“The pandemic is galvanizing change”: Shifting to a critical and decolonial approach to human rights education with youth

Natasha Blanchet-Cohen*
Associate Professor
Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University
Co-titulaire de la Chaire-réseau jeunesse
natasha.blanchet-cohen@concordia.ca

Geneviève Grégoire-Labrecque
PhD candidate
Applied, Human Sciences, Concordia University
genevieve.gregoire-labrecque@mail.concordia.ca

Amy Cooper
Knowledge manager
Equitas
acooper@equitas.org

Abstract

The heightened visibility of racial discrimination coupled with the repression of young people's civil and political rights during the COVID-19 pandemic is surfacing the need for human rights education (HRE) to address anti-racism more intentionally. HRE practitioners reflect on language, the limitations of celebrating diversity, and the need for critical consciousness and deliberative spaces in youth engagement programming to address lived injustices across communities. As children's rights researchers and practitioners, we consider the interdependence of the rights to participation and non-discrimination and the need to recalibrate youth programs to consider age alongside race and other aspects of identity. The shift to a critical and decolonial approach to HRE includes embracing intersectionality and reflexivity, actively bringing BIPOC youth to the centre of defining and cultivating racial justice engagement to catalyze systemic-level change. We identify reflection questions for institutions, programs, and practitioners to support this journey.

Keywords: human rights education, young people, BIPOC, racial justice, participation, decolonial

Introduction

While the widespread impact of COVID-19 is unprecedented, there is a parallel social upheaval, equally extraordinary, as incidents of racial discrimination come to the surface and intensify in many places around the world. In Canada, tragic incidents of human rights violations are making headlines (see for example CBC, 2021; Cecco, 2020; Hobson, 2020; Ip, 2020). Globally, social movements advocating for racial justice are gaining momentum. Notably, the #Black Lives Matter movement is highlighting the lived racial injustices present in our communities (see Maqbool, 2020). Systemic racism is being named and action to counter racism is being called for across all sectors. Young people are actively taking part in, and feeling, the impact of these events and movements (Fine et al., 2021; Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021).

With human rights violations in the spotlight, many questions arise about the protection and promotion of young people's civil and political rights. As part of this debate, Equitas, a Canadian non-profit organization focused on human rights education, and the young people and partner organizations it works with, are asking what role human rights education (HRE) can play to support youth engagement in civil and political rights and to counter racism in communities.

This article emerges from a three-year community-university partnership looking at Equitas' *Speaking Rights* program which has, over the last 10 years, promoted youth-led community action projects (CAPs) related to shaping more diverse and inclusive communities. Learning about the role HRE programs like this can play and thinking about how they might need to be revisited to respond to the context of the pandemic motivated us to collaborate on this study. Herein, we reflect on the issues, ideas, and conversations that have been surfacing since the beginning of the pandemic amongst HRE practitioners (youth workers and human rights educators). The article draws on interviews and focus groups with Equitas staff and its long-term partners in cities across four provinces in Canada, representing a range of organizations integrating HRE into their programming for youth who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC).

The article begins with a review of the literature that critically examines how HRE has typically dealt with inequality and race, followed by a description of the evolving *Speaking Rights* program and a discussion of the methods used in this research. In the findings section, we identify the human rights issues that young people have faced since the pandemic began and discuss their responses. The next section of the article presents the conversations and reflections around HRE and racism that are happening amongst practitioners. We conclude by identifying fresh considerations for HRE and youth engagement.

Reconsidering Inequality and Race in Human Rights Education

Human rights have been proclaimed as the basis for a fair and just society (Destrooper & Merry, 2018), with HRE as a means for transferring the knowledge and skills in applying these rights (Zajda & Ozdowski, 2017). Embodied in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the notion that every person has inherent dignity and value, as well as the right to be free from

non-discrimination irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity, religion, or other realities. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reiterates this right for individuals under 18 years of age, with non-discrimination and equal opportunity as core principles, along with the right to participation.

While espousing the importance of human rights as a basis for practice, this article considers that implementation requires analysis and critique (Ife, 2009). Indeed, human rights discourse is political and historical, and there are many orientations to HRE (Zajda & Ozdowski, 2017). In general, an overly legalistic and rhetorical focus in HRE with “abstract conceptions and rules rather than historical and lived realities of ordinary persons across diverse geographies” has prevented the full realization of human rights (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018, p. 28). Implementation of children’s right to participation has often ignored the issue of inequality and race (Savyasaachi & Butler, 2014). Herein, we review why and examine how the potential of HRE in promoting non-discrimination among young people will only be realized through reappraising conventional practices of HRE. Otherwise, its contribution will remain restricted, potentially impeding marginalized voices from emerging.

One of the reasons why HRE lags as a basis for promoting equality is that its claim of universality and neutrality has contradicted the reality of a world that has been perpetually “structured by racist, sexist, patriarchal and capitalist hierarchies” and where unequal power relations amongst nations and social groups continue to exist (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018, p. 28). For Mutua (2001), the human rights movement is deeply problematic because human rights are portrayed as “saviors” (p. 201) but promote Western norms, liberal practices, and a White-centred culture. This imposition of a White, Western, Liberal way of knowing and analyzing has suppressed the ontologies and epistemologies of Black/African, Indigenous and racialized peoples, making its universality arbitrary (Coysh, 2014). Thus, parallels have been drawn between the human rights movement and colonialism, given seemingly common motivations and purposes of perpetuating imperialism and ethnocentrism (Zembylas & Keet, 2019).

