

“THE TEACHER SAID NOTHING”:
BLACK GIRLS ON THE ANTI-BLACK RACISM
IN GREATER TORONTO AREA (GTA) SCHOOLS

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Jada, who is 18, spoke of an experience that took place during her Grade 10 drama class in Ontario, Canada. She retained a vivid memory of the incident because it was the first time a fellow student called her “nigger” to her face. Describing her emotional turmoil, Jada recalled how her shock turned into embarrassment, and then her embarrassment turned into straight fury when she was verbally assaulted by another student. “*The teacher said nothing,*” she explained. “*It was in the middle of class, and a student walked up to where I was sitting and casually blurted out the “n word” as if it were my first name.*” Jada was surprised because this blatant racial assault had never happened to her before in school, and the teacher’s failure adequately to respond made the situation even more confusing. The teacher asked if Jada was okay and told the offending student to just “take a seat.” “*That’s it? Take a seat,*” Jada said. Angered by the teacher’s callous response, Jada decided to excuse herself from the class to take a walk.

Introduction

Jada’s story reflects common themes found in the narratives of the participants who took part in a larger study focused on Black girls’ and education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (McPherson, 2020). This is one of several accounts documenting situations that can be seen either to perpetuate or excuse anti-Black, racist attitudes and behaviours in Ontario schools. Based on the direction of Ontario ministry policies such as the *Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (2017) and *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan* (2017), and considering

the statistics outlined from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC),¹ it is evident that there are concerns with educational practices and academic outcomes of Black students in Ontario. According to the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), high dropout rates, high numbers of suspensions, high expulsion rates and lower rates of matriculation into post-secondary programs for both Black boys and girls compared to non-Black students (Ontario Alliance of Black Educators, 2013).

There seems to be a lack of attention placed on failures which continue to impact Black students. For example, in the OHRC section of Ontario's *Safe Schools Act* (SSA), there is evidence of the disproportional impact of SSA on Black students. Ontario's SSA was instituted in the 2000s, as an educational reform policy to address student behaviour. The policy used strategies such as "zero tolerance", which requires mandatory suspension for what is considered "bad behaviour" to enforce disciplinary standards across Ontario schools. Although the act is said to have been repealed with a move towards what is labelled as "progressive discipline" (Winton, 2012)—that is to say, less harsh and/or lasting measures—the lingering impact of the SSA continues negatively to impact Black student outcomes (Howard & James, 2019; Maynard, 2022).

Accounts like Jada's suggest that educational environments are often unsafe for Black students. Considering the policy documents and statistics reflecting concerns with Black student achievement, it must be emphasized that the responsibility for these long-standing concerns cannot be placed at the feet of Black students, as common discourse on schooling and performance suggests (Howard & James, 2019; James et al., 2017; McPherson, 2020b). As issues with racism continue to distort the experiences of Black youth in Ontario schools; educators must come to terms with how maintaining, tolerating, and excusing racism, especially while enforcing former reformative policies such as SSA, disproportionately impacts the education and achievement outcome of Black students.

My research foregrounds the observations and perspectives of Black girls on anti-Black racism in GTA schools. The accounts of participants elucidate the degree of anti-Black racism seen and experienced within the school system. Detailed in their narratives are a number of discriminatory situations and practices that they either experienced or witnessed in the classroom, or in other school environments. Using intersectionality as method for analyzing Black girls' accounts of the anti-Black racism they have seen or

¹ The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) is the governing body of Ontario's *Human Rights Code*, a provincial law that gives everybody equal rights and opportunities without discrimination in specific social areas such as jobs, housing, services, facilities, and contracts or agreements. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en>

experienced, this paper reveals what we can learn from Black girls about anti-Black racism in Ontario schools. Two of the broader questions advanced based on the participants' accounts are: to what extent do Black students continue to experience and witness anti-Black racism in the Ontario school systems? And how do education equity policies address anti-Black racism perpetuated by teachers and administrators in educative spaces?

The voices of Black girls on anti-Black racism in schools lead us to a central argument: education systems in Ontario must first tackle the school environments and pedagogical practices before suggesting that the disproportionately low achievement of Black students in Ontario is primarily a reflection of the ability and culture of Black students themselves. With evidence of anti-Black racism impacting the quality of education Black students receive, any reference to achievement and outcomes of Black students without adequately addressing the concerns with anti-Black racism in pedagogies and school environments will remain grossly inequitable.

Position of the Author

I am a Black, feminist educator, researcher, and scholar, trained in Ontario as a K-6 schoolteacher; I have taught and assisted in classrooms at the primary-junior level, and have been working in the field of education in different capacities for over 15 years. In addition to my formal teaching and research practices, I use my passion for anti-racism education and social justice as a community leader and youth program developer to create and support community-based programs which focus on Black youth.

