

**REPORT ON
RACE, RACISM AND EDUCATION
A One-Day Teach-In on the Persistence of Racism in Education**

Introduction

On February 26, 2005, the Centre for Integrative Anti-Racism Studies (CIARS) organized a one-day Teach-In on the persistence of racism in education. The Teach-In was a forum where researchers, administrators at all levels, and policy makers concerned about the continuing effects and changing faces of racism listened to those directly affected by manifestations of racism, including students, parents, teacher candidates and community members. It was intended to generate questions for and proposals to those authorized to make changes, as part of the Centre for Integrative Anti-racism Studies' (CIARS') ongoing effort to raise awareness about racism in the educational system. This report provides the background of and context for the Teach-In, and summarizes the major themes that emerged. We are cognizant that we cannot possibly represent, in a few pages, the poignancy and depth of experiences shared; we can only attempt to capture the overall discussion that took place on February 26 as a record of the event. The report ends with a set of proposals for OISE/UT's senior administration regarding their role in the elimination of racism in the Canadian educational system.

The Centre for Integrative Anti-racism Studies (CIARS)

CIARS is the first and only Centre at the University of Toronto, and to our knowledge, the first in Canada, to be devoted to Anti-Racism Studies in Education. It is housed in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education (SESE) within the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). However, members of CIARS, consisting of scholars and students, come from four out of the five departments at OISE: Adult Education and Counselling Psychology; Curriculum, Teaching and Learning; Sociology and Equity Studies in Education; and Theory and Policy Studies in Education. The Centre's aim is to raise the profile of race scholarship locally, nationally and internationally. Members' research and teaching interests cuts across departments and disciplines.

CIARS' mandate is to focus on research and practice in the areas of equity, anti-racism praxis and the production of alternative knowledge in education. Our research looks at education from an integrative perspective, that is, education as a process embedded within wider social processes. Our work takes place both inside and outside the immediate realm of formal education (e.g., research on inclusive schooling practices; social and legal regulations affecting communities of colour; media representations of communities of colour). CIARS' mandate also includes the generation of collaborative relationships with community and other social justice organizations. Members of CIARS have strong links to these organizations, and seek to represent the concerns of communities of colour¹ to the academy and vice versa.

¹ Although we are aware of the semantic differences between and among terms such as minority and racialized communities and communities of colour, for the purpose of this report we are using them interchangeably.

Background and Context

One of CIARS' goals is to increase the profile of OISE/UT as the hub of anti-racism research and practice. To this end, CIARS organized a national conference on Critical Race Scholarship in 2002, which brought together over 300 participants across the country to network and present their research on race and racism. It became clear, at this gathering, that OISE/UT has the largest number of scholars and the most concentrated scholarship in Canada on anti-racism, broadly defined. Since 2003, in order to respond to emergent issues, CIARS members decided to organize our activities around an annual theme. The 2004 theme, entitled "Anti-racism Responses to the War on Terror", enabled us to reach out to and connect with communities of colour affected by the US war on terror, and provided different fora for these groups to express their experience and concerns on campus.

Meanwhile, we have been increasingly concerned about the persistence of racism in education. While racial tension has been on the increase in Canada, especially in urban centres, educational discourses seem to have forgotten the existence of racism and the detrimental effects it has on the well-being of the majority of learners. Even if students of colour do not drop out (and many of them do), they go through the educational system with diminishing self-esteem and self-worth due to the erasure of their identity in schools; the negation of their culture and heritage; and due to overt discrimination and denigration by their peers and by educators. Intellectuals speak less and less of racism in education, and retreat to concepts, such as cultural difference and diversity, which conceal the salience of race, to describe problems arising from racism in schools. As scholars who teach and do research from an anti-racist perspective, we feel a deep responsibility to draw attention to this contradiction.

It is with this glaring contradiction in mind that CIARS decided to make "Race and Racism in Education" our thematic for 2005 (see Appendix 1 for our 2005 brochure). The Teach-In was our lead event for the year. We felt that it was appropriate, given the severity of the issue and its effects on the daily lives of members of minoritized communities, to begin our thematic by providing them with a space to voice their experiences, as part of our ongoing inquiry into and documentation of racism in education. To this end, the whole event was video- and audio-taped. Together with this report, the tapes provide a public record of the participants' experience, and their generosity in sharing their views with each other.

