

Teacher's Choice: Agents of Harm or Help? Innovation as a Lever for Social Justice and Intersectionality

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Abstract

As educators, the need to adapt, change, and help students is always at the forefront. Today, there is a growing demand for teachers to innovate the curriculum to ensure accessibility and representation of student diversity as well as address inequities in education. This is an educator's professional reflections on the relationship between innovation in education and the use of social justice in Quebec's pedagogy, how to reduce injustices in the classrooms, and why it is necessary.

"Writing and learning from the lands of The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples, who have long ties to what is now the Island of Montreal. Kawenote Teiontiakon is a documented Kanien'kéha name for the Island of Montreal. The City of Montreal is known as Tiohtià:ke in Kanien'kéha, and Mooniyang in Anishinaabemowin."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the most famous anti-apartheid freedom fighters in South Africa, reminds us that a "little bit of good" adds up. During one of the worst periods in humanity, Tutu still inspired and called for positivity. This is innovation—it is an act of change. Most people define innovation as the ability or process of taking something old to create a new process, service, or model. This is what Tutu teaches us as educators to find something new in the old. In South Africa, the old regime was dark, negative, and violent. And as teachers, the old and dark are when our students are unseen, unheard, and unvalued. And yet in this darkest moment, innovation is a way that we can spread and teach positivity.

I have always wanted to be a teacher. I am a proud to be part of this profession. I am an Afro-Indian Canadian teacher, who proudly teaches at Westmount High School—a school that is always on the cutting edge, ensuring that our students get what they need versus what the curriculum may want to transmit. As a young child growing up, with an amazing single mother, my family taught me that helping others is in our DNA. It is who we are as a family and our legacy. I come from a long line of activists in education, who have committed their time and lives to making sure that students feel valued. This was done by taking a holistic approach to education. This is where my journey of changing the old into the new began. This was the debut of innovation for me as a teacher.

Currently, we are trying to educate, learn, and teach in a system that is highly politicized, and complex, and has completely ignored the need to integrate and teach the histories of equity-seeking groups in Quebec. We are teaching amid a number of laws and bills that have restricted our curriculum and the career choices of some of our students. As a result, the goal is clear: we must change the old and create an education experience that is equitable and inclusive.

I made a clear decision to use the tool of teaching as an avenue to help others. It was and, continues to be, a simple choice. We are responsible for making decisions about how we teach, what we teach, and the skills we would like to develop. Every single choice we make has the possibility to change the world into what it needs to be. Every time we enter a classroom and interact with our students, we have one single choice we need to make. Are we agents of harm or help in the classroom? It is important because teachers spend a significant amount of time with students, which, as a result, shapes and influences their school experience. Therefore, we must decide if we want to help create positive outlooks of learning for our students in the world in which we all live and interact.

When teachers overlook or fail to understand this choice, negative experiences happen. Currently, when we harm our students, we affect their lives immensely. Borri-Anadon and Collins' (2022) work with Afro-Canadian students illustrates that these students expressed feeling humiliated and disrespected by teachers. Their research draws on decolonized approaches and Black traditions to help uncover systemic barriers experienced by Afro-Canadian students. As educators, knowing that there is a group of students feeling demoralized should activate our need to undo this harm—to essentially change the old system into a positive experience, despite being in a broken and structurally discriminatory one. This is a must.

There is also a growing number of students who have reported bullying and experiencing micro-aggressions. This experience of micro-aggression, a term coined by Dr. Chester Pierce (Johnson & Johnson, 2019), is brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward people who are not classified within the “normative” standard. And our students experience both bullying and micro-aggressions from both their peers and teachers.

These student narratives let us know that the current state of education continues to fail and devalue our students. Knowing this, I knew making changes in what and how I teach was needed. I chose to use an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) and social justice (Pauly, 1989) approach to address the gaps in our pedagogy. These two approaches allow teachers to look at our students as diverse and holistic. Using an intersectional approach as educators is the acknowledgment that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression. Moreover, we must consider anything that can marginalize people—gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and so on. It allows us to see the complexities of our students, and adding the social justice lens, helps us diversify and apply a tool which provides a framework in our curriculums to help guide learning, plan actions, and evaluate resources for social change.

Why are these approaches important? The two answers are: 1) to identify gaps and 2) to promote and bring about a sense of belonging. As human beings, we crave one thing—to belong and to find our place in this world. When our students enter the school system, they look to find their “group, crew, tribe”—their people. But they also look for themselves in the curriculum they experience. However, the current pedagogy reinforces a narrative of the dominant Western culture—one that excludes and signals to students from historical equity-seeking groups that they do not have a place here in this system, in this province, and in this country.

Imagine, that students spend at least 11 years in school from Kindergarten to Secondary Five. During that time, our Indigenous, Afro-Canadian, Asian Canadians, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and other groups do not see themselves represented in the curriculum. What they do learn about their histories is reduced to an unflattering and inferior narrative. This is why it is necessary to change the old into the new and find ways to show our students they matter. To do this requires consistency and dedication. For example, most educators now celebrate and integrate Black History Month into their pedagogies. However, why reduce the contributions of Afro-Canadians or any other equity-seeking group to a month? In my current curriculum, I use the social justice lens to diversify my sources, material, and topics. Last year, I focused on a new social movement per month, as opposed to reducing it to a specific time in our school year.

Innovation in education first requires self-reflection. When we make the conscious choice to be agents of help, we must also make a decision to be reflective, take into account our biases and lived experiences and be aware of the potential harm we can bring into the classroom. Also, we must change our mindsets and approaches, and be honest about gaps in our learning. It is never easy to recognize our predisposition to discriminate against our students or promote the current pedagogy as the most representative form of learning. Being reflective as teachers helps us to become more aware of underlying beliefs, and/or assumptions we have about our students, and what we teach. The ability to reflect helps us rethink and design truly equitable and positive learning environments. Reflection is required to help us consciously develop a mindset where equity and inclusiveness are at the forefront. This process, in turn, also opens the door to re-examine our approaches and incorporate a social justice approach in all our teaching and learning pedagogies.

