

Banality of Privilege: Examining Why EDI Is Under Assault Through the Case of the Ontario Equity Policy

Awad Ibrahim, University of Ottawa
Nettie Boivin, University of Ottawa

ABSTRACT

Grounded in extensive interviews with teachers and school-level administrators in Ontario, Canada, this article proposes *banality of privilege* as a primary reason for why EDI has turned into a performative act, which facilitated its attack. To make banality of privilege concrete, we suggested three forces and six tenets that helped us in our data analysis. Collected through interviews with teachers and school administrators between 2024–2025, the data show that embedded institutional barriers are the frontline of all issues that hinder effective communication, implementation, and administration of EDI policy; and that, among these barriers, the primary obstacle to a meaningful EDI implementation is not financial constraint, but a systemic lack of buy-in or interest convergence, specifically at the leadership level. This lack of buy-in from leadership, we show, trickles down to staff and the broader school community, resulting in low engagement and missed opportunities for meaningful inclusion. This not only renders EDI performative, but it gives reasons for why it is under attack. For those of us who are working toward a just world, we conclude, we need to be mindful of this situation and address the concerns of the EDI critics.

Keywords: EDI, banality of privilege, counternarrative, interest convergence, lived experience

RÉSUMÉ

S'appuyant sur des entretiens approfondis menés avec des enseignant[e]s et des administrations scolaires en Ontario (Canada), cet article avance que la « banalité du privilège » est l'une des principales raisons expliquant pourquoi l'équité, diversité et inclusion (EDI) est devenue un acte performatif, facilitant ainsi sa remise en question. Pour concrétiser cette notion de banalité du privilège, nous identifions

trois forces et six principes qui ont guidé notre analyse de données. Recueillies lors d'entrevues avec des enseignant[e]s et des administrations scolaires entre 2024 et 2025, les données montrent que les obstacles institutionnels profondément ancrés constituent la principale source de difficultés entravant la communication, la mise en œuvre et l'administration efficaces des politiques d'EDI, et que le principal obstacle à sa mise en œuvre efficace n'est pas la contrainte financière, mais un manque systémique d'adhésion ou de convergence d'intérêts, notamment au niveau de la direction. Nous démontrons que ce manque d'adhésion de la direction se répercute sur le personnel et la communauté scolaires au sens large, entraînant un faible engagement et des occasions d'inclusion significative manquées. Cela rend non seulement l'EDI performatif, mais explique aussi pourquoi il fait l'objet de critiques. Pour ceux d'entre nous qui œuvrent pour un monde plus juste, nous concluons qu'il est nécessaire d'être conscient de cette situation et de répondre aux préoccupations des détracteurs de l'EDI.

Mots clés : équité, diversité et inclusion (EDI), banalité du privilège, contre-récit, convergence d'intérêts, vécu expérientiel

INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a larger, longitudinal study funded by the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC). Conducted between 2018–2023, with a year-and-a-half interruption because of COVID-19, the study is a partnership between the University of Toronto, Western University, and University of Ottawa. It is the first, most comprehensive and province-wide study of the Ontario equity policy¹ (2013). It covered all corners of the province, where University of Toronto oversaw southern and northern Ontario, Western University oversaw western Ontario, and we at the University of Ottawa oversaw eastern Ontario. Each site covered an average of eight public and Catholic, French-language, and English-language school boards, where the three sites (a) conducted an in-depth analysis of each of the school boards' equity policies as found on their websites, (b) surveyed 2,000 educators, and (c) conducted interviews with 200 teachers and school administrators.

It is worth noting that education is a provincial responsibility since Canada does not have a national department of education. As such, the 10 provinces and three territories develop their own curriculum, run their own schools, and are accountable for their success or failure. Roughly three times larger than the size of Germany, the province of Ontario, where this study was conducted, has 72 school boards (31 English public, 29 English Catholic, four French public, and eight French Catholic), which are governing the local delivery of education, focusing on student achievement, well-being, and financial stewardship.

Eastern Ontario has the highest concentration of French-speaking population in Ontario (Heller, 2011), so within the research partnership, we were the only one who conducted analysis, surveys, and interviews in French and English. Guided by a quantitative and qualitative data analysis, our empirical investigation examined relationships between the Ontario equity policy, its institutional interpretation and enactment, and classroom practices at the school level.

The University of Ottawa research team was composed of the principal investigator, a Black man with over 20 years of committed social justice work and anti-Black racism struggle; a White woman PhD student; a White woman PhD holder; and a woman of colour (of East Indian

1 See: <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policy-program-memorandum-119#:~:text=Related-,Summary%20of%20the%20strategy,a%20religious%20accommodation%20guideline>

descent) PhD holder. As a team, our beings and work are guided by an ethics of criticality, humility of the limit of what we know, and a struggle for a better world, which we are working to bring into existence. Guided by this set of ethics, no one in the team was able to join the write-up but the two authors of this article.

The major conclusion of our larger project analysis (which combines University of Toronto, Western University, and University of Ottawa) is this: The school boards that *owned* the Ontario equity policy were the school boards that had a clear, realistic, and implementable policy. Indeed, they held themselves accountable, which showed both in their reporting and in the many activities they conducted. By ownership, we are referring to a linguistic iteration and policy articulation that translated the policy into a comprehensible language that spoke to and about local realities; thus, turning the equity policy into an inspiration as opposed to directives. On the other hand, school boards that saw the *equity policy as directives* ended up doing the absolute bare minimum. In the latter context, genuine engagement and sustained commitment were hard to come by.