Voices of Black Girls

Intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is the theory used to conceptualize, situate, and emphasize the power that factors into the lived experience of Black women based on the marginality of their identities. This theory is important to the positioning and lack of power and agency Black girls encounter in school. As this article focuses on the data collected from Black girls, intersectionality is centered here as an approach to effectively use knowledge, based on the compounding factors of their identity, to describe their experiences. The multiple axes of difference (Butler, 2018), which shape the lives of Black girls in Canada factor into the discrimination they face (Collins & Blige, 2020). Centering the voices of these participants creates space for the opinions of Black girls to be heard as they touch on the specific, individual racial assaults they face and witness in GTA schools. Butler (2018) notes that if Black women and, by extension in this context, Black girls “experience oppression along the lines of space,

place, race, gender, sexuality and class; liberation should be imagined along those same lines" (p.28).

The narratives and accounts of Black girls and their interpretation of the anti-Black racism they witness and experience within the Canadian school system are therefore analyzed through an intersectional lens. Here, the goal is to center intersectionality as an analytic tool, which effectively situates their analysis of power (McMillan-Cottom, 2016) in relation to the authority of teachers and administrators. In addition to the specifics of their individual stories, participants' accounts reflect general concerns with anti-Black racist attitudes and practices in Ontario schools, which impact the achievement outcomes of Black students in general.

Anti-Black Racism in Canada

All racialized people are impacted by systemic and social manifestations of racism; however, these effects of racism continue to have adversely disproportional impacts on Black people in Canada. Describing racism specifically as "anti-Black" is necessary to emphasize the explicit and brutal effects that racism, both social and institutional, has on Black communities across Canada.

The nature of the inequities faced by Black students in Greater Toronto Area (GTA) schools requires the naming and acknowledging of direct and specific incidents of racism enacted towards them in the education system. The histories and contemporary realities of anti-Black racism in Canada is bound up in the country's violent colonial past. This legacy of control and occupation in the establishment of Canada, based on a foundation of Eurocentric ideals, contributes to the normalized racism and discrimination (Cooper, 2000) that is the status quo within Canadian social systems. The enslavement of African people and their arrival in Canada marks the beginning of ongoing racial segregation and criminalization of people of African descent (Maynard, 2017). Black bodies historically, have been used to sustain and service white supremacy in North America, instituting notions of non/status and maintaining the insignificance of Black humanity even after the end of legal system of slavery across the diaspora (McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016).

Kathrine McKittrick (2006) describes Blackness and Black people in Canada as "altogether deniable and evidence of prior codes of representation that have identified Blackness/difference as irrelevant"; this is to say that Black people and Blackness have always operated on the margins of all aspects of Canadian life. Still, McKittrick goes on to remind us that "Black existence is an actuality, which takes on several different forms that do not always conform to the idea of Canada"(p. 93). Ultimately, McKittrick describes the preservation of anti-Black division and racism in Canada. Black people

cannot be removed from the violence and bondage that brought them to the country. As a result, the idea of Black people being treated as equal members of society, with human rights that must be observed, cannot be reconciled with the white racial and colonial framing that continues to control the country.

The term anti-Black racism is used in this article to describe the specific impact of racism and discrimination on Black people in Canada. Anti-Black racism, when used in context to countries within the Black African diaspora (such as Canada), helps to underscore the vicious and deliberate racism directed toward Black people within these regions of white control. Canadian schools offer no exception to the impact of anti-Black racism for Black students (James et al., 2017).

Anti-Black Racism in Ontario Schools

Anti-Black racism within educational spaces and practices has a long history in American and Canadian school systems. Michael Dumas (2016) describes education policy as “a state of anti-Blackness”, looking at the historical connection to anti-Blackness within social systems, he notes, “to the extent that there is ample evidence of the civic estrangement of Black people—their exclusion from the public sphere—one can theorize that the Black is still in the position as the slave”, which might explain how easily the needs and priorities of Black students are overlooked within systems of education.

Examining the limited, but emerging, research on Black student’s school experiences in Ontario, there are clear indications of systemic failures (Howard & James, 2019; James et al., 2017; McPherson, 2020). For example, Black Demographic Data Advisory Committee for TDSB notes that, 42% of Black students were suspended at least once between 2006-2011, compared to only 18% of white students during that same period. The same report indicates, “Black students have a drop-out rate almost twice that of their white peers, while the graduation rate of Black students is 15% points below that of their white peers” (Ontario Alliance of Black Educators, 2013).

Several education scholars have focused on examining the impact of education administration policies and pedagogical approaches on Black students in Canada (Dei et al., 2017; George et al., 2020). To name two notable scholars in the field: Annette Henry, research focuses on the education of Black girls and the experience of Black women teachers in Canada, has and continues to account for the inequity experienced by Black girls and educators in her work (Henry, 1998; 2005; 2017). Researcher and scholar Carl James’ work has, for decades, called educational administrators to task on how Black students, particularly Black boys, are miseducated and disadvantaged in Canadian schools (James 1995; 2004; 2012). Still, the issues facing Black students resulting in further

marginalization and barriers to their achievement and success continue across Ontario school boards, and positive outcomes from educational equity plans, dating back to 2009, have not be effectively realized.

