

PERSONAL THOUGHTS ABOUT RACISM

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Over the past several months, we have witnessed on-going protests in Canada and the United States related to racism. In my experience working with students over the 25+ years, I have come to see the issue of race as one of those untalkable subjects. At some level we know it is there, but we are not comfortable having an open dialogue about it.

For me, the concern is impact that racism has on individual students and their families. As a society, we need to create structures where each of us belongs, has some control over our lives and has a sense of purpose. Where any of those functions are lacking, there will be conflict.

In Canada, our racism began when the early settlers and governments sought to negotiate lands from our indigenous peoples. In looking at the Glenbow archives, one can clearly see the terminology that that was used to describe our indigenous peoples both in the media and in the courts. The language used was not deemed out of place at that time but set the stage to view our indigenous peoples as “other and for the most part less-than”. Although I am not versed in the significant events that have taken place since the settlers first arrived, I am aware of the racism that is directed at our indigenous peoples and their struggles for recognition and rights. That remains a matter to be settled by “Nations” leadership, Federal and Provincial Governments as they as representatives of the people.

As our country became to grow, more people were encouraged to come to Canada. The Soldiers Resettlement Act was one such initiative. Initially, immigration was primarily open to Europeans, and members of the British Commonwealth, who shared a similar laws, religions and institutions with the original settlers. Over the generations, Canada has opened its arms to many people who arrived at our doorstep hoping for a safer, better life. Canadians were not always welcoming. When I was growing up, I remember the discrimination against the German immigrants who arrived in Canada after the war. Later, Canada opened its borders to world-wide immigration. People looked different, had different cultural practices, different ideologies and religions. The government’s policy of multiculturalism was shared and embraced by the public. However, once the density of the immigration policy became visible, so too, did the differences. Not all Canadians were prepared for, nor have, adjusted to our emerging Canada. In the power struggle to achieve those three fundamental needs of people: belonging, control and purpose, and as a result of the current debate in the United States, Canada is having to address its own racist struggles.

Fundamentally, in my view, the issues are:

- how do our laws and institutions allow equal opportunity and access for all
- how do each of us seek to understand and value the perspective of others
- what process does the government put in place to ensure that new immigrants have the opportunities to be successful and productive in Canada
- how do our institutions reflect the diversity within our populations
- in schools,

- do staffing policies, reflect the diversity within our population
- do school libraries offer stories and hero(ines) from other cultures
- are minorities promoted to leadership roles
- do we in our curriculum acknowledge contributions of other cultures-
leaders, mathematics, literature, science, the arts
- in communities
 - how are cultures celebrated
 - how are leaders developed and promoted
 - how are children included and treated
- as individuals
 - do we seek to understand
 - do we stand up against racism
 - do we value our diversity
 - do we help our children to value others

Racism is not a one-way street, people of all ethnicities carry prejudices. Prejudices are developed within families, within communities and within our institutions. Unless we are talking about the prejudices and biases within each of us and our society in general, there will be no change. No change can create greater entrenchment of ideology.

It was interesting to me to read the Glenbow archives; listen to podcasts regarding race issues in the United States; and reflect on the ideology of the NAZIs in World War II, that a narrative can be built where the society as a whole see nothing wrong with demeaning, subjugating or excluding a portion of the population. As citizens we must guard against cultural mindsets of racism.

I certainly, do not begin to hold the answers, however, I have seen racism in action, it is subtle, it is destructive, and it undermines our society. For me, public discussion and respectful debate is the best way to move forward.