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Canada is Not an Educational "Dreamland": Activism and Exploring Layers of Oppression and Denial

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ABSTRACT
In the realm of global education, Canada is often hailed as a dreamland, a beacon of democratic and equitable schooling. However, within this seemingly idyllic narrative lies a complex tapestry of hidden oppressions. Two activist-teachers-academics, one of us a queer, white settler on stolen lands, the other a newcomer from Iran, both of us women and mothers, come together to expose these concealed layers of oppression within the Canadian education system. Through the lens of post-qualitative autoethnography, we embark on a deeply personal and professional exploration of our experiences as parents of school-aged children, teachers, and teacher-educators within the Canadian school system. We share our design of An Onion of Oppression to expose denialism and to explore the ways in which activism in research involves letting go, opening to other possibilities, and actively choosing to be activists.

KEYWORDS
Researcher activism; post-qualitative; denialism; Canadian education.

INTRODUCTION

Lyndze

In the summer of 2017, my youngest child was five years old and told me that they were not a boy, but a fairy, and that fairies do not have a gender. I got curious and, after weeks of this ongoing thread of discussion, it became clear that my child was describing an identity that didn't fit the binary of boy or girl. They adopted 'they' and 'them' pronouns and asked to grow their hair. They wanted more pink and purple in their wardrobe. Their dad and I quickly became educated on gender-affirming care and reached out for support from resources in our community.

I had no apprehension about school. I know now that this was due to my privilege as a white settler, middle-class, in a hetero-passing family. The first days of kindergarten were approaching and, as a former teacher and current teacher-educator, I was aware of the obligations of the teacher, administration, and school board. I felt fortunate to live in Canada, a progressive and democratic country with strong human rights, at a time when the conversation about transness in the media was mostly positive.

As a Canadian, and a teacher, I had also been taught the narrative that our schools are superior in the world. The majority of our teachers identify as progressive (Ryan, 2008), and our curriculum calls on us to prepare students for our pluralistic democracy (Harvey, 2020; BC Ministry of Education, n.d.). I was not under any illusion that Canadian schools were perfect, but I saw them as liberal and forward-looking, committed to being welcoming to all, multicultural, with equal access, integrated, and striving toward diversity and inclusion.

I know now that I was inhabiting a dreamland; I had been lulled into a false sense that Canada's education system was the ideal, especially in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion. At the first school meeting with the other parents and the teacher, I was forced to wake-up and attend to reality. Now, years later, as a parent of two queer and neurodivergent school-aged kids, and as a teacher and teacher-educator, I am an activist by default. An 'activist' must confront their preconceived notions, their privilege, and face the discomfort of it all. An activist is also a dreamer; I hope for a better world. I see the potential for schooling, and I dream of an education that is both humanizing and democratic for all.

In 2021, before Tahmineh began her doctoral program at our institution, she emailed me to introduce herself. In it she wrote: "I am a teacher, a mum, and a dreamer who has followed her dreams contrary to all limitations in Iran." Over subsequent conversations, it became clear to me that Tahmineh envisioned Canadian education to be a dreamland of progressivism and democracy; one in which her young daughter would thrive, but also one of which Tahmineh wanted to become a part, too. The next couple of years of teaching, learning, and researching together forms the basis of this study.

Tahmineh

After years of dreaming, teaching, and getting involved with politics as a student and an English teacher in Iran, I found myself isolated in my office with a couple of students whose main goal

of learning a new language was nothing but immigration or running away from their current circumstances. Despite the impacts of the government regime in my country, I still had agency in my life. I could help my students with their main goals and mentor them around many other benefits of learning a new language; in some countries, English is a tool to manoeuvre censorship and resist the oppressive systems. I was dreaming of gradual societal change through increasing awareness of human rights and the possibilities of equitable life.

When my daughter turned three, I suddenly felt a new version of her blossoming—beautiful yet tough. She began asking questions I couldn't answer. She questioned and compared my beliefs, pointing out inconsistencies between what I claimed to believe and how I presented myself socially. Her questions led me to an identity crisis: *Who am I, and why do I have to live in this place where I believe in one thing, but I'm expected to live another?* I saw her rebellious heart peeling back layers of compliance I hadn't even noticed in myself.

