

Uncomfortable truths: Teaching about race and anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom

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Anti-Indigenous racism education is often framed as a way to improve non-discriminatory care for Indigenous peoples. This study asked: What happens when anti-Indigenous racism is taken up by educators? What makes it challenging to manage in an adult classroom? What strategies are (un)successful? Ten adult educators participated—Indigenous (n = 4), White (n = 3) and non-Indigenous People of Colour (n = 3)—in either an interview or focus group. A phenomenological approach guided interpretation of participant narratives. Findings revealed persistent anti-Indigenous racist violence in adult educational settings. Successfully challenging anti-Indigenous racism required deep educator knowledge, self-awareness, cultural humility and strong facilitation skills. The traumatic toll on Indigenous educators and differing responses to resistance highlighted how racism is experienced and addressed differently by Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White educators. This study provides empirical evidence for the need for pedagogical strategies that improve cultural safety, support educators and meaningfully confront anti-Indigenous racism in adult education classrooms.

Keywords: racism, Indigenous, colonisation, education, anti-racism, anti-Indigenous racism

The following prologue describes a hypothetical scenario in which two experienced adult educators, one White and one Indigenous, decide to collaborate and strategise about managing resistance to learning by White learners. While this scenario was not a part of the original research, it effectively sets the context for understanding the way in which anti-Indigenous attitudes surface within educational spaces.

Prologue

The educational series is co-facilitated by two female untenured professors: Grace is White, interested in Indigenous issues and considers herself an ally to Indigenous people; Winona is Indigenous, an experienced educator and is hoping to publish the insights about facilitating this learning series for university staff. The two women have not co-facilitated together before but have spent considerable time working on both the curriculum and the facilitation model they plan to use. Some of the assumptions they believe will impact the dynamics of the learnings sessions are:

- insufficient communication with staff about the learning sessions
- resentment from staff about being required to attend
- pre-existing dynamics related to colonial history and impacts, including deeply entrenched attitudes related to racist stereotyping
- lack of familiarity with language and conceptual frameworks to dialogue in a safe way about issues related to Indigenous people
- racial composition of the university staff as adult learners (predominantly homogeneous and overwhelmingly White)
- underrepresentation of Indigenous instructors and students at the university (despite close proximity to two reserves and a large urban community)
- neutral receptivity of staff for a recent equity initiative
- instructor requests for support from student services for assistance in addressing increasing racist attitudes in their classes regarding Indigenous issues.

Grace and Winona decide to use their different racial standpoints strategically. Grace was tasked with addressing resistance, with particular focus on the resistance of White people. Winona was responsible for opening up the session, acknowledging the territory and conducting the introductions. Content was divided between Grace and Winona based on anticipation of predictable areas of engagement and resistance. They also used this as an opportunity to:

- model decolonising attitudes and behaviours
- demonstrate respect and cross-racial collaboration
- challenge colonial stereotypes
- centre Indigenous epistemology
- model the requirements for managing a culturally safe space.

The initial session of the learning series is completely full. Winona introduces the elder who has been asked to do the official welcoming and a senior university administrator who has come to speak about the goals for the series. Grace begins to set the context for the first of the three sessions and a middle-aged White male puts up his hand:

I have some questions for you. I want to know why these sessions are mandatory and I want to know why we have to learn about historical issues that have nothing to do with how I teach math. I especially want to know why we have to spend our time hearing about the natives, and if we have to do that, then do we also have to learn about every other ethnic group that has problems?

Grace responds:

Those are important questions and I imagine there are others in the room here who are thinking about similar things. What I can share about the mandatory requirement is that this learning series is intentional and designed to address the tremendous gap in knowledge that most people have regarding many issues related to our collective history and responsibilities. The university has expectations that this initiative will have the support of the staff who will do everything they can to ensure they have the information and analysis they need to do their jobs. With regard to your comments about why this series is focused on Indigenous people, I am confident that you will find the answers to these questions will become apparent during the sessions. As I was saying ...

