Lack of Black Educators in Canadian Education System and its Impact

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Abstract

This paper is the combined effort of group members Aissatou Barry, Maria Hussain, and Tricia Chambers. In this paper we explore and analyze the lack of black educators in Canada. We draw on recent research and data to support our claim and then we synthesize this information to investigate the impact on different stakeholders in education including the psychological and socio-economic impact on black students, as well as the effects on pedagogy and curriculum, and on authorities such as school boards. We include in our paper contemporary experiences of black teachers and students who first hand suffer from a lack of representation and lack of role models in education. Finally, we conclude our paper with possibilities of change and initiatives we believe will lead to a more inclusive education system in Canada.

Lack of Black Educators in Canadian Education System and its Impact

Education is one of the bedrock of Canadian society. Schools and classrooms are legislated as 'socially safe places' intended to provide both socialization and opportunities to develop youth's minds and relationships and to help them build their futures. However, for many Black students, schools are places where they experience degradation, harm, and psychological violence. Canada's population continues to become more racially diverse as current immigration, and Canadian birth patterns change the face of the population. As the general population diversity has increased, so has the student population in schools, especially in urban areas. In some of these urban school districts, the visible minority population exceeds 50% of the total student population (Ryan et al., 2007). However, the educator workforce in Canadian schools has failed to keep up with the pace of the increasing levels of this diversity. The lack of black educators in schools is why the experiences of black students are vastly different from their white counterparts. In this paper, we are concerned with the lack of black role models and leadership for black students, which results in demotivation and disconnect from not only the curriculum but also from having future goals and prospects.

Our position in this paper is that due to the lack of black educators in the Canadian education system, black students do not feel safe in the classroom and are made to feel like they do not belong. We elaborate this through the experiences of black students and teachers in schools. We show through means of data the discrimination against black educators in the education system. Lastly, we provide changes that can be made in the education system to create intentional spaces of belonging for educators and students.

In a world where race is determined by skin color and other related characteristics, those who do not have white skin do not have the same privileges as white people (Ryan et al., 2007).

One of such privileges that black students do not have is when children and students do not see black teachers or teachers of color in the classrooms, in the school boards, or school counseling and advisory. They lack the privilege to see leadership, role models, and inspiration in a discriminatory and racialized society. To see that they are represented in positions of authority helps black students feel safe. It helps them feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Professor Campbell quoted, "Too many of our students are made to feel like they are strangers in schools - as if they are interrupting something! Let students feel that the classroom is theirs!". How do we help black students feel that the classroom is theirs? By having more black teachers. Black teachers are well-positioned to establish relationships with students of color, deliver relevant pedagogy, and prepare students of color for a world that marginalizes them (Ryan et al., 2007).

Given the importance of color, how many teachers of color are there in Canadian schools? To answer this, we examine the data compiled by James Ryan and his colleagues at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education for their Paper Prepared for the Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of Education held in Saskatoon in May 2007, as well as the experiences of black students and black teachers shared in the Voices of Ontario Black Educators Experiential Report compiled in May 2015. First, we look at the data for the visible minority teachers in major urban cities in Canada compared to the number of visible minority students in Canada. Table 1 shows a significant demographic gap between students of color and teachers of color. This gap is referred to as the Teacher Diversity Gap. Given the increasingly diverse population of Canada, it is expected that this gap may widen (Turner, 2014). This data confirms that there are many more students of color than educators of color. These demographic and societal changes create a compelling case of systemic racism in education.

Table 1

Visible Minority Teacher[7] and General Population in Canada and Selected Provinces and Cities

	Total Teacher Labour Force	Visible Minority Teacher Population	Percentage Visible Minority Teachers	Percentage Total Visible Minority Population	Percentage Difference
Canada	412,955	22,415	5.4	13.4[8]	7.6
Quebec (Prov)	96,190	2,690	2.7	6.9	4.2
Montreal	42,905	2,305	5.3	13.5/22.7[9]	8.2/17.4
Ontario	162,240	12,055	7.4	19.0	11.6
Toronto	62,950	9,260	14.7	36.8/42.4	22.1/27.7
B.C.	52,055	4,645	8.9	21.6	12.7
Vancouver	25,730	3,935	15.2	36.8/49.0	21.6/33.8

Note: From "Teacher Diversity in Canada: Leaky Pipelines, Bottlenecks, and Glass Ceilings" by J. Ryan, K. Pollock, and F. Antonelli, 2009, p.11.

