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SYSTEMIC RACISM: Does It Exist in Canada?

Video duration – 10:59

The police killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed have brought renewed attention to systemic racism. In Canada, some have been quick to deny its existence. But these experts say racism has been normalized within Canadian institutions.

Related Content on curio.ca

- News in Review, January 2020 – Exposing Hate: Are Hate Crimes on the Rise in Canada?
- News in Review, January 2015 – Our Canada: Are We Racist?
- Cindy Blackstock (Mansbridge One on One)
- nîpawistikāsowin: We Will Stand Up (CBC Docs POV)
- The Science of Racism series (Canadian Race Relations Foundation)
- The Skin We’re In (Firsthand)
- Skinhead (CBC Docs POV)
- White Privilege: Does It Exist? (The National)
VIDEO REVIEW
BEFORE VIEWING: Teacher instructions

Teachers: Don’t let students see this slide

1. Organize your class into three rows facing an empty (and clean) garbage can at the front of the classroom. Space the rows out a bit.

2. Give students in each row a ball (you’ll need a minimum of three balls). Note the proximity of each row to the garbage can.

3. Explain to the students that the classroom is a microcosm of Canadian society, where each individual has opportunities to achieve success. In this example, success is measured by being able to throw the ball into the garbage can.

4. Ask the front row to throw their balls first, followed by the second row, and then the third row.

5. Keep track of both the successful throws and the ones that don’t make it into the garbage can.
BEFORE VIEWING: The ball toss activity

As a class, consider the following:

a. What factors influenced your chance for success in the ball toss activity?

b. Did each individual have an equal chance of success?

c. What measures could be implemented to ensure equal access to success?

Define the terms *privilege* and *systemic racism*. Use your smartphone, tablet or computer if necessary.

**Guiding question:**
How do the concepts of *privilege* and *systemic racism* apply to the activity you just took part in?
TALK PROMPTS
TALK PROMPT #1

Consider pausing the video and giving students the opportunity to talk to an elbow partner for a few minutes or use these questions as part of a class discussion.

Pause the video after Professor Rinaldo Walcott says, “These are institutions that were built with the intention and the understanding that they were not actually really to service people who were not White.”

1. Is this statement surprising? Explain your answer.

2. Why might leaders like Ontario Premier Doug Ford, RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki and Quebec Premier Francois Legault have difficulty conceptualizing the existence of systemic racism in Canada?
Pause the video after Rinaldo Walcott says, “When I see the prime minister take a knee, I think of it as a distraction. Here is the leader of a middle power in the world who could do much to demonstrate what moving to anti-Black racism could look like. And that is not what we’re being offered. We’re being offered a knee.”

1. Do you agree with Walcott’s opinion regarding Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s decision to take a knee at a Black Lives Matter protest?

2. Why might this gesture be seen as inauthentic given the prime minister’s status and position?

3. What do you think racialized Canadians and their allies are seeking from our political leaders?
THE STORY
Perspective: A Parable
When faced with the question of whether systemic racism exists in Canada, a parable comes to mind:

There are two young fish swimming along, and when they meet an older fish swimming the other way, the older fish nods at them and says, “Good morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a while, before one of them eventually turns to the other and says, “What the heck is water?”

What the older fish knows that the two younger fish do not is what American sociologist C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination — the idea that “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.” In other words, a person’s experience is the product of the social context in which they live, and vice versa.

Fish out of water
It’s no wonder then why Brenda Lucki, Doug Ford, Francois Legault and Stockwell Day — four prominent White political leaders, when pressed
about the prevalence of institutional discrimination against Black, Indigenous and Canadians of colour — seemed so out of their depth, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

- “I think that if systemic racism is meaning that racism is entrenched in our policies and procedures, I would say that we don’t have systemic racism,” said RCMP commissioner Lucki, responding to questions about officers assaulting Chief Allan Adam of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation while he was on a date with his wife in June.

- Ontario Premier Doug Ford expressed a similar sentiment about the May 25th killing of George Floyd by Minnesota police, “Thank God we’re different than the United States and we don’t have the systemic, deep roots they’ve had for years.”

- Quebec Premier Legault and former Alberta Conservative MP Day later echoed Ford’s view.

After considerable public backlash, all four leaders walked back their claims. The initial statements, however, are part of a long history of denial by our politicians — the majority of them White — who simply don’t have the experience of racialized Canadians’ with systemic racism as a barrier to equality and success.
Revisionist History

According to Natasha Henry, President of the Ontario Black History Society, such offhand dismissals of systemic racism are rooted in a biased understanding of our past. “It’s part of the Canadian national narrative to position ourselves in juxtaposition to the United States,” Henry says. “That’s how we get this ‘exceptional Canada’ of being welcoming and warm — and not paying attention to our own parallel history of racial exclusion and dispossession.”

