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# A Critical Examination of Anti-Racist Education

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Multicultural education has been the subject of intense criticism since the early 1970s. Most criticism has come from the advocates of anti-racist education. At the same time, anti-racist education has been subjected to very little scrutiny. This paper examines some conceptual, empirical, and political limitations of anti-racist education.

Most educators consider the current curriculum to be apolitical. Although it is the case that all education is political education, anti-racist education is viewed as being too political. Anti-racist education tends to be reductive — victims of discrimination are usually referred to as “black,” whereas perpetrators are “white” — and narrowly conceived to refer only to institutional racism. Finally, many of the anti-racist interventions reported show negligible and even negative results.

Depuis le début des années 70, l'éducation multiculturelle fait l'objet de vives critiques, surtout de la part des partisans d'une éducation antiraciste. Pour sa part, l'éducation antiraciste a été très peu commentée. Dans cet article, les auteurs examinent certaines lacunes conceptuelles, empiriques et politiques de l'éducation antiraciste.

La plupart des éducateurs estiment que les programmes d'études actuels sont apolitiques. Bien qu'en fait toute éducation soit politique, l'éducation antiraciste est considérée comme trop politique. L'éducation antiraciste a tendance à être réductionniste — les victimes de discrimination étant habituellement désignées comme des “Noirs” et les coupables comme des “Blancs” — et à ne s'occuper par définition que du racisme institutionnel. En outre, un grand nombre des interventions antiracistes signalées donnent des résultats négligeables et parfois même négatifs.

Almost from its inception as an official Canadian government policy in 1971, multiculturalism has received intense criticism. Perhaps the most serious criticisms have come in the area of multicultural education. Anti-racist theorists have maintained that multicultural education does not address visible minorities' real concerns. Critics contend that under the guise of such explicit purposes as cultural enrichment, equality of access, and reducing personal prejudice, multicultural education has implicitly functioned to reinforce the status quo (Parker, 1992), subvert minority resistance (Troyna & Williams, 1986), and reproduce social and economic inequities (Troyna, 1992). Unfortunately, most of these contentions are speculative and unsubstantiated.

Tator and Henry (1991) suggest that “the most recent trend in education is to move away from a multicultural approach and to embrace the model of anti-racist education popular in England and the United States” (p. 144). The two

approaches differ substantially in their emphases. Multicultural education has traditionally emphasized intergroup harmony (Lynch, 1992), educational underachievement (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1989), individual prejudice (Lynch, 1992), equality of opportunity (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1989), enrichment through celebration of diversity, and improving self-image through pride in cultural heritage (Fleras & Elliott, 1992). The more recent anti-racist perspective emphasizes intergroup equity (Parker, 1992), educational disadvantage (Wright, 1987), institutional racism (Stanley, 1992), equality of outcome (Massey, 1991), unequal power relationships (Donald & Rattansi, 1992), and cultivating political agency through critical analysis (Massey, 1991). There are, as well, several similarities. Both approaches support the teaching of heritage languages, and promote student teamwork and dialogue as preferred classroom activities (Hernandez, 1989; Troyna, 1992). Both emphasize culturally different ways of perceiving and learning, and advocate the removal of bias, tracking, and assessment barriers from the curriculum (Fleras & Elliott, 1992; Tator & Henry, 1991). Whereas multicultural education has been subjected to considerable critical analysis over the past two decades, however, anti-racist education has received relatively little critical scrutiny.

This paper examines some of the political, conceptual, and empirical limitations of anti-racist education in order to question the call for replacing multicultural education with anti-racist education. We argue that multicultural education should be retained in Canada, and should incorporate only the best elements of anti-racist education for the purpose of providing a more comprehensive approach.

A Marxist informed anti-racist movement developed in the United Kingdom and the United States in the early 1970s (Troyna, 1992). Liberal education's promise of equality of opportunity through meritocracy had not been fulfilled, and it was argued that the objectives of progressive education could not be achieved in a capitalist society because the school's function was the reproduction of a stratified labour force.