In practice, several studies point to the shortcomings of HRE in denouncing racism. A Scottish nursery study by Konstantoni (2013) shows, for instance, how a focus on listening to young children and including them in decision-making without actively involving the practitioner in challenging racist and discriminatory attitudes and incidents is limiting; while non-discrimination may be a core right, it can be unequally respected and acted upon. Similarly, Kustatscher (2015) shows how the celebration of diversity in school settings (such as sharing of food, language, cultural practices, and religion) portrays simplified views of children’s social identities. A study by Galloway et al. (2019) in public high schools in Oregon demonstrates the impact of the choice of certain terms used by educators. For example, a focus on the term “culturally responsive” led educators to emphasize individual practices to be inclusive, develop positive interactions and relationships in the classroom, and bring students’ cultures and voices into the curriculum. In contrast, use of the terms “anti-racist” and “anti-oppressive” compelled educators to address the constructs of racism.

Indeed, addressing diversity and multiculturalism by celebrating differences has been critiqued for simplification and essentialization of culture, ignoring “structural and ideological power relations that continue to construct inequality” (Ngo, 2010, p. 475). The teaching of empathy, defined as putting oneself in another’s shoes, is another popular tool in multicultural education and HRE that deserves to be revisited. The ability of the privileged to be able to understand the complex experiences of the oppressed is limited. Furthermore, as Pedwell (2016, 2017) points out, mainstream ideas of empathy that rely on individual action without connection to structural relations of power may impede social transformation, potentially reinforcing social hierarchies.

In response to these growing criticisms, there is a call for espousing critical HRE that provides for reflexivity and for “new possibilities that open up towards different futures along social justice lines” (Zembylas & Keet, 2019, p. 30). As part of critical HRE, Woldeyes and Offord (2018) call for decolonizing HRE, allowing for understanding diverse cultures and subjectivities while remaining compatible with human rights. A critical pedagogy of human rights would be more relevant and responsive to the “multiple, intersectional and complex questions of existence and relationship, sameness and difference” (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018, p. 26). In universities, this could involve providing for dialogical practice so that students can engage with complexities and intersectionalities that problematize and challenge dominant discourses that neglect human dignity for all, as well as explicitly leaving space for excluded voices and marginalized experiences.

The need for decolonizing perspectives was also called for by Zembylas (2018) who points out how Freirean theory and critical pedagogy perpetuate reductionist views of forms of oppression and neoliberal views of change as progressive and individualistic. He calls for the reinvention of Freirean theory and critical pedagogy to include a deeper consideration of affective and emotional dimensions in ways that contribute to transformation. In line with Pedwell’s (2016, 2017) notion of “alternative empathies,” Zembylas calls for decolonizing empathy, making it instead interrogative, action-oriented, and challenging; premises of care, concern, and sympathy have been shown to be insufficient.

Moving forward with HRE involves a pedagogy that is more explicitly conscious of race, class, language, gender, ability, and sexuality to reflect a shift from a focus on diversity to a focus on equity, and from “safe” to “brave spaces” (Arao & Clemens, 2013). It entails engaging in difficult conversations, preparing educators for teachable moments when students talk about the tensions and conflicts of cultural difference, and creating spaces for dialogue, learning, and reflexivity (Ngo, 2010). It also means considering the different ways empathy is experienced given positionality, as well as awareness of approaches to enacting empathy that are conscious of structural inequalities (Zembylas, 2018).

Intentionally naming race and racism and having an explicit anti-racist stance are part of destabilizing the racism in institutions and ensuring accountability and racial equity, particularly when decision-makers are white and the youth they are teaching or programming for are people of colour (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). This includes dealing with white people’s discomfort and

often denial when embedded privilege and socially constructed dominance are raised (Di Angelo, 2018). Neglecting this denial ultimately reinforces injustices for racialized and other minoritized youth (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014; Whipp, 2013). In fact, Baldridge's (2020) study with Black youth workers in predominantly white community-based educational spaces shows the perpetuation of the idea that racial disparities are caused by an individual's behaviour and that the prevalence of organizations that avoid difficult conversations about race actually reinforces anti-Black racism.

Adherence to the principles of non-discrimination and anti-oppression requires a combination of individual and structural orientations by educators. Both self-worth and self-respect as well as broader accountability are needed for a move toward racial equity (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Whipp (2013) shows how socially just teaching requires teachers to have a multi-dimensional orientation. Teachers with an individual orientation who advance colour-blind, "caring" relationships disregard the very real structural inequities that impact marginalized young people's school experiences.

For the children's rights movement, there are also profound implications. The focus on age and children's agency at an individual and experiential level has largely ignored how the various social structures and power relations impact children differently (Kustatscher et al., 2018). As pointed out by Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017), an emphasis on unity is problematic, resulting in a false homogeneity of childhood experiences that restricts the emancipation of all children, particularly the marginalized. Thus, the authors call to adopt "intersectionality as praxis" that commits various actors to work towards an emancipatory and activist agenda, with "the goal to challenge multiple discriminations and promote complex social justice problems" (p. 16).

Indeed, transformative orientations of human rights emphasize enabling participation and providing spaces for young people to learn (Percy-Smith et al., 2020). However, just as Ladson-Billings (2014) calls for an examination of culturally relevant pedagogy and Zembylas (2018) critiques Freire's pedagogy for disregarding race and inequality, HRE compels questions regarding how it promotes the right to participation alongside the right to non-discrimination. Based on the above, this article reflects on recent conversations amongst practitioners concerning how HRE could better support anti-racism in youth engagement initiatives.

The Evolving Speaking Rights Program

Data for this article are drawn from the partnerships with community organizations, schools, and municipalities that Equitas has built in the context of the *Speaking Rights* program. Equitas developed and has implemented this national program since 2009 with over 250 organizations ranging from community groups and schools to municipalities across Canada. The program provides opportunities for young people (ages 12-25) to learn about human rights and build confidence, self-esteem, and skills to identify issues in their community they would like to address through community action projects (Equitas, 2018).