Format of the Teach-In

Due to time limitation (one day), we decided to focus on two areas of experience: the experiences of students and parents in the schools, and the experiences of students and teachers in relation to teacher education. The day's program was organized accordingly into two major blocks. In the morning, participants shared experiences of racism in the school system, specifically the experiences of students and parents. In the afternoon, they shared experiences of racism in teacher training from the perspectives of students and teachers in teacher education

programs. These two topics allowed the attendants to see the multiple ways in which racism manifests itself: in the treatment of minoritized and immigrant students; in interactions among students, and between teachers, school personnel and students; in curriculum materials; and in the administration of the educational system based on white Euro-Canadian norms. In preparation for the Teach-In, in the publicity materials, we also asked those who could not attend or who wanted to remain anonymous to make written statements and submit them. These statements were read out at the Teach-In as an addition to the actual voices we heard.

In the Teach-In, those affected directly by racism were asked to speak first. In order to accommodate all the speakers, each person was allotted a maximum of 5 minutes for their testimonials. Afterwards, other participants who wished to share their thoughts were allotted 2 minutes to speak. Even with this strict time management technique, we could barely accommodate all the speakers, and we had to extend the length of the forum, finishing at 5 p.m. instead of the intended 4:30 pm. As well, since the number of attendants exceeded our estimate of 90 people, we ran out of chairs, food and drinks quite quickly. In spite of it all, people stayed and listened in an over-crowded and stuffy room, captivated by the testimonials they heard. (See Appendix 2 for the Teach-In agenda.)

Apart from advertising the event widely in the community (e.g., via community newspapers and radio programs, and listserves of school boards), invitations were sent out to relevant ministries in the provincial government, chair of boards of education, OISE/UT's senior administration, and faculty of OISE/UT's and York University's teacher education programs. In all, over 150 people attended the Teach-In. They included high school students and their families, teachers, teacher candidates (students in teacher education programs), community members, members of boards of education, funders, elected members of boards of education and the provincial government, graduate students, faculty in OISE/UT's teacher education program, and representatives of OISE/UT's administration.

Themes from the Testimonials

A. Morning session: Testimonials from Students and Parents

The day began with a moving testimonial from a young Latino man, who described the relentless surveillance he experienced while completing the last years of his high school education. He was often told that he would never end up in university; he and his friends were sent repeatedly to the principal's office for a variety of infractions. A trip to the school library, for example, often ended in the principal's office. The young man recalled how close he came to dropping out. Fortunately for this young man, he had a strong, supportive family who sprung into action when they saw that he was at risk of dropping out. Stunningly, we heard from his older sister, who described her own shock and despair, when she and other family members tried to speak to the vice principal and to the guidance counselor, only to encounter the very same racist contempt that their brother had been experiencing. "We couldn't believe that [our brother] had gone through five years of this treatment," she said. This opening testimony described a surveillance of racial minority bodies in schools that was repeated throughout the day.

Youth and young adults testified about being stereotyped by fellow students and teachers alike, and there was no official condemnation of these actions by school administrators. “We begin to believe in our own worthlessness,” one speaker said. Another student described the lack of material in the curriculum that would help her to think positively about her roots and heritage to counter the everyday racism she experienced in the school. In a school where a young child was told that “Black girls cannot be ballerinas,” she needed to hear that Black people had achieved a wide range of things; she didn’t need to hear about diversity in the abstract. Positive achievements by people in her community constitute the hope that a child could hold on to in an environment where so few saw her prospects and potential, one speaker said.

