were the cornerstone of colonial policies that included war, starvation, disease and relocation designed to “assimilate” native peoples into European societies so Europe could claim ownership over the land and its resources.”





“I want to get rid of the Indian problem,” the aforementioned Scott said when making residential schools compulsory for Indigenous children. “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”

As Jesse Wenté, a broadcaster, writer and director of the Indigenous Screen Office, told the educators, “I am the embodiment of what Canada hoped to achieve through the previous 150 years of Indigenous policy. From the colonial nation state to an assimilated First Nations man with a settler father and an Anishinaabe mother, divorced from my community, from my culture, from my language, from our stories and from our lives.

“This was, after all, the goal of residential schools, the most pernicious and diabolical assault on Indigenous peoples.”

Said Colinda Clyne, an Anishinaabe woman who is an Ontario curriculum lead for First Nation, Métis and Inuit education: “The colonial assimilation experiment has been so successful that many students don’t self-identify as Indigenous.”

According to the [Toronto school board census portrait](#), “Aboriginal people are much less visibly different from others in a very diverse city like Toronto, and are often ‘hidden in plain view.’

“This cultural anonymity can act as a shield against racism as many Aboriginal people choose not to self-identify in order to avoid the risk of racial stereotyping and discrimination.”

**Jesse Wenté, a broadcaster, writer and director of the Indigenous Screen Office, described himself as an assimilated First Nations man and the embodiment of what Canada hoped to achieve through the previous 150 years of Indigenous policy. PHOTOGRAPH NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS**



When Indigenous students hide their identities to escape the racist implications of inferiority, teachers have to practise assuming there are more Indigenous students in their classes than they know.

The Truth and Reconciliation report was released in 2015, based on interviews with more than 6,000 witnesses. Its 94 calls to actions were a rare moment of reckoning on Canada's conscience.

Many provincial governments, including Ontario, publicly committed to implementing the recommendations on education, including making "age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada" mandatory for school students.

Saskatchewan developed an online resource named [Supporting Reconciliation in Saskatchewan Schools](#) to help educators learn and teach that curriculum.

The Alberta government pledged to professionally develop teachers with foundational knowledge and formed a Joint Commitment to Action in 2016 among associations of teachers, superintendents, university deans and school boards.

So, progress, perhaps? The first steps of a long journey?

Blackstock is having none of it. " 'We are making progress' " is not the answer that I want to hear," she said.

**A First Nations children's advocate says provinces and territories are avoiding their responsibility when it comes to the 2016 ruling from the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal which said the federal government discriminates against Indigenous children. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director of First Nations Child and Family Caring Society holds a press conference regarding First Nations child welfare in Ottawa on Thursday, Sept. 15, 2016. PHOTOGRAPH SEAN KILPATRICK/THE CANADIAN PRESS**

“We have to understand that every time we accept their ‘Be patient, we’re going to be taking first steps,’ we’re setting an example for First Nations kids that you’re not worth the money. That you’re not worth the effort and that you’re not worth standing up for.”

The Truth and Reconciliation report is only the latest in a line of public reports on Canada’s treatment of Aboriginal students.

In addition to Dr. Bryce’s reports, there was the 1967 [research on Saskatchewan residential schools](#) by social worker George Caldwell, who criticized the operations of schools that left the students to fend for themselves as neither Euro-Canadians nor children immersed in Indigenous cultures, who were then marginalized and often unemployed, and “exposed to a life of crime and alcoholism.”

“We have to understand that every time we accept their ‘Be patient, we’re going to be taking first steps,’ we’re setting an example for First Nations kids that you’re not worth the money. That you’re not worth the effort and that you’re not worth standing up for.”

— CINDY BLACKSTOCK

The same year, Alex Sims noted in a report commissioned by the federal government the underfunding of First Nations schools, the lack of equitable outcomes for their students and lack of Indigenous content in the curriculum.

In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples brought former residential school students to public attention and recommended a public inquiry into the effects of those schools.

“Canada has known about the inequalities with First Nations kids for 112 years, and they’re still at the first steps,” Blackstock said.

The wounds of history are still bleeding.

“When the nuns at St. Joseph’s (in Thunder Bay) would torture (my grandmother), hitting her, whipping her, striking her tongue with a ruler or freezing it to the flagpole outside because she spoke Ojibwe,” Wente said, “the goal was not just to stop her from speaking

our language, but to stop me as well and to stop my children from speaking it as well.”

Rote reading of land acknowledgments at school every morning does not remedy these effects of ongoing colonization.

It requires schools to embrace decolonial thinking. “Decolonization” has become a buzzword in education, even before its meaning has been unpacked, and is used as an inaccurate stand-in for anti-racism, or equity, or more vaguely, interchanged with Indigenous resistance.

Scholarly views of decolonization range from a political process that seeks to return sovereignty to Indigenous peoples to a social reframing of narratives about Indigenous cultural practices to individual healing journeys.

What decolonization is not, though, is a footnote.

It’s not an addendum to the process of equity. Indigenous peoples are not an ethnic minority seeking inclusion in the existing structures. They have their own nations, own governance, own laws that pre-date the establishment of Canada, and they continue to be pushed out of their own lands for the benefit of settlers.

Decolonizing is not just about obligations to embedding Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum. It's also about valuing that knowledge, acknowledging other worldviews and growing the number of Indigenous leaders in our school systems.

Decolonization is about sharing power, about collaborating rather than jostling for supremacy. It's not enough to "include" Indigenous people in existing structures. Those structures have to alter.

What would altered structures look like?

There are at least two examples of education agreements between First Nations and federal and provincial governments. One is the [Mi'kmaq Education Act](#) that passed in Parliament and Nova Scotia legislature in 1998, which gives participating First Nations jurisdiction over elementary and secondary schools as well as management responsibilities for post-secondary programs.

The other is the [2017 agreement](#) between Anishinabek First Nations and the Government of Canada that gives full educational authority to participating nations.

Both emphasize language, culture and identity in their curriculum. [A report in 2014](#) found the Mi'kmaq system in Nova Scotia had high school graduation rates among First Nation students at nearly 88 per cent, compared to the national average of 35 per cent.

Change is possible within provincially funded schools, too.

One example is the award-winning [Braided Journeys graduation coach program](#) in place at 14 schools of the Edmonton Catholic School District that has increased school retention and graduation rates for First Nations, Inuit and Métis students.

The program chiefly altered the physical structure of the school by offering Indigenous students a safe space.

"It wasn't always a welcome approach," said Pam Sparklingeyes, program manager for Indigenous Learning Services at Edmonton Catholic Schools. "Administrators needed to be convinced that it was important enough they needed to set aside a whole room in their building for the use of Indigenous students."

But it is essential.

"The Braided Journeys room was like my home away from home," said Sean Grey, an alumnus from Blessed Oscar Romero High School. "I felt it was a place I could calm down. I made friends I still talk to, to this day."

Grey also struggled financially, which meant access to food was very important.

"I was hungry throughout the day and we could get a snack between classes ... Access to medicines also helped me during anxiety attacks."

Donita Large, a graduation coach for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students at Archbishop O'Leary High School in Edmonton, said "for some of our students they spend a lot of time in the Braided Journeys room."

In this school, a storage room with a wall of windows was converted into a space with tables, chairs, computers, a fridge, a microwave and books. "As they continue to grow in confidence," said Large, "they start to reach out to other parts of the school. We see they feel they're grounded in both worlds."

Grey had transitioned from a small school on her reserve to the city. "As an Indigenous person I felt out of place. I didn't recognize anybody and didn't see anybody I could connect with. I felt an



immediate connection when I went into that space (the Braided Journeys room) because people were talking about sweetgrass and sage and I felt connected to my Indigenous roots.”

She is now a student of Aboriginal education at the University of Alberta.

Another structural change was in staffing itself.

All 14 schools have at least one full-time staff member such as Large dedicated to working one-on-one with students who self-identify as Indigenous, to facilitate transitions from junior high to secondary and then on to post-secondary education. Larger schools also have a part-time coach.

Large said she hosts welcome events and meets one on one with students who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit and looks at their specific needs.

At Archbishop O’Leary, the coaches conducted smudge ceremonies in the Braided Journeys room on Monday mornings. “At the beginning I used to have to deal with other students making comments,” said Large.

So she worked with the principals and teachers and the school came together to tackle that.

“Before we had this model, there was a lot of helicopter type of work,” said Sparklingeyes. “It was a lot of part-time liaison type work. And in that type of model it was really hard to build relationships, and what we know in our culture is that relationships are important.”

“This year we decided to have staff smudge ceremonies so all the staff are aware and participating. So that they, too, can educate and talk about what we’re doing and why we do it. So it’s

**Sean Grey is an alumnus from Blessed Oscar Romero High School in Edmonton for whom the Braided Journeys room was “like my home away from home.” April 2019 photo.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

not about one Indigenous person in the school trying to explain things to 1,700 students. It's very much a team effort."

At St. Joseph High School when the program started in 2009, [the graduation rate](#) for Indigenous students who had stayed in school for three years was 14.9 per cent. By 2011, it stood at 43.8 per cent, surpassing the provincial rate for Indigenous students, which was at 40.2 per cent.

The school district saw consistently higher third-year high school completion rates for Indigenous students than the rest of Alberta, with 57.8 per cent graduating in 2017 compared to 53.3 per cent provincially.

That year, Sparklingeyes said, schools with the Braided Journeys program saw an Indigenous graduation rate of 75.5 per cent.



## AS A BLACK STUDENT, HE WAS TOLD TO DREAM SMALL

He had hoped things would change for his son

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 6, 2019 | OTTAWA

“I can’t believe what you say because I can see what you do.”

— JAMES BALDWIN

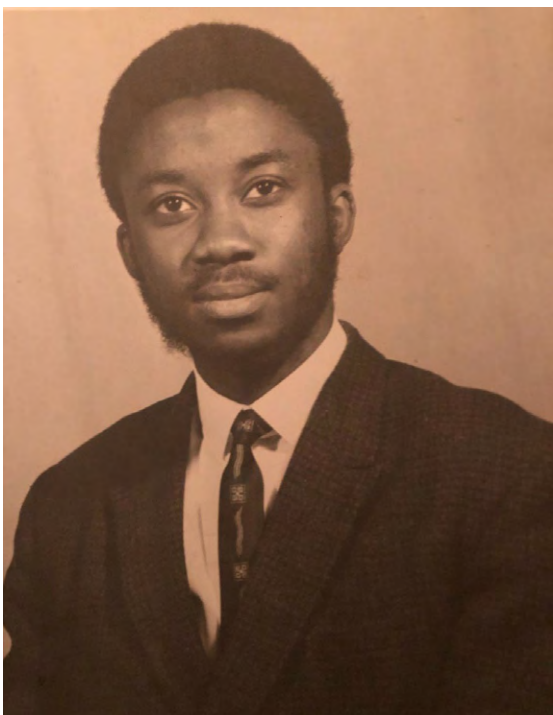
**O**ne fine morning in the mid-1960s, Donald Edward Sharpe, a Black undergraduate student at Oxford University, was walking to his church, where he taught Sunday school. He passed a house where a little white girl sat on the steps in front of her home. He said hello and walked on.

Common courtesy, or crime?

Soon after, a group of white men surrounded him and almost beat him to death.

That incident was a nasty jolt for the man who in hopes of escaping racism, set his sights on the other side of the Atlantic. America was glowing from its recently passed Civil Rights Act that

**Mandela Mahatma Sharpe, left, and his father Richard Sharpe in Ottawa in May 2019. The Sharpe family’s experience of generational discrimination is an indication of how anti-Blackness is baked into the Ontario education system. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR /THE TORONTO STAR**



outlawed discrimination based on race. But he saw Canada, specifically Ontario, where the last racially segregated school had just closed, as an ideal place to settle with his wife.

Donald Sharpe was likely unaware of Canada's own history of slavery and certainly unaware that Indigenous children were being scooped from their homes and fostered or adopted out to mainly white families, or that they had been dying in abusive residential schools estimated to be in the thousands.

He would soon find out, though, that desegregation was not the same as integration.

The couple settled in London, Ont., and a year later bore their first of six children, a son, Richard.

Richard Sharpe, now in his 50s, sits in an Ottawa café as he tells of his family's experiences. What they had to contend with

is part of a broader pattern that establishes how anti-Blackness is deeply entrenched in Ontario school practices.

Sharpe has vivid memories of the first day of Grade 1 at Lord Nelson Public School in London in the early 1970s.

"I remember going to the schoolyard and a group of white kids surrounded me and said, 'Why are you here? You don't belong here.' So I turned around and went home. And my father said, 'Why are you home? If they don't let you in, fight and go in.'"

So every morning Sharpe would fight the boys to get in at the school gates, and every evening he would fight them to get out of the gates.

"I learned to fight," he says. Eventually, he also learned something else. Beat up the instigator — the leaders — and the others will back off. "I learned to fight strategically at a very young age."

While his teachers liked him — he was a bright kid — they didn't intervene, he said, and he did get into a lot of trouble for defending himself.

"I never instigated violence. But I was the one charged by the school administrators with the crime."

When Sharpe, who calls himself a daydreamer, told his Grade 3 teacher he wanted to be an astronaut, she said, "Richard, people like you don't become astronauts."

"I remember how I felt looking around the class and realizing I was the only Black child and that the others were being encouraged to follow their dreams. I started to think differently of what I could attain in my life. So I focused my attention on sports and art."

**Donald Sharpe in the 1960s — when he decided to move to Canada from the UK. The Sharpe family's experience of generational discrimination is an indication of how anti-Blackness is baked into the Ontario education system. PHOTOGRAPH SHARPE FAMILY**



Around this time, in the 1970s, the Toronto School Board, historically the most diverse in the country, had been given recommendations by a Working Group on Multiculturalism to overcome a “fundamental incompatibility” between white teachers and non-white students. They also implemented programs such as Appraisal for Better Curriculum to cater to multi-racial students.

Such discussions didn’t impact Sharpe’s school life. His mother had a Grade 8 education and told him to go to school and be a good boy. “She didn’t know how to manage the bureaucracy at school,” Sharpe said. “Parents are often concerned there’ll be reprisals for children and they’re not equipped to deal with that.”

Meanwhile, his father completed a master’s in education from the University of Western Ontario. It took him almost 25 years to land a permanent teaching job in Canada.

“That was very difficult for him,” Sharpe said. “It was difficult for him to advocate for us because he couldn’t get into the system himself.”

By the time Sharpe was in Grade 6, the fighting, at least, had stopped. “But I realized people were afraid of me. I was big and strong. So I thought if I could behave in a way that made me more respectable, things would be easier.

“I became the epitome of calm. I smiled more, cultivated a discourse that was very articulate. I learned how to behave and I understood the unwritten rules about being Black in Canada and how to keep myself safe.”

Years later, in 1992, following the Yonge St. riot — some call it an uprising against police brutality — Stephen Lewis wrote a [Report on Race Relations](#) for premier Bob Rae. It was the first to officially name the injustice in education as anti-Black racism. He called the lack of progress in dealing with racism in education “shocking.”

“It’s as if virtually nothing has changed for visible minority students in the school system over the last 10 years,” Lewis wrote.

“Everywhere, the refrain of the Toronto students (was) ... where are the courses in Black history? Where are the visible minority teachers? Why are racist incidents and epithets tolerated?”

Another report that year, [Towards a New Beginning](#), identified concerns for Black students including streaming below ability (pushing them out of university-bound courses), high dropout rates, lack of Black educators, Eurocentric curriculum and interpersonal racism.

But in the late '90s, Ontario’s Conservative Mike Harris government cancelled the requirements that school boards develop anti-racism and ethnocultural equity policies. [It took steps](#) to remove references to pro-equity goals from future curriculum policy documents. It also implemented a [stricter enforcement of suspensions and expulsions](#), even though studies in the U.S., U.K. and Nova Scotia since the mid-1970s had all shown the disproportionate impact of suspensions and expulsions on Black students and students with disabilities.

It would take a decade to [replace those zero-tolerance policies](#) with a progressive discipline approach.

Fast-forward to the new century.

Sharpe was a federal government worker in Ottawa. His wife, Sandhya Singh, was a university-educated woman whose father was a teacher. They checked all the boxes in the respectability requirements. “We figured we had everything to advocate for our children.”

Years after they had given up hope of conceiving, they had a baby in 2001. "It was a miracle baby," Sharpe said. Thinking they could only have one child, the couple heaped greatness into his name: Mandela Mahatma. (They ended up having three children.)

"When he started school, we thought we'd just be present, engage with teachers and make sure everything's good," Sharpe said.

"But right after Grade 1, the tone and approach with him changed. He was suddenly the problem.

"We raised him to be opinionated. To speak his mind, to ask for what he needs, to challenge.

"He had difficulties reading and writing. He was very verbal. He would speak to (adults) as though he was also an adult. And people didn't like that."

He asked too many questions, a teacher said, who then made Mandela stand in a small square made of tape on the floor. "They said this was behavioural adjustment required to ensure he and the other children would get the best out of school," Sharpe said.

"Too loud," "disruptive," "too rough in the schoolyard" were some of the descriptors sent home from school.

After many run-ins with the school, Sharpe and Singh decided to home-school Mandela and their other kids. They did so for years.

Students who don't have that option end up risking suspensions and expulsions from the public school system.

The Roots of Youth Violence report to the provincial government in 2008 argued that Ontario's school suspensions and expulsions contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline.

"We said we can't do anything about anti-Black racism without tackling education," said Rinaldo Walcott, a University of Toronto professor who wrote one of the background papers for that report. The authors Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling also raised serious concerns about the Eurocentricity of the curriculum, pointing to the "use of stereotypes, the failure to include the negative history of Canada's interaction with Aboriginal peoples, the institution of slavery, exclusionary race-based immigration policies and so on."

After five years at home with his family, Mandela went back to school in Grade 7. The tone of the feedback from school changed in the higher grades: "Threatening" and "physically imposing." A drama teacher once called home to say she was concerned that Mandela had made comments on drug use in class, and someone else said he smelled of marijuana. "Yes," said Mandela when he came home, he and his classmates had floated the idea of being a pothead as part of a skit. His parents felt racial stereotypes influenced these interpretations, especially because he has no history of drug use.

