
Anti-Racist Lesson Plan: How to Teach Early Elementary Students about Canadian Residential Schools

Junita Subangani Raj*

Abstract

This paper delves into a personal exploration of race, identity, and experience in the University of Saskatchewan's Anti-Racist Education Mentorship (AEM) Project. I recount my process of learning about racism, its ramifications in society, and my conclusion that racism is taught and passed down generationally. I define anti-racism and emphasize the importance of anti-racist education when pursuing racial justice. I detail my experience creating an anti-racist lesson plan about residential schools in Canada and delivering my lesson plan to grade 2/3 students in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I reflect on this teaching experience, students' engagement, and understanding of anti-racism concepts, and I stress the importance of age-appropriate discussions surrounding racism. My experience delivering an anti-racist lesson to grade 2/3 students disrupts the status quo by challenging the conventional belief that early elementary students are not mature enough to discuss experiences of racism.

Keywords: Residential Schools, Anti-Racism, Lesson Plan, Grade 2-3, Canadian History, Indigenous Peoples, Early Years

*College of Education, University of Saskatchewan

Correspondence: jqb267@usask.ca

USURJ

University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, 2023



© 2023 Junita Subangani Raj. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial 4.0 license. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Who Am I

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am on Treaty 6 Territory the ancestral and unceded territory of the Métis People. I pay my respects to the First Nations and Métis People of this land.

I am not a Canadian citizen nor an American one, though I have lived in both countries for ten years of my life. I was born in Tamil Nadu, India and still hold my citizenship there, but moved to Minnesota, U.S., with my family when I was thirteen years old. I graduated high school and started university in the U.S. then moved to Saskatchewan, Canada in 2021 where I am currently pursuing my undergraduate degree in Education.

Why Did I Join Anti-Racist Education Mentorship (AEM) Project

My interest in the Anti-Racist Education Mentorship (AEM) Project dates to 2020 when I was residing in Minneapolis, U.S.A., and my understandings about the complexities of racism began to form. On May 25, 2020, the world's eyes were on Minneapolis due to the murder of George Floyd, a Black American man, by a white Minneapolis police officer. Floyd was arrested on account of a suspected twenty-dollar counterfeit bill that he handed to a store clerk. He was handcuffed and killed by a police officer who pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for nine and a half minutes as Floyd cried out, "I can't breathe." The police officer responsible was fired and charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter and sentenced to twenty-two-and-half years in prison. The murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans at the hands of police officers evoked discussions of racism, politics, and police brutality, which prompted me to educate myself on racism, colorism, and its surrounding histories. As news outlets across the world reported on the murder of George Floyd, the divisive opinions of people of all races, ethnicities, political views, and religions poured in, prompting me to think about the racialized realities

of American society. As a woman of Color, I have experienced racism when residing in the States and in Canada, but when I was residing in India, for thirteen years, I did not have a clue as to what racism meant. In India, I was surrounded by people who all looked like me, with the same hair color, eye color, and brown skin. But I was aware of colorism due to being a dark-skinned Indian girl. I was often told by my caregivers to not play outside in the sun too long as it would darken my skin, women in my family doused themselves with lotions and powder to lighten their skin, people who were lighter skinned were perceived to be more attractive, smart, and were generally treated better. I was also aware of classism that existed in my culture, due to the caste system; still, growing up in a Tamil, South Indian household, our family had abandoned those concepts as did many other Tamilians in India. For instance, Tamilians do not use their caste names as their last names as it is a traditional practice in many parts of India.

After the murder of George Floyd stunned the nation and my city, I dedicated myself to learning about racism, its origins, its implications in the present day, and how we can overcome it. Through my search, I learned that racism is taught, is passed down from generation to generation, and as a teacher candidate, I know that change can be fostered through early education on racism, and that change is necessary for society to work toward racial justice. When the opportunity to join the AEM-Project was presented to me, I was immediately intrigued and decided to apply to be a representative. The AEM Project is a project designed by Dr. Carmen Gillies to aid teacher candidates, teachers, schools, and administrators in implementing anti-racist content in their classrooms and schools. Through being part of this insightful project for a year, I have learned so much through various meetings, PDs (Professional Development), and teaching opportunities, and feel prepared to foster an anti-racist classroom in the future.

Creating the Lesson Plan

Prior to being a part of the AEM Project, I had thought that teaching anti-racist content meant having a diverse curriculum or an inclusive one that

catered to all cultures, languages, and students in the classroom, but I have since realized I was not educated on what being anti-racist meant. Through the AEM Project I learned that being anti-racist is not just about adding diverse or culturally responsive content to a curriculum written by and about White people; it is:

The study of racism (not people who are racially oppressed) and how racism manifests in varying ways, adapting to changing socio-economic and political conditions as racism is resisted. It is an action-oriented strategy grounded in theory conceptualized to expose and counter White structural advantages, everyday normalized racism, and White supremacy (C. Gillies, personal communication, October 5, 2023).