James and Turner's 2017 report entitled *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* provides an examination of the current state of education for Black youth in the GTA. The authors' findings are placed in context to the historical and systemic factors that play a considerable role in the contemporary educational system and practices of educating Black students in Ontario. The report reflects the inequalities in educational outcomes, which impact overall academic success of Black students. Issues such as, low academic performance based on provincial standards, disproportionate number of school suspensions and expulsions, and lower graduation rates, continue to plague Black students in Ontario.

Though there have been consistent calls for multicultural and anti-racist education, "institutions operate on the premise that the education they provide is free of cultural bias – that there is no one ethnic group or culture that is dominant or informs educational practices and content" (James, 1995, p. 31). Over the years, more data has been collected, outlining the discrimination faced by Black students in Canadian schools (Dei et al., 2017; James et al., 2017; George et al., 2020). According to the TDSB (2020), "anti-Black racism, is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions and our schools." In the same document, *Supporting Black Student Achievement and Dismantling Anti-Black Racism at the TDSB*, the board acknowledged that "systemic and individual acts of anti-Black racism have become normalized and are therefore sometimes difficult to identify, address and prevent (p. 2). The Durham District School Board (DDSB), representing public schools east of Toronto, Ontario, outlined similar concerns with anti-Black racism in a 2018 report noting, "The stigma and stereotypes Black Ontarians and communities face have impacted public policies, decision-making and services. As a result, anti-Black racism is felt in nearly every measure of opportunity, security, and fairness in our society" (p. 7). Despite these institutions acknowledging the presence and impact of anti-black racism, the data available on the achievement of Black students fails to adequately assess pedagogical approaches that do not effectively address anti-Black racism, or support anti-racism education in schools.

Gaps in educational outcomes predominantly affecting Black youth require thorough examination, which includes more than statistical data on outcomes. Policies such as zero tolerance—the automatic suspension or expulsion for any school related infraction—or academic streaming—the grouping of students based on perceived ability and/or potential—are consistently and disproportionately used against Black students. These harsh and punitive policies suggest that when there are concerns with the behaviour or

academics of Black students, these issues are their responsibility and Black students are punished and held accountable for the obligations of the system. The biases in these plans are seen in the number of Black students whose achievements are restricted and limited through these policies compared to non-Black students (James et al., 2017; George et al., 2020). Educative spaces, policies, and pedagogical approaches that do not address racism or provide culturally appropriate teaching approaches only create and maintain toxic educational environments for Black students (Dei et al., 2017; James et al., 2017; George et al., 2020).

Ontario School Boards Anti-Black Racism Plans and Initiatives

Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in Canada with the most diverse population of students, has attempted to address anti-Black racism through a plan titled, *Anti-Black Racism Strategy 2018/19*. In this plan, there are several lofty goals for what the plan describes as an “engaged deep-dive into anti-Black racism through current research, understanding and context”. The strategy is part of TDSB’s multi-year strategic plan: *Towards the Excellence in the Education of Black Students*. In working toward the five system goals, the multi-year plan includes: transforming student learning, creating culture and staff well-being, providing equity of access to learning opportunities for all students, allocating human and financial resources strategically to support student needs, and building strong relationships and partnership within school communities.

Adding to TDSB efforts, in 2021 the Toronto Star reported a new initiative led by TDSB teachers to create a new course on anti-Black racism for grade 12 students (Francis, 2021). According to the news article, the course will be piloted in one high school in the west end of Toronto, with the hopes of offering the course in additional TDSB schools as interest grows for the content and material. There is no indication or initiative reported that establishes a similar educational endeavour aimed at providing teachers with anti-Black racism education to assist in transforming pedagogical practices.

Other school boards across Ontario have also outlined plans for addressing anti-Black racism in schools. After years of planning, The Durham District School Board (DDSB) released the “Compendium of Action for Black Student Success” in 2018, a plan that details actions to be taken between 2018-2021 to address the ongoing concerns of anti-Black racism in the region. The Peel District School Board’s (PDSB) website dedicates space on the platform to outlining “anti-Black Racism Resources and Supports”, with a list of material to support teachers and families in dealing with barriers caused by anti-Black racism. Both Durham and Peel regions are located in Ontario and are considered a part of the GTA.

Methodology

My position as a Black feminist educator compelled me to utilize a data collection and analysis method that allowed for the effective identification and description of the lived experiences of the Black girls in this study. The data used in this article was obtained from a larger study entitled: *Black Girls Clap Back: Intersectionality, Black Girlhood, and Inequity in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)* (McPherson, 2020a). This study contains stories collected from 14 self-identified Black girls, between the ages of 13 and 19, who were living and attending school in the GTA at the time.