Matters came to a head in the spring of 2017, when Mandela was in Grade 10 and got suspended after he accused his vice-principal of racially profiling his friends. It happened after the vice-principal told a group of assembled Black and brown kids to remove their bandanas. Mandela wasn't wearing one that day, but "I had seen many students wear them," Mandela said. "Nobody stopped them.

"I was asked to go to the office, where I thought we'd at least have a discussion," he said.

But he was just handed a day's suspension. "Persistent opposition to authority" was the reason in the note.

“There was at least one dress-code assembly,” Mandela recalled. “They had never mentioned bandanas.”

An Ottawa District School Board spokesperson said that while the board was familiar with the case, “due to privacy legislation we are not able to comment on the details of situations involving individual students.”

After exhausting the appeal process within the school board, Sharpe turned to community support to deal with the suspension and found “almost every Black family I met had similar experiences.”

A coalition of Black parents was formed, following in the footsteps of a long Canadian history of Black parental advocacy.

Documents in the Archives of Ontario show that as far back as 1842 — even as Ontario’s education system was being shaped — Black parents in Hamilton, in Chatham, in Windsor were calling on white trustees to intervene in what was happening with local schools, especially with segregation, said Natasha Henry, a historian and Peel school board curriculum consultant.

“We had parents challenging that in the court system and pushing for racial equality,” she said.

In Ottawa, getting together gave voice to a common experience for Black families. Black families began coming to Sharpe in droves. “They call to say, ‘my child is catching hell at school’ or ‘the teacher is humiliating them, what can we do,’” Sharpe said.

The coalition has been pushing the school board for identity-based data and continuous engagement with the Black community.

“We have anecdotal qualitative data,” Sharpe said.

“We have stories. This is how we feel. What we don’t have is the hard numbers.”

The Sharpe family’s experiences are echoed across the province.

In 2015, the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal [found there was a glaring racial disparity](#) in Durham’s public and Catholic board schools after [parents of Black youths complained](#) of racial bullying and unduly severe discipline ranging from suspensions to arrests.

Another report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2017 stated that “racialized students receive harsher treatment or punishment than their white peers for similar behaviour.”

The Toronto District School Board remains the national leader in gathering detailed race-based data on students. [Student outcomes](#) — dropout rates, suspension rates, streaming practices, (non-gifted) special education designations — show that Black children in particular continue to bear the brunt of the failures of schools.

Black students had the lowest rate of graduation and highest rate of suspension and expulsion between 2011 and 2016, compared to white students and other racialized groups. Almost half

“Student outcomes — dropout rates, suspension rates, streaming practices, (non-gifted) special education designations — show that Black children in particular continue to bear the brunt of the failures of schools.”

of all high school students expelled were Black. (The researchers did not include Indigenous students in this study.)

After five years of high school, Black students have a dropout rate twice that of white students. According to the board's Enhancing Equity Task Force report, 53 per cent of Black high schools students were in academic programs of study — the pathways to university education — compared to 81 per cent of white students and 80 per cent of other racialized students. They were also underrepresented among gifted students, while white boys whose parents have prestigious jobs are [overrepresented](#).

Since structural anti-Black racism does not recognize national or municipal boundaries or fizzle out as it traverses Highway 401, schools across Ontario could extrapolate from Toronto's data and embark on the hard task of transformation. Instead, many continue to treat each complaint from Black families as one-offs, as rootless anecdotes rather than part of a pattern of anti-Blackness in the system.

"Where is the evidence of racism?" they ask," said Sharpe.

The late U.S. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison once said: "The function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being."

A few researchers sought to document Black experiences in Canadian school boards to provide this evidence.

The result was a seminal report from the community perspective that made for a compelling reflection of the historical and systemic nature of anti-Black racism in schools.

Towards Race Equity in Education, co-authored by Carl James, chair of the faculty of education at York University, and Tana Turner, of Turner Consulting Group, found the TDSB data validated community experiences in school systems across the GTA.

Black students and their parents told researchers that they were being streamed below their ability, and their streaming began in kindergarten.

"A kindergarten teacher told a parent her child isn't academic material," said Turner. "That gets documented and put into the student's academic record, then gets read by the Grade 1 teacher. If they act on that assessment it creates a self-fulfilling cycle."

Societal inability — and therefore educators' inability — to see Blackness as an asset leads to insidious anti-Blackness in our social institutions. [A Yale Child Center study](#) in 2016 showed teachers' implicit biases against Black students [begin in pre-school](#).

That these outcomes are showing up across generations shows that this isn't about the students, said Turner. "This is really a systemic issue that's baked into our school system."

All the data in the world — apart from being a tool to identify a problem — cannot by itself shift outcomes. This is chiefly because data (if collected and analyzed with integrity) is rational, prejudice is not.

Data can also be manipulated. In 2009, [the Toronto Star found](#) school principals formally "excluding" students to stay out of suspension statistics, because exclusions were not reported to the education ministry.

Turner's conversations with staff of school boards since the York report was released found Black parents were being "pressured to put students voluntarily into expulsion programs" that are learning programs for expelled students, so they wouldn't count in the expulsion statistics.

"What we heard from students and parents and teachers is that Black students don't drop out of school, they're being pushed out," said Turner.

Said the U of T's Walcott, an associate professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education: "When you begin with an attitude towards slaves, saying slaves can't be taught to read and write ... that's the attitude that plays in the system, all the way from segregation to now, the idea that Black people are poor and need to be educated. To be sanitized. To be taught how to be clean. They need to be helped but also disciplined."

To determine education that is relevant to all our lives and empowering to our children, change needs to happen on three levels: structural operations, systemic policies and individual actions.

That the Toronto board is phasing out streaming at Grade 9 is an example of structural change. That it is implementing a targeted strategy to improve Black student outcomes with its Strategy for Black Student Achievement and Excellence is an example of systemic change.

Yet, if all that data, all those policy recommendations and plans by school boards only manage to nudge the needle from A to B, then it's time to deal with an uncomfortable truth: individuals need to change.

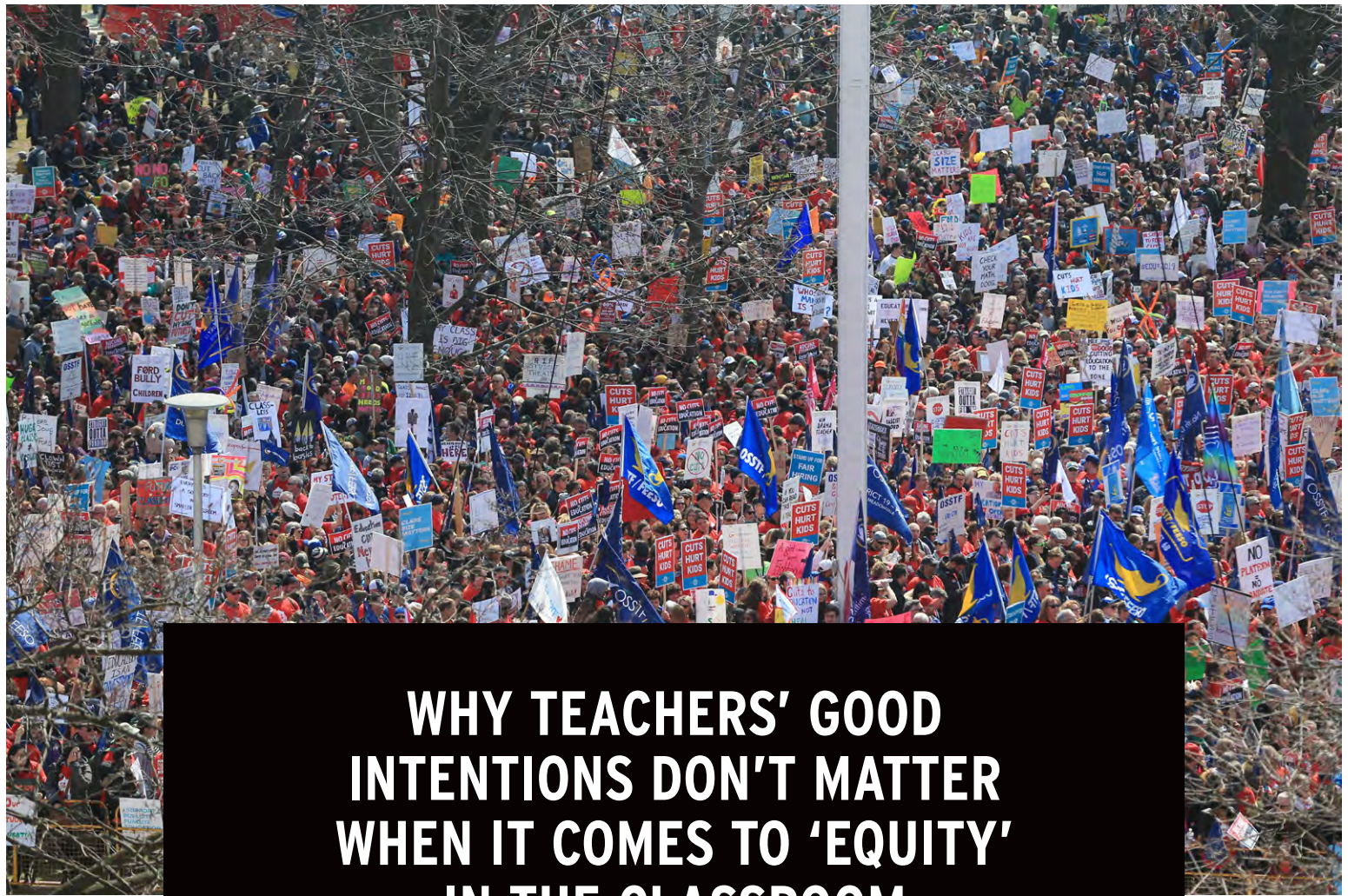
What teachers, as the frontline workers, do impacts an individual's chances of personal and financial success and growth as a global citizen. This, in turn, impacts our economic and social prospects as a nation.

How could teachers start to address anti-Black racism? In Ontario, where a majority of teachers are white women, seeking equity means asking people least affected by racism to understand it and deeply feel the need for change.

The first step to that change requires an understanding of what oppression looks like.

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*Mandela graduated from high school in June 2019 on the honour roll and as an Ontario Scholar. He received a scholarship to play soccer at Guelph University. He is actively pursuing his dream of a pro soccer career. His father, Richard Sharpe, said Mandela was asked to practise with the Ottawa Fury professional team for parts of the summer.*



# WHY TEACHERS' GOOD INTENTIONS DON'T MATTER WHEN IT COMES TO 'EQUITY' IN THE CLASSROOM

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 12, 2019 | TORONTO

"There's no such thing as neutral education."

— PAULO FREIRE

If the school year in September 2018 had begun under the cloud of a repealed modern sex-education curriculum in Ontario, cancelled Indigenous curriculum writing projects and \$100 million cuts in school repairs, by early April 2019 the drumbeat of unrest had only escalated.

More than 150,000 students from over 700 schools across Ontario walked out to protest Premier Doug Ford's plans to raise class sizes, have fewer teachers, ban cellphones in classes and mandate four online courses for high school students.

Thousands of education workers, students and allies from across Ontario gather at Queen's Park on Saturday April 6, 2019 to protest proposed cuts to education.

PHOTOGRAPH RENE JOHNSTON/THE TORONTO STAR

That month, Halton [school board trustees told Lisa Thompson](#), then minister of education, in a letter that increased class sizes would inevitably lead to eliminating specialized courses that had fewer students, as they couldn't be replaced online.

"Expected course offering losses will be felt most in classes with marginalized and at-risk students, upper-year arts, specialized math and skilled trades and technology courses, all of which are largely unsuited for the online environment," they wrote.

Education in Canada — even though it's administered provincially — is among the most vaunted in the world according to multiple metrics. It appeared in the top 10 for reading, math and science in tests on international assessments that the Programme for International Student Assessment conducts to measure educational performance among the OECD, a grouping of mostly rich nations. It also found children of new immigrants quickly reach the levels of achievement as their peers.

Yet, while the education system works for most students, it doesn't work for all. Despite decades of concern, the system continues to fail the same marginalized groups — mainly Indigenous students and Black students.

This is why words like "equity" and "anti-oppression" have become part of the educators' lexicon. But what do they mean? Are they merely the newest in a long line of buzzwords that trickle down from academics and armchair experts who never set foot in classrooms?

A white, male principal from the Toronto school board that gathers detailed race-based data on students said, "Talking of equity is an uncomfortable topic for people like me. Teachers mean well. If they thought someone was suffering due to an equity-related issue, they help them out." He spoke on condition his name not be published.

The request for anonymity shows he knows his opinion is not officially acceptable, but it's clear he doesn't understand why. Here is how that kind of thinking obstructs change:

- It centres issues of equity around the discomfort of people in positions of power.
- It holds as true the fallacy that equity just requires teachers to be well-intentioned.
- It confuses "equity" with "racism."

In defining the word equity, [Renu Mandhane](#), the chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, said, "We're not talking about treating everyone the same. We're talking about how you treat different people appropriately so that they can achieve equitable outcomes."

Putting equity into operation requires practising education through an anti-oppression lens. An understanding of anti-oppression makes transparent the societal power structures that lead to some groups of people being valued and others being viewed as deficient.

"An understanding of anti-oppression makes transparent the societal power structures that lead to some groups of people being valued and others being viewed as deficient."

School board equity plans tend to be at pains to point out the “unintended” or “accidental” biases of teachers. Yet, among the dozens of teachers who spoke to this reporter, not one appeared to be ill-intentioned.

Intentions — unless from open and overt bigots — are irrelevant. A deeper understanding requires focusing on the outcomes of oppression.

For instance, in looking at the racial makeup of the cast of a school musical, a school might find their choice of who gets to be the princess and who are the servants results in signalling messages of race-based inferiority.

“Every society is really governed by hidden laws, by unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people, and ours is no exception,” writes James Baldwin in *No One Knows My Name*.

In Canadian society, that centre is whiteness.

It’s important to distinguish between whiteness and white people.

Whiteness is an academic term that describes social hierarchy by race. It’s the system that prescribes which beliefs, practices, habits and attitudes are the norm, and then enables the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin colour.

Whiteness would have simply been one of the pack of global dominant groups had it not been for colonization and cultural imperialism that posited it as the universal norm, the unbiased standard-bearer of our time, the representative of all that is good and decent and the inexorable outcome of progress and modernity.

How might this play out in school? I witnessed two examples. Last summer, a South Asian schoolteacher from Toronto said she would not go out in the sun, lest she become dark. In December 2018, a white TDSB teacher asked her class to draw sketches of kids playing in the snow. Then she helpfully instructed the students to colour in red cheeks.

An anti-oppression lens would help both teachers understand how their words centred on whiteness and marginalized dark-skinned children by linking normalcy and desirability to skin tone.

“White people” — not a biological term — are closest to this centre of power, with heterosexual, able-bodied, wealthy males at the apex. They benefit even if they don’t actively try.

The question, therefore, isn’t “Am I racist?” but “Am I a beneficiary?” This would take teachers away from defensiveness on race issues and help them objectively assess the psychological impact of their actions.

Race is anthropological fiction. Scientists who completed the [Human Genome Project](#) in 2003 found that genetically humans are more than 99.9 per cent the same. They found that there are likely to be more genetic variations between, say, two Europeans than a European and an African. Racism is the oppressive social outcome of that fiction.

“The question, therefore, isn’t ‘Am I racist?’ but ‘Am I a beneficiary?’ This would take teachers away from defensiveness on race issues and help them objectively assess the psychological impact of their actions.”





White is the identity created by a series of laws from the Atlantic slave trade era to establish the dominance of European kidnappers over African labourers. Using fake science to show Africans as subhuman, it allowed for laws that would render the Africans landless and without human rights.

Who is white can shift from Anglo-Saxons and western Europeans to eastern Europeans, Jewish and Hispanic people.

“Non-white” people can also benefit from the system at a little distance from the centre — so long as they “assimilate” by showing alignment with what whiteness stamps as normal, and so long as they limit the exhibition of their otherness in small, non-threatening doses.

Still, viewing oppression purely through a binary lens of white people and non-white people greatly misses the nuances of marginalization.

It’s not as if only white people are bigots and people with melanin — dumped into one monolithic group — are equity-minded non-bigots.

Depending on the identities that privilege us — gender, skin colour, class, caste, education, sexuality, ability, etc. — we can be oppressors as well as the oppressed in different contexts. Many of us have intersecting identities that interact with power in their own unique ways. Black as an identity occupies the densest of those intersections. Add Black to any identity and the marginalization magnifies instantly.

Just as no understanding of decolonization can begin without centring the voices of Indigenous

**Jeewan Chanicka, Ontario's first superintendent of equity, anti-racism and anti-oppression, leads a half-day workshop for 45 east-end principals and vice-principals in Scarborough in January 2019. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR**



peoples, no understanding of racism can begin without placing anti-Blackness at the centre of it. This is true even if neither the two forms of oppression nor the groups they affect are always separate or distinct.

Since actions that dismantle these oppressions unravel the narratives that drive white supremacy, they benefit all people who are discriminated against.

This is why Jeewan Chanicka, who was Ontario's first superintendent of equity, anti-racism and anti-oppression at the Toronto school board until recently, and appeared around the province urging educators to bring equity to the centre of education, had at least one recurring theme in all his talks: "What is necessary for some is good for all."

Teachers who go to workshops on anti-oppression often ask for what to do next. But no to-do list would be effective

unless teachers learn to stay in the uncomfortable zone of introspection. It's not enough to know what oppression or whiteness means — teachers of all backgrounds have to critically assess their daily choices through this consciousness. They have to learn what they really think and what biases guide their actions.

They might, for instance, reflect on how often they mispronounce or avoid unfamiliar names, how often they mistake one racialized child for another.

Do they view students who don't meet them in the eye as being shifty, because they think meeting eyes is a universal sign of honesty?

Do they use racially coded language such as "school safety" or "those children" or "those parents"? Anti-Black racism, for instance, does not only come from acts of intentional cruelty such as the use of the n-word.

It can also be relayed by teacher indifference, undue impatience or disproportionate punishment.

It shows up in degrading comments about Black children's hair and over-surveillance of their behaviour and even their clothes. ("Hoodies are a school safety issue.")

It appears when teachers buy into tired stereotypes such as white students are all-arounders, East and South Asian students excel at science and math, and Black students are beyond redemption.

A Peel school board report on the perspectives of Black boys found that teachers tended to "play favourites" with South Asian students, whom they viewed as "model" students.

