MOSTLY YOUNG, MARGINALIZED AND VILIFIED:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION AND WELLBEING OF BLACK YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

Carl E. James holds the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora in the Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto. His scholarly interests include examination of how race, ethnicity, gender, class and immigrant status / citizenship intersect and mediate schooling opportunities and educational outcomes of racialized and Black students. His forthcoming publications include: Colour Matters: Essays on the Experiences, Education and Pursuits of Black Youth.

INTRODUCTION

A recent Statistics Canada (February 2019) report indicates that in 2016, children under 15 years old represented 26.6% of the Black population, while only 16.9% of the Canadian population were in that age group.[1] Given that such a significant proportion (slightly more than one-quarter) of the Black population are students engaged in their foundational education, schooling has a considerable effect on the cultural, social, economic and political welfare of Black communities in Canada. And insofar as schooling institutions have long been contributing to the marginalization, racialization and vilification of Black youth (James, 2012; James & Turner, 2017), it is understandable that there would be considerable concern with Black youths' educational and social trajectories. In reflecting on this reality, I explore the educational experiences of Black youth noting how through the years, antiblackness – the disregard for Black humanity, psychic hurt, and educational, social and cultural wellbeing of Black students (Dumas, 2016) – has been used in the sorting of Black students into status-differentiated educational programs that have structured their life in school, school credentials and educational outcomes (Domina, Penne, Penner, 2017).

THE SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION OF BLACK STUDENTS

From the 1970s and every decade since, studies of the educational experiences and achievements of Black youth have shown that compared to their White peers, Black students in the Toronto Board of Education (TBE)[2], for instance, are more likely to be enrolled in *Basic* (or the lowest) level of educational programs rather than an advanced program of study which would prepare them for greater educational and occupational opportunities – including postsecondary studies (see Deosaran, 1976; Wright & Tsuji, 1982). Further, a 1991 study of TBE students showed that 74% of all students, but only 55% of Black students were studying at the advanced level, and that Black students were more likely to plan on attending college rather than university (Cheng et al, 1993). Studies by independent researchers in cities such as Halifax, Edmon-

1 The median age of the Black population is said to be 29.6 years compared to 40.7 years for the total Canadian population.

2 TBE was the only school board in the country to provide information based on race, but region or country of birth was used to assign racial identification – for Black students, it was "the West Indies and Guyana."

ton, and Montreal – also showed a similar schooling situation for Black students (Codjoe, 2001; Kakembo & Upshaw, 1998; Kelly, 1998). In fact, speaking to the situation of students in Halifax, Castor Williams, chair of the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) said that African Nova Scotian students were experiencing, "a discordant education system that is devoid of any effective policies essential and sympathetic to their needs" (BLAC 1994, p. 13).

Fast forward to the 2000s, the schooling situation for Black students remains the same. For instance, in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB),[3] there was a 25% difference between Black (55%) and their white and other racialized (80%) counterparts' enrollment in the board's Academic Program of Study; and Black (8%) students were more likely than their counterparts (3%) to be in the lowest level of study (Basic). As in earlier years, Black youth were less likely to pursue post-secondary studies; and those who did, more often chose to attend college. Black students also dropped out of school and were suspended and expelled from school at higher rates than other students (James & Turner 2017; Szekely & Pessian, 2015). Further analysis reveals that third generation Black students – mostly of Caribbean descent – were most likely to be in an Applied Program, while first and second generation – most of them of African descent – were mostly in Applied and Essential programs (James, in press).

The educational programs in which Black youth were/are likely to be found and expected to learn, are sustained by schooling environments in which racial stereotypes or profiling, disproportionate discipline, bullying, schooling disruption and educators who question their social behaviours and their capacity for learning and commitment to education. In fact, recent news reports in many areas of the country tell of the inequitable treatments, punitive disciplinary measures, and harmful bullying that Black students experience in schools. Royer-Burkett (2019) tells of her 5-year-old son being stereotyped by his teacher as "a safety hazard, aggressive and violent." And she recounts the experiences of other parents whose kindergarten and elementary aged sons were suspended from school, noting that "there is an inherent bias that is ignored in how Black youth are being disciplined in our schools." Similarly, in Ottawa, Richard Sharpe[4] recalls how his son was suspended both in elementary and in high school which was a "common experience for Black families" (Paradkar, 2019). And in Edmonton, a mother alleged that her 11-year old son was "racially profiled" when he was asked by a school official, a retired police officer, in his Catholic school if the red durag "indicated that the boy was affiliated with a gang" (Issawi, 2019).[5]