The history Henry is referring to isn’t often written in our textbooks. Generations of Canadians have been taught about Canada’s place as the last stop on the Underground Railroad where American slaves found their freedom. This idea has been stretched to suggest the implicit premise that this somehow absolves Canada of structural prejudice.

But, this narrative silences the suffering of thousands of enslaved people within Canada, says Henry, and ignores the fact that systemic racism on this land is older than Canada itself.

Slavery in Canada

Between 1628 and the 1800s, nearly three thousand people of African ancestry were brought to Canada from the U.S. and forced to live here in slavery. It wasn’t until 1834 that the Slavery Abolition Act...
became law — just 27 years before the American Civil War.

After emancipation, Canada’s Black population experienced segregation and other forms of discrimination, including the menace of hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan, whose pamphlets and rhetoric continue to circulate today in some communities. First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples were also enslaved by colonial powers — a fact largely omitted from our curricula.

Recent efforts at reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous population focus more on the 150,000 children taken from their families and forced to attend residential schools between 1886 and 1996. The generational trauma of slavery and residential schools, as well as the subsequent attempts to eliminate Indigenous cultures, also persist.

“You have to decide — are you going to accept all of Canada or none of Canada?” said Henry.

“Because you can’t parcel out what you want. That’s not how history works.”

**An undeserved reputation**

The current dominant view is that we live in a post-racial society where everyone is born equal and treated fairly and equitably by the country’s institutions. Yet, disparities between White and racialized Canadians in criminal justice, child services, education, and the workplace suggest that we are deceiving ourselves — that
the values that shaped our past also inform the present.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) reported recently that Black people are more likely than other groups to be arrested, charged, or treated with force by Toronto police. According to the study, Black people represent only 8.8 percent of Toronto’s population, but represent 32 percent of all people charged — despite the fact that Black people are no more likely than other racial groups to commit a crime. A separate OHRC study showed that Black and Indigenous people living in Toronto are 10-20 times more likely to be shot by police than Whites.

**Negative Outcomes**

Similar disturbing outcomes exist in national child services. Black and Indigenous children in Canada have a greater chance of being referred to the Children’s Aid Society, are removed from their homes in greater numbers, are far less likely to be returned to their families, and more likely to spend significant portions of their youth in foster care. According to Renu Mandhane, chief commissioner of the OHRC, “[T]he long term damage caused by separating children from their families is undeniable.”

In school and in the workforce, Black and Indigenous Canadians lose more learning time to suspensions than
non-racialized Canadians, have lower expectations for higher education, make less annual income, and are far more likely to be unemployed. Representation of these groups in corporate boardrooms and in provincial and federal parliament — spaces where the nation’s real economic and political power is wielded — is virtually non-existent.

**Stop, listen and learn**

When our leaders offer glib and unsupported denials of the systemic racism they do not have the personal context to understand, not only are they gaslighting racialized Canadians, they are proving the very notion they reject.

So, the next time the Luckis, the Fords, the Legaults and the Days of this country are asked about the structures that repeatedly produce negative outcomes for Black, Indigenous and people of colour, they would do well to stop, listen and learn.

**TO CONSIDER**

1. What lesson does the parable of the old fish and the two younger fish teach?
2. What do Brenda Lucki, Doug Ford, Francois Legault and Stockwell Day have in common in their responses to the idea that systemic racism exists in Canada?
3. What important fact about Black and Indigenous populations in Canada is often left out of our textbooks?

4. What are some examples of systemic racism in Canada today?
ACTIVITY: Exploring Systemic Racism in Canada

Your task is to explore the ways in which Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) are impacted by systemic racism.

- Form a group of four and select an area of focus below.
  - Education
  - Health Care
  - Employment
  - Income
  - Criminal Justice
  - Housing
  - Representation in Parliament
  - Representation in business and on Corporate Boards

- Conduct research on your selected topic, with specific focus on data that supports the existence of systemic racism (we suggest a good place to start is the “Subjects” area on the Statistics Canada website — www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/subjects?MM=1 — however, you may choose to focus on the provincial or municipal level instead.

- Using the data you find, create a graph using an app such as Canva: www.canva.com/graphs/

- As a group, prepare a 5-10 minute multimedia presentation on systemic racism in your chosen area of focus.
Sources