Since this was my first time creating an anti-racist lesson, I did not know how to begin, but with the help and guidance of Dr. Carmen Gillies, I was able to design the lesson plan. I started out by looking for children's books that taught anti-racism and chose a topic I felt comfortable teaching students about. I chose the 2017 book *When We Are Alone* by David Robertson, a book about residential schools and anti-Indigenous racism—a topic that I have become very familiar with since my move to Canada. I read the book and included sticky notes with questions that I would ask the students as I read it to them. I also looked up the pronunciations of Cree words included in the book so that I would be able to pronounce them properly when reading aloud. The reading of the book was the bulk of the lesson. I wanted the introduction of the lesson to be engaging and something that would capture the students' attention, so I decided on a video. I chose a video from *CBC Kids* titled, "What is Racism?" (2022) that had puppets who explained racism using student-appropriate language; the video even included ways that students can combat racism in their community. For the end of my lesson, I chose to collect exit slips from students that asked them to answer two questions, "In your own words, what is racism?" and "Tell me one way you can stop racism in your community." I also created a PowerPoint presentation that included a brief introduction about me, the introductory video,

the student-appropriate definition of racism, and the questions on the exit slip. This PowerPoint assisted me to structure the lesson as well as to make it more engaging through the use of visuals.

The most challenging part of creating this lesson was deciding on a definition of racism that was simple enough for grade 2/3 students to understand and, with the help of Dr. Gillies, I was able to use the concept of fairness to come up with an appropriate definition. The definition that I used was: "Racism is treating people unfairly because of the color of their skin. Especially if the color of their skin is dark like black or brown." After I had written my lesson plan and collected all the materials needed, I timed myself to gauge how long the lesson took as I wanted to give the students enough time to complete their exit slips. After timing myself, I practiced the entire lesson with my mum to ensure that the lesson was engaging, easy to follow, and correct any errors.

The Lesson Plan

College of Education Lesson Plan Template

Teacher Candidate Name: Junita Subangani Raj

Date and Time: Jan 20 (2:30-3:20)

Subject: Social
Studies

Grade: 2/3

Topic: Anti-Racism

Essential Questions:

- How do I know when people are being treated unfairly?
- How does unfairness make me feel?
- How have people been treated unfairly in the past?

Materials: *When We Were Alone* book, PowerPoint Slides, Exit Slips

AEM Anti-Racist Lesson Plan

Stage 1- Desired Results

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to explain what racism means.

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to identify 2 ways they can help stop racism.

- *Broad Areas of Learning:*

Lifelong Learners: students will listen, comprehend, and engage in discussions based on the text which contributes to building basic reading skills and sparks curiosity.

Sense of self, community, and place: students will learn about Indigenous peoples and cultures through the reading of the text. They will also learn about racism that affects people of color and how they can identify and stop racism in their own communities, schools, etc.

Engaged Citizens: Through the reading of the text students will become aware of the historical discrimination of Indigenous peoples, and how they can use this knowledge to be empowered to stand up for those who are marginalized.

- *Outcomes:*

Outcome that fosters “dynamic relationships” through investigating “stories of significant events and persons in the local community’s history” (DR2.1; [Saskatchewan] Ministry of Education, 2010a, p.21):

Investigate stories of significant events and persons in the local community's history to describe the contribution of those who lived in the community in earlier times.

Outcome that fosters “dynamic relationships” through describing “the influence of Treaty and First Nations people on the local community” (DR2.4; [Saskatchewan] Ministry of Education, 2010a, pp. 21-22): Describe the influence of Treaty and First Nations peoples on the local community.

Outcome that encourages students to “comprehend and respond to a variety of grade-level texts (including contemporary and traditional visual, oral, written, and multimedia texts) that address:

identity (e.g., Just Watch Me)

community (e.g., People and Places)

social responsibility (e.g., Friendship) ...” (CR2.1; [Saskatchewan] Ministry of Education, 2010a, p.15).

Stage 2- Assessment

Assessment will take place in the form of assessment of learning. To do this, students will engage in discussions with a partner to answer the following questions:

“What can you say if someone asks you, ‘I don’t know what racism is; can you tell me what it is?’ and ‘What are two ways I can help stop racism in my community?’”

Students will then fill out exit slips with their answers and submit them to the teacher. If needed, students may also engage in a share-aloud of their answers orally instead of writing on exit slips.

