Research Spotlight

MISTRUST AND LOW EXPECTATIONS: EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE AND BLACK YOUTH IN ONTARIO

MAY 2019

Pathways
to Education

Executive Summary

This research spotlight outlines the barriers that Black students face in high school and beyond. The spotlight cites seminal studies on Ontario's education system alongside statistics from the Toronto District School Board.

Findings suggest that Black students often face mistrust and low expectations in high school. This results in Black youth being disproportionately suspended, expelled, and streamed into Applied or Locally Developed Compulsory Credit courses[1]. According to data collected for this report, Black youth report feeling discriminated against by teachers and discouraged from taking challenging courses. As a result of these practices, Black students demonstrate higher rates of leaving high school before graduating, lower post-secondary enrolment rates, and overrepresentation in precarious work when they begin employment.

The literature on this topic stresses the following approches to minimize or eliminate these barriers: ensuring access to positive role models, helping youth develop networks of support, encouraging participation in career exploration, and joining local youth development programs.

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[1] According to the Toronto District Schol Board, Applied courses cover core content and focus on practical learning. These courses count towards college admission. Locally Developed Compulsory Credit courses are developed by the school board and teach essential concepts using practical acti-vites to develop essential skills. They are offered in grades 9 and 10 in the following subjects: math, science, Canadian history, and English.

"[In 2004] If you were a Black boy from a working-class family, your chances of getting an offer from a university were about a third of those for kids from white professional families. Less than one-third of those from low-income neighbourhoods even applied to university while over two-thirds of high-income school graduates from secondary income neighbourhoods did so. If you came from a low-income neighbourhood, you were more than five times as likely to be in Applied or Basic secondary school programs, and effectively denied access to university, as kids from high-income neighbourhoods. These figures represent a very large waste of the talent of young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds" (Livingstone, 2004, p. 9).

Introduction and Context

This research spotlight explores the barriers that Black students face in high school and beyond. It focuses on findings that identify mistrust and low expectations as key barriers to full school participation, academic success, and employment beyond high school.

The educational gap between Black students and white students has persisted over time despite various initiatives that aim to level the playing field. Poor outcomes for Black students are often seen as the failure of the individual, not that of the systems that serve Black youth (James & Turner, 2017; Cresnik & Pinto, 2014). Research shows that Ontario's education system operates in a way that maintains inequalities and does not equitably support all students. The lack of equity[2] in the Toronto school system is evident in graduation rate gaps and data on high school non-completion rates. Between 2006 and 2011, 69% of Black students graduated from high school in Toronto, compared to 84% of white students (Gordon, 2017). In addition, Black students left high school before graduating at twice the rate of students from other racial backgrounds (Gordon, 2017). These disparities exacerbate and reinforce the difference felt in many Canadian urban areas where, as is the case in Toronto, concentrations of poverty act as racial divides (James & Turner, 2015).

Methodology

To collect these findings, we reviewed literature on challenges and barriers that Black students face in Canada, with a particular focus on Ontario and Toronto. A snowballing[3] approach was used once the most current and seminal literature

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[2] Equity is achieved when student outcomes are not dependent on social background, such as gender, race, and social class (OECD, 2018).
[3] Snowball sampling refers to a data collection method where additional sources are gathered by examining sources cited in literature already collected for the study.

was gathered to examine studies referenced in other sources. Literature excluded from this study included publications older than 15 years old and any resources that were not from reputable or verifiable sources (e.g. blog posts).

Key Findings

- Lack of trust by teachers and school staff leads Black youth to be overly monitored, heavily disciplined, and feel "pushed out" of school.
- Low expectations of Black students lead to negative academic outcomes: Black students are disproportionately streamed into Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses. Being enrolled in Applied or Locally Developed Compulsory courses leads to a higher likelihood of leaving high school before graduating and decreases the chances of moving onto post-secondary education.
- Lack of trust and low expectations have a negative impact on academic achievement and contribute to Black employees being disproportionately concentrated in precarious, low-wage, and unstable work.