**A poster on the wall of Rose Ave Junior Public School, where teachers are highly engaged in anti-oppression education. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR**

The stereotype masks much, including the myth of the model minority that erases the struggles of poorer or struggling South Asians.

But it is essentially anti-Black because it unfairly implies, "If they can do it, why can't you?" It renders invisible the impact of intergenerational cycles of poverty and trauma that shape children's lives.

Among students who are poor, experiences of discrimination can vary greatly. A child of refugees or immigrants who enjoyed some social capital in their home country has a greater chance of academic success — even if they live on a low income — than the child of a Canadian or Indigenous person shackled in generational chains of subjugation.

We inherit privilege, we inherit prejudices, we inherit trauma.

True equity aims to smash those intergenerational cycles.

Neither teaching nor learning happens in a vacuum. There is no social reset button when the school bell rings every morning. Neither educators nor students leave their personal and social experiences behind when they step into the classroom.

When both come from similar backgrounds, the student experience can be relatively seamless. But what happens when they don't? The burden is on children to adapt to a way of life they have no other exposure to. They are assessed based on how quickly and closely they adhere to the white world standards imposed on them.

A key demand of equity is that it shifts that burden of bridging that gap to the adults.

In January this year, Chanicka, then the equity superintendent, was leading a half-day workshop at a Scarborough secondary school on goal setting for schools. He asked 45 east-end principals and vice-principals who had gathered to establish three goals for the school around achievement, well-being and equity.

"Because Black kids experience racism differently, I will, for instance, be asking what are you doing to reach out to Black kids," he told them.

"A goal," he said, "is the adult learning what needs to happen in service of children."

What is being asked of teachers is not more niceness or compassion or a reinvigorated saviour complex or a need for all of us to get along. What is being asked is intentional strategizing against racism.



## 'NO ONE IS ASHAMED TO BE WHO THEY ARE'

This simple Maori idea is revolutionizing  
teaching in New Zealand

FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 13, 2019 | HAWKE'S BAY, NEW ZEALAND

"Ma te huruhuru, ka rere te manu"  
"Adorn the bird with feathers so it may fly"  
— MAORI PROVERB

**U**nlike many teenagers, the 13 young leaders who have gathered in the school library have good things to say about their school.

"This is my seventh school and it's my favourite," said one.

"Everyone is comfortable — it's family-based. Like, if I need a ride or I'm in trouble I can go to a teacher," said another.

There was more.

"Our principal is so inclusive. He's not Maori but he acknowledges different cultures."

"No one here is ashamed to be who they are."

13 school leaders gather in the library of William Colenso College in eastern city of Napier, New Zealand.

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



“In other schools, there is still a lot of racism. They can feel left out and be ashamed, and they don’t have any opportunity to speak their language.”

“There’s a student support centre so if we’re hungry or need clothing we go there. There’s also a lot of help mentally — a school guidance, a nurse.”

William Colenso College in the eastern city of Napier on New Zealand’s North Island is a Decile 2 secondary school — meaning a school where families are low-income — where 70 per cent of the students identify as Indigenous Maori and 10 per cent as having a Pacific Nation’s heritage.

Flaxmere College in nearby Hastings is a secondary school classified as Decile 1(A) (even more student families are poor), with a student body that is 90 per cent Maori and 10 per cent Samoan.

Both schools have transient populations; both schools have students who come in below curriculum expectations.

Both schools have Teen Parenting Units that act like a daycare for children of teenage parents from all schools in the area, so the parents can continue their education. But the units stigmatize the schools that host them.

In other words, neither school enjoys a good reputation in the Hawke’s Bay area.

Yet both schools have excelled on standardized test scores.

Both schools have won the Prime Minister’s Education Excellence awards; last year Flaxmere

**Mere Berryman, 2017 finalist for the New Zealander of the Year award, is one of the chief architects of the Te Kotahitanga program that has so transformed New Zealand education.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

won the Supreme Award while William Colenso won the Excellence Award for inclusive education. William Colenso also won that award for leadership in 2017.

Both schools embed the principles of a professional development program called [Te Kotahitanga](#).

In 2001, professors Russell Bishop, Mere Berryman and a team of researchers from the University of Waikato set out to do something unusual. In looking for solutions to vexing questions on underachievement of Indigenous students in English-language schools, they spoke to teachers and principals of secondary schools, but they also went to the students, and their families.

What they found formed the basis of Te Kotahitanga, a program that eventually so transformed school cultures, and student achievement, that in 2013 Saskatchewan asked Berryman to lead similar research on Indigenous students in the province.

Yet New Zealand's government scrapped it in 2013 because it was deemed expensive.

Today, Berryman, who is Maori, heads a research and professional development unit named [Poutama Pounamu](#) at the university's faculty of education in the city of Tauranga. Its team of 20 bridges the gap between the ivory tower and the field.

She is adamant that any examination of student success in New Zealand go beyond Te Kotahitanga. "I say you need to really look at what we've learned since then."

Her team put what had been learned while the program operated [into a blueprint](#) on guiding educational transformation, with family an essential part of the mix. They submitted this blueprint to the government that had come to power in 2017 on a platform that promised to restart Te Kotahitanga.

Separately, they partner with school clusters in the country offering professional development training to staff for months at a time.

Since the team members couldn't be on the ground all the time, they puzzled over how to accelerate training across schools and still make the learning process slow enough that teachers would absorb their own reflections and apply their new understanding every day. How to scale up but also create a "slow burn learn" that is more effective than a one-day professional development?

The result is an 18-month "Blended Learning" course conducted online and face to face that educators say moved them from powerlessness to confidence, from fatigue to vitality, and revolutionized their teaching practices.

Poutama Pounamu has about 160 school contracts across the nation that range from six months to two years.

Meanwhile, a cost-benefit analysis by the education ministry in 2015 found that to be effective any intervention would need to bring about a change in achievement for at least one in 30 Maori students. Te Kotahitanga Phase 5 made a difference for around one in eight.

On June 1, the ruling coalition government of the centre-left Labour Party, nationalist New Zealand First and left-wing Green Party [came through in its budget](#), announcing \$38 million (Canadian) over three years to test the new blueprint.

New Zealand is a tiny country with mostly uninhabited spaces. Blue waters of the South Pacific Ocean crash on black sandy beaches. Hot springs and geysers gush out of the grounds — the still-smouldering remnants of volcano eruptions from millennia ago. And during the month of May, its countryside undulates with looming hills lush with native trees that remain steadfastly green through the autumn season.

Seafaring Polynesian Islanders arrived in New Zealand in the 13th century and lived in isolation, developing over time their unique culture and language. The Maori say when Europeans came, they were asked “What are you?” and they responded “Normal. We are normal.”

In their language, the word for “normal” was “Maori.”

That’s the word that now describes the 600,000 Maori, or 15 per cent, of the estimated resident population of almost 4.2 million people, according to [the last census](#) in 2013. The majority, or 74 per cent of the population, identify as Pakeha or white European settlers, 11.8 per cent as [Asian](#), and 7.4 per cent as [Pasifika](#) or Pacific Islanders.

New Zealand’s official languages are Maori, sign language and English.

It’s quite common in New Zealand to hear words from Te Reo Maori mixed with English by people of all backgrounds. Apart from the ubiquitous “*kia ora*” greeting, one might hear about *whanau* (extended family) or *whakapapa* (lineage) or *kaupapa* (agenda). “Wh” makes the sound “Fa.”

Maori protocols include respectful introductions that begin with describing the features of the region the speaker’s ancestors come from, who they are in relation to their tribe, a recitation of their lineage or ancestry and finally their name.

Still, underneath the progressive international image of New Zealand and a national attitude of “we’re not as bad as Australia,” [Maori experiences of historical trauma](#) mirror those of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the U.S., Australia and other colonized nations.

The Maori are undergoing a [crisis of suicide](#) at the rate of 23.72 people dying per 100,000, almost double that of non-Maori suicides.

A [Child and Youth Mortality Review](#) Committee report in 2018 found that 20 Maori children aged 10 to 14 killed themselves in a five-year period, which makes up about 60 per cent of all suicides in that age group.

The Native School systems established in 1867 sought to “civilize” the Maori and banned cultural practices and language in schools. Funding was conditional on the employment of English in schools. That legacy continued even after the system closed in 1969.

“We have had to leave our culture at the school gate to achieve in schools that marginalized and belittled our cultural identity,” said Berryman.

There are 2,500 state-run schools in the country and every school is a Crown entity. While New Zealand performs above average among OECD nations, or rich countries, a [disproportionate number](#) of Maori and Pasifika students perform below OECD levels.

If school reforms are making strides toward restoring Maori excellence, they are thanks to decades of Maori resistance. This ranges from demanding a return to New Zealand’s foundational document — the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, which promises equal benefits to Maori as well as Europeans — to activists such as the group Nga Tamatoa, which in the ‘70s drove the broader discussion to include Maori identity and language. It also includes the emergence of academics such as Bishop and Berryman, pushing for equity.

Donna Sanders was comfortable in her role as teacher in Raureka School in Napier. After all, she had been a dedicated teacher at that school for about 30 years. Although she was a white woman who grew up in Blenheim on the South Island, where there was one Maori family and no Pasifika children, she cared for her students equally. Heck, she didn’t even see the difference in their skin colours.

“I’ve said it. I know I’ve said it. I hear myself saying it, that I don’t see colour in my classroom. Well, it’s wrong. And I’ve realized that — it’s one of those epiphanies I’ve had — what are you saying, Donna? You should, in fact, see colour.”

Sanders is about halfway through the Blended Learning course and already, she said, “I think I’ve had the biggest change in my whole attitudes and thoughts and teaching than I’ve had in 40 years of teaching.”

The course begins with a two-day face-to-face session at a *marae* (pronounced maar-eye) — a compound for Maori gatherings that contains open grounds as well as a large meeting house with intricately carved woodwork in statues, doorways and along the edges of long sloping triangular roofs.

In a *marae*, many teachers enter a rare space where their culture is minoritized. That discomfort and vulnerability opens up opportunities to make connections. There are two such gatherings during the course.

Online, the first activity of nine modules is around looking at images, artwork, cartoons and reflecting on questions such as “Is this right or is it racist?” and “What can I do about it?”

Berryman said that “when you could discover ideas in the privacy of your own head first, you can test your own assumptions out and you’re in a better place to have a conversation with others.”

Discuss it in front of an audience and there is likely to be pushback.

“You can’t see any way except from your own upbringing and culture,” said Chris Meynell, a principal of six years at Marewa School in Napier, where 60 per cent of students are Maori and 18 per cent are Samoan.

“I was brought up in a Pakeha middle-class farming family where all that stuff just wasn’t on my radar. I would never have considered myself a deficit thinker (viewing certain students as inherently inadequate) by any stretch of the imagination ...

“But then you start some of the challenging material that’s in the Blended Learning and ... you know, it’s not an even playing field. Society is not set up like that.”

Facilitators act as a sounding board, and provide feedback. They ensure participants have the time and space to do the work, leaning on the school leadership when needed.

About midway through the modules, the participants convene an *akonga* — a group of learners — in this case four or five colleagues with whom they hold group discussions. The university facilitators ensure they are available to participate.

In Sanders’s case, the principal gives the group time for discussions during the workday. These discussions help the teachers make connections between theory and practice. It also turns participants into leaders-in-training.

This distribution of leadership was a key learning from Te Kotahitanga.

The team ditched what Berryman calls a “colonial top-down model of imposition,” where the

“In a *marae*, many teachers enter a rare space where their culture is minoritized. That discomfort and vulnerability opens up opportunities to make connections.”



university trained a leader who then trained teachers who then taught students. Instead, they created a strategic change leadership team — principals, middle-level leaders and teachers. All of them taught, “so they weren’t people who sat on the outside on their butts and telling teachers what to do.”

In the classroom, “power sharing is a huge, huge change,” said Mary Stubbings, head of arts at Flaxmere College. “The teacher not being the font of all knowledge at the top ... All teachers need to plan and over-plan. But having that relaxedness in a classroom where students are saying no, we want to do it this way, and giving them a student voice, actually listening.

“We all say, ‘Let’s listen to our students.’ ‘Let’s see what they want.’ But that’s really hard to do.”

Cultural relationships that respect each other’s culture, language and identity underpin the training leading to a teaching approach that’s responsive to student needs.

“Cultural relationships that respect each other’s culture, language and identity underpin the training leading to a teaching approach that’s responsive to student needs.”

A good relationship between teachers and students, said Meynell, is honest. “It’s open. It doesn’t mean you’re their best mate all the time. Mutually respectful. You know their likes, their dislikes, their *whanau*, their cousins. You can make links to all sorts of things — you know them as a person rather than just a number. And the same thing, for the kids. You’ve got to share of yourself. Because if the kids don’t know you as a person then it diminishes the respect that they have for you.”

Sanders said she began to look at her school with fresh eyes.

“When you walk around our school, you would not realize how many children at school are Maori,” said Sanders, “Because it doesn’t look it.

“We’ve found with our Maori children,” she added, “they like their art. So we thought, right. We need to start looking at that.”

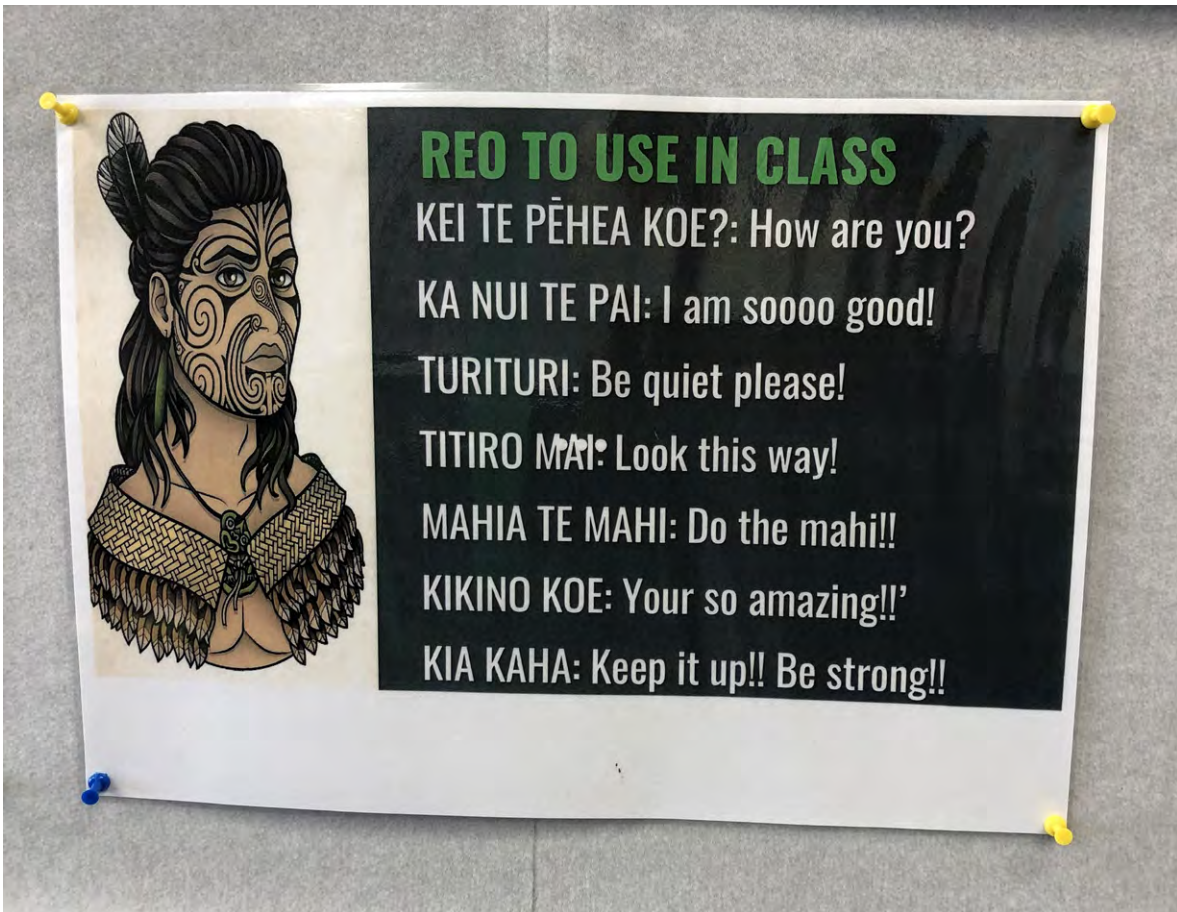
One of her group discussions was “How to get our *whanau* (extended family members) into the school?”

Sanders said she used to feel proud for hosting the annual carnival. “But it’s once a year,” she said. So on ANZAC Day (a national day of remembrance) in April, the school had a picnic on the lawn, where parents came and shared food. “Instead of closing the school up, we opened it, where people can come and go.”

Staff are also making a point to engage families at sporting events or during drop-offs and pickups of students.

Back in 2001, when Bishop and Berryman started their research, the country already had Maori-language schools with curriculum based on Maori worldviews that showed achievement outcomes on par with all students.

But the researchers sought interventions in the English-language schools because that’s where a majority of Maori students went. Their research included voices from five secondary schools: those of 70 Maori students of Year 9 and 10; principals of those schools; 50 family members; and



80 teachers. Students start school at age 5; a Year 9 student is typically 12 or 13 years old.

Their analysis of the narratives became the basis of *Te Kotahitanga*. It found that three of the four groups — students, families and principals — identified the relationships between teachers and students as the most influential to achievement.

For instance, in one school, students said that relationship was a deciding factor in whether to complete homework. "Sometimes you just can't be bothered," one student told them. "It helps if they want to teach you. If they really want to teach you."

In marked contrast, one group — teachers — focused on perceived dysfunctions of Maori students: their lack of motivation, poor behaviour, and their homes, socio-economic problems, inadequate nutrition, access to drugs, etc.

"In terms of agency, this is a helpless position to take," Bishop and Berryman wrote in *Culture Speaks*, a book about the study, "because it means that there is very little any individual teacher can do about the achievement of the Maori students in his or her classroom."

This pattern of narratives was repeated across time and distance in 2013, when Berryman conducted a similar research in Saskatchewan in partnership with the University of Regina. That study was captured in a [2014 report](#) called *Seeking Their Voices*.

A poster at William Colenso College in Napier, New Zealand.  
PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



Except, says Berryman, the community voices in Canada were more desperate.