Situating the research

This paper shares findings from a study conducted by the lead author that explored how anti-Indigenous racism manifests in adult education settings, including university classrooms and health institutions where anti-Indigenous racism education is mandated or offered. The study drew on the experiences, knowledge and insights of Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White educators who teach or navigate anti-Indigenous racism education to investigate challenges to instruction presented by the attitudes and behaviours of adult learners in university and health institutions. When Indigenous issues are “in the room”, attitudes and behaviours exhibited by learners reveal discourses of resistance (Bell, 2024; Cote-Meek, 2014; Hatchell, 2004; Ward et al., 2021). We suggest that unpacking and examining discourses of resistance may offer a framework for understanding the complexity of anti-Indigenous racism in adult education environments.

It is one thing to experience racism in the classroom, or participate in workshops and presentations on racism, but quite another to be an anti-racism educator, or an educator responsible for including anti-racism education into their teaching (Arneback, 2022; Ward et al., 2021). Anti-racism educators, or anti-Indigenous racism educators as is the case for the lead author of this paper, require more than good intentions or understanding of curriculum to be effective (Arneback, 2022; Sefa Dei & Simmons, 2010). The impetus for this research derived from a desire to know if other educators shared similar experiences of difficult conversations, dilemmas and situations. Questions that eventually formed the basis of a study included: How do other anti-Indigenous racism educators respond in situations similar to those I have experienced? How do they manage classroom dynamics? What happens to Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour or White educators when they challenge different forms of racism in the classroom? Are their experiences similar?

The impetus for this study is the lead author’s experience as an Indigenous anti-Indigenous racism educator while holding a leadership position with an organisation that provides Indigenous cultural safety training for numerous health authorities in Canada. Indigenous cultural safety training is a form of anti-Indigenous racism education for adults. Within the lead author’s workplace, Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White educators work together to facilitate the training and those engaged in the training (learners) are primarily health authority staff. The lead author developed the training model and, as part of her doctoral research, conducted the study discussed in this paper.

Organisations and institutions implementing mandatory training and education for staff and leadership on anti-racism and cultural safety rely on educators to facilitate learning with people of diverse backgrounds, attitudes and experiences (Vass et al., 2011; Walter & Butler, 2013). When institutions prioritise cultural awareness and competency training over anti-racism frameworks, they often depoliticise systemic injustice by focusing on individual-level knowledge and interpersonal skills rather than confronting the structural roots of racism and discrimination (Patel, 2022; Pon, 2009). Institutions and educators striving for “safe” learning environments often serve to maintain the status quo and offer symbolic gestures of inclusion without addressing power, privilege, and structural inequities embedded within institutional and classroom practices (Patel, 2022; Razack et al., 2025; Summerlin & Ponder, 2020). Lawrence and Dua (2011) contend that seriously addressing colonisation means centring race and racism in theory construction. In other words, we must directly discuss and confront how we and others understand and experience race and racism if we want to address colonisation and decolonise through anti-racism and cultural safety training. Such training can be challenging because tackling and responding to racism in any context may have risks. It requires educators to venture into the unfamiliar and unknown, and we may lack confidence about what we are doing or why we are doing it.

At the time of writing this paper, one might expect increased focus on anti-Indigenous racism education within health care systems given stark examples of anti-Indigenous racism and cultural genocide across Canada, where all co-authors live and work. In an investigation looking into allegations of misconduct by health professionals in British Columbia, 84% of Indigenous people reported experiencing discrimination within the health care system (FenTurlpel-Lafond, 2020, p. 36). In Quebec, an Indigenous mother cried for help while dying and, rather than being attended to, was mocked by nursing staff (Shingler, 2020). Across Canada, there have been discoveries of mass and unmarked graves of Indigenous children who were forced to attend church and state-run residential schools (Hopper, 2021).

This study was designed to seek out educators who tackle anti-Indigenous racism in adult education classrooms, and create a compassionate, productive, and beneficial space in which they can share their experiences and ideas. We reveal themes that capture the complexity and depth of issues linked to anti-Indigenous racism and how it manifests in the adult education context, as well as identify strategies that educators employ to manage anti-Indigenous racism constructively.

Research questions

The goal of this study is to enhance understanding of the experiences of educators who deal with anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom. The research questions that guided this study follow.