The data was collected through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. One-on-one, in-depth interviews provide a “deeper understanding of a social phenomenon” and are most appropriate when detailed accounts on a sensitive topic are needed from the participants of the study (Gill et al., 2009, p. 292). In addition to one-on-one interviews, focus groups were used to create a supportive environment for participants to speak with each other about their experiences. At the time of the study, three of the participants were post-secondary students, and 11 participants were attending high school in the GTA. Participants have been given a pseudonym for privacy. All direct quotes taken from the narratives and accounts of participant data will be outlined in italics throughout the article and the age of each participant, as their name first appears, are indicated in brackets.

Data Analysis and Review

As this article focuses the experiences of racism in Ontario schools, the analysis centers on examining experiences with teachers and students in school environments. To contextualize the accounts of Black girls attending an Ontario high school, I use intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry (Collins & Blige, 2020). “Intersectionality’s critical praxis can occur anywhere” (p. 38); considering the unique position of Black girls in Canada, advancing intersectionality as a critical praxis helps to position experiences that make intersectional knowledge possible and valuable in social discourse, social policy analysis, and reform. Intersectionality is used here both as theory, grounding the positions of the participants within the larger scheme of Black feminist knowledge, and as method, to analyze their accounts in relation to their live experience and understanding of power (McMillan-Cottam, 2016).

Intersectionality used as a form of critical inquiry allows for the analysis of the accounts of Black girls to be considered as a direct challenge to the status quo (Collins & Blige, 2020). According to McMillan-Cottam (2016), intersectionality as theory and method is a “political imperative” as it advances an approach that allows one to “reinforce hierarchies that reify whiteness, especially middle-class whiteness on whom the [higher] education

norms are predicated” (p. 216). The accounts of Black girls in Canada contain knowledge of the power structures, which is then translated through their intersectional gaze, creating an intersectional interpretation of their experiences.

Intersectionality supports the use of a Black feminist lens to examine the narratives and accounts of the participants. It also assists in the process of deconstructing the social and political structures that influence Black girls’ experiences, such as schooling. In addition, intersectionality provides a context for examining identity and power in the Black African diaspora. Although the focus of this analysis is not meant to specifically underscore gender, a Black feminist analysis approach also helps to situate the intersections of identities impacted by the social and political structures that maintain manifestations of racism.

Anti-Black Racism Behind the Walls of Ontario High Schools

The opinions and responses of the participants have been divided into two categories: interactions with teachers in school environments and pedagogical approaches in the classroom. In each of these categories, the accounts of the participants are reflections of circumstances that were experienced and witnessed and point to anti-Black racism and discrimination within the school system.

Interactions with Teachers (School Environment)

The data reveal a number of instances where the participants shared experiences of their interactions with teachers who, by their estimation, were ineffective at motivating, supporting, and providing a safer environment to cultivate their learning.

When participants were asked about their general experiences with teachers, Deja (16) provided a summary of her assessment of teachers and what she considers their consistent stereotyping of Black students:

I feel like the majority of the teachers don't care. They already have an assumption of what they think you're doing already. They don't care if you come from a good home. They already see your skin is Black. You're dressed a certain way. There is also the way you carry yourself, and instead of them taking the time to look into you and listen to you, they just look at the outside and say, "okay that's your stereotype," done. That you're a drug dealer. You hang out with these people, so okay you are that type of person. Instead of being like, yes, you hang out with this group, but you are your own person. Yes, I dress this way but that's because my freedom of expression. I want to dress this way. Not thinking there's more behind the story, you know what I mean? So, I feel like there's lots of that with the teachers.

Deja's assessment supports literature that notes how Black students have a history of being negatively stereotyped in Toronto area schools (Soloman, 1992). Teachers often assume the worst of Black students due to their internalized negative pathologies that associate Black students with crime and violence (Maynard, 2022). These notions of Black and criminality perpetuates anti-Black sentiments and attitudes commonly shared by administrators, teachers, and other students. Deja's account reflects her understanding of how Black students are often positioned as inferior students in schools based on their identity. In this, Deja interprets the callous stereotyping and the reinforcing of those stereotypes as a consistent barrier that limits the freedom of Black students in school spaces.

Continuing the topic of Black students being stereotyped in schools, two of the participants, Sienna and Zara, shared their opinion on the matter:

Sienna (14): Yeah. I think that some people in my class aren't like most of the Black grade 9s in our class. Like I'd say, not as rowdy as you'd expect. Anyway, so when the teachers look at it, they are not thinking that they are expecting that they're going to be rowdy. All Black kids are rowdy. They're waiting for them to act that way and act out so they're just sitting back and like, oh yeah, I knew what you were going to do.

Zara (17): Sometimes they'll do things to trigger that [rowdy behavior] in Black students. They'll do things to kind of like push you and push you to that point and sometimes even when you try and walk away from them, they'll follow you and try to get that out of you. It's sad because the teachers that you would expect to have your back are the ones that are doing it to you. So, it's just like, how am I supposed to look up to you or look at you as an authoritative figure and you're doing stuff to make me come out of myself?