Marxist educational theorists portray racism as originating in the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, the class controlling the means of production and distribution of material wealth. They contend that racism arises from and is a condition for capitalism (Bourgeault, 1988). In this view, "racism serves the important function of producing cheap labour for capital accumulation" (Bolaria & Li, 1988, p. 14). This function of capitalism is accomplished by bringing large numbers of non-white immigrants or migrant labourers into the country, providing employers with a "reserve army" labour pool, that is, more labourers than are needed, ostensibly as a hedge against unforeseen shortages, but in actuality to reduce the demand for, and hence the value of, indigenous workers. Immigrant workers who consider even a low standard of living better than what they were familiar with in their home countries, are often willing to work for less than their indigenous counterparts, and thus employers can use them to

undermine indigenous workers' ability to demand higher wages. Employers benefit from the cheaper, more docile immigrant labourer, compared with the higher priced and better organized indigenous labour force, which resents what it views as unfair competition (Adam, 1983). In this way, white working-class resistance to capitalist exploitation is conveniently redirected toward "alien," non-white scapegoats (Jenkins, 1978). Capitalism, then, is considered to have a vested interest in maintaining material discrepancies and racial antagonisms between white and non-white workers, and thus in perpetuating racism (Elliott & Fleras, 1992). Accordingly, Marxist educational theorists have concluded that the purpose of the education system as an integral component of capitalist societies is "not to achieve equality, but quite the reverse: to reinforce inequality" (Willis, 1981, p. x).

Anti-racist educators seek to redress these inequities through a politicization of curriculum and instruction (Francis, 1984; Short & Carrington, 1992). This position is clearly evident in Troyna and Williams' (1986) contention that anti-racist education requires "involvement by educational institutions in political issues" (p. 107), and in the view of Thomas (1984) that "anti-racist education is also political education" (p. 24).

As a politicized curriculum, anti-racist education teaches the structural, economic, and social roots of inequality. It "confronts" prejudice through an examination of the historical antecedents and contemporary manifestations of racial discrimination in society (McGregor, 1993; Tator & Henry, 1991). It focuses critical attention on unequal social and power relations that capitalism maintains and gives the appearance of rationality. Unless students understand the nature and characteristics of discriminatory barriers and thus acquire political agency, anti-racist educators believe the prevailing inequitable distribution of resources will remain intact (Fleras & Elliott, 1992). Anti-racist education should, argues Stanley (1992), be directed toward changing the social realities that racism appears to explain, rather than simply trying to change the explanations themselves.

Critics of the politicized character of anti-racist education have complained of "the subordination of education to political ends regardless of the educational consequences" (Pearce, 1986, p. 136) and the possibility of indoctrination or propaganda (Troyna & Carrington, 1990). A difficulty in using politically oriented anti-racist curricula is the perception of many parents and educators that the current curriculum is and should remain apolitical. A related concern is whether the Canadian public, which is predominantly centrist politically, would support a type of education so closely aligned with the political left. One should also remember the strong anti-left sentiments of many immigrant and refugee groups in Canada for whom Marxism is synonymous with oppression (H. Palmer, 1991). Some observers such as Massey (1991) maintain that anti-racist education carries too much left-wing baggage to gain widespread public support. Perhaps Sharma's (1991) observation that anti-racist education will have to dissociate itself from

leftist ideologies if it is to engage the support of the general public is an accurate assessment, given the historical and contemporary political climate in Canada.

