

# **An anti-colonial discursive analysis of racial equity and anti-racism policy in K-12 public schooling in British Columbia**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this research is to examine how Canadian K-12 public education racial equity policy may function to reproduce the oppressive social, historical, and political forces it claims to challenge. This research conducts a qualitative content analysis of Surrey School District's Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023-2028, through an anti-colonial discursive framework, to research how capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy may be overlooked within attempts to achieve racial equity in education. Specifically, this investigation focuses on how hegemony may be reinforced through the implementation of educational racial equity policy due to persistent power inequities embedded in the text which function in opposition to policy goals. This research finds that in order for the Surrey School District's Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023-2028 to improve the equity outcomes of its target populations, it must acknowledge and address the normative colonial structures and values that enforce educational domination over and oppression of marginalized communities beyond the dimension of race. Racial equity and anti-racism policies must incorporate initiatives of critical structural reform of education systems that seek to address the root cause of racism, such as capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, systemic whiteness, and white supremacy, in order to meaningfully and holistically address racism for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities within K-12 public schooling.*

**Keywords:** *anti-racism, anti-colonialism, policy, public education, discursive*

## Introduction

As a second-generation Punjabi-Sikh settler, I acknowledge that the educational privileges I have been afforded conducting this research on the traditional, unceded, and stolen lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwət (Tsleil-Waututh), are tainted with histories and structures of colonialism, systemic violence against Indigenous peoples, and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands. Further, I acknowledge that “non-Indigenous and non-Black communities, particularly South Asians, continue to benefit from Indigenous erasure in settler states through their labor and investments in the system of whiteness, contributing to the making of model minorities” (Ranauta, 2020, p. 366). The ‘model minority’ myth upholds white supremacy by creating divisions and perceived hierarchies between racialized communities (Harvard Law School, 2018). As such, histories of exclusion and racism such as the *Chinese Exclusion Act* of 1923, Japanese internment during World War Two, and the Komagata Maru being ignored and erased (Ellis, 2022). I am continually working towards detangling these values from my cultural understandings to rebuild a sense of self-pride and decolonized understanding of my Punjabi-Sikh identity to inform my research perspectives.

Solidarity with Indigenous communities calls for sovereignty on these lands and around the world, it is important for me to note that the reclamation of Indigenous relationships to land (the very Indigenous lands I live on) are central to Indigenous resistance against colonization. Thus, I approached this research not only in solidarity with Indigenous communities’ calls for the recognition of their sovereignty across Turtle Island and to avoid perpetuating the erasure of Indigenous communities’ voices, but also from a perspective of holding myself,

my family, and my community accountable for our complicity and active role in the continued colonization of Turtle Island (Kaur, 2022; Ranauta, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The purpose of my research was to investigate how Canadian K-12 public education racial equity policy may function to reproduce the oppressive historical, economic, social, and political forces it claims to challenge. I conducted a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the Surrey School District's *Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023-2028* through an anti-colonial discursive framework to show how colonialism may be overlooked or be framed as an experience of the past within the policy's focus on achieving educational racial equity (Surrey Schools, 2023). This study examined if/how the strategic plan acknowledges and addresses the normative and oppressive systems of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, systemic whiteness, and white supremacy that have become deeply entrenched in Canadian public education, including in diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, that function in opposition to the intended policy goals and resultingly continue to reinforce oppression of marginalized communities.

Within the scope of this work, colonial hegemony refers to dominant Eurocentric epistemologies and pedagogies that serve to reinforce white settler colonial identities, historical narratives, and unequal relations in education systems and educational policy making processes (Mackey, 2000; Tupper, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that anti-colonial and decolonization work is not the same as anti-racist work, but they are interrelated through the desire to decenter and dismantle the system of 'whiteness,' through which settler colonialism exploits people by racial hierarchization (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

I approached this research by grounding my analysis in the seminal works of anti-racist, decolonial and anti-colonial scholars, notably, George J. S. Dei and

Marie Battiste, whose insights have paved the way for critical examinations of the impacts of colonialism and continuing unequal power relations within educational structures in Canada. The research question that guided my analysis was: How does Surrey School District describe, problematize, and challenge racial inequity and racism against Indigenous, Black, and racialized students and staff within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023-2028* and its related sources?

Current events are shifting the discourse that is prioritized within educational policy provincially, nationally, and internationally. Recent political events, such as the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, the unearthing of the unmarked residential school students graves, and the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 94 *Calls to Action*, have all contributed to a focus on racial equity and anti-racism at the institutional level (Connors & McCoy, 2022; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). I selected to research the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* because Surrey School District, along with the provincial government, Canadian government, and other public-school districts in B.C., have dedicated greater focus to creating racial equity and anti-racism initiatives due to the advocacy of racialized community that has long been aware of and directly impacted by these injustices. It was important to conduct this study because there is a need to investigate how colonial hegemony is embedded into educational discourses, policy, and curriculum which results in systems of education potentially functioning to fulfill colonial goals, even within diversity and equity policy (Battiste, 2017).

