

What are Critical/Courageous Conversations?



“Two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, “to kill the Indian in the child”. Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.”

– Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Parliament of Canada)

Critical/courageous conversations build on **critical race theory**. Cheryl I. Harris in her 1993 *Harvard Law Review* article posits that to fully understand racial disparities in a nation, one first has to understand that racism is woven or embedded throughout the fabric of that society and all of its institutions—often in ways that the dominant people barely perceive, but which the victims experience every day.

Critical literacy requires that teachers adopt a critical stance. This stance requires the educator to first become critically aware of race and racism and other issues related to power and inequity and then to develop a personal understanding of critical literacy. Self-reflective and reflexive ways of being and doing within the classroom, our community, and our home are important ways to develop a personal understanding of critical literacy, social justice, and anti-racism. (For more information on critical race theory and education, see resources and references in the appendices of this document.)

Many non-FNMI teachers have had limited or no opportunity to reflect upon the social constructs and privilege of “Whiteness” and are consequently socially unaware of its implications. As a result, many educators typically are “oblivious to racism; avoid racial and social issues; deny the social construction of race; and assume no responsibility for, nor take any action to reverse, the social implications of Whiteness” (Delano-Oriaran et al.).

However, teachers can “unlearn” racism and become transformative educators. Educators that use a transformationist lens have developed the ability to successfully teach FNMI students, as well as those with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds that are different from their own. They have

- reflected upon and acknowledged their privilege and their racial biases and stereotypes
- understand their influence in their teaching and relationships with FNMI and culturally and linguistically diverse students

Such educators employ culturally relevant and culturally responsive approaches and pedagogies and apply anti-racist and multicultural education strategies. When transformationist teachers implement FNMI, anti-racist, and multicultural curriculum approaches, they change the very structure of the curriculum and teach within and across all content areas to enable students to view issues from a diversity and equity perspective. They are able to

- provide equitable education opportunities for all students
- build upon the background and experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students
- empower students to think critically
- leave no child “academically behind”
- teach equality, justice, and power (Delano-Oriaran et al.)

By engaging in critical/courageous conversations on race, racism, and racial identity and their implications for culturally and linguistically diverse students, educators are able to unlearn racism and develop a critical perspective and transformative pedagogy.

Intersectionality

“For more than 25 years, Aboriginal people have been articulating their goals for Aboriginal education. They want education to prepare them to participate fully in the economic life of their communities and in Canadian society. But this is only part of their vision. Presenters told us that education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. Youth that emerge from school must be grounded in a strong, positive Aboriginal identity. Consistent with Aboriginal traditions, education must develop the whole child—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Current education policies fail to realize these goals.”

– *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*

Although race and racism are at the centre of critical race analysis, it is important to recognize their relationship or intersection with other forms of oppression, such as gender and class discrimination.

While layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality will lead to different experiences for a wide range of people of colour, they all share the experience of a racialized identity.

Critical/Courageous Conversations in School Divisions

Critical/courageous conversations on race and racism at the school division level are an important aspect of addressing racism in education and in society. This means that the division’s leadership needs to engage in such conversations and initiatives designed to address inequities related to systemic racism.

The goals of the framework are to achieve improvements in three distinct but overlapping domains:

- Community
- Leadership
- Learning and teaching

Beginning Critical/Courageous Conversations

All schools are challenged by institutional forms of racism, but some seem to do better than others at creating equitable learning environments.

“There’s no one-size-fits-all response to that question and no magic checklist or formula to answer it or, more importantly, to bring about needed change. However some approaches to identifying and mounting a strong response to institutional racism in schools are increasingly accepted as effective practices.

Mica Pollock, editor of *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real about Race in School*, calls on educators to develop an “everyday consciousness” about the relevance of race in schools. Be aware, ask questions, and “keep inquiring,” says Pollock, who is the director of the Center for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment and Teaching Excellence at the University of California, San Diego. Pollock offers four questions as a starting point for assessing and addressing institutional racism in a school setting:

- Am I seeing, understanding, and addressing the ways the world treats me and my students as members of racial groups?
- Am I seeing, understanding, and addressing communities and individuals in their full complexity?
- Am I seeing, understanding, and addressing the ways opportunities to learn or thrive are unequally distributed to racial groups?
- What actions offer necessary opportunities to students in such a world?

And then, when considering such actions, Pollock urges educators to ask the following:

Is this action moving students closer to educational opportunity or farther away from it? Why? What is our evidence?”

– Southern Poverty Law Center

Supporting Critical/Courageous Conversations in Schools and among Educators

“...You will know you have achieved your goal of quality education when your children are enjoying the challenge of school/learning. When their self-esteem and self-confidence is evident, when your children are proud of who they are, and when links with the older generations are made. You will know you have achieved your goal when the majority of the children who enter your system graduate and go on to further education or get a job, when they are living happy and fulfilled lives of their own making. This list could go on and on. What is clear is that it could take several years before you see the results of today’s efforts, much as it has taken years to realize the devastation caused by residential schools and other forms of colonial schooling.”