One parent told the Saskatchewan researchers “many of our children that are suffering with fetal alcohol (syndrome) ... some of them are not even assessed and will probably never get assessed.”

“I’m not saying that we don’t have that, but over there if you happen to be First Nations or Métis then there was almost this understanding that you were suffering from fetal alcohol,” said Berryman. “That was so pervasive. And students here could see the solutions, the students over there couldn’t. They were so ground down by the negativity.

“So I think the context over there was much harder.”

In New Zealand the researchers used their own data to create an “effective teacher profile.” The tool made the connection between identity and achievement and focused showing teachers change was possible if they stopped thinking that student backgrounds made them deficient. It showed them how to build relationships with students and their families and the importance of “prior knowledge” or teaching based on building on what students already know.

They found when teachers were able to reflect on other perspectives, they were generally able to switch from frustration to a solutions-oriented approach.

“It’s not just reflection, it’s reflexivity,” said Berryman. “It’s thinking about the thinking—‘When

**Louise Anaru, Maori principal at Flaxmere College in Hastings, New Zealand.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



I said that, what was I thinking? And why was I thinking so? ”

The program was progressively implemented in 54 secondary schools in New Zealand, with learnings from each phase incorporated into the next.

By the end of Phase 5, one statistic stood out amid a slew of favourable outcomes: the achievement of Maori students in Phase 5 schools improved at around three times the rate of Maori in comparison schools.

Both William Colenso College and Flaxmere College have seen academic achievements skyrocket once they adopted Te Kotahitanga principles.

At Flaxmere, close to 90 per cent of students completed Year 12, which is the minimum needed for post-secondary education. That compares to 2009, when only one-third did so.

Nationally the percentage of students completing Year 12 went from 65.6 per cent in 2009 to 77.4 in 2016. In the same period, the equivalent for Maori students at William Colenso went from 32.4 per cent to 73.5 per cent.

“If we engage with Maori families then we found belonging of those students increases considerably,” said Daniel Murfitt, principal of William Colenso. “And it’s not just engagement around sport and culture. It’s also engagement around learning.”

**Beth Te Kiri, a Maori teacher at Flaxmere College in Hastings, New Zealand.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

Senior leadership invested in cultural relationships are able to bring change at an institutional level. Flaxmere College introduced a “Whanau Conference” in 2014 — a celebration evening with a sit-down dinner.

“When we sent out surveys in the past we’d only get a couple back,” said principal Louise Anaru.

“We knew from our traditional teacher-parent evenings we’d just give feedback on, yes, you have a good boy, good girl, they’re behaving well or badly. And *whanau* voted with their feet.”

That changed, when some 400 family members showed up. There was at least one staff at each table with questions ready such as: “What are the strengths of our school?” “What are the three best experiences you’ve had?” “What are your hopes and aspirations?” “What do you want your child to be learning?”

Then they asked the same questions to students and staff.

“We’re quite strong on bringing those other voices,” said Elizabeth Eley, associate director of Poutama Pounamu, the research and professional development unit at the University of Waikato. “That’s when we start to disrupt and make change.”

In both schools, teachers use the survey responses and student performance data to reflect on their practices. The principals are also trained in facilitating “co-construction meetings” where teachers of a group of five or six students meet once a term to evaluate — not the students, but themselves. It’s a continuous internal evaluation that is embedded, and the teachers guide one another.

“The senior leadership facilitates it so teachers see it as valued,” said principal Murfitt. These meetings are another example of ditching the top-down training model.

Principal Anaru said that “because it’s so strongly immersed in evidence and research, this (program) puts us in a confident space that we know this is what we need to be doing.”

Fiona Mason, general manager of Heretaunga Kindergartens, responsible for bringing Blended Learning to teachers of the 16 kindergartens, said the course offered “a much deeper look at how we could enhance our culturally responsive pedagogy.”

“Fatigue among teachers is about teachers not connecting with *whanau* and children. I find the more that our teachers engage, the more that our teachers make connections, the more that they explore their own thoughts and feelings and experiences and knowledge and skills, the more open and alive and better teachers they become.”

Beth Te Kiri, a teacher at Flaxmere, said “I thought I had a good pedagogy in class until Te Kotahitanga came across my path. And then I realized that perhaps it wasn’t as good as what it could be.”

She always had good relationships with her students but she learned that teachers nurturing that self-belief in students was vital. “There is a mentality out in the world that Maori are under-achievers. They can’t do any better than working in the orchard or just doing manual work.”

“One important thing that helps with high expectations, is when they know where they need to go ... help them see the next steps.

“Let them know that us as teachers are advocates for them. We’re here to help them.”



## 'YOUR NAME IS TOO DIFFICULT'

What a school's hidden curriculum is telling students

SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 14, 2019 | TORONTO

"I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions —  
a movement against and beyond boundaries."  
— bell hooks

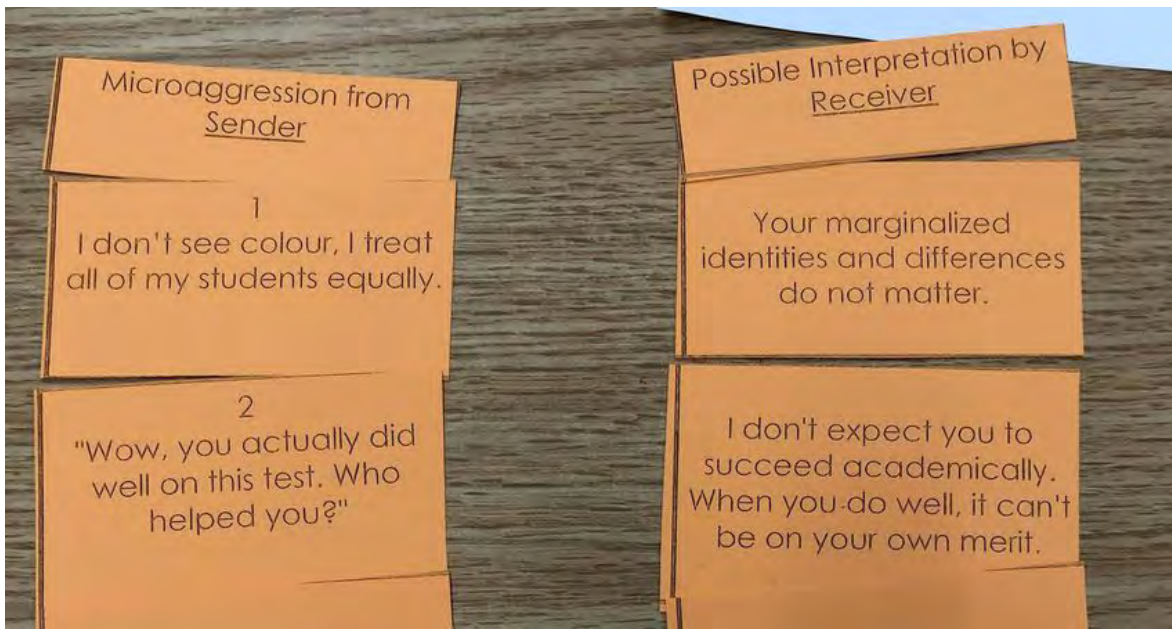
**O**n a cold February day, groups of teachers huddled into different sessions at the TDSB Beginning Teacher Equity Conference in downtown Toronto.

They were warming up with topics such as "Anti-bias education in early years" and "Questioning school dress codes" and "Culturally relevant teaching in early years."

In one session, Sharla Falodi and Farah Rahemtula, both learning coaches at the Toronto District School Board, were speaking on "Microaggressions in Schools: Making the Invisible Visible."

"The micro refers to the everyday regular mundane reactions, not its severity," said Rahemtula. "The severity comes ... in its cumulative effect. It can really impact the quality of life over time as it's happening again and again and again and again."

**Sharla Falodi, left, and Farah Rahemtula lead a session on "Microaggression in Schools: Making the Invisible Visible" during the TDSB Beginning Teacher Equity Conference held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) building on Bloor St. W. in February 2019. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR**



An example she cited is of a teacher who says, “Your name is too difficult. Can I say it this way instead?” Or asks the class, “What did you do with your mom and dad over the weekend?” (thereby not considering the nuances of sexuality and different family structures).

The first thing teachers are asked to do after bias-awareness training is to self-reflect. Learning about [microaggressions](#) and the difference between intention and impact helps in the mental investigation of those unthinking assumptions and biases. They also help teachers identify and unearth what is known as the hidden curriculum at their schools.

An explicit curriculum is the formal framework of content teachers are expected to impart. Then there is the hidden or invisible curriculum.

This curriculum operates through verbal and non-verbal microaggressions, such as a teacher’s tone or even gaze, or what cultural values are held as the norm — for instance, are prejudicial behaviours tolerated.

These unarticulated values are unofficial, unacknowledged and sometimes even unintended, but they influence student perceptions and affect their performances.

The teachers at the TDSB conference discussed how in some classes, students were allowed to fidget during land acknowledgments but were asked to stand to attention for the [national anthem](#).

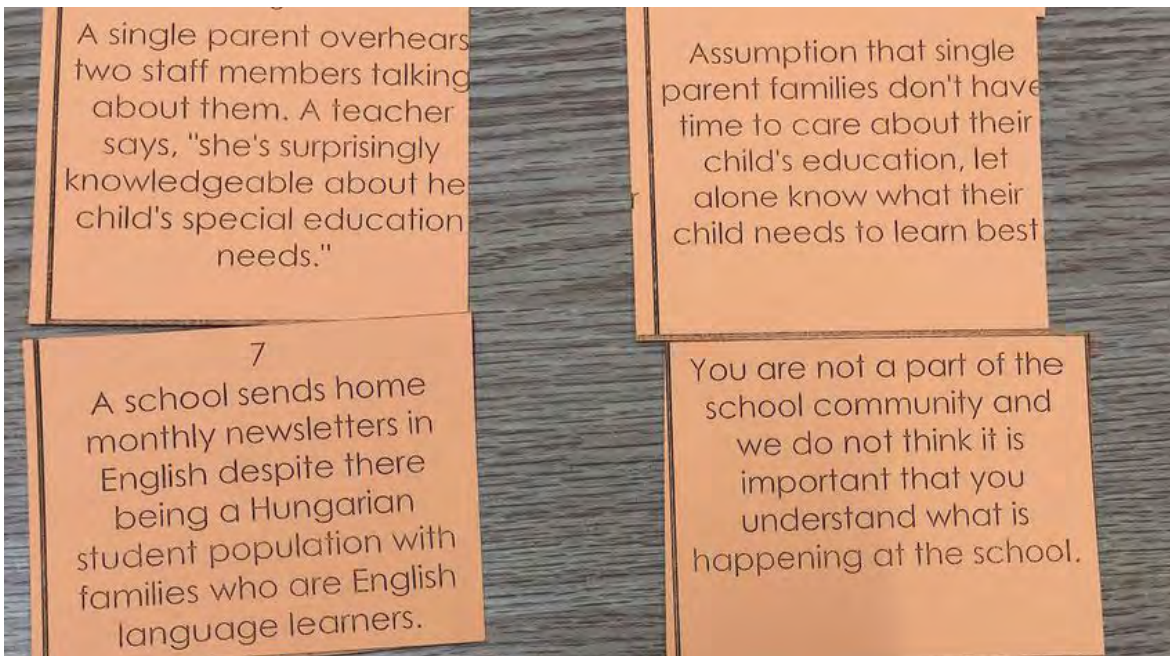
“It’s not written in policy,” says Falodi, “but by me valuing the (national) anthem over the land acknowledgement I’m communicating something.”

One teacher said in the session that she asks her students to stand during the acknowledgment. “I know that in some Indigenous communities, standing is a form of colonization as well, so we can sit or stand. But we talk about it.”

Falodi said that “bringing the subtleties to the explicit and challenging the dominant narrative is exactly what we need to do.”

The hidden curriculum can show up in cultural perspectives.

**Teachers are shown examples of microaggressions at the TDSB Beginning Teacher Equity Conference earlier this year. PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR**



A York Region District School Board teacher who worked with English Language Learners said in an interview that new Canadians end up at the extremes of being either overidentified for special education support or underidentified.

For example, she said, a teacher might consider assessing a student without English-language skills for autism.

At other times, a teacher thinks such a student needs time to adjust because they are homesick, but there is a cognitive need that's not being met.

"And it's a very valid point, right?"

"Just talking to the parents makes a huge difference," said the teacher, who wanted anonymity for fear that any media mentions would obstruct her work.

"I've talked with the parents, and if the parents are telling me, yes, back home, my child also had difficulties in these areas ... now there's an indication that maybe there is a cognitive challenge.

She advocates for academic tests in the students' first language.

Sometimes the hidden curriculum shows up in omissions.

"A specific example," Falodi said in an interview before the conference, is the book *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, "which is so provocative. Adolescent children absolutely love it." The New York Times bestseller, which was made into a film, is about anti-Black racism, political activism, police brutality and white privilege.

It has caused tensions between librarians and principals, Falodi said, because school staff can act as gatekeepers of what adolescents should be exposed to based on their own belief systems.

"Vetoing a book on anti-Black racism to send a message that swearing is bad ... is incomparable to the impact exposing students to the text can have on developing their critical consciousness, self-advocacy skills and political engagement," Falodi said.

The York school board teacher said some schools might engage with *The Hate U Give*, which is an important book, but not *Saints and Misfits* by S.K. Ali, a story of an adolescent Muslim girl navigating her high school years and dealing with sexually inappropriate behaviour by an adult.



“They say ‘I don’t want to teach religion’ or say ‘But I didn’t know if that would be appropriate’ without having read the book.

“Or there is pushback from families on ‘Why is this content being shared with my child?’

“But the book doesn’t deal with religion. The character is Muslim. There’s real difficulty in understanding the difference between teaching religion and learning about it or being exposed to it.”

A school’s hidden curriculum is influenced by where its teachers’ knowledge on anti-oppression stands, ranging from those who do anti-racism work to those who are resistant to the idea of bias-awareness training.

Early in 2018, a Scarborough schoolteacher became upset after doing a workshop on white privilege, during which teachers are asked to stand in a circle and reflect on their identities. There, based on each identity being called out, the participants were asked to take a step forward or backward. In her case, being white meant take a step forward. Being female, a step back. Being university-educated, a step forward, able-bodied, forward, heterosexual, forward, cisgender, forward and so on.

“I’m not walking that circle, because what’s the point?” the teacher, who did not want to be named, told this reporter. “I can tell where this is going. It’s like the walk of shame. It’s like a perp walk.

“And what are we doing with this knowledge of privilege? How do I apply it in class?”

Asked about those comments, Falodi said there are a few steps to applying the knowledge. “First, understand the concept, then self-reflect. Then actually learn how it plays out in society ... So, like, how do you identify it when it’s happening in the moment?”

The next step is how to call it out “either as an ally or someone directly impacted by it. Then finally, it’s facilitating learning” with that knowledge.

Microaggressions have impacts that are anything but micro: loss of drive or motivation, sleep difficulties, isolation, academic performance, diminished confidence, anxiety disorders, hyper-vigilance, challenges with cognitive functioning.

During the Toronto session, one teacher said when he asks students how to say their names correctly, “some of them don’t even care to say ‘Say it this way,’ because they’re so washed out because teachers have forever called them this wrong name. But I’ve had to say ‘This is your name, what do you want me to call you?’ ”

Falodi told him: “Your awareness of the impact, of how students feel defeated because of this repeated encounter, but you asking the students, ‘No, really, tell me’ — (that’s) you interrupting that process” of microaggression.

About a year after she first railed against the white privilege workshop, the Scarborough teacher began reading up on anti-oppression. Then she read *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo.

DiAngelo defines white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves ... (that) function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”

“It is a difficult read,” the teacher said. She read a little, reflected, spoke to others about it, and came back to it. She also politely asked a teacher who made blatant anti-Black statements to reconsider what she said, and she saw other teachers nodding. “In the past I would have just rolled my eyes in my head. Now I feel I have to speak up.”

## GOING BEYOND 'SARIS AND SAMOSAS'

As part of Ontario's [Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy](#) in 2009, teachers are asked to be "responsive to culture."

That responsiveness and relevance, which is about using culture as a basis for learning, sometimes ends up tokenized, with what is derisively called a "saris and samosas" approach; a homogenized interpretation of culture that results in surface appreciation of clothes and cuisines from non-white cultures.

As a result, the province's elementary teachers union released a resource guide called [Respond + Rebuild](#) to help teachers use culture as a vehicle for learning.

Teacher attitudes towards student cultures also constitute the school's hidden curriculum. Cultural awareness, say the experts, is not the outcome of a one-day workshop but a continuous process.

"Are we giving them (teachers) the skills to understand culture and community as this dynamic force that's constantly being negotiated, constantly being shifted and worked?" asked Carl James of York University, whose authorship of several studies has helped to quantify race-based discrimination in education in Ontario.

Because cultures are constantly evolving, a teaching approach that is culturally responsive is by definition not formulaic.

"What teachers also need is to be able to live with confusion and constantly working through that," said James.

Teachers in Ontario don't mirror their communities. One report by the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators shows that while racialized people represented 26 per cent of the province's population in 2011, they made up only 13 per cent of the province's teachers.

One way to close that gap is to get teachers into the neighbourhoods they teach.

"Do teachers walk around and talk to the shopkeepers if the school is in a business area?" James asked. "Do they look at where the bus stop is? Do they pay attention to who uses a bus stop, who does not use the bus stop? Who walks at lunchtime?"

In his pointedly titled book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... And the Rest of Y'all Too*, Christopher Emdin writes: "The place for teachers to start is in businesses (such as convenience stores, grocery stores) that are in close proximity to school and are patronized by students." These are public spaces where a teacher's presence would not be unusual or unwelcome.

The next step is to walk further afield and observe "not as if they (the students) are zoo animals, but as an opportunity to learn with, and from students," he writes in the New York Times bestseller. "This includes places of worship, housing projects and other local gathering points."

The third step is making the connections from the context the teacher gathers and the content, he writes. "When a teacher makes connections between context and content, innovative lessons that connect things like graffiti and mathematics or hip-hop music and science being to emerge."



## HOW DO TEACHERS KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW?

Indigenous stories are a place to start

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 15, 2019 | FERGUS

“Education must not simply teach work — it must teach life.”

