CONFRONTING CRITICAL ISSUES OF RACE AND THE NEED FOR DECOLONIZING EDUCATION IN CANADA: PROBLEMATIZING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY, A NOVA SCOTIAN STORY

WENDY MACKEY *St. Francis Xavier University*

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this article is to confront critical issues of race and add a missing critical analysis of the attempts to implement culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) within education in Nova Scotia and across North America. This critical analysis addresses the inequitable learning environments facing Black learners. The stories of both pre-service and in-service teachers highlight the need for educators, educational leaders, and policymakers to embed decolonizing steps to implement CRP and overcome systemic racism in education. Their accounts demonstrate that changes in policies have not led to an understanding of CRP, decolonizing, or an interruption to systemic racism. Without decolonizing steps, including giving educators the time and opportunity to decolonize their thinking, efforts to implement CRP will fail.

AFFRONTER LES ENJEUX CRITIQUES DE LA RACE ET LA NÉCESSITÉ DE DÉCOLONISER L'ÉDUCATION AU CANADA : PROBLÉMATISER LA MISE EN ŒUVRE D'UNE PÉDAGOGIE CULTURELLEMENT PERTINENTE, UNE HISTOIRE DE LA NOUVELLE-ÉCOSSE

RÉSUMÉ. L'objectif de cet article est d'affronter les enjeux critiques liés à la race et d'apporter une analyse critique manquante des tentatives de mise en œuvre de la pédagogie sensible et adaptée à la culture (PSAC) dans l'éducation en Nouvelle-Écosse et à travers l'Amérique du Nord. Cette analyse critique aborde les environnements d'apprentissage inéquitables auxquels font face les apprenants noirs. Les récits d'enseignants mettent en évidence la nécessité, pour les éducateurs et les responsables scolaires, d'intégrer des démarches de décolonisation afin de mettre en œuvre la PSAC et de surmonter le racisme systémique dans l'éducation. Sans démarches de décolonisation, notamment offrir aux enseignants le temps et l'occasion de décoloniser leur pensée, les efforts visant à mettre en œuvre la PSAC échoueront.

On May 25, 2020, Mr. George Floyd was murdered by a policeman who used his knee to crush Mr. Floyd's neck and impair his airway for over 9 minutes. That summer was filled with images of further persecution of Black people as they expressed their outrage through protest. This outpouring of outrage stemmed from the murder of Mr. Floyd; however, at its core, were 400 years of injustice and racism against Black people. The outrage went far beyond Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Mr. Floyd was murdered. The Black Lives Matter movement was resurrected, and protests were held worldwide by people who were disgusted with the killing of a Black man, in daylight, on a public street, with witnesses.

As the world saw daily images of Mr. Floyd laying on the ground with the police officer's knee on his neck and protestors being gassed and hit with rubber bullets, Black Canadians were sickened and traumatized. Blatant and systemic racism is not confined to the United States. It is a reality also for Black Canadians. In Toronto alone, between the years 2000 and 2017, Black people consisted of almost 37% of the victims of death by police (Marcoux & Nicholson, 2020).

While Canada promotes itself as the great mosaic, where all peoples are welcomed, and differing cultures and races are valued (Philip, 2018), Canada's history tells a different story. For example, when the words "slavery," "racism," or "Ku Klux Klan" (KKK) are uttered, the minds of many travel to the Deep South of the United States. Something not commonly taught in schools is that the "Ku Klux Klan and other white nationalists were active forces in Canada" (Maynard, 2017, p. 42). Evidence of the KKK organization, members, and beliefs grounded in white[1] supremacy, white power, and hatred for non-White people across Canada, including Nova Scotia, date to the early 1920s (Bartley, 2020). The border between the state of Maine and the province of New Brunswick served as a well-traveled route for KKK members to enter the Canadian Maritime provinces. In 1925, it was recorded that there were 150,000 KKK members in Maine (Bartley, 2020).

In Nova Scotia, racism is not usually associated with the familiar provincial tourist pictures. The sentiments of the KKK did not dissolve in the 1920s. Canadian Klansmen set up a headquarters in Toronto in 1980 at the same time when it was reported that a new KKK group was also forming in Nova Scotia (Sher, 1983). This is an example of how white supremacy preserved colonialism and systemic racism in Canada and Nova Scotia.

Black people in Canada have been subjugated by colonialism since their arrival. The history of Black people brought to Canada, including to the shores of Nova Scotia, is the history of a people that have been stripped of

their homeland, native languages, and epistemologies; forced into slavery; and brought to Canada as property of White owners. Although slavery was practiced in Canada for more than 200 years, "the realities of Canadian slavery and the hostilities enacted upon Black populations in Canada are not taught in most Canadian schools" (Maynard, 2017, p. 18). The fact that many Canadians did not learn about slavery in Canada confirms why colonialist ideals and systemic racism permeate throughout the foundations of Canadian society and government agencies, including its school systems (Thoboni, 2007). This missing curriculum not only kept the truth away from White Canadians, but it also continues to rob Black Canadians of their histories and epistemologies through "the imposition, and internalisation of the colonisers' way of knowing, by the colonised" (Dei, 1999, p. 23). Therefore, it is crucial to have a decolonizing process in place for all educators.