Part 1: Mistrust

- Lack of trust from teachers and school administration is most evident through racial discrepancies in disciplinary actions;
- Lack of trust at school has been shown to have negative consequences, including the "school to prison pipeline", which results when students feel overly monitored and develop tougher demeanours, leading them to get into more conflict later in life;
- Trust in the education system and in the adults within the system has been cited as playing a significant role in a student's decision to enroll in and complete university.

> "They constantly feel like they have to keep a guard up and defend themselves. Young Black youth more times than not walk around with a chip on their shoulder. After a time they find it hard to decipher when they're in a safe place and can relax and feel comfortable. ~ Key informant" (James & Turner, 2015, p.37).

Schools are established to provide all youth with the necessary and appropriate scaffolding for success. Unfortunately, success does not always come easily, especially for visible minorities and immigrants whose cultures are not reflected in the education system's Eurocentric views. As Sium (2014) describes, "class bias, laced with race and gender biases, wrapped up in a Eurocentric world outlook, was quite prevalent in classroom discussions" (p.55). Many students in Ontario, and especially in Toronto, experience the challenges of mistrust and misunderstanding when schools do not acknowledge the richness and diversity of their cultures and backgrounds and focus instead on Eurocentric views and curriculum content. This leads students to feel a lack of belonging and become disengaged from school (Cresnik & Pinto, 2014).

Black students are often viewed with suspicion, monitored more heavily, and punished more severely than other students (James, 2012, James & Turner, 2015; Smith, Schneider & Ruck, 2005). A lack of trust at school often has negative outcomes for students. The construct of Black students having ill intentions perpetuates the "school to prison pipeline" — since Black students are not trusted, they tend to be overly monitored within schools, which leads them to develop tougher demeanours and to disengage. This results in more conflict and difficulty later in life (James, 2012).

A study by Abada and Tenkorang (2009) examined the impact that trust has on academic success. The study found that youth who reported a strong sense of trust in their school, community, and family were 32% more likely to have graduated or enrolled in university. Youth who do not experience trust within their schools due to being viewed with suspicion are therefore less likely to succeed academically and move on to post-secondary education.

Suspension and Expulsion Discrepancies

- Due to the zero tolerance policy in Ontario's Safe and Healthy Schools Act that came into effect in 2001, Black students were suspended and expelled at an unparalleled rate;
- Though the zero tolerance policy was replaced in 2007, Black students continue to be suspended and expelled at a higher rate than any other group;
- Suspensions and expulsions are proven to lead to student disengagement and increase the likelihood of leaving high school before graduating.

An environment of mistrust and suspicion within the school system has resulted in Black students — particularly males — being suspended and expelled at a rate greater than that of any other demographic (James & Turner, 2015). A recent analysis of high school suspensions at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) found that, between 2006 and 2011, 42% of Black students were suspended at least once. The suspension rate for white students during the same period was 18% (Gordon, 2017). The same study also found that almost half of the 213 students expelled between 2011 and 2016 were Black.

Racial discrepancies in suspensions and expulsions began in 2001 when Ontario's Safe and Healthy Schools Act included a zero tolerance policy (James & Turner, 2017). This Act led to racialized students, in particular Black students, being suspended and expelled at an unprecedented rate. The impact of the zero tolerance policy was so severe that it was replaced in 2007 with the Progressive Discipline approach as a result of a settlement between the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Education (James & Turner, 2017).

While the Progressive Discipline approach does not allow for student suspensions and expulsions as easily as the previous policy, racial discrepancies continue to be evident in suspension and expulsion records (James & Turner, 2015; & James & Turner, 2017). TDSB data, as cited by James and Turner (2015), show that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than white students at all levels of education: "JK-Grade 6 (1.5% versus 0.5%); Grade 7-8 (7.6% versus 2.4%); Grade 9-12 (8.6%-2.9%)" (James & Turner, 2015, p.34).