Elliott and Fleras (1992) maintain that institutional and systemic racism are “embedded within the structures of a Capitalist system” (p. 74). Similarly, Massey (1991) recognizes that in the anti-racist view, “racism is seen as the direct and deliberate consequence of capitalist colonial exploitation” (p. 32). Consequently, many anti-racists believe that as long as we have a capitalist system we will have racism. One difficulty with this position is that any improvement in racist attitudes or behaviour in Canadian society must be discounted because racism is a necessary condition of capitalism. Similarly, if the very structure of the education system functions as an agent of institutional racism in a capitalist society, as some anti-racists suggest (Tator & Henry, 1991), then it is highly unlikely that schools will be sympathetic to challenging the capitalist system. When anti-racist education attacks the values of capitalism, it sets itself in an untenable position in the Canadian context, where Canadians have historically embraced capitalist enterprise and continue to do so.

#### ANTI-RACISM AS A REDUCTIVE PROCESS

Anti-racism tends to be reductive. One reductive stereotype used by anti-racists is the term “black.” In the United Kingdom, anti-racists use the term “black” to subsume all African and Caribbean blacks of any national or ethnic descent, as well as East Indians, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese immigrants (Allcott, 1992; Brah, 1992). Although anti-racists in Canada confine their use of the term “black” to those Canadians who actually define themselves as black, the term is still used without acknowledging varied ethnic and differentiating characteristics (Elliott & Fleras, 1992; Tator & Henry, 1991; Thomas, 1987). All differentiating characteristics are thus reduced to colour only, and to only one colour—black. The term “black,” according to Banton (1988), oversimplifies the problems faced by various black immigrant groups by implying that all their problems are colour-related and hence attributable to racism. Use of the undifferentiated term “black” has also given the erroneous impression that the central element of black existence is racism (Gilroy, 1992; Rattansi, 1992). As Gilroy (1992) explains of anti-racist initiatives in education, “they have trivialized the rich complexity of black life by reducing it to nothing more than a response to racism” (p. 60). Additionally, the term “black” hides the fact that some black groups have fared much better than others economically (Honeyford, 1986), and that some have achieved far better academically than others in the same circumstances (Banton, 1988; Gibson, 1991).

The term “black” excludes non-black groups who may experience as much racism as do black groups (Rattansi, 1992). It denies cultural specificities and sets itself in opposition to cultural pluralism (Brah, 1992). Non-black ethnic groups in Canada are likely to reject anti-racist education if the exclusive focus

remains “black.” Perhaps an even stronger reason for minority members to reject anti-racist initiatives, with their intensive focus on colour, is expressed in Modood’s (1992) observation that “Muslims (and indeed most other minority communities) do not see themselves in terms of colour and do not want a public identity that emphasizes colour” (p. 273).

One reductive tendency of anti-racism and anti-racist education is to reduce racism to something primarily, if not exclusively, perpetuated by whites (Gordon, 1989; F. Palmer, 1986). An important criticism of anti-racism is that it portrays all whites as racists (Sarup, 1991) while disregarding evidence of racism committed by non-whites. The following statements are indicative:

In the field of education, the basic assumption behind many current anti-racist policies is that since black students are the victims of the immoral and prejudicial behaviour of white students, white students are all to be seen as racists, whether they are ferret-eyed fascists or committed anti-racists. (The Runnymede Trust, 1989, p. 22)

There are certain difficulties in attributing racism to minority groups. According to our interpretation of racism as power, they cannot display racism against the majority sector. Statements made by a minority group—however unflattering or ethnocentric—should not be regarded as racist since they are merely slogans without the capacity for harm. (Elliott & Fleras, 1992, p. 58)

These views contribute to what F. Palmer (1986) calls “the preposterous suggestion that *all* white people and *only* white people are, and cannot *but be* racists” (pp. 149–150). This suggestion is likely to be rejected by Canadians not only because a majority of Canadian ethnic groups are white, but because it is clearly inaccurate. As many point out, “notions of inferiority and superiority are certainly not limited to whites” (Hastie, 1986, p. 70). Japanese treatment of Koreans is an obvious example. Cashmore and Troyna (1990) cite American Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan’s blunt anti-Semitism, and racism by Malaysians against the Chinese minority; Henry and Ginzberg (1985) highlight black racism against other blacks; Stasiulis (1990), citing Iocavetta, explains that “racisms built on language, religion and other cultural markers have historically be [*sic*] directed at white as well as non-white groups” (p. 291).