Grounded in a participatory approach to HRE, the program starts from participants' experiences, followed by critical analysis, reflection, and engagement in actions that support respect for human rights (see Cooper et al., 2013). The program is recognized for its ability to both communicate in age-appropriate ways the abstract concepts of human rights and support youth to engage in their communities. It includes Community Action Projects (CAPs) which follow five steps: motivate, explore, investigate, take action, and evaluate and celebrate (Equitas, 2018).

Through the program, youth develop skills and behaviours to identify common issues that impact participation in community life and to engage with local decision-makers to help shape positive change. The program aspires to address barriers to participation such as lack of information and understanding about rights, lack of dialogue or conflict between diverse groups, as well as instances of discrimination and exclusion taking place in communities. Areas of focus within the program also include looking at non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, and youth engagement and participation in broad terms. Prior to the pandemic, the 2018 *Speaking Rights* tool kit included a two-page document that identified awareness and increasing education efforts as the best means of preventing racist behaviour and provided examples of how racism may be present in a group. In the last year, Equitas has been working with partners to better map how racism is being experienced in communities and to support CAPs' focus on building movement around anti-racism in communities.

Commitment to anti-racism action plans on the part of governments (federal and municipal) as well as the general context of the pandemic have, however, had an impact on Equitas and its partners, instigating them to rethink the role of HRE in supporting BIPOC youth movements as they call for racial justice. Below, we present these conversations that, as a whole, point to how HRE can evolve to better support youth engagement in communities countering racism.

Methods

This article describes collaborative research in which a community-based partner was included in two phases of the study. The first one was held in 2018-19 and the second in 2020-21, both with the explicit goal of sharing and creating knowledge that addresses "pressing issues of well-being and justice and promotes social change and empowerment" (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 28). The method reflects the view that generating knowledge that is warranted and responsive to current questions calls for working as partners who are equally invested in the research process and disrupting conventional research practices that delineate the positions of the researcher and the subject (Foster & Glass, 2017).

Aligned with the topic and approach to our research, we locate ourselves as authors, recognizing that our identity and position influence how we understand the world (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Natasha who is White/Caucasian, was raised in her formative years in Asia and has engaged in various collaborative community-university research initiatives in children's rights and participation with Indigenous and immigrant youth over two decades. Having grown up in Québec, Geneviève is a White cisgender woman and an early-career engaged researcher

also working in children's rights and participation. Amy is a biracial (Japanese/European) cisgender woman. Her work, centered on transformative educational practices inside and outside of the classroom, also focuses on children's rights and participation. Together, we share a commitment to social and racial justice as it applies to working with young people, while remaining mindful of the need for reflexivity and humility given our positions of privilege, biases, and blind spots.

The research design adhered to the ethical research protocol of Concordia University. However, in this collaborative study, some of the conventional protocols relating to confidentiality, anonymity and objectivity were problematic. For instance, as a staff member and an active participant in this process, Amy experienced the impacts of the issues raised by the research differently than Natasha and Geneviève, who were concerned about how to bring forth BIPOC voices both in the literature and amongst the participants. We also had to grapple with what constituted data: as a current topic, many aspects of our study were evolving as we worked on them. We debated how best to convey the information shared by participants/co-authors during the writing stage. We also had to be conscious of how to maintain the balance between an inquiry perspective and organizational needs. However, we consider that acknowledging and working through these thorny aspects has contributed resonance and sincerity, and strengthened the ethical framework of this research, thereby enhancing the quality of our study (Tracy, 2010).

In addition to these multiple conversations amongst the co-authors, the research findings are grounded in an online focus group with Equitas staff and six interviews with long-term partners involved in the *Speaking Rights* program that took place during the winter and spring of 2021 and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

¹ Both methods are consistent with collaborative research as the focus group allowed Equitas staff to express their views, listen, reflect, question, and challenge each other while generating discussion, insights, and new understandings (Choak, 2012). The semi-directed interviews provided space and flexibility for conversation and probing (Choak, 2012). Participants, identified by Equitas, represented a range of organizations that coordinate programs with BIPOC youth, in a school or community setting, or were young people involved in a CAP, two thirds of whom self-identified as Black/People of Colour. We had interviewed most participants in the first research phase, prior to the start of the pandemic, which helped to quickly establish rapport, despite the online format.

Questions were framed to provoke sharing of viewpoints: "Last interview, we asked about how HRE supports diversity and a lot spoke about how it raised awareness for seeing sameness and difference with a tone that was quite celebratory. Are we talking about the same thing with anti-racism?" In another question, we asked: "Do you agree with the affirmation that the pandemic we are going through calls for a shift from HRE as a tool for promoting diversity to HRE as a tool for anti-racism?" Interviews were facilitated by two of the authors, Natasha and Geneviève, with a member of the Equitas staff present and who subsequently followed up with questions seeking partners' advice on how Equitas could better help them support youth and involve decision-makers in contributing to anti-racism efforts. All parties involved in the study appreciated the combination of research and practical goals, given concern during these times to

not overload community organizations. Natasha and Geneviève coded transcriptions inductively, resulting in three dominant themes presented below.

Findings

“We Were Woke”: Young People’s Experiences and Responses to the Pandemic

At the outset, practitioners elaborated on the issues and responses they heard from the young people with whom they interacted with during the pandemic. On one hand, the pandemic has exacerbated inequality and discrimination, while on the other, there has been an awakening in which the young people with whom they work are more informed and engaged and eager to have conversations about racial tensions and racism. This unfolding context poses new questions for youth practitioners and organizations involved in HRE.

Generally, there is agreement amongst those participating in the study that the pandemic has disproportionately intensified inequalities for marginalized/racialized communities. Issues present in young people’s lives, such as food instability, limited access to the Internet and technological devices, poverty, and overcrowded housing conditions, have worsened. These “already existed, but under the light of COVID it’s definitely shone brighter” (MB). With family members who are often front-line essential workers, young people involved in the programs have also experienced a higher than average rate of COVID-19 infection.

