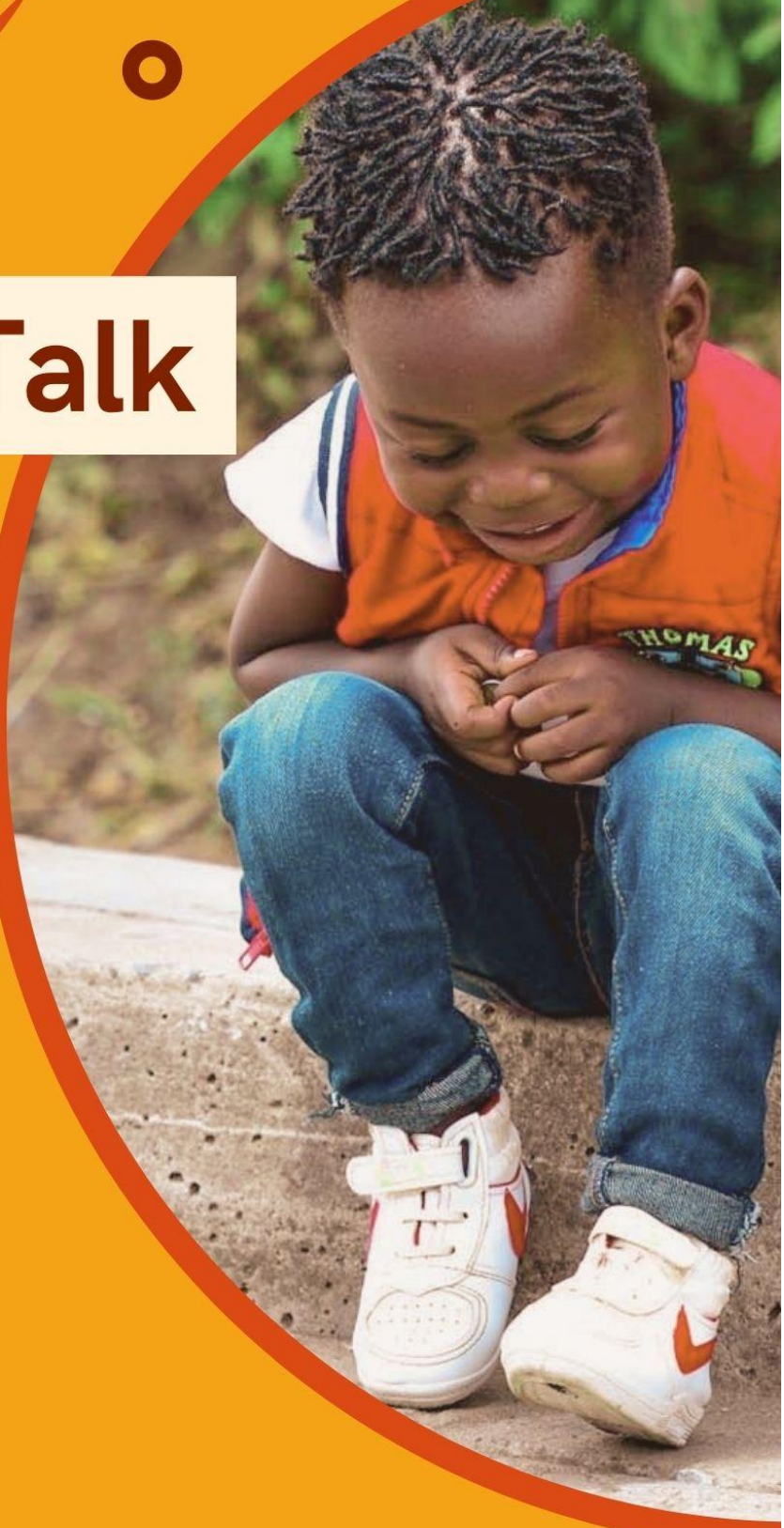


The Race Talk

A Guidebook
For Navigating
Conversations
With Your Child
About Race



Presented by:
Mountview Alternative School Equity
and Social Justice Committee and
Parents of Black Children (PoBC)

The Race Talk

Navigating conversations with your child about race

How to use this guide

“There are many talks that take place along the journey of raising a child. You know the ones: The importance of kindness and sharing, the physical changes that occur while growing up, why it’s important to be smart about dating and sex. There is, however, a unique talk that takes place in households where children of color are being raised.”