Another reductive tendency of anti-racism is to privilege “institutional racism” as the exclusive explanatory variable in accounting for discrepancies between educational and material attainments of “blacks” and of the white majority. Although anti-racists disparage social or cultural *difference* explanations in terms of “deficit,” “deprivation,” or “pathological models” (Massey, 1991, p. 23), they discredit such explanations without demonstrating their incorrectness. Religious and cultural traditions, belief systems, and socio-economic background, identified as explanatory factors in attainment discrepancies by such observers as Morris (1989), are essentially disregarded. Similarly, rural-urban migration adaptation problems (Rattansi, 1992; Sowell, 1981), dysfunctional family organization

(Coelho, 1988; Head, 1984), or the restricted linguistic codes identified by Bernstein (1977) are largely discounted as explanatory factors. The proclivity of anti-racists to regard other explanations for material or academic inequities as excusing or denying institutional racism (Tomlinson, 1990; Wright, 1987) results in a reductive polarization that is likely to be viewed by Canadians, and particularly by educators, as dogmatic and narrowly conceived.

#### ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION AS COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE

Anti-racist education as it is predominantly theorized may have the unintended effect of exacerbating rather than ameliorating the very problems it identifies. With its almost exclusive emphasis on "race," anti-racism acts to reify "race," a concept anti-racists themselves agree is "vacuous" (Brah, 1992). Although such anti-racist theorists as Donald and Rattansi (1992) contend that "the physical or biological difference between groups defined as 'races' have been shown to be trivial" (p. 1), and Sarup (1991) asserts that "scientifically speaking, race does not exist" (p. 23), the discourse of anti-racism predominantly emphasizes race (Brah, 1992; Troyna & Williams, 1986). "In this way," states Li (1990), "race is reified, or treated as though it were a concrete form which in fact it is not" (p. 7). A singular emphasis on "race" within the schools may also unintentionally contribute to what African-American educator Shelby Steele (1990) describes as "race-holding"—a defensive and debilitating maintenance of personal identity solely in relation to one's "race."

Anti-racists' specific reference to racial characteristics for the purpose of countering racism is what Troyna and Williams (1986) describe as "benign racialization." But how benign is this racialization, whether in schools or in society? For example, the Runnymede Trust (1989) recognizes that anti-racist education which intensifies the focus on race can lead to polarization of students along racial lines, and Ramcharan (1982) observes that increased emphasis on race "has been a major factor in the exacerbation of colour consciousness in the society" (p. 107).

Indo-Canadian educator Kogila Moodley (1984) suggests that Canadian multiculturalism has been correct to be silent on "race," and to emphasize instead what she considers to be the more valid concepts of ethnicity and culture. Perhaps by using such invalid notions as race, anti-racist educators may unwittingly validate them in the minds of both racists and their victims. The danger in emphasizing race in our efforts to assist the victimized, suggests Moodley, is that "they will be restigmatized through the very efforts meant to destigmatize" (p. 802).

A second counterproductive aspect of anti-racism and anti-racist education is that their virtually exclusive association of racism with colour distracts attention from other, perhaps equally damaging forms of discrimination. Modood (1992) describes the problem as "a concept of racism that sees only colour discrimina-



tion as a cause and material deprivation as a result" (p. 272). Whereas such anti-racists as Thornhill (1984) react against a broader, multifactor conception of racism, contending that it minimizes colour-related racism by placing it "on the same footing as discrimination based on language, religion, cultur[e]" (p. 4), such authors as Stasiulis (1990) posit that "Canadian racism has been evoked not only by skin colour, but by ethnic markers as well, based on language, religion, and other components of ethnic culture" (p. 278). The significance of Stasiulis' observation becomes evident in a conversation related by Adams (1990) in which he expressed admiration to a civic official in Owen Sound, Ontario, at the re-election of their black mayor. The official responded by asserting, "Oh, up around here we don't mind blacks. It's Catholics that we hate" (p. 96).