As a Black professor, teaching sociology of education and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), students' honest, critical responses to lessons on racism in Canada revealed that several students were unaware that slavery occurred in Canada. Alarmingly, in 2021, pre-service teachers in Nova Scotia, who had completed a 4-year undergraduate program before starting their education degrees, did not know that enslaved Africans were sold in their province. As recorded by the Nova Scotia Historical Society: "At an early period ... as to the presence of slaves at Halifax a year or two after its settlement there can be no question" (Smith, 1899, p. 6). There were three major points of entry for the Atlantic slave trade in Canada: Montreal, Quebec City, and Halifax (Maynard, 2017). Though there is no question this occurred, it remains a sobering moment, both for my students to learn these truths and for myself, as their Black professor, to continually explain the colonization of my people.

The responses from my students are the impetus for this study — to confront critical issues of race and the need for a decolonizing process among educators if true change is to happen. In this article, I propose that Canada's history be taught and understood through a critical anti-racist lens and be a prerequisite for all educators. This article also outlines the efforts in Nova Scotia to implement CRP to address issues caused by systemic racism.

This article demonstrates that CRP cannot be implemented if educators do not confront critical issues of race and incorporate a decolonizing process. As posited by Hilliard III (1978), "Quality education for all is possible if educators are mature enough to confront directly the vestiges of racism and domination in our educational process" (p. 123). As the

primary focus of this article is to confront critical issues of race, Hilliard's words are significant, as a goal of this study is to add a missing critical analysis to the actions that have been attempted within education in Nova Scotia and North America to address systemic racism and inequitable learning environments for Black learners. As stated by Wright (2022), "Racism is North America's original sin" (16:45). Without confronting the issues of race as part of the planning and implementation of CRP, efforts being implemented will fail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One method that teachers, schools, and school districts have attempted in order to address the inequities for Black students is CRP. Being culturally relevant is a way of being that is culturally and racially competent, is socially and conscientiously critical, and provides a method for students to be successful (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Gay (2000), whose work is grounded in culturally responsive teaching, has described her method as using the everyday lived experiences and cultural norms of students as the avenue to teach. School districts where teachers are expected to use a culturally relevant or responsive approach must ensure that every educator within a school district is culturally competent (Mackey, 2021). Ladson-Billings (1995a) proposed three pillars of CRP: student academic success, cultural competence, and critical and social consciousness. This should be the focus of all teachers. Therefore, before calling oneself a culturally relevant educator or leader, an individual must ensure they are all these things. Educational leaders, educators, and policymakers need to have the knowledge and skills to identify when educators are not culturally competent and when their actions, whether conscious or not, are having a negative impact on students (McCray & Beachum, 2014). This is critical if our goal is to address schools that are not operating in an equitable manner.

To understand the concerns associated with the implementation of CRP, I first provide context for my research, as well as statistics depicting the state of education for Black students in Nova Scotia. Afterwards, I describe systemic barriers that are halting the promise of the implementation of CRP to improve academic achievement for Black learners. Finally, I look at current scholars researching decolonizing processes in education to confront critical issues of race and racism.

Setting the context

This study was situated in Nova Scotia, a small province on the east coast of Canada. Nova Scotia is an important province to concentrate on when

talking about colonialism and racism because it has the highest proportion of Canadian-born Black people in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). According to Statistics Canada (2019), Black people in Nova Scotia made up the largest non-White portion of the population in 2016, with 80.7% of Black people being born in the province. From the days of slavery, Black people in the province, also referred to as African Nova Scotians, have not been spared the ravages of racism. One example is the policing system. In Halifax, the capital city of Nova Scotia,

> between 2006 and 2012, Black civilians were five times more likely to be subject to a street check than their proportion of the population would predict. Although Black people make up only 3.7% of the population, the [*sic*] were involved in 18.4% of street checks conducted during this twelve-year period. (Wortley, 2019, p. 104)

As an African Nova Scotian, I have been a victim of these street checks. It was not until the 2019 report was released that my teaching colleagues stopped denying my stories when I shared my negative experiences with the police department.

Fast forwarding to 2021, my White 1st-year education students grappled with the existence of systemic racism in the country, province, and towns they grew up in. They were, and continue to be, shocked at the results of racism when the facts are laid out. The impacts of these injustices reveal themselves in the province's public school assessment data. In Nova Scotia, only 59% of Grade 6 Black students met grade-level expectations in reading for 2019–2020. Only 43% of the same students met the benchmark for writing conventions, and only 53% met the benchmarks for Grade 6 math (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [EECD], 2020b). It is important to note that students who have been placed on individual program plans are not eligible to write these assessments. It is also important to note that Nova Scotian public school enrollment in 2019 was 123,239 students and there were 7,602 students who had self-identified as Black. This number only represents the students who had chosen to self-identify and is notably smaller than the population of Black children in Nova Scotia (EECD, 2020b).

