"I guess I'm not alone in this": Exploring racialized students' experiences and perspectives of safer classrooms at McMaster University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details the findings of our critical race theory-informed study, which explored how pedagogy can adapt to create, foster, prioritize, and sustain safety for racialized students in the classroom. We invited racialized students to participate in a focus group which researchers designed to be a safe space, unpack their experiences of tokenization, harm, and exclusion in the classroom. Participants described the (a) systemic issues within white-streamed pedagogy, (b) the significance of uncompensated and unrecognized labour in the classroom, (c) classroom experiences of harm, and (d) long-term emotional and academic impacts of racial trauma. Drawing from their recommendations, we emphasize the production of counter-stories that centre the need for safer and more inclusive classrooms within post-secondary institutions. Recommendations offered from participants include ways the administration can materially invest in the safety and well-being of students of colour; implications oriented to instructors, staff, and white- identified students in making classroom spaces more equitable; and reflexive-learning and educational opportunities to change language, curriculum, discourse, and interactions across the institution.

KEYWORDS

racism, race, racialization, pedagogy, anti-racist education, safety

There has been extensive discussion for the past several decades at McMaster University about commitments to equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and decolonization (EDIAD). In fact, an archive of minutes from a Race Relations Committee indicates that McMaster began engaging in discussions of anti-racism at the institutional level by at least the 1970s (McMaster University Office of the President Fonds, 1977-1981). In a report detailing McMaster's commitments to "inclusive excellence" via their equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) strategy, Dr. Arig al Shaibah (2020), McMaster's inaugural associate vice president for equity and inclusion, listed several foundational reports from 1990 to 2008 that were led and authored by students, staff, faculty, and community members with vested interests in naming historical and contemporary inequities and offering tangible ways forward to build campus cultures of inclusion, including dedicated explorations of sexual and gender diversity,

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Indigeneity, racial inclusion, and accessibility (also see McMaster University, 2004). Since 2008, new reports have been published on Islamophobia (McMaster University Equity and Inclusion Office, 2017) and trans and gender-diverse students' experiences (Brockbank et al., 2021), among other social justice issues. The narratives emerging from these reports, which review marginalized students', staff's, and faculty's experiences of exclusion and dismissal, indicate systemic marginalization experienced by equity-deserving groups. As a result of these dynamics, marginalized community members have suggested that there are ongoing impacts on their ability to safely and actively engage in their education (Brockbank et al., 2021; McMaster Equity and Inclusion Office, 2017). However, these initiatives also offer an action-oriented response to the concerns identified by marginalized staff, faculty, and students, including a continual emphasis on building safer spaces and campus solidarities to tangibly support and resource equity-deserving community members.

The present study seeks to further mobilize calls for action to address experiences of racism in the classroom. While we entered this study with the goal of cultivating safer classroom spaces within the School of Social Work, specifically by integrating students' perspectives and suggestions into curriculum development and instruction, we also sit and grapple with the potential impossibilities of truly creating safety when pedagogy continues to be Eurocentric and imbued with whiteness, as many students have indicated (Barrett, 2010; Do, 2020; Gregory, 2021; Keane & Joseph, 2017; Owen, 2020; Shank, 2020; Vanderleeuw, 2018). We also stumbled into exploring the pervasiveness of Eurocentricity and whiteness beyond the School of Social Work as we found that many students in other faculties and departments at McMaster—and beyond—were eager to have this conversation. Merging the themes outlined in the literature and our own research about how current classroom practices facilitate learning at the expense of marginalized persons, we seek to mobilize these discussions to make concrete suggestions about how classrooms can shift toward safety for racialized students. Specifically, our recommendations address educators and administrators who have the power to make material changes to course structure and instruction.

As we embark on commemorating 50 years of service at the MacPherson Institute, it is imperative to reflect on the challenges of working within a colonial education system that has perpetrated ongoing harm against marginalized persons living and working in these spaces. Recognizing these violent histories and committing to addressing them through tangible action is a necessary piece of teaching and learning and (re)imagining ways forward that strive for inclusive excellence. As McMaster University's (2021) new teaching and learning strategy places renewed emphasis on "inclusive excellence," our project directly engages with efforts to facilitate the conditions by which Black, Indigenous, and racialized students[1] can be more readily reflected, included, and cared for in pedagogy and instruction (al Shaibah, 2020).