Perhaps we have not observed that some of the most devastating forms of human intolerance, which have motivated white to kill white in Bosnia and black to kill black in Rwanda, have nothing to do with colour. If anti-racist education is to focus exclusively on colour discrimination, it may minimize the importance of "racisms built upon language, religion, and other cultural markers" (Stasiulis, 1990, p. 219) in the minds of students, and inadvertently excuse acts of discrimination or prejudice unrelated to colour. Rather than have students see discrimination as based solely on colour, it is important to remind them that, as Henry and Ginzberg (1985) observe, "there are few among us who are not potential victims of discrimination, whether it is based on sex, race, religion, country of origin, disability or occupation" (p. 54).

Without an understanding of racism, what generates it, and how it is manifested, teachers who would implement anti-racist initiatives are in the awkward position of being well-intentioned but poorly informed arbiters of racism. This lack of clarity concerning racism is exemplified in the following comment by Troyna and Williams (1986):

In short, the relationship between racist intent, racist practices and racist effects (in the form of inequality) are not as clear-cut as many would have us believe. The imperative must be to clarify empirically these relationships if realistic and productive anti-racist policies are to be formulated. (p. 56)

It is in reference to this uncertainty that F. Palmer (1986) states, "anti-racism is its own worst enemy, for it lacks a clear concept of what racism is" (p. 112).

Not only has the phenomenon of racism not been adequately specified, but anti-racist theorists have yet to provide educators with a clearly enunciated concept of how anti-racist education can achieve its goals. As Tator and Henry (1991) observe, "what is also increasingly clear is that educators who now espouse anti-racist education also lack a clear conceptual understanding of how this approach can act to change the system" (p. 144). Before anti-racist theorists can hope to achieve anti-racist goals through the schools, they must, as Knowles and Mercer (1992) admonish, provide educators with "a historical account which



specifies what precisely is to be opposed, and secondly, how this might be achieved" (p. 113).

A related consideration seldom mentioned by anti-racist educators is what should be accepted as evidence of less racism. Some anti-racist teaching studies accept a positive change in attitude as measured by social distance, semantic differential, and Likert scales. Others include a decrease in authoritarian beliefs; a decrease in the belief the world is just; and an increase in expressions of empathy for victims of discrimination. Given the nature of the goals of anti-racist teaching, however, consideration should also be given to a willingness to remove institutional barriers and to indications of a willingness to cause social and power relations among groups to be equal. In addition, a greater willingness to attribute lack of success to societal attitudes and policies rather than to group characteristics would be an indication of less racism.

A final problem concerning anti-racist education is suggested by several research findings that implementation of anti-racist initiatives may produce negligible results or, in some cases, unintended counterproductive outcomes in the classroom. Rattansi (1992) states that "like the multicultural project of reducing prejudice by teaching about other cultures, the anti-racist project of providing superior explanations of unemployment, housing shortage and so forth, has so far, and for similar reasons, produced only patchy evidence of success" (p. 33). Three studies (McGregor, 1993; McGregor & Ungerleider, 1993; Ungerleider & McGregor, 1992) used meta-analyses to compare anti-racist teaching and multicultural teaching programs. The results of all three studies showed some positive effects and some negative. Even those teaching programs reporting positive change, however, showed only minimal gains.

Not only is there little evidence of success of anti-racist educational initiatives, there are indications that some of these initiatives may actually increase racism. Kehoe (1984), for example, has observed that "in general, school courses on the nature of prejudice have not been effective in reducing prejudice and in some instances have had negative effects" (p. 50). Black's (1973) semantics study, for example, comparing the effectiveness of general semantics and anti-racist-oriented semantics in reducing racially prejudiced attitudes, found that although instruction in general semantics usually reduced prejudiced attitudes, instruction in anti-racist semantics had the opposite effect.