What Zara is describing is teachers intentional misuse of power, resulting in unsafe educative spaces for Black students. This is a particular issue for Black girls as reflected in reports of increased rates of suspension and conflict with authorities (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). The putative response to Black students in Canadian schools also makes this type of behavior particularly concerning as pushing Black students "to that point", while knowing the potential consequences for Black students, is undoubtedly a form of anti-Black racism that will impact Black students' ability to trust their teachers. It is no surprise that actions similar to the ones described by Black girls result in an inability to develop trusting relationships with certain teachers due to their continuous and disproportionate targeting of Black youth in schools. Nicole (17), described an incident she witnessed that happened to one of her peers during a class she was attending:

And yesterday this Black girl that I know from elementary school, she actually had an incident with the teacher where the teacher was just being rude to her, and the teacher wouldn't acknowledge it. The girl was just like, 'you don't understand that what you were saying was hurting me and you embarrassed me in front of the whole class without even acknowledging it. Now, you are just threatening to call my mom and tell her that I am being bad, call the principal and have a meeting, when you are not even acknowledging and understanding the impact that you had on me in front of all my other classmates...'. And so, I just think there is a lack of understanding between students and teachers, specifically Black students, and teachers.

Nicole's perspective of the event outlines the Black girl's explicit attempt to be heard and validated in the classroom. Nicole's account underscores her concern of how the teacher's power is used to silence this Black girl. It is common for Black students to witness these types of interactions between teachers and other Black students. Based on Nicole's account, there seems to be a clear understanding that because of racism, teachers have little interest in supporting the emotional needs of Black students.

Similarly, Zara's lack of trust toward teachers comes from what she interprets as consistent teacher apathy that regularly affects Black students in the classroom. Zara said:

"Their favourite line to say is whether you do the work or not I get paid anyway. They don't care. They're just there for the money. They don't care about helping you. As long as they write the lesson on the board and you copy it, or not, they are done."

Zara's account reflects her general conclusion that teachers simply do not care about Black students, and there seems to be little recourse for students in these situations. Teachers have the power not to care, and their apathy has no impact on their position as a teacher within a school system.

There is also the general concern about the assumptions and expectations of Black students that points to additional forms of discrimination consistent in school environments. Samara (17), describes some of her concerns with how teachers effectively exclude Black students from the school community, she notes:

It is like it puts you in a really weird spot for extracurricular or even when staff want something. For Black History Month, the Black girls get summoned to do something, right, and then it's like, why don't you call me for women's history month? Why don't you call me for Halloween? Why didn't you call me for Christmas? I like regular stuff, you know, I like to party, I like to talk. So, you have Nigerian and Somali people all in one school and there is a lot of trauma there. We are all the first-generation kids, and then they want you

to put your trauma on display for one month of February, and then you have to go back and you are not allowed. You are not invited to any of the parties or for Halloween or school spirit week, nobody asks the Black kids if they want to do school spirit. But you are going to do Black History Month because we need to learn something from you and Dr. King and whatever they want to do for that one month, and then it is over. That kind of sucks because it kind of says that you were only welcome when it's about pain.

Samara's points suggest the importance of intersectional approaches used in pedagogical practice. The cursory and often benevolent efforts to isolate Black History Month, for example, as the month for Black students, deliberately leaves them out of general school events and sustains and heightens the levels of exclusion Black students feel within school environments. This practice of tokenizing Black students for Black history month is a common occurrence in English schools across the diaspora (Doharty, 2019; Tosolt, 2020) and what seems like a simple and appropriate way to include Black students reflects the central isolating concerns that result from lack of understanding and consideration for Black students.

In these examples, the attitudes reflected in the interactions with teachers lead to a general lack of trust. Based on these accounts, teachers are said to regularly taunt Black students, forcing them to behave in the stereotypical ways, to justify punitive measures commonly used against Black students. In addition, Black students face discrimination when they are isolated and relegated to school activities that solely focus on Blackness and "pain", with little opportunities to participate in general school activities. Many teachers also do not seem to expect positive behavior and outcomes from Black students, leading to and reinforcing what Dumas (2014) describes as "sites of Black suffering" for Black youth. The participants' accounts also indicate that Black students in these situations are often fully aware of the teacher's stereotypical perception of Black students. All of this leads to further tensions in school environments, which have a direct impact on the quality of education for Black students.

Pedagogical Approaches (In the Classroom)

Two of the girls in the study spoke about their experience with one, very popular and controversial book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in 1960 under the author's pen name Harper Lee. The classic American novel set in a fictional Alabama town in 1933 tells the story of a widowed White lawyer and his two children. The story depicts events that arise when the lawyer defends a Black man who is accused of raping a white woman (Lee, 1960). Much of the controversy surrounding the use of the book in school is based on the plot and particularly the use of the word "nigger," which appears in the novel 48 times (Saney, 2003). As a result of the language and events in the book, it has been removed from English reading lists across North America (Saney, 2003).