Discussing interviews conducted with teachers and administrators, in what follows, we intend to (a) mark (Ibrahim, 2025) and highlight the everyday, often-unnoticed practices that constitute what we are calling *banality of privilege* within educational institutions, a theoretical idea we explore in the next section, and (b) seek to understand how participants interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, focusing on process, understanding, and context. These interviews constitute our empirical data, which illustrate the different ways a banality of privilege and the lack of buy-in, especially from leadership, are primary obstacles toward fully realizing EDI implementation in Ontario's K–12 education system. We conclude by proposing policy changes and recommendations through what we are calling “the third way.”

BANALITY OF PRIVILEGE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We offer *banality of privilege* as a lens through which we are looking at our data collection, analysis, and findings, and as a way to think about why, despite EDI and all the social justice work that has been done, privilege persists and continues to be perpetuated. The idea of “banality” often refers to mundane or ordinary, but when it meets the syntax of privilege, it takes on a more nuanced meaning (McNeil, 2021). Our notion of banality of privilege is indebted to Richard R. W. Brooks's (2014) work around what he terms “banality of racial inequality.” Brooks based his ideas on Daria Roithmayr's (2014) work. For Brooks, banality of racial inequality refers to the idea that inequality is not just a matter of large-scale social structures or dramatic events, but is also deeply embedded in the everyday routines, practices, and mundane interactions of social life. It highlights how seemingly insignificant actions and choices contribute to the perpetuation of inequality, often without intent or malice.

“Banalities of inequality,” as Brooks (2014) explains using Roithmayr's wording, are “the everyday mundane determinations that reproduce social and economic differences along racial lines—and seeks a remedy” (p. 2630). Building on this definition, we see *banality of privilege* as the everyday, unintentional ways in which structural inequalities are reproduced and maintained, often through seemingly innocuous actions or decisions by educators, especially leaders in educational institutions. The understanding of this phenomenon is crucial because it hinders the effective implementation of EDI policies, thus perpetuating systemic barriers within particularly marginalized communities. This is evident in how policy documents address race and equity in general, often demonstrating what might be called *performative change*, where the emphasis is on showing what in essence is a surface change, rather than focusing on radical or substantive change (Ahmed, 2012; Ibrahim, in press). The performative nature of change ostensibly impacts not only how privilege is understood, but also in how it perpetuates and makes persistent structural disadvantages for generations (Roithmayr, 2014). This underscores the

need for leaders, not just teachers, to critically examine how their beliefs and values influence educational practice (Carlisle, 2010).

To help our analysis of the interviews we conducted with teachers and school administrators in Ontario, we made banality of privilege concrete by breaking it down into three forces (coloniality, globalization, and lived experience), which themselves are broken down into six tenets: permanence of privilege, privilege as property, critique of neo-liberalism, intersectionality, counternarrative, and lack of convergence (see Figure 1).

Coloniality

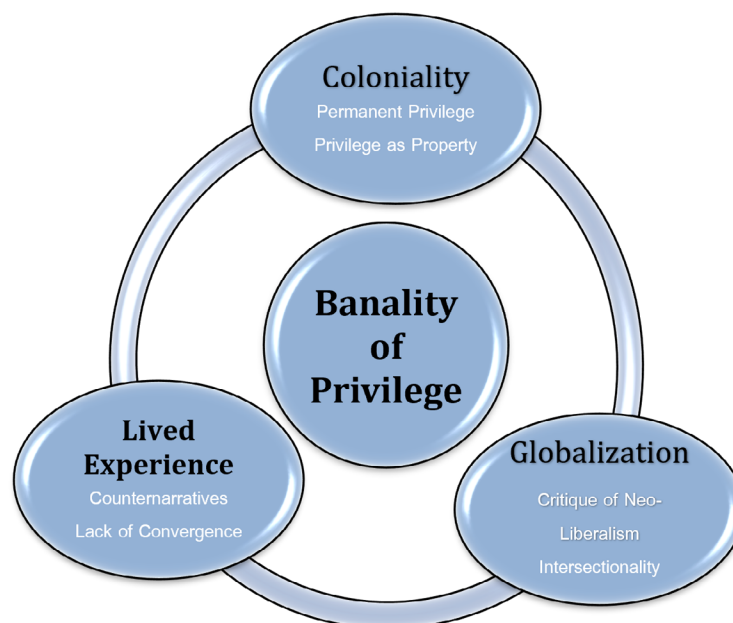
Representing socio-political institutional forces, coloniality is distinguished from colonialism. Colonialism refers to the brute, brutal, and naked political and military occupation, economic exploitation, and administrative control by European powers over much of the world (e.g., the British Raj or the Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru). Whereas coloniality, as Aníbal Quijano (2007) argues, refers to the fundamental concept that colonial domination did not end with the formal dissolution and dismantling of colonies.

Instead, it persists in the present day through entrenched power structures, knowledge systems, and ways of being that were established during the colonial period.

