



The Implications of Black Lives Matter for Education: What can White People in Positions of Privilege do?

Conrad Hughes
conrad.hughes@ecolint.ch

I hesitated for a long time before writing this because I am white, male, in a position of leadership. What right does a white man in a position of privilege have to write about Black Lives Matter? Is this not a story that should be told by people of colour and should white people not listen rather than preach? Part of me is tired of seeing that discussion taken over by people who are not suffering from racism themselves. I believe that a space needs to be created for the voices of those on the coalface to speak and be heard.

The problem is, I cannot keep quiet. I cannot stand on the sidelines of what is happening without expressing how it makes me feel. Perhaps this is because my wife and children are black and I therefore feel drawn to this closely and personally. I see in George Floyd my own son. I might not be a person of colour or a black person but it hurts me - as I believe and hope it hurts every thinking person - to see a people suffering unjustly, it unsettles something deep inside. Therefore, I will speak, because there is something wrong and I will not remain silent.

[The Black Lives Matter movement](#), established in 2013 after the shooting of teenager Trayvon Martin is now sweeping across the planet as people take to the streets to show solidarity with the victims of police brutality, racism, and violence against black people in the United States and elsewhere.

The harrowing murder of George Floyd ignited a spark that quickly turned into a flame that is now a raging fire. This fire is burning away any attempt to cover up [racist inequalities](#) in the United States that have been the structural bedrock of hundreds of years of exploitation. The underbelly of racism is complex and unsettling. It needs to be understood at three levels.

Racism and History

As an economic and political system, the slave trade and indentured labour have contributed to the structure of capitalism in [Britain](#) and [the United States](#). Apartheid South Africa's economy thrived on [exploitation](#) through the deliberate maintenance of an underpaid workforce. In many ways, racism as a system of exploitation, goes hand-in-hand with the history of capitalism. So much history has been shaped by racism, such as the American Civil War, [WW1](#), [WW2](#) and [The Vietnam War](#). Racism has not been a mere incident of history, it has been a driver of history.

Racism and Culture

[Language and social codes](#) are saturated with the legacy of racism: many metaphors and [expressions](#) are still embedded with it and much canonical [literature](#) carries the weight of slavery, colonisation and exploitation. Statues of slave owners and symbols of colonisation are studded over the cities of the world and many are now being pulled down. The culture of racism becomes [institutionalised](#) and normalised. However, when many norms and institutions are investigated critically, their implicit unfairness and bias towards ingroups becomes clear. Much propaganda has created racism, demonising certain racial groups in order to rationalise their existence at the bottom of a social pyramid. Believing that such pyramidal social structures are justified and normal is called [the just world hypothesis](#). Closer inspection reveals that social hierarchies are artificial and imposed by power.

Racism and Psychology

Racism, as a part of [prejudice](#), is a natural reaction to fear that the fright or flight brain system triggers: human beings are naturally disposed to "Othering", essentialising and stereotyping people who look, sound and seem different to them. Over-generalisations are cognitively natural and require deep critical thinking and self awareness to be reduced. An old hypothesis about prejudice by the psychologist Mustafa Sherif called [realistic conflict theory](#) states that when resources are scarce, people regress into prejudice quickly. With recurring financial recessions and related unemployment in the 21st Century, the natural inclination is to fall into a mindset of fear and hatred.

In fact, many politicians use racism as a [tactic](#) to manipulate those who are suffering from a lack of resources and will, therefore, slide into prejudice easily. As Ijeoma Oluo states in her brilliant book [So you want to talk about race](#), "racism [...] exists to exclude people of colour from opportunity and progress so that there is more profit for others deemed superior. This profit itself is the greater promise for nonracialized people - you will get more because they exist to get less" (p. 12).