– Verna J. Kirkness

Teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the impact of racism on students and learning is a critical aspect of creating equitable, inclusive, and appropriate classroom and learning environments. Gary Howard in *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* outlines what good teachers know, what they do, and how they embrace culturally responsive teaching. With our student population becoming ever more diverse and teachers remaining largely of white, non-Aboriginal origins, this is an important aspect of addressing racism and closing the achievement gap. Therefore, it is important that schools facilitate and deepen the discussion of race and social justice in education among their teaching staff.

In a more recent article “As Diversity Grows: So Must We” (March 2007), Howard states that educational leaders in diversity-enhanced schools are working to transform themselves and their schools to serve all their students well. From his experience working with such schools and educators, he has learned that such transformative work proceeds best in five phases:

1. Building trust
2. Engaging personal culture
3. Confronting issues of social dominance and social justice
4. Transforming instructional practices
5. Engaging the entire school community

Supporting Critical/Courageous Conversations with Students

“Education is central to a movement towards a fairer, less oppressive society. All students have dreams or hopes for the future and it is our responsibility to find ways to generate hope and agency, to empower Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike.”

– Michelle I. Vanhouwe

Critical literacy is an approach to teaching that focuses on building students’ awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. This approach invites conversations about fairness and justice, and encourages children to ask why some groups of people are positioned in society as the “other” or as “others” (Leland et al.).

Critical literacy and critical books meet one or more of the following criteria:

- They don’t mask or try to make differences invisible and instead seek to explore what differences make a difference in society.
- They give voice to those who traditionally have been silenced or marginalized, and thereby enrich our understanding of history and life.
- They provide examples of how we can begin to take action about important social issues.
- They explore how the dominant systems of power and meaning work in our society to create hierarchies and to position certain groups.
- They don’t provide easy or “happily ever after” endings for complex social problems.

Heather Coffey states that “Critical literacy is the ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships. For the purposes of critical literacy, text is defined as a ‘vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society.’ Accordingly, songs, novels, conversations, pictures, movies, etc. are all considered texts.” (Coffey)

Critical literacy is a crucial aspect of anti-racism education and of engaging students in critical dialogue on race and racism. Critical literacy encourages social justice and exploration of language and literature in many forms. However, because critical literacy will look different in every classroom as a result of the subject, the theme or issue, and the population of students, there are many ways in which teachers may engage students and help them master critical literacy.

There are many resources that teachers may draw on to help them implement critical literacy approaches and inform their practice. See the [bibliography](#) at the end of this document.

Teaching from a Critical Social Justice or Anti-racism Perspective

As teachers seek to engage students in critical and courageous conversations on race and racism, it is important that they first consider some important points and reflect on their own knowledge and comfort with talking about race and racism, particularly with respect to FNMI peoples.

The suggestions that follow build on the B.C. Social Responsibility Performance Standards and are from the British Columbia teachers' resource *Make a Case against Racism: A Guide for Teachers of Grades 4–7* (British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General).

Pre-teaching Considerations

Racism is a topic that conjures up a range of thoughts and emotions. In approaching this topic, teachers may find it helpful to consider

- how their own background and experience might affect their approach to the topic (those who have not personally witnessed or experienced racism may not be aware of its presence or of its impact on those who have)
- what their own thoughts and feelings are with respect to this subject
- what generalizations or stereotypes they themselves may have harboured
- what race-related power dynamics might exist in their classrooms (e.g., who might be experiencing racism—either in subtle ways or through bullying, harassment, or intimidation)
- how best to create a safe learning environment where racism can be discussed in a constructive way

Good will and professional judgment supported by excellent classroom-management practices are important assets to support discussions about this topic. In addition, teachers may find it helpful to approach the discussion with

- heightened sensitivity to the comfort levels of students who might have first-hand experience of racism
- honest acknowledgement of their own limitations (e.g., not having personally experienced what it is like to be a target of racism)
- some familiarity with the terminology and concepts involved with anti-racism education (see the [glossary](#) included in the appendices of this resource)
- a clear sense of boundaries regarding forms of self-expression in the school environment (respecting students' needs and rights to self-expression and inclusion does not involve a validation of any or all opinions; self-expression that is hurtful or that can readily be construed as a perpetuation of oppression or injustice should not be a part of classroom discourse and should be immediately addressed)

It is hoped that teachers who have addressed these considerations will find that the students who may have experienced racism welcome a chance to have their reality acknowledged, placed into context, and discussed openly (British Columbia Ministry of Attorney General, 2008).

Resources to Support Divisional, School, and Classroom Reflection and Awareness

See the [appendices](#) for three case studies and three discussion/reflection tools that can assist in stimulating critical/courageous conversations and reflection at the divisional, school, and classroom levels.

The three case studies are

- Case Study 1: Supporting Equitable Outcomes In Low SES Schools Pilot Project
- Case Study 2: Dufferin School Centennial Project
- Case Study 3: Social Responsibility Standards

The three discussion/reflection tools are

- Questions for Dialogue—Division and Schools
- School Indicators of Inclusiveness with Respect to FNMI Students
- Teaching from a Social Justice Stance: Questions for Self-Reflection