BACKGROUND: STUDENTS' ANTI-RACISM WORK IN MCMASTER'S SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

As both of us are long-time students in the School of Social Work, the purpose of this project was to extend the critical work around race, racialized students' experiences, and conceptualizing safety at McMaster University that our academic colleagues in the School of Social Work have initiated over the past several years. Namely, Watt et al. (2014) provided a

brief historical account of United in Colour, the Black, Indigenous, and racialized student caucus group engaged in continued advocacy within the School of Social Work. Further, the RACE (Racialized students' Account of Classroom Experience) forum and report within the School of Social Work, led and authored by Roché Keane and Dr. Ameil Joseph in 2017, documented racialized students' experiences of systemic issues within the curriculum, microaggressions in the classroom and in the social work field, conflicting definitions of safety, and the lack of attention to intersectionality. The report's conclusions emphasized the need for (a) increased representation of Black, Indigenous, and racialized scholarship, authorship, lived experience, and voice in the curriculum; (b) the facilitation of safety in the classroom through direct efforts to redress racist microaggressions occurring in class dialogues; and (c) the application of critical, intersectional, and racially conscious perspectives to theoretical and practical education (Keane & Joseph, 2017).

Expanding on this work, in 2018, social work graduate student Glenda Vanderleeuw used anonymous, arts-based approaches to solicit students' perspectives of how McMaster University can make its learning spaces racially inclusive. The 32 anonymous responses submitted to a suggestion box held shared themes that overlap with and parallel those of the RACE report, including:

1. The need for racialized persons' lived experiences to be "mandatory" incorporations in courses and for this knowledge to be "held paramount and given as much space as other theories," with specific attention to "confluence and racial trauma."
2. The need for instructors to "educate themselves and seek training on intervening when classrooms become an unsafe learning environment," rather than turning to the racialized student to undertake that labour. (Vanderleeuw, 2018)

In 2019, United in Colour was reignited to further take up and action this foundational work by pursuing material changes. United in Colour's co-facilitators have historically observed the same patterns and concerns among racialized students accessing United in Colour, including experiences of harm in the classroom causing mental and emotional strain; impacts on academic, personal, social, and professional identities; and feelings of un-belonging and isolation (Watt et al., 2014). The RACE report, the suggestion box, and the ongoing legacy of United in Colour initiated a conversation around racialized students' experiences specific to the School of Social Work and organized solidarity-building within the school. However, tangible and action-oriented resolutions to address the harms that students of colour were experiencing were far and few between, as evidenced by the ongoing and paralleled narratives of students year after year.

Therefore, in the 2019–2020 academic year, United in Colour's co-facilitators (Renata Hall and Fatemah Shamkhi) aimed to mobilize these narratives beyond the School of Social Work to support university-wide conversation and identify actions to acknowledge and address racialized students' learning experiences across McMaster University. Partnering with Dr. Ameil Joseph and Maddie Brockbank, United in Colour received funding from the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation, and Excellence in Teaching's Student Partners Program to

further this work. Ange Bitwayiki and Valerie Nwaokoro joined the research team to conduct a tangible, action-oriented study of racialized students' experiences and ideas regarding how classrooms can be safer. What differentiates our project from previous work within the School of Social Work is the goal of soliciting the verbal accounts of students of colour spanning all faculties at McMaster University to sufficiently integrate them into tangible change.

LITERATURE REVIEW: WHITENESS, RACIST MICROAGGRESSIONS, AND SAFE(R) SPACES

Existing literature explores how racism is embedded within the Western, Eurocentric academic space. While many postsecondary institutions attempt to positions themselves as inclusive, culturally attentive/safe, and diverse—which mirrors Canada's myth of the "mosaic," where insidious experiences of racism and violence that remain a persistent issue for racialized persons are obscured by national claims of inclusivity and diversity (Pillay, 2015; Skerrett, 2008)—the ongoing narratives presented by racialized students, staff, and faculty indicate that the educational space continues to centre whiteness and subvert marginalized identities (Brunsma et al., 2013; Hytten & Adkins, 2002; Montgomery, 2013). While there has been work undertaken by select instructors and faculty to decentre Western epistemological approaches to pedagogy (e.g., through alternative assignment structures, evolving syllabi, and claims of "decolonizing" the curriculum, among other methods—see Dei, 2016; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011), there continues to be a gap in providing a thorough and sufficient historiographical account of education and its links to projects of capitalism, colonialism, and racism (Gregory, 2021; Henry et al., 2017; Mahtani, 2004; Sonn, 2008). Of paramount concern in recent years are the covert and overt manifestations of harm in classroom settings and their impacts on the cultivation of safe(r) pedagogical spaces, as Canadian postsecondary education maintains its roots in colonization and racism, which often reinscribes and rewards Western ways of knowing (Gregory, 2021; Jeyasingham, 2012; Mueller & Feagin, 2014; Sonn, 2008; Yee & Dumbrill, 2003). Our literature review below aims to illuminate the entrenchment and pervasiveness of whiteness and microaggressions in post-secondary education to assist in identifying barriers and considerations for safe(r) classroom spaces.