As the study participants spoke about incidents related to studying the book, their concern seemed primarily about their teachers' inability to teach the novel in a way that educated all students about racism, while supporting the Black students in the classroom. In their experience, using the book allowed for a stream of insensitive, racist comments, coming from both teachers and students. Of course, teachers can use controversial material in their lessons; however, they need to have effective, anti-oppressive teaching skills as a means to protect and support all students in the classroom while doing so.

Ebony (15) described an experience in her Grade 10 English class, which was taught by a male teacher: *"We were reading To Kill a Mockingbird and he was trying to say how he faces stereotyping because when he was in high school, he was on the basketball team and he was a white guy. It is like, you cannot relate that to the actual racism, Sir. I think it just does not make sense."* After the teacher's exploitation of the ideology of racism to describe his experience as a White man, Ebony recalled feeling silenced and unable to speak out on this misuse of racism. She explained:

I did not say anything. I wish I did but I did not. I spoke to my mom about it and apparently, we were not even supposed to be doing To Kill a Mockingbird and I think he was a very lazy teacher. He did it because we already had the printed materials. We were not supposed to do that book anymore, he was not supposed to do it, and he did it anyway.

Interestingly, Ebony did not appear to have any concerns about the book itself. She took issue with the way her teacher misappropriated the ideology of racism in response to the book. Ebony was also one of only two Black students in the advanced English class, which contributed to her feelings of isolation and not wanting to call attention to herself by addressing the teachers directly.

Samara shared a similar situation in which the teacher failed to provide effective and supportive instruction while teaching with *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

We are supposed to be reading Death of a Salesman. We ended up reading To Kill a Mockingbird, which is littered with the 'n word', and we were not allowed to choose it in 11th grade to do like our book reports on because of the 'n word'. But come 12th grade in a class there is six or seven non-Black kids who were allowed to just suddenly choose it. There is this particular group of Asian kids who are so excited to get their hands-on a book with the 'n word' in it, and they use it [nigger] throughout their entire presentation. When a lot of us called them out on it, we were like "yo, you didn't have to throw it in your presentation that many times." The teacher was like, "leave him alone, it is contextual, and

it makes sense." But they did not need it, it's weird, it's really weird. It is just sometimes it feels like we are the adults in the room, they want every single avenue to deny that they are racist.

Samara's point illustrates the larger issue with using sensitive material. When teachers are not prepared to guide students on topics that surround race, Black students are put at risk in classrooms with teachers who do not have the knowledge or capacity to explore topics that might be controversial or triggering. Considering the emotional impact of racially hostile material, teachers who fail to support students when teaching it, contribute to Black students' isolation and anti-Black racism in school settings (Livingstone & Wienfeld, 2017).

The saliency of anti-Black racism is consistent in these accounts. For example, Deja described the inconsistencies between how teachers treat Black students compared to their treatment of non-Black students. Highlighting a situation in which a white student was given more leniency with an assignment deadline, she says:

I find that with lots of my teachers when this is their situation they always try to come up with an excuse for their lies. So, it's just like, no but she came to me last week. But I just heard you tell her that she didn't have the assignment. So, there is always I feel, a rebuttal for the lie that they are telling me instead of like being truthful. Like, yeah, okay. I just said she can do it next week. You, I want you to do it today, please and thank you. Like, that's it, and there is never a please and thank you. So, it's always like a demand.

Deja's example illuminates her direct experience of racial discrimination at the hands of her teacher, and what appears to be permissible for some students, is unacceptable for others. Deja uses her understanding of power in this context to interpret how differences in the treatment of students, based on the racial background, are experienced by Black students.

Ebony provided yet another example of discrimination in an anecdote about a teacher's unexplained negative attitude towards her:

I had one teacher that I had a problem with. I do not know why, me and her we just did not get along at all. I am okay with all my teachers; they all seem to like me. It was just this one teacher, and she was like always calling me out, for no reason, just me specifically and like I don't know why she's always calling me out; but I honestly think she was racist. Honestly, I think she was.

Due to the frequency of these experiences, Black students learn to identify differences in the ways they are treated by their teachers. For Black girls, the way they are treated is often solely based on their identities. In Ebony's reflection of her situation, she recognized that sometimes students don't get along with teachers, but according to her, there is always an incident or something that explains why a teacher doesn't like you. In the absence of an incident, Black students are often compelled to speculate. As the reality of world forces them to be hyper aware of the racism that they and their peers experience, race becomes the only justifiable reason for a teacher's unfair mistreatment of them. Anti-Black racism leads to the stereotypes, which precipitates the added pressures that Black students regularly experience in school.

Discussion

Based on the accounts of the participants, there are several concerns with anti-Black racism in GTA schools. As the tensions of anti-Black racism and other forms of discrimination surfaced in their accounts, as did concerns about the level of support and quality of pedagogy offered to Black students. Examining the research on effective teaching and pedagogies, it is indicated that "teacher effectiveness is a strong predictor of student achievement" (Munzo et al., 2013). There is evidence pointing to the approaches used by teachers and school administrators that indicate an inability to effectively educate Black students. Anti-Black racism remains at issue in North American schools as White teachers are continually cited for creating, perpetuating, and maintaining racist ideology and practices (Hines, 2017; Love, 2019; McPherson 2020b; Sleeter, 1993,2008). The accounts outlined here brings us to one of the broader questions relating to the anti-Black racism in GTA schools: to what extent do Black students continue to experience and witness anti-Black racism in Ontario schools?