The Surrey School District enrolls a diverse population of students, wherein more than half the students in the district come from a household where a language other than English is primarily spoken at home, with 197 language representations (Surrey Schools, n.d.). Indigenous, Black, and racialized

communities have called on the Surrey School District and public education systems in B.C. more broadly, to challenge racism (Racing to Equity, 2022).

The B.C. Ministry of Education and Childcare first implemented the *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan*, in order to “address [this] discrimination, dismantle racism and make B.C. a more equitable, inclusive and welcoming province” (British Columbia Ministry of Education and Childcare [MEC], 2023, p. 5). Building on this strategic plan, the Surrey School District implemented the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, with the intent to contextualize anti-racism initiatives through the specific needs of students in the Surrey School District. The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* also claims to draw on anti-racism specific policies to guide its construction (Surrey Schools, 2023). These policies include the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the Declaration of Rights on Indigenous Peoples Act (B.C.), B.C. Human Rights and other Canadian Human Rights legislation, the B.C. K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan, and the B.C. Anti-Racism Data Act” (p. 6).

The plan aims to support all racialized students and staff within the district but allocates particular attention to challenging anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism. The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* states that its objective is to foster belonging, equity, and diversity through four main objectives of: (i) advancing racial equity initiatives; (ii) on-going education and professional development; (iii) responding to racism; and (iv) curriculum and resources (Surrey Schools, 2023).

## Literature Review

Neoliberalism commodifies non-economic spheres, including education, which results in education systems operating to sell people social, cultural, economic, and political capital in support of global capitalism regardless of how this

reinforces systems of inequity (Issar, 2021). International educational equity policy, and its influence on Canadian educational policy, focuses on equity in terms of participation in capitalism, rather than “[addressing] the broader historical and political contexts that produce disadvantage in the first place” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, pp. 156-157; see also Ismail, 2015). Racism is inextricably linked to neoliberal capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, whiteness, and white supremacy in Canada due to the exploitation of racialized populations to seize Indigenous lands for resource extraction and control of populations to support colonial and imperial goals (Issar, 2021). Thus, this research critically examined the influence of neoliberalism into the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*’s construction and implementation, and the potential embeddedness of intersecting systems of oppression into educational policy in Canada.

Additionally, educational policy in Canada has not always been supportive of equity and inclusion. Chan (2007) states that “policy is used as a tool to meet particular goals, such as separation and exclusion.” as seen in the historical application of Eurocentric policy in Canadian society (p. 131). The *Indian Act of 1876*, an overtly white supremacist document, functions to dispossess Indigenous peoples from Indigenous land, culture, and identity to benefit European settlers and colonial objectives (Joseph, 2018; Vowel, 2016). Residential schools, legislated into the *Indian Act of 1876*, “[constituted] genocide” against Indigenous children and their communities, in addition to the racist and exclusionary practices of B.C.’s public school system created in 1872 (Carleton, 2021a, p. 470; see also Carleton, 2021b). These histories that disrupted Indigenous lifeways and supported settler colonialism are still shrouded by a lens of settler denialism that devalues Indigenous communities’ efforts toward Truth and Reconciliation (Carleton, 2021a).

The *School Act of 1849/1850* established separate schools for Black children to segregate them from white students in common schools (McLaren, 2004; Knight, 2012). This policy reinforced mythical understandings of Canada as a nation that supported Black people's emancipation from enslavement, as well as "a haven from racism" relative to the United States (McLaren, 2004, p. 29). Additionally, historical policies such as the *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923*, *Continuous Journey Regulation of 1908*, and the *Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities of 1912* (along with many other policies), were all constructed to support exclusion and disenfranchisement of marginalized groups in Canada. From 1908 until 1922, education policy was used to segregate and exclude Chinese students from attending common schools owing to the persistent and entrenched white supremacy throughout British Columbia and its public education system (Chan, 2007; Stanley, 1990). Likewise, "the impact of evacuation and internment of Japanese children is an example of the culmination of racialized federal policy on education," wherein no schools were built during this time of internment to accommodate Japanese students (Chan, 2007, p. 135).

This literature allows for the investigation of ways the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* describes, contextualizes, and problematizes racism within the district, based on the historical, social, economic, and political conditions that shaped the colonial educational experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized students in Canada.

