

Public Narrative

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I'm Edison. Science teacher by choice. Londoner by sheer luck of birth! My parents had both escaped war-torn countries and so growing up, they made sure that I never forgot how lucky I was and how thankful I should be. We even watched the Queen's annual Christmas speech! Regardless, I was definitely proud to call myself British.

However, I remember the exact moment when my identity was questioned. I had taken the train up to Newcastle to visit some friends. Walking out of the train station, I suddenly hear some loud voices from across the road. "*Ching Chong Chang*". I was perplexed. Were those teenagers shouting at me? I remember looking around and noticing that there was no one else near me. Confusion quickly turned to anger and I told them forcefully to "*F off*". The teenage boys cracked up laughing and walked away. I told myself that kids were kids but in reality, it hurt me deeply. I was a grown man, being subject to racist abuse and in my own country!?

I don't know how many people in this room have ever experienced racism in their own country but that moment changed me. For the first time, I felt that I didn't quite belong. A bit like an odd puzzle piece which doesn't quite fit in with the big picture. I compared this feeling with how I felt when living in China for a year. Suffice to say...I blended in (if I kept my mouth shut long enough)! But on a more serious note, I remember feeling a deep sense of connection – connection with my ancestry stretching back thousands of years in one of the world's oldest civilisations. I also remember feeling free – free from needing to justify why I was there. Why I should be there. Why I should belong.

When I became a teacher, such thoughts of identity and belonging continued to occupy my mind. Every day I would see British Nigerians, Polish, Bangladeshis – all in the same class and yet, at lunch time, I would go out into the playground and see largely divided racial groups – one group playing footy here, another group over there.

To this day, I still think about such divisions on a personal level. The dilemma of belonging. But you know what? Our kids growing up today shouldn't face this dilemma. And they won't have to if people are sufficiently prepared for the reality of the globalised world. In Canada, as in every other country, your kids, my kids – they are going to encounter people from diverse cultural backgrounds with differences more visible than ever before. That old buzzword of successful integration – 'tolerance' – it just won't be good enough anymore.

This is why over the past few years, I've devoted myself to researching and developing a more culturally responsive education. All of us – teachers, politicians, parents – we need to advocate for this type of education because it gives young people, including those teenagers in Newcastle, the tools to navigate pluralism. I want them to understand different identities emerging in our culturally diverse world. But more than that, I want them to engage in those differences, not ignore them or use them to exclude others. At the very least, a culturally responsive education can help counter the identity politics that we see right now from Marie Le Pen in France to Donald Trump in America. But at its very best, education can create that vital sense of inclusive national belonging – one that isn't just skin deep. One that allows you to be both British and Chinese. Through better education, we can ensure the full inclusion and participation of all our students not just in the classroom but in world beyond too.