



A Story About Fighting Environmental Racism: Baneen's Community Court

Author's Note

I created this story as a part of my research with the Catamount Fellowship at the Institute for Community Prosperity in partnership with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Southern Alberta Chapter and Dr. Ranjan Datta. My aim was to portray a story about environmental racism while also breaking barriers in eco-action, which is defined as action that is taken to conserve, preserve and/or support the environment. The story follows Baneen, who is a young Muslim girl of colour facing environmental racism in her community.

While creating this story, I considered many barriers that young Baneen might face. Unfortunately, there were too many barriers to simply illustrate in a manner that is easy and digestible for children. A barrier that young Baneen might face is a language barrier at home. While she tries to learn and understand the definition of environmental racism in English, it might be hard for her to try to explain this term to her family in her native tongue. Another barrier that Baneen may face is the lack of time to perform eco-action as a family. As Baneen's teacher mentions, her parents were always too busy with work to do anything about the conditions in her neighbourhood. This may very well be the case with Baneen's parents as well. This can be supported by my research that has found that communities at risk (victims of systemic racism, low-income families, minorities, etc.) are less likely to participate in eco-action because they are too worried about trying to make ends meet each month along with the fact that eco-action is typically a white, middle-class family activity. In the story, we can see that Baneen faces systemic racism and an initial lack of a safe space to share with her peers.

For Parents and Educators

The term “environmental racism” was coined in 1982 by Benjamin Chavis, a Black civil rights leader from the United States (Macdonald, 2023). He defined environmental racism as a form of systemic racism that stems from racist institutional policies/practices which have been constructed by privileged individuals (Macdonald, 2023). Environmental racism occurs when racialized communities are faced with unsafe and unhealthy environmental conditions in their neighborhoods (e.g. toxic waste facilities, landfills, polluted air and water, etc.) All of which have detrimental effects on human health like exposure to cancer causing toxins, respiratory issues due to air pollution, skin rashes, stomach problems and neurological problems due to water pollution and increased levels of stress and anxiety which negatively impact both physical and mental health of these individuals (Macdonald, 2023). Communities impacted by environmental racism are often lower socio-economic status families, low-income, racialized, vulnerable communities who have limited access to healthcare services which exacerbate existing inequalities and decrease overall quality of life for these individuals (Al-Sachit, 2023).

Baneen was a 5th grade student when she first noticed the litter in her neighbourhood.

This all started one afternoon when she was playing basketball in her community court.





One day after school, Baneen went to play basketball at her friend Emilie's community court.



The following day, Baneen played basketball in her neighbourhood court. She had played in this court almost everyday and was used to her surroundings. However, after her last game with Emilie, she realized something different about her community court...



Baneen continued to play basketball that afternoon with the thought in her mind.



The next day, Baneen went to school still troubled by the garbage in her community court. She wanted to mention this difference to Emilie and her peers, but she felt embarrassed.



As the day went by, Baneen's teacher noticed a change in her behaviour.

“Baneen, is everything alright? You seem upset.” Her teacher asked.

“Well...my basketball court doesn't look like Emilie's court, it has trash everywhere.” Baneen said.

“Thank you for sharing that with me, Baneen. How does that make you feel?”

“I feel sad and embarrassed that my court is dirty. This is a place where I go to have fun, it should be clean and safe.”

“You're absolutely right, Baneen. You deserve to feel safe when you are playing outside. Can I share a story with you?”

Baneen nodded.

“This is something that I experienced when I was your age. I lived in a neighbourhood that wasn't well taken care of and people in my community often got sick because of the pollution and garbage. I was also upset about the way my community looked but I felt like I couldn't do anything about it because my parents were always at work and I was too ashamed to tell my teacher. As I got older, I learned that this was not normal. It is called “environmental racism.” Have you heard of that term before?” Her teacher asked.

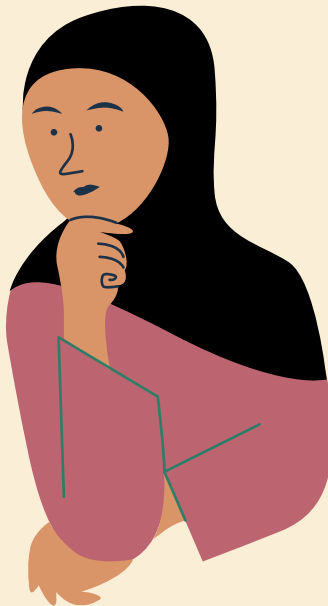
“No, I have not...what is it?” Baneen wondered.

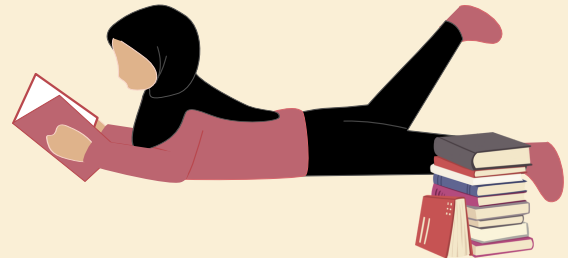
“Environmental racism occurs when racialized communities are faced with unsafe and unhealthy environmental conditions in their neighbourhoods. I encourage you to do some more research on it. Would you like to borrow this book?”

“Yes! Thank you for teaching me about this.”



When Baneen went home that night, she spent hours and hours learning about environmental racism by reading books and scrolling through the web.





The following day Baneen spoke to her teacher.

“I want to make a change in my neighbourhood by cleaning it up!” Baneen exclaimed.

Her teacher responded, “that’s such a great idea, Baneen! Can our class help you?”

“Yes, please!” Baneen said.




That same afternoon, Baneen's teacher gathered the supplies they needed to clean Baneen's community.

Baneen and her classmates spent the rest of the day cleaning her community court.







Thank you for your help, everyone! This project is important to me because my community is facing environmental racism which is when people of colour or less fortunate communities live in unhealthy environments because of their surroundings like nearby factories or dumps.





Baneen was so thankful for her class's help. Her community court was now a clean and safe place to play. She had also noticed an improvement in the air quality with less odour from the litter that was lying around. This improved the enjoyment she had playing on the courts.

References

Al-Sachit, B. (2023, February 13). Take a Look Inside: Environmental Racism in Canada. Mount Royal University.

Macdonald, E. (2023, January 31). Environmental racism in Canada: What is it and what can we do about it? Ecojustice. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://ecojustice.ca/environmental-racism-in-canada/>