## Discursive Framework

For this research, I utilized George J. S. Dei's and Alireza Asgharzadeh's anti-colonial discursive framework as well as Marie Battiste's theorization of cognitive imperialism to guide my research. Using an anti-colonial discursive

framework enabled me to critically question the social relations, power issues, and reproduction of cognitive imperialism embedded in policies in practices that reproduce settler colonialism within Canadian education systems (Battiste, 2011; Dei, 2006; Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) describe how epistemological oppression and cognitive imperialism result in the entrenchment of colonial hegemony into educational systems. By using anti-colonial discursive framework, I was able to flexibly draw on theories, concepts, and practices of anti-colonialism, decolonization, anti-racism, and cognitive imperialism to inform my research of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*.

In this study, I distinguished between anti-colonialism and decolonization in order to avoid reducing practices of decolonization to a theoretical or ‘metaphorical’ understanding in the research (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Dei (2019) describes anti-colonialism and decolonization as “intertwined logics” (p. vii) wherein, “anti-colonial becomes a path to a decolonial future” (p. viii). In this way, Dei (2006) describes anti-colonialism as developing an awareness, consciousness, and resistance of the conditions of domination and oppression that sustain hierarchies and systems of power.

Anti-colonial discursive framework asks researchers to consider the connections between racism and colonialism. This allowed for this research to investigate the root causes of racism in order to understand if and to what extent the Surrey School District’s *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* meaningfully addresses racial equity and anti-racism. The process of colonialism “uses racism as a tool” (Max, 2005, p. 80) to justify its existence, and “race, racism, and xenophobia lie at the heart of all colonialist and imperialist enterprises” including education (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 309). Dei (2006) emphasizes that “education is racialized” (p. 9) as seen through the experiences of those that are excluded from educational access, as well as when we look at “whose [knowledge] and

what knowledge and [experiences] are validated and delegitimized within education in Canada (p. 9).

Thus, this research also draws on Marie Battiste's (2011) conceptualization of Eurocentrism and cognitive imperialism to analyze how normative systems of oppression may be embedded within educational racial equity policy. Battiste (1986) describes cognitive imperialism as the generation, legitimization, production, and diffusion of knowledge that values epistemologies that are connected to those who hold colonial power, while other groups' knowledge systems are devalued and marginalized (Battiste, 2017). Cognitive imperialism examines how colonial systems of public education in Canada utilize Eurocentrism to structure educational curriculum and pedagogy to control and devalue the knowledge systems of marginalized groups.

Anti-colonial discursive framework and cognitive imperialism are interrelated, strengthen each other, and guided my research of the Surrey School District's *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*. While anti-colonial discursive framework attempts to critically gaze upon inequity due to hierachal power relations within social systems broadly, cognitive imperialism hones this investigation into colonial public education systems in Canada.

## **Methodological Framework**

This study used a qualitative content analysis (QCA) methodological approach to investigate how the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* describes and challenges racial inequity and racism in the Surrey School District. The objective of QCA is to capture the key meanings, themes, and contents of text in order to understand the organization, process, and construction of the text being researched and is often used for public policy awareness, advocacy, and research (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Lin, 2019). QCA is applied through

systematic and rule-driven codifying of identifiable themes, ideas, and patterns within the text (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). The approach enabled me to subjectively interpret the meanings of the overt/covert themes found within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* and describe how these meanings are conveyed. QCA was also used to expand and enlarge the data set as the strategic plan is a relatively short document, as well as adapt the research to address themes that were not foreshadowed but nevertheless are consistently present within the plan (Lin, 2019).

As informed by Gloria Lin's (2019) use of anti-colonial and decolonial QCA, anti-colonial QCA in this study allowed me to analyze the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* through the lens of anti-colonial discursive framework and cognitive imperialism. My analysis of the text categorizes the main themes that arise from the strategic plan using these frameworks to guide my research. My analysis investigates what is overtly and covertly implied within the text and in particular, what information may be left out or omitted as informed by the literature review and discursive/theoretical frameworks.

To conduct my anti-colonial QCA I used a deductive coding approach wherein I first selected texts to be used as part of the data set. All of the data that I interpreted was derived from publicly available texts from the Surrey School District and B.C. Ministry of Education and Childcare. The *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan* is a strategic plan, similar to the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, which has been implemented by the B.C. Ministry of Education and Childcare and that must be adhered to within each school district, including Surrey Schools. It was not within the scope of this research to analyze additional anti-racism strategic plans across the province of British Columbia or the policies/legislation that influenced the construction of these documents.