- Jada was called a "nigger" by another student and the teacher did not address the violation, nor did the student face any consequences for his racial assault. The teacher, in this case, was ineffective in her role and failed to use the situation to both protect and educate the students in the space.
- Deja reported what she perceives as clear discrimination as teachers allow white students to submit schoolwork past the deadline and then make excuses that that she would not extend the same accommodation to Black students.
- Ebony reflects on concerns with discrimination with one teacher consistently calling her out for no reason.
- Samara points out that Black students are only called on to contribute to the school activities when there is an event or program that is based on Black pain.

These and other accounts detailed throughout not only illustrate the circumstances of anti-Black racism in schools, but also how the opinions of Black girls on these matters help to “interrogate how Black girls unpack the relationships between race” (Butler, 2018, p.36) and power within the educative spaces. In their descriptions, these Black girls are clear on what constitutes racist behavior and attitudes in their schools. They can interpret how whiteness and power continue to be normalized within school spaces and are therefore able to contextualize the situations they experience, and witness based on that understanding. With the majority of teachers in the Ontario school system identifying as White and the evidence of anti-Black racism in the accounts of these Black girls, it is evident that the ongoing ineffective instruction of Black students requires extensive reform beyond existing educational equity policies.

Educating Black students requires more than ensuring that students meet curriculum goals and standards; it should involve teaching Black students how to deal with the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that they are likely to experience throughout their lives. Black feminist pedagogical practices, such as creating space and place for healing in the classroom (MacArthur & Lane, 2018), for example, allow Black students to speak and have their voices heard. This approach is particularly important because the statistics on Black achievement identify Black students and their ability, potential, and behavior as the predominate issue resulting in disparaging outcomes (Dei et al., 2017; James et al., 2017; George et al., 2020). Any policies developed to address anti-Black racism in the school system must address the pedagogical approaches and spaces that we are expecting Black students to excel within.

Recalling Nicole’s account of the Black girl who was shut down by her teacher when she attempted to identify her concerns with the teacher’s treatment of her. This situation demonstrates that despite educational equity policies, it is not a general practice for educators to consider the intersectionality and compounding factors that maintain obstacles for Black girls in school, for example. From Nicole’s recollection of what transpired, the teacher was unwilling to resolve the issue in a way that supported the student, and instead, the student was sent to the office to be further disciplined by the school administration.

What Deja described in her accounts are also clear examples of racism. The teachers were not connecting with students on a personal level; and as Bettina Love (2019) notes, you can’t effectively teach Black students if you don’t know them. Taking necessary steps to connect with all students and support individual needs is a responsibility of teachers. However, I would argue that fostering positive relationships with Black students is particularly urgent considering the ongoing issues with Black students and educational outcomes. As the role of teachers in the classroom is authoritarian, teachers hold power

and influence within these educative spaces. Black students are expected to work harder to succeed, pushing against the norms of a Eurocentric, white educational system that does not accommodate for their cultural and ancestral needs (Henry, 1998; James, 1995; Soloman, 1992). If Black students are being targeted and frequently experience discrimination at the hands of teachers and school administrators, what type of academic outcomes can be fairly expected of them? Trusting relationships, especially with students who have been consistently marginalized in the process of education, are required to produce positive educational outcomes (Henry, 1998; Munzo et al., 2013; Nyachae, 2016).

Nicole's story of the teacher's treatment of the Black students relates to the teacher apathy indicated in Zara's accounts. From Zara's perspective, if teachers are apathetic and "*do not care*" about Black students, they do not make an effort to use diverse materials or approaches in their teaching practice. Educational environments with teachers who are unprepared to deal with and manage racism within school settings, essentially further isolates and marginalizes Black students because Black students are unlikely to benefit from education delivered by uncaring and unsupportive teachers (James et al., 2017; Morganett, 1991; Naman, 2009).

The equity policies and call for educational reform in Ontario have been consistent over the last two decades. School boards in Toronto, Durham, Peel, and York (the GTA) have all made some attempt to emphasize the concerns with anti-Black racism in their schools. Which leads us to another broad question: how do these education equity policies address the anti-Black racism of teachers and administrators in educative spaces?

In Samara's account which describes the use of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the teacher sanctioned the use of a racially offensive word without providing proper educational context for its use. Allowing students to repeat the word, whether in context or not, was offensive to a group of students in the classroom, and use of the full word should therefore have been avoided completely. Still, when students expressed their concern, the teachers continued to endorse its use, even as Black students voiced their discomfort with the racist word. When teachers do not effectively address racism, they are, in fact, teaching other students how to maintain the racist, discriminatory practices that schools should be actively working to dismantle. The participants' understanding of the white teacher's power in school effectively maintains their silence as they see themselves as powerless and unable to stop teachers' discriminatory behavior.