A range of children’s rights have also been violated since the start of the pandemic such as the right to education, where school closures as well as the imposition of online learning highlighted the unequal access to technology, home support, and resources. “Young people are very, very aware that their education has gone by the wayside with the arrival of the pandemic” (QC). Children’s right to participate in programs has also been compromised, with youth having limited access to private spaces: “not everybody’s comfortable or has access to, like, a camera or a microphone, or even, like, a private space where they’re able to speak within their homes” (BC2). The fraying social fabric surrounding young people, along with isolation, has also had an affect on youth’s mental health and well-being. For example, peer counselling was identified by several participants in the study as being limited, given restrictions in social contact and, for those transitioning out of care, the isolation has added to the stress and fear of moving out, even if temporarily on hold. The difficulty in accessing mental health services and youth programming was seen by several as aggravating these challenges.

Meanwhile, according to our study, young people have been highly affected by the racial violence that has occurred across both the country and over the border in the U.S. during the pandemic and shared widely on social media. The community partners and youth talked about marking events including the murder of a Black man named George Floyd by a White police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the killing by police of an Indigenous youth in Winnipeg, and the tragic death of Joyce Echaquan, an Indigenous woman who was abused by hospital staff in a hospital in Québec. These incidents and events, part of the #Black Lives Matter movement, were identified as sparking conversations amongst youth about racism, children’s rights to non-discrimination, and the right to be protected from violence in everyday life.

According to the participants in the study, young people have raised questions about microaggressions and how these affect their ability to exercise their own daily rights. For example, one participant reported being unfairly treated by authorities and “being ticketed or fined for being outside and violating rules during this pandemic in terms of isolation and quarantine and curfews” (DL2). A youth worker characterized the Black Lives Matter movement as “not only a wake-up (...) but an awareness creation tool” (ON). The communication happening via social media and the global nature of the Black Lives Matter movement are providing a basis for a common level of awareness allowing for comprehensive conversations (BC2).

Throughout the period of the pandemic, the resilience and resourcefulness of young people is remarked on: “young people know what is going on and they are taking the opportunity to use whatever resources are in their reach to make their voices heard, to have their impact made out” (ON). In many ways, youth’s amplified awareness of racism and their calls for change illustrate an unforeseen impact of the pandemic: “I don’t know if everyone just had more time on their hands or too much social media, but it got really big. I don’t know if it would have gotten the same level of attention if there hadn’t have been this pandemic” (MB).

Youth workers and organizations involved in HRE have thus been deeply challenged. At the outset, given the restrictions on in-person gatherings, many organizations had to deal with shifting to an online platform. To appropriately respond to issues that youth were raising, practitioners also shared their need for more tools to address “difficult things that happened in a context that was already difficult” (DL4).

The next two sections present reflections on how to use HRE with young people in ways that strengthen anti-racism initiatives.

“Curtains Have Been Opened”: Shifting Conversations Around HRE and Racism

During the pandemic, participants reported on how the heightened visibility of racial discrimination resulted in an increase in the number of conversations on the importance of addressing racism. These conversations surfaced issues that clearly existed before the pandemic but provided an impetus to now confront them. Participants referred to an opening of the “curtains,” and used the word “reckoning” to express the pressing obligation to better address racism. Below, findings around the use of language, the limitations of past HRE approaches to diversity, and the interlinkages between HRE and anti-racism are discussed.

Practitioners spoke about how their language was changing, with terminology being revisited and certain terms becoming part of daily vocabulary. Terms that in the past would have been infrequent are now regularly used: “Saying BIPOC and White fragility and White silence, and all of these things are just common occurrences now in our language because of the rise in visibility of things” (DL6). These shifts in language reflect changes in perspectives: “that’s a reflection of where we are and where we’re growing and how we’re growing our language and our approaches. It wouldn’t have come up perhaps a year or two years ago. It is a signal of

what's happened over the past six months" (DL2). The pandemic has "forced us to think" and "to use stronger language," such as acknowledging systemic racism (DL1). One is reminded by several practitioners that the reality and terms are not themselves new. The difference is in the level of readiness to use and engage with language and think about responses in these terms.

Comments on the need to revisit language are not dissociated from the broader context, including changes in the political and funding climate. Participants recollected "having to go through a [funding] proposal and take out any mention of activism ... and replace it with 'political dialogue' whereas now the acceptability of the language has changed" (DL3). Certain school partners were also reported to be grappling with terms and concepts. The need to address racism and anti-racism was recognized, but the partners were unsure of how to do so: "What I'm seeing is this push and pull at the higher level of bureaucracy. ... [They] need to address racism and anti-racism work and [they] think human rights is the way to do it. ... They did say [they want] empathy and sensitivity to it, but they're also ... like, 'We can't just talk about diversity. We have to name it as racism'" (DL2). Another case in point mentioned in the conversation was the federal government's call for proposals from community organizations launched during the pandemic titled *Anti-racism action program*.

While there is some movement at the administrative and political levels to talk more overtly about racism, young people are centre stage, provoking conversations and asking questions. The spread of incidents of racism through social media during the pandemic has resulted in increased connection with others facing similar issues: "That's what gives them a lot of energy and of resistance towards the system. ... They began to mirror their experiences with what is happening to other Black folks around the world" (ON). This has provided an impetus for "progressive conversations" in connecting and sharing with other Black people across the country, as well as some "uncomfortable" dialogue with neighbourhood police, including a case of youth 12-14 years old questioning them about racial profiling in their neighbourhood.

In this "bubbling period" of change, conventional ideas and approaches have become unsettled. In the first phase of the research that was undertaken pre-COVID-19 to explore how HRE supports diversity (note that our own questions were framed this way), participants mostly emphasized the value of HRE in promoting commonality while valuing differences. Three comments from participants in the earlier study encapsulate this idea:

We might not all relate the same way, but we can all learn kindness, empathy, and compassion, and understanding. And that comes with understanding what human rights education is, and what the human rights values are" (QC); "We can use [HRE] to bring people together to accept one another no matter your colour" (NB)²; and, "We learn to be more open towards each other. We accept each other, and we learn to live together" (QC).