My initial coding process used the Surrey School District *Racial Equity Strategic Plan 2023-2028* and the *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan* as the data set

to derive the main categories and the subcategories of analysis that were used to code and analyze the full data set. After reading the strategic plans in the data selection/immersion step and drawing on the perspectives outlined in my literature review and discursive/theoretical framework, I designated the main and subcategories of analysis from which I predicted initial codes to orient my analysis. The focus of my content analysis and main/subcategory derivation was on themes present in the text, rather than specific repeated words or phrases. Using the deductively derived main categories, I formulated subcategories, coding definitions, frames, and rules which were used to code part of the data set according to anti-colonial discursive framework and cognitive imperialism (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Lin, 2019). Next, I coded part of the data set using the deductively derived coding categories, and I evaluated and modified the frame to adjust unforeseen emergences and clarifications where required. Lastly, I coded the full data set with the finalized coding categories. Below I provide a list (in no specific order) of the finalized main categories of analysis:

1. Responding to racism
2. Education and professional development
3. Amendments to curriculum, pedagogy, and resources
4. Policy construction, amendment, and enforcement
5. Collaboration with Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities
6. Data collection, research, and reporting
7. Anti-Indigenous racism
8. Anti-Black racism
9. Defining key terms (other)

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research point to: (i) ways the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* focuses on addressing interpersonal racism rather than systemic/institutional racism; (ii) the lack of clarity regarding the implementation of proposed initiatives to promote racial equity and anti-racism; (iii) the failure of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* to examine the root causes of racism for diverse communities including capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, systemic whiteness, and white supremacy; (iv) and the ambiguity on evaluation and accountability in the implementation of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*. As it stands, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* might function more effectively to improve the Surrey School District's public and political image than to promote racial equity and anti-racism in K-12 public schooling in B.C.

### Conceptualization of Racism within the Racial Equity Strategic Plan

Within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, racism is described as “the belief that one group, as defined by the color of their skin or their perceived common ancestry, is inherently superior to others” (Surrey Schools, 2023, p. 33). Additionally, the plan states that racism operates at various levels including interpersonal, individual, systemic, or institutional. The findings of this research suggest that the definition of racism outlined within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not fully translate into the proposed methods by which racism will be addressed in the district, as the propositions of preventing and responding to racism are mostly targeted towards addressing overt incidents of racism at the interpersonal level. Moreover, the strategic plan does not mention, question, or challenge systems of whiteness and white supremacy in relation to the definitions of racism presented within the plan, even though the plan states that it aims to implement anti-racist policy and practices into the district which requires systemic action against white supremacy.

For example, a proposed response to incidents of racism is to strengthen mental health support for students and staff. Research has shown that mental health support is a key component of supporting students and staff after incidents of racism occur (MEC, 2023). However, supporting individuals' mental health does not address or prevent systemic or institutional racism, rather it responds to interpersonal incidents of racism after they occur. While systemic and institutional racism are mentioned as a part of racism definitions, the proposed actions within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, for the most part, do not include critical structural reform of the Surrey School District.

This finding is supported by the work of Anderson and Donchik (2016) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010), who describe how educational policy is influenced by neoliberal focused international educational policy which is commonly adopted by Western educational systems (Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Further, Hart describes that neoliberal influenced educational equity and social justice policies focus on evaluating equity based on students access to capital and outcomes related to capital, such as job opportunities after graduation (see also Ismail, 2015). While attainment is an important indicator of movement towards equity, these indicators only hone in on one facet of equity, namely economic equity. The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not provide specific descriptions of how racism, racial equity, or anti-racism will be evaluated because of the implementation of the plan and its resulting racial equity policies. However, it can be assumed that these evaluations will be influenced by “common sense” neoliberal and Eurocentric understandings of racial equity, as defined by international equity and educational policies (Ahmed, 2012; Anderson & Donchik, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

This research found that the influences of collective neoliberal values and international human rights policies are exemplified through the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*'s use of the terms “racial equity” and “anti-racism” together

and/or interchangeably to describe the proposed actions of the plan, even though it is not clear why these terms were chosen, or what the envisioned differences are between each term. The term “racial equity” may have been used to soften the language within the plan to appeal to a larger and avoid issues that may be deemed as politically controversial within the greater political climate of B.C., especially as anti-DEI rhetoric is becoming more prevalent in society (Bryant & Appleby, 2024). Further, the usage of the term “anti-racism” may have more directly admitted that racism exists within the Surrey School District which starkly contrasts with Canadian mythological narratives of equity and multiculturalism within Canada.

Another example of neoliberal “common sense” influences within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* is that there is no specific explanation as to what “trauma-informed” or “culturally responsive” responses to racism entail, and yet these terms are the foundational approach described towards racial equity and anti-racism. Additionally, Daigle (2019) importantly notes that:

Reconciliatory rhetoric, mandates, and programs shaped by trauma and healing ethos are a continuation of these neoliberal colonial humanitarian interventions, whereby the complexities of Indigenous polities across space continue to be erased as Indigeneity remains framed within pathologizing and trauma-based narratives. (p. 708).