1. What are the characteristics of an anti-Indigenous racial dialogue that make the dialogue challenging for educators?
2. How do educators address or not address resistance discourses related to anti-Indigenous racism?
3. What intervention strategies have proved successful and unsuccessful in being used in facilitating challenging dialogue on anti-Indigenous racism?

Research methodology

Phenomenological approach

This paper explores the “phenomenon” of anti-Indigenous racism in the adult education classroom through the accounts of 10 educators and self-reflexivity of an anti-Indigenous racism educator. Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) state that “data from only a few individuals who have experienced the phenomenon – and who can provide a detailed account of their experience – might suffice to uncover its core elements” (p. 1375). Using a phenomenological approach provided a structure to guide and support the process of collecting and interpreting narratives of anti-Indigenous racism educators. As Miller and Glassner (1997) explain, delving into social worlds to illustrate what happens in them – through the stories people tell – helps people to “make sense of themselves, their experiences and their place within these social worlds” (p. 52). Research from a phenomenological perspective provides an opportunity for self-reflexivity in the research process and enhances the researcher’s potential to theorise about the social worlds that participants share. Phenomenology draws attention to the emotional experiences of participants, a key subject area that surfaces repeatedly in this study. Moreover, a phenomenological approach is a “useful methodology for Indigenous researchers who wish to make meaning from stories” (Kovach, 2009, p. 27).

Recruitment

After research ethics approval was granted by the University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and Vancouver Island University, participants were recruited from all four universities in British Columbia. A description of the study and invitation to participate was circulated on the four university campus bulletin boards and by word of mouth. Adult educators who were experienced in teaching content where anti-Indigenous racism was addressed were invited to participate. Participants emailed to express interest and make arrangements for in-person interviews. Three to four people positioned in each of the three racial groups—Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White—were interviewed. Recruitment acknowledged the impact of different racial standpoints on classroom dynamics while also recreating the “real world” conditions in which the issue of anti-Indigenous racism emerges.

Data collection

The researcher arranged to meet in places that were convenient to participants and offered some privacy. The semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and guided by the following three questions:

- a) How do you address (or avoid) resistance discourse related to anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom?
- b) What are the characteristics of an anti-Indigenous racial dialogue that make the dialogue challenging for you?
- c) What intervention strategies have you used in facilitating challenging dialogue on anti-Indigenous racism? Which have been successful and which have been unsuccessful?

During and after interviews, observational notes were written to capture emotions and sentiments that may not be reflected in transcripts.

Following one-on-one interviews, all participants were invited to join a two-hour focus group held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Participants were provided financial compensation for transportation and given a small gift as a token of appreciation for their time and participation. The focus group provided an environment in which educators could discuss and critique themes and issues that emerged from the interviews, as well as stimulate ideas and capture insights generated by group dialogue. All interviews and focus group conversations were transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

A six-step data analysis process, informed by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994), was used. First, the transcripts and observational notes were read. Second, the transcripts were read along with the audio to enable the researcher to make notes on the inflections, tone and emotions of speakers. Third, statements of strong significance for each participant were highlighted and annotated notes were made. Participant quotes and researcher notes were separated by participant. Fourth, all quotes and notes were organised by Indigenous, White and non-Indigenous People of Colour participants. An in-depth analysis was conducted by examining the quotes and notes, and grouping them into larger units of information, called “meaning units” or themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 192). Fifth, participant experiences, including a description of what happened, were cross-referenced with experiences of members of the same racial group. This process resulted in clusters of themes of varying strength. For example, some themes were observed within the transcripts themselves, while other themes drew on insights that were not explicitly named

by participants and run deeper in the subconscious realm, as recognised by the researcher. Sixth, diagrams showing associations between ideas and experiences, as well as comparing themes between the three groups, were prepared.

About the participants

Ten anti-Indigenous racism educators participated in an interview. Seven of the 10 participants expressed interest in joining the focus group. Five people were able to attend, of which three self-identified as White, one self-identified as Indigenous and one self-identified as a non-Indigenous Person of Colour.