If coloniality leaves traces and thus influences power relation, labour, culture, and knowledge production, among others, then those who grow up within coloniality, unless conscious of it, may reproduce privilege and other colonial structures without intending to. This is how, according to critical race theory (see Capper, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ibrahim, 2015), *privilege (and even racism) is made permanent*. As such, privilege permeates all levels and all aspects of the education system, working closely with systemic racism to create a system that is oblivious to its complicity in reproducing its colonial history. This is why scholars emphasize that achieving equity requires dismantling entrenched power structures that sustain the colonial “them and us” dynamics (DiAngelo, 2018; Kymlicka, 2010). In the context of our research in Ontario, there is often an assumption that EDI policies alone will erode inequities over time (Pinto, 2012; Tarc et al., 2025). However, as we also saw in our interviews, without sustained reflection on everyday practices such as hiring,

Figure 1

Forces and Tenets Creating and Reinforcing Banality of Privilege



curriculum design, pedagogy, etc., privilege is reproduced, and structural inequality persists. The banality of privilege leads leaders to overlook the need for intentional and ongoing action.

If coloniality makes *privilege* permanent, it also confers advantages to some and excludes others, thus operating as *a form of property*. This is evident in how “achievement” and “smartness” are constructed and measured—often via standardized tests that reinforce White supremacy (Eizadirad, 2019; Shah et al., 2022). By situating itself as the centre of not only beauty but also “smartness,” Whiteness is thus turned into a property that grants societal benefits based on privileged racial identity (Harris, 2012). In Ontario, education has become a globalized commodity shaped by colonial and neo-liberal values, where Eurocentric curriculum treats Western knowledge as universal and marginalizes Indigenous and sub-altern epistemologies and entrenches privilege as institutional property (Battiste, 2013; Capper, 2015). This lack of incentive for leaders to decentre themselves and imagine others differently, particularly Black and Indigenous communities, contributes to a lack of genuine convergence with EDI efforts (Ibrahim, 2011).

Globalization

Representing socio-economic forces, globalization has built on colonial legacies. In doing so, it has used an instrument that could and should have been used for liberation and decolonization: education. Instead, education was, and continues to be, used to reinforce privilege through the international standardization of curriculum, assessment, and internationally accepted institutional evaluation such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment; see Kohn, 2021; Teodoro, 2022). These high-stakes exams, where educational leaders are pressured to meet their targets, are then bid against EDI efforts, thus marginalizing the latter and reinforcing the mythology of the neutrality of these exams and education in general (Butler et al., 2019).

The neutrality of exams and education is a foundational principle to the *neo-liberal framework*, where it is assumed that market forces are the determining factor in who succeeds and

why, thus masking persistent privilege (Appadurai, 1990; Butler et al., 2019; Merryfield, 2000). The work of Ebabuye and Asgedom (2023) shows clearly that first, both implicit or explicit curriculums continue to disadvantage minoritized students, and second, students are more motivated and successful when curricula reflect their cultures and ways of being. Despite this, integrating intentional studies on race and (White) privilege into curriculum remains challenging, especially for those in positions of privilege who may resist confronting their own roles in perpetuating inequality (Sawyer & Waite, 2021). As a result, these inequities remain embedded and are even normalized, allowing the banality of privilege to persist unchallenged in educational leadership and policy.

Shah et al. (2022) argue that privilege cannot be addressed through single-issue frameworks but instead requires an analysis that keeps intersectionality alive. Offering Ontario as an example, the authors explain that EDI efforts are often siloed, where schools may celebrate 2SLGBTQ+ Pride Month while neglecting racial disparities in discipline or achievement. This fragmented approach ignores how systems of oppression intersect, and leadership blind spots persist when principals from privileged backgrounds lack awareness of how race, class, gender, class, (dis)ability, etc. combine to marginalize students. Effective equity work demands that leaders recognize and address these overlapping inequities, rather than treating them as isolated issues.

Lived Experiences

Representing socio-emotional forces, lived experience is essential for decolonization and breaking down privilege, as it involves personal experiences and perspectives that inform one's understanding of systemic inequities. Since we cannot imagine what we do not know, EDI policies are more effectively implemented by leaders who have had lived experiences or are able to reflect deeply on other people's lived experiences, particularly in addressing racial and ethnic inequities (Sawyer & Waite, 2021). Without this, normative practices that perpetuate institutional privileged norms remain unchallenged (Daniel, 2018). Leaders must inhabit or

become aware of the realities and lived experiences of marginalized communities to intentionally address the interplay of (White) privilege and overcome normative practices (Styres, 2019). Intentionally and incessantly addressing the interplay of privilege is the only means to overcome normative practices (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2025; Waxman & Simms, 2016).

But our last sentence, according to Capper (2015), is more of a wish than an expression of reality. This is because of what Capper might call lack of “interest convergence,” where the interest of the dominant group supersedes all other interests. For Capper, interest convergence is a principle that asserts that social/racial justice has a higher probability of success if, and when, it aligns with dominant group interests. Rezai-Rashti et al. (2024) show that, in Ontario, leaders tasked with EDI implementation often lack either the lived experience or training to do so in any meaningful way, especially White leaders, resulting in performative compliance that fails to address systemic inequities. In the case of the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), Campbell (2021) explains, the framework omits any explicit reference to EDI, signalling that equity is not a core leadership competency. This persistent misalignment means that genuine equity work is sidelined unless it serves existing institutional interests.