An education system that operates by producing the same dismal results year after year for the same population of students is a broken system that needs fixing. To break the hold of colonial practices and change results, all educators must begin the process of "understanding and unpacking the central assumptions of domination, patriarchy, racism, and ethnocentrisms that continue to glue the academy's privileges in place"

(Battiste et al., 2002, p. 84). The central assumption about Black and non-White students is that they are incapable of succeeding in academics as well as White kids. The "very view of *diversity as deficit* needs to be reframed if educational reformers are serious about affording all students an equal opportunity to learn" (Nieto, 1998, pp. 430–431). This deficit thinking (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010) is the glue that upholds colonialist ideals, and the unpacking process is the beginning of decolonizing the education system. Educators therefore require "an awakening from the slumber of hegemony, and the realization that action has to occur" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 201). In the context of educating Black children, decolonizing involves recognizing and acknowledging the differential power relationships created through colonialism that uphold White dominance. White dominance in education is symbolized by the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, being suspended, and on the lower end of assessment results in writing, reading, and mathematics. The aim of decolonizing education for Black students is to interrupt the differential treatment from teachers and administrators that Black students experience based on stereotypes and unexamined beliefs systems. In a decolonized education system, Black students will be seen as intelligent beings with a rich cultural and linguistic heritage that is valued and incorporated into the delivery of instruction.

In recognizing the practices and policies within education which do not always validate the knowledge and histories of Black people, educators can begin to decolonize learning spaces for Black children (Dei & Howell Rutherford, 2023; Simmons, 2023). Educators must be given the opportunity to examine their practice and beliefs and their impact on students.

Systemic racism and decolonizing of schools

Decolonizing education has not been at the center of educational reforms (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2017). Addressing the need for decolonizing is difficult because it requires conversations about racism with mostly White educational leaders. One challenge to understanding racism is that it is perceived as a personal affront by White people (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The word "racism" invokes images of hatred and violence, but it does not normally encompass the regularity of systemic barriers to Black people. In discussions about racism, the focus must transition from thinking about individual acts of racism, and towards validating and addressing the powerful effects of systemic racism, which uphold the inequity in schooling for Black students.

These conversations appear not to have occurred to a meaningful degree in Nova Scotia from a policy and procedure standpoint. One possible reason is because people who fill the top roles in the ministry of education, as well as the top roles in the provincial government, have always been White leaders. When racism has never influenced you, it is easily avoided (Hilliard, 1978; Stanfield, 2008). As Battiste (2013) stated, "Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness and dominance" (p. 125). When racism is not dealt with as an institutional phenomenon, it prevents institution members from examining "the personal, interpersonal, cultural, historical, and structural analysis that is necessary in order to challenge it" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 125). To improve academic success for Black students, systemic racism needs to be understood, acknowledged, and addressed: "Naming and undoing the practices of colonization and racism require an acknowledgement and critique of power. A denial of power as central to systems of violence and domination is a certain route to resisting an understanding of colonialism" (Simpson et al., 2011, p. 289). Understanding how colonial ideals still saturate the education system is part of the decolonizing process and cannot be avoided.

A decolonizing process

Research has shown that the implementation of CRP does improve academic success for Black students. This is true at the classroom level (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995a/1995b), the school level (Bishop et al., 2010; Mackey, 2018), and at the school district level, where the possibility of a region-wide transformation is possible (Mackey, 2021). Interrupting systemic racism and improving education for Black students include a "disruption of the very belief system one has come to know. Decolonization recognizes and accepts that colonization exists and continues" (Absolon, 2019, p. 17). Denying colonization and racism while attempting strategies based on students' race and culture through CRP is a non-starter.

A starting point for implementing CRP is a decolonizing process where educators are provided professional opportunities to learn the concepts of race and culture, as well as to discover their own culture and its impact on students (Mackey, 2021). It is important to understand that race and culture are distinct from each other. Culture is the set of norms that hold a group together and includes the use and meaning of words, worldviews, beliefs, and values (Gay, 2010). One's culture shapes the way one sees the world and what one values (Ladson-Billings, 1995c). For some, the way they see the world includes normalizing racist ideologies and practices,

creating a culture of racism that continues to negate the experiences and knowledge of Black peoples.

Black people in Canada are part of the African diaspora. Therefore, not all Black families have the same cultural beliefs and values. For some, prior to becoming Canadians, school was not a place of Whiteness. An intersecting point for most Black people who attend school in Canada is that through teacher perceptions, and historical colonial practices, racism is a very real reality (James & Parekh, 2021).

These opportunities to examine one's culture and race, afforded by the decolonizing process, have led the participants in this study to question their beliefs about Black children, conscious or not, and to internalize what the impact of their beliefs on Black children has been. This process is intentional and deliberate. It is not easy, which is why it rarely happens. As stated by St. Denis and Shick (2003), "Teachers are not necessarily interested in hearing the difficult things that need to be said or doing the difficult analysis of unpacking their assumptions about inequality" (p. 55). One-day-long workshops on culturally relevant pedagogy and racism will not accomplish this. Decolonization is a holistic process in which a critical examination of how an individual's and organization's culture impacts student achievement, along with an in-depth understanding of colonialism, are crucial. As part of the planning stage to implement CRP, these steps can be helpful in alleviating the denial stage of resistance and combat deficit thinking. These steps are not new: Already in 1978, Hilliard III stated that educators must understand: (a) the concept of culture; (b) that there are varying cultures and linguistic styles; (c) that each person sees the world through their own perceptual lens and one's reality differs from others; and (d) that forcing students to adapt to a culture other than their own is an aggressive act.