— W.E.B. DU BOIS

**T**here are times when Colinda Clyne finds herself acting on her traditional responsibilities in a very public way.

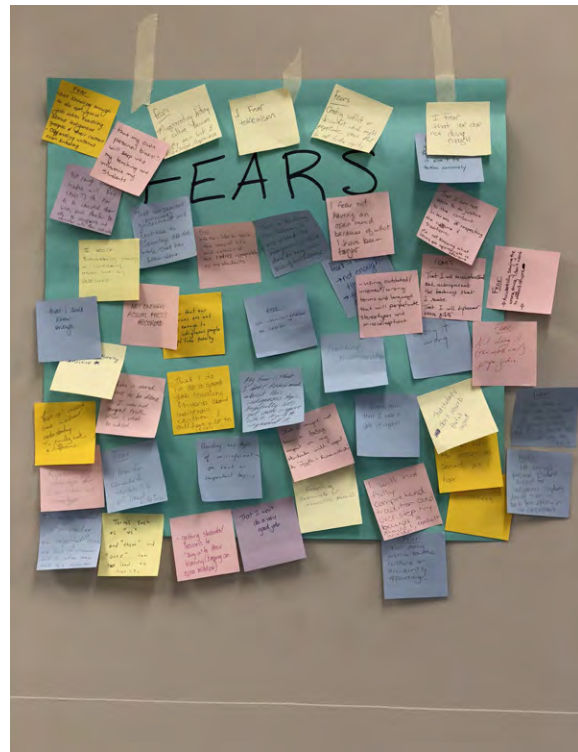
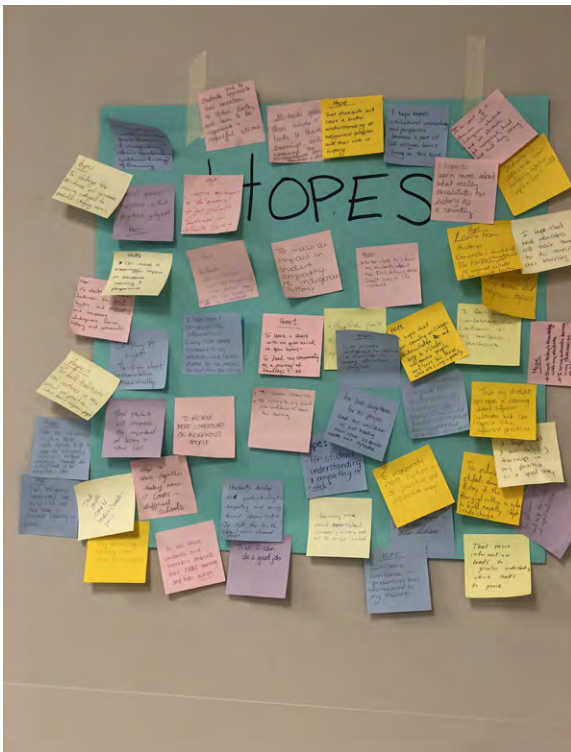
In July 2018 when the Ontario government cancelled pre-arranged summer sessions to revise and look at the curriculum to incorporate Indigenous content, Clyne, who is the Indigenous curriculum lead for the Upper Grand District School Board, felt compelled to call it out.

It was her tweet that alerted the rest of the province that this wasn't business as usual, that the government was reversing revisions that had been put in place in response to the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Clyne, who is Anishinaabe, talks about her responsibilities as bear clan member: medicine and healing, policing and justice.

**Colinda Clyne is the Indigenous curriculum lead for the Upper Grand District School Board.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



“I can tell you, I have been policing other people since I was 2 years old,” she said in a café in Guelph.

At a workshop on Grade 7 and Grade 8 curriculum enhancements at the Wellington County Museum and Archives in Fergus in November 2018, Clyne told teachers, “When I look at the new curriculum additions, I know about half of them. So don’t feel badly.

“I’m asking you to be vulnerable in embarking on work that you’re not confident about,” she said.

Making headway on the anti-oppression continuum is multi-layered work for teachers. If critical self-reflection is the foundation of that work and recognizing the hidden curriculum is the next step, a logical progression is engaging in an official curriculum that explicitly includes non-European viewpoints and knowledge.

This means teachers have to know what they don’t know.

Clyne asked the teachers to write their hopes from the workshop on one sticky note and fears on another, which she then posted on a wall in two clusters.

“What I see coming up a lot is that people are worried that they don’t know enough. And it’s true,” she told them. “You weren’t taught Indigenous content when you went to school on purpose. You weren’t meant to know that we still existed. We’re supposed to be fully assimilated and we’re not.”

Storytelling is a powerful teaching method, and Indigenous leaders and early-adopter non-Indigenous teachers used it that day.

They shared names of books such as *We’re All Treaty People* and introduced Indigenous worldviews such as connectedness to land. They showed wampum or beaded belts used in

**Hopes and Fears expressed by teachers of the Upper Grand District School Board at a the workshop on Grade 7 and Grade 8 curriculum enhancements in Fergus in November 2018. PHOTOGRAPH LIAM RICHARDS /THE TORONTO STAR**

ceremonies but that also signify ongoing peace agreements, such as the Dish With One Spoon Treaty that covers most of southern Ontario.

It's the airing of a dark chapter of Canada's colonial history that is prompting these discussions in education. At least 462 children died in Ontario residential schools while an unknown number are listed as missing. In response to the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Ontario created a [Journeys Together plan](#) in 2016, committing to curriculum changes and supporting "mandatory learning about residential schools, the legacy of colonialism and the rights and responsibilities we all have to each other as treaty people."

In 2017, the province [asked all school boards](#) to hire a dedicated Indigenous education lead.

The Ontario education system operates with a high level of trust in teachers' professional judgment, allowing them flexibility in choosing the specific content within a prescribed curriculum. But it falls short on accounting for the diversity of that content. Training sessions are optional, unless they are held on board-mandated professional development days.

In the course of her work, Clyne noted, "usually, it was the same 60 or 70 folks who were becoming awesome allies" that were coming to workshops.

After about three years of training teachers, she once sat down with a few Indigenous high school students. "So I'm all excited. I say, OK, so tell me, what are you seeing in your classrooms?"

"And nothing. They had seen nothing. Because they didn't have any of those 60 teachers. I cried because I felt I'd been working so hard and I missed the mark."

Clyne said she was fortunate to have a superintendent who understands the importance of this work in Indigenous education. When teachers signed up for sessions, Clyne kept a list of the schools that were represented.

"So my superintendent got on the phone to every single principal who didn't have someone signed up and said, I need you to send somebody.

"I hope that other people consider this."

The trauma of colonization isn't limited to the 86,000 people who sued the government, leading to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that gave rise, in part, to the TRC. It isn't limited to survivors of the Sixties Scoop, in which provincial governments forcibly removed thousands of Indigenous children from their homes and gave them up for adoption. And it isn't contained in the past.

"As Indigenous people we live in a post-apocalyptic world," writes the author Alicia Elliott in the foreword of the graphic novel *This Place: 150 Years Retold*. "Every Indigenous person's story is, in a way, a tale of overcoming apocalypse."

As a result, learning about the people of this land is often woven with stories of heartache, loss and tears.

This raises concerns about public expectations that Indigenous people expose their vulnerabilities to make a case for their humanity.

"Oftentimes those of us who share our stories feel a larger responsibility to our families and our communities to do this because we don't want others to feel shame," Jenna Joyce Broomfield, an Inuk from Nunatsiavut in Labrador, told a conference on Indigenous education in Edmonton in April.

"Sometimes I do this, so others don't have to."

One of the stories she shared was how her grandmother had needles stuck in her tongue every

time she spoke Inuktitut in school. She bore 18 children, but never taught them the language lest they use it accidentally and suffer.

But if people like Broomfield's grandmother were punished for speaking the language, others are now penalized for not speaking it.

Young Indigenous people, especially those who are light-skinned and don't know their language, find their Indigeneity doubted, Broomfield said.

"... learning about the people of this land is often woven with stories of heartache, loss and tears. This raises concerns about public expectations that Indigenous people expose their vulnerabilities to make a case for their humanity."

In Fergus, Nick Bertrand, a Haudenosaunee man from the Indigenous Education Office at the Ontario education ministry, also shared an intensely personal story. As a boy, his father was taken out of his mother's home, a mother who was a product of Canada's first residential school — Mohawk Institute in Brantford.

Bertrand's father was given a good life by his adopted family, "but the part where I really, really struggle with is the house he grew up in was only about five kilometres from the rez," where his biological family was, Bertrand said.

"That five kilometres might have been five worlds apart," he said. His father "never engaged in ceremony, never engaged in his culture, in his language. So all that was lost."

Bertrand managed to trace his father's family and at Christmas five years ago, he placed a call to a man he had researched after being told the man had been looking for his father.

He called and said, "I'm pretty sure I'm your nephew and my dad is your brother."

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Then:

"Nick, I remember the day they came for us. We've spent the last 60 years looking for him," his uncle said.

"We talk about loss of identity, loss of culture," Bertrand said. "But the real loss for my dad was not even really knowing he had a sibling."

The brothers met shortly after and his uncle placed a photo of a woman in front of his father and said, "That's your mother."

"I remember my dad looking down at that photo, poring over it, you know," said Bertrand.

"Not knowing your mom looks like that. That hurts."

Inuit Knowledge Keeper Tauni Sheldon introduced the teachers to history from an Inuit perspective, starting at about the 1500s. When it came to the more recent past, Sheldon choked up.

She was taken away on the day she was born in Nunavik in northern Quebec, and adopted by a white family.

The government took the kids. Then they took the dogs, too.

The RCMP slaughtered dogs in many northern communities, including in her mother's community of Inukjuak, she said.

"The 1940s and 1950s were really, really heavy times for our Inuit up north.

"Inuit relied on our dogs as a way of life. We would use them to travel from community to community," Sheldon said. The slaughter "was a way to keep us in one spot and to also direct the people: You're going to not live nomadically anymore."

Federal and provincial authorities and the RCMP said the cull was carried out for health and safety reasons.

Sheldon suggested teachers talk to students about the High Arctic Relocation during the Cold War. Canada needed to populate the Far North and removed people from southern Inuit communities, forcing them to move to the High Arctic.

"So if you think about Inuit going from the Inukjuak to the High Arctic, which is a similar distance from here to Florida ... how would we adapt?"

All Inuit families were impacted by colonial policies, she said. "You may have Inuit students like my son that may feel as emotional I did this morning.

"We need to create that space for any one of our children to say, you know, I had a hard day. Just understand."

Bertrand wanted to end the day on a positive note. Don't just talk about residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, talk about the good stuff, too, he told teachers. "Talk about what makes us strong."

There are very visible signs of change in Ontario, he said. It's in naming schools such as Oodenawi Public School in Oakville. "That's the Ojibwe word that means 'heart of the place.' Think about that. Beautiful, right?"

Then there is Orange Shirt day, an annual day to mark the legacy of residential schools. "Those are all notches along that journey ... but it's deeper. It's getting into classrooms where we have Indigenous knowledge stood up on equal platform with non-Indigenous knowledge ... And that instills pride in our kids to see themselves and their way of understanding in the classroom.

"I was taught Louis Riel was a traitor. And there we are, raising a Métis flag at a school in Milton to acknowledge Louis Riel Day."

Be allies, he urged teachers.

"It's in the moments where you're out with your friends and you hear the comment, 'Why don't those freaking people just get over it?' I don't fault people for that. But it's very tiring. It's emotionally taxing, doing this work. And in those quiet moments with the baseball team, at the social gathering on Friday night, that's when we need allies to step forward."



## WHAT BLACK CANADIAN STUDENTS LEARN THROUGH OMISSION

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 15, 2019 | MISSISSAUGA

**O**ntario's curriculum has no mandatory expectation about including Black Canadian perspectives.

"Students are required to learn about white, French and British people and, more recently, Indigenous people," said historian Natasha Henry, who is also a curriculum consultant for the Peel District School Board.

"People of African descent have had a presence in what is now called Canada, going back to the early 1600s ... along with European colonists. Yet this long history is not considered to be necessary knowledge for Ontario students to learn."

This is called a null curriculum: "Knowledge that is excluded, the knowledge students did not receive in the classroom," Henry said.

When Black children go to school, they learn through omission — and sometimes commission — that their ancestors never discovered any riches, never contributed to science or to the progress of humanity.

**Natasha Henry is a historian and curriculum consultant for the Peel District School Board.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



Does Black History Month every February balance that out?

Henry cites Carter G. Woodson, often known as the father of Black History Month.

“When he proposed Negro History Week (in 1926) and subsequently the month, it was really with the idea that throughout the year people would be learning about and teaching about Black history, Black experiences.” That one month would be for coming together and sharing all that has been learned throughout the year.

Instead, some teachers discuss a handful of Black people in that one month, or even just the last couple of weeks. Black male students interviewed in the We Rise Together report by the Peel District School Board complained that the few times Black history was discussed, teachers only focused on the contributions of prominent African Americans such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman.

“History,” said Henry, “should also speak to Black agency, give a critical presentation of the struggles that Black Canadians endured, the collective actions they took to challenge anti-Black racism and how Blacks overcame multiple forms of oppression.”

Absent were names such as Lincoln Alexander, Canada’s first Black member of Parliament, or Marie-Joseph Angelique, the enslaved woman convicted of starting a fire in Montreal as an act of protest in 1734, or Toronto civil rights activist Harry Gairey Sr.

Black perspectives belong to more than just the history class. Auburn Drive High School in Cole Harbour, N.S., offers an [Africentric math course](#), using, for instance, Egyptian pyramids to teach trigonometry.

Henry, who is president of the Black History Society, specializes in developing curriculum resources that focus on Black Canadian experiences or experiences of the African diaspora for Ontario students. She guest-edited *Kayak*, the Canadian history magazine for kids, in February that featured [Black Canadian history in Canada](#).

A common narrative taught in school is the underground railroad, she said, in which Black people from America flee here to Canada, the land of happily ever after.

“The story of the underground railroad characterizes Canada as a haven, a freedom for Blacks escaping enslavement in the United States that shows Canadians as good white abolitionists and Canada as free soil. This narrative is instilled in young students early on in elementary school. It is served to portray and maintain the notion of Canadian moral superiority over the United States.”

In *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto*, authors Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost lay out, among other things, how Black people helped to lay the foundation of Toronto from its beginnings as an important colonial town in 1793; founded some of the earliest churches in the city; and were politically active, persistently resisting, for instance, offensive Black minstrel shows featuring white people in blackface as early as 1840.

“History,” said Henry, “should also speak to Black agency, give a critical presentation of the struggles that Black Canadians endured, the collective actions they took to challenge anti-Black racism and how Blacks overcame multiple forms of oppression.”



## ZERO SUSPENSIONS. MEDITATION. FEEDING FAMILIES.

How schools in Baltimore — a place Trump called 'rat infested' — are succeeding

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“Without community, there is no liberation”

— AUDRE LORDE

**T**he row houses are a picture of gloom on this rainy day in October 2018 as they glower down the sparsely treed streets of West Baltimore’s Mondawmin area. For decades, these homes, many shuttered and boarded up, have witnessed traumas too many to be told.

Yet this is a neighbourhood that resists. Nearby, a huge graffiti tribute to Freddie Gray — who died in police custody in 2015 — declares its defiance.

“Does anybody hear us pray, for Michael Brown or Freddie Gray,” crooned Prince in a protest song named after the city, following unrest over Gray’s death.

Other encouraging signs of resilience are the city’s inner-city schools.

Bertha Knight greets a student at Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore in October 2018.

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



It ought to be a grim task for neighbourhood schools to nurture and nourish children who come from communities that continue to be traumatized in a state where slavery was legal until 1864, a year after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

A place that according to U.S. President Donald Trump’s ahistorical views is a “disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess.”

From Jim Crow laws and policies that led to housing discrimination, job discrimination, poverty and criminalization, African Americans have been subjected to centuries of relentless racism, the outcomes of which are painfully apparent in Baltimore.

Yet — despite Trump’s rhetoric — the two elementary schools this reporter visits are anything but grim.

A few minutes’ drive from the shuttered houses in Mondawmin is Robert W. Coleman Elementary School, from pre-kindergarten to Grade 5. The other school, City Springs Elementary School, which goes up to Grade 8, is on the eastern side of town.

They echo with the sounds of shuffling feet and giggling kids and the voices of teachers giving errant kids a talking-to.

“The last time I counted,” says principal Carlillian Thompson at Robert W. Coleman, “we had about 50 families that are homeless.” Another 20 per cent of the 300 students, she reckons, come from low-income backgrounds.

At City Springs, principal Rhonda Richetta describes her 800 students as being African-American — “probably 99 per cent of our students” — many with family household incomes at

**Carlillian Thompson, principal, Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore. in October 2018.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



the poverty level. “The majority of our students live in public housing.”

But the stories within these schools aren’t about rescuing poor Black kids. The stories are about building communities with the school as a hub. They are an example of how policies that bring educators and community partners together can strengthen all communities, but especially struggling ones, and help young people thrive.

The Baltimore City Public Schools system administers about 188 schools that are among the most impoverished in America. In addition, it offers 34 charter schools, which operate similarly to alternative schools in Ontario. In Maryland, charter schools are public, given autonomy over curriculum and community engagement. They are operated by not-for-profit organizations, and the teachers are unionized. Robert W. Coleman and City Springs are charter schools.

The schools identified as having high needs prioritize removing obstacles that prevent children from coming to school, focusing, and believing in themselves.

They invest not only in the students, but their parents and caregivers. For instance, the schools host free workshops on resumé building and how to speak in an interview.

Community co-ordinators tapped into Baltimore’s rich history of organizing and facilitated training for parents to lobby the state for \$1.1 billion for renovations and new schools. In 2013, the [proposal cleared both houses](#) of the state legislature.

“We want more of our parents to see themselves as leaders in school, in their community and in the city,” says Danista E. Hunte, executive director of Child First Authority, a non-profit partner of the city’s Family League Agency.

**Perkins Homes is Baltimore’s largest housing complex situated near City Springs Elementary School.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

Driven by the possibilities, the educators are throwing out the do's-and-don'ts rulebook and creating new templates.

Robert W. Coleman school has seen the eye-popping outcome of zero suspensions and expulsions for the past five years.

A big part of that zero-suspension rate is the school's departure from "zero-tolerance" of student misbehaviour. Instead of automatically meting out punishments, staff mediate conflicts to make the wrongdoer accountable.