Manifestation of anti-Indigenous racism

Racism in the classroom

I can remember people putting their hand up in the back of the room and just saying, “Why don’t they just get a job?”. And I remember just standing there and it’s just, like, feeling completely resigned and just going, “Oh my god, you know, like, really! Are we having this conversation, you know, like”. I mean I didn’t say those words but I’m sure everybody was just ... and then, you know, just plough over that and into whatever we’re going to do next, but you know I’m sure that my voice probably reflected that I was pissed off. (Indigenous participant 3)

In this example, the educator takes us through her response to the comment. The intent of the question, “Why don’t they just get a job?” is not clear, but the impact on the educator is unmistakable. She has a strong reaction, and speaks candidly about being “pissed off”. The question could be viewed as both a manifestation of anti-Indigenous racism and a racial microaggression. These racial aggressions may be intentionally harmful, or an expression of ignorance. Regardless of intent, we are reminded that expressions of anti-Indigenous racist ideology are witnessed by educators and adult learners alike.

Consider the following experience provided by a White participant:

I was co-facilitating with an Indigenous facilitator. We were doing a workshop and there was a racialised man who made a racist comment in one of the scenarios. He said, “Indigenous people smell”. And it was based on a scenario about a hospital setting where a family, a White family, was making racist comments about an Indigenous patient and family. And basically, blaming the smell on the Indigenous person ... the Indigenous patient in the room, not their loved one, but the Indigenous person based on the stereotype, right. This deep racist stereotype. So, instead of understanding what we were getting at in this scenario, this man actually voiced that he believes Indigenous people smell. That’s what he said in the room. (White participant 2)

This scenario was excerpted from a workshop given to a leadership group about Indigenous cultural safety. It was co-facilitated by an Indigenous and a White educator. Both educators were participants in this research study. The individual in the workshop who made the comment “Indigenous people smell” was a man of colour in a large cohort with other senior leaders. When thoughts, opinions and beliefs are openly expressed about Indigenous people, educators need to know how to tackle these issues. As educators admit, responding to anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom is complicated.

Resistance

Resistance is a common response when students are exposed to information that illuminates historical and continuing injustices that Indigenous people experience. Resistance can be difficult for educators to manage, particularly in the context of anti-Indigenous racism. One educator observed:

It's like a minefield, you know. Like you're stepping very carefully because you're trying to balance the needs of everybody in the classroom and some classrooms just seem to have a more critical mass of particular kind of people than in other classes. So, it really depends on who's in the classroom with you and where they're at in their own learning and how open they are as an individual. (White participant 1)

The foundational knowledge of educators, their levels of critical self-awareness and their instructional skills are challenged when dealing with racism and resistance to learning. Goodman (2011) maintains that, when certain root ideologies, such as beliefs in meritocracy, individualism, religion, and "colour-blind" stances are challenged, individuals may react and resist learning (pp. 51–61). Understanding the roots of resistance and their entanglement with colonial ideologies, inferiorisation of Indigenous people, white supremacy and settler privileges is critical for educators.

Participants spoke about how learner comments are often used to distract, deflect or dismiss attention from the content. Educators in this study described resistance as manifesting in attitudes and behaviours that can be intentional or unintentional. They also noted that resistance can occur without the learners being aware that they are resisting. As one participant noted:

I think there's many ways that resistance shows up. Sometimes quite overtly – body language – people will sit with their arms folded or, you know, be on their cell phone or have their legs up on the desk that communicates some resistance. (White participant 2)

In addition to physical manifestations of resistance, Okun (2010) suggests that resistance can take on many forms, including marginalising, trivialising, rationalising entitlement, blaming the victim, claiming experiences of "reverse racism", and suggesting no intent means no racism, guilt or shame (pp. 42–62). Okun (2010) contends that all of these forms of resistance are about denial that "allows us to live in ignorance of our own privilege and the ways it shapes our lives at the expense of whole groups of people" (p. 42). While anti-racism educators may not assume people are resisting; they are often alert to the ways in which students attempt to deflect, hijack or otherwise divert dialogue away from core discussions of resistance.