The process of decolonizing is emotional and personal. For Stanfield (2008),

> this is because truth telling in the study of race leads to asking uncomfortable questions not only about a population, an institution, a community, or a society, but also about ourselves as academics who are products of this race drenched society. (p. 278)

This is especially true when educators teaching Black students are mostly White. Decolonizing is also a "multi-layered and multidimensional" process (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 200). Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) conceptualization of the decolonizing process described the first stage as *critical consciousness*, which must happen before the implementation of actions in the classroom to become culturally relevant. Critical

consciousness is the awareness of the hemogenic state of society and the injustices that continue to occur for non-White people. Without using a decolonizing lens to change educational thinking and settings, efforts toward change, including implementing CRP, will have little effect for Black learners. Once educators realize *why* efforts to date have not resulted in change for Black learners, then they will be ready to act. This realization drives the actions for CRP and only occurs when critical issues of race are faced.

As theorized by McCray and Beachum (2014), what is "missing is a way to inform educational leaders in the critical areas of knowledge, attitude and practice in order to address difficult equity-based issues in dealing with students and communities of colour" (p. 404). Their conceptual study outlined steps for leaders to become culturally relevant that align with a decolonizing process, which are "liberatory consciousness," "pluralistic insight," and "reflective practice." Liberatory consciousness, or critical consciousness (as discussed above), is the first step to decolonizing. It requires educators to deeply reflect on their own belief systems about race and culture in order to have a meaningful understanding of the impact that those belief systems have on their decisions.

Pluralistic insight is the awareness that comes from being critically conscious. Through pluralistic insight, educators and educational leaders can recognize deficit thinking in their own actions and the actions of others. CRP cannot be implemented effectively unless the leaders of the system are able to move those they are working with forward through the decolonizing process.

The next step is putting knowledge and theory into action — praxis and relational reflection (Milner, 2006). Educators need opportunity and time to "think intently about their own perspectives, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction with, comparison with, and contrast to those of their students and their students' communities and worlds" (Milner, 2006, p. 85). This level of reflection allows educators to transition beyond deficit thinking to an understanding that a culture may be different, though just as valid. When educators reach this step of the decolonizing process, they can "develop innovative solutions, take risks and pull from the broad range of resources in their schools" (McCray & Beachum, 2014, p. 407). This is what is required to confront and answer critical questions about systemic issues in schools and to prioritize the problem of racial injustices. To add a missing critical analysis to the actions that have been attempted within education in Nova Scotia to address inequitable learning environments

for Black learners, I will use narratives of pre-service and in-service teachers to demonstrate the importance of the decolonizing process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study utilized anti-racism theory as a lens to analyze stories of pre-service and in-service teacher learning reflections as they participated in the decolonizing process, as well as of teacher interview transcripts from a larger study focusing on how educators made sense of change through implementing CRP. Anti-racism theory is appropriate for this study, as demonstrated by Lynch et al. (2017) in their systematic review of studies focused on anti-racist education between 2000 and 2015. Lynch et al. (2017) found three common goals of anti-racism: "(1) identifying or *making visible systemic oppression*; (2) *challenging denial* of complicity in such oppression; and (3) ultimately *transforming structural inequalities*" (p. 135). All three of these categories aligned with this article's purpose to confront critical issues of race and the need for decolonizing education in Canada. It is through a critical anti-racist approach that solutions for the denial of racism in education and the inequality of education for Black students can be exposed and discussed (Boyd & Arnold, 2000; Dei, 1999; Dei, 2005). CRP cannot be practiced without the decolonizing process, and one cannot engage in the process of decolonizing without examining anti-racism. Anti-racism as a theoretical framework "addresses the problems racism presents to education in a democratic society" (Thompson, 1997, p. 17).

METHODS

The methodology used for this study is the critical analysis of stories from pre-service and in-service teachers and a document analysis of Nova Scotia provincial policies. The policies analyzed were chosen because they contained statements about CRP. Through the critical analysis of interview transcripts, students' reflective journals, and document analysis, (a) systemic racism is made visible; (b) denial of racism in Nova Scotia is challenged; and (c) a method describing how educators can confront critical issues of race in education through the decolonizing of beliefs is offered.

For the analysis of the data, *racism* is defined as the means by which the system upholds inequities for Black and other non-White peoples through the legitimization of practices that negate their histories, epistemologies, and intellectual ability (Dei & Howell Rutherford, 2023; Thompson, 1997). When confronting racism, using stories as research is essential because it gives readers insight into the storyteller's process of learning and

unlearning their beliefs through the decolonizing process. Sharing the stories of pre-service and in-service teachers while they were beginning the decolonizing process, and in-service teachers who were implementing CRP, illuminates the need to confront race and racism as a first step to improving education for Black students. As stories are "the cornerstones of qualitative research" (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 410), critically analyzing stories from former students and research participants are appropriate for this study. As Gay (2000) has stated,

> [Using stories as research data] demonstrates how research, theory, and practice are woven together to develop major ideas; establishes the fact that school achievement involves more than academics; [and] attempts to convey a feeling for the personhood of the students of concern in the analysis. (p. 2)

Along with teacher stories, the ideology, manifested in the story of Nova Scotia's provincial education policies and practices, was critically analyzed to depict the direction education is taking in the implementation efforts of CRP. Through an anti-racist lens, data was critically analyzed to discern what is missing and what is required to critically confront issues of race and create environments that promote the success of Black learners.

