

Gender and Racism

By Richard Fairbanks with assistance from Marian Dodds, Susan Horner, Ellen Hall, and Linda Peterat

He has told me from the day he entered this class, he is only taking clothing because he has to. He says in his family men don't need to know about sewing or clothes. His mother or wife will do these things for him.

We find that if we teach food preparation in relation to the home, we will not get any of these boys enrolled. They and their parents think a course in foods is acceptable only if it relates to restaurant management and entrepreneurial skills.

We teach the regular things in this course (family management) but many of these girls will have arranged marriages and very restricted lives.

These voices of teachers convey a reticence some feel in addressing gender biases and discrimination when they feel they may be offending racial, cultural or class based beliefs. However, if such attitudes are not openly addressed, both gender and racial inequities may be perpetuated. We as teachers may accept stereotypical generalizations about all East Indians, Italians, or other racial and ethnic groups based on the attitudes expressed by one or a few individuals, while identified with a particular race, class or culture, also hold individual beliefs about justice and equity. Feminism and struggles for women's rights are worldwide efforts. Women's movements exist in most countries of the world, and this we fail to recognize if we dismiss biased attitudes as racial and do not take up these attitudes in discussion in our classes.

For many students, encountering racism in social activities, classroom interactions, and, even in curriculum materials is part of everyday life. After a recent performance of the Vancouver Youth Theatre's play about the effects of racism on the lives of immigrant students, an audience member asked the actors what the general audience response was to the production. The actors replied that in mostly white schools, students said they had no idea this kind of thing went on; and in the schools with mostly students of color, students said they knew exactly what the play was about.

One way schools and teachers have addressed racism has been to "celebrate difference" by exploring the various customs and foods of different cultures, believing that doing so will make students more tolerant of differences. Sampling different cultures is one way to familiarize students with different cultures, but it can reinforce the notion that "others" are exotic and not really a part of day-to-day society. Some have suggested that "culture touring" can reinforce stereotypes by providing racist students with substantiation for their beliefs (i.e., "these people are really weird, look at the food they eat"). Celebrating difference also does nothing to challenge institutional racism. This is racism which is inherent in the social organization of our institutions and our society. In the past, discrimination against First Nations peoples was institutionalized by the Indian Act. Similar laws in the past have institutionalized discrimination against Chinese Canadians. Today, institutional racism can be seen in hiring practices, textbooks, and Eurocentric curriculum.

How can we as teachers address racism in the curriculum and the classroom? To begin with, curriculum materials such as textbooks, videos, and other materials can be examined for evidence of racism. This can be done by the teacher alone or together with students. For example, pictures in textbooks can be analyzed for their content by asking such questions as: How many people of colour are in the pictures of the text? What are non-white people portrayed as doing? Are non-white people portrayed in equal status with whites? Another exercise might be to have students look at some media source such as music videos, TV, or advertising and analyze how people of color are represented, if they are represented at all. When describing their childhood, many people of color have said that they rarely saw anyone like them on television, it was mostly just white faces. Teachers and students can also look at their own school. What nationalities are represented by the students in the school? What nationalities are represented by the teachers in the school? In the district?

Another anti-racist action that teachers can take is to adopt a policy for their classroom in which they set out clear standards of acceptable behaviour and language. Make it clear that language intended to disparage someone because of their race is unacceptable. Teasing can also be a form of racism. When incidents occur such as embarrassing or tricking ESL students, teachers can use these moments to talk about racism. They can discuss and raise questions with the class about what motivates particular students to take such actions, or discuss what makes an act racist.

Ideally, anti-racist policies should be a part of school policy so that teachers and students do not feel unsupported when trying to counter racist acts. The involvement of parents in formulating an anti-racist policy for the school would give support to administrators and teachers. Many times, fear of retaliation by parents prevents administrators from creating and enforcing anti-racist and sexual harassment policies. In the very complex issues where race and gender discrimination intersect, it is likely that parents need to be involved in open discussion if they are to understand the intentions schools and teachers are attempting to bring about. If parents are involved and support school policies, anti-racist and sexual harassment policies can extend to create community standards rather than just classroom policies.

Gender, class, and race are linked; each has a part in any individual person's oppression. The teaching practices used to address gender can also address race and class. What is most important in addressing all of these biases is our own beliefs and awareness of gender, race, and class issues. What are the expectations we have about the girls and boys we teach and how do our own beliefs affect their education? These are the most important questions we can ask ourselves.