Canada prides itself on its policies on diversity and inclusion. Although it appears that there are policies in place for a more diverse education system, the data says otherwise. For instance, "In 2009, the provincial government recognized the need for greater diversity within school boards through its Equity and Inclusive Education Policy" (ONABSE, 2015). However, due to systemic racism, these policies do not reflect their actual implementation. The experiential report gathered by ONABSE conducted a survey in which respondents were asked, "their perception of their board's commitment to workplace diversity and whether the organization has placed enough emphasis on hiring and promoting staff from diverse backgrounds." The following graph shows that the majority (53%) of the respondents did not agree that school boards actively employ more racialized teachers.

Graph 1

Perceptions of Commitment to and Action on Workplace Diversity
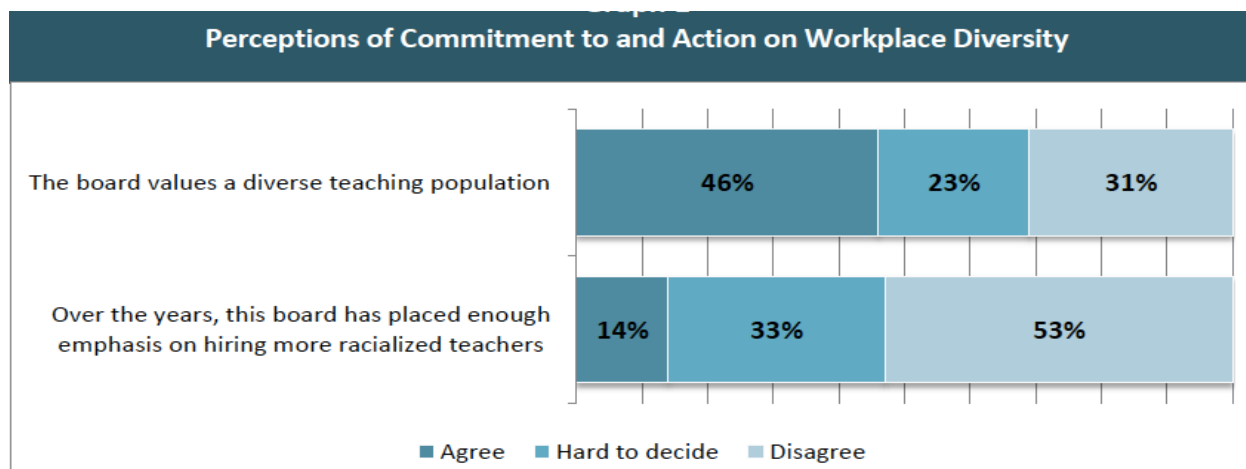
Note: From Voice of Ontario Black Eductaors: An Experiential Report, 2015, p.17.

The case of systemic education is further reinforced by the experiences shared by black students and educators in the ONABSE report. We believe that these experiences are important to share in our paper because "experiences provide the best basis for the analysis of the simultaneous impact of racism in different sites and in different social relations" (ONABSE, 2015). Black teachers expressed their frustration with micro-aggression in schools that make it harder for them to get hired and stay in the job. One of the teachers' expressed,

> "My experience is] rooted in racism and not believing that an educator can be black. [I was told] I am not allowed to park my car in staff parking. Standing in front of the Principal's office-dressed as a professional police officer asked if they were there for me. ~ You are very aware of the fact that you are a "minority," and that you do not necessarily belong" (ONABSE, 2015).

Another teacher expressed the impact of seeing fewer black teachers leads to a lack of role models for students; she said, "[Black students] do not see themselves in the profession because of the systemic barriers that keep teachers of color out of the system. It is a predominantly Caucasian profession, and that's not by accident. It's not that Black people don't have the aptitude to teach. ~" (ONABSE, 2015).

For years policy makers suggested that the lack of Black educators was only a supply problem that affects Black students. Research through the teacher applicants data and hiring process discovered that Black applicants had a significantly lower chance of receiving an offer than a white applicant (D'amico et al 2017). When Black teachers are hired, research indicates that they are placed randomly in school districts associated with poverty or gained the job from another person of colour (D'amico et al 2017). This represents one of the many ways the education system can be designed to stop the representation of Black individuals within their institutions. Currently, policy makers continue to avoid the systemic racism that is embedded into society surrounding the notions of Black educators in positions of power. The hiring process is selected by the principals at these institutions and studies report that Black teachers represent a lower percentage of the workforce than others (D'amico et al 2017). Then are segregated into placements which questions if there really is a supply/demand issue when they can pick and choose where they want Black teachers to attend (D'amico et al 2017).