Students begin their day with 15 minutes of meditation. During the day, disruptive students are sent to a mindfulness room, where an instructor guides them through a [meditation session](#). The door is also open for students who simply want to de-stress.

But it's not the whole story.

"A big part of that zero-suspension rate is the school's departure from 'zero-tolerance' of student misbehaviour. Instead of automatically meting out punishments, staff mediate conflicts to make the wrongdoer accountable."

Holistic Foundation, the non-profit that operates Mindful Moment programs in 17 Baltimore schools, is one of 75 community partners at Robert W. Coleman vested in supporting its 300 mostly African-American students.

Key to this success is community school co-ordinator [Bertha Knight](#), whom Thompson describes as "a principal's dream."

"If you sit down with her for five minutes and you have any kind of organization or anything that would benefit the school, you're going to be a partner."

Knight, 62, a teacher who retired as director of enrichment for Baltimore City Public Schools and is now employed by Child First, arrives at school around 6:30 a.m.

"I arrive so early because children start eating breakfast at 7 o'clock in the morning," she says.

A federal program that began in 2015 offers free breakfast and lunch every student in the city, regardless of income level.

After assembly and their meditation session, "which sets the tone for the day," Knight walks through the classrooms, making sure teachers have supplies, checking which students need school uniforms (a community partner donated \$18,000 for those uniforms) and who needs clean uniforms. (Another partner donated the washer and dryer.)

"It's like a temperature check," she says. She also keeps food bars or snacks on hand for the latecomers. "We try to remove all of the barriers for kids, so they know even if they come late ... they have something to eat."

Every Friday, staff, also mostly African-American, send home bags of energy bars, peanut butter and jams to tide students over the weekend, in case there is no electricity or working stove at home. Every two weeks, bags of with meats and other perishable foods are taken home.

At the end of that schoolday, a 4-year-old comes into the office looking for food. The cafeteria staff has gone. "You hungry, love?" asks assistant principal Tifini Stewart, who goes into the kitchen



and fixes him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. (The school takes allergy precautions.)

“We don’t say no if anyone comes asking for food,” says Stewart.

Support isn’t a one-way street, not in a community that bears the grim toll of gun violence.

In June 2018, 7-year-old Taylor Hayes, a student at Robert W. Coleman, was riding in the back seat of a Honda Accord when she was struck by a bullet in a drive-by shooting. She died after two weeks.

Baltimore is America’s murder capital, with 56 homicides per 100,000 people in 2017, according to the FBI’s “Crime in the United States” report. It is ranked second-highest for violent crimes after Detroit.

Its schools are often left tending to the impact on the community’s most vulnerable members.

Taylor’s death brought the already tightly knit staff members even closer to each other and to the school community. Fundraisers were held. A small flower garden in the front yard was dedicated to Taylor. Community members helped paint the inside walls of the expansive two-storey brick-and-mortar building. A neighbourhood church painted the walls of the cafeteria with messages such as “Never give up” or “Forgive” and “Laugh.” An eight-metre wall next to the office became a mural in honour of Taylor.

In November, her younger sister, 5-year-old Amy, was shot while walking to a corner store after being caught in a crossfire. She survived.

“Children may have seen a lot of violence in their homes,” Knight says. “They’re angry because

**The most noticeable feature of City Springs Elementary School in Baltimore is the many shades of purple on its walls, doors, lockers and even the stationary. The school even has a slogan about it. “It’s not a colour. It’s an attitude.”**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



Mom is angry, and they don't get to see Dad. So there's a lot of anger, a lot of trauma, and so what we try to do is give them a lot of love."

The absentee and violent Black dad is often used to pathologize Black people, served up as an example of racial and cultural deficiency rather than an outcome of ongoing exclusion and racism.

That racism continues to impact younger generations. A [2016 report](#) by the Economic Policy Institute outlines how children of incarcerated parents are — apart from developing health problems — more likely to drop out of school, develop learning disabilities and misbehave in school.

Children with incarcerated parents are 33 per cent more likely to have speech or language problems like stuttering or stammering, 48 per cent more likely to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and 23 per cent more likely to suffer from developmental delays than otherwise similar children, it says.

Yet there have been no suspensions and expulsions at Robert W. Coleman for five years.

"One thing that we realized about suspensions," says Thompson, "is you send a child home for a day or two or three days, you haven't addressed the behaviour.

"That child comes back. Nothing has changed except for the fact that they go home and play their video games or do absolutely nothing. They're not learning at home, nothing changes. So we took a stance that we were going to do everything humanly possible to keep children in school."

The students view the school as a safe space, she said. "And at the end of the day, we literally have to say, 'go home.' "

**Little Colin knows he's not in trouble even though he's been disruptive in class. A quick mindfulness session will send him back to class at Robert W. Coleman Elementary School in Baltimore in October 2018.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

Another thing: unlike in Greater Toronto Area schools, the school has never chosen to call in the police to deal with children who are acting out.

Never.

It's a sunny day when Ahmad Collick knocks on the door. "It's Ahmad from City Springs," he hollers up to the second-floor windows of a city housing unit.

"I identify myself so they don't think I'm the police," he said.

Collick is the community co-ordinator at City Springs Elementary School in East Baltimore, situated near Perkins Homes, the city's largest housing complex. Looking at the soulless, monochromatic brown "projects" with their barred windows, it's hard to gauge whether urban planners saw social housing as a means of sustenance for the poor or as a sentence for those living there.

A century of federal, state and local policies segregated Baltimore's Black population into isolated slums, writes American historian Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, an academic specializing in education, race and housing. These policies, he writes, continue today.

Collick is making the rounds, checking on students who have been absent for more than a day. He is at the door of the address listed for a student who hasn't been seen in a month, a boy now also on the police missing children's list. The boy's grandmother lives there.

"What you comin' knocking around for, like you the po po?" she scolds him. "You nearly gave me a heart attack." She invites us into her sparsely furnished flat. She doesn't know where her grandchild is and says she doesn't have her daughter's phone number. But she is remembering to take her meds, she says.

It's clear she's struggling. She repeats herself frequently and goes off on tangents. She promises to call Collick if she sees her grandson.

Maryland law holds parents responsible for their children's school attendance, and Collick says it's likely that this boy's parents will be taken to truancy court.

Absenteeism is a major problem across schools in Baltimore. One-fifth of the city's elementary and middle school students missed more than 20 per cent of school in 2016-2017, as did more than half of high school students, according to the Maryland State Report Card.

At the end of the previous academic year, City Springs, which takes students up to Grade 8, was at 90 per cent attendance, Collick says.

But even as he goes looking for absent students or calls parents to find the reasons, he finds that approach reactive and inadequate.

Collick has studied the school's attendance rates and patterns and found housing instability (people not staying at one address for long) and transportation were major risk factors.

So he tries to get ahead of the problem by building relationships.

He has regular meetings with community partners. Two days before, he asked if a partner was able to donate bus passes for students who have moved and don't have access to transport yet. Someone has extra — meaning instant, if temporary, relief for Collick.

Students who experience homelessness qualify for free bus transportation.

But when their families are evicted, or are shunted from housing in one part of the city to another, triangulating the information — tracing absenteeism to eviction, finding the new address and linking





to the transportation route — can take 10 to 12 days. If they move again, that’s another 10 days, leading to what the board considers “chronic absenteeism.”

During the summer, Collick spent time with families. He found a lot of them didn’t know the kinds of support — and resources — that are available at school. So the school made a resource guide.

He finds ways for parents to have positive interactions with the school rather than just around problems with children. These can be bingo nights, parent breakfasts, parent night with workshops.

Separately, he has familiarized himself with city resources and providers. So when a parent was in distress because she had no electricity, Collick knew to call Energy Assistance, help the parent log in to the school computer and fill the required forms, print them and pay for the ride to the agency. (“Basically, I try to remove all barriers.”)

During the school year, he often sits with students for lunch, or plays games with them. During one conversation, a 12-year-old boy told him he had decided not to sleep anymore. Bullets had ricocheted outside his home the night before and he was worried one would come through a window and hit him.

City Springs now has 60 community partners. It has a full-time social worker, a psychologist and a counsellor. A mental health clinician who works for Johns Hopkins also has an office here. Her entire caseload consists of students from City Springs.

The school itself is impressively appointed. Its most noticeable features are the many shades of the colour purple painted on doors, walls, lockers, posters, even its playground. The colour began

**Danista E. Hunte, executive director of Child First Authority, that has implemented Baltimore’s community centred approach in 8 schools. The Baltimore public school system’s community schools initiative funds 51 schools in 2019.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



as a symbolic gesture by principal Richetta to signify change in the school culture. But it has gone beyond that now. The school even has a slogan about it: “It’s not a colour. It’s an attitude.”

How to measure the impact of all these measures on schools?

“Success to us looks like more students in schools, more students staying in school,” says Jennifer McDowell, director of community schools at Child First.

“We can talk anecdotally about individual students, their shifts from 50 absences a year to 20 or 30 to 10, and what it took to make that happen. But we haven’t had the resources to do a quantitative study on our impacts yet.”

A [review of community schools](#) by the California-based Learning Policy Institute found significantly higher attendance rates for Baltimore community schools operating for five or more years, compared to non-community schools.

Transfers out of these schools were also less common than for students at non-community schools, suggesting that community schools are a place where students want to be, the report said. Parents of community school students more often reported that school staff connected them with community resources and were more likely to report that staff cared about their children, compared to parents at other schools.

When evaluating these initiatives, wrote the authors, “patience is key.”

Standardized testing can be an inadequate measure of success.

“There’s a big sort of push and concern that community schools should be able to show academic impacts for students,” says Child First’s Hunte. Since community schools focus on

**A huge graffiti in Baltimore stands in tribute to Freddie Gray who died in police custody in 2015.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

student well-being, the expectation “is false and it sets us up for failure,” she says.

Brilliance denied in one framework of education still finds other ways to shine. At City Springs, a year-end Grade 8 visit to the state Senate in Annapolis showed the students were confident in their identity and able to assert themselves when they came across what they viewed as an injustice.

“When they came back from the Senate they just crowded around me talking all at once,” said Richetta.

“They wanted to know, ‘why were there not more people like us in the Senate?’ ‘Why didn’t they talk about what our ancestors did?’ ”

Richetta told them, “Well, why don’t we see if you can tell the senator yourselves?” She called up Sen. Bill Ferguson and asked if he could visit. He couldn’t make it before the school year was out. So he visited in the fall of 2018.

That class graduated but they wrote him letters that the new Grade 8’s read out to him. Here is some of what they wrote:

“Dear Senator Ferguson, Do you know what it is like to have the eyes of a slave owner looking down at you in the governor’s house and be asked to look up at their painting with respect? ... It felt as if no matter where I went on the tour of the state capital I was met with the eyes of former slave owners but never met with the eyes of my own people. For a black teenage boy like myself, this was something that told me I was in a building that I didn’t belong in.”

“Dear Senator Ferguson, Today on the tour I asked the tour guide a question I thought was simple. ‘Did that man in the painting own slaves?’ Her response is something I will never forget in my lifetime, “I don’t know, I guess they probably did.” She said it with a shrug of her shoulders as if she had never really thought about it before, and didn’t really have any interest to think about it ... How could it be possible that something so important to the history of my people could be treated as an afterthought?”

“Dear Senator Ferguson ... There was a painting of Frederick Douglass, and a small statue of Harriet Tubman, and that was it. She (the tour guide) was simply pointing out what was there, and we weren’t there. We weren’t there when she talked about how the capital was built. We weren’t there when she talked about how Maryland fought for our freedom. We weren’t there when she talked about how Maryland became Maryland. Were we really not there, or did someone decide to ignore that we were there?”

“Dear Senator Ferguson ... Think about how Black people might feel, how women might feel, how Hispanics might feel, how Native Americans might feel. If this tour is supposed to be about (our) state, it should be about our entire state, not just white men.”

“At the end of it,” said Richetta, “he told me, ‘You know what? They’re right. As a white man, I had never seen the Senate through their eyes.’”



## THESE GIRLS WERE POWERLESS, LIVING ON THE EDGE OF SOCIETY

But one school is turning them into  
heroes, feminists and resisters

SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 22, 2019 | LUCKNOW, INDIA

“Awake, rise and educate  
Smash traditions — liberate!”  
— SAVITRIBAI PHULE

It's early afternoon on a pleasant February day when Kiran Sahu, 18, is walking home after a morning spent working at a daycare and before going to school.

Home for Sahu is a stark contrast to the gated bungalows with picture-perfect gardens that she walks past. It is a brick-walled room about 12 by eight feet tucked into one corner of a walled plot of land rented from the owner. The asbestos roof is leaky and layered with burlap and broken tree branches for protection. Colourful clothes hang on a line outside.

**Kiran Sahu, 18, is in Grade 10. She has had to drop out of school at least 5 times. Once when her father died. Another time when her sister was married in their faraway ancestral village, yet another time when her brother burnt her books so she wouldn't go to school. She wants to be a police officer so that all girls understand that even if they face obstacles to education, they don't have to accept defeat.**

PHOTOGRAPH KATHRYN MALLINSON/THE TORONTO STAR

Just inside the doorway is a chulha or a brick stove about a foot wide, with clumps of ashes in the hearth. Next to it is a little yellow matchbox and plastic containers with food. Most of the space in the room is taken up by a bed on which Sahu sleeps with her mother, who is a construction worker, and two younger sisters. (Two other sisters and a brother are married and live elsewhere.)

There is no electricity. There is no bathroom. Heeding the call of nature necessitates a 25-minute walk to the railway tracks, usually in the darkness for privacy.

Like approximately six million children in India, who come from poor, landless and marginalized communities, Sahu accompanied her parents when they migrated a decade ago from their ancestral home to the city in search of seasonal work.

Her family reached the northern city of Lucknow. There she joined [Prerna Girls' School](#), run by the Study Hall Educational Foundation.

“What the students learn is the stuff of educators’ fantasy: a sense of oneself as a full human with rights; an ability to recognize and name the constraints of patriarchal, caste and class structures; and a boldness with language coupled with an inner conviction to challenge those oppressions.”

Sahu is keen to show her home and share details of her life. A Grade 10 student, she is soldiering on despite numerous pullouts from school, most recently when her beloved father died and the family moved back to the village, and before that when her brother burned her books to stop her from going to school.

A common trajectory for a girl of Sahu’s background is to follow her mother’s footsteps, be married off as a child, and live a life of hard labour. She is designated OBC, or “Other Backward Classes,” a legal Indian term for socially and economically marginalized people who are neither the “upper caste” nor the “lowest.”

[A Human Rights Watch report](#) in 2014 found discrimination remained a major factor affecting access to education for children from marginalized communities, including Dalits (previously “untouchables” and lowest in the caste hierarchy), tribal groups, and Muslims.

Instead, Sahu, who studies in the light of a solar lamp her school has given her, aspires to social leadership. Also, she met Barack Obama last year.

Sahu is one of nearly 1,000 girls enrolled at Prerna school, defying the odds to become authors of their self-rescue

from hauntingly marginalized lives at the intersections of gender, caste and extreme poverty.

The average student family income at this school is 9,000 rupees a month, or \$180 Canadian. Twenty-six per cent of the girls work during the day to supplement their family income. Some 43 per cent of the fathers of students are chronic alcoholics, according to school data. The same proportion of fathers are illiterate, as are 63 per cent of mothers.

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 80 million Indian children drop out of school before completing elementary education.

There are numerous schools across the world for students of lower economic status, many driven by charitable ideas of helping the poor.

A few practices set Prerna — which means inspiration — apart:

- The educators position themselves not as do-gooders but as co-learners in the education process.
- They place the curriculum and their teachings in contemporary social and political context.
- They exclusively employ critical feminist pedagogy — meaning, all their teaching practices cater towards raising a feminist consciousness.
- And they do so through drama and critical dialogue.

Since being established in 2003, the school has enabled girls to become the unlikely heroes and resisters of their lives' journeys.

What the students learn is the stuff of educators' fantasy: a sense of oneself as a full human with rights; an ability to recognize and name the constraints of patriarchal, caste and class structures; and a boldness with language coupled with an inner conviction to challenge those oppressions.

In Sahu's case, that has led to a reimagining of the future.

"I want to be an officer in the Indian police," she says in Hindi. She is at least partly fuelled by the desire to prove her brother wrong. "I want all girls to understand that ... they don't have to accept defeat."

During one of her stints out of school, Sahu was sent back to her ancestral village and made to work on a farm. She says she constantly nagged the girls there. "I used to ask why don't you study? Who is it that creates a problem? And in all families, it emerged that it was either a father or a brother who did so."

Urvashi Sahni is the founder of Study Hall Education Foundation, the driving force behind Prerna. Sahni channelled her own experience of sexist discrimination at home and society to become an academic at University of California, Berkeley and then to empower girls in far worse social positions. Her approach to education was deeply influenced by the guru of education philosophers Paulo Freire, Maxine Green and bell hooks.

"Critical pedagogy really is very simple. You talk about your world, you talk about what's going on and collectively you make sense of it. The teacher's role is to ask the difficult questions to help them see that it's a structural thing."

To implement these teaching practices, she turned to her own love of drama.

"How do you work on yourself to build an identity as an equal person deserving respect, having the right of agency," she says, "and to voice your protest and to voice your desires, your aspirations? Drama is a great place for that.

"We use performance drama. We use street theatre. We use poetry. We use every medium that we can to provide a safe space for self-work."

This use of drama as awakening is central to the school's philosophy. The Human Rights Watch report titled *They Say We're Dirty* found that discrimination in Indian schools took various forms, including teachers asking Dalit children to sit separately and making insulting remarks about Muslim and Adivasi (tribal) students.

"Our goal is to give them (students) a safe space to feel indignation and to practise resistance," says Sahni.



“Many oppressed people have no right to expect that indignation. They’re not even supposed to feel bad.”

Using drama as a teaching tool is safe, she says, because “you can express resistance without a backlash. You can express your indignation, your anger, your hurt, your pain and your desire for transformation to your parent community without directly addressing your father.”

The methodology in the classroom is also interactive. Children are encouraged to speak a lot, teachers listen. “Whenever somebody you respect listens to what you have to say,” says Sahni, “the message you get is that I must be saying something smart, that’s why somebody’s listening. And that helps you develop a voice.