Resistance can take many forms. For example, when White university students resist opportunities to learn about colonial history, anti-racism, white privilege, oppression and power, DiAngelo (2011) comments, "So-called progressive whites may not respond with anger, but still may insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the need for engaging with the content because they 'already had a class on this' or 'already know this'" (p. 55). For many adult learners, resistance to anti-Indigenous racism education is not merely about discomfort with discussing racism; it is entangled with deeper ideological commitments to white supremacy (DiAngelo, 2018; Park & Tomkins, 2021; Ward et al., 2021). Silence and disengagement in the classroom are not neutral acts; they often function as a means of maintaining dominant power structures and avoiding critical self-reflection (Bailey, 2016; Sonn, 2008). When students choose not to participate, educators must recognise that such silence implicates teaching practices and classroom power dynamics, rather than viewing it solely as an individual student choice (Bailey, 2016; Nicoll, 2004). As Sue (2016) points out:

In the face of a difficult dialogue on race, many facilitators remain silent as heated race talk occurs between participants. In classrooms, for example, they allow the students to take over the conversation, and they exhibit not only behavioral but emotional passivity in their own reactions. They offer little if any guidance to students about the conflicting conversations and make few attempts to bridge the differences being discussed. (p. 231)

When participants discussed educator silence (not their own), they agreed that it was problematic and damaging to students. One participant shared:

Most of the faculty doesn't really address the issues. There are only a few classes where they do. So those students don't even have to bump up against it [racism and white supremacy]. It's not even talked about; it is just a footnote. (Indigenous participant 3)

Another participant spoke about the potential impact of avoidance saying, "The damage that happens when instructors don't address it. The silence is the big response ... silence is accepting that the student who said that [has the opinion that] matters more" (Indigenous participant 1).

What are the implications of silence in classrooms? Cote-Meek (2014) found that when a professor fails to address racism in the classroom, the burden for addressing the racism may fall to Indigenous students or other Indigenous professors. Cote-Meek (2014) provides a scenario that resonates with many educators:

The burden of responding to racism in the classroom is initially laid upon the Aboriginal professor. However, when the professor does not hear, see or respond to the racism that is operating, the Aboriginal student feels placed in the difficult position of having to respond. Clearly this student is literally left to her own resources to respond to her classmates who look to her for some sort of response. If she responds and names the racism inherent in the assumptions being made, she is at risk of being attacked by her peers. If she does not respond, she fulfills pre-existing racialized constructions that Aboriginal people are unintelligent. (p. 102)

While educators may experience harmful resistance from students, harmful resistance can also be used to describe educators who are silent about addressing racism in the classroom. Silence is a powerful form of resistance with consequences. Unfortunately, Indigenous students will often take on the risk of addressing anti-Indigenous racism when educators choose not to engage (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Emotional fragility

There is also an emotional component to resistance. Participants described the prevalence of emotion in the classroom when Indigenous topics were presented. A participant shared:

So, I don't think it's always okay to be nice or it's possible to be nice. Because I don't think we can do this work without shaking people up and people have to get uncomfortable. They have to squirm because the reality is squirm-worthy. I don't know how we cannot really talk about the issues without getting uncomfortable about it. And if we disassociate from feeling that discomfort, how can we then build any empathy or compassion for what has happened and what is continuing to happen and will go on happening, unless we feel something about it. (Focus group Person of Colour participant 1)

This participant acknowledges the difficulty inherent in managing race-based discussions and the accompanying emotional work. While DiAngelo (2011) uses the term "white fragility", we suggest

“settler fragility” is also appropriate because it more accurately reflects systemic issues that shape anti-Indigenous racism discourse. Regardless of the different standpoints of White people and People of Colour, all settlers have the potential to display similar emotions that become a focus for the educator in the classroom.