It was often hard to tell where a child’s experiences ended and a parent’s or family member’s story began. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of our first session was to hear parents relive their own childhood experiences of racism in schools, as they described what was happening to their children today. We heard of children as young as three enduring racist remarks that teachers assumed could not hurt them, of children developing allergies and vomiting, of children dropping out because of the racism they encountered, and of children curled up into balls unable to summon the courage to go to school. A parent showed us curriculum materials with demeaning images of Black people from a school primer currently in use in her five-year-old son’s school. What was very striking was the age of the children (as young as three or four years old) when they had their first experiences of racism in the school system. Equally striking was the reluctance of teachers or administrators in condemning racist behaviours and practices.

Parents were unanimous about one thing: schools preferred not to say the “R” word. The chief strategy was denial, with teachers and principals insisting that what was happening to students of colour had nothing to do with racism. A parent who tried to name her child’s experience as one of racism was treated as someone with a chip on her shoulder. Parents reported that their relationships with school administrators and teachers would diminish swiftly once racism was named. “We are made into threatening and monstrous people when we speak the ‘R’ word,” one parent summarized, recalling the school’s reaction when she tried to complain of the labeling of her child of racist classroom materials. At least two mothers described receiving notices of restraining orders, advising them to cease contact with school administrators who had complained of their “aggression.” This marking of parents of colour as dysfunctional and criminal was one of the most poignant themes in the testimonials.

Parents were clear that their children needed to know how to combat racism. They felt that multicultural initiatives, such as logos depicting children from diverse backgrounds holding hands, are inadequate in addressing racism. Sometimes, these initiatives made it harder to have any critical dialogue about racism. In the absence of anti-racist initiatives, parents felt that they had to resort to drastic strategies such as advising their children to be wary of white teachers, or to learn to be silent in the face of denigrating treatments. “[A] Black body is a disruptive body in the educational setting,” one parent declared. Both students and parents spoke repeatedly of the surveillance and discipline students of colour were subjected to; for example, they were suspended for wearing head wraps. They spoke of the debilitating effects of the Safe Schools Act on children, especially Black children, who were considered threatening to white teachers, and of

a dozen everyday examples of bodies marked as not belonging to the educational setting. A parent related that her son was deemed “gifted” in the United States but labeled disruptive in Canada. The only way out of this state of affairs, parents insisted, was to tackle the problem head on, with parent advocates, new curriculum and teachers of colour. For many, the answer lay in Black focused schools, and a curriculum that saw Black issues and culture as something more than a topic covered in Black history month. “We need to break the pattern that says we can’t because we don’t have enough money.” “Tolerance,” one parent activist and teacher stated passionately as she reflected on a slogan on the wall of the OISE/UT classroom in which the Teach-In was being held, “is not the best we can do.”

While the experiences of Black students and parents emerged as one of the prominent narratives of the morning, attesting to the persistence of anti-black racism in Toronto, they were not the only groups to be the recipients of racism. From the knowing nods and gestures by other attendants around the room, it was clear that even those who did not speak shared many similar experiences, agreeing on the depth and extensiveness of racism in education.

B. Afternoon Session: Teachers Candidates and Teachers

The afternoon was devoted to hearing from teacher candidates and teachers. They spoke both of their experiences in schools and in teacher education programs. However, their testimonies were not simply about negative experiences; they also offered thoughtful suggestions for remedial action. All spoke compellingly of the meaning of their own bodies in schools: they all experienced being talked down to by other teachers and administrators in front of students. Asian women teachers were assumed to be passive, weak women, and so their formal authority was undermined by colleagues and pupils alike. Many told of how their own knowledge and authority were held suspect, and of how they were refused access to vital resources. Most significant of all, minority teachers were subjected to the kind of surveillance and disciplining we heard about from youth of colour. One new teacher found himself demeaned and patted on the head by a white female principal, who thought his religious head covering was like a Christmas tree.

Teachers of colour who spoke out found themselves labelled as troublemakers, paralleling the experience of students and parents of colour. Routinely having their authority undermined and denigrated by both parents and school administrators, teachers of colour were nevertheless expected to be resource persons for “everything non-Christian and non-European.” They were often asked to mediate between students of colour and school administrators, and to take on resolving any issues that have to do with “other” cultures. In school environments where the administration and teaching staff were mostly white, this practice not only burdened teachers of colour, but it increased their vulnerability to racism from colleagues. Racism is known to be such a “professional” problem in some schools that teachers of colour try not to have to teach “north of a certain point” in the city – in suburban schools where the administrator and teacher population is almost entirely white.