- Khama Ennis, MD

We created this guide to support families in better understanding [race, racism](#) and racial justice, and to equip you to have the [race talk](#) with your children and within your family.

For Black, Indigenous and racialized families, conversations about race and racism are inevitable. For others, it is a privilege to avoid the topic. Either way, we know the topic of racism is a difficult one. Yet, we believe that everyone is a part of the solution. Our hope is that as you read through, you’ll gain concrete tips, ideas and actions to raise your family with anti-racist values.

Starting the conversation

Here are some things you might want to think about as you prepare for these conversations. You may find many of the approaches below are the same ones you use in other areas of your life and with your family. It's worth noting, you may never feel 100% ready and that is OK.

Age appropriate

It is [never too early](#) to talk about [race](#) and racism. When discussing race and racism, it's important to consider your child's age. That can help you assess how much and what information to share. For example, images of violence are not appropriate for young children. Instead, for young children, you may choose to talk about the topic more generally - how inherently unfair it is that a group of people are treated differently. For older children, you can ask more complex questions and work to unpack situations with more depth. At any age, chances are you will learn something from your child through these conversations.

It's worth noting, there are some harmful approaches that must be avoided at all ages such as the [colourblind strategy](#) (e.g., telling children "Skin colour doesn't matter," or "We're all the same on the inside" at the risk of overlooking how we are different and celebrating those differences) or refusing to discuss it (e.g., "It's not polite to talk about that").

It's OK to say: I don't know

We don't have all the answers. And especially for adults, we have many years of unlearning to do when it comes to tackling our own [biases](#) and habits born out of a system and society that is racist. The best we can offer when we don't know is to be curious and seek to understand, alongside our children.

Be honest

We as adults appreciate and benefit from others being honest with us. So will your child. These are not easy topics and it may involve asking yourself questions and taking an honest reflection of your role in [systemic](#) or [interpersonal racism](#). It can be uncomfortable at first, but honesty and vulnerability will allow your child to learn and grow. This might raise feelings of guilt - for you and possibly your child. It's important to acknowledge these feelings but don't let them stop you in your tracks. If you can find forgiveness for yourself and others, it can help you move the conversation forward and learn from the experience.

Be courageous

These conversations may take a bit of courage. While we want to be mindful of our children's emotional and mental well-being, we also don't want to avoid discomfort. The emotions may be challenging and uncomfortable. But by avoiding them, we don't save our children from harm. They will experience the impacts of systemic racism, directly or indirectly. Having open and honest conversations will help your children recognize racism and take action against it. It is important to remember that when we acknowledge and work to dismantle anti-Black racism and other forms of racism, we all benefit from a more just society.

Seek to understand

We've all been guilty of jumping to judgement or to make a correction when we see an error. Sometimes that can shut down natural curiosity and learning. By using open ended questions to talk about a situation or incident, you may find that the resulting conversation will be more meaningful than asserting a correction.

Pattern and Practice

This may be the most important in the list. Like many things about raising a family, the commitment is lifelong. It is not enough to have one or two conversations when a major news story emerges, and tweeting about it in social media is just not enough. Systemic racism exists in every aspect of life and informs our every day biases. No matter how small, consider building in a practice to have these conversations regularly (e.g., did you notice that the TV show only had white characters - I wonder why that is? At school, did you notice that all the authors and characters are predominantly white? Do you notice the lack of diversity in our school? What can we do to change things?).