Once she began attending pre-school and came home with some religious crafts that reflected the Ministry of Education curriculum which projects vivid sexist and implied racist messages, my concerns about obedience and indoctrination became tangible. I did not stop dreaming of a humanizing education based on freedom. I decided to move to a country with a progressive education system and a high value placed on human rights; an inclusive country where human beings have equity. I would end the struggle for social justice for good. After only six months in Canada, my dreamland for education, I found myself on the same path, but this time with new pieces of identity that did not exist before: woman of colour and immigrant with an accent. At first, I interpreted my socio-cultural struggles as isolated events, limited to one single incident and one narrow-minded individual. My beautiful image of inclusive Canada remained intact, until I was jolted awake and realized that it wasn't real. My activism was reborn.

We are activists and dreamers

We are activists by our births and by the births of our children. We pursued teaching and academia as a form of activism. For both of us, our presence in academe is resistance. We are women and outspoken, critical, and truth-telling. But our similarities and lives diverge; one of us is a queer, white settler on stolen lands, the other a newcomer from Iran. We came together to tell stories and to listen generously to storytelling. We both have experienced being silenced by not having the safety to tell our stories and through the denial of our stories once they are told.

There exists a narrative that often characterizes countries like Iran as lagging behind on the global stage. It is also widely believed that countries like Canada offer educational systems that foster a democratic and equity-based mindset (Anders et al., 2021). But, because of our privilege, many of us in Canada and the global North do not need to reflect on the validity of this narrative. The purpose of this study is to consider the perceptions, both from the lens of a settler-Canadian and a racialized newcomer, of the Canadian education system as an educational "dreamland" and the ways in which oppression and denialism can be considered

within this context, but also the role of activism in our research. It becomes a choice: activism in our research is something we choose and of which we need to be conscious. It is easy to overlook.

The Educational "Dreamland" Narrative

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international study of achievement in reading, science and mathematics among 15-year-olds. Conducted every three years by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the top-performing countries garner attention and accolades, and influence educational policy development throughout the world (Raffe, 2011). Since 2000, when the studies began, Canada has ranked between 6th and 12th out of 81 countries, making it an "education superpower" (Coughlin, 2017). The most recent PISA has Canada ranked 9th in the world (2022); when "more than a third of young adults in Canada are from families where both parents are from another country," this standing is notable both inside and beyond our borders (Anders et al., 2021). In a study that examines Canada's PISA scores, and the reasons they may be suspect, Anders et al. (2021) notes that the education director of the OECD, Andreas Schleicher, says that Canada's scores are "driven by its strong commitment to equity" (p. 230). Among migrant children, Schleicher's interpretation of Canada's scores is that "there is a strong sense of fairness and equal access - and this is seen in the high academic performance of migrant children" (Coughlin, 2017). In 2022, the US News ranked Canada as the 4th best country for education in the world (Canam Group, 2023). Based on narratives and statistics such as these, many immigrants view education in Canada as ideal.

Canadians also receive the message that our education system is one based in democracy, strong inclusivity, and supportive of diversity. This message can be an indirect one, told through narratives about schools in the global South and lack of access, the impacts of violence, and poor outcomes. Canadians hear the most troubling news about schooling elsewhere, such as the poisoning of thousands of schoolgirls in Iran (Tizhoosh, 2023), millions of girls in Afghanistan being denied access to schools by the Taliban (UNESCO, 2024), or the mass abductions of school children in West Africa (CBC, 2024). When we read such stories in the media, we find ourselves feeling grateful for the relative safety and accessibility of schools in Canada.

Alternatively, Canadians find themselves learning about the issues with schooling South of the border, and the famous Canadian pastime of comparing ourselves to Americans takes hold. Stories surrounding book banning (Oladipo, 2024), Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill (CBC, 2022), and school shootings (CBC, 2022; Mathews et al., 2025; Press, 2023) prop up the narrative that Canadian schools are more progressive, inclusive, and safe.