Detailed, passionate and constructive testimonials came from people who described their experiences in teacher education programs. For example, during practicum, teacher candidates

were often deliberately blocked, having to endure rude, offensive and overtly racist remarks and behaviours from associate teachers². Associate teachers were not made accountable for their behaviour, and teacher candidates reported being at considerable risk in their placements. In their classrooms, including OISE/UT classrooms, mention of racism usually earned students the label of troublemaker. They encountered the rolling of eyes and contempt by their professors, ranging from patronizing remarks to outright penalties. A teacher candidate reported that one professor simply responded to a student who complained of his racism by saying, “What are you going to do, come up and check up on me next year?” Teacher candidates overheard their professors describing some minority groups as slow learners, dismissing racist slurs as “just words,” and instructing their students to beware of “kids with baggy pants because they carry guns.” Candidates who are white were often hostile when race issues were mentioned in the classroom; they saw these issues to be irrelevant to their training – a response that further underlined the lack of official support for anti-racist interventions.

In sum, the teacher education classroom was described as a poisonous learning environment by both candidates of colour and white candidates who tried to make anti-racist interventions. Teacher candidates stated in no uncertain terms how little anti-racism featured in their own education and training. Concluding that she did not learn anti-racist strategies at OISE/UT, one speaker asked her fellow teacher candidates to reflect on what they were taught about racial minorities: “Are we educators or missionaries who believe that our students [of colour] are culturally deprived?” Her testimony identified the common practice in teacher education: issues concerning the experiences of racial minorities are seen to be cultural in origin, and as having more to do with minority dysfunction than with racism. These testimonials had a considerable impact on the parents in attendance. As one parent put it, “if Black teachers have so many problems, what about a four-year old child?” The afternoon comments indicate, without a doubt, that racism in the schools is a systemic problem, and that anti-racist education needs to begin in teacher education.

Responses from CIARS

The Teach-In concluded with brief comments by OISE/UT faculty. Professor George Dei reminded the audience that there was an institutional responsibility to implement anti-racism strategies, a responsibility the province of Ontario had shirked with the abolition of the Anti-racism Directorate in 1995. Describing the hate mail he received in response to his suggestion for Black focused schools in a public forum at the St. Lawrence Centre early in February, Professor Dei recalled his own son’s advice to him to do what had to be done. “If anybody thinks that the voices we heard from today ought to be dismissed, they are not on this planet,” Professor Dei advised, concluding that “the more we talk about race, the better off we would be.” There is an easy slippage between the “politics of race” and the “politics of difference,” a slippage, Professor Dei warned, that enabled dominant groups to deny their responsibility for eradicating

² Associate teachers supervise teacher candidates when they do their practicum in the schools as part of the teacher education program.

racism. If the problem is that “they are different,” there can be little accountability for change. Popular calls to move beyond race and towards culture can easily lead to the erasure of racism as a phenomenon that profoundly shapes the educational experiences of racial minorities. Professor Dei emphasized our intellectual and political responsibility “to break the silences and negations around race.”

Professor Rinaldo Walcott challenged the application of the term “urban” to issues of racism in schooling, and spoke of the impulse to bury racism by turning it into something else. He recalled the testimonies heard throughout the day about how difficult it was to call schools to account for racism. Responding in particular to the stories heard about the experiences of teacher candidates, Professor Walcott offered this conclusion:

The idea of training is what needs to be seriously remade if teaching is supposed to fulfil the needs of a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Teaching must be remade not as a fancy apprenticeship, but as a mode of thought and a practice of thoughtfulness.