The role of HRE in supporting diversity was largely celebratory. With the heightened visibility of anti-racism and racial justice, practitioners elaborated on the limitations of celebration in addressing racial inequality, feeling that it was merely "scratching the surface" (DL1). There was a sense of urgency to go deeper into the issues by raising other questions: "It's

great to celebrate diversity, but why are we doing that? We have to get to the root of all that stuff. Why is there inequality? And so there's [the question of] 'What about power and privilege?'" (DL1). The celebratory approach was also seen as potentially oppressive. A practitioner of colour remarked:

Some of the celebratory aspects are really for the comfort of non-racialized folks because it's a good way to talk about it, while it also cements for me, even for children, the perception that, 'If you work hard, you'll get ahead,' which can be problematic from a rights-based perspective. (BC2)

A Black practitioner emphasized the need to "engage Black people" and that people should not be "colour blind" (ON). One practitioner told the story of a young Black person asking for help so his mother could get time off from her job for her vaccine appointment without losing pay (she did not have sick leave). The youth stressed the need to distinguish between equity and equality and added that people's circumstances impact how they can exercise their rights. The practitioner recounted: "He knows she has the right, so he wants to know *how* she can assert that right" (ON). The pandemic has indeed created an awareness in the practitioners who participated in this study that requires going beyond the celebratory: "Now the curtains have been opened and they're like: this is the reality that we exist, and I exist in this body, and this is how I am going to be treated" (DL6).

This acknowledgement leads to a reflection on the relationship between HRE and anti-racism. Practitioners spoke evocatively of the two notions being complementary, with HRE providing a base for addressing racism. An HRE educator explained how they saw the interlinkages in practice: "I mean, human rights and anti-racism, to me, seem, like, you can't distance them. Like, when I have conversations about anti-racism, or if we're talking about an issue that's come up for youth, then they feel like they've undergone some discrimination. I go back to human rights really often" (BC2). The two notions are viewed as supporting each other: "HRE and anti-racism go hand-in-hand, but I don't believe they're the same thing. I believe, especially for our young people, HRE is a great way to lead to anti-racism" (MB). They go on to say that their recent awareness and knowledge has motivated them to change: "At this point, I feel like adopting more of an anti-racist practice and mindset will lead to more racial justice and more of an understanding of the personal power of even oppressed groups" (MB).

In the following section, we present emerging implications for HRE promoting youth engagement in ways that contribute to anti-racism in youth engagement initiatives.

"Pushing a Little Bit Further": Implications for HRE and Youth Engagement

Going forward, participants called for a more purposeful focus on anti-racism in HRE and youth engagement. As one partner reflected, "the community action projects are a step towards anti-racism in that [they're] asking young people to take a look at their surroundings and to recognize places where perhaps one group is not being afforded the same opportunities as another and to actively speak out" (MB). Doing so, however, requires practitioners and

programmers to consider how to draw out an anti-racist perspective. Another partner stated bluntly: “The Black Lives Matter movement and, like, this whole year has shown me that we have a lot of steps that need to come in between—just including folks in the spaces [to start with]” (BC2).

Below, we discuss paying attention to critical consciousness and youth spaces as two considerations that stood out in our conversations. At the outset, all practitioners reiterated the value of having youth lead the CAPs. Consistent with the findings in the first research phase, participants emphasized the benefits for the individual, the group, and the broader community: “It’s really a good way to forge a sense of belonging in a group. ... It’s good for self-esteem and to keep alive our little flame inside” (QC). Being able to work on things that matter to them makes “young people take ownership” (ON) in ways that provide for a “transformational process” (BC1; QC). As such, “it’s just a lot of hope for young people when they don’t have, like, that opportunity. They don’t feel that sense of belonging, they don’t feel that sense of welcome” (ON). This is central given a context in which young people lack these types of positive experiences: “I think that’s a good power shift that doesn’t happen often enough and a way for adults to actually feel what that’s like to be brought into a young person’s version of them asserting their rights” (BC2). The *Speaking Rights* toolkit was appreciated for its flexibility. One practitioner stated that the toolkit was:

my go-to for any group that I have.... And, especially given this past year, where we’ve had a lot of discussions about, like, abuse of human rights or, like, with the Black Lives Matter movement in the States, it just seemed like the natural resource to go to. (BC2)

Two CAPs undertaken during the pandemic were highlighted for illustrating youth leadership in addressing racism. Both projects, in BC and the other in Ontario, took the form of a mural with similarities in framing. A young participant explained the process of the mural project located in BC titled Common-Unity: “We were talking about just like equity and equality and how our neighbourhood is very multicultural. And we wanted to represent that but, also, represent the things that might not be as positive” (BC3). This conversation resulted in a mural depicting the creation story for their area, selecting the First Nations medicine wheel colours and placing the Black Lives Matter fist along with a red hand representing the missing and murdered Indigenous women in the centre (see Figure 1). This was important as a way of expressing what was felt to be misunderstood by the majority, and thus, the mural represented a call for unity in the fight for justice. In Ontario, the mural combined 12 individual canvasses around the theme of “what our identity means to us ... and [includes] how I am going to change the world” but also showed how “to face solutions together” (ON). The individual and collective forms of expression throughout the process reflect both ownership and resistance, a combination of significance throughout this pandemic.

To enable youth engagement in addressing anti-racism, participants called for greater conscious support of young people from an anti-racist and racial justice perspective. This involved revisiting some of the ways facilitators and organizations have done things: “[normally]

we could do it without any preparations, with our eyes closed ... but, [during the pandemic], the way we had to do our projects and address these topics forced us to stretch and to innovate and to look at different approaches” (DL2).