Whiteness

Pedagogical development and facilitation, which also encapsulates the curriculum and best practices for teaching, is often informed by whiteness. Here, the concept of whiteness refers to, in its simplest terms, "dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of colour" (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 1983). For example, educators may teach about "others," "differences," or "margins" when facilitating discussion of diverse topics, with little or no attendance to the intersecting identities and experiences diverse populations hold, or they may subscribe to additive and individualized models of intersectionality (Brunsma et al., 2012; DiAngelo, 2006; Hytten & Adkins, 2002; Joseph, 2015; Montgomery, 2013; Sonn, 2008). Additive models of intersectionality refer to discussions, activities, and reflections that silo identity markers and remove them from historical context/origin. For example, the "power flower" or the "privilege walk," two activities that have become popularized in anti-oppressive education, have been critiqued for the ways in which they depict gender as separate from race,

disability as separate from class, et cetera. This approach risks erasing and collapsing unique experiences of oppression experienced by communities (e.g., the nuances and differences within categories) and removing identity from the interlocking systems and structures that facilitate these experiences (e.g., white, colonial, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy) (Joseph, 2015). By not unpacking what it actually means to be part of a dominant, namely white, culture, whiteness is depicted as a static, monolithic social location or experience instead of a structural standpoint that is differentially and contextually achieved, practiced, and assumed in society (Brunsma et al., 2012; Hytten & Adkins, 2002; Sonn, 2008).

Part of what makes whiteness so difficult to identify, name, and challenge within academia is its ability to remain invisible to white educators, practitioners, and students, thus permeating the physical and intellectual space and utilizing its normative structure to protect itself from redress (Kandaswamy, 2007; Kohli, 2008; Mueller & Feagin, 2014; Sonn, 2008). The predominantly white institution (PWI) is described as the composition of an organization, system, and/or structure where the majority of faculty, instructors, senior administrators, and—in some cases—students are white. In a PWI, the curriculum is structured and approved by other PWIs and the majority of course content is authored by white academics. PWIs, while a term often applied in the American context, are also visible in emerging reports from Canadian universities, where—even when the student body is described as diverse—university leadership is largely white (see Johnson et al., 2020; Smith, 2018; Smith, 2019). Within these experiences of PWIs, whiteness becomes further entrenched and rendered invisible, natural, and normal, thus leading to "colour-blind" spatial and curricular walls protecting and reinforcing a pedagogy of whiteness (Brunsma et al., 2012; Hytten & Adkins, 2002; Montgomery, 2013).

Microaggressions

According to Sue et al. (2009), microaggressions are commonplace, daily implicit and explicit verbal, behavioural, and/or environmental expressions that cause harm and are hostile, derogatory, and negative in nature toward a person or group of people. Racial microaggressions in the classroom have been well-documented, with literature identifying several shared themes. Racial microaggressions (a) rely upon and communicate stereotypes and assumptions about specific groups of people or racialized communities more broadly, regardless of delivery and intent; (b) can present as a response to discomfort, fragility, and power that can be cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural; (c) are imbued within pedagogy and the classroom structure and result in cultural misrepresentation, misappropriation, and erasure; and (d) occur before, during, and after "difficult dialogues" in the classroom about identity, racism, and power, often rooted in stereotype-dependent harmful debates (Brown et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Hubain et al., 2016; Malone & Barabina, 2008; McGee, 2016; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ong et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2009). Racial microaggressions then impose the following impacts on racialized students: they (a) implicitly and explicitly demand that racialized students educate others about their identities and experiences through disclosure, tokenization, and being "put on the spot"; (b) facilitate unchallenged surveillance, scrutiny, and questioning of racialized students; and (c) operate to

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further isolate and marginalize racialized students and facilitate poor physical, mental, cultural, and social health outcomes (Brown et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Hubain et al., 2016; Malone & Barabina, 2008; McGee, 2016; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018; Ong et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2009).

