



# RETHINK: WHAT IS PRIVILEGE? WHAT IS WHITE PRIVILEGE?

## LEARNING GOALS:

- To understand that diverse forms of privilege and oppression can be experienced simultaneously and vary depending on context and time.
- To examine and reflect on personal experiences of privilege and oppression.

Excerpted from *RE-THINK • RE-IMAGINE • RE-CONNECT: Thinking about ourselves, our schools, our communities. Reflecting on White privilege* by Stephanie Fearon, Catherine Inglis and Velvet Lacasse.

## PRIVILEGE

People can be privileged in some ways, while disadvantaged in other ways. There are many different types of privilege that shape how we move through the world. These are typically things we are born into, not things we have earned, that afford us opportunities and advantages that others may not enjoy.

## REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on your own identity and its impact on how you navigate the society in which you live:

- Do I share a similar social class with my elected representatives?
- Am I able to move about in public without fear of being harassed or physically attacked because of my sexual orientation?
- Am I slotted into a narrow range of occupations identified with my gender?
- When I am in public spaces, will I be treated as if I belong there?

- Do I assume that most buildings and other structures will be designed in ways that limit my access?
- Am I free to reveal and live my gender identity openly in public and at work without risk of discrimination and violence?

## WHITE PRIVILEGE

Our race is one of those factors that shapes the benefits and resources that we have access to in our society. These privileges based on race vary depending on the other identities that we hold, such as our gender, sexual orientation, class, citizenship status, physical ability, religion and so on.

White privilege describes the benefits, resources and rewards that White people receive by virtue of their skin colour. Privilege or discrimination based on our race does not determine our outcome in life, but it does affect how our talents, abilities and aspirations are received in society.

### “HOW WE SET UP THE TERMS FOR DISCUSSING RACIAL ISSUES SHAPES OUR PERCEPTION AND RESPONSE TO THESE ISSUES.”

– Cornel West

#### REFLECTION

Examining the power or oppression that we experience based on our race can be difficult. Think about the ways that you benefit from or are disadvantaged by White privilege:

- I choose whether to be conscious of my race or to ignore it.
- I share the same race as most of the people I studied at school and saw in textbooks.
- Because of my race, I was discouraged or prevented from pursuing academic or work goals.

- National heroes, success models and other figures held up for admiration are generally of my race.
- I assume that when in public, I won't be challenged or attacked because of my race.
- The ruling circles of government, corporations, universities and other organizations disproportionately reflect my race.
- My failures are attributed to my race; my successes are met with surprise.
- When I meet someone for the first time, I am often asked, “Where are you from?”

# RECONNECT: SO WHAT? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY TEACHING PRACTICE?

## LEARNING GOALS:

- To explore relationships between privilege, oppression and schooling.
- To learn about and reflect on personal teaching practice while using an equity lens.

## MY TEACHING PRACTICE AND EQUITY

The same attitudes, ideas and practices that sustain White privilege in society also work to deny Aboriginal and racialized peoples their dignity and success in the school system.

Understanding how privilege and oppression work in the education system helps us to think of ways that we can create schools where students are engaged, have their voices heard and enjoy equitable opportunities for high academic achievement:

- How are Aboriginal and racialized students routinely perceived and treated in my school by staff and other students?
- What attitudes, ideas and practices found in Canadian society (e.g. media, government, police, etc.) shape these perceptions of Aboriginal and racialized students?
- How do societal attitudes, ideas and practices in relation to Aboriginal and racialized peoples influence my own assumptions about race and education?

## CALL TO ACTION

We have a responsibility, as educators, to work with students, their families and colleagues to challenge and disrupt racism and other forms of discrimination found in schools and communities across Ontario. To achieve this goal, educators are being called on to explore their practice and the outcomes of schooling by asking critical questions of themselves and their work.

This is challenging, requiring courage and humility, yet it is necessary and relevant especially in current times of racial tensions, academic achievement disparities, institutional inequities and globalization.

**“A PERSON WHO NEVER  
MADE A MISTAKE NEVER  
TRIED ANYTHING NEW.”**

– Albert Einstein

### **REFLECTION – EQUITY WITHIN MY TEACHING**

Consider the ways that you can help create a culture of equity in your classroom where students and their families are honoured and empowered:

- How can I use my students’ interests and current issues to help develop curriculum lessons and units?
- How can I design assignments that allow students to discuss narratives that reflect their own lives and experiences?
- In my classroom, how can I give students time to share and validate learnings from their own communities and families?
- In what ways do the school resources and library reflect the needs, interests, languages and demographics of my students and their families?
- How can I use curriculum materials in my classroom to critically explore power, privilege and oppression?
- How can I connect with my students and their families in ways that honour them as valuable resources in my classroom?

Resources committed to advancing equity and professional learning in schools can be found on the ETFO website. These resources help educators to implement the Ontario curriculum in ways that provide students with authentic opportunities to engage in social justice and activism. ■

# **MYTHS AND FACTS**

### **MYTH #1:**

**“I am not racist. I do not see race. Every child is the same. We all need love.”**

Failing to acknowledge racial and cultural diversity is to silence and erase the important diverse experiences of all of our students in a global community. Children have different needs depending on their backgrounds and many other factors. It’s okay to acknowledge our differences. It’s critical to recognize, understand and value how we are different. It’s not okay to judge one’s experience as superior to another.

### **MYTH #2:**

**“I don’t need to teach about anti-racism. All of my students are White.”**

Making assumptions that all of your students are White fails to recognize the diversity of White cultural experiences. Many White people have experienced discrimination throughout history, and these examples of prejudice can help us understand and make connections to how power and privilege impact everyone. It is also important to recognize that some people do not feel comfortable self-identifying as Aboriginal or racialized because of their prior experiences.

### **MYTH #3:**

**“Children aren’t ready for discussions about power, privilege and oppression. Talking about racism and White privilege is not appropriate for younger students.”**

We know that children develop an understanding of race and power at a very young age. We learn about who we are and how we fit into the dominant White culture from our families, schools, friends, media, toys and books. Silence prevents children from being informed and from being actively involved in challenging misconceptions and racial stereotypes.

### **MYTH #4:**

**“Talking about White privilege will upset the students. I don’t want to make them feel guilty. After all, it wasn’t my students who drove Aboriginal peoples from their lands or enslaved Africans.”**

When we avoid or deny the complicated history of racism, we fail to acknowledge how our White students benefit every day from their skin privilege. The impact of colonization and slavery in the past helped to create a system that continues to privilege White people in the present. By encouraging our students to question the culture and values that are being supported by the dominant White culture, we are teaching our students to be critical thinkers and active members of a democratic society.

### **MYTH #5:**

**“I am not privileged. My family struggled when I was younger. I still struggle to make ends meet.”**

We can be privileged and oppressed at the same time. It is important to recognize the advantages that certain experiences give us because of the bodies and opportunities that we are born with. Acknowledging privilege does not deny our challenges and struggles. It is important to recognize the impact that sex, class, ability and sexual orientation have on power and White privilege.