Modeling and Practice

[Do as you say.](#) You are your child's first and most important teacher. They are watching and learning from you each and every day, whether or not you intend for those moments to be lessons. Show them kindness and love, model compassion and helpfulness. Help them learn positive ways of interacting with people and the world around them. For example, at a school yard, greet parents and caregivers that don't look like you - treat them with respect; plan play dates with families that don't look like you; introduce books and toys that celebrate racial diversity. Being intentional in understanding race is not a performative act, but a critical and conscious effort to racial justice. In short, our actions can speak louder than words.

Responding to questions and call it out

Situations where your child may have questions

Using some of the approaches above, let's explore some examples. We've included suggestions on what to ask to help guide your conversations.

Situation: At school, a student uses a racial slur against another student at recess. Your child sees this happening but isn't directly involved. At home, they share that they heard a friend call another classmate a mean word.

Suggested questions:

- How did it make you feel?
- How do you think your friend who was called a racial slur felt?
- What happened after the child said the racial slur?
- Is there something you could have done?
- What would you have done differently?
- For older children: what do you think should come next? Is there something that can be done to help these two classmates? And also how would you improve the situation and avoid hurtful language like this in the future?

You may want to look up the history or context of the word. If you're not from the racialized group that the term refers to, consider finding a video or article to understand what it feels like to be called those words. A good place to start is a series called [Kids Meet on HiHo Kids](#).

If your child was the one who was called a racial slur:

- In whatever way feels authentic, show you care (e.g., affirmation of who they are, how they are important, how they matter).
- How did that make you feel?
- How did you respond?
- Is there anything you wish you did differently? Is there anything you wish someone else did differently (e.g., your classmate, teacher, etc.)?
- Did the teacher provide you with the support you needed?
- What other adults were involved?
- Who witnessed it?
- Were they supportive?
- What would you have liked them to do?

If your child was the one who used the racial slur:

- How did it make you feel?
- How do you think your classmate felt when you used those words?

- How do you think it would feel if someone did something similar to you? How do you think you would react?
- What do you wish you would have done differently?
- What can you do moving forward?
- What did you learn?

Situation: Your child comes across news coverage of police violence against Black people and they ask you about it. For example, last year, the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked many questions from our kids.

Potential questions:

- How do you feel about this?
- Why do you think this happened?
- Why would someone do this?
- What can be done about it?
- For older children: what are some of the conditions / biases / stereotypes that allow something like this to happen? At the system level? At the individual level?

Points to make:

- It is important to name what this is: racism and in this example, anti-Black racism.
- The age of your child may impact the words you use. For example, with younger children, explain how these things happen because of the incorrect things people believe about different races. And that it can lead to people getting hurt.
- Find ways of bringing the conversation back to your own spaces. Consider asking if they have noticed Black or racialized people in their lives being treated differently and what might we do about it in the future.

Calling it out

Situation: While you're at the grocery store with your child, you observe two staff members speaking to each other in Spanish. Another customer walks by and says to the staff, "Speak English. You're in Canada."

Suggested comments:

When speaking out, it helps to practice beforehand and regularly so that you build muscle memory. Try practicing the following phrases with your children.

- That comment is not OK.
- That sounds like racism to me.
- Oh wow, that was mean and hurtful!
- Stop. That's not respectful.
- Stop means stop.

Suggested questions:

To the person(s) at risk:

- Are you okay? I saw that and it's not okay for that person to talk to you like that.
- Can I get your help in the next aisle? (Depending on the situation a diversion may be a safer choice.)

To your child:

- That was hard to witness, how are you feeling?
- Do you have questions about what happened?
- What was wrong about how that customer treated the staff at the grocery store?
- Do you think we could have done anything differently?
- Do you know that speaking more than one language is an asset? Would you like to learn another language?
- For older children: Why do you think someone would feel like they have the right to say something like that?

Situation: Using books or other media from around your house, consider how you can use them to spark a conversation. While we've referenced specific books below, many of the questions can be useful with any type of book/media. Essentially, who gets to tell the story and who gets to be in them? What narratives, biases or stereotypes might be reinforced in these stories? What does this say about our society and what impact does it have in shaping our understanding of the world? Lots of good conversation to spark here.