This research shows that concepts such as “trauma-informed” and “culturally responsive” act as buzz words within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*. These terms are influenced by neoliberal educational agendas and cause active harm by pathologizing and victimizing Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities as a result of settler colonialism and Eurocentric educational systems. Additionally, it is unclear how generalized “trauma-informed”, or “culturally responsive” solutions could be implemented that fit the diverse needs of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities. This initiative

then becomes another example of how the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* may function better to improve the perception of the Surrey School District in public and political spheres, as it co-opts neoliberalistically determined “common-sense” language, but lacks the clarity as to how this may actually work towards racial equity or anti-racism practice.

The findings of this research show that even if the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* is well-intentioned in supporting racial equity and anti-racism, the policy maintains colonial hegemony and Eurocentric rights-based paradigms that reinforce tokenistic understandings of diversity, equity and inclusion. This finding is supported by the work of Lowman and Barker (2015) who describe that understandings of “multiculturalism, anti-racism, and equality have been repeatedly co-opted to serve the settler colonial agenda” through the reinforcement and reproduction of Eurocentric human rights, including in Canadian education, which reinforce inequity and racism (p. 73, see also Shahjahan, 2005; St. Denis, 2007).

### Addressal of Racism within the Racial Equity Strategic Plan

Curriculum reform, diversity events, and teacher education are presented as initiatives aimed at preventing incidents of racism within the Surrey School District. These initiatives align with propositions from Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities. For example, the plan specifically proposes that schools should “support ‘diversity week’, ‘multicultural day’ opportunities”, and guest speakers with an emphasis on teaching about racial equity (Surrey Schools, 2023, p. 16). However, this research found that these initiatives are vaguely described. This finding is supported by the work of Verna St. Denis (2007) who states that initiatives focusing on celebration and inclusion focus more on addressing the symptoms of racism rather than the root cause of racism. Diversity events attempt to foster empathy and understanding but do not function to remove the structures that produce racism in the first place. As well,

diversity days, weeks, and events often are also limited in their ability to acknowledge and address the fact that students do not wear their identities only on specific days of the year.

Additionally, curricular reform on its own may not necessarily be the most effective approach towards racial equity and anti-racism practice. This research shows that it is unclear what topics, perspectives, and knowledges will be incorporated into curriculum, by or in consultation with whom, or for which grades and subject areas. The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* briefly mentions curricular reform within Social Studies and Physical Health Education disciplines, such as through the text, “increase number of educators identifying appropriate ‘Big Ideas’ in Social Studies Curriculum (K-12),” with regards to teaching anti-Hate and Black History. However, meaningful curricular reform that aligns with community calls would require that change is implemented in all grades and across all subject areas.

One example of an area of curricular reform that is overlooked within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* includes the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples to learn Indigenous languages as credit courses, as outlined in the Calls to Action (TRC, 2015). The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* and the *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan* do not mention the protection of language rights or opportunities to offer Indigenous language credit courses within schools, even though it is mentioned that these plans affirm their commitment towards Truth and Reconciliation. This is a major component of reconciliation and rights for Indigenous students, as outlined by Indigenous communities in Canada, and is wholly neglected in the curriculum reform initiatives outlined within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*.

This finding is supported by the work of Marie Battiste (2017) who shares that anti-racism has fostered some movement towards inclusion, but largely continues to fragment, marginalize, devalue and deliver diverse scholarship and

knowledge from a Eurocentric perspective. Even though the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* may be well-intentioned, it can continually fail to address educational equity for Indigenous, Black, and racialized people because structural systems of inequity such as colonialism and cognitive imperialism are not challenged.

Additionally, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not clearly outline if the proposed curriculum reform will foster the addressal of hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy in order to make space for and validate Black scholarship, knowledge, and education. Specifically, anti-Blackness is used to further “colonial projects and logics of White supremacy,” within Eurocentric educational curricula and pedagogical practice in order to maintain neoliberal capitalism and colonial hegemony in schools (Aladejebi, 2015; Dei, 2022, p. 69). Without this addressal, Aladejebi (2015) states that the “erasure of African Canadian Culture from the school curriculum [has] had adverse effects on Black students,” in the form of racial streaming, exclusion, teacher bias, high dropout rates, and the absence of Black representation in K-12 public schooling in Canada, further reinforcing anti-Black racism into BC public school districts.

The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* also outlines propositions for responding to racism, including improving hiring practices and reporting procedures, but this research found that the plan provides little to no detail as to what such improvements would entail. The Surrey School District would need to provide clarity as to how Indigenous, Black, and racialized administrators, educators, and staff could be hired and better retained as these teachers experience intersectional spaces of oppression and know how to create inclusive, anti-racist, and decolonial spaces of education.