One Montreal mother whose son was "the target of numerous racist attacks" – including being called "the n-word" by peers – insisted that this was a consequence of "the systemic racism at the school that they don't want to admit" (CTV, 2019). And in Halifax, Nova Scotia two grade 12 students who have had enough of the "hurt" and "put down" of being "called the n-word," have acted by making presentations to peers hoping to discourage the use of the n-word (CBC Kids News, 2019). The use of racist epigraphs also caused some students to change schools due to feeling unsafe. One Vancouver student who complained to school authorities about feeling unsafe at her high school because of the obscenities and threats directed at "Black people" from a fellow student on social media, was told that "you're going to have to deal with it." This response of the failure by school authorities, as the reporter writes, "to take action to ensure the safety" of Black students "raises important questions about the response to racism by the school, the Vancouver School Board and police" (Hyslop, 2019).

Undoubtedly, such schooling environments not only contribute to the educational outcome and social welfare of students, but also to their life circumstances such as their contacts with the justice system. The case of a 20-something Black man who was charged with running from police and found with a gun is worth referencing here. It is a case in which Justice S. Nakatsuru (R v. Morris, 2018), who, after taking into account the "expert evidence" and "social history" of the accused, in his ruling cited "systemic failures" in the education of this youth. His education, according to the judge, failed to provide the youth what he needed to deal with the social and economic challenges in his life. Justice Nakatsuru also writes:

> "Anti-Black racism has shaped your life in a way that has brought you into the criminal court… You did not find a way out through the public education system. I have no doubt that anti-Black racism affected how you were treated in school… I am not saying that your teachers were racist, uncaring, or that you do not share

3 Starting in 2008, Toronto District School Board has been the only School Board in Canada that collects race-based data. In 2018/19 other public school boards in the GTA collected data of their student population, but at the time of writing, have not made their findings public. It is important to note that the Catholic school – even in the Toronto area where there is a culture of collecting race-based data – have not moved to do the same. And except for Nova Scotia, this practice has not been adopted in other school boards in Canada's provinces.

4 In the *Toronto Star* article, Paradkar (2019) recounts the discriminatory experiences of three generations of the male members of the Sharpe family in three different Ontario school boards. Sharpe's son, the third generation, was suspended from his high school for, according to the suspension note, "persistent opposition to authority."

5 The mother is seeking to get an apology from the school.

> responsibility. Rather, I am recognizing the studies that show systemically that racism exists and has not served Black children well. That failure in the education system makes a child vulnerable to becoming involved in the criminal justice system" (page 15, #74)

Recognizing these problems, the United Nations' Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent – which made an official visit to Canada in October 2016 and consulted with Black community members on human rights issues – recommended, among other things, that Canadian schools need to "implement a nationwide African Canadian education strategy to address the inordinately low educational attainment, high drop-out rates, suspensions and expulsions experienced by African Canadian children and youth." And in order to provide young people the knowledge which will enable them to have productive lives, the Working Group also recommends that to avoid "negative stereotypes" that Black students encounter in their schooling, textbooks and other educational materials must provide accurate information about Black peoples' presence and history in Canada (United Nations Human Rights, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Many within the Black communities have long advocated for changes in the education system that would address the anti-Black racism to which Black students and parents are subjected. For members recognize that the welfare of their communities is connected to the education that Black students obtain at the early stages of life. Indeed, the schooling environments in which Black students are to be found and expected to learn are sustained by an interlocking set of stereotypes, teacher low expectations, streaming into lower level educational programs, lack of culturally relevant and responsive curricula, differential treatment, and lack of Black teachers who could show interest in them, act as role models, and address the absence of Black presence or history in the curriculum (James & Turner, 2017). There is certainly an urgency that educators come to recognize, and like Justice Nakatsuru admit, that the educational situation of Black students is a consequence of a system that has failed – and continues to fail – to address their needs, interests, issues and concerns, and those of their families and communities.

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