Participant practitioners called for modifications at the level of both the organization and individual: “If we want to be authentic and just true to the work, then we really need to look—and I don’t mean navel gaze. We have to understand what is our role in that process” (DL1). Meaningfully making the shift will require organizations to avoid performing measures of inclusion that are merely tokenistic and to take the time to consider the question: “What do we want to be different as a result of an anti-racist or reconciliatory or decolonial perspective?” (BC1). HRE facilitators also need to go through their own reflective processes, including becoming aware of their positionality and associated biases. This is central to avoid contributing to oppressions: “to recognize that, like, we have racial biases, too. ... We also need to be conscious of, like, how we’re acting, so that we’re not [committing] microaggressions” (BC2). This call for introspection is recognized as difficult but necessary. Indeed, “everyone needs to take responsibility for their own learning and then hopefully get to a place where they’re comfortable having conversations that can further their learning” (MN). Doing so is part of moving away from reliance on BIPOC young people to do the teaching, a burden that is exhausting and unfair.

Another key point highlighted by the participants is the need for HRE practitioners to pay greater attention to the type of space created for youth engagement. In other words, “it’s not enough to just create the space, but how those spaces are created” (ON). Greater intentionality is needed: “The move that I’d hope to see is that not only are you bringing BIPOC people into spaces, but you’re also making sure that those spaces are safe and set up for them not to feel any type of discrimination” (BC2). Holding safe spaces implies “changing our perspective on youth and getting interested in what youth say and think” (QC) and in that vein, a youth of colour had this advice to offer:

It’s not an easy thing to go to—to talk to someone about [racism] if you think that they don’t care or don’t know about those situations. So, I think being open, that you’re very—that you’re anti-racist, and that you want to help with those situations, if they do come up, so that they can be able to talk to you about it and be vulnerable. (BC3)

This is a process to be nurtured as young people also engage with decision-makers. For instance, in response to young people digesting news and as a result, becoming fearful of being shot going to a store, community-based HRE practitioners organized a round table with police. In the first meeting, there was no open communication, but during the second one, the police started listening to the 12-14 years olds’ questions such as: “Why do you arrest White people different that you arrest us?” (DL6). Creating a platform for their voices to be heard was intended to “make those responsible for the system feel uncomfortable” (ON) We are reminded that “it’s not enough to [just] have anti-racism training. Rights have to be actionable” (ON). Thus, adults play an important role: “I think that’s where maybe some of those more transformative conversations

that range from celebrating differences to acknowledging existing inequities and injustices can live ... but also [adults should show] a willingness to go into the conversation, even if you are not the expert on it, to allow space for it” (BC1).

Related to the importance of holding the space is the concern to remain age-appropriate: “[It’s] not to say that we can’t directly speak about what an anti-racist lens looks like for children. But what I like about the approach that *Speaking Rights* takes is that it gets you to start thinking about these kinds of daily experiences from a rights-based perspective” (BC1). Another concern was related to young people’s readiness to take on action around racism, given that it is considered a delicate topic that some young people may find difficult to approach directly even if it is part of their daily life. Thus, holding the space is finding a balance between being sensitive to young people’s process and being open and inviting conversations about difficult topics, such as racism, that impact so many young people’s lives.

Discussion

Overall, our research points to the transformational potential of the pandemic. The heightened visibility of racism in parallel with the exacerbation of human rights violations and repression of young people’s civil and political rights have resulted in a call to revisit conventional practices of HRE. Emphasis on youth participation, the universality of rights, and celebration of diversity while appreciated, is limiting and can inadvertently serve to promote the status quo by ignoring structural and ideological power relations (Ngo, 2010) and reinforce seemingly ethnocentric norms and hegemonic discourses, irrespective of context (Woldeyes & Offord, 2018).

Indeed, our research on the *Speaking Rights* HRE programming, which was conducted pre-COVID, examined the role of HRE in providing for meaningful youth engagement and highlighted the value of connecting, reflecting, acting, and learning. It included little to no mention of the inequalities amongst young people’s lived experiences and how HRE could be implemented to take that into account (Blanchet-Cohen & Grégoire-Labrecque, under review). Regardless of whether this was because of the way our questions were framed, our positionality as disproportionately majoritarian people was indicative of the program’s focus. This omission led us to a deep reflection on how children’s rights may disregard the equal importance and interdependence of the right to participation and the right to non-discrimination. It also opened up a reflection on our responsibilities as researchers to be accountable and transparent around these omissions. A focus on age and a celebration of diversity, while perhaps valuable in recognizing youth’s positive contributions, may inadvertently further contribute to marginalization (Baldrige, 2020).

Our study supports the need for critical and decolonial HRE programming with youth (see Coysh, 2014; Woldeyes & Offord, 2018). A critical HRE means cultivating critical thinking and pedagogies that allow for alternative perspectives and contribute to social and racial justice in a given context (Zembylas & Keet, 2019). A decolonial stance involves ensuring that HRE espouses (and does not suppress) ontologies and epistemologies of Indigenous and racialized

peoples, encouraging alternative narratives in defining everyday experiences of dignity and/or discrimination. This is part of recognizing the intersectionality in young people's lives (Konstantini & Emejelu, 2017) and recalibrating programs to consider age alongside race and other aspects of one's identity. Additionally, this requires that HRE practitioners are ready to self-reflect on their power and positionality when engaging in critical conversations about human rights experiences.

The context of COVID-19 and the #Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted how young people can contribute to the dialogue involved in seeking racial justice with HRE. In particular, the increased use of social media for communicating and sharing amongst young people has caused unprecedented solidarity, with BIPOC youth in our study reporting finding common ground in the injustices experienced. More diverse ontologies and understandings of the world and how rights exist (or not) in everyday spaces are surfacing. Thus, there is a need for HRE practitioners and youth doing anti-racism work to collaborate more intentionally in considering how social media, seen mostly as an instrument of advocacy, also has potential as a powerful pedagogical tool. Equipping HRE practitioners to support young people to tell their stories and understand other people's stories, as well as to use online spaces to reach out to young people about human rights is important in the future direction of HRE.