In Canada, the media narrative on our own educational institutions oscillates between K-12 schools' innovative and progressive efforts toward equity and inclusion, and learning being undermined by politics and an inundation of inclusivity policies and materials. The former message is often couched with the problem of exclusion but is followed with a Canadian

approach to addressing it. For example, an article for 2021 discusses "the multi-layered obstacles and barriers Black children and teens face in school — everything from lessons that ignore Black history, perspectives and contributions to Black students disproportionately being disciplined to the ongoing practice of academic streaming from as early as kindergarten" (Wong, 2021). The article also celebrates the efforts of three Canadians–a parent, a principal, and a school board representative–tackling anti-Black racism (Wong, 2021). Another article, from the Globe and Mail (Breznitz, 2024), claims that Canada's "most impressive achievement is the fact that we are the world's most just, inclusive and hopeful society. That doesn't mean that we are as just and fair as we should be" but our K-12 education system is the envy of the world because, "no matter where you are in Canada and no matter to whom and where were you born, you have one of the highest chances in the world to excel in your studies and acquire the skills needed for a good life, and which society needs to achieve high levels of productivity and innovation."

But the latter message, the one that creates an atmosphere of fear and misinformation surrounding Canadian schooling and diversity, equity, and inclusion measures, is currently the more discernible in media. In the 2024 provincial election, leader of the BC Conservatives John Rustand "argued that B.C. classrooms are biased politically and insists changes are needed for schools to be places of learning" (Pawson, 2024). Rustand's platform stated that SOGI 123, a resource to help "educators make schools safer and more inclusive for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities" (SOGI 123, 2025), was "too divisive" and "problematic" and needed to be removed by the provincial government (Pawson, 2024). SOGI 123 was endorsed in 2022 by the BC NDP, who was ruling with a slim minority government, as well as the British Columbia Teachers Federation (Pawson, 2024). In other news, Alberta's Premier, Danielle Smith, connected a lack of space in K-12 schools with the Federal government's "unrestricted" and "high immigration levels" (Ridder, 2024). Although Smith claims that she and the province she represents has "always welcomed newcomers *who possess our shared values*," this message could be interpreted as a xenophobic dog-whistle, especially as Smith has asked for Ukrainian immigrants over those from other (less white and Christian) parts of the world (Ridder, 2024, *our emphasis*).

The dreamland narrative itself is not as harmful as the layers of oppression it obscures and the accompanying denialism that maintains a negative impact on identities and hierarchies, as well as ongoing patterns of hegemony and subjugation. As we will discuss later, this narrative can facilitate a sort of gaslighting that casts a veil on the aspects we intend to bring to light.

Our research is focused on the personal and professional journeys of two researcher-activists. We reflect on our own stories as we awaken from the dreamland of Canadian education in our particular social and cultural contexts. We then consider Canada and our own experiences with the so-called democratic school system and its layers of oppression through a tool we have created: an Onion of Oppression. We engage the question, how have layers of

denial obscured oppression in Canada's so-called educational dreamland? Peeling back these layers with storytelling is our protest.

A Post-Qualitative Approach: Humanism and Posthumanism

As qualitative research has become increasingly standardized, scholars have begun to question its foundational assumptions, leading to the emergence of post-qualitative inquiry as a response to the methodological constraints and humanist underpinnings of conventional qualitative research. St. Pierre (Aghasaleh & St. Pierre, 2014; St. Pierre, 2021) reminds us that qualitative methodology was not something natural or inevitable but was constructed, repeated, and reinforced until it became normalized within academia. While it has remained broad enough to accommodate various interpretive and critical approaches, it is still grounded in humanist assumptions that shape how research is conceptualized. Building on this, Lather (2013) argues that qualitative research has become caught up in neoliberal demands for standardization, putting it at risk of being reduced to an instrumentalist framework that serves audit culture rather than critical inquiry. Rather than resisting positivist tendencies, qualitative research faces the danger of being disciplined into rigid methodological structures that prioritize systematization over epistemological and ontological complexity. It is within this questioning that post-qualitative inquiry emerges–not as a replacement for qualitative or even quantitative approaches–as something that carves out its own space in the ever-expanding landscape of research (Rautio, 2021).

