

A Neuroscience Perspective on Systemic Discrimination

By **Shakil Choudhury**



After working with thousands of people across the education sector, I'm clear there is a central problem in our attempts to advance diversity, equity and inclusion: most people don't fully grasp the concept of *systemic discrimination*.

Without this key concept, we can't entirely understand what underlies the student achievement gaps so often discussed by education leaders. Nor, can we comprehend the phenomena of *glass ceilings* and *sticky floors* in hiring that often hold back minority group members. The end result is staff teams that often don't look, act or sound like the diverse communities they serve. The inconsistent understanding of systemic discrimination is similar whether I'm working with admin assistants, caretakers, teachers, school principals and vice-principals, superintendents or directors of education.

The results of my own work and a growing body of academic research show that inherited neurobiology coupled with the power of social dominance underpin

systemic discrimination whether in the forms of racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism or transphobia. I've concluded this after synthesizing considerable research from the fields of neuroscience, social psychology, anti-racism, emotional intelligence and mindfulness in my book, *Deep Diversity: Overcoming Us vs. Them* (2015). We will discuss what school leaders can do about it in four very concrete steps.

To back up slightly, systemic discrimination is a tough concept to understand as it only becomes visible when we collect data and analyze the experience of thousands of people. Through such statistics the gaps become evident, forcing us to ask questions like:

Why do women earn less than men for the same or similar jobs (non-unionized)?

Why are racial minorities and Indigenous Peoples undertreated in the health care system?

Why do Black and Indigenous students face disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion?



Comparatively, overt forms of discrimination – whether explicit acts of racism, sexism or homophobia – are not only more easily identifiable in today’s fair-minded, democratic society, but are deemed unacceptable. And this is part of the issue: when discussing issues like racism or sexism, people confuse *systemic* with *overt* discrimination. As a result, people frequently become defensive and polarized, as it is difficult to imagine how their school or school board could be accused of being “racist,” “sexist” or “homophobic.” After all, most of us would be very hard-pressed to give examples of people in our professional circles that would easily be described as dyed-in-the-wool bigots.

Yet, all the data over the decades clearly demonstrates that a disproportionate number of hard-working students and staff from minoritized backgrounds – including but not limited to race/ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, religion and language – are demotivated, experience obstacles to advancing, and face higher rates of harassment and various forms of violence.

So, what’s going on?

First of all, systemic discrimination is the land of *micro-inequities* – subtle and seemingly small words, actions and beliefs that accumulate to create an environment

that prioritizes and validates some social groups while minimizing and diminishing others. For example:

A high school teacher shows a video about Muslims from a far-right extremist group to generate “conversations” about religion in a World Issues course. When the only two Muslim students in class challenge the choice of video due to its offensive language and slanted portrayal of Islam, the teacher states they should view the video from an objective perspective and not take the content so personally.

The week before, a non-Muslim student dresses up in a “turban” and comically distorts the Islamic call to prayer into “Alla-walla-burger!” while other students laugh along. A teacher tells them to “stop fooling around and get back to class,” as he walks past them, smiling and not taking it seriously even though a hijab-wearing student stands in the same hall isolated from others.

When a group of Muslim students – a small minority in this predominantly white, Christian school – finally meet with their principal to share their concerns and describe their cumulative experiences as racist, she takes issue with their use of language, describing the events as “unfortunate” and the school as “not racist.” She demands an apology from them.



It's unlikely that any non-Muslim individuals in the above scenario – a composite of many real experiences in Ontario schools – would describe themselves as proudly racist or Islamophobic ... yet their words and actions would be. There is a cumulative effect that re-enforces racist attitudes towards Muslims students as being *less than* – not worthy of basic levels of respect, support or protection. In fact, the victims were even told to apologize for accurately describing what happened to them. This is how systemic discrimination in the form of Islamo-racism (more commonly called Islamophobia) plays out. Similar examples and patterns could be provided for all the other “isms.”

So, in spite of our good intentions and explicit commitment to valuing diversity in our schools, such mistreatment is unfortunately common. In fact, it's system-wide.

As stated earlier, systemic discrimination plays out because two key factors are activated: our primitive motivational systems buried deep within our brains, coupled with a history of social dominance.

To explain the first factor, research demonstrates that our empathy circuits light up when we interact with people most like ourselves – known as our “in-group” – especially when those individuals come from society's dominant group based on social identities such as race, gender,

sexual orientation or disability. Our empathy circuits are much less active when dealing with people we have less experience with – called “out-groups” – especially if those individuals come from non-dominant, historically excluded groups. Furthermore, the threat-response system rooted in the limbic region of our brain is activated when we interact with our out-group members, resulting in higher levels of fear, vigilance and anxiety.