In realizing a shift toward a critical and decolonial HRE, we identify some questions for reflection at the level of the institution, program, and practitioner, gleaned from our conversations as well as from the work that Equitas has been undertaking to shift towards racial justice and more intentionally supporting youth to engage in racial justice issues in their communities (see Table 1). These complement Woldeyes' and Offord's (2018) examples for decolonizing HRE in higher education in ways that are not antithetical to the purpose of human rights, but respectful of cultural diversity. They are part of supporting the reflexivity and ability to engage in difficult conversations, and the efforts to surface and address structural causes (such as colonialism, capitalism, and the patriarchy) of discrimination that impede the realization of human rights. Indeed, individual and structural orientations are necessary in realizing the right to participation and non-discrimination, an aspect that is sometimes neglected in HRE practitioners' work with youth.

Table 1

Reflection Questions for HRE to Better Support Racial Justice With Youth

Level	Questions
Organizational/ Institutional	<p>How can we develop a common understanding of how HRE can support racial justice work across diverse institutional stakeholders (partners, staff, board members, funders)?</p> <p>Are we ready to be intentional about taking a critical and decolonial approach to shifting institutional policies and practices for racial justice?</p> <p>Are we equipped to move through complexity and discomfort that this work brings?</p> <p>Are we ready to be accountable and transparent in actions that may support or hinder racial justice efforts within and by the institution?</p> <p>How can we engage in a deeper analysis of systemic racism and how colonialism intersect with other forms of oppressions?</p> <p>How can we integrate Indigenous perspectives on history and colonization into our understanding of racism?</p> <p>How are we creating safer and braver spaces for diverse individuals to participate and inform our racial justice work within the institution?</p>
Program design, development, and delivery	<p>Whose knowledge and experience are informing our programs? How can we support Indigenous epistemologies and other ways of knowing about the world to better support HRE practitioners' contributions to racial justice?</p> <p>How can our programs integrate intersectionality and reflexivity more intentionally to support meaningful participation and non-discrimination of diverse young people?</p> <p>How do our programs support HRE practitioners and decision makers to engage in braver conversations about racial justice with young people?</p> <p>How do our programs support HRE practitioners to enter into this work with humility and openness for learning?</p>
Practitioner	<p>What attitudes, knowledge, experiences do I carry into a conversation about racial justice? What biases and blind spots about race, class, language, gender, ability, and sexuality do I have? How does all of this influence my attitude and behaviours?</p>

Am I ready to use and engage with new language to describe my human rights education work?

Am I ready to be challenged, to sit in discomfort, to be accountable for my actions?

Am I willing and able to leverage the power and privilege I have to hold space for others, particularly the youth I am working with?

Can I enter a space with humility around what I don't know? Am I ready to take responsibility for my own learning?

The reflection process that needs to take place within organizations offering HRE programs to support youth engagement initiatives on anti-racism and racial justice in communities involves a deep commitment to change and learning. This entails listening in the sense of “being available to ‘others’ and leaving space and time for them” (Savyasaachi & Butler, 2014, p. 52). Additionally, it involves allowing space for taboo/discriminatory issues to surface and be addressed intentionally and deliberately (Konstantoni, 2013), thereby decolonizing the notion of participation of young people. This means designing HRE programming to better equip practitioners to listen, be reflexive given their positioning, and be able to invite and engage in uncomfortable conversations that can emerge from addressing power, privileges, and inequities with and amongst young people and adults, as well as give space for BIPOC young people to be at the forefront of identifying their needs and defining how HRE can better support anti-racism work.

Conclusion

The context of the pandemic has brought to the spotlight the need for HRE practitioners to engage more intentionally in anti-racism and racial justice work. As practitioner Destin Bujang from the Black Creek Youth Initiative in Toronto reminds us, HRE is a powerful tool where “an important outcome is empowerment, the process through which people and communities increase their control of their own lives and the decisions that affect them” (see EquiTalks, April 2021). As researchers, practitioners, and aspiring allies to all young people, we are called upon in the new-normal, post-pandemic world to embrace a critical and decolonial practice in HRE in the hopes of deconstructing hegemonic discourses and allowing for a plurality of perspectives that can address racism and discrimination with young people. Our research shows that when HRE practitioners and young people intentionally embrace intersectionality and reflexivity together, they continue the movement towards racial justice, catalyzing systemic-level change.

Acknowledgments

This paper draws on research supported by a Partnership Engagement Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