(Post)humanism acts as a foundation for reimagining research practices and methodologies, shaping the evolving field of (post)qualitative research (Le Grange, 2018), which challenges the normative frameworks of traditional research methodologies (Aberasturi-Apraiz et al., 2020; Rautio, 2021). It is devoid of a structured methodology and thus rejects the demands of application and is rooted in poststructuralism rather than methodology. This rejection of method can be challenging, as we tend to methodologize, scientize, and systematize ordinary activities such as conversing, observing, writing, walking, and storytelling (St. Pierre, 2024). Tahmineh expresses her experience in this research: "While post-qualitative inquiry rejects fixed methods and categories, letting go of structured analysis was not immediate or intuitive for me. There were moments when I found myself wanting to define our 'data,' code themes, or impose order onto the process, as if still anchored in conventional qualitative expectations." This desire of categorizing and coding could be considered as a "resemblance of objectivist epistemology and realist ontology" (Rautio, 2020, p. 228). The shift toward post-qualitative thinking required unlearning the impulse to categorize and instead embracing the ongoing movement of meaning-making. A post-qualitative approach was a conscious choice, and it aligns with our activism and supports our 'dreamer' tendencies.

We do not use a post-qualitative approach as a replacement for another methodology, rather we view this approach as one that involves developing an attitude and an ability to coexist with, and question, the diversity of existing understandings of research, knowledge, and the world, and ideally collaborating with them (Rautio, 2020). Rautio's four balancing acts informed

us in the process of our research and helped us to avoid post-qualitativism from becoming an isolated approach. These acts include balancing planned data with unexpected discoveries, viewing methods as dynamic thinking patterns, and acknowledging complexity while maintaining perspicuity. It also requires balancing individuality with interconnectedness and respecting the other's alterity. These continuous balancing acts enrich our research and promote collaboration that informs us in viewing our narratives in relation to each other’s as well as the questions we engage.

In this research, we did not choose a ‘method’ to apply, but instead the flow of our storytelling, dialogue, and interactions alongside our conversations have held us and the data. Our process was not linear, but constructed in layers, and not hierarchical but flattened. We shared our stories, then we found ourselves in storying, and some stories revealed that we did not know they existed within us or had not been told before this engagement. We were telling stories, thinking, and writing; research was flowing, while remaining open to what Lather (2009) described as "getting lost" in research (p. 4). We embraced this ‘lostness,’ trusting the unknowability of the process and allowing meaning to emerge in ways we could not have anticipated. Over time, we realized that as we told our stories, they became both a part of us and separate from us, taking on their own agency. The stories combined, collided, and reshaped each other, producing meaning beyond what either of us initially intended. Allowing ourselves to surrender to this flow took time; it was a process of learning to trust the unknowability of research rather than trying to impose structure upon it. Activism in research involves letting go.

If we were to outline our process, our oral storytelling was a jumping-off point, told and retold in unstructured moments in which connections were made haphazardly but with clarity. We elected to attempt a more controlled approach, and we wrote our own stories surrounding the dream of Canadian education as a democratic utopia and waking up to unexpected oppression. But, after reading each other’s stories (and poems), we found ourselves going deeper into unwritten memories. It was as though the writing itself tamed the stories we chose to tell and made the moments they represented less raw and removed from the oppression we sought to uncover. The words on paper are another example of obfuscation or veiling. Oral sharing and dialogic analysis of our stories allowed us to examine "issues in depth through exploratory, open-ended conversations, prioritizing holistic understanding situated in lived experience" (Trahar, 2009, p. 4). Through the process of sharing our stories, more stories emerged that articulated the deeper elements that were too painful to write; new narratives that were 'untellable' were given voice.