Consequences of suspension and expulsion go beyond missing time in class. Unsupervised time out of school can lead youth to engage in risky behaviour (James & Turner, 2015). Temporary suspensions from school have also been shown to lead to permanent school-leaving: students who are suspended once in grade nine are twice as likely to leave high school before graduating (James & Turner, 2015). Repeated suspensions have also been noted to lead to disengagement and gradual decrease in attendance resulting in dropping out — something parents and community members have termed being "pushed out" of school (James & Turner, 2017).

Stereotyping and Discrimination

- Black students perceive discrimination in the school system more than other groups of students;
- Perceived discrimination is shown to have negative consequences on academic achievement;
- Black students are discouraged from Academic and STEM courses (science, technology, engineering, and math) in favour of arts and sports.

> "Black youth develop coping mechanisms that people perceive as behavioural problems. They can't say what they feel sometimes. They are often mislabelled as criminals and thugs. This affects their sense of self, confidence, educational performance" - Key informant (James & Turner, 2015, p.21).

Stereotyping and discrimination of Black students in the school system is evident through differentiated treatment. Black students are often stereotyped in the school system in the same way that Black people are stereotyped in the media — portrayed as "immigrants, fatherless, athletes, troublemakers, and underachievers" (James, 2012, p. 467). Differentiated treatment extends past disciplinary practices to opportunities. In addition to being more harshly disciplined, Black students are more likely to be in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses. They are also more likely to feel discouraged by teachers and pushed away from academics, compared to white and other racialized students (James, 2012, James & Turner, 2017, James & Turner, 2015; Cooper & Cooper, 2008; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009).

Teacher discrimination can present itself in many forms. Black youth have reported being discouraged from taking Academic classes and being harshly disciplined (Thomas et al., 2009). A study by Cooper and Cooper (2008) showed that Black students perceive discrimination more than other groups of students. Perceived discrimination was found to negatively impact academic success for both African and Caribbean Black youth (Thomas et al., 2009). Thomas et al. (2009) found that students who felt discriminated against by school staff had lower grades than students who did not feel discriminated against. In addition to perceptions of discrimination impacting academic achievement, perceptions of discrimination often contribute to Black students becoming disengaged from school (Cooper & Cooper, 2008).

Discriminatory practices have resulted in Black students being pushed out of school due to unfair disciplinary practices or in having their academic success stunted due to a stronger focus on sports than on academics (James, 2012;

James & Turner, 2017 James & Turner, 2015; Cooper & Cooper, 2008; Thomas et al., 2009). Being stereotyped as athletes and underachievers has often led Black students to be pulled into sports and pushed away from Academic and STEM courses (James & Turner, 2015; James, 2012; James & Turner, 2012). Differentiated treatment as a result of stereotyping and discrimination has led to a disproportionate number of Black students being enrolled in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses. Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses exhibit lower academic achievement rates, lower graduation rates, and lower post-secondary enrolment rates compared to Academic courses. This high school trend has led to a higher concentration of Black workers employed in precarious work — jobs characterized by unstable employment and low wages (James, 2012; James & Turner, 2017; James & Turner, 2015).

Part 2: Low Expectations

- Low expectations from teachers and school administration result in low self-esteem and self-confidence among Black students;
- Low expectations of Black students are most evident through streaming practices that disproportionately place Black students in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses;
- Consequences of streaming and low expectations work together to perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce the achievement gap.

> "I think we have to fight an uphill battle in almost everything we do, especially school. I've had teachers tell me straight up that they don't believe my group of people could do certain things" - Youth (James & Turner, 2015, p.31).