Does this mean that the marginalized are doomed to silence or failure? The answer comes from critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ibrahim, 2015), which argues that, for the subaltern to speak (Spivak, 1988), the margin must be centred (Smith et al., 2011). This is done through *counternarratives*, where marginalized voices are centred to speak their own language, tell their own stories, and spell their own names. If not, the banality of privilege will reign supreme and persist through the uncritical acceptance of dominant narratives (Gasman et al., 2015; Harvey, 2014; Hode & Meisenbach, 2016). To be sure, lived experience is not a counternarrative in itself, and—to quote the Socratic dictum—an unexamined life is not worth living (see Plato, 399/2002). We put counternarrative within the domain of lived experience to show its potential; for example, when people are wide-awake and able to critically narrate their lived experience, especially marginalized voices, then we

are within the cartography of counternarrative. We know the latter can be based on fictions or intellectual exercise, but in our case, we are basing it on lived experience. Indeed, we locate the analysis in this article at the intersection of lived experience and counternarrative. Against this backdrop, in what follows, we enter a dialogic space (so to speak) where these three forces and six tenets are in a conversation with our study, thus becoming instrumental in our methodology, especially data collection, analysis, and findings.

METHODOLOGY

For this article, we make a distinction between methodology and methods, where the former refers to the overall naming or the lens used for data collection and analysis, and the latter refers to the techniques used for data collection (Ibrahim, 2015). We are deploying *counternarrative* as our methodology. As conceived by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), counternarrative is intentional in decentring the centre and “telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). For our part, we use counternarratives to interrogate stories of privilege and dominant narratives often taken as the natural order in education. In doing so, we not only question power and inequality but also call for a transformative and social justice framework that centralizes marginalized voices and ways of knowing and being (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2013).

Since our intent is to mark the everyday and understand participants’ interpretation, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) call this *inductive approach*: a bottom-up approach where analyses and conclusions are not pre-determined but are instead dependent on people’s narrative and interpretation (see also Durnova et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To gain a nuanced understanding of policy implementation, we explored the values, attitudes, and experiences of policy actors—including teachers and administrators—examining the relationships between equity policy, institutional interpretations, and classroom practices.

Methods

This article is the result of interviews conducted with 15 teachers and school administrators from two English-language school boards (one public and one Catholic); hence no mention of the French-language interviews here. These teachers were recruited through professional networks and research announcements. After ethics clearance, we began our recruitment with a flyer that was sent to all teachers in these two boards. In it, we explained the nature of the research project and that we would like to interview teachers and administrators about their experience with the equity policy. Except for one administrator who was recruited out of personal connection with the principal investigator, all 14 teachers came through this flyer. All 15 interviewees, including the administrator, were veteran teachers, with three self-identified males and 12 self-identified females. To express our appreciation, a gift card of \$25 was offered to

each of our interviewees. The interviews were a combination of in-person/online and individual/focus-group interviews.

We began by dividing the labour of transcription among the two authors of this article. The idea was, while transcribing, we started our analysis: themes started to emerge and we used different colours for themes. Using these colours and preliminary analysis, we read and re-read the participant quotes relevant to particular themes. We grouped different citations under different themes, and this was how we ended up with the themes discussed in this article. When themes solidified, we checked with our participants and asked for their take on our conclusions, and we then triangulated our conclusions with our survey data and policy analysis from the larger project. Because this is a bottom-up project, where our conclusions are based on the survey, policy analysis, and interviews, all is contextualized and any generalizability should be mindful of this contextual nature of analysis.

Table 1
Notes On Participants

Participant	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Notes
Jay	Male	Asian	Experienced teacher in vocational high school (HS)
Liz	Female	White	Experienced teacher of special education (HS)
Christine	Female	Black	Experienced teacher, member of 2SLGBTQ+ (HS)
Meredith	Female	White	Experienced teacher (HS)
Talia	Female	White	Experienced teacher (HS)
Frances	Female	White	Experienced teacher (HS)
Pierre	Male	Black	Experienced teacher, acting vice-principal
Sonia	Female	White	Experienced teacher of special education, technology, math
Vicky	Female	White	Experienced teacher (HS)
Shirley	Female	Black	Early-career teacher
Shelly	Female	White	Early-career teacher
Zakara	Female	Black	Experienced teacher, seconded to the school board (HS)
Rachelle	Female	Black	Experienced teacher, seconded to the school board (HS)
Adrienne	Female	Black	Experienced teacher, seconded to the school board (HS)
Tony	Male	Black	Experienced teacher and working to be vice-principal (HS)

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

STUDY FINDINGS

Privilege in Education: Who Should Address It?