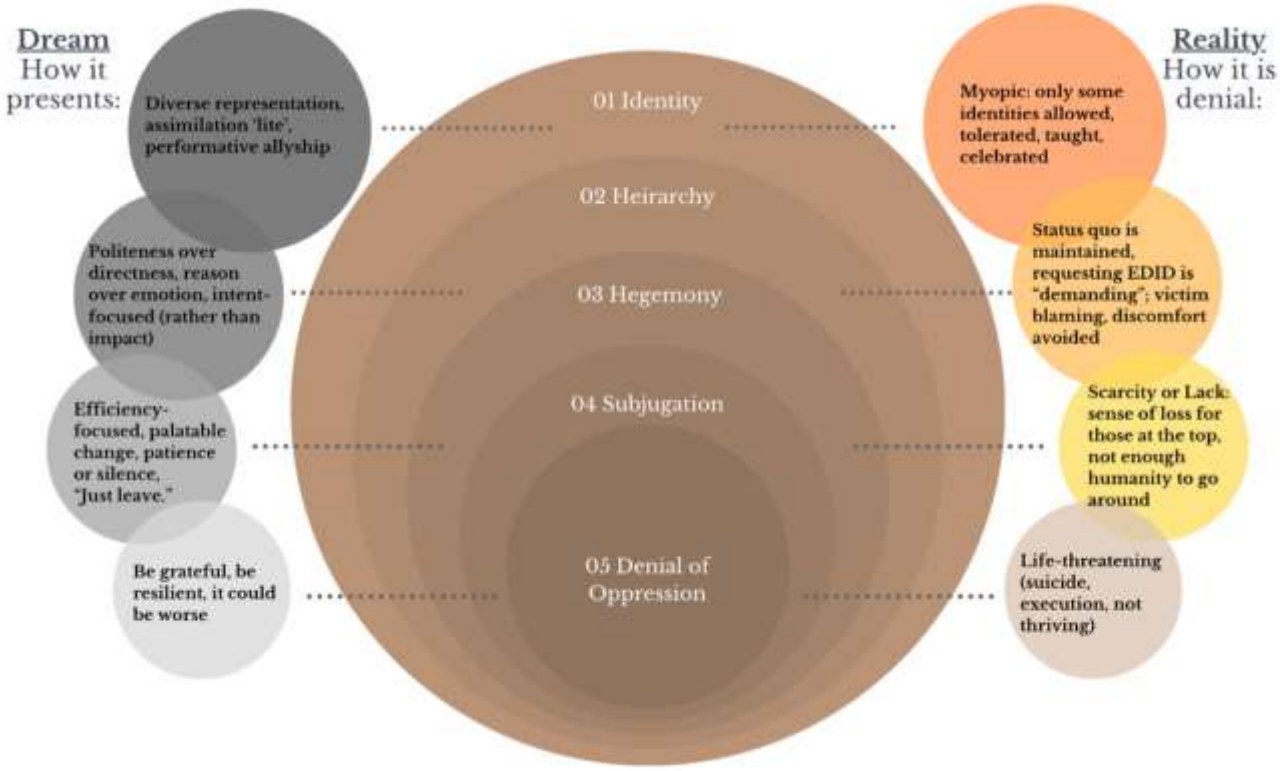
An Onion of Oppression: Layers of Denial

In our research, we developed the Onion of Oppression (see Figure 1), a conceptual tool that emerged from sharing our own stories and lived experiences. Like layers of an onion, separate and attached, and part of a whole vegetable, each story was found to contain similar and related elements. The approach of analyzing common "expressions" rather than coding, seeing the whole rather than parts, is a way in which we resist dichotomous thinking and align with post-

qualitative approaches. These stories could be explored in layers, like an onion, and although we acknowledge that we have different social constructions of reality, it was clear that we had a shared dream and nightmare. The onion, and the layers of oppression, helped us to see the ways that denial and other ways of obscuring oppression were at the rotten core of our experiences. We were not immune to the denialism–there were times when were obscured our own realities–but in collaboration and with generous listening we unwrapped each other's layers and gently approached the core of our experiences.

Figure 1.