In Ontario Black educators are lacking representation in the school system, Statistics Canada reports that 15% of Londoners identify as Black finding that both Black individuals and teachers within this region are underrepresented (Dubinski 2020). Thames Valley school District survey concluded that only 1% of their staff is Black which is a nearby school district to London, Ontario (Dubinski 2020). It is a serious problem when Black children often go their entire

education process without seeing a similar face in front of the classroom. It is suspicious that Ontario knows that they are dealing with a crisis in the education system and continues to blame the over staffing and oversaturated market for the reasons why there is a lack of Black Educators in Ontario. It is important to value the impact Black educators can make working in these school zones that would provide the needed diversity to expand the opportunities to others.

When institutions lack Black teachers in the school board it affects every individual, policies and the curriculum. Adding diversity protects these students from systemic racism that hinder their experiences within the classroom and deprives students of alternative methods of learning. Allowing Black educators will set them up successfully to interact with others in society and non-racialized students also benefit by having Black leaders in their learning institutions. By creating a space for everyone to feel included breaks generational norms of white supremacy and interrupts socially constructed ideas surrounding racism (Dubinski 2020). Changing the learning dynamic will allow for new responses in academics that can dominate the future and create new avenues of learning that do not fit in with the traditional method society grew up in.

The guest speaker in Professor Campbell's lecture, Aida al Thayabeth did an amazing job at highlighting some of the ways she dismantles colonialism in her classroom that changes the learning dynamic of all her students. Students are able to speak openly without raising their hand which breaks the negative stigmas surrounding asking a question. Her curriculum acknowledges the hidden components that were forbidden from literature and creates opportunities for everyone in the classroom. Intersectionality is becoming a fundamental analytics framework for understanding a person's social political identities in society. Gender race sexuliaty and classism are major factors in one's life creating unique experiences. This framework in the classroom will

remove privilege based power, support policies for the success of everyone and demonstrate diversity in leadership. People must question everything they were taught and know about the different perspectives of people who help build Canada other than the European settlers stories.

When we remove Black leaders from the education system Ontario can see the difference it makes on students. When a student has a Black teacher by the third grade they are 13% more likely to enroll in college than others (Dubinski 2020). The concern is that the education board acknowledges the issues surrounding Black leadership and can easily implement policies/hiring tactics that will boost the amount of Black teachers in positions of power but continue to make excuses to address this phenomenon. Not only do they make it difficult to obtain spots within these positions, school boards are known for limiting the amount of Black teachers in these institutions making Black representation in the work environment not present (Dubinski 2020).

Melissa Allder is a learning coordinator with the Thames Valley School District and before this career she was an English teacher that dealt with the lack of representation in her department (Dubinski 2020). She notes that it was a hard environment to grow in, many of her students would express their concerns about other faculty members and prejudiced remarks that they would make (Dubinski 2020). When noticing what was really happening in her highschool she wanted to make a change and demand a better opportunity for all her students. When students would feel discouraged or need an adult to talk to Ms. Allder was there to listen and give advice to help (Dubinski 2020). Having a teacher that knows the disadvantages people can endure and stereotypes constructed creates a better environment where students can learn free from discrimintion and displays Black greatness in the classroom.

The lack of Black educators in the Canadian educational system has an impact on Black students, and consequently, on the Black community. On one hand, the absence of Black

educators can rob Black students' of the opportunity to feel seen and heard. On the other hand, it can even perpetuate many existing systems of anti-Black racism.

The achievement gap is one particular cycle of oppression that relates to the inequality of attainment between people of different races, gender, and class. Black people, especially Black boys, have been dropping out more frequently than their white counterparts. Professor Cooper, a Black Canadian scholar and author, stated that Black students are sixty-percent more likely to drop out of high school (*Black Drop-out Rate In Canada "A National Disgrace": Professor Afua Cooper*, 2015). This appalling number is a mere result of the socio-economic barriers that Black students must face. Most Black students come from lower-income households and might not have access to the educational advantages such as tutoring sessions and or a private desk. Hence, Black students can have a harder time achieving higher grades and pursuing higher education. Not having Black teachers can lead to even more misunderstanding between schools and their Black students – predominantly white school boards may view their failing Black students' as delinquents. This culturally biased standpoint overlooks the root of their academic failure which are related to systemic barriers and an overall lack of support.

Speaking of lack of support, Black neurodivergence can often be misinterpreted. Due to common stereotypes regarding Black men, educators are less forgiving when it comes to their Black students. Black boys in particular, are more policed and punished than their other non-Black classmates. Learning disabilities that go undiagnosed can cause much confusion. In addition, white people are more likely to receive a diagnosis and treatment for their neurodiversity. Black households, who are perpetually left behind in the health care system, may struggle to tame their children's learning disabilities or be aware of it in the first place, thus perpetuating a stereotype of the «slacking Black boy». A Black educator could validate a Black

student's situation like no other – Come to think of it, cultural relatability cannot be imitated. Thus, having Black educators could help foster and honest and co

The lack of Black educators impacts the curriculum-making process which will have a direct impact on Black student's self-concept and identity. If the curriculum has remained so Eurocentric despite the increased presence of BIPOC children in the classroom, it is because the curriculum makers are probably not committed to dismantling anti-black racism. As a result, Black students do not necessarily feel seen by the Eurocentric material that is being taught. They will internalize colonial beliefs of European supremacy while dismissing their own racial group's achievement – ones they are not aware of.