The presentations of microaggressions and their impacts on racialized students are further influenced by instructors' willingness, ability, and skill to intervene or discomfort, anxiety, or disengagement (Hubain et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2009). While the literature has noted various manifestations of racist microaggressions, ranging from allegedly "well-meaning" comments about racialized students' intellect, identity, and appearance to "straight-up aggression" (Hollingsworth et al., 2018, p. 99), both expressions of microaggressions leave racialized students feeling embarrassed, angry, distressed, and unsafe (Brown et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Hubain et al., 2016; Kandaswamy, 2007; Malone & Barabina, 2008; McGee, 2016; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2014; Ong et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2009).

Safe(r) spaces

In response to these burgeoning concerns about racist microaggressions, educators have become interested and invested in the notion of classrooms becoming "safer spaces." Safe(r) educational spaces are described as a fluid, dynamic, and contextual classroom climate predicated on (a) cultivating an ability to take risks and be honest; (b) fostering and sustaining a nonjudgmental, respectful, and open sense of community; (c) exploring and working through conflict; (d) using safety as a means to enhance student learning outcomes; and (e) recognizing safety as an ethical responsibility for both educators and students (Barrett, 2010; Garran & Rasmussen, 2014; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Quaye & Chang, 2012). According to a survey conducted by Holley and Steiner (2005), 97% of 112 undergraduate and graduate social work-student respondents indicated that having a safer classroom environment was very or extremely important to their learning; 32% of the respondents were from equity-seeking groups in relation to race and ethnicity.

However, it is important to also note that conceptualizations of safer spaces can conflict depending on students' and instructors' identities and social positionings (Garran & Rasmussen, 2014; Quaye & Chang, 2012). In a study exploring and comparing students' perspectives of safe(r) spaces, Garran and Rasmussen (2014) found that students from dominant social groups and positionings (e.g., those who were white, non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual, etc.) defined safety in much different ways than students from nondominant positionings (e.g., those who were racialized, disabled, trans or non-binary, queer, etc.). Namely, nondominant students suggested that the classroom could never be safe for them as they were frequently put on the spot, told that their emotional reactions were irrational, forced to educate others and speak on behalf of their marginalized identity marker, and stereotyped. In contrast, dominant students framed safety as the ability to make mistakes, take risks, and avoid being attacked, judged, misunderstood, or shut down by their peers (Garran & Rasmussen, 2014). As Garran and Rasmussen (2014) conclude, "the very nature of the dominant group of students' concerns reflects privilege" (p. 407).

THEORETICAL & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

It was important to choose a theoretical grounding that honours the lived experiences and voices of students of colour, while simultaneously offering a methodological and action-oriented avenue for change. We drew on critical race theory (CRT), which has been adapted and used to understand racialized persons' disparaging and disproportionate experiences of racism, harm, and marginalization across sites of compounding sites of oppression (e.g., ableism, cisheterosexism, etc.), in various social, professional, and institutional contexts, such as law, healthcare, and especially education (Dei & Johal, 2005; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

CRT is grounded in the following central tenets and assumptions that shape our methodology and inquiry: (a) racism is foundationally and inextricably linked to Western and Canadian ways of life; (b) race is a social construct that creates tangible and inequitable experiences for people of colour; (c) dominant ideologies of race neutrality, colour-blindness, and fallacies of objectivity must be deconstructed and interrogated; and (d) inquiry must focus on the historic and contemporary patterned experiences of systemic and institutional racism, such as those lived by students of colour across McMaster University, to create informed recommendations (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In line with CRT, our project aimed to (a) create a shared space where students of colour can have their stories valued and heard; (b) gather the insights of a diverse group of students, across constructed racial categories and academic disciplines, to understand how oppression, racism, and other experiences of "unsafety" occur in various spaces and stages of academia; (c) draw forward these students' perspectives, narratives, and insights regarding how these experiences can be better addressed; and (d) create space for counter-stories to emerge. A counter-story, as defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), refers to an oppositional, critical, and experientially informed narrative from those who occupy racial identities that counters Eurocentric assumptions and discourses around constructed racial and oppressed groups. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), qualitative data collection aligns well with CRT as it seeks to uncover shared, partial, and erased histories via creating space for marginalized persons to share personal narratives and experiences of racism.

In January 2020, our study was reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) (protocol #2458). Participants were recruited via social media and emails sent to administrators for circulation through departmental and faculty mailing lists. All 10 participants that reached out to express interest in participating in the study were included. In February 2020 (pre-COVID shutdowns), we conducted an in-person qualitative focus group with these undergraduate and graduate Black, Indigenous, and racialized students from across various faculties and departments at McMaster. Participants were offered refreshments and fare for transportation as tokens of appreciation for participating. The focus group spanned close to 3 hours in length and was facilitated by four members of the research team, all of whom are students of colour at McMaster University. Facilitators responded to participants' comments and shared their own stories, which often prompted further engagement from participants and allowed for the production of the counter-story at the heart of our analysis. Upon completion, the audio recording of the focus group was transcribed by members of the research team and

subsequently anonymized. Our team followed Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) approach to thematic analysis to organize and analyze the data, which bridges CRT with qualitative data analysis via exploring majoritarian and counter-narratives emerging from participants' accounts.