Educating for less racism

The Black Lives Matter movement is causing many institutions to think deeply about racism. How can we fight against racism in schools? There is no simple answer and the journey will not be easy or short. My [book](#) on education and prejudice takes the conversation further but three major principles should be respected if there is to be some progress:

1. Understanding racism as a major thread running through history and celebrating the untold stories

Events imbued with racism such as the Slave Trade, Colonisation, the Holocaust, phenomena such as the modern prison system in the United States and several immigration laws need to be viewed as central operating systems of history. Books like Jill Lapore's [These Truths](#) or David Olusoga's [Civilisations: First Contact / The Cult of Progress](#) should influence history curricula as should films such as [13th](#) or [I am not your Negro](#). By teaching the humanities with an understanding of the system of exploitation that has run through human development, schools will make students better critical thinkers who are less naive and incredulous about racism. Some of the important shapers of the modern world, such as decolonisation, the conflict in the Middle East and the war in the Congo need to be taught more systematically as they explain the morphology of modern politics and power relations and how they are inextricably linked with exploitation and race.

At the same time, empowering narratives should be told to give children of colour pride in their heritage and not to feel as mere victims of history. This allows white children to view their classmates with less superiority and more genuine respect and admiration. We can no longer teach the history of pre-colonial societies, for example, as stories of underdevelopment and exploitation, life before colonisation should be celebrated as the fascinating, culturally vibrant world that it was. Furthermore, many keys to the future of the planet, such as sustainability and respect for animals, come from traditional, pre-colonial societies. The emancipation of black people in America should not be viewed as something that was given to them by white liberators but something that was won through a hard fought battle as the recent film on Harriet Tubman, [Harriet](#) shows.

2. Leaders have to push for diversity in their institutions

Institutional racism exists when the leadership team, made up of those that take decisions and recruit, represents one privileged group and does not seek to diversify itself or the staff in general. Students need to see the diversity of the world reflected throughout the school, at all levels of the positions that adults hold. This not only makes schools safer places for children of colour but it ensures that discourses, reflexes, codes and what we call the hidden curriculum is not controlled by one power group. When we diversify institutions, diversity is celebrated and

minority groups feel more confident to stand out and shine. Furthermore, [diversity is good for productivity](#).

Parents and speakers from diverse backgrounds should be invited to speak at schools and cultural literacy should be put on the map as an essential part of a good education. Schools will know that they have struck the right chord when children and adults of colour walk away from events, discussions and lessons with their heads held up high because they are proud of who they are and feel valued.

3. Hard work has to be done on grappling with the psychology of prejudice

This means understanding the neural and psychological mechanisms of prejudice, recognising how ubiquitous it is. Lifeworthy lessons in the 21st Century have to focus on neurobiology and [concepts](#) from social psychology such as implicit bias, cognitive dissonance, ingrouping and outgrouping and projecting. Importantly, ongoing discussion groups and deep reflection should be frequent: this creates more trust and openness. We should not be afraid to talk about race and to share our stories in an ongoing thread. At this point in time, with the soul-searching that is taking place at so many levels about racism, educators must have the courage to scaffold meaningful discussions with students. Educators and students will grow through this process.

“Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” Martin Luther King once said. Let us work together in our schools to ensure that this arc does not take so long to reach a place of goodness that we run out of time. Too many have suffered and enough momentum has been created for us to change our systems for the individual, collective and public good.

At my school, we have set up an anti-discrimination group, published an anti-discrimination statement, set up a decolonising the curriculum core group to lead work with department heads, we are recruiting diversely including to positions of leadership, we are running discussion groups and trainings on diversity and in our philosophy courses we teach Ubuntu, Yoruba cosmology, Confucianism and Buddhism. Our students and faculty have been privileged to hear from Angela Davis, David Olusoga and Kenneth Reams as part of our speakers series.

There is still much work to be done, there is a mountain to climb and we will climb it. We might never reach the top but we will keep moving in the right direction.

White people might feel intimidated to speak up during these times of turmoil and awakening. They should not. They should have the courage to move beyond [white fragility](#), beyond fear into action. Why? Because being white and saying nothing right now is ambivalent. Now is not the time to be silent. Silence is violence. Now is the time to speak, all of us.

Better, now is the time to act. For all educators reading this, let us activate these changes. I am working on this in my school, will you join me?