Data sources

Data for this article consists of three main sources. The first source came from two research participant narratives in an instrumental case study (Mackey, 2021) that examined how people who have different roles in a school district make sense of the implementation of CRP. The two interviewed research participants were both White in-service educators. One was a senior leadership team member of a school district who did not have the opportunity to experience the decolonizing process before leading her team through implementing CRP. The other was a classroom teacher who participated in a specialized Master of Education program focused on CRP, taught by the author of this article, and participated in a decolonizing process. These two participants were chosen because they demonstrate the beliefs of teachers as a result of participating and not participating in a decolonizing process. The second data source consists of narratives from my former, all-White pre-service and in-service teachers. These teacher narratives were extracted from critical responses and learning logs from three courses taught at a university in Nova Scotia focused on the sociology of education, inclusive practices, and CRP (at a graduate level). The stories of the pre-service and in-service students' learning logs and reflections represent their changing beliefs as they decolonized their thinking through course materials and discussions,

which is the topic and purpose of this study. All stories presented in this study are from White educators, which is significant as most educators in Nova Scotia are White. Invitations to participate were sent to all students, and narratives were taken from those who accepted. There was an abundance of stories to choose from, all of which had the same theme: the unknowing of racism in Canada and in Nova Scotia. The third data source was a document analysis. The analysis of provincial reports and policies provided a history of events that outline the actions that the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) took when incorporating what they define as culturally and linguistically responsive teaching.

Ethical considerations

This study's research procedures and collection of narratives began after permission was granted by the university's research ethics board. For the larger instrumental case study, ethics approval was granted by the school district. All possible safeguards were employed to protect the confidentiality of participants. This included the use of pseudonyms. All policy documents analyzed for this study are public, and therefore ethics approval was not required for retrieval.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We don't know: Nova Scotia education students and teachers

Anti-racist practices and CRP are the foundations of the university courses I teach. My course content includes the history of Black Nova Scotians and the Indigenous People of Nova Scotia — the Mi'kmaw First Nations. After learning about slavery in Canada and specifically in Nova Scotia, the phrase "I had no idea about this" is commonly heard. "Betty," a 1st-year education student, confirmed as such through her learning reflection:

> My previous knowledge of the history of the slave trade and the role Nova Scotia had in it was very limited and almost non-existent … That, mixed with growing up in a rural, predominantly white area, has led me to some very inaccurate assumptions about African Nova Scotian history. (Inclusive Practices 1, Critical Response, 2021)

Although the history of Black people in Nova Scotia goes back 400 years, this is not knowledge that pre-service teachers have grasped. Imagine a school system where teachers, school administrators, and system leaders are not aware of the history and injustices that have occurred for Black people in the very place they live. This lack of knowledge cannot lead to the level of critical consciousness described by Ladson-Billings (1995a) that

is required of educators in order to possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be culturally relevant.

If teachers are receiving little information about the history and culture of Black people in the provinces where they teach, where are they getting their information? Teachers are entering the field of education with assumptions and unconscious biases about Black children. Betty, before taking a course focused on decolonizing her thinking, would have been one of those teachers perpetuating systemic practices. Another of those teachers would have been 1st-year education student "Lynn." After gaining an understanding of the history of Black people in Nova Scotia, she admitted,

> An assumption I made was that African Nova Scotian ancestors were not educated in the same way my white ancestors were (which I am very sorry for), [the learning I received] opened my eyes and proved to me that they [Black people] were educated, there was midwives, leaders, and teachers. (Inclusive Practices 1, Critical Response, 2021)

Black children deserve teachers that view them as capable, brilliant, and successful. Whether conscious or not, deficit thinking, as shown above, is what many educators in Nova Scotia hold as they start and move throughout their careers. Black children continue to suffer because teachers have not internalized learning about race and culture. "Tommy," another 1st-year education student, explained his colour blindness like this:

> This idea of colour-blindness really stuck with me. I like to think I don't see race when I encounter people. However, from reading … and reflecting within, it is apparent that I am also finding it difficult to address my unconscious beliefs. My heart and head are in the right place, and I am continuously trying to learn. This learning is brief in what has been a lifetime of receiving and processing racist biases that I am only just becoming aware [of]. (Sociology of Education, Learning Reflection, 2020)

It is not only pre-service teachers that have the potential danger of carrying these belief systems into the classroom. "Sharon," a veteran teacher working on her third master's degree, disclosed,

> When I began my studies in the education program, we were taught the fundamentals of subject matter, inclusion, curriculum, how to create lessons, the philosophies, ideologies, and theories of what education was, and how to deliver it. I do not recall acknowledging students' individual experiences, backgrounds, and cultures when teaching the outcomes. (Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Critical Response, 2020)

The narratives above illustrate the Eurocentric focus of public schools and institutions of higher education. They also highlight the lack of cultural and critical competence many are left with because of their schooling.

What does race have to do with it?