FINDINGS

Through our process, we sought to highlight the language, lived experiences, and voices of students of colour.[2] We identified the following themes: (a) systemic issues with pedagogy and instruction, (b) uncompensated and unrecognized labour in the classroom, (c) classroom experiences of harm, and (4) long-term emotional and academic impacts.

Systemic issues with pedagogy and instruction: Colour-blindness and racial erasure

The systemic and pedagogical issue of colour-blindness and racial erasure emerged from the discussion. Participants provided several examples of how instructors and faculty purposely positioned themselves as colour-blind to justify a lack of interference in classroom dynamics and discussion when topics of race arose. These examples allowed for a discussion around how colour-blindness then becomes the foundation for other systemic issues that students of colour experience, including the centrality of whiteness. Participants identified these dynamics by acknowledging a lack of readings, theories, and critical discussions built into the curriculum, as well as a lack of holding instructors accountable for refreshing their course materials and teaching methods from a standpoint that is reflective of the nuanced experiences of students of colour. Two participants discussed this theme in the quote below. All participants are identified by pseudonyms in this chapter.

Lauren: I think, yeah, that's also another conversation, like, who decides what's mandatory and what's not? Like, why is it not mandatory to learn about race or disability or mental illness? It's just, like, bizarre.

Farha: Yeah, I agree. So you were talking about how whenever we ask profs to talk about race or bring up race, they're kind of, like, "I don't want to talk about it because I'm white." But whenever it's, like, a paid [consultation or administrative] kind of position. . . you know what I mean? They'll gladly take up that role because they can control that narrative. And when there are, like, racialized faculty that can be teaching it, they [white faculty] won't give up their space.

Uncompensated and unrecognized labour in the classroom

Uncompensated and unrecognized labour—the extra work that students undertake outside any potential paid role (e.g., as a teaching assistant or research assistant) to educate and/or support their peers, challenge racism in the classroom, and offer solutions to these issues—was also central to our discussions. There are often different expectations, demands, barriers, and concerns regarding this labour between undergraduate- and graduate-student

experiences. Rochelle described how these labour demands emerge and their injustice as follows:

> I think in the classroom, the learning that happens, like, is often on the backs of the people of colour and it ends up being the decision in the moment of, like, am I gonna take the extra time and energy and effort, put my own story, my own energy and effort on the line so that I can educate people? And I think, mostly, Black, Indigenous, people of colour decide to take on that work with the hope of, "I don't want future students to go through what I'm going through." And I think that the white professors, particularly, rely on the students of colour to do that work because they're not doing it themselves. And, in my experience, they've played that card, "oh, like, because I'm white, I don't feel like I can speak on issues of race, or anything like that." And I think that's not good enough because, ultimately, it comes down to who has the power in the room and it's not up to the students of colour to respond. It's not up to the students of colour to explain why something is harmful or violent.

Participants highlighted the experience of being the only racialized voice and representation in their classroom and the onus and responsibility that this dynamic placed on them for ensuring racial identity is meaningfully integrated into course content. As racialized students, participants faced a collective expectation to take up informal teaching responsibilities, consultation roles, and committee/peer-support positions inside and outside of the classroom. As a result, racialized students are forced into tense, awkward, and harmful positions of educating peers and faculty on race, which often manifests in unpaid work facilitating and leading interpersonal work, feedback, and curriculum development. Participants emphasized that professors should be mindful of these dynamics by proactively engaging in the work to address racism in the classroom rather than expecting racialized students to undertake the labour of doing so. Uncompensated and unrecognized labour is further complicated by the instructor's power to govern classroom dynamics and discussion, which participants identified as allowing instructors to "opt-out" whenever they were uncomfortable or unwilling to intervene.

Classroom experiences of harm

Participants' daily experiences of harm in the classroom were interwoven throughout the entirety of our focus group. Namely, various microaggressions—including playing the "devil's advocate" and invalidating racialized students' reactions to racism—were identified as significant harms shaping their experiences. Students provided examples of how harm was reproduced by white professors and students being misinformed, offensive, ignorant, and intentionally combative by invalidating and challenging the lived experiences of students of colour:

> Farha: I've had situations where people would say something to be devil's advocate and, because it's so violent, I literally have cried in class, which feels so

humiliating even though we know, like, vulnerability is not a weakness and all that shit, but still, like, it feels embarrassing to fucking cry in front of people.