Expressions of emotion can hijack or disrupt learning. Consider the following interaction a participant shared in which a White educator was co-facilitating an interactive, experiential activity with an interracial group:

A Métis man ... said, “These are part of my lived experience”. [The Metis man] said, “What I’m sharing here are things that have been said to me and told to me, and violence I’ve seen”. So that’s part of the context. Anyways, later on a White man in the room says, “I gotta say this. I’m really uncomfortable. I don’t think we need to name the racist comments explicitly. I think we can just say, ‘There were racist comments made’. I don’t think we need to name it”. And you could see some indignance. You could see he was indignant, right. And he was troubled by violence. (White participant 2)

The participant describes an exercise intended to surface anti-Indigenous attitudes in which the discussion is derailed by the emotional fragility of a settler (Nicoll, 2004). A White man reacts to the activity by describing the discomfort the discussion engenders for him. For that reason, other participants are asked to reference the racism without explicitly naming personal experiences. The educator participant further shares their analysis of the incident by saying:

But the function of what he just said, the impact of what he just said could shut down the whole room, could shut down the conversation. And what we have seen is that often when one White person says, “I’m uncomfortable”, other White people will join in and say, “Yeah, no. I think it’s totally inappropriate for us to name the racist comments”. And so, it shuts down. It silences the conversation about racism. (White participant 2)

As the participant notes above, indulging the discomfort of the White man silences important dialogue about anti-Indigenous racism.

Cultural and classroom safety

Classroom safety has become part of the vernacular among many educators and in university policies and procedures, yet, there is often limited understanding of what it means. We use the word “safety” to describe classroom contexts where dialogue can be heated, controversial, provocative, emotional or involve new learning. Most anti-racism educators would be familiar with references to classroom safety because it is considered an important conceptual framework used to proactively manage discomfort and unpredictable classroom interactions (Gadd, 2023; Ward et al., 2021). Ground rules, classroom guidelines and agreements are tools many educators and workshop facilitators, especially on topics that involve difficult or personal topics, learn to use to facilitate classroom safety (Gayle et al., 2013). The intent is to co-create environments where people agree to abide by mutually agreed upon rules, support each other’s learning and show respect.

Early experiences of facilitating anti-Indigenous racism training for the lead author often involved inviting classroom participants to co-create guidelines whereby the first suggestion was often for the class to be a “safe space”. At that time, the term “safe space” seemed like a progressive idea whereby “the practice of engaged pedagogy became especially critical for me as I sought to create a *safe space* in

the classroom not only for my students but for myself" (Ray, 2010, p. 79). It is necessary to examine the purpose of safety – what it is in service of and whom it ultimately protects. The meaning of safety itself is complex and multifaceted; it can refer to emotional wellbeing or physical security, or both. The process of creating safety involves intentional practices, carried out by individuals or institutions, often shaped by power dynamics and social context. The appearance and experience of safety are not universal; they vary widely. Likewise, being unsafe carries different meanings depending on identity, environment and circumstance. Certain individuals or groups may experience unsafety more acutely, and for specific reasons rooted in social, political or historical forces. Finally, particular materials or ideas may be considered unsafe, depending on their content, context and perceived threat to established norms or structures. We argue that such questions must be asked when using the concept of classroom safety.

The issue of *safe space* has been tackled by a number of scholars (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016; Wagner, 2005) with a pedagogically critical lens. Scholars have critiqued the meaning of safe spaces and for whom the construction of safe space dialogues is intended to benefit. While the idea of a "safe classroom space" is appealing, once we start to interrogate the idea of safety in depth, it begins to unravel. Creating "safe spaces" can serve to shut down critical discourse. Numerous scholars suggest that classroom safety should be a questionable goal for educators (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Iversen, 2019; Love et al., 2016). We agree with Leonardo & Porter's (2010) conclusion:

We want to suggest that the reason why safe-space discussions partly break down in practice, if not at least in theory, is that they assume that, by virtue of formal and procedural guidelines, safety has been designated for both white people and people of color. However, the term "safety" acts as a misnomer because it often means that white individuals can be made to feel safe. Thus, a space of safety is circumvented, and instead a space of oppressive color-blindness is established. It is a managed health-care version of anti-racism, an insurance against "looking racist". (p. 147)

Impact on Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White educators

Anti-racism educators who are Indigenous or People of Colour bring racial standpoints forward to the work. Educators who are White bring the privilege and the perspective of their racial standpoint to this work. Each of the three racial groups of participants (Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White) in this study spoke about the way that teaching and engaging with racism, including anti-Indigenous racism, affected them at emotional, physical and professional levels. Participants shared examples of microaggressions, backlash from students, and insights on the roles of colleagues and institutions in perpetuating anti-Indigenous racism. Themes from Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White participants are shared here and discussed separately.