We argued that privilege is a permanent feature of educational systems and structural institutions, deeply intertwined with systemic racism. This permanence is reinforced by a lack of access to resources and critical engagement with diverse viewpoints (see also Braithwaite, 2018; Sawyer & Waite, 2021). The educators we interviewed were conscious of both the existence and the workings of privilege in their schools and at the school-board level. They hold accountable the upper level of the school board and even the Ministry of Education for the disconnect between their desire to implement and put EDI into practice and the obstacles that are put in their way to make that possible. These obstacles are placed there not out of malice and bad intent, but out of reluctance and fear of the unknown; hence expressing the permanency of privilege. Put otherwise, those in positions of privilege can afford to take these decisions without being personally affected, and their lived experience gives them no sense of guilt or responsibility—after all, in their minds, they are just applying the law. Sonia summarized lots of these ideas:

Any attempt to make change is met with two types of things...resistance or a lack of engagement. Our school is fairly racialized...the engagement [with EDI and racial issues] is not really something that they're comfortable with or something they see the need to do. With resistance I have a fight to make this [engagement with EDI and racial issues] happen, but it's still what your school needs and it's getting a lot of recognition or benefit for that. So, the incentive to continue it sometimes is difficult, because it is worth it for the kids. It's worth it for the community. But from, I guess the emotional bandwidth, this is workload...you're kind of putting yourself out there as a person that does that, and sometimes that can be something that kind of becomes a target for some people.

First, one must note Sonia's use of "they"—who are "they"? Second, Sonia is making two very significant observations. On the one hand, EDI and engaging racial issues are not only important to all parties, but they are important even to those who are resisting them. The irony for Sonia is that, when the engagement with EDI takes place and it is successful, "they" are quick then to jump on the bandwagon and take credit for that success. Their reluctance stems from the fact that "they" see engaging with EDI and racial issues as extra work and may make them "a target for some people." As the collective narrative of this diverse group of teachers argues, this disconnect creates frustration amongst those who are working for change. The result, as Liz explains, is that students feel "overlooked" and therefore "don't matter." When decisions do not consider the privilege of the decision maker, they not only perpetuate banality of privilege but may perpetuate coloniality. This is why Jay argues:

Changes within our system require a change of mentality from our teachers, from our administrators, all the way up to our superintendents, and to the board. All the way up to the Ministry of Education. The board-superintendents are in charge of the implementation of this.

Jay is answering the earlier question of who "they" are. For Jay, the buck stops at the "board-superintendents'" doors. Since "they" are elected in Ontario, they may be "a target for some people," as Sonia described, especially those who will be de-privileged if radical implementation of EDI and racial issues are addressed in serious ways. Hence, we find ourselves facing a perpetuity of EDI as a performative act, where the saying (pronouncement, written policy, and declaration) replaces the doing (the actual implementation and meaningful and radical change). In their study in Ontario, Rezai-Rashti and her colleagues (2024) discussed examples of racialized leaders who, ironically, became gatekeepers only to maintain their privilege, which was associated with social class more than race or ethnicity.

Building on a similar argument to Jay, Shelly contends that—given the working of the banality of privilege where superintendents think their job

is simply to apply the law—compliance not only becomes the name of the game, but turns EDI into static reports on diversity without any actual change. For Shelly, equity requires persistence, long-term investment, creativity, courage, and thinking outside the box. Shelly put it thus:

The answer to equity comes in various forms and certain different things to achieve it. It's not just one thing and when you do it and all of a sudden equity exists. You gotta sometimes go off the books. The government and the administration have to show stats to the government. They think that if we just state that it's equity and we do a few things that this is a fix to everything.

Shelly did not want to stick to the analytic and the theoretical, so she offered a concrete example of thinking outside the box. In the same interview, Shelly proposed a portal that is accessible to all employees and teachers at the school board. This portal will act as a hub to access all EDI resources and materials (including policy, reports, stats, teaching materials, training, etc.), a one-stop shop that can also be used for transparency and accountability. Shelly explains:

I did actually bring forward to the people at the board level. We have, like, online platforms, like, for example, [a] literacy portal, and in that portal all of the resources that the board is putting out [are] in this portal. So, if you're looking for something, you just go back to that website. I said, we need that for equity and [diversity], we need a portal. I said, like, instead of having these equity blasts come out. We're constantly getting sent emails from parents to admin to this to colleagues, and it gets lost in the shuffle. Whereas if we, like, if I had a question about something that I was dealing with in my classroom, I'd be like, "Oh, there's a website, there's a portal," [and] I can just go to there and search up the resource that I need and it's all right there.

In sum, participants' narratives revealed that banality of privilege creates a discomfort and resistance to change. When that is the

case, privilege becomes invisible, and change becomes performative. In one case, Frances made a book recommendation for the library of their school. Frances was horrified by the male school administrator, who preemptively censored himself because he thought the superintendent would censor him. Frances explains:

I've made a suggestion about one book and the [male] administrator was like: "WELL!!!!" [with a gesture that indicates a belief that the book will certainly bring trouble to the school]. So, I asked, "Have you read the book?" [with an angry voice]. "No, I haven't" [the administrator responded]. But I know it's a good book for our kids to have...that's the kind of resistance I am talking about.

Here, we are in the domain of what Foucault (1977) calls *panopticism*, a form of self-censorship that does not require an external force. This is the case with this administrator, who in many ways may act as a metaphor for the superintendent, who censors him/herself because they think the Ministry of Education and the electors will make them a "target" of critique and punishment. The result is a reproduction of a system that preserves the perpetuity of (White) privilege.

This is an exemplary demonstration of how privilege in education operates as a form of property, conferring advantages to some while excluding others. In such situations, Patton (2016) notes, dominant group members often engage only in symbolic efforts toward change, aware that acknowledging complicity in racial subordination could compromise their power. This was particularly reflected in participants' narratives about barriers to accessing EDI resources, including ineffective communication from leadership, lack of centralized resource banks, and bureaucratic hurdles. Like Shelly, Frances highlighted the need for accessible and relevant resources for all stakeholders: "Making a central resource bank that is not only available, but people know about it and can use. Like the other professionals, the psychologists, the social workers, and translators."