Layer of Denial: An Onion of Oppression



The Onion of Oppression model illustrates the layered nature of oppression, revealing how inequities are both sustained and obscured within social systems. The outer layers of the onion—Identity, Hierarchy, Hegemony, and Subjugation—represent the visible and structural aspects of oppression, while at the core lies Denial of Oppression, the mechanism that allows these injustices to persist unchallenged.

On the left side of the diagram, we depict the **Dream**, which represents the ways oppression is softened, hidden, or framed as progress. These layers include 'diverse representation,' which creates the illusion of inclusivity without structural change, and 'assimilation 'lite',' where marginalized individuals are tolerated only if they conform. 'Performative allyship' offers symbolic gestures of support that lack real action, while 'politeness over directness' and 'reason over emotion' ensure that discussions of injustice remain palatable for those in power. The Dream also promotes 'intent over impact,' dismissing real harm if it was

not deliberately inflicted, and emphasizes 'efficiency,' prioritizing quick and surface-level solutions over meaningful transformation. Lastly, there is an expectation of 'patience and silence,' reinforced by phrases such as *"Just leave" "Be grateful"* or *"Be resilient"* These narratives discourage resistance and normalize enduring oppression rather than confronting it.

On the right side of the diagram, **Reality** disrupts these illusions, exposing how oppression actually operates. It is often 'myopic,' allowing only certain identities to be represented, tolerated, or acknowledged while maintaining the status quo. 'Requests for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDID)' are reframed as unreasonable demands, while 'victim-blaming' shifts responsibility onto marginalized individuals rather than the systems that harm them. Discomfort is avoided to preserve the stability of dominant groups. A scarcity mindset is also at play, where those in power perceive equity efforts as a personal loss, as if humanity, dignity, and opportunities are finite resources. At its most extreme, the Reality of oppression is 'life-threatening,' leading to systemic neglect, erasure, or even violence against those deemed unworthy of inclusion.

An Onion of Oppression: Storying Lived Experiences

To exemplify our engagement with the Onion of Oppression, we offer written excerpts from each of our stories. As previously discussed, the written stories are processed and lack the depth that helped us to develop and test the Onion. But the written stories can exemplify the way the tool can be employed to explore the layers of oppression that are obstructed by the dream-like beliefs and expectations surrounding Canadian schooling from both a Canadian and a newcomer.

Lyndze's Story

I spoke to the principal and teacher in August. Our kindergartener had told us that they weren't a boy or a girl. They said they were a 'they-them' and wanted to grow their hair long. The teacher and principal said that they support SOGI. It wouldn't be a problem, they said. And then I attended the first parent meeting.

"We don't do the pronoun thing." Said one father.

"They're just kids." He added.

Another parent chimed in, "Yeah, my kid just wants to learn about dinosaurs. He's 5! Gender isn't really on his radar."

The teacher was silent then. And later when my child was excluded from the bathrooms. And even still when they were badgered with "are you a boy or a girl?" And when another child called mine an "it" the silence grew even louder.

My child also likes dinosaurs. And my child exists.

Lyndze's reflection on her story through the Onion of Oppression reveals how silence, inaction, and complicity reinforce exclusion and deny oppression. To begin, the teacher and principal said they support SOGI, but this was performative (Dream side, Identity layer). They didn't back this statement up with action but instead stayed silent when parents repeated transphobic rhetoric. The silence was a form of politeness, as indicated in the 'Hierarchy' layer,

when maintaining decorum is favoured over directness or conflict. Discomfort is avoided through silence.

When considering the 'Reality,' or right side of the Onion of Oppression, the teacher and principal did not promote understanding or inclusion with the other students. The humanity of some children was maintained, but not all; the children perceived as cisgender have their experiences centred and normalized (Identity layer). The remarks of the parents indicate that the nonbinary child's presence, as well as what calls for equity, diversity, and inclusion that came with it, would be *too demanding* because "they're just kids" (Hierarchy layer).