Professor Sherene Razack, summing up the day, recalled how little had changed since she and Professor Dei headed a large team investigating the best practices of anti-racism in schooling in Ontario in 1994. Dei and Razack, and the team of OISE researchers, concluded then that schools did not systematically address issues of race and racism. Many educators were even likely to believe that it was racist to think about race at all. Facile multicultural solutions were often advanced by school administrators as the answer to the problem of racism, while few efforts were made to recruit racial minority teachers, to solicit community input, or to track the problems of racial minority students. Only a few educators believed that anti-racism consisted of tackling the problem of racism head on and not in a piecemeal fashion, and that it required honouring the cultures and experiences of racial minority students. Professor Razack remarked that the Teach-In confirmed that schools had become more about policing and surveillance than about schooling, and that the system remained overwhelmingly white both in its teacher and administrator population, and in the practices of schooling.

Importantly, the testimonials all emphasized the will to resist and survive *collectively*. The words of a Black teacher, according to Professor Razack, best expressed the solidarity and strength displayed by the participants of colour at the Teach-In. “I’ve got your back,” one teacher said, addressing the young Latino man whose testimonial had begun the day. “You need not stand alone” was the emerging consensus among the participants.

Proposals and Future Directions

Inspiration for organizing the Teach-In arose from our perception of the disappearance of racism in educational discourses. Testimonials from the Teach-In confirmed our perception that racism is alive and well in the educational system; in fact, it has become worse in the lives of parents and students of colour in the schools. (See Appendix 3 for an incident that took place after the Teach-in that corroborates the findings we document in this report, and an initiative arising from the Teach-In that offers hope for change.) Indeed, what is occurring in Toronto

schools and the silence around issues of race and racism contravene UNESCO's initiative for an international coalition of cities against racism, which identifies the urban environment as a prime site for racism. However, UNESCO also claims that the city offers a privileged space for the fight against racism precisely because it has the resources, capacity and knowledge base for intervention. Point 8 of the Ten-Point Plan of Action developed by UNESCO directly addresses education as a key site for change.

Teacher education contributes to racial tension by not making the elimination of racism central and explicit to the training of future teachers. Members of CIARS believe that OISE/UT is uniquely positioned to be a leader in the prevention and intervention of this serious and pernicious urban problem, because it is the largest institution for research and training in education in the country, and because of the breadth and concentration of anti-racism scholarship at CIARS. Thus, while there are many issues that emerged from the Teach-In based on which actions could be taken, we decided to focus our effort on ourselves – on OISE/UT– due to its critical role, and therefore responsibility, in educational scholarship and practice in Canada and worldwide. We urge the senior administration of OISE/UT, working with CIARS and its constituencies, and with other groups inside and outside of OISE, to take a proactive stance in confronting racism in education, especially in teacher training. The following proposals are formulated as beginning steps in this direction.

Proposal One

We urge OISE/UT to commit funds to strengthen the design, implementation and delivery of the teacher education program in relation to racism. Concretely, this commitment would include at least the following elements:

- the inclusion of more practicum supervisors from under-represented groups.
- the development of an accountability process within OISE/UT, and in relation to associate teachers who work with the teacher candidates. This process may begin with concerted dialogues with teachers to ensure that they understand the pernicious effects of racism in the lives of school students and teacher candidates.
- the creation of an anti-racism liaison officer between teacher candidates and the teacher education program, and between the candidates and the associate teachers. While this function could be part of the role of Student Services, we believe that issues of racism must not be subsumed under the general rubric of equity. They must be addressed specifically and explicitly to draw attention to this specific form of marginalization.
- the establishment of a mentorship program for minority teacher candidates.
- the creation of a space, as part of the teacher education program, for teacher candidates of colour to share experiences, and to generate feedback and suggestions to those in charge of the program. CIARS has been hosting four to five two such meetings every year for the last five years. However, since these meetings were informal, they were not part of the feedback loop for information and suggestion to the program. We recommend that these processes be formalized.
- the incorporation of equity and anti-racism courses as part of the required curriculum. Treating these courses as electives communicates to the teacher candidates that issues of

racism and equity are not central to their education.

Testimonials from the Teach-in, especially those from teachers and teacher candidates, indicate clearly that reforming teacher education cannot be left to the discretion of departments and to equity groups, concerned though these groups may be. This is because they do not have the overall mandate and authority to take leadership for teacher education. In the past, the Office of the Dean had committed funds to anti-racism initiatives. We urge that this practice be maintained.