This research also found that the strategic plan does not outline who would be charged with the responsibility of implementing the outlined initiatives. A major critique of this lack of accountability is that the onus and responsibility of

engaging in anti-racism and decolonizing work is often placed primarily on Indigenous, Black, and racialized staff (Daigle, 2019; Ekpe & Toutant, 2022). The implementation and uptake of initiatives outlined within the strategic plan should be mandatory for staff and students and should go beyond passive learning and listening towards taking systemic action (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022).

This research shows that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* also outlined data collection and surveys to address racism within the district but provides no detail as to what the surveys would include/measure, who they would be distributed to, who they would be made by, where/how collected data would be utilized, or how this data would be used to challenge racism. Additionally, the quantification of racism as a measure of racial equity or anti-racism is in itself a Eurocentric approach to evaluating equity initiatives. It is also important to note that not all incidences of racism can even be quantified. This finding is supported by the research of Sablan (2019), Anderson and Walter (2013), and Zuberi (2003) who note that Eurocentric quantitative analysis has historically been utilized to reinforce racialization and exclusion as part of eugenics movements and supporting racist colonial policies. Thus, mainstream quantitative and statistical methodologies do not necessarily accurately portray the experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities because they are reductive and frame the complexity of peoples lived experiences within a colonial lens. Alternatively, research that employs anti-oppressive methodologies inspired by Indigenous, Black and racialized scholars, such as through community-based participatory action research or critical narrative research would “attend to subjectivity and emotion, promote participation and self-determination of research participants and communities, engage accountable relationships, give and share reciprocally, share control and ownership, and collaboratively contribute to social change” (Carlson, 2016, p.

4; see also Datta, 2018; Marker, 2018; McNiff, 2007; Tandon & Srinivasan, 2023).

### Indigenous and Black Communities' Calls for Racial Equity and Anti-Racism

Although anti-Indigenous racism and anti-Black racism are said to be given particular focus in this plan, this research found that they are both scarcely mentioned or intentionally addressed. For example, one of the only instances in which anti-Black racism is directly addressed within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* is within the proposal of creating “a district Racial Equity, Diversity, and Belonging Calendar with important cultural dates, in addition to recognizing the importance of Truth and Reconciliation Day, Black History/Excellence Month, and cultural months that occur throughout the school year” (Surrey Schools, 2023, p. 16). The initiatives within the plan greatly overlook the implementation of anti-Black education policy within B.C. and Canada, as well as the enduring impacts of histories of slavery and segregation on Black students in the Surrey School District by placing the systemic oppression of Black communities’ into a location of the past.

This finding is supported by the work of Maynard (2017) who reminds us that “slavery, followed by centuries of segregation in the school system,” has resulted in the continual racist exclusion and discrimination against Black students in public schools (p. 213). This research found that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not openly acknowledge the harm that the *School Act of 1849/1850* caused to Black students and their families, and its enduring impacts. Racial streaming is an example of the consequences of the historical, racist educational policy implemented in B.C. and must be addressed by the strategic plan. Another important facet of anti-Black racism that is not addressed within the strategic plan is how public schooling results in the disproportionate criminalization of Black youth particularly through school suspensions and

expulsions, otherwise known as the school-to-prison pipeline, and its resulting educational achievement gap.

Furthermore, this research found that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not mention settler colonialism as a root of racism, particularly anti-Indigenous racism. Pidgeon (2022) emphasizes that educational policy is a critical component of challenging anti-Indigenous racism and supporting decolonization because “policy has been a tool of colonization” (p. 26). The findings of this research show that *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* offers generalized remarks towards supporting Truth and Reconciliation efforts within schools. For example, the plan states that “Surrey Schools is committed to acknowledging historical and ongoing injustices to Indigenous Peoples across Canada and to honouring and acting on Truth and Reconciliation” (Surrey Schools, 2023, p. 2). However, there is a lack of specificity as to what these actions would look like. There are many *Calls to Action* that are specific to education that have not been addressed throughout the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* and could actively challenge anti-Indigenous racism within K-12 public schools and support anti-racism and decolonial practice, as outlined by Indigenous communities. For example, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* does not clearly state that there is an educational attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Consequently, there are no specific measures outlined to address this attainment gap.

Colonialism is briefly mentioned within the *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan* within the quote, “systemic racism and settler colonialism have shaped our province for generations, and this continues to hurt Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour in B.C.,” but there is no further acknowledgement or addressal of how the school system is still Eurocentric and reinforces settler colonialism, as well as how this affects the school community, especially Indigenous students (MEC, 2023, p. 5). This finding is supported by the scholarship of

Michelle Pidgeon (2022) who argues that decolonizing or anti-racism education “without clear articulation of practices and policies that address land and ongoing impacts of colonization” may not actually function in ways that empower Indigenous peoples within educational systems because education will continue to reinforce capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy (p. 18).