Privilege as property works through control; control of funding, structures, resources, and even passwords to accessing platforms and electronic system. Ironically, this is all done

under the guise of compliance and privacy. Intentional or not, the result is a hierarchical system that keeps the control and ownership of knowledge to the privileged few. This is the case, as Pierre notes, even when teachers proactively seek resources and know how to access them: “Also, I might know where to find the information but need approval from the administration. Leadership is reluctant, even when teachers are providing suggestions for resources.”

Teachers also cited the overwhelming administrative workload and lack of investment in EDI as a way to break down barriers, with Pierre stating, “There are a lot of things teachers have to keep up with that are changing.... You’re barely keeping your head above water, and then compound that with someone who *doesn’t understand the lived experience of another person* [emphasis added].” On her part, Frances emphasized that effective EDI implementation requires not just time, but financial investment: “If people even know where to begin with that, and I think some practices that need to happen to make things more equitable require money that’s not there.”

The collective narrative thus far illustrates the reluctance for meaningful EDI change, as this would loosen control which is central to privilege. Therefore, leadership resists funding and prioritizes EDI aspects, which end up reinforcing banality of privilege. Expanding resources for marginalized students is often perceived as a threat to the status quo, echoing the literature on how privilege is maintained through rights of exclusion and institutional inertia (Shah et al., 2022). This underscores the need for systemic change, not just additional resources or training, to challenge the entrenched property functions of the built-in privilege in Ontario education.

Banality of Privilege: The Neo-Liberal Turn

A core tenet of the banality of privilege framework is the critique of neo-liberal forces driving the economization of education. Ontario’s curriculum aspires to global standards and measurable outcomes, listing human rights, culturally responsive practices, and EDI among its goals. However, as many participants and scholars argue, these commitments often re-

main at surface level. Radically (almost nihilistically) stated by Talia: “Change cannot occur as it is institutionalized normative colonialism that is embedded. People at the higher level make a lot of money, so they are disincentivized from rocking the boat.” The result is a perpetuity of privilege, which is now embedded in measurable, quantifiable learning goals rooted in Western, White institutional, pedagogical, and assessment practices. Building on her experience as a veteran teacher, Sonia argues that much of our current approach to assessment does not account for multiplicity and different points of view. It is catered to the dominant group and the dominant culture. Sonia put it thusly:

Well, it’s easy to see how the assessment practices in our classrooms are not really meant for our classrooms. They are meant for a different time. In my conversations with the teachers and students, these tools do not account for students’ different points of view or deal with students’ real situations and lives. In general, I think a critical mass of education is leaning toward the dominant culture and it hardly considers people outside of that domain group.

Even when curriculum documents reference decolonization or the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)², these are often addressed at surface level, such as adding Indigenous content as a “unit” while retaining Eurocentric grading systems. This is what Talia described earlier as “normative colonialism.” For those who want to change this situation, they are confronted by two lacks: lack of time and lack of effective training or professional development. Almost all participants described being overwhelmed by administrative duties and the relentless treadmill of bureaucratic, quantifiable expectations, leaving little time for genuine engagement with EDI resources. As Vicky explained, “If there are resources, I don’t have time to open all the links to look at those resources. It’s just overwhelming, all of

2 See: https://unpartnerships.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/2024-01/SDG%20Briefing%20Book_2023.pdf

it.” Concerning professional development, Liz contends, “I haven’t found professional development that is worthwhile. This is because we have so many other expectations and administrative tasks. We are told we need to meet provincial, board, and municipal learning goals.”

In terms of content, politics, and outcome, our research participants reported that EDI training is often shallow, with little explanation of its importance or relevance. Pierre described resentment toward “performative workshops,” noting that “leadership has not fully engaged and explained why to teachers.” Contextually in Ontario, the work by Rezai-Rashti and colleagues (2024) points to the fact that almost none of the teachers they interviewed had read the Ontario education policy. Building on this, our study shows that there is a lack of awareness for EDI policy-specific training and indifference from leadership. Talia stated, “At the top of our board’s helm, the Director of Education lacks understanding and awareness of how important representation is and why it matters.” For Zakara, the board is not feeling the urgency of the need for a meaningful EDI implementation, as she boldly stated, “There is certainly a lack of willingness to unlearn normative practices, especially at the leadership level.”

So, we are left with a system and a leadership that are focusing on measurable outcomes rather than on understanding the process required to meet these outcomes, and superintendents who lack an understanding of the wholeness and the totality of the student (and even the totality of the teachers, especially those who are committed to social justice). As Jay explains, kids panic when they have tests and exams, and teachers certainly need equity training that opens their eyes to the banality of privilege in these contexts:

When kids are having problems, you know that parents are on board with you, because they know that [kids struggle] especially when tests come around. But teachers try to comfort them: It’s like, “Listen, I’m trying to get you to a certain goal.” Yeah. But we need to train teachers to be in tune with the kids and to also reach out to parents; we also need superintendents who understand this

need, that this is a component of the teaching that teachers need to be trained on. That’s right. For greater equity, I challenge the administrators that are in our board and in other boards to reflect on the kind of teachers and students we want.