Low expectations exacerbate the challenges faced by Black students in an education system plagued by mistrust. Low teacher expectations have been shown to be a strong determinant of student success and self-esteem (Clandfield, Martell, Galabuzi, San Vicente, Livingstone, & Smaller, 2014; Thomas et al., 2009). In a study by James and Turner (2017), Black youth stated that they were pushed away from reaching higher and attaining more: "My guidance counsellor didn't want me to apply to the University of Toronto. When I insisted, she said, 'Don't be discouraged when you don't get in.'" (p.52). Interactions with teachers and other authority figures who mirror social patterns of inequality result in students feeling disempowered in schools and feeling that their voices are not respected or valued (Cooper & Cooper, 2008). A culture of low expectations within schools often leads students to have low self-esteem and low self-confidence (James & Turner, 2017).

Streaming

- Students in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses have lower

graduation rates than students who take Academic courses;
- Streaming has been shown to be based on racial and socioeconomic factors rather than ability;
- Black students are disproportionately represented in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses;
- Less affluent neighbourhoods have higher proportions of students in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses.

"The message to Mohamed would be loud and clear: that he was less capable than other students, which is why he requires a 'special' and obviously easier version of work. Soon, he would start to see himself through the eyes of others, and believe this too" (Sium, 2014, p.95).

Academic streaming is the most obvious evidence of low expectations of Black students. Academic streaming refers to the "stream" or class level a student decides to take. Streaming in Ontario schools starts as early as grade 9, but this practice is currently under review. Students have the option between Academic, Applied, and Locally Developed Compulsory courses. Academic courses are more demanding and are required for university entrance. Students in Academic grade 9 English or math courses have the highest rate of achievement and are most likely to graduate (King et al., 2009). Applied courses are required for college applications but do not count towards university admission. Students who take Applied courses have to retake the course in the Academic stream if they wish to apply for admission to university. Students in Applied courses are less likely than students in Academic courses to graduate from high school (Clandfield et al., 2014). Lastly, Locally Developed Compulsory courses have the lowest academic expectations. They are available in English, science, or math. Students who take Locally Developed Compulsory courses are at the highest risk of leaving high school before graduating (King et al., 2009). Clandfield et al. (2014) found that, in Ontario, the 2006 grade 9 cohort graduating in 2011-12 had a 40% graduation rate for students in the Applied stream and only a 10% graduation rate for students enrolled in Locally Developed Compulsory courses.

Streaming is sometimes based on racial and socioeconomic demographics rather than ability (Clandfield et al., 2014; Gordon, 2017; James & Turner, 2015; Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; James & Turner, 2017). Schools in working-class neighbourhoods disproportionately stream students into special education, Applied, and Locally Developed Compulsory courses (Sium, 2014). In Ontario, students whose parents are in professional occupations are twice as likely as those from working-class homes to be in Academic classes (Clandfield et al., 2014). Additionally, evidence shows that African-Canadian students, both foreign- and Canadian-born, have long been disproportionately streamed into special education and Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses (Sium, 2014). Gordon (2017) found that Black students were twice as likely to be enrolled in Applied courses compared to white students. Between 2006 and 2011, 53% of Black students were enrolled in Academic classes, compared to 81% of white students and 80% of other racialized students (Gordon, 2017). Abada and Tenkorang (2009) found that a higher portion of Caribbean-born Black

Canadian students were enrolled in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses compared to African-born Black Canadian students. Caribbean students were also found to be less likely to graduate than Canadian students (Clandfield et al., 2014). James and Turner (2017) attribute this overrepresentation of Black students in Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses to the low expectations that teachers have of Black students and assumptions about their abilities, interests, and commitment.

Consequences of streaming are felt generationally (James & Turner, 2017). When disproportionate numbers of Black and, in particular, Caribbean-born students are pushed into Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses, their chances of graduating from high school decrease and the likelihood of being in precarious work increases (James & Turner, 2017; Clandfield et al., 2014). Black students are often discouraged from taking STEM and higher level courses that are required for post-secondary education and viewed as necessary preparation for the 21st-century workplace (James & Turner, 2015; Sium, 2014). Thus, "streaming has acted historically to deny subordinate youth access to key educational opportunities, to undermine their self-esteem and school engagement, and to perpetuate various stereotypes about their (in)abilities, leading to lower expectations, poor educational outcomes and, in current terms, the reproduction of the achievement gap" (Clandfield et al., 2014, p.188).