Stage 3- Learning Plan

Motivational/Anticipatory Set: Students will watch a *CBC* video that defines racism to introduce the day’s topic. The video will help define racism in student-friendly terms appropriate for the age group of the class. The presence of a video will also help students who are visual learners so that everyone can understand and engage in the lesson content.

Main Procedures/Strategies: Teacher = myself

- The teacher will begin the lesson by projecting the PowerPoint on the board. [slide 1]
- The teacher will introduce herself, why she is here, and a couple of fun facts about herself. [slide 2, 3]
- The teacher will then transition into the motivational set. [slide 4]
- The teacher will engage with students by going over the definition of racism. She will ask if students have heard of the term “racism” and if students know what it means before showing a formal definition. [slide 5]
- The teacher will share her own experiences learning about racism (when she learned about it, why she thinks it is important that everyone learns about it, etc.)
- If there is a reading corner students can move there and be seated in semi-circle in front of teacher.
- The teacher will then transition into reading a book aloud. [slide 6]
- The teacher will pose discussion questions while reading the book (e.g., Do you think it is fair that Nókóm must not wear colourful clothes, cut her long hair, not see her family, or speak Cree? How would you feel if your school said you could not see your family, speak your home language, or grow out your hair? Why do you think Nókóm was treated this way? If you could say anything to Nókóm when she was being treated this way, what would you say?)
- The teacher will ask students to pair with a partner. The teacher will make sure each student has a partner.
- The teacher will ask students to discuss the questions: “What can you say if someone asks you, ‘I don’t know what racism is, can you tell me what it is?’ and, ‘What is one way I can help stop racism in my community?’” [slide 7]
- The teacher will pass out exit slips for the students to fill out that include the previous questions (see slide 7) and will collect the exit slips at the end of the class.
- The teacher will thank the classroom teacher and students for their time and attention. [slide 8]

Adaptations/Differentiation: If students have trouble writing sentences, they can share their thoughts orally with the teacher/class. Students will be taught the definition of racism in multiple ways (i.e., through video, discussion with a partner, listening to the teacher).

Closing of Lesson:

The teacher will transition into ways students can help stop racism. She will ask students to discuss the following: “What can you say if someone asks you, ‘I don’t know what racism is, can you tell me what it is?’ and ‘What are two ways I can help stop racism in my community?’” The students will fill out exit slips provided to them and hand them back to the teacher (alternatively, the students may discuss these questions orally in class).

Exit Slip

Name:

1. In your own words, what is racism?
2. Tell me one way you can help stop racism in your community.

* The lesson plan was formatted using the College of Education’s lesson plan template

Reflection

Going into teaching the lesson, I had no idea about how the students would respond. Truthfully, I expected them to disengage swiftly or be entirely confused by the end of it, but to see the students engaged, respectful, and already knowledgeable about this topic was a pleasant surprise. The classroom teacher had already been discussing these topics since the students were learning about Martin Luther King Jr., and it was evident the students were passionate and engaged in the topic. After the lesson introduction, I moved on to introduce the book I was going to read with the students. As I read, I occasionally stopped and asked the students questions related to the book and was impressed by their prior knowledge and the thoughts they wanted to share. After the book reading, I handed the students exit slips with two questions to answer and was thoroughly fascinated by how much they knew and their solutions to how we can combat racism. Even the discussions they were having with their peers surprised me. The students advocated that they, should invite students of color to join in during play time, if a student of color is being picked on at the playground, they should help stop it, and children who have white skin should build friendships with children who have black and brown skin. Through teaching this lesson, I learned that young students are capable of tackling these heavy topics when done in an appropriate manner such as through a reading of a storybook. By participating in this teaching experience, I also gained more confidence that I will be able to teach anti-racism in the future, as I now know the capabilities of young students as well as which methods are suited to introduce the topic of anti-racism.

in racism. By making students aware of this racism, providing them with an age-appropriate definition of racism, teaching them about the effects of racism, and empowering them to combat racism in their own communities, the status quo was disrupted.

Disrupting The Status Quo

Since this lesson was specifically designed to be anti-racist, it disrupts the status quo. Specifically, the belief exists that we should never teach nor talk about this and other related subject matter, especially during early elementary school. This lesson tackles a topic facet of Canadian history that is actively rooted

References

- CBC Kids. (2022, July 6). *What Is Racism?* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uz5BcMzqZs>.
- Roberston, D. (2017). *When We Were Alone*. Portage & Main Press.
- Ministry of Education (2010a). 2010 Saskatchewan Curriculum Social Studies 2.
<https://curriculum.gov.sk.ca/CurriculumHome?id=165>.
- Ministry of Education (2010b). 2010 Saskatchewan Curriculum English Language Arts 2.
<https://curriculum.gov.sk.ca/CurriculumHome?id=28>.