

# How literature teachers can create anti-racist classrooms

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Many schools say anti-racism and equity initiatives matter for quality education, yet specific plans are often wanting. [In 2023, the not-for-profit organization People for Education reported](#) that 73% of schools included anti-racism and equity in their school improvement plan, but only 28% of school boards actually have an anti-racism policy, strategy or approach.

More work is needed from [school boards](#) to support anti-racist teaching and learning. However, in the interim, what can classroom teachers do to create equitable and anti-racist classrooms that meet their racialized students' needs?

We are two researchers and educators whose work has explored anti-racist approaches to teaching literature. We are interested in how literature engages students in powerful conversations about topics like [grit, determination and hope](#)— and [what resilience may look like for](#) racialized students in Canadian schools as they face social and systemic barriers.

While literary texts can nurture deep understandings about racism and power, it's not enough to provide students with racially and culturally diverse reading material. Depending on how teachers use a text in the classroom, it is equally possible to perpetuate harm as it is to empower racialized students.

Educators must adopt anti-racist teaching approaches that work towards holistic education models rooted in community practices.

## **Systemic racism**

Systemic racism refers to how various institutions in society are built on

beliefs and values that perpetuate [white supremacy](#).

Systemic racism appears in schools in various ways, including a lack of culturally relevant classroom materials. Black feminism scholar Robyn Maynard explains that for Black youth, in particular, schools tend to be their first encounter with [the organized and systemic devaluation of Blackness present in society at large](#).

Anti-racist education in schools is crucial for increasing racialized student agency and students' abilities to thrive in classrooms. For non-racialized students, anti-racist teachings allow them to unpack how systems of oppression perpetuate divides and how they may be impacted by these systems. By identifying these systems, students can work towards effective change.

## **Defining student success**

While dominant understanding of the purpose of education tends to measure [student success](#) based on [academic grades](#) and [transferable career skills](#), it is important to view student success as intimately related to self-expression and fostering community.

The [scholar and educator bell hooks](#) reminds us that classrooms are spaces of radical possibility that can create space for student joy and freedom. Student success then translates into creating environments where students [can realize their passions and work](#) towards possibilities of self expression and collaborative expression.

## **Why English class?**

As the late Cree lawyer and author Harold Johnson explains in "The Power of Story: On Truth, the Trickster and New Fictions for a New

Era," ["story is power."](#) Stories allow us to reflect on the past, present and future while connecting with others.

Counter-stories—narratives about marginalized groups not commonly heard in society that challenge social, racial and cultural stereotypes—[can be empowering for racialized and marginalized students](#) because they help readers understand they're not alone. These also provide an avenue for students to discuss topics related to marginalization without directly addressing their own experiences.

Stories can also provide teachings to [contribute to holistic forms of education](#) and foster [empathy for others](#).

When educators and students study narrative structures, they find a starting point to understand different power dynamics in our world.

English teachers can support students to pay attention to the finer details of literary texts to make informed observations and analysis—[to "close-read" texts as a way to address the limitations of their readerly perspective and expand this](#). Close-reading can help students find points of connection and difference between themselves and the text, including stories and characters that represent themes about race and racism.

## **Anti-racist practice: two areas of focus**

We recommend that English language arts teachers build their anti-racist practices in two areas: by developing their own racial consciousness as people making decisions about teaching and learning, and by prioritizing student empowerment. The ideas here are also beneficial for parents or people in the wider community who are interested in anti-racist learning.

### **1. Practice becoming self-aware of how your identities**

## **impact your values, beliefs and lived experiences.**

Engaging with diverse literary texts can help teachers develop an anti-racist teaching practice by providing a concrete way to reflect on their "positionality"—how identities across various categories impact our values, beliefs and lived experiences. [Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality](#) highlights how where we are positioned in society with regards to different identities maps onto systems of power and oppression. Critically reflecting on our values, beliefs and lived experiences as they relate to various facets of our identities is a key part of developing a conscious understanding of different ways you do or do not hold privileges.

Being self-aware shapes how you relate to a text. This can lead to deeper insights into how to navigate student relationships and curriculum.

## **2. Find community resources.**

To develop your anti-racist lens, look to community resources. What groups are available to support anti-racist and anti-oppressive learning in your community? What are local grassroots organizations or libraries doing? Are there community conversation groups with elders, parents and youth? Are there [social obstacles impacting specific intersections](#) of identity, and how do those barriers look in your community? Invite guest speakers into the classroom and model creating generational connections. Demonstrate to students what respectful collaboration can look like.

## **3. Foster student agency.**

Diverse stories allow students to enter conversations about inequity through narratives that resonate with them without demanding students

share their personal narratives.

When teachers come prepared with community and academic resources, students can [exercise their agency](#) to access knowledge.

If teachers present alternative assessment strategies, students can build on their understanding by using their strengths as learners. They can also work towards teaching their peers.

#### **4. Create bridges between students.**

A [competency for intercultural teaching](#) is creating opportunities for peer learning and interaction among diverse learners.

Using stories that discuss power hierarchies, including but not limited to racism, can build bridges between learners with different intersectional identities. These stories become a common place of discussion that create opportunities for peer-to-peer connection without asking racialized and other marginalized students to disclose their personal narratives.

To encourage peer learning, invite students to use close-reading to help articulate their understandings of race and privilege based on their unique perspectives.

#### **Recommended books**

If you are looking to incorporate some Canada-based books to discuss forms of racism and connections to school, here are some recommendations:

- How to Pronounce Knife by Souvankham Thammavongsa

- Scarborough by Catherine Hernandez
- Fire Song by Adam Garnet Jones
- Dear Current Occupant by Chelene Knight
- Home of the Floating Lily by Silmy Abdullah
- Brother by David Chariandy

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