Furthermore, when non-Black people are in charge of making pedagogy decisions, they tend to approach with the «add-and-stir» method. The latter consists in mixing few Black teachings into predominantly Eurocentric teachings, giving the impression of diversity & inclusion. This particular approach to dismantling anti-black racism in the classroom is a form of tokenism that eventually becomes ineffective because the approach is image-focused instead of system focused. The latter prioritizes the complete renewal of a system in order to dismantle its underlying oppressive tendencies – exactly what we need in order to make real change.

By including Black voices in the curriculum-making process and in other important pedagogical decisions, the learning material could be much more culturally responsive than it is. In other words, you cannot fight against racism in pedagogy without prioritizing Black voices in that specific field. A lack of Black input during curriculum-making results in the erasure of Black knowledge,and ultimately of Black history.

Moreover, the lack of Black educators can make a Black student's school experience more alienating and damaging. In an interview with Vogue, Emma Dabiri, author of «Don't Touch My Hair» discusses having Black hair in a deeply racist society. She explains that *«most schools say to tie your hair back, but afro hair doesn't tie back very easily»* (Subair, 2020). This statement relates to the lack of comprehension regarding Afro hair – Afro hair does not make sense to non-Black people and it is the classroom that they become aware of this miscomprehension. Indeed, when it comes to disapproving of Black hair, the classroom is a crime scene. White educators have a history of alienating and even humiliating Black students' hair. The perplexity of non-Black people surrounding Black hairstyles can be quite alienating for Black students. Thus, having Black educators could make a significant difference in the academic journey of the Black student because they will be able to relate to their experiences and affirm their racial identity.

Solutions

The solution to increase the number of Black educators is to start with one's self – we must start with our own biases before tackling societal issues. Although anti-racism matters are quite collective, the self is a crucial component of honest commitment to change.

Then, the focus should be on others. By seeing the world through an equitable lens, we observe society's doing and how it affects Black people. To understand others is to understand society. Thus, being committed to seeing others through a culturally responsive lens can help propel to fight against anti-Black racism.

Moreover, education boards in Canada must employ legislated employment equity: The government should legislate school boards all over Canada to address the racial disparities and the teacher diversity gap in schools and other educational institutions. While writing this paper, we realized that while there is much data available on racialized and minority students and

teachers in the United States, the same cannot be said about Canada. There is a need for intentional effort to collect and analyze teacher employment data to understand the disparities better and create policies that reflect a plausible change in education's equity and diversity programs.

Another solution that Professor Campbell also speaks about in classroom is to encourage black parent involvement in school boards. Schools in Ontario have a Parent Association and just like school boards it doesn't have enough black parents who can voice their children's needs or advocate for a more diverse teacher employment.

Lastly, it is evident that the current curriculum needs to be changed to include an Africentric curriculum. Curriculums need to include African history rather than hiding it behind performative 'celebration' of Black History Month. This misguided pedagogical approach reinforces the idea that "Black history is peripheral to the school curriculum. An African-centred approach to teaching Black History would help students critically challenge dominant narratives about the history of Black Canadians, in a transformative way that extends beyond the 28 days in February" (Butler, 2021). Therefore, by including Black voices in the curriculum-making process and in other important pedagogical decisions, the learning material could be much more culturally responsive than it is. In other words, you cannot fight against racism in pedagogy without prioritizing Black voices in that specific field. A lack of Black input during curriculum-making results in the erasure of Black knowledge, and ultimately of Black history.

To conclude, representation is much more than having Black superheroes, it's about having Black mentors, in real life. As mentioned above, Canadian school districts and boards have yet to implement employment systems that empower Black educators and protect Black students. Doing so will consequently uplift Black students which will have positive outcomes for

the Black community as a whole. This further proves the importance of Black educators in the academic journey of Black students – the latter might feel more confident in their own ability. This specific fallacy is not to be taken as an isolated combat, for it is associated with many vicious cycles that exist outside of the classroom. The truth is, education is a powerful weapon that can hit or miss – students can either feel seen or completely dismissed. There are no gray areas, no in-betweens when it comes to race – you either are *personally* committed to fighting anti-black racism or you are not.

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