The overall understanding observed from the research of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* with regards to addressing anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism is that although terminology such as “equity,” “institutional racism,” “reconciliation,” and “decolonization” are used often, the actions towards these concepts are not concretely exemplified. It can be acknowledged that the district may have internal (administrative) policies that are more detailed, but if these policies are not public facing, it is unreasonable that students and community members understand how to act in accordance with the strategic plan. As well, if these policies are not publicly available, students, community members, and policy makers would not be able to keep the district accountable to their proposed initiatives and practices.

Based on this policy analysis research, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* provides ambiguous propositions of improving the district’s collaboration with Indigenous, Black, and other racialized community members. Even within the proposed initiatives of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, there is a continual lack of two-way communication to community calls for systemic educational reform that have been strongly advocated for historically and continually. As a researcher, my access to this advocacy is limited to publicly and academically accessible literature, but even in my brief review it is clear that Indigenous and Black communities’ needs are continually being overshadowed by “checking-the-box” approaches towards racial equity and anti-racism practice (Jimmy & Andreotti, 2021; TRC, 2015). Additionally, if there is no accountability of the

district's consultation with Indigenous, Black, and racialized community members, then consultation can result in the legitimization of equity policy without authentication that the consultation feedback was actually utilized in a meaningful way to construct policy.

### Critical Reform of Educational Spaces in Canada

The implementation of the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* is an important step towards addressing and challenging racism and inequity within the Surrey School District. Racism is historically entrenched and endures within public schooling in Canada and must be addressed as a priority issue. Racial equity policy at the institutional, provincial, federal, and international levels offers marginalized communities' a legal anchor to draw on in cases where they may need to seek action against racism. However, equity policy that is implemented into structurally racist, colonial, and Eurocentric institutions, such as in Canadian education systems, will inherently be limited by the enduring systems of oppression that are rooted in educational institutions in Canada. (St. Denis. 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012). While reforming educational equity policy and implementing anti-racism or racial equity policy into currently existing educational systems is a necessary step towards racial equity and anti-racism, it cannot fully support racial equity or anti-racism practice for Indigenous peoples because current systems of public education in B.C. and Canada are foundationally Eurocentric and reinforce capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy.

This research found that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* would be categorized as “soft reform” within the context of decolonization (Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 32). Soft educational reform offers critiques of violence caused by racism, capitalism, colonialism, systemic whiteness, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy as issues of “inclusion” and “equity,” but they do not address significant structural reform of educational institutions. This finding is

supported by the work of Andreotti et al. (2015) who argue that these policies can be, “tokenistic, incomplete, insufficient, and/or inadequate” in meaningfully addressing broader systems of oppression that reproduce and reinforce racism (p. 33). Systemic change is needed to move education systems towards non-performative anti-racism practice which requires dedication and time over multiple generations (Ahmed, 2012). To focus on institutional reform would allow for more opportunity to meaningfully address the root cause of racism. Likewise, findings from this study show that education systems in Canada should offer greater focus on incorporating strategies of educational reform that strongly commit to centering and empowering marginalized groups, as well as challenging Eurocentric and cognitive imperialism in K-12 public education.

Additionally, educational equity policy can be constructed to target a broad-range of communities with various categories of difference or just one specific dimension, such as race (Zine, 2001). This aspect of educational policy production is contested because there are benefits and drawbacks to constructing either type of policy. This research found that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* risks excluding certain individuals or can lack addressal of intersecting inequities. Consequently, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* fails to adequately address intersectionality, which is a necessity of anti-racism practice. For example, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status/citizenship, (dis)ability, and religion are all overlooked as intersecting dimensions of difference within proposed solutions towards racial equity. Interestingly, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* provides a definition of intersectionality, but it wholly neglects the implementation of this understanding within the proposed initiatives. This critique of racial equity policy was even made within the *K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan*, wherein it is stated that “anti-racism cannot be addressed in siloes,” yet the provincial and district levels still chose to write the racial equity policy so that it functions in this way (MEC, 2023, p. 9).

The findings of this research also show that the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* essentializes all Indigenous, Black, and other racialized people which can result in policy falling short of addressing racism meaningfully for the specific needs of diverse racialized communities, their distinct relationships to the land, and their complex relationships to Canada. For example, policy that addresses all Indigenous peoples as one group, such as the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, has the potential to reduce Indigenous identities to pan-Indigeneity, rather than recognizing the diversity within Indigenous communities, their specific needs, or honouring of their specific Treaty Rights and sovereignty (Battiste, 2011; Vowel, 2016; Zine, 2001).