"Patricia," a senior director from a larger study (Mackey, 2021), was helping lead the implementation of CRP for her district. Throughout her 31 years with her district, Patricia served as teacher, administrator, and central office consultant and coordinator. Throughout her years as an educator, Patricia worked tirelessly to meet the needs of the students she served. Before the implementation efforts of CRP in her district, Patricia was not given the opportunity to participate in the decolonizing process to confront critical issues of race and instead relied on practices she believed to be effective. This was evident when asked to describe CRP. Patricia stated, "When I'm thinking of culturally relevant pedagogy, it fits really well with my way of thinking, because it starts with the relationship, and then you go from there" (Director Interview, January 8, 2018). Patricia was clarifying for herself that CRP would not result in changing the way that she thought about educating students throughout her career.

> I kind of feel that cultural relevant pedagogy is kind of one of those latest things. But I just see it with all my experiences, and all the things I've done in education, that it's the latest thing that connects to a whole lot of other things that I've done. (Director Interview, January 8, 2018)

Patricia's perspective about CRP made it difficult for her to understand the need to address racism. This lack of understanding for Patricia, and other teachers who have not gone through the decolonizing process, meant issues that caused inequity in public schools would not be addressed through their efforts to implement CRP.

Patricia's analysis of the effects of racism on the district's African Nova Scotian learners and the need to address systemic racism is circumvented by talking about all learners:

> Because we could sit and admire that gap as much as we want, and we have for many, many years, right? And we said, "Look at this gap! Oh, my goodness! Our African Nova Scotian learners, why aren't they doing so well?" Why are they … you know? And, to me, it's not … okay, we have to have a strategy for African Nova Scotian learners? No. We have to have a strategy for every student. (Director Interview, January 8, 2018)

This response is surface level and implies that the solution for the academic achievement of African Nova Scotian students is just good pedagogy in general. Patricia's negation of race and systemic issues when implementing CRP reminded me of what Geneva Gay (2000) forewarned:

that the limiting of one's perspective to ignore the effects of systemic racism is part of the disease itself. This is the problem with implementing CRP without confronting the critical questions around race: The denial of systemic racism halts the whole process. One cannot decolonize their belief systems if they do not recognize those parts that have been colonized. Educational leaders and policymakers also need to understand that they cannot use the term "CRP" without naming for whom and why they are implementing it. Without naming Black people, CRP becomes a "one-size-fits-all for addressing issues of racism, especially in the diversity policies of large institutions" (Walcott, 2018, p. 90). The one-size-fits-all model pushes the needs of Black students to the back of the line.

First, we must know better to do better

When educators have the opportunity to decolonize their thinking, there is promise for practices in schools to be decolonized. After studying CRP, "Sharon," a Master of Education student, admitted,

> I was naïve, as a new teacher. What I have come to know is that my teaching needed to reflect the students in front of me, the community they lived in, and the school environment that, for many parents, may or may not have [been] a good experience. (Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Critical Response, 2020).

More benefits of the decolonizing process can be found in Tommy's story. Tommy described his learning and change of beliefs about students in this way: "I understand this isn't a quick fix, I am conscious of this, and it is through continuous reflection and learning I will do better and improve as a human towards treating all humans with equity" (Sociology of Education, learning reflection, 2020). Tommy's thinking is an example of what Kafele (2021) has described: "Equity is a reflection of the educators' humanity toward the students they serve" (p. 79). It is the reflection of humanity that is the target of learning for teachers before the implementation of CRP.

After completing his 1st year in a Master of Education program with a focus on CRP, "Cory," a research participant in my larger study (Mackey, 2021), and 13-year veteran teacher, through reflection on his learning, recognized the importance of time and opportunity that is required for the decolonizing process. Through the Master of Education program, he was given time to reflect on his beliefs and educational practices. For Cory, this time and opportunity clarified where he had to make changes in his thinking and practice:

> When I think about my own past, I can identify times in my life when I really worked from like, a savior perspective … over the last couple of

> years, through the [Master of Education] program, it's really helped me
> to start interrogating why I'm doing this, and how I feel about doing
> this, and being critically self-reflective. (Cohort Teacher Interview, June
> 30, 2018)

Cory gained an understanding that the first step towards being culturally relevant was to recognize the need to decolonize his own thinking.

The way teachers approach and teach Black children is entangled with what they believe is the capability of the child. Before expecting teachers to provide culturally relevant education through a list of strategies and procedures, they first must be exposed to the current realities for Black students in public schools, where ingrained colonized thinking and systemic racialized practices continue.

Deficit thinking can be turned into asset thinking. Teachers need to be given opportunity to examine their positions in society based on their race, culture, and social status. How much easier would it be to change the state of public education for Black children if teachers were provided time to enter the process of decolonizing? There is hope. Through design and intentionality, efforts to implement CRP, starting with the decolonizing process, can be successful. Take, for example, "Candice," a mature 1st-year pre-service student:

> Ten years ago, I would have been a really different teacher that possibly
> could have made assumptions about students, and that is a very
> challenging thought ... I also know that I am still learning myself and
> that I have a long way to go ... I need to remember to not push my own
> norms on my class and [not] ever make a kid feel like their culture, and
> their norms, are wrong. (Sociology of Education, Critical Response,
> 2020)

At this point, Candice was just a few months into her education program. Candice's learning, though deeply reflective, is just the beginning. She must be given every opportunity to reflect on her beliefs, while at the same time learning culturally relevant instructional practices to ensure the success of her future students.