Whitney: And the institution doesn't support that.

Farha: Yeah! And what I've literally heard people say, like, after I've broken down in class is, "well, it's because I'm right and she's getting defensive." You know what I mean? [noises of agreement] And that's how embedded it is in the culture, I guess? Um, where no one even sees that it's so violent, that the reason I can't respond to you, like, I physically can't because just hearing what you're saying is so fucked up.

The expectation to respond and contribute during discussions of racially charged topics in the classroom targets students of colour and perpetuates experiences of microaggressions, tokenization, and having to defend experiences of racism and identities. Students of colour are then put in the position to be exposed to adverse reactions, emotions, and conversation from both students and faculty. This process of racialized students being forced to call in, which refers to privately speaking with someone about their behaviour to educate them about its impacts, and/or respond to these harms further continues to shape the mischaracterization and stereotyping of racialized students where they are profiled as aggressive, combative, or distracting.

Long-term emotional and academic impacts

Participants reported the long-term impacts of defending themselves, their identities, and their experiences in the classroom as leading to sustained racialized trauma (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Hargons et al., 2022). They expressed pervasive feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, invalidation, anger, anxiety, isolation, and invisibility and long-term impacts including a negative effect on grades, lack of involvement and participation in the classroom, decreased attendance and concentration, lack of cultivation of community and friendships, and an inability to feel safe in consulting and confiding in faculty. Two participants elaborated on the multiple impacts of these racialized traumas as bleeding across life and school domains:

Cara: That's a big thing they miss too, is the impact, you know? The impact is not just an isolated situation where it stays there, you know? It impacts you in different ways. For me, it impacted how to even study. I was isolated, I felt like my peers were not my peers . . . it's like, I guess I'm alone in this? Just the anxiety . . . the trauma of it—they don't get it.

Ahmed: And the way it bleeds into other aspects of your life and throws you off, where it's like, "oh, why am I so angry, more on-edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop?" It's because of, like, the constant unease in the school environment.

The resounding message from our discussion is that a lack of sufficient and thoughtful consideration of race in the classroom reproduces unsafe experiences for students of colour

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and carries a tremendous impact on their overall well-being. This lack of safety is present in interpersonal relationships with white counterparts in the classroom, in interactions with professors and faculty, and in the presentation and reception of the curriculum. The collective experiences of racialized students' within white pedagogies produced a counter-story that challenges the narrative of diversity and cultural attentiveness that is often put forth by postsecondary institutions.

DISCUSSION

Our study affirms and builds on prior recommendations from racialized students at McMaster University and beyond. The notion of uncompensated and unrecognized labour that students engage in to educate faculty members and peers indicates systemic issues in the creation and curation of curriculum. Central to this discussion was the concept of racial erasure in discussions in the classroom and in curricula and course construction, which results from a pedagogy being centered around whiteness (Brunsma et al., 2012; DiAngelo, 2006; Hytten & Adkins, 2002; Joseph, 2015; Montgomery, 2013; Sonn, 2008).

The prevalence and persistence of whiteness in the classroom was found to create nuanced experiences of harm, which had specific long-term emotional implications for students of colour. This reality, much like previous research posits, was a direct result of microaggressions in the classroom that facilitate consistent instances of racial trauma, marginalization, and discrimination. These findings confirm the need for safer spaces in academia as the long-term emotional impacts on students of colour clearly affect self-reported retention, grades, class engagement, and attendance and feelings of inclusion, community, and belonging (Gregory, 2021; Jeyasingham, 2012; Mueller & Feagin, 2014; Sonn, 2008; Yee & Dumbrill, 2003).

As we grounded our themes in the principles of CRT, the production of racialized students' counter-stories came to life, thus challenging the safe and culturally diverse majoritarian narrative that postsecondary institutions market and put forward in philosophy, mandate, and recruitment (Dei & Johal, 2005; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The counter-story presented by students of colour is that Western education is not a site of safety; rather, it is often viewed as a space that could never truly be safe for marginalized persons. This disconnect occurs interpersonally, systemically, institutionally, and structurally and thus illuminates the harm, labour, and neglect that students of colour learn to navigate and cope with throughout their postsecondary experiences. The shared experience of attending a white-dominated classroom and institution was identified as a generalized experience for students of colour across colonial educational institutions:

> I don't think that everything we're talking about is, like, Mac-specific. It's most definitely just, like, higher education because I do have friends in different schools and all our experiences do mirror each other's. Having placeholders like equity and inclusion just to make the school look good happens in most schools. (Luis)

It is clear the perspectives indicated from our pool of participants are not siloed and, rather,

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reflect deeply ingrained institutional issues that inform classroom dynamics and procedure.