The only person willing to be direct, and ask for equity, diversity, and inclusion (Lyndze) would also be labelled 'emotional' (Hierarchy layer). The parents were also attempting to use 'reason,' and their *intent* was the focus (Hierarchy layer), not the potential *impact* on the nonbinary child or parent. There is no room or space for the trans-nonbinary 5-year-old, only the children who fit the status quo, and this aligns with the idea of scarcity or lack (Hegemony layer); there is not enough humanity to go around.

Lyndze's story reveals how oppression operates not just through explicit exclusion but through silence, inaction, and complicity. The school's initial support of SOGI reflected the Dream; a symbolic commitment to inclusivity. However, when faced with pushback, the teacher's silence upheld the status quo, prioritizing parental comfort over a child's dignity. This silence reinforced subjugation, allowing transphobic rhetoric to go unchallenged while erasing the lived reality of a nonbinary child.

Lyndze reflects, "My child carries these experiences with them and does not thrive. We hear the saying that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Is this learning resiliency? Or is this a denial of oppression?" (Subjugation layer). Using this tool to reflect on her experience was an empowering process for Lyndze. It allowed her to name the forces at play, shifting the burden from personal struggle to systemic patterns. In sharing her story, she not only disrupts the silence that enabled her child's exclusion but also affirms that she is not alone and that many others navigate the same layered realities of oppression.

Tahmineh's Story

My daughter in grade one struggled with belonging and making friends. School was her only social space. Meanwhile, she was excited about the elaborate Chinese New Year celebrations in class but remarked that Persian celebrations weren't cool because they didn't have dragons. Hoping she would also celebrate her heritage, I approached the teacher again when she didn't reply to my emails about the Nowruz celebration, mentioning it would only take ten minutes.

Teacher: "My week is planned, and I'm on leave Friday."

Feeling dismissed, I was upset I had to beg for recognition of our culture. An Iranian mom said, "We are immigrants, always inferior. You need to adjust!" Confused, I booked a meeting with the principal.

Principal: "My teacher is a planner. She has worked hard, and you should be happy to have your kid in her classroom."

Me: "Why didn’t she plan for the Iranian New Year like the Chinese one?"
Principal: "Maybe because you can see Chinese New Year symbols in many grocery stores."
Me: "I didn’t know the BC curriculum depended on grocery stores, but BC Policy 3 says the teacher must celebrate diversity and different identities. She ignored my communication. We need to address this. It is a sort of discrimination"
Principal: "It’s not discrimination; it’s lack of flexibility. She’s upset with you using the word discrimination in your email and won’t acknowledge it. she can follow up on this"

Tahmineh’s story reveals how oppression operates through dismissal, denial, and deflection, maintaining a school culture where some identities are celebrated while others are ignored. Her daughter, struggling with belonging, was excited about the elaborate Chinese New Year celebrations in class but felt her own Persian heritage was "uncool." When Tahmineh reached out to the teacher about incorporating Nowruz, she was met with avoidance, first through ignored emails and then with a direct denial of flexibility—the teacher had already planned her week and would be on leave.

Seeking recognition for her daughter’s cultural identity, Tahmineh escalated the issue to the principal, only to encounter the Dream’s expectation of gratitude over demands. The principal reframed the situation as lack of flexibility rather than discrimination, shifting the focus away from systemic exclusion and onto Tahmineh's persistence as the problem. The blame-the-victim pattern emerged when the principal criticized Tahmineh for using the word "discrimination," centring the teacher’s discomfort rather than addressing the exclusion. When these tactics failed to silence her, the final layer surfaced: threat and control, which was a reminder that as a newcomer, she was still expected to "adjust" rather than challenge the system.

At the heart of this experience is denial, the defining layer of oppression within the Onion. Unlike in Iran, where oppression is overt and expected, in Canada, oppression is obscured beneath institutional politeness and bureaucratic justifications. Calling it out is unexpected and often met with resistance or outright refusal to acknowledge its existence. Tahmineh’s experience highlights how the Canadian narrative of diversity and inclusion functions as part of the Dream, shielding the reality of systemic exclusion from view.

By reflecting on this experience through the Onion of Oppression, Tahmineh gains a framework to name and analyse these barriers, shifting the issue from a personal struggle to a larger pattern of institutional denial. Sharing her story disrupts her silence and empowers her; she felt a sense of agency in resisting this hierarchical power structure.