Similar to Samara's account, Ebony's teacher used material that should not have been used in instruction. For justifiable reasons, teachers who are not prepared to provide further education on racism should refrain from using such material. However, rather than representing an opportunity to learn about the insidious nature of anti-Black racism

and its contemporary manifestations, the use of the text *To Kill a Mockingbird* only created space and opportunities for racist comments and verbal assaults in an educational setting. This setting where students are permitted to use racial slurs at random also happens to be the same educational setting used to judge Black student's achievement. Considering Canada's colonial history and Ontario's direction toward equity (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009; Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan, 2017), teachers need to assist Black students with resisting the status quo of racism, which could lead to cultivating an educational community where Black students feel safer, hopefully precipitating improvements in achievement.

Tokenizing of Black experiences and the use of Black pain and suffering only further marginalizes Black students (Cruz & Petersen, 2011) and should also be addressed in broad level education equity policies. Pedagogical practices should not maintain the stereotypical notions and tactics that continually harm Black students, and teachers must be fully aware of the stereotypes that harm Black life. Unfortunately, based on the opinions of the Black girls, anti-Black racism is alive and well in GTA schools. Since there is clear evidence that points to anti-Black racism in school policies and practices, these concerns must be appropriately addressed before we can fairly discuss and set expectations for Black student achievement within these systems.

Conclusion

The accounts of these Black girls in GTA schools in Ontario are essential to informing the discourses that surround the education of Black students in the region. The data used here, in combination with other published research and literature on educational outcomes (Howard & James, 2019; James et al., 2017) suggest the urgency required to address teaching practices and educative environments that significantly impact Black students. It does not seem to add up: there are numerous expectations of Black students when the basic requirements for positive educational outcomes are not instituted or regulated within these systems. As McKittrick (2014) points out, anti-Blackness in Canada provides no way out and essentially expects the "condemned", in this case the students, to escape the undesired impacts of a system that was not designed or intended to support their needs. The narratives of the participants indicate evidence of inadequate teaching approaches employed by high school teachers in Ontario. Regardless of the circumstances of the interaction with Black students, teachers should adapt practices that emotionally and academically support students both in and out of the classroom. Without consistent and unbiased support provided through pedagogical approaches, how will Black students combat the legacy of racism and isolation that Canada has maintained socially and systemically?

Some of the changes and transformations needed in pedagogical approaches used in Ontario schools have been outlined by TDSB to address anti-Black racism. It is unclear, however, how and if the board has included a plan to ensure that TDSB administration and staff will be held accountable for ensuring the specific measures are taken by teachers in the classroom or other school environments. What is increasingly clear is that anti-Black racism cannot be addressed through workshops and the use of training labels as strategies. All the details in the reform plans center on education and leadership, and there is very little indication of how these plans translate into action. Based on the direction of TDSB, for example, which recommends creating an anti-Black racism course for grade 12 students, it is evident that the board continues to miss the mark. Although students can benefit from education about anti-Black racism, students are powerless in addressing the broader systemic issues that allow anti-Black racism to continue in Ontario schools. What the narratives of the Black girls in this study reveal is that it is not the students who need to take a course about the manifestations of racism. Black students continually face anti-Black racism and therefore a course for students who lack power within the education system is not a worthy strategy or solution to this ongoing issue within a system they themselves have no power to correct.

Focusing on the opinions of Black girls about the anti-Black racism they confront, allows for teachers and administrators to see these concerns from their perspective. Using their intersectional lived experience, they describe their own interpretation of educational spaces and their experiences with the teachers charged with the duty to educate them effectively and fairly. Through analysis of their accounts, we learn that when teachers fail to build trust, maintain toxic racist school environments, and reveal their apathy toward the needs of Black students, they are demonstrating their inability to effectively educate Black children and youth. Ontario school boards must face the harsh reality that teachers who are unable to put aside their inherited biases and racist perceptions of students to effectively educate and sustain safer school environments have no place within an education system that aims to reform and address inequities in education for all students.

It is uncertain how much research is required to hold education systems, and those who maintain its limitations, accountable for not prioritizing the needs of Black students in its policies. The insidious and unfortunately common anti-Black policies and pedagogies that are manifested through the actions of teachers and administrators in Ontario schools lead to and maintain some of the negative outcomes reported for Black students. Due to the prevalence of anti-Black racism in schools, the outcomes of Black students should not be compared with that of other non-Black students as reference for measurement and to make claims about achievement. Non-Black students do not have to contend with deplorable and limiting impacts of anti-Black racism perpetuated in schools. Addressing educational inequity such as anti-Black racism in schools requires systems to center the

voices of those most at risk. Centering the narratives of Black girls is one very important place to start. The consequences from the current systems of education in Ontario can no longer hide behind surface level strategies that fail to address the very serious concerns that continue to impact the achievement and well-being of Black youth.

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