#### THE RECORD OF MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA

Because much criticism of multiculturalism by anti-racist proponents may no longer be valid in light of the present evolutionary state of multicultural initiatives in Canada and their attendant successes, we argue here that multicultural education, augmented with some of the more positive anti-racist elements, should continue to be the educational means by which Canadians seek to accomplish intergroup understanding, harmony, opportunity, and equity.

Some of the most serious criticisms levelled against multiculturalism are that it has done nothing to redress employment and material inequities between minorities and the majority (Dahlie & Fernando, 1981; Troyna & Williams, 1986). But even here the situation appears to be changing rather rapidly. In 1965, Porter pointed to the salience of ethnicity in the social and economic hierarchical stratification of Canadian society as a "vertical mosaic." Darroch (1979) used Porter's methods to see if the vertical mosaic continued to be a fact of life for minority Canadians 14 years after the original study, and found that ethnic affiliations were no longer a significant factor limiting social and economic mobility in Canada. Similarly, Ramcharan (1982) found that although most non-white immigrants had to settle initially for jobs below those they had occupied in their homelands, after language and professional training a majority were able, in a short time, to progress to similar or better positions than they had held in their homelands. Ramcharan believes this would not have been the case in Canada as little as a decade previously. A study by Lautard and Loree (1984) reported that although Porter's vertical mosaic was still evident, occupational inequality among Canadian ethnic groups had declined significantly. And, although they do not distinguish between visible and other minorities, Pineo and Porter (1985) found that particularly for native-born men (of any ethnic group), ethnicity had no bearing on occupational attainment.

In 1985, Henry and Ginzberg found considerable evidence of racial discrimination in their well-known study *Who Gets the Work?* where black and white applicants with the same credentials and approaches applied for the same jobs in Toronto with vastly different results. But more recently Henry confirmed that "The study was replicated in 1989 with different results. In field tests, the number of jobs offered to white and black applicants was virtually the same" (cited in *Employment Equity and Access to Opportunities*, 1990, p. 27). Lautard and Guppy's (1990) meta-analysis of demographic data similarly indicated that social and material inequalities originally described by Porter (1965) have largely dissipated.

#### THE CALL FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

Anti-racist and multicultural education have typically been promoted in opposition to one another over the past two decades (Gill, Mayor, & Blair, 1992). This has led to a concern that the ongoing conflict between proponents of multicultural and anti-racist education has harmed their common purpose of a more just society. One unfortunate consequence of the multicultural versus anti-racist conflict is that it has confused or antagonized many educators who seek direction in modifying their curricula or instructional practices, to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the ethnic communities they serve. Clearly, it is time for an accord. What we propose is that the focus of multicultural education could

be expanded to incorporate some important concerns of anti-racist education, such as institutional barriers, material inequalities, and power discrepancies between minorities and the majority. What we do *not* suggest is that multicultural education adopt anti-racism's exclusionary emphases of colour-racism and capitalism, or its divisive, oppositional approach.

Fleras and Elliott (1992) advise that "a truly effective multiculturalism must be concerned not only with culture and heritage, but more importantly with disadvantage, justice, equality, discrimination, and prejudice" (p. 136). Such an expanded role for multicultural education has recently been advocated by Gollnick and Chin (1990), Sleeter (1991), and Nieto (1992). This more materially and critically oriented expansion would enable Canadian multicultural education to address some persistent concerns of recently arrived visible minorities, while it continues to pursue such goals as celebrating and sharing heritage, and promoting intergroup understanding, harmony, and equity. It is this type of education for an ethnically and culturally pluralist society that is arguably most appropriate in the context of Canadian ethnic diversity, and most likely both to receive sustained public support in our liberal democratic society and to retain the essential capacity to evolve in relation to the needs and aspirations of all Canadians.

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