Proposal 2

Following from the above, we urge OISE/UT to work closely with CIARS, and to utilize the theoretical and practical expertise, as well as its connections with communities of colour, to advance anti-racism objectives and actions. In addition to being a research centre for promoting anti-racism scholarship, CIARS has been, since its inception, advocating for anti-racism activities in OISE /UT. This is because we view action as an integral part of our scholarship, and have, over the years, reached out to and formed partnerships with communities of colour as part of our research agenda. To bring our work into a closer relationship with anti-racism initiatives at OISE/UT, we recommend the following as beginning steps:

- that members of CIARS be invited to participate in the orientation of students at the beginning of the academic year.
- that members of CIARS be invited to participate in professional development activities of new and continuing faculty, such as the design and delivery of anti-racism workshops.
- that members of CIARS be invited to participate in OISE/UT's equity and diversity committee.
- that members of CIARS be invited to participate in the Preservice Admission Committee (PAC) and subsequent training for profile reading.
- that members of CIARS be invited to participate in the curriculum development of the teacher education program at OISE/UT.

Whereas some members of CIARS, who teach in the teacher education program, have been participating in some of the above activities, they have done so as individuals. We suggest here that a formal relationship be formed so that CIARS scholarship and expertise can be readily integrated into the development of teacher education at OISE/UT.

Proposal 3

We urge OISE/UT to provide financial and other incentives to promote research on anti-racism initiatives. Since the abolition of the Anti-racism Directorate in the Ministry of Education, funding for research and practice that explicitly addresses issues of race and racism

have all but disappeared provincially. However, given OISE/UT's central leadership role in education, OISE/UT can lobby the provincial government to re-instate an Anti-racism Directorate which will provide funding for research and other initiatives. (Indeed, the federal government has just announced the establishment of an Anti-racism Office at the national level.) Meanwhile, we recommend that OISE/UT allocate resources for the following activities as part of its concerted effort to address issues of racism in education. These include:

- providing funds to assist CIARS faculty to initiate and develop large scale research proposals that relate directly to teacher education programs. In this regard, we urge the Office of the Dean to encourage department chairs to offer course release or other incentives in order for faculty to participate in anti-racism activities, which requires a great deal of commitment, time and energy.
- establishing an annual award recognizing students, staff or faculty whose scholarship and/or service has made a significant contribution to the elimination of racism in education.
- providing space for meetings of or with community groups around anti-racism issues and initiatives. We envision this to be similar to the establishment for a space designated for aboriginal communities and activities in OISE/UT's space planning effort currently underway.
- organizing an annual public lecture on anti-racism.

Proposal 4

We urge OISE/UT to initiate and stimulate critical reflections on racism in relation to teacher education program by:

- holding an anti-racism Teach-In at a selected school in the GTA on an annual basis (see the George Brown Labour Fair as an example).
- sponsoring a national symposium on anti-racism in teacher education periodically.

We recommend that the organization and launch of these initiatives end with the development of a concrete plan(s) of action, which would become the basis for OISE/UT's ongoing review of its teacher education program. We further recommend that OISE/UT take on an advocacy role for anti-racism education vis-a-vis other teacher education programs and with the Ontario College of Teachers.

Both Proposals 3 and 4 are in line with UT's *Stepping Up* academic plan and the *Employment Equity Report* to build a stronger relationship, both internally and externally, with diverse communities. We also see the above activities as part of OISE/UT's participation in UNESCO's call for action against racism in the cities.

Proposal 5

As an immediate follow-up to the Teach-In, we request that OISE/UT provide funds for CIARS to develop an educational video, based on the video and audio documentation of the Teach-In, for use in teacher education programs. We believe that a documentary of this kind would be an invaluable resource. CIARS would develop such a documentary in collaboration with the Centre for Media and Culture in Education at OISE/UT. However, given the very limited budget and staffing we have, we will need additional financial support from the Office of the Deans to realize this plan.

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