Suggested questions:

Kindergarten to grade 3 - [Let's Talk About Race, By: Julius Lester](#):

- Who is the narrator? The main character?
- What do they look like?
- Do they look like you? What do you look like?
- How are you the same? What do you have in common?
- How are you both different?
- Lester shares some information about himself, what makes up your story/background?
- For other books/media:
 - The questions above, as relevant.
 - Do you think the story would be different if the main character looked like you? How so?

Grades 4 and up - [New Kid, By: Jerry Craft](#):

- The questions above.
- Can you think of a time when you felt new? Different? How did it feel?

- What are some ways the main character (Jordan) found a place for himself at his new school?
- What would it take to make you comfortable in that situation? Do you think you'd do anything differently?
- For white kids: how do you think it might feel for someone who isn't white to not be represented in stories?
- For racialized kids: what story would you write if the main character looked like you?

Self-reflections

We all come from different social locations and life experiences which may impact the way we broach this topic. Noticing how our own personal lived experiences can impact how we speak with our children in our homes about race and racism is an important step in having these talks.

What are social locations?

Social location can be described as the groups we belong to because of our place or position in history and society. We all have a social location that is defined by identities such as gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Each group membership confers a certain set of social roles and norms, power, and privilege (or lack of), which heavily influence our identity and how we see and experience the world around us¹.

How does this impact conversations about race in our homes?

The impact will depend on what our social location is and how strongly we identify with those identities. For example, a family that is white, with two cisgender parents, who all identify as able-bodied, and who live in a middle or upper class neighbourhood with families of similar social locations, may not fully appreciate or be fully aware of the real impacts and trauma of discrimination. This may lead to a downplaying of these impacts and a misunderstanding of our roles in addressing racism. At the same time, those of us who have social locations that have been historically oppressed will have a very different approach and reaction to these discussions.

What can we do about this?

The first thing is to notice that our social location plays a role in these conversations. Many of us are learning about issues of discrimination at the same time as our children and may be entering these conversations for the first time. It is important to approach this topic with openness and honesty, but with a commitment to eradicate all forms of discrimination.

Some things to consider:

1. **Acknowledge that your social location will play a role:** before engaging in the conversation, check-in with yourself to see how the topic makes you feel and be mindful of how this might affect the conversation.

¹ Glossary, Cultural Safety: Experiences of Oppression - found at <https://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/courses/csafety/mod2/glossary.htm#socloc>

2. **Admit when you are not sure or don't know:** it is better to admit that you don't have all the information and to seek it out with our children, than to proceed with an incomplete understanding.
3. **Be kind and fair with yourself:** we will make mistakes, but this is a process of learning and unlearning. Be humble.
4. **Commit your own learning:** this resource has several ideas of how to educate ourselves on this topic. Consider how you might approach learning together as a family.
5. **Become familiar with your own social location:** perhaps this is something you are already aware of; however, there are various tools available, and a starting point is this exercise: [Power Flower](#).

Further resources

Here's a collection of resources for further learning. We've curated the list to uplift positive stories about racialized peoples, to provide a counter-narrative to traumatic stories that have been the focus in the past (i.e., placing racialized people in victim roles instead of empowered ones). Please don't think you have to buy anything to start these conversations. Many of the materials in the list are available at the [Toronto Public Library](#) (TPL) or free online. TPL also shares reading lists during heritage months, so keep an eye out for those displays or online.