Teodoro (2022) would describe this situation as ironic, because students are asked to speak the language of the standardized test, a foreign language that does not come naturally; and those who speak, read, and master how to take standardized tests, they speak it because *it is naturalized* for them through historical, social, and racial privilege. An essential access to this privilege is monetary: the lack of funding and support for students, especially those with high learning needs, compounds their marginalization and challenges, as schools prioritize meeting measurable standards to secure continued funding (Onwuegbuzie & Abrams, 2024). In sum, the commercialization and the coloniality of education, especially measuring all students by the same yardstick, ultimately benefits privileged communities while failing marginalized ones.

This is why we need an analysis that highlights the necessity of addressing overlapping identities and systems of privilege and oppression. While intersectionality is central to inclusive theory and policy (Linley, 2018; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013), our participant narratives revealed that EDI in practice is often fragmented, with issues like race, gender, and disability treated separately rather than interconnected. This siloed approach pits groups against each other for resources and representation, undermining the effectiveness of EDI initiatives. As Shirley noted,

I haven’t seen training specific to intersectional approach. There’s been training about...if we want to increase our knowledge having to do with Indigenous issues. With Black history, that’s been more available. There’s been training around those kinds of things. But in terms of the actual multiple and an analysis that accounts for intersectionality or policy, I have not seen that.

Teachers also described a lack of effective connection between EDI, relationship-building,

and classroom management. As Jay stated, “You’ve got to have the rapport with colleagues and students to have true, authentic discussions on this kind of difficult subject [referring to racism]. And, you know, we have very few, you know, there’s very few BIPOC staff.” Of course, the lack of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of colour) representation is a chronic issue that is still plaguing education at all levels, from school to university (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2025).

Implementing EDI: Lived Experience, Buy-In, and Leadership

Leadership often defaults to institutional priorities such as graduation rates, overlooking stories of systemic exclusion. While teachers may also disengage due to time constraints or poor communication, this diverse group of participants consistently identified leadership as a main barrier to effective EDI policy implementation. As Sonia stated, “Leadership has to be able to change those hearts and minds to want to do right by the kids, because that’s the job of leadership.” Talia echoed this, noting, “People at the board level in positions of power wanted to maintain White privilege and power.” Yet, participants emphasized the need to push back against dominant narratives that suggest EDI practices cannot change student outcomes. Pierre captured the power of counternarratives:

The buy-in happens when the media features important stories that are different from our own, and then that helps us wrap our heads around how someone else lives differently. So, those stories are so, so, so important. Then the rest of us buy in, but it’s a slow thing.

Showing leadership’s failure to protect marginalized students, Talia tells the story of a high school club for trans and 2SLGBTQ+ students, in which a White male board-wide director posted a photo of club members on social media, exposing them to potential harm. Despite being informed of the risk, the director neither pulled the photo down nor faced any consequences, so Talia concluded: “This is the privilege of job title and White male that needs to be called out, but at present is ignored.” This is

the banality of privilege at work, which silences marginalized voices, superficially engages with EDI, and fails to communicate the necessity and urgency of equity work.

For Zakara, this failure is notably linked to the lived experience of educational leaders, who often reflect institutional privilege rather than the diversity of their communities, thus creating a disconnect between EDI policy goals and actual practices. As Zakara observed, “This goes back to who makes the policies: White, older, privileged, able men not thinking about the implementation and the full impact of policies.” Zakara continued, “Equity isn’t just slapping up a poster of another religious holiday,” while Talia added, “EDI becomes just buzzwords and performative if those in positions of power do not understand how small actions can create great harm.” The deepest insight into the issue of lack of convergence is meaningful representation at the leadership level. Sonia put it thusly:

Yeah, but I think it’s just, EDI can’t depend on some individuals, it’s a function of a mass of people, right? Like the people who are your leaders, they all look the same and they don’t value diversity, so it’s not gonna change until you have more diverse people. Case in point, if you look at Toronto, if you look at their, just their superintendents’ structure, it’s very racialized.

When discussing this observation with Tony, he argued,

I would say that a lot of the things that [the] Toronto board is doing [are] very progressive for addressing EDI, and I think it’s a function of, you know, the leadership structure. If you look at our school board, I think there are two, maybe three, superintendents of colour.

Efforts to implement EDI often stall at the leadership level, Pierre observed, with initiatives created but not meaningfully enacted. Pierre recounted how sad it was to see many great EDI ideas and lesson plans come out that were simply shelved, with very few teachers knowing about or using them:

I've seen so many of these amazing booklets that deal with diverse populations and topics being created, and they have brilliant ideas, but they are used as just ticking the box.... I use those lessons, but nobody else knows about them. It didn't go anywhere.

Participants argued that meaningful change requires leadership to gain direct experience of classroom realities. As Frances suggested, "I'd want them to come to the classroom and teach... not just for an hour for a photo op, but like, come do it for a week and see the needs." This lack of lived experience and interest convergence leads to a lack of buy-in from leadership, which in turn trickles down to staff and the broader school community, resulting in low engagement and missed opportunities for meaningful inclusion. Jay noted, "These multicultural days, I'm still very, very shocked to see how little staff involvement there is. Leadership involvement is superficial. Staff feel removed, so they don't attend, even if they are from these communities."