By applying the Onion of Oppression, we move beyond individual stories to reveal systematic patterns. The silence in Lyndze and Tahmineh’s stories are not unique, it is a recurring mechanism used to avoid discomfort and maintain existing power structures. This tool encourages us to examine not only the overt moments of exclusion but the more insidious ways in which oppression is reinforced through inaction, justification, and the illusion of inclusivity. Through storytelling, we peel back these layers and expose the hidden realities that shape

marginalized experiences in Canadian education. The question remains: Will we continue to accept the Dream, or will we confront the Reality?

Oppression, Denialism, and Storytelling as Resistance

For all our best intentions, oppression remains a significant issue in Canadian society and in K-12 education. Some evidence shows that student success and failure follow distinct patterns linked to race and ethnicity; students from non-dominant ethnic backgrounds in countries of the Global North face significant obstacles in educational institutions (Raby, 2004). Where racism is most visible, manifesting in both overt and subtle ways, a tension arises from a genuine desire to be 'not racist,' while still operating within social structures that perpetuate and reinforce racism (Raby, 2004). Regardless of a school's socioeconomic status or demographics, powerful personal and observed stories reveal persistent racial injustices in the Canadian education system (Kohli et al., 2017). In his book, *How to be an Anti-Racist,* Ibram X. Kendi (2019) contends that racism is sustained by denial; the central refrain being 'I'm not racist.' The activist researcher (and teacher) needs to face the knee-jerk reaction, founded in a need for certainty and a fear of vulnerability, to deny our own roles in oppression. Anti-racism and anti-xenophobia require constantly examining your own biases, challenging systemic inequities, and not shying away from uncomfortable truths (Kendi, 2019). Denial halts that process.

This extends beyond racism to all forms of oppression. When people demand anti-oppressive policies and practices, they are often met with dismissals and told to be grateful for the progress that has been made, to cultivate resilience, or to recognize that "things could be worse." These strategies of denial sustain the illusion of fairness while allowing harm to persist. But denial does not merely distort reality; it is life-threatening. It prevents action, silences those most affected, and upholds the status quo. By telling our stories and naming oppression for what it is, we disrupt the denial and move toward a more just and truthful reality; we make the invisible visible.

Many teachers have sounded the alarm on their lack of confidence in teaching and supporting gender diverse students (SOGI 123, 2025), and the lack of teacher education on the needs of newcomers has been researched (Damaschke-Deitrick et al., 2023), but the story of the Canadian educational dreamland persists. Teachers are not denying that they struggle to offer equity-centred space for all students, but their own engagement with these issues is obscured through layers of oppression.

Denial is not merely a lack of knowledge but a deeply rooted psychological and emotional process shaped by cognitive dissonance, motivated reasoning, and confirmation bias. Denial emerges when individuals reject factual claims despite overwhelming evidence, often because accepting the truth threatens their identity, beliefs, or emotional security (Bardon, 2019). Bardon (2019) argues that denial is often reinforced by powerful elites who manipulate public perception through media and strategic misinformation, capitalizing on ignorance and emotional vulnerabilities. Whether it manifests in the denial of the climate crisis, systemic racism, or religious superiority, these beliefs persist because they fulfil profound psychological

needs for validation, security, and meaning. In this way, denial is not simply an individual failure to recognize truth but a socially and politically reinforced phenomenon that sustains existing power structures.

We believe that storytelling has the power to unveil the layers of denial that sustain oppression, much like peeling back the layers of an onion to reveal its core. Through shared narratives, we expose the ongoing patterns of denial that work to keep oppression invisible. As psychologist educator Dr. Derald Wing Sue explains, "Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory" (Sue, 2010, para. 20). Denial operates in the same way: by refusing to name oppression, by minimizing its impact, or by redirecting attention away from its harm, we sustain the very structures we claim to challenge. As mothers, activists, researchers, and educators, we must walk our talk, speak our truths, and push-back on denialism.

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