References

- Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators* (pp. 135–150). Stylus Publishing.
<https://www.anselm.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Center%20for%20Teaching%20Excellence/From%20Safe%20Spaces%20to%20Brave%20Spaces.pdf>
- Baldrige, B. J. (2020). Negotiating anti-Black racism in ‘liberal’ contexts: The experiences of Black youth workers in community-based educational spaces. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(6), 747–766. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753682>
- CBC. (2021, June 18). Montreal police filmed kneeling on Black teen’s neck, prompting calls for investigation. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/spvm-kneeling-black-teen-neck-1.6070618>
- Cecco, L. (2020, September 30). Canada: Outcry after video shows hospital staff taunting dying Indigenous woman. *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/30/joyce-echaquan-canada-indigenous-woman-hospital>
- Chevalier, J. M., & Buckles, D. (2013). *Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Choak, C. (2012). Asking questions: Interviews and evaluations. In S. Bradford & F. Cullen (Eds.), *Research and research methods for youth practitioners* (pp. 90–112). London: Routledge.
- Cooper, A., Nazzari, V., Kon Kam King, J., and Pettigrew, A., (2013). Speaking Rights: Youth Empowerment Through a Participatory Approach. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 3(1). 489-501. doi: 10.18357/ijcyfs43.1201312627.
- Coysh, J. (2014). The dominant discourse of human rights education: A critique. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 6(1), 89–114. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/hut033>
- Destrooper, T., & Merry, S. E. (2018). *Human rights transformation in practice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- DiAngelo, R. J. (2018). *White fragility: Why it’s so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Dowd, A. C., & Bensimon, E. M. (2015). *Engaging the “race question”: Accountability and equity in U.S. higher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Equitas. (2018). *Speaking rights. Human rights education toolkit for youth*. Equitas.
- Fine, M., Finesurrey, S., Rodriguez, A., Almonte, J., Contreras, A., & Lam, A. (2021). “People are demanding justice”: Pandemics, protests, and remote learning through the eyes of immigrant youth of color. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 36(5), 437–466.
- Foster, S. S., & Glass, R. D. (2017). Ethical, epistemic, and political issues in equity-oriented collaborative community-based research. In L. L. Rowell, C. D. Bruce, J. M. Shosh, & M. Riel (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook of action research* (pp. 511–525). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Galloway, M. K., Callin, P., James, S., Vimegnon, H., & McCall, L. (2019). Culturally responsive, antiracist, or anti-oppressive? How language matters for school change efforts. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(4), 485–501.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1691959>
- Goodwin-De Faria, C., Bendo, D., & Mitchell, R. C. (2021). “Post-COVID” Childhood-s?: Transdisciplinary reflections on participatory praxis in the lives of 21st century children. *The International Journal of Children’s Rights*, 29(2), 371–399.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-29020007>
- Hobson, B. (2020, April 9). 16-year-old Winnipeg girl shot and killed by police. *APTN News*.
<https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/16-year-old-winnipeg-girl-shot-and-killed-by-police/>
- Ife, J. (2009). Needs, rights and democratic renewal. *Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales*, 22(1), 38–51.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/039658ar>
- Ip, S. (2020, November 23). Human rights complaints filed by Indigenous grandfather arrested at Vancouver bank. *Vancouver Sun*. <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/human-rights-complaints-filed-by-indigenous-grandfather-arrested-at-vancouver-bank>
- Jacobson, D., & Mustafa, N. (2019). Social identity map: A reflexivity tool for practicing explicit positionality in critical qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919870075>
- Konstantoni, K. (2013). Children’s rights-based approaches: The challenges of listening to taboo/discriminatory issues and moving beyond children’s participation. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 21(4), 362–374.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.867169>
- Konstantoni, K., & Emejulu, A. (2017). When intersectionality met childhood studies: The dilemmas of a travelling concept. *Children’s Geographies*, 15(1), 6–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1249824>
- Kustatscher, M. (2015). *Exploring young children’s social identities: Performing social class, gender and ethnicity in primary school* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh]. Edinburgh Research Archive. <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/11773>
- Kustatscher, M., Konstantoni, K., & Emejulu, A. (2018) Hybridity, hyphens, and intersectionality: Relational understandings of children and young people’s social identities. In T. Skelton, S. Punch, & R. Vanderbeck (Eds.), *Families, intergenerationality, and peer group relations. Geographies of children and young people: Vol. 5* (pp. 475–492). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-026-1_6
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. the remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74–84. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.p2rj131485484751>
- Maqbool, A. (2020, July 10). Black Lives Matter: From social media post to global movement. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53273381>

- Mutua, M. (2001). Savages, victims, and saviors: The metaphor of human rights. *Harvard International Law Journal*, 42(1), 201–245.
https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/journal_articles/570
- Ngo, B. (2010). Doing “diversity” at dynamic high: Problems and possibilities of multicultural education in practice. *Education and Urban Society*, 42(4), 473–495.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124509356648>
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77>
- Pedwell, C. (2016). De-colonising empathy: Thinking affect transnationally. *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, XVI(1), 27–49. <https://samyuktajournal.in/de-colonisingempathy-thinking-affect-transnationally/>
- Pedwell, C. (2017). Transforming habit: Revolution, routine and social change. *Cultural Studies*, 31(1), 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2016.1206134>
- Percy-Smith, B., Thomas, N. P., Batsleer, J., & Forkby, T. (2020). Everyday pedagogies: New perspectives on youth participation, social learning and citizenship. In A. Walther, J. Batsleer, P. Loncle, & A. Pohl (Eds.), *Young people and the struggle for participation: Contested practices, power and pedagogies in public spaces*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429432095-12>
- Savyasaachi, & Butler, U. M. (2014). Decolonizing the notion of participation of children and young people. In E. K. M. Tisdall, A. M. Gadda, & U. M. Butler (Eds.), *Children and young people's participation and its transformative potential: Learning from across countries* (pp. 44–60). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137316547_3
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Whipp, J. L. (2013). Developing socially just teachers: The interaction of experiences before, during, and after teacher preparation in beginning urban teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 64(5), 454–467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487113494845>
- Woldeyes, Y. G., & Offord, B. (2018). Decolonizing human rights education: Critical pedagogy praxis in higher education. *International Education Journal*, 17(1), 24–36.
<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11937/69214>
- Zajda, J. I., & Ozdowski, S. (Eds.) (2017). *Globalisation, human rights education and reforms*. Dordrecht: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0871-3>
- Zembylas, M. (2018). Reinventing critical pedagogy as decolonizing pedagogy: The education of empathy. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 40(5), 404–421.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2019.1570794>
- Zembylas, M., & Keet, A. (2019). *Critical human rights education: Advancing social-justice-oriented educational praxes*. Cham: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27198-5>

Notes

¹ In citations, we use the following codes MB, BC, ON, and QC to refer to the provinces in which the discussions were held. DL refers to “diverse locations.”

² In the pre-COVID findings, we collected data from New Brunswick (NB).