In my case, the use of a social justice lens in my teaching did not happen overnight. It did not start with an immediate change to the curriculum. My desire and passion were to ensure that my students understood that they are agents of change in the world. As a student myself, I had a mixed experience. I was taught and understood about my value and history as a mixed-race Canadian. My mother was an Afro-Nova Scotian Baptist woman, while my dad is a Caribbean Indian Muslim. At home, both of my parents made certain that this history, absent in the school setting, was instilled in me at home. Fortunately, I did have teachers who valued me and recognized my learning style. This combination of knowing about my history as an Afro-Canadian and being seen by my teachers created a fairly positive school experience for me. Still, this absence of diverse pedagogy played a distinct role in who and how I am as a teacher and what I have taught in my classroom. Knowing that I wanted to approach pedagogy differently was a start, but ironically, it was when I began teaching Moral Education, and now the current Quebec Ethics and Religious Culture (MELS, 2008) (ERC) program, that I found a path forward.

I pause here to take a moment to discuss the ERC program as it always receives a variety of responses that includes criticism. It is not a perfect program, yet it does open many doors for students and teachers. It paves the way to innovate teaching. Many educators do not realize that the ERC program provides students with a very vital skill—critical thinking. Throughout the program, the emphasis is on developing in students an understanding of the greater good and to recognize that in others. These two fundamental goals demand that students must think deeply and in a critical manner. ERC has provided me with a way to introduce and root social justice in my classroom. Drawing from the program, I have been able to

introduce to my students the need to think for themselves. In turn, it has given me the opening to explore topics that were glaringly absent from the curriculum, for example, religious literacy, the women's movement, the genocides in Rwanda, and new social movements such as Black Lives Matter and the #metoo movement. This was my innovative moment. I took the opportunity provided in this program and opened the doors for my students. For over 10 years, this subject has given me the platform to present a multitude of social justice issues to students.

As mentioned, the ERC program promotes critical thinking as a fundamental skill. And for me, it was the perfect storm. I believe that critical thinking helps both teachers and students learn how to create new ways of learning and thinking. It allows us to think differently and outside of the box to voice what needs to be said and what is feared to be said. With practice, care, and understanding, critical thinking permits educators to help students express themselves respectfully, while being able to absorb and understand a diverse number of perspectives that they can examine and process. It does not promote one dominant view. Rather, it creates space for different views to exist. This is how I innovate, how I make certain that social justice is present in my class, and nurture inclusiveness. For example, when Bill 21 was first proposed, it was necessary to address my feelings as an educator and to reduce any bias that I held. Instead, I created a series of lessons in which the students and I examined the history of French Canadians, the notion of secularism, the varying opinions of the law, and finally the multiple impacts of the law. Additionally, when I am addressing the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the injustices experienced and faced by People of African descent, it is vital that I research and present a narrative that does not pigeonhole the community. What this means is creating lessons that permit students to see the diversity in the African communities and their experiences not only in Montreal, Canada, but also worldwide. Innovating and social justice in pedagogy means creating space for a multitude of perspectives, despite their similarities and contradictions. As teachers, we must ensure that this perspective and its impact on equity-seeking groups are presented and that students are not solely introduced to the dominant narratives, but, rather, they learn to challenge it.

Critical thinking is the one of the most significant and innovative skills that signals to our students to embrace change and to "draw outside of the lines." The ERC program has given me the opportunity to present a multitude of social justice issues to our students. Additionally, it has allowed me as a teacher to be challenged by my students and to be consistent with my reflectivity. This has ensured that I am acting as an agent of help in the classroom. Students, both in secondary school and university, often ask me why don't I exclusively teach at one level—high school or university? My answer is because of innovation and access. Secondary school teaching for the last 22 years has challenged me to find new ways to present the curriculum while ensuring that students are not harmed and are able to navigate this world and its injustices. Secondary school students also keep me invigorated, creative, and honest. On the other hand, teaching preservice teachers allows me to ask them the question, that is, will they become agents of harm or help? And if they choose help, this provides me both a platform and an opportunity to present the need for a social justice approach and inclusiveness in future learning environments. In addition, it gives me access: I get the opportunity to prepare future citizens and teachers. This is my innovative way of doing my "little good bits" in education. And, in turn, I hope that my acts of goodness will inspire a movement of goodness in the classroom.

Finally, we cannot teach if we cannot innovate and ensure that every single student we are privileged to encounter feels worthy. Worthiness stems from their understanding of diversity, their access to learning, and their feeling valued. We all have the capacity to make change happen. To reiterate, it is a privilege to teach, and it is our duty to innovate to make every student's learning/school experience positive and liberating.

I leave you with the powerful words of W.E.B Dubois, an African-American author, "Children learn more from what you are than what you teach" (Dubois, 1920).

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Sabrina Jafralie (she/her/elle) has led an impressive career as a secondary school teacher and a university course lecturer in her 21 years working in both the United Kingdom and in Canada. Her research includes equity and religious literacy, inclusion, and purposeful dialogue. She received her Master of Arts in Theological Studies from Concordia University, and a PhD in Teacher Education from McGill University in 2017. In 2018, she received the certificate of achievement for the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence. In addition to her teaching and research, she does substantial activism. In 2019, she garnered the Activist of Year Award. And in 2021, she was recognized as a Black Change maker in Canada. In September 2022, Dr. Jafralie was a Ted Talk X speaker. Recently, Dr. Jafralie was included among the top 100 Black Women to watch by the CIBWE.