Educators occupy powerful positions in developing pedagogy and teaching students, which then creates educational experiences and opportunities that have lasting effects on the direction and trajectory of students. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, we understand universities as inherently colonial institutions built on foundations of whiteness and Eurocentricity; in this, we wonder if postsecondary institutions can ever truly be safe or accountable to marginalized community members. However, we also believe that universities and their representatives have the ability make these spaces safer and more equitable, where every student can feel heard, represented, and protected and can flourish and obtain their educational goals. We turn next to explore these possibilities.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: HOW DO WE CREATE SAFETY?

Anti-racism work requires financial, philosophical, and methodological resources and investment into creating safety for students of colour: a pedagogical reparation, if you will. As we have identified through literature and projects before us in addition to our study, there are opportunities to fill gaps to cultivate and foster safer educational experiences for students of colour. A core goal of our project and key to CRT principles is the intentional creation of actionable change-oriented suggestions for the education system that are directly designed and derived from the voices and experiences of students of colour. Participants in our study made recommendations for addressing harms and cultivating safer classrooms that were clear, tangible, and easy to implement and that addressed both interpersonal and systemic issues.

The most salient suggestion was to educate faculty members, staff, and non-racialized students in navigating discussions and discourse on race, racism, and other forms of oppression. Rooted in a discussion in our focus group around intent versus impact, it was clear that a primary factor in safer classrooms is an effort to create spaces for educational, proactive, and progressive conversations around race and racism where non-racialize folks recognized that, regardless of curious and well-meaning intentions, the impact of their language and behaviours can be potentially harmful. Here, a focus on facilitating a shared sense of accountability for missteps, mistakes, or harms and possibilities for unlearning historically harmful languages, understanding roots of microaggressive language, and engaging in equitable and safe social interactions is key. As Chantelle stated, "instructors need to be more proactive about the supports that are available rather than waiting for something to happen and then being like 'how do we fix this?'" Participants encouraged the university to supply instructors with tools and recurring educational opportunities on how to navigate conversations about race from white positionalities and increase comfort with seeing and addressing colour in the classroom.

Participants' recommendations largely reflected those posed in contemporary works, such as Yancy's framework for challenging whiteness in the classroom (Yancy, 2017). This process requires pushing beyond the popularly deployed "unpacking the knapsack of privilege" (McIntosh, 1989) and other microlevel (individually and interpersonally situated) diversity and inclusion trainings to shift toward the intentional decentralization of Western epistemology and knowledge. This shift will create space for non-Western ways of thinking and knowing, such as

the lived experience and storytelling of racialized people. Decentering whiteness in the classroom is core to crafting safety in pedagogy as it challenges the notion of colour-blindness and racial erasure while making space for the representation and inclusion of literature, discourse, opinions, and materials from the margins (Joseph, 2015; Joseph, 2017). We can decenter whiteness by purposefully integrating conversations about race, racism, and racialization into mandatory[3] course curriculum and professor training,[4] thus ensuring all students and faculty can engage and reflect with racially diverse materials and dialogues. Dialogue provides a unique opportunity for white counterparts, at all levels in teaching and learning, to have potentially harmful beliefs and perspectives challenged in safer ways, while allowing students of colour to feel represented and supported in curriculum and class structure (Joseph, 2015; Joseph, 2017).

Further, participants in our study emphasized the need for an increase in representation of racialized identities in faculty positions and greater diversity among student representatives on committees and in meaningful faculty conversations about responding to instances of harm in the classroom. However, these recommendations require material investment in anti-racism work. Institutional supports can be strengthened by ensuring avenues for white instructors to reflect on course content and engage in consultation with compensated racialized students and scholars.

Efforts to facilitate inclusivity must challenge the fallacy that students of colour are "protected"[5] and separated from general society in academic spaces through the cultivation of safer spaces and move towards recognizing the dual positionality of being both a student and a person of colour when functioning within and outside of academia. For example, Dua illustrated how their identity, impactful current events, and academic expectations are interwoven rather than separate:

> Remember last year when the Christchurch shooting in New Zealand happened and . . . I'm Muslim, right? So, the entire day I just felt like I was in a nightmare. I didn't know how to process my emotions. I had an assignment due, [but I'd] used up all my MSAFs [McMaster Student Absence Forms], and I'm just sitting in the library, like, trying to do this assignment and . . . I know for a fact I cannot email my professor and be like, "there's a mass shooting that happened across the world, and I can't finish this assignment right now." You just have to push through it knowing that there aren't spaces for you to talk about stuff like that. You know it won't be received, you know that they can't relate to it because they've never been in this position.