Talia described what performative EDI might look like when recounting being disciplined by a predominantly White male panel for sharing an example of structural racism, thus demonstrating how those tasked with promoting equity may, in practice, silence meaningful discussion:

White privilege [is] asking someone whose job is to train and highlight structural racism not to highlight racism.... This is the ultimate in performative EDI. They say they want EDI, but when it is messy and authentic, they push it aside.

Ultimately, the lack of lived experience and genuine buy-in at the leadership level fosters indifference toward meaningful EDI work, perpetuating the banality of privilege throughout the school community. This persistent indifference, one may conclude, is further reinforced by broader forces of neo-liberalism, colonialism, and lived experiences within a globalized context.

The Third Way: Or, Why EDI Cannot Have a Conclusion

If EDI is under attack, we join Sarah Ahmed (2012) in recognizing that a written policy—however amazingly articulated and conceived, and however radical it may be—does not necessarily translate to enactment of that policy; that the saying and the doing are not one and the same. For this article, we attempted to use a bottom-up methodology, where we used participants' interviews and narratives as a site of analysis and theorizing, hence the birth of the idea of *banality of privilege*. Our findings reveal that banality of privilege in Ontario education is sustained across coloniality, globalization, and lived experiences. Coloniality persists through the permanence and property of privilege, as seen in leadership and curriculum structures (Capper, 2015). Through counternarrative analysis, we revealed that, despite policy rhetoric, educational policy structures continue to advantage certain groups, embedding privilege in curriculum, leadership pathways, and institutional norms. This is how privilege is made banal and is perpetuated by becoming a permanent property. For us, the fragility of EDI and the critique it is receiving stems from not being courageous enough to name and resist this reality of privilege. Instead, EDI is turned into the latest fad of social change without needing to do the necessary and arduous work of change itself.

What we presented in this article was corroborated by all three sites of the research (University of Toronto, Western University, and University of Ottawa). However, in their study of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), our colleagues at the University of Toronto discussed a few hopeful and successful EDI initiatives that others might find useful. Of course, success in this realm is complex, often contested, and involves ongoing work, not a final destination. The TDSB has implemented some of the most comprehensive, data-driven, and policy-advanced EDI frameworks in North America over a sustained period (see Brown et al, 2020).

These initiatives can be grouped in six broad areas, which can also be accessed on the board's website³. First, the systemic, policy-first approach, where EDI is not a set of optional workshops but embedded in core policy; including Equity Policy (P037), Gender-Based Violence Prevention Policy, and Human Rights Policy. Second, the creation in 2023 of the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, a unit dedicated to improving outcomes, experiences, and well-being for Black students. Third, disaggregated data collection: the TDSB conducts a system-wide student-and-parent census that collects identity-based data on race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and socio-economic status. This is revolutionary, because it moves beyond anecdotes to identify exact achievement and well-being gaps between groups (e.g., graduation rates of Black boys vs. the general population). It also allows for targeted interventions and holds the board accountable for closing identified gaps, and it makes inequities visible and undeniable. Fourth, a mandatory workforce census concerning employment equity: focusing on staff, this data is used to identify and address representation gaps in hiring and promotion, particularly for leadership roles, aiming to ensure staff diversity reflects student diversity. Fifth, the promotion of comprehensive identity-based affinity groups and support: the board supports and funds numerous student census groups and staff networks (e.g., for Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, Sikh, Muslim, Latino/a/x, etc. groups, for staff and students). Sixth, the implementation of curriculum innovation, through (a) phasing out the practice of "streaming," where students used to be streamed into academic vs. applied tracks (which historically marginalized Black, Indigenous, and low-income students); (b) prioritizing culturally sustaining, relevant, and responsive pedagogy, where all staff is expected to complete a mandatory training course to adapt their teaching to reflect students' cultural backgrounds; and (c) developing alternative, inclusive courses (e.g., Grade 11 and 12 Black Studies courses).

Though not without controversy or challenge, the TDSB offers a few grounded and well-informed ideas for how to struggle against the banality of privilege, which requires a holistic approach that recognizes how coloniality, globalization, and lived experience intersect to sustain inequity in education. Both our research and the TDSB example are calling for the need to (a) prioritize ongoing professional development, focusing on systemic inequities and intersectionality; (b) critically examine and reform policies and practices that reinforce privilege as permanent and property; and (c) move beyond performative gestures to enact substantive, sustained, systemic, organic, reflective, intentional, and meaningful change. The convergence of these three elements is what we are calling the third way, a hopeful place where our eyes are wide open and our minds are wide awake to what is possible. It is not a space of wishful thinking, but a space that is full of grounded and informed hope, and where equity is equated with high academic performance. Otherwise, in Ontario and elsewhere, the banality of privilege will remain a Kafkaesque obstacle, barrier, and figure that will haunt effective EDI implementation. It will perpetuate exclusion and inequity by normalizing structural inequalities as routine and unremarkable. Recognizing and addressing this phenomenon is essential for leaders to move beyond symbolic gestures and create truly equitable learning environments. It is only by staring the banality of privilege in the face that we can hope for a world where people's full humanity is called on; people who are able to write their own stories, spell their own names, and locate themselves in time and space—and, at the same time, question the adequacy of that location.

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