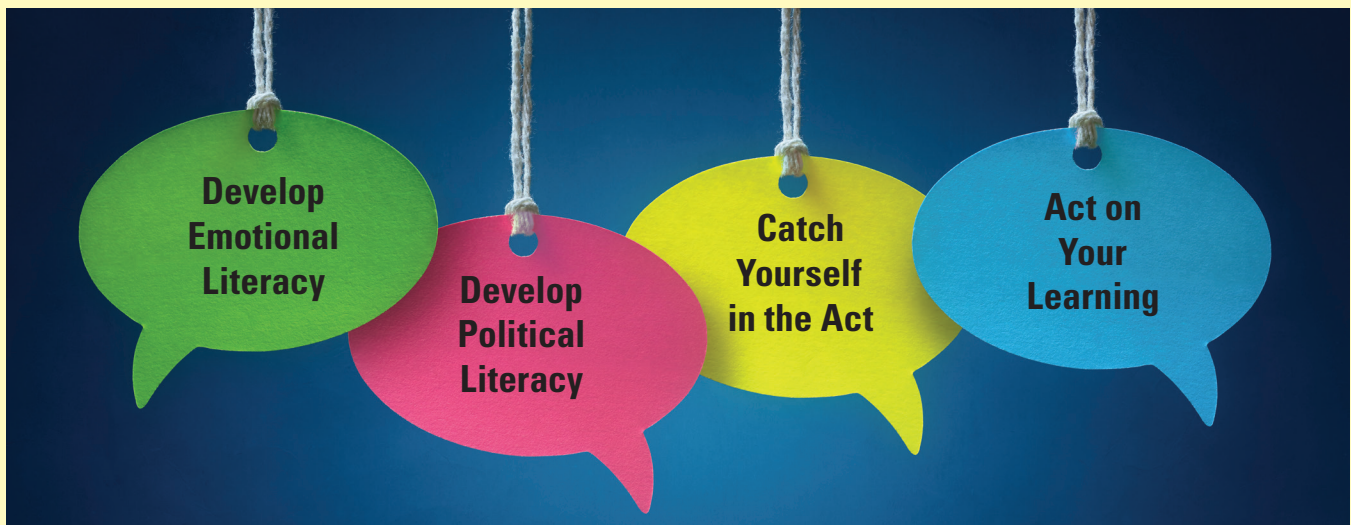
The above two phenomena are examples of *in-group bias* and *out-group threat* respectively, powered fundamentally as *feelings* at the unconscious level of mental processing, often hidden from ourselves. This is critical to understand because, according to neuroscience research, our emotions directly impact our thoughts, actions and choices, whether we are aware of these feelings or not.

It's also important to state that this neurobiology is not activated in a vacuum. In-groups and out-groups are defined by the powerful processes of socialization, of being marinated in the historical-political context that defines which groups are normative, mainstream, and dominant ... from those that are not. Every nation has socially dominant in-groups that form the rules and norms of society based on a wide variety of factors including, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, language or religion. And minority group members struggle to advance as a result.

In the previous example, there are a myriad ways in which in-group bias and out-group threat contributed to the negative experiences of the historical out-group, Muslim students. Low empathy and less emotional connection likely motivated the choice of video, the dismissal of their concerns by teachers, and the demand for an apology by the principal for accurately describing their experiences as racist. This is systemic

discrimination in action: small but significant events accumulating over time creating an *environment* that allows Islamo-racism to flourish. And it requires no hostile, swastika-clad Islamaphobe to lead the charge.

So what can school leaders do about it? Although there are many things, below are four tips that can serve as starting points. ☞



- 1. Develop Emotional Literacy:** This includes developing greater self-awareness and self-regulation skills in order to see yourself clearly as a leader, understanding the impact of your words, actions and social identity on staff, students, families and broader community stakeholders. Emotional intelligence is also key to engaging in the uncomfortable process of uncovering our personal biases and stereotypes, as well as confronting how our words and actions may unknowingly contribute to systemic discrimination.
- 2. Develop Political Literacy:** Understand the socio-economic and political history faced by minority groups and how this contributes to systematic discrimination and mistreatment today. Get comfortable with equity-oriented terms like white/whiteness, privilege, power, oppression, white supremacy, racialized, cis-gender, etc.
- 3. Catch Yourself in the Act:** On a daily basis, seek to uncover your bias, prejudice or stereotypes. Learn to “catch yourself” in your personal contradictions in order to role model a growth mindset and authentic leadership. Rather than wondering if you have bias, ask when and how does my bias appear? Invite feedback from others to help uncover what you can’t see or experience about yourself.
- 4. Act on Your Learning:** Turn your learning into actions that nurture equity and inclusion in schools. Support staff and students from minoritized backgrounds by centering their needs, concerns and experiences in school planning and decision-making. Encourage and provide formal opportunities for staff to deepen their political and emotional literacy skills through appropriate professional development. Role model by being vulnerable with your new learning and mistakes. Interrupt stereotyped and biased behaviour whenever possible.

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Diversity: Not So Black and White: bit.ly/2vbbelz

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