This comment provides an example of a unique opportunity for faculties and instructors to respond to, hold space for, reflect on, check in with, and acknowledge racialized experiences and their impacts on racialized learners beyond the classroom space. Other forms of recognition by the university and its employees were also suggested, such as consistency and intentionality in addressing historic and current events that may be impacting students in the classroom. For example, thoughtful, consistent, and discussion-based presentation of land acknowledgements (Joseph, 2015).

Further, faculty and administration must focus on resources to offer to students of colour to ensure that they are supported, including formalized peer support, wellness, and spaces dedicated to racialized students specifically, which were seen amongst our participants as a primary pathway to safety and equity within pedagogy. These spaces should be intentionally built and funded to create physical safer spaces for students of colour to facilitate peer support and expression outside of unfunded, regulated clubs or caucus groups. These physical spaces require material and financial investment so that students do not continue undertaking the uncompensated labour of finding, funding, and building these spaces themselves. At McMaster, we are currently seeing the benefits of the funded Black Student Success Centre and the ways in which it has intentionally cultivated a safer space for Black students to gather. A multi-level approach such as this does not come without work; it requires attention to the nuanced and compounding intersectional identities of the student population and how these impact learning experiences and interpersonal dynamics in postsecondary institutions.

Beyond these seemingly small steps to building safer and more inclusive spaces on campus and in classrooms, we aim to centre the need for liberation from oppressive conditions. A final remark from Chantelle at the end of our focus group aptly summarizes the importance of this work: "this conversation was actually liberating." Here, we see recognition of the ways in which naming experiences in a shared space with racialized students provided space for imagining a future we have not seen yet in postsecondary education: one where racialized students do not experience violence. We do not believe that this liberation can necessarily happen without complete and total overhaul of the current colonial, white-supremacist, Eurocentric postsecondary educational system; however, we believe that the recommendations posed by students in our study and those that came before us offer avenues for carefully and intentionally dismantling this system, brick by brick.

From this study, we created a web-based resource consolidating information, resources, and recommendations for all educational stakeholders about how to build safer and more accountable classroom and campus spaces. To learn more about our project and what we created, visit Learning in Colour.

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NOTES

1. In this chapter, we use "Black, Indigenous, and racialized students," "racialized students," and "students of colour" interchangeably. We understand that there is complexity and nuance in the meaning of these terms and acknowledge the risks of collapsing race into one category and/or diluting the social construction of race in relationship with the lived realities of racism. It is to be of note that we use these terms interchangeably based on (a) one author's experience of using these terms and (b) the various ways that students participating in our study chose to identify themselves, which often involved various uses of these terms.
2. We recognize that racialized students' experiences differ depending on their identity. Specifically, we note that experiences of anti-Black racism differ from Islamophobia and anti-Indigenous racism, et cetera. However, to protect the identities of participants, we do not identify participants based on the specific forms of racism they experience. Additionally, as this focus group largely focused on shared experiences of racism, we focus on shared themes despite the realities that many experiences of racism are unique to specific groups.
3. We recognize that mandatory inclusion of discussions about race/racism in courses will differ depending on level of education. Here, we put forth that undergraduate discussions of racism offering a diverse and expansive range of theoretical and practical learning about how students can engage in anti-racism in the field and in the classroom. In research-intensive graduate programs, we see inclusion of race/racism as offering students extensive information about critical race theories and anti-racist methodologies, which is something that participants emphasized as currently lacking in their respective graduate experiences (across disciplines).
4. While we firmly believe that considerations and discussions of race and racism should be embedded within all courses in all programs, we also want to acknowledge that educators with no prior experience in anti-racist or anti-oppressive scholarship, research, and community work should not be expected to deliver this content, nor should they claim expertise in these areas after training/discussion. Rather, we suggest that guest speakers with anti-racist and decolonial expertise and experience be invited into courses to deliver this content, consult on course syllabi, and be compensated financially for their contributions.
5. Here, we are referring to racist discourses that underpin stereotypes about racialized students as benefitting from differential treatment (e.g., "affirmative action") and emerging claims that "free speech" is limited by the identification of "protected" groups (for examples see Clark et al., 2014; West, 2012).

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