“So it’s not just the curriculum. It’s the whole school culture and we call it a universe of care. The teachers are respected as persons, too. Their lives also matter.”

When India won independence from the British in 1947, its literacy rate was 14 per cent, with female literacy at 8 per cent. Successive government initiatives have brought the overall national literacy rate to 74 per cent (and a female rate of 65 per cent).

But education by itself does not empower people unless its curriculum critically addresses inequitable social norms and structures, Sahni writes in her book *Reaching for the Sky: Empowering Girls Through Education*. “Education to be real and authentic must be relevant to our lives. It must

**Students perform a dance on women’s empowerment at Perna school.**

**Perna Girls’ School is run by the Study Hall Educational Foundation in the north Indian city of Lucknow. There are nearly 1,000 students there in 2019. The girls have defied the odds to become authors of their self-rescue from hauntingly marginalized lives at the intersections of gender, caste and extreme poverty.**

PHOTOGRAPH KATHRYN MALLINSON/THE TORONTO STAR



respond to our condition and it must illuminate it.”

What does teaching with drama look like? It is not the same as having year-end musicals or class skits as entertainment, or perhaps to learn a story.

Teacher Roli Saxena is taking a critical dialogue and drama session in a “bridge class” — a class with a group of girls age 10 to 18, who have returned after long periods of being out of school. They spend a year studying together before being evaluated and assigned to appropriate grades.

She begins innocuously enough. “What is your day like?” she asks. “What do you do when you wake up?”

The girls shout out their answers as she writes them.

“Wake up” “Around 5 a.m.” “6 a.m.”

“Make tea.”

“Clean the house.”

“Make breakfast.”

“Go to work” (usually domestic labour in people’s homes).

“And then?” she prompts.

“We come to school from 1:30 to 5:30.”

“Cook dinner.”

**Using drama helps “express resistance without a backlash,” says Urvashi Sahni, the founder of Study Hall Education Foundation, the driving force behind Prerna.**

PHOTOGRAPH KATHRYN MALLINSON/THE TORONTO STAR





"Clean the house."

"Study."

"Go to bed." "10:30." "11 p.m." "Aunty, sometimes it's midnight."

"OK," says Saxena. "On this list, what are things your brothers do?" And she puts a check mark next to the activities in common — going to school and studying — and a cross next to what's not, which is the rest of it. Only one item gets both a check and a cross — some of their brothers also work before or after school.

Saxena starts another list next. "What are things your brothers can do that you can't?"

And the responses come fast and furious.

"He can go out in the evening."

"He can wear whatever he wants."

"Aunty, he got a mobile phone."

"He can marry whoever he wants."

She asks: "How does this make you feel?"

"Unwanted."

"Like I'm not good enough."

"Like what did I do to be treated this way?"

Now comes the assignment. The class is split into two. "Take seven minutes. You," she says, gesturing to one half, "will make a play based on the first list. You," she tells the other half, "will make one based on the second list of things, your brothers can do but you can't."

Seven minutes later the class is engrossed in two entertaining plays. They have one prop — a chair — and the dialogues come from their lives, leading to a cacophony of voices of their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, brothers, all putting them in their place when the girls try to resist the constraints.

At the end of it, Saxena credits their creativity and then asks, "So do you want to do something about it?"

Of course, they do. They discuss options and decide to speak to their brothers. "They're our age. They might understand why it's not fair."

"OK," she says. "Your assignment for the next class is to come back with what your brothers said."

After the class, Saxena says: "The solutions have to come from them."

"In previous years, when speaking to brothers didn't work, they have roped in their grandmothers." If nothing works and the situation is urgent — say there is an alcoholic, abusive father or a girl is being married off against her will — they ask the teachers to mediate, and the teachers do.

Outside of drama, says school principal Rakhi Panjwani, who also teaches math and science, "We connect social justice to as many subjects as we can."

"(If) I'm teaching them systems, like digestion, I create a drama around malnutrition. They discuss 'What is a balanced diet? Why do you need a proper digestive system for the body?'"

**Previous page, top: Gomti Rawat, 15, left and her sister Garima, 17, are students at Perna. Gomti played the role of a child bride in a school play. The performance caused the girls' mother to have a change of heart about marrying off an underage Garima. Middle: Twenty-six per cent of Perna girls work during the day to supplement their family income. Bottom: Since being established in 2003, Perna Girls' School has enabled girls to become the unlikely heroes and resisters of their lives' journeys.**

PHOTOGRAPH KATHRYN MALLINSON/THE TORONTO STAR

The principal recalled an example from math. “There was a population census done in a village. In it there were these many girls and these many boys. So I say, ‘Let’s talk about why there are more boys?’ And they come up with the answers. Girls are burnt to death (for dowry), and girls are even killed in the womb. So now it’s related to math — and gender.”

A critical feminist teaching practice that dives deeper than slogans such as “girl power” or hashtags such as #TheFutureIsFemale would also greatly benefit Ontario schoolchildren of all genders, but especially those marginalized on the basis of identity or ability.

University of Toronto researcher Kathleen Gallagher and her team of graduate students conducted a five-year study on drama pedagogy and “radical hope” across five countries including Prerna school in Lucknow. Where in Lucknow it interrupted oppressions of caste and gender, their three years of research in an east-end Toronto classroom showed it had the potential to interrupt the classroom social relations of race and gender.

In one classroom in the [first year of the study](#), the drama work saw animated discussions on race and police brutality that disrupted the usual dynamics by focusing on Black expertise and experience and inviting a reflection on white privilege.

If drama-based classes “allow young people to break out of prescribed and limiting social roles, even temporarily,” the researchers wrote, “they remain hopeful possibilities.”

Sahni’s own journey of understanding oppression has evolved with the school. If the first year was spent going door to door persuading girls to join in 2003, the next two years looked at the quality of education and introduction of a critical feminist pedagogy.

“I was very, very focused on gender,” she says, “because it cuts across caste and class.” Over time, the focus on caste-ist oppression grew as did creating an intersectional approach.

This much is clear: the school has wrought attitudinal shifts. More fathers have become involved, for instance. “We’ve seen many of them dropping their girls, many more attend the meetings,” Sahni says.

The aspirations of the girls have grown. “It’s almost the new normal,” she says, that they will go to university.

Parental aspirations have changed, too. “We have been able to delay marriage dates.”

Of the 151 girls who have graduated from the school, just 26 are married.

Rekha Kashyap, who has two daughters in the school, says she used to be illiterate and ashamed of it. “But soon my daughters taught me to read and write, and now I can sign my name, I can even read newspapers now. I’m a seamstress, and I can read all the paperwork.”

Two fathers, Vijay Kant Singh and Muharram Ali, say neither caste nor religion would matter in their daughters’ choice of husbands as long as their girls were happy.

Rajesh Burman has two daughters in school. “I want them to stand on their own feet,” he says. But he wouldn’t support them marrying into another caste. When asked, he says flatly: “No.”

It is simple enough to ask students to “say no” at school. Say no to child marriage. Say no to child labour. Say no to bullying. But what happens when “saying no” carries risk of damaging, even deadly repercussions?

“Saying no” to child labour could mean no food in some of the Prerna girls’ homes. It could take away their ability to come to school. So the school accommodates the girls’ schedules and begins in the afternoons to offer a pathway out of poverty. It charges a fee of 30 rupees a month.

In the mornings, it houses middle- and upper-class students whose fees subsidize Prerna operations.

“Saying no” to child marriage could mean physical violence against the girls and sometimes even death. So when teachers mediate, they don’t demonize the parents or their culture. They negotiate the timelines, making parents see the benefits of waiting until the girl is at least an adult. Sometimes they turn to a women’s rights organization — which also runs a family counselling centre — and child protection services. In the worst cases, they call police.

Teachers, who come from more privileged class and castes than the students, are made to reflect critically on their own unearned privileges, says Sahni. They are trained to honour the intrinsic worth of a child, to empower them and to help them develop alternative visions of the future.

“We do not view ourselves in adversarial relationships with the parent community,” says Sahni. “Teaching does not happen in a vacuum but in the social context of the children’s lives and worlds.”

Every six weeks or so, the students perform street theatre for the community, something that the school sees as non-confrontational intervention, a bridge between the girls’ school lives and home lives.

Two years ago, they performed a play on child marriage. A 15-year-old girl named Gomti Rawat was cast in the role of child bride. Unbeknownst to the teachers, Gomti’s 17-year-old sister, Garima Rawat, was resisting tremendous pressure from her mother and grandmother to get married.

“I had just begun Grade 9,” says Garima. “So I was looking ahead at my life thinking of what needed to do, to study more, what kind of job I’d have, what I want to be. And it also happened that my mom was fixing my marriage.”

At this point she grew indignant. “That boy was not a boy. He was a man. And quite old. He didn’t have parents. He didn’t have his own house. And he had just popped up. He probably helped Mom work around the farm and she thought he would be a good match.”

The girls have long dreamed of graduating Grade 12, for a shot at a job allowing them to stop working as domestic labour.

“We tried hard to reason with Grandma. I said I’m not even in Grade 10. If I don’t finish Grade 10, I won’t be able to get a job. Then I spoke to Mom (who lives in their ancestral village) on the phone and tried to make her understand. “I don’t want to just cut grass in farms like you do. I don’t want to just stay at home and do housework. I want to become someone. I also have dreams.’ My brothers also tried to convince her that this was wrong.”

But their mother got upset and told them, “You no longer exist for me.” She stopped speaking with them.

The play was scheduled while this was going on, and their grandmother persuaded their mother to come. The girls didn’t know she was in the audience.

“Teachers, who come from more privileged class and castes than the students, are made to reflect critically on their own unearned privileges, says Sahni. They are trained to honour the intrinsic worth of a child, to empower them and to help them develop alternative visions of the future.”



The play was about a girl being forced to marry. “She knew that I played the role of the bride, and that’s all she knew,” says Gomti. “She didn’t know that it was going to be about what kind of problems arise if you’re a child bride.”

“We had shown quite brutally what the consequences of a child marriage are,” says Panjwani, the principal. “Her home situation, how her studies end, and then how the child can’t share with her parents what’s going on because she doesn’t want to hurt the parents.”

Garima takes up the tale.

“Their eyes started filling with tears. Mom and Grandma both. And then after the play she came to us and she just fell in our arms and started crying. ‘Now I understand,’ she says. We also started crying. And we said this is a good thing to have happened. She said, ‘Study as much as you want, marry whom you want. Now go, study well.’ ”

At this both the girls tear up a little. Garima wants to become a teacher. Gomti wants to be an actor or writer.

“We have a good life,” Garima said.

Sahni calls her Prerna students dynamos. “Look at the power of drama. I’ve seen them learn to walk taller. I’ve seen them learn to look into your eyes and talk and to have an unfaltering gaze and I’ve seen them develop such strong selves and it shows in their bodies.”

Laxmi Nishad, 26, is a Prerna alum with an MBA. She is Dalit. She says there were times her alcoholic father would bring in a man he’d just met and order her to marry him. There were times

**Barack Obama with Prerna founder Urvashi Sahni, to his right along with former student Laxmi Nishad and current student Kiran Sahu. PHOTOGRAPH OBAMA FOUNDATION**

when he would beat their mother and abuse them all. When she was 13, her mother died. Her father, he still drinks. Only now he has tuberculosis and hospitals don't take him in. "He drinks every day and when he's desperate he sells things from home." Her story has been shared in Sahni's book.

Nishad won't throw him out of the house. Like many girls in the school, she has become the family leader and takes responsibility for the wellbeing of the rest. She bought a plot of land for her sisters.

"If I go away or I get married and the girls are young, then instead of renting they can at least stay in their own home so that they don't have any troubles." Then she weeps softly. "I feel like they should never have the kind of problems I've had."

Buying land has wider implications than her personal empowerment; Dalits are traditionally landless.

In 2016, Perna was chosen to be part of the Obama Foundation's Global Girls Alliance. Although as U.S. President, Obama supported policies such as standardized curriculum and using test scores to evaluate teachers, his foundation chose a school that had thrown out the standardization rulebook in favour of learner-centred education.

The foundation has an annual summit where Sahni was invited to come along with two girls whose lives changed because of education. Sahni chose Nishad. The foundation did a short film on Laxmi's life and young Laxmi was played by Kiran Sahu, the teen who wants to be a police officer. So both girls went with Sahni, where they met Obama.

Nishad had fantasized about travelling and perhaps seeing the White House someday. "I never even dreamt that that I would actually go to America, that I'd meet Obama and shake hands with him. I shook his hand twice! Ha ha! I felt so good. We didn't talk much but he said 'You're from India? Nice to meet you.'

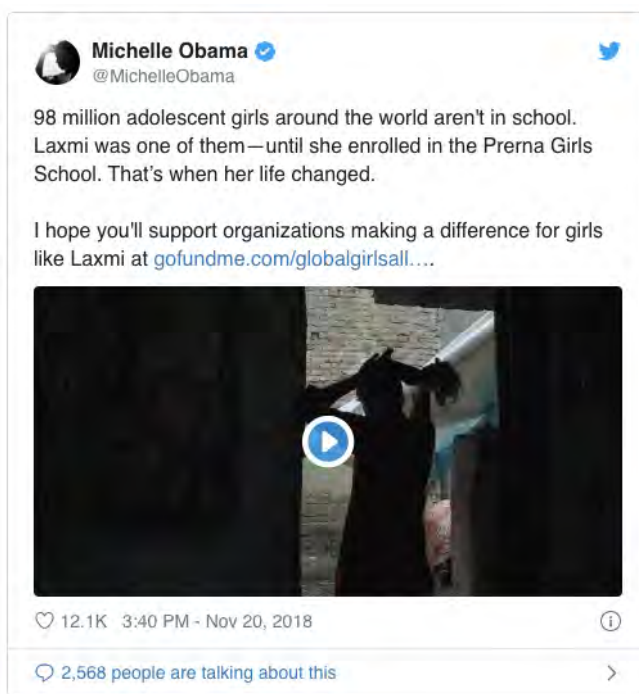
"Then I came back, and everybody was congratulating me, and they'd say 'Now you're a big shot, why would you now speak to us' or 'now we'll have to take your autograph.'

"Compared to a lot of people I've achieved a lot in my life."

Sahu's face breaks into a wide smile at the mention of Obama. "It was good," she says shyly, of the meeting.

Given everything she has been through, how does she view her 18 years on Earth? Has life been a gift, or a burden?

Sahu looks up with a steady gaze. "School is where I found family. From no angle does my life feel like a burden."



## PRERNA ALUMNA ON HOW THE SCHOOL CHANGED THEIR LIVES



### LAXMI NISHAD

Laxmi Nishad, 26, became the head of the family at age 13 when she lost her mother. Today she has an MBA. She bought a plot of land so her younger sisters can be independent.



### AARTI SINGH

Aarti Singh, 27, stole 10 rupees (20 cents) from home to pay her school fees at Prerna in 2003. She attended school in secret before she was found out. But she stuck with it. Today she is a schoolteacher with a degree in psychology.



### PREETI VERMA

Preeti Verma, 25, was a child domestic worker, working in four homes with her mother. She was to go to school, something her mother said they couldn't afford. Today she has a master's in sociology. She also transgressed by marrying a man of her choice.



### SADHNA RAWAT

Sadhna Rawat, 26, is fighting for the legal right to share of her parents' property. It is currently willed to her brothers even though she is their primary caregiver. She says critical dialogue at school helped her recognize her oppression and fight it.



# AN EDUCATION WITHOUT OPPRESSION BENEFITS EVERYONE

Here is what we can do

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 24, 2019

“Until all of us have made it, none of us have made it.”

— ROSEMARY BROWN

It's tempting to look at Ontario's education system with its 86 per cent high school graduation rate and conclude that if the system works for so many students, failure is the fault of those for whom it doesn't.

This education series for the Atkinson Fellowship, which is a synthesis of interviews with about 45 educators, 15 academics, dozens of students from 17 schools in four countries and a smidgen of the scholarship on the issue, found that educators are successful in improving outcomes for all students when they flip that paradigm.

Instead of expecting benefits to trickle down and playing the blame game when that supposition falls flat, experts are flashing a light from the bottom up, from the margins to the centre.

**A visit to City Springs Elementary School in Baltimore explored the idea of schools in poor urban areas benefitting by becoming part of the community.**

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR



According to feminist philosopher Sandra Harding's "standpoint theory," it's those in the margins who have the most accurate view of the world. They have the insider view of what's working for them and what's not.

That view shows that the system has wrought physical and psychological terror on students marginalized for generations.

Education is legislated as "a fundamental social good" in this country. Yet, what changes did the education system undergo after local Black activism forced Ontario to desegregate schools? How did it change its foundational blueprint to put in front and centre the worldviews of those indigenous to this land? How did it reflect various cultures after Canada opened its doors to non-white immigrants in the 1960s and after multiculturalism became an official policy in the 1970s?

The perspective from the margins shows that not only are problems of oppression in education not new, but that pathways out of it have long existed, and publicly so.

If in 1992 Stephen Lewis, in his report on race relations to Premier Bob Rae, called it "absurd" to teach texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* "in a world which has a positive cornucopia of magnificent literature by Black authors." That book was again the subject of a controversy in 2018 after the Peel District School Board told teachers to help students analyze it through an anti-oppression lens.

Even the impatience that Gitksan activist Cindy Blackstock voiced to Alberta educators last April is not new — "Canada has known about the inequalities with

First Nations kids for 112 years, and they're still at the first steps."

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail that after Black people had waited three centuries for civil rights, the time for waiting was over: "For years now, I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' "

Education is at the core of deep change required in a world openly grappling with issues of power and oppression and growing nationalism.

In Canada, white nationalists are recruiting high school students, Evan Balgord of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network told parents at a Newmarket high school in April. A majority of the so-called alt-right or white supremacist members are white males age 16-30, he said. He urged teachers to look for signs of radicalization in students' homework.

It's understandable why teachers feel bogged down by the demands placed on them. Teach larger classes, instruct students with special needs without additional help and deal with anti-oppression and white nationalism, too?

Yet, motivation can be found globally.

It's impossible not to be inspired by the community support worker at City Springs Elementary School in Baltimore who spends his summers building relationships with families, or the renewed

"The perspective from the margins shows that not only are problems of oppression in education not new, but that pathways out of it have long existed, and publicly so."

vigour of the vice-principal of William Colenso College in New Zealand, who was ready to retire until the professional development program Te Kotahitanga reminded him of why he became a teacher.

### INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS

A common-sense definition of equity involves giving more to those with less, to level unequal conditions that students come from and to remove barriers to accessing an empowering education. Educators around the world are layering that understanding with the concept of culture in the curriculum.

Experts have long said students' sense of belonging matters. Being valued matters. A curriculum relevant to their lives matters. Using culture and the world around students as teaching tools fosters that.

Daniel Murfitt, principal of award-winning William Colenso College, embarked on his journey to understanding oppression when he started learning Te Reo Maori. He thought he'd learn a language. "But actually," he said, "I was going to learn about tikanga — culture, relationships, history. Language was just a door to that learning and that provided me with a much greater understanding of the country."

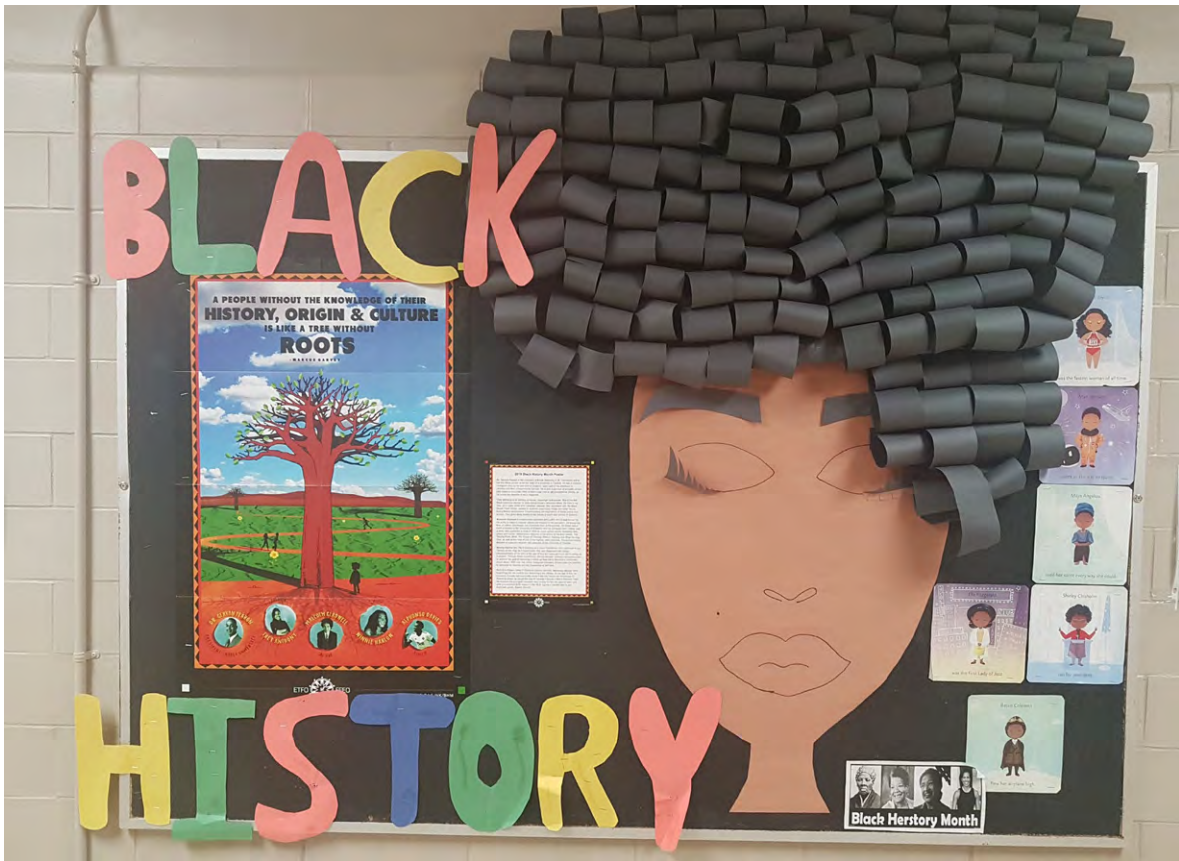
The Maori Language Commission in New Zealand offers schools resources, including a songbook with lyrics, stories based on oral traditions, suggestions for activities and a program to teach 50 Maori words in 50 weeks.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Implement the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action relating to education.
- Support the revival of Indigenous languages at the provincial level and strategize with First Nations, Métis and Inuit experts on mandatory language programs in all schools.
- Restart the curriculum enhancement process in consultation with elders and knowledge-keepers.



**One of the subjects Matua Tangira teaches at Flaxmere College in Hastings, New Zealand is carving. He uses traditional Maori carving to teach concepts like geometry to high school students (and neighbouring school students). PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR**



## BLACK PERSPECTIVES

Reconciling with Indigenous people is a moral responsibility for Canadians, and woefully inadequate though it is, there is at least some movement towards it in education.

Black histories and perspectives continue to be invisible.

The stories of Richard Sharpe, his father, Donald, and son, Mandela, show the need for a public reckoning of the generational harm education has perpetuated on Black families.

What little acknowledgment exists, is still geared towards boys' perspectives. What about Black girls and trans students who experience racism quite differently?

"For Black girls, to be 'ghetto' represents a certain resilience to how poverty has shaped racial and gender oppression," writes Monique W. Morris in *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. "To be 'loud' is a demand to be heard. To have an 'attitude' is to reject a doctrine of invisibility and mistreatment." Although these were lessons learned through generations of struggle, Morris writes, "these survival characteristics are degraded and punished."

A 2017 study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality showed for the first time that adults view Black girls aged 5 to 14 as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers. That they needed less comforting, less nurturing, among other features.

"Our findings reveal a potential contributing factor to the disproportionate rates of punitive treatment in the education and juvenile justice systems for Black girls," the authors wrote.

Woodcrest Public School in Oshawa marks Black History Month in 2019.

PHOTOGRAPH B. QUAMMIE/THE TORONTO STAR

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Require Black Canadian perspectives in the curriculum. Fund the development of resources, train teachers and all school staff to challenge anti-Black racism, empower their professional judgment.
- Collect and act upon Black girls' voices — see their innocence, afford them decision-making power in their lives. Build relationships of trust.
- Establish and adequately fund more Africentric schools, at least until Black-affirming practices become the norm in current Eurocentric schools.

## CULTURE IN CURRICULUM

Every educator interviewed who has embarked on a serious understanding of anti-oppression education at some point was influenced by Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire and his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

A founder of the philosophy of “critical pedagogy” in the 1960s, Freire called for education that enables students to challenge dominant beliefs and participate in the transformation of the world.

Teaching using critical theory is by definition not formulaic. If Freire advocated for a critical teaching practice, then the American scholar and activist bell hooks espouses a critical feminist lens, and the Indian academic Urvashi Sahni uses critical feminist drama in Prerna school in Lucknow.

Other key influencers are the American pedagogical theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings, who in the mid-’90s developed a framework around “culturally relevant teaching,” and education scholar Geneva Gay, who founded “culturally responsive pedagogy.”

In New Zealand, educators moulded these concepts to their context. For education to be authentic and relevant, they say, relationships are paramount.

Elizabeth Eley, an associate director of the University of Waikato, said their preferred term is “Cultural Relationships for Responsive Pedagogy.”

“How you teach really matters but actually bringing yourself into the relationship and building on those relationships matters more,” Eley said. “The relationship comes first.”

If teachers understand — and value — where students come from, and change their judgment about how poor, “dirty,” “dangerous” or inadequate their students’ homes are, they can teach by building on the students’ knowledge and develop student voice and esteem.

Such practices ask senior leadership and teachers to consider every policy change, every lesson through a lens of “How does this affect the most marginalized student in my school, in my class?”

“If teachers understand — and value — where students come from, and change their judgment about how poor, “dirty,” “dangerous” or inadequate their students’ homes are, they can teach by building on the students’ knowledge and develop student voice and esteem.”

This cannot happen as long as educators view the work of equity as something additional, an extra that “we” have to do to enable “them” to be more like “us.”

Inequitable outcomes cannot change as long as awareness is mistaken for action, and any action is divorced from accountability.

Overwhelmed principals and teachers cannot perform or be held accountable if not given clear support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Train teachers in culturally relevant teaching practices that encourage critical consciousness.
- Expect schools to visibly honour cultures in their class and communities.
- Mandate anti-racism training during professional development days. Support teachers who take on anti-racism leadership and work in their personal time.
- Make anti-racism and community knowledge a required skill for performance reviews for principals and teachers. Develop evaluation standards.
- Make schools welcoming for student families.

## EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY

There is much that is good in Ontario education, beyond academic achievement metrics. Incidents such as the massive student walkout in April 2019 stand as testament to schools developing a well-rounded, engaged citizenry.

Still, the last year has made clear the battle lines around a basic aspect of education: its purpose. Why do we educate children?

In March, Lisa Thompson, then Ontario’s education minister, revealed how business interests dictate policies when she told the CBC consultations with professionals, employers and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce showed students “lacking coping skills, and they’re lacking resiliency.”

“By increasing class sizes in high school we’re preparing them for the reality of post-secondary as well as the world of work,” she said.

In July, the new education minister, Stephen Lecce, who committed to listening to experts, also espoused that neoliberal view, when he spoke of students having access to “good jobs at the end of their journey” and making financial literacy classes mandatory.

“I want us to be looking at this with a labour market lens,” he told the CBC’s Metro Morning.

Is that the limit of our ambition for our children? That they become compliant cogs in the corporate machinery, at best overlords of company cubicles?

None of us shuns the idea of financial security for our children. But people also hold broader visions of schooling as a developer of moral and social responsibilities, of an education that fosters deep intellectual growth and inner wellbeing.

As these labour market goals are not about education that connects learning to students’ life experiences, they do not bode well for students unendingly kept in the margins.



#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Roll back increases in classroom sizes and cancel mandatory online courses for high schools.
- Ban suspensions and expulsions in elementary schools. Place adequate in-school staff who can use alternative forms of discipline.
- Hire equity- and anti-oppression-oriented Black and Indigenous staff at all levels, but especially in leadership positions.
- Follow the Baltimore model in underserved communities. Increase the number of adults in those schools — place one vice-principal, at least one community support worker, more social workers, more guidance staff in each school.
- Anti-oppression education is directly linked to other socio-political sectors and institutions.

Shivani Kannaujia, 16, cycles two hours to school every day and two hours back. “People say why do you need to study? You’re only going to be a maid. I want to be an army officer.” Prerna Girls’ School is run by the Study Hall Educational Foundation in the north Indian city of Lucknow. There are nearly 1,000 students there in 2019. The girls have defied the odds to become authors of their self-rescue from hauntingly marginalized lives at the intersections of gender, caste and extreme poverty.

PHOTOGRAPH SHREE PARADKAR/THE TORONTO STAR

“Education reform isn’t a cure-all,” former U.S. president Barack Obama, tweeted recently. “Fixing educational inequality requires doing more to address the broader, systemic sources of economic inequality.”

This means employment reform is education policy. Although identity-based discrimination isn’t solely a class issue, class is closely linked with achievement. Children of rich parents are 80 per cent more likely to attend college than those of low-income parents, a U.S. academic study on social mobility found.

Criminal justice reform is education policy. A 2016 report by the Economic Policy Institute outlines how children of incarcerated parents are — apart from developing health problems — more likely to drop out of school, develop learning disabilities and misbehave in school.

Housing reform is education policy; as the Baltimore community schools showed, transience hurts attendance.

Likewise, eliminating racism in child welfare, health care and transportation policies stabilizes children’s lives and, in turn, benefits education.

System-wide changes for Indigenous and Black students have to be implemented now. Not later when there’s a friendlier government, not later when the “basics” have been restored first, not later when teachers and school leaders feel ready and there is the much-vaunted consensus in staff rooms.

An education that benefits all children is the basics. If we’re serious about raising culturally flexible children fluent in global dealings, deeply practised equity policies in every school — even in racially homogenous ones — are non-negotiable.

The right to an education free of oppression should be a human right.

The New Zealand experience of “what works for Maori works for everyone,” the reimagining of lives

among India’s poorest, the engagement of Baltimore school students, and the safe spaces for Indigenous students in the Braided Journeys program in Edmonton Catholic schools show that when the practice of education focuses on anti-oppression, and relationships are based on mutual respect, all aspects of education including academic achievement fall into place.

Nevertheless, even the best-funded schools, the most transformative policies, the longest bias-awareness training and the deepest restorative practices are but tools in the kit. They cannot by themselves eradicate racist practices.

Students and their families who face racism in schools are still asked for proof of racist intent.

When faced with potentially racist situations, school boards still respond using reputational risk management strategies. How do reputations matter more than racist harm faced by children? How can fear-based approaches untangle the roots of discrimination?

“An education that benefits all children is the basics. If we’re serious about raising culturally flexible children fluent in global dealings, deeply practised equity policies in every school — even in racially homogenous ones — are non-negotiable.”

A look at the long pattern of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous racism in the school system since its inception should indicate at least one thing: Believe Black people. Believe Inuit, First Nations and Métis peoples. Ensure that reparations are made for those impacted.

Individual mindsets inform policy. No amount of reflection would move those who believe they are essentially civilizers of the backward. Breaking that primitive thought process requires practising respect, a term far more tossed around than understood.

Changing habits requires what King called a “revolution in values.” That is, a revolution not just at an abstract level of ideas but in daily choices and habits.

Yet, it is Canada — this petri dish of shared values from hundreds of cultures — that has an opportunity to be a thoughtful world leader, where teachers and principals, schools, boards and unions, parents and students could unite with humility on the path to education without oppression.

I hope educators who read this series and examples of successes feel a renewed vigour. If they have just one takeaway, I hope it is understanding that what needs to change is the framework with which they view students in the margins, but especially Black and Indigenous students.

I hope policy makers and lawmakers acknowledge that fairness isn’t organic. It requires investment, which comes before accountability.

I hope parents and caregivers of all backgrounds see that they have a larger role in schools than they may have realized or given the space for by the system. That they should expect to see their language, their culture — beyond clothes and festivals — represented and valued in their child’s classroom. I hope they agitate for more Indigenous content and Black Canadian perspectives in the curriculum starting in kindergarten.

I hope students understand they have a right to an education that values them in the classroom and in the curriculum, at schools that welcome them and their families, where they don’t need to codeswitch to “fit in.”

I hope every reader understands that while all children including able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, rich white children can be disrespected and devalued in class, for Black and Indigenous students negative schooling is part of a much wider, deeper and harsher mosaic of discrimination.

That when we support those in the margins, we support everyone.

We have the wealth to make this happen. We have the know-how. All we need is the will — and a bit of courage.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I owe an immense debt of gratitude to the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family and the Toronto Star for entrusting me with the task of investigating solutions to the vexing problem of inequitable education globally and providing me with the invaluable gift of time to do so.

Seeking social justice is often dismissed as unrealistic idealism by the jaded and the cynical. The Toronto Star and its Atkinson Principles offer a refreshing brand of journalism that not only accepts that ideal but encourages it as a core principle.

At the Atkinson Foundation, I'm grateful to Colette Murphy for anchoring my work, Jenn Miller for listening with an open heart and Phillip Roh for his quiet encouragement. At the Star, I'm grateful to Lynn McAuley for ruthlessly keeping me on point, Jon Ohayon, for his eagle-eyed editing, Kelsey Wilson, for turning rambling videos into coherent narratives and Tania Pereira, for seamlessly sewing all the stories, photos, videos and various links together into one package. Toronto Star Editor Irene Gentle and Ryerson University Professor Asmaa Malik enabled me to break the glass ceilings that present themselves to me as an immigrant woman of colour in Canada, despite my many privileges.

When I began the fellowship, peering into the field of equitable education was akin to standing at the edge of a chaotic swirl with multiple entry points. My challenge was to choose one point, sift all the information in the swirl; the already existing sophisticated scholarship, the daily unsung activism of educators, sustainable breakthroughs and the voices of students and families, and funnel it into stories that were clear, accurate and comprehensible on a mainstream platform. I can't thank scholars Beverly Bain, Rinaldo Walcott, Carl James and Veldon Coburn enough for their wisdom, knowledge and gentle guidance that nudged me towards informed choices.

Much gratitude to Upper Grand District School Board Indigenous Curriculum lead Colinda Clyne whose dignified teachings pushed me towards new awakening and historian Natasha Henry whose knowledge base effortlessly exposed the gaps on Black perspectives in Canadian curriculums.

Jeewan Chanicka, who was then the Toronto District School Board's equity chief demystified the structures of the school system and the board's learning coach Sharla Falodi interpreted the system through the eyes of educators. Videographer Kathryn Mallinson turned into a sounding board in India to help process the stunning revolution — a transgression of boundaries, really — unfolding in front of our eyes.

I want to thank the heroes behind the Braided Journeys program in Edmonton, Alta., the Community School Coordinators of Baltimore, Md., the pioneers of Te Kotahitanga in New Zealand and innovators

of the critical feminist pedagogy through drama in Lucknow, India, and all the communities that enabled them.

Most of all, though, I want to thank the dozens of students in Canada, the U.S., India and New Zealand, who lives play out at the intersections of poverty and at least one identity that has been marginalized for generations. With just a little faith and respect, how they shone.

These children show us the path and make education a sacred journey. It is they who turned out to be the best teachers of all.

These podcasts offered epiphanic moments of understanding that went on to frame my research:

Scene on Radio  
Teaching Hard History: American Slavery  
Teaching While White  
The Secret Life of Canada  
Thunder Bay  
Uncivil

Apart from the reports I linked to in the articles, these books, listed in alphabetical order, added context to “lived experiences” with research and philosophy.

*Culture Speaks* by Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman  
*For White Teachers Who teach in The Hood and The Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* by Christopher Emdin  
*New Perspectives on African-Centred Education in Canada* by George J. Sefa Dei and Arlo Kempf  
*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire  
*Policing Black Lives* by Robyn Maynard  
*Pushout* by Monique W. Morris  
*Reaching for The Sky* by Urvashi Sahnii  
*Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks  
*The Underground Railroad, Next Stop Toronto* by Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost  
*White Privilege* by Robin DiAngelo

SHREE PARADKAR  
December 2019

# THE ATKINSON

JOURNALISM FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

A collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich Family and the Toronto Star, the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy provides financial support for a Canadian journalist to investigate a public policy issue, with a goal toward promoting social and economic justice.

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For social and economic justice



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