The Nova Scotia story continued: The inclusion of culturally responsive teaching

In 2017, an action the EECD took to address the long-standing call to tackle the disparities and injustices for Black and other non-White students in Nova Scotian schools (Black Learners Advisory Committee [BLAC], 1994; Lee, 2009) was to introduce the concepts of *culturally and linguistically responsive teaching* to its regional school leadership teams. This introduction was provided by an invited scholar from the West Coast of

the United States (Peddle, 2018; Syme, 2018). In October 2018, the EECD's invited scholar provided a 1-day workshop to all educators in the province. In July 2018, the term "culturally responsive" was added to the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards. According to the Nova Scotia inclusion policy (EECD, 2020a), culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is defined as "teaching practices that connect students' social, cultural, family, and linguistic backgrounds to what they are learning and their sense of belonging" (p. 4). This definition is also used for the provincial expectations for teachers. The term "culturally responsive" appears in the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards (EECD, 2018) 18 times. There are six standards. In the description of the first four standards — engaging students, knowing your subject, assessment, and learning environment — the following teacher expectations are listed:

> [Teachers will] provide culturally-responsive, engaging learning experiences that enable students to achieve the learning outcomes ... respond to diverse student learning needs through culturally-responsive teaching and individualized program planning ... tailor assessment to meet the needs of students through culturally-responsive assessment practices and program planning ... [and] provide culturally-responsive and student-centered responses to differences in student behaviour associated with culture, language, and life experience. (EECD, 2018, p. 2)

It is important to note in the passage above that the EECD connects "culturally responsive" with terms designated for special education. For example, the following terms used in the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards are described and defined in the Special Education Policy (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008): "program planning" and "individualized program plans." In the subsections below, I will describe how the processes of individual program planning have been disadvantageous to Black students in Nova Scotia.

Individual program planning

The terms designated for special education that are associated with CRP in the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards are *individualized program planning* and *program planning*. According to the Special Education Policy of Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008), individual programming, also known as an individual program plan (IPP), "will be developed and implemented for every student for whom the provincial outcomes are not applicable and/or attainable" (p. 32). The use of CRP for teachers to "respond to diverse student learning needs through culturally-responsive teaching and individualized program planning" (EECD, 2018, p. 2) is problematic. It may lead teachers to believe that the

purpose of CRP is to work with diverse students, a term also used to describe non-White students. The implication is that non-White students have diverse learning needs and cannot meet provincial grade level benchmarks because the outcomes are not attainable.

Overrepresentation of Black students on IPPs

According to the Special Education Policy (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008), the program planning process has eight stages to identify and assess the learning progress of students. The last three stages of the process are to develop, monitor, and review IPPs. Connecting these processes with the concept of teachers being culturally responsive perpetuates systemic racism. The EECD (2016), in a review of students with IPPs in Nova Scotia, stated that "African Nova Scotian students who self-identified were 1.5 times more likely to have an IPP in at least one subject or programming area than non-African Nova Scotian students" (p. 5). This acknowledgement, first reported in the BLAC Report (1994), was not a surprise to those in the Black communities. The BLAC Report also stated that the lack of culturally responsive teaching approaches was a factor contributing to Black students being placed on IPPs.

Student behaviour

Another problematic area written into the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards is the statement that teachers will "provide culturally-responsive and student-centered responses to differences in student behaviour associated with culture, language, and life experience" (EECD, 2018, p. 2). In the literature, when student behaviour is referenced, it is because the behaviour exhibited by the student is perceived as problematic. Once a child is labeled as having problematic behaviour, they are also labeled with one or more of the following: "poor impulse control, motivation and concentration; the inability to cooperate and anticipate consequences; low empathy and self-esteem; 'language delay'; and deficiencies in 'emotional literacy'" (MacLure et al., 2012, p. 448). When students do not react to the delivery method of instruction or the content of the curriculum in what is perceived as a reasonable way — from the Eurocentric standpoint — they are deemed to be discipline problems (Delpit, 2006; Irving, 2006). When student behaviour and cultural characteristics of non-White children are connected, "deficit thinking can exasperate misunderstandings of these cultural characteristics" (Ford et al., 2001, p. 53). These misunderstandings have led to misconceptions of the abilities of Black children.

When teachers expect their students to work, behave, think, and speak in a manner that matches the teachers' cultural norms, cultural collisions happen (Mallea & Young, 1984). A cultural collision results when students do not respond to instruction and expectations that are outside of students' cultural norms and they are subsequently labelled as incapable of academic success, defiant, and disengaged in learning (Dei et al., 2000; Fitchett et al., 2012).

The need for systemic change

Until the problem of systemic racism is prioritized, language changes in policies to promote CRP will just be words on the page, absent of actions. As noted in my in-service teacher's stories, systemic racism and changes in policies have not led to the understanding of CRP, decolonizing, or systemic racism. A teacher cannot be expected to meet expectations they were not taught. An instructional leader cannot hold a teacher accountable for something they may not understand. Even so, teachers are evaluated on the attributes, knowledge, and skills listed in the Nova Scotia Teaching Standards (EECD, 2018), which include being culturally responsive. Under the skills listed, the policy currently states that a teacher "provides culturally responsive teaching that reflects the diverse cultures, languages, life experiences, and backgrounds of students" (EECD, 2018, p. 7). Under the category of "knowledge," it states a teacher "knows how to provide culturally-responsive teaching that includes integrating ethnic and cultural content, assessment practices, and instructional resources" (EECD, 2018, p. 8). For a teacher to accomplish this well, they will need guidance. Guiding teachers is the primary role of the instructional leader. The question then arises, who prepares the instructional leader to be culturally responsive? Ministries and districts of education "need to acknowledge that structural racism is at the root of the educational experiences and outcomes of Black students" (Gardner-Neblet et al., 2023, p. 443). Actions to assist educators and educational leaders must be built into the system to eradicate structural racism.