Additionally, the strategic plan lumps all racialized communities into a singular “other” category. Consequently, the diverse South/Southeast Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern communities that make up a large portion of the population of the Surrey School District are wholly overlooked in the initiatives outlined within the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* (Ellis, 2022; Zine, 2001). This further emphasizes the point that racial equity and anti-racism policy is inherently limited in its ability to meaningfully address racism within K-12 public school districts because generalized policy in itself cannot be constructed as a one-stop solution to address complex, intergenerational, and systemic issues. The essentialization of race and its influences on understandings of identity, systemic whiteness, and racial positionality has resulted in the fracturing and fragmentation of critical solidarities between racialized communities in support of maintaining settler colonial logics and imperialist objectives in Canada.

The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* defines terminology such as “Anti-Islamophobia,” “Anti-Asian Hate,” and “Anti-Semitism,” but it overlooks non-education specific policies that have resulted in historic and continual discrimination against these communities within K-12 public schooling in B.C. and Canada. This research found that the plan does not describe how this racism

is perpetuated, or how the policy initiatives challenge these forms of racism (Surrey Schools, 2023). Ellis (2022) notes that this type of racism is founded in settler colonial objectives that racialize groups of people in order to benefit the construction of Canada as a white Eurocentric country, especially within educational systems. While it is understandable and important that the plan pays particular attention to addressing anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, this research shows that the racialized communities that make up a large portion of the Surrey School District's population would also need their district to implement strategies to challenge and respond to incidents of racism to meet their specific needs.

## **Research Limitations**

This research was conducted as part of my MA thesis research. Within the scope of this project, and constraints of a thesis, I was unable to speak to how educational equity policy affects students and staff from each of the many diverse communities that Surrey School District hosts. Thus, the scope of my research does not include an extensive intersectional analysis of the specific contexts of each of these diverse communities, most prominently South/Southeast Asian, East Asian, and Middle Eastern communities that make up the Surrey School District (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Surrey Schools, n.d.). Additionally, beyond the theoretical perspectives that guide this research, it was not within the scope of this research to analyze, in great detail, further dimensions of difference that intersect with anti-racism such as class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status/citizenship, (dis)ability, language, and religion (in addition to others). I acknowledge that these intersections and spaces of divergence are a critical component of anti-racism and anti-colonial research and praxis, and I hope to complete further research that fully incorporates these lenses of analysis.

## Conclusion

The lenses of anti-colonial discursive framework and cognitive imperialism have offered an understanding of how strategies of challenging racism that are not critical of the intersectional influences of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, systemic whiteness, and white supremacy may function to reproduce or reinforce racism rather than reduce it within K-12 public education. The implementation of a racial equity or anti-racism policy, even if well-intended, may not function to create holistic, meaningful, and transformative reform towards the redressal of structural/institutional racism (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022; Jimmy & Andreotti, 2021). Educational equity policy, such as the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan*, must acknowledge and address hegemonic essentialism as well as the historical and continuing root causes of colonialism and racism through critical structural reform of the education system, rather than focusing all efforts towards addressing the “symptoms” of systems of oppression or overt interpersonal racism.

Based on the findings of this policy analysis research, it is my recommendation that the Surrey School District and B.C. Ministry of Education and Childcare allow for the construction and implementation of racial equity and anti-racism policy that pays particular attention to addressing the historical and continuing root causes of colonialism and racism in order to meaningfully address racism within the Surrey School District for Indigenous, Black, and other racialized students. This work must centrally acknowledge and challenge how systems of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy are foundational to Canadian educational structures and reinforce violent intergenerational harms against Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities.

The *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* should also clearly define what equity looks like and provide details for how policy evaluations will be conducted. Educational equity policy must move beyond tokenistic, Eurocentric, and

colonial understandings of equity to instead center community-specific initiatives in order to meaningfully address racism for the diverse needs of all Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities. If anti-Indigenous racism is to be addressed within racial equity policy, it must center on challenging and dismantling Eurocentric and settler colonial educational systems and actively support Indigenous community calls for Truth, decolonization, self-determination and sovereignty with education. If anti-Black racism is to be addressed, the Surrey School District must implement policy, curriculum, and education system reforms that redress the continuing impact of segregation and enslavement against Black people in Canada such as through racial streaming and the school-to-prison pipeline. Further, the *Racial Equity Strategic Plan* should clearly include specific plans to address Indigenous, Black, and racialized students' educational attainment gaps and inequitable access to post-secondary schools.

There is opportunity for this research to contribute to discussions by policymakers, teachers, administrators, and students surrounding anti-racist educational policy and practice, particularly in B.C.'s K-12 public school system. I hope that this research sheds light on spaces of improvement within racial equity and anti-racism policy in order to support transformative, anti-colonial, socio-political action for students and the broader school community through policy implementation.

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