Indigenous educators

Indigenous educators spoke of continuous scrutiny of their Indigenous identity and the cumulative impact. Indigenous participants recounted questions and comments from students that illustrated common and complex colonial narratives that target Indigenous people. Documented narratives of "angry" or "not-a-real" Indigenous person relate to colonially constructed criteria for determining whether or not an Indigenous educator is credible (Erb, 2020; Lowe & Galstaun, 2020). Such anti-Indigenous narratives are in stark contrast to the positioning of White educators. As Harlow (2003) observed, White professors typically do not have to anticipate being challenged about their racial phenotype. Indigenous participants in this study felt they shouldered the burden of colonial assumptions, prejudices and anti-Indigenous racism in ways that other educators did not.

Experiences of being questioned about their identity were prominent among all Indigenous educators and participants. Identity questions were lightning rods for participants—attracting attention and leading to intrusive questions. The following participant describes her own experience of being questioned about her Indigenous ancestry:

[They] want to make me something else—less First Nations. It's an in-body kind of experience ... more subtle because again I don't present as First Nations. I would be introduced and say "oh", you know the subject of identity, "where are you from?" or whatever, and I would say, "Well, I'm First Nations, my mom ... blah, blah, blah". "Oh, I would have guessed you as Greek or Italian". And just again in those conversations thinking, feeling somehow that I don't count. That I, you know, being First Nations, they want to make me something other than First Nations. And again, feeling that somewhere in my gut that because I'm First Nations, why do you want to put me in a different category? (Indigenous participant 1)

When an Indigenous person is "White-presenting" (Efimoff, 2018), that is, does not appear to have the physical characteristics that are widely associated with an Indigenous phenotype, such as skin colour, facial characteristics, hair colour and texture, and body type, there is an added layer of complexity. Being told that one could be Greek or Italian, rather than Indigenous, conveys the message that one's phenotype, cultural identity, lines of descent and race are tenuous. The Indigenous educator quoted above was scrutinised about their "authenticity" by being questioned about where they might have grown up. The implication is likely that, if an Indigenous person did not grow up on a reserve, then they may not be "Indigenous enough" (Indigenous participant 1). The same Indigenous participant went on to explain that the questions "Did you grow up with your culture? Do you know your language?" are really implying "If you don't, then you're not Indigenous" (Indigenous participant 1). This scenario raises the following questions: Given this participant's experience, are there certain questions that are unacceptable to ask an Indigenous person? Does it make a difference if the question comes from an Indigenous or a non-Indigenous person? Is it possible to ask the question without giving offence? Why is this question provocative? What are some of the implications of this question?

Non-Indigenous People of Colour educators

Non-Indigenous People of Colour participants spoke about their personal histories of racism and how they experienced racial violence. They shared about the impact of witnessing Indigenous people being targeted with anti-Indigenous violence, and how such experiences have shaped not only the way they view anti-Indigenous racism, but also the ways in which they may (or may not) engage with anti-Indigenous violence. Interviews with non-Indigenous People of Colour educators revealed that they had spent considerable time unpacking anti-Indigenous racism and considering how their own experiences of racial violence had shaped their understanding.

White educators

White participants spoke about their increased awareness of being racially privileged inside educational institutions and having an elevated/protected status with students. From this place of privilege, they were able to challenge racism and white supremacy in ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous People of Colour educators could not. Additionally, White educators recognised the prevalence of anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom and expressed their concern for the welfare of the Indigenous colleagues with whom they work, and for the Indigenous students in their classes as they navigate and challenge anti-Indigenous racism in the classroom. One participant explained that because White

educators have not developed a sense of “racial stress”, they can be “afraid of making waves” or “looking like a race traitor” (White participant 2). While the concern about making waves and creating student complaints is real for all educators, “looking like a race traitor” was an issue only raised by White educators. DiAngelo (2011) suggests that White people “live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress” (p. 55) and, in the context of anti-Indigenous education, White educators often need to learn how to deal with situations that challenge racial comfort. When White people experience situations where the focus is on race-related issues, resistance emerges and “reinforce[s] the pressure on facilitators to avoid directly addressing racism” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55).