Books

[Indigenous stories \(kindergarten to grade 8+\)](#)

[Indigenous story books](#)

[Scholastic's list of multicultural books \(ages 6 to 10\)](#)

[Story time with Mr. Limata](#)

Videos

[Alphabet Rockers](#)

[Celebrating Black Voices, Netflix's Bookmarks on YouTube](#)

[Sesame Street in Communities - Standing up to racism](#)

[What does the word Indigenous mean?, CBC](#)

[What it takes to be racially literate](#)

For adults to learn more

[Anti-racism resources for adults](#)

[Black Lives Matter - Toronto](#)

[Parents of Black Children](#)

[Parents for change](#)

[Parents teaching kids about anti-black racism, Global News](#)

Glossary

Anti-Black Racism: Operates within society to disadvantage, oppress and dehumanize Black people. Anti-Black racism is prejudice, attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement (followed by colonization). Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, such that anti-Black racism is either functionally normalized or rendered invisible to the larger white society ([We Rise Together, 2016](#)).

Anti-Racist: Being anti-racist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily. These choices require ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection as we move through life. When we do not make anti-racist choices, we (un)consciously uphold aspects of white supremacy, white-dominant culture, and unequal institutions and society.

Colonization: In our context, this refers to the acts of European colonizers, who physically and culturally exterminated millions of Indigenous peoples across the Americas and founded the Trans Atlantic Slave trade. The consequences of colonization are still felt today – particularly the discrimination towards Indigenous communities and people from Africa and its diasporas.

Dominant Group: The dominant culture is the group of people in society who hold the most power and are often (but not always) in the majority. In the US, UK and Canada: people who are white, middle class, Christian, and cisgender are the dominant culture. They hold the majority positions of power in institutions and have established behaviours, values and traditions that are considered acceptable and the "norm" in their countries.

(Educational) Liberation: Based on the notion that students with all needs should actively participate in the education system without restrictions and having to prove themselves.

Equality: Based on the principles of sameness and fairness. It means providing equal access to everyone despite and irrespective of their backgrounds.

Equity: Based on providing different access to resources depending on people's needs.

Implicit Bias: Also known as hidden bias, refers to the many patterns and behaviours that we uphold, "[creating real-world implications](#)." Exposure to structural and cultural racism has enabled stereotypes and biases to penetrate deep into our psyches. Implicit bias is one part of the [system of inequity](#) that serves to justify racist policies, practices and behaviors that persist in mainstream culture and narratives.

Inclusion: Based on the idea that all people should be included and their opinions, worldviews, experiences, and perspectives should be respected and meaningfully present.

Justice: Based on the idea that when the root cause of a problem is removed or dismantled, it ensures that everyone has access without focusing on individual adjustments/fixes. Rather justice is a system-wide approach in addressing the inequity.

Microaggression: The everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

Non-dominant Group: As noted above, dominance equates to power. The opposite of a dominant group is a non-dominant group which by definition would equate to lack of power and control.

Individual Racism: Refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism. Individual racism can be deliberate, or the individual may act to perpetuate or support racism without knowing that is what they are doing.

Examples:

- Telling a racist joke, using a racial epithet, or believing in the inherent superiority of one group over another.
- Avoiding people of colour whom you do not know personally, but not whites whom you do not know personally (e.g., white people crossing the street to avoid a group of Latino, young people; locking their doors when they see African American families sitting on their doorsteps in a city neighborhood; or not hiring a person of colour because “something doesn’t feel right”).
- Accepting things as they are (a form of collusion/complicity).

People of Colour: Often the preferred collective term for referring to non-white racial groups. Racial justice advocates have been using the term “people of colour” (not to be confused with the pejorative “coloured people”) since the late 1970s as an inclusive and unifying frame across different racial groups that are not white, to address racial inequities. While “people of colour” can be a politically useful term, and describes people with their own attributes (as opposed to what they are not, e.g., “non-white”), it is also important whenever possible to identify people through their own racial/ethnic group, as each has its own distinct experience and meaning and may be more appropriate.

Prejudice: A pre-judgment or unjustifiable, and usually negative, attitude of one type of individual or group toward another group and its members. Such negative attitudes are

typically based on unsupported generalizations (or stereotypes) that deny the right of individual members of certain groups to be recognized and treated as individuals with individual characteristics.

Privilege: Unearned social power accorded by the formal and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group (e.g., white privilege, male privilege, etc.). Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we're taught not to see it, but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage over those who do not have it.