Implications and next steps

The findings of this article suggest three actions for school districts to consider when implementing CRP for the purpose of improving educational environments and academic success for Black learners.

Develop critical consciousness

Decolonizing thinking is a necessary requirement to address and confront systemic racism to move forward in creating equitable learning spaces for Black learners. If school districts are serious about implementing CRP,

then space and opportunity need to be created for educators and district school leaders to understand the culture and history of their students who have been historically marginalized due to systemic racism. Educators must examine their biases and the impact their practices have on Black learners. Educators throughout school districts must develop a critical consciousness regarding the ongoing impacts of systemic racism on the lives of Black students for CRP to be realized.

Develop cultural competence

When implementing CRP to address inequities in achievement levels for Black students, teachers and educational leaders need to come to an understanding that it is a process and not a program. To truly have an effect, educators need to develop the three components set out by Ladson-Billings (1995a): be dedicated to student success, develop cultural competence, and have a critical and sociopolitical mindset. Only when educators have opportunities to develop these mindsets can they be incorporated into instruction for the students.

Develop strategic partnerships

Creating a partnership between university faculties of education and school districts would be beneficial to both. Pre-service and in-service teachers would have the opportunity to work with practitioners with an expertise in CRP at the university who could provide deep, ongoing professional learning, with no cost to a school district. Because of distance learning platforms, geographic proximity to a university is no longer an obstacle. Universities can provide the necessary time for learning that is required, something which school districts are usually unable to offer (Seller & Hannay, 2000). Another benefit is that universities are not bounded by the same time restrictions and funding requirements as school districts, so school district–university partnerships can offer a plethora of opportunities for school districts to develop deep learning for their teachers (Mackey, 2020). For the partnership to be beneficial to the university's faculty and the district, the faculty would need to work in collaboration with teachers and teacher leaders to provide pre-service teachers with voices from the field, and in-service teachers with professional learning, to aid in the decolonizing process and the implementation of CRP.

CONCLUSION

As school districts across North America attempt to implement CRP to address the negative differences between the percentages of Black students and all other students meeting state and provincial outcomes, the

decolonizing process is a necessary first step. Having CRP embedded into provincial policy is an effective way to hold educators and educational leaders accountable. However, one cannot be held accountable for a practice they have not learned. Educators charged with teaching Black children cannot be expected to arrive in schools possessing the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a culturally relevant educator without beginning the process of decolonizing their thinking. The learning narratives of my 1st-year education students, in-service Master of Education students, and other research participants reflecting on their personal decolonizing journeys are testimony to the reality of the belief systems of educators. The stories presented in this article exemplify the need for educators to have opportunities to understand their own culture and its impact on others. This cannot happen without confronting critical issues of race.

This research has drawn upon the narratives of pre-service and in-service teachers to describe the lack of knowledge about race, racism, and the history of African Nova Scotian peoples among educators. This article also describes a method to stop the perpetuation of systemic racism through decolonizing. This can only be done through confronting critical issues of racism in education. In the areas of equity, decolonizing, and cultural and critical consciousness, it is a lack of understanding and an unwillingness to confront critical issues of race that halt efforts to properly transform educational centres to address practices and policies that hinder academic success for many Black learners. The implementation of CRP is a method to address these issues when decolonizing steps are imbedded in the process.

The recommended steps provided from this study can be accomplished by adding the needed deep professional learning for educators throughout a school district. Prior to filling any school administration roles, leadership candidates can be provided with the necessary space, time, and anti-racist learning necessary for the decolonizing process. With this understanding, instructional leaders will be able to lead and support school staff through a decolonizing process and monitor their actions. With assistance from university partnerships, this can be done easily within the time and space required. As stated by Edmonds (1979),

> It seems to me, therefore, that what is left of this discussion are three declarative statements: (a) We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; (b) We already know more than we need to do that; and (c) Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (p. 23)

The state of education for Black students will not change unless school districts choose to make the inequity in schools a priority and confront issues of systemic racism. We already have the mechanisms to do so.

NOTES

1. I employ the lowercase "w" for the terms "white supremacy" and "white power" to not give them power.

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WENDY MACKEY is an associate professor in culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership at St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia. Prior to moving to higher education, Wendy served in several roles, including senior diversity advisor for her school district, school supervisor, school principal, school vice principal, and music teacher. wmackey@stfx.ca

WENDY MACKEY est professeure agrégée en pédagogie sensible et adaptée à la culture et en leadership à l'Université St Francis Xavier, en Nouvelle-Écosse. Avant de se tourner vers l'enseignement supérieur, Wendy a occupé plusieurs fonctions, notamment conseillère principale en matière de diversité dans son district scolaire, superviseure scolaire, directrice d'école, directrice adjointe et enseignante de musique. wmackey@stfx.ca