Managing resistance and scrutiny is a burden that has a cumulative impact. An educator shared:

So, it's just all those layers of exposing yourself, making yourself vulnerable and sometimes it takes me days to recover from that. And sometimes I get into it and it's, you know, we have great conversations and people are learning through that story and they're asking questions and they're getting those, “So they had a right to say that your mom was no longer ...?”, “Well, why?” and then we, you know, and it's good dialogue and it's great. But then I walk away and it brings up stuff for me. (Indigenous participant 1)

Discussion

This study revealed persistent anti-Indigenous racism in classrooms, manifested through resistance, emotional fragility and the concept of classroom safety. Anti-Indigenous racism educators address resistance discourses and challenging dialogue through the distinct lens of their positionality and lived experience. Educators apply their acquired facilitation skills, extensive knowledge, critical self-awareness, and cultural humility to deal with racism and resistance to learning in the classroom. While White educators were able to challenge racism and white supremacy, exposure to racist violence took a noticeable traumatic toll on Indigenous educators.

While all educators would benefit from developing and enhancing their baselines of the three key areas of knowledge, self-awareness, and skills related to anti-Indigenous racism, organisations and institutions are also accountable. We assert that it is insufficient to only train people in addressing anti-Indigenous racism. It is imperative that, parallel to the education, there are also institutional accountability mechanisms for harms caused by racism. There are many instances of anecdotal evidence that we have heard that suggest there are no clear pathways of accountability within complex systems like health care and education. Many anti-Indigenous educators work within institutional contexts where Indigenous cultural safety training may be required; however, health and education systems, including post-secondary institutions, often lack the human resources, training or policies to support people to report anti-Indigenous and other race-based harms (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Kitching et al., 2020; McGibbon, 2019). As organisations and institutions increase their commitments to anti-Indigenous racism education (Funnell et al., 2020), it will be important to observe how and who takes up the charge in leading anti-Indigenous racism education.

Future research agenda for education

Anti-Indigenous racism education leaders are responsible for developing and overseeing curriculum and pedagogical practices, as well as recruiting, training and supporting educators. Institutional accountability requires transparent and clear reporting procedures; policies that make it safe for people to report incidences; policies and procedures to hold people accountable for race-based harm; data to

track reported incidences, processes and outcomes; and, perhaps most importantly, training and support for people who are responsible for facilitating and enforcing the anti-racism policies and procedures. However, as our research has shown, anti-Indigenous educators run a high risk of backlash and burnout. It is troubling to find that some of the most skilled and effective anti-Indigenous educators are being disciplined and replaced with individuals who are moving away from anti-racism work and moving towards cultural awareness – a regression, in our estimation.

Two other areas for suggested future research include (1) how institutions that value anti-Indigenous racism training are embedding accountability measures in their policies and practices, and (2) how different teaching models, such as co-facilitation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous People of Colour educators, may serve to identify wise and promising practices for sustainable teaching in anti-Indigenous racism education.

Conclusion

While anti-racism education has been well documented, the roles and experiences of *anti-Indigenous racism* educators has not been well researched or documented. This study provides insights into the challenges educators encounter, and raises awareness of the different experiences of Indigenous, non-Indigenous People of Colour and White anti-Indigenous racism educators. Classroom dynamics between learners, learners and educators, and educators is clearly shaped heavily by the skills, positionality and past experiences of each educator. We suggest that aspiring to conventional pedagogical practices such as creating “safe spaces” in the classroom may serve to problematically silence, privilege and undermine important learning. We suggest that educators’ institutions must provide clear accountability systems, supportive policies, and protections to prevent burnout and backlash against anti-Indigenous racism educators. Relying solely on individual training is insufficient; organisations and institutions must embed structural supports and ensure that anti-Indigenous racism efforts are sustained and not diluted into superficial cultural awareness.

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