Race: For many people, it comes as a surprise that racial categorization schemes were invented by scientists to support worldviews that viewed some groups of people as superior and some as inferior. There are three important concepts linked to this fact:

1. Race is a made-up social construct, and not an actual biological fact.
2. Race designations have changed over time. Some groups that are considered "white" in the United States today were considered "non-white" in previous eras, in U.S. Census data and in mass media and popular culture (for example, Irish, Italian, and Jewish people).
3. The way in which racial categorizations are enforced (the shape of racism) has also changed over time. For example, the racial designation of Asian American and Pacific Islander changed four times in the 19th century. That is, they were defined at times as white and at other times as not white. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, as designated groups, have been used by whites at different times in history to compete with African American labour.

Racism: Is based on the idea that some races are inferior or superior to others. Racism is founded on the notion that a person's race determines their human capabilities, leading to the discrimination of people based on their skin colour, language or culture. In Toronto, we can see the effects of racism in economic, social and cultural inequalities. According to data from the ethnic diversity survey, 49.6% of Black people reported experiencing higher racial discrimination compared to the 35.9% of racialized people in general.

Structural Racism: The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal – that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of colour. Structural racism encompasses the entire system of white domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics, and entire social fabric. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in a particular institution because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually reproducing old and producing new forms of racism. Structural racism is the most profound and pervasive form of racism – all other forms of racism emerge from structural racism.

Whiteness: The term white, referring to people, was created by Virginia slave owners and colonial rulers in the 17th century. It replaced terms like Christian and Englishman to distinguish European colonists from Africans and Indigenous peoples. European colonial powers established whiteness as a legal concept after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, during which indentured servants of European and African descent had united against the colonial elite. The legal distinction of white separated the servant class on the basis of skin colour and continental origin. The creation of 'whiteness' meant giving privileges to some, while denying them to others with the justification of biological and social inferiority.

White Privilege: Unearned advantages that white people enjoy and that allow them to have access to resources which is unequal to any other racial group in Canada. White privilege reveals itself in schools when white students learn about the successes of their ancestors, see other white people in textbooks, are treated fairly by white teachers, and can take time off school for major holidays such as Christmas and Easter, to name a few examples.

White Supremacy: Ideology that white people and their ideas, thoughts and beliefs are superior and should dominate society. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of colour as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, inhuman and undeserving.

Acknowledgements

This document was developed by Equity and Social Justice Committee Mountview Alternative School:
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Thank you to [Parents of Black Children](#), especially Charline Grant, Claudette Rutherford and Kearie Daniel. Their insight, expertise and time have opened our eyes and hearts - and we're ready to take action.

Land acknowledgement

Mountview Alternative Elementary School is on Indigenous land on the traditional lands of the Huron-Wendat, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

This land is governed by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum. This is a historical pre-contact wampum, a part of the Great Peace of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and was an agreement with the Anishnabeg to protect and be stewards of the land and to share its resources. The Bowl, which was originally represented by the beaver tail, represents the lands of the Great Lakes Basin, including all of its water, plants, animals, and various peoples. Through the Great Peace, all of the Haudenosaunee weapons were buried under the Tree of Peace. The wampum invites us to intentionally put down weapons, harsh words, or uncaring hearts and so come to the bowl with a spoon, and other tools with no sharp edges, to feed ourselves and others. The Dish with One Spoon wampum says we must take care of the land and ensure that there is always food left in the bowl for future generations.

We would like to also acknowledge those of us who were brought here forcibly, particularly as a result of Trans-Atlantic enslavement. Therefore, we honour and pay tribute to the ancestors of African origin and descent.

We occupy stolen land and at the displacement of Indigenous peoples. We acknowledge the ancestors of this land, as Ontario's education system continues to administer and exercise colonial power in Indigenous and racialized communities. It is important to reflect about what has happened, is happening and what changes can be made going forward to further [reconciliation](#).