Part 3: Beyond High School

Barriers and challenges that Black youth face during high school have long-term consequences. Feeling pushed out of high school or being discouraged from taking Academic classes result in Black youth being under-represented in both post-secondary education and management-level opportunities in the workforce. This is felt generationally as poverty is cyclical, resulting in the next generation having fewer opportunities and experiencing similar barriers to success.

Post-Secondary Education

- Financial concerns are a major barrier for some students pursuing post-secondary education;
- Negative high school experiences deter students from continuing their education;
- Trust in a supportive network has proven to be a major factor in whether a student pursues post-secondary education.

Post-secondary education is vital in the 21st century labour market. Training in the trades, college, and university are viewed as minimal requirements for entrance to a meaningful career. Unfortunately, the barriers and challenges that Black students face in high school often deter them from continuing their education. James and Turner (2017) found that the percentage of Black students that did not apply to post-secondary education (43%) was almost the same as the percentage of white students that went to university in Ontario (47%).

A study of who does not attend post-secondary education in Ontario (King, Warren, King, Brook, & Kocher, 2009) identified three most influential factors behind a student's decision to not pursue post-secondary education after completing high school:

1. Lack of career direction;
2. Financial concerns;
3. Negative high school experiences (e.g. lack of academic success, lack of support from school staff, and lack of school involvement).

Clandfield et al. (2014) found financial barriers to be a main factor as well, with rising tuition fees acting as a barrier for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Clandfield et al. (2014) noted that less than a fifth of Black working class boys in the TDSB confirmed entry to Ontario universities.

Another factor impacting post-secondary education is trust. A study by Abada and Tenkorang (2009) found that youth who reported a strong sense of trust in the school system and the adults in it were 32% more likely to have enrolled in or completed university compared to students who reported a low sense of trust in their social networks. Findings in this study suggested that it was beneficial for Black youth to extend trust beyond their immediate family to people in their community, work, and school environments in order to receive additional sources of support and information about post-secondary education (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009). Unfortunately, research shows that it is challenging for Black youth to develop a wider network of support (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009; Cooper & Cooper, 2008). The mistrust and low expectations that Black youth face in high school leave them disengaged from the school system and less likely to attend post-secondary education.

Employment

- The barriers that Black students face in high school prove to be detrimental to finding meaningful employment;
- Black Canadians, regardless of age, experience higher rates of unemployment compared to the Canadian population;
- African-Caribbean Canadians hold lower positions and are paid less than other Canadians.

"Immigrant groups, regardless of their higher levels of education, still encounter barriers in the labour market, and thus severe wage disadvantage, especially native-born and foreign-born Black men" (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009, p.190).

Income disparity persists between visible minorities and non-visible minorities,

and between foreign-born and Canadian-born individuals, despite similar education levels and skills. The changes in the labour market are deepening these divisions. The rise of precarious employment and unemployment disproportionately impact racialized Canadians, especially those living in poverty (James & Turner, 2015). Black Canadians have almost double the rate of unemployment compared to white Canadians (James & Turner, 2015). Black youth aged 15 to 24 exhibit unemployment rates almost 10% higher than those of non-visible minorities (Civic Action, 2014).

Barriers also persist for those who are successfully employed. Despite having similar or higher education levels as the rest of the Canadian population, African-Caribbean Canadians hold lower positions and are paid less (James, 2009). James (2009) found that only 6% of African-Caribbean Canadians are in managerial positions compared to 10% of the rest of the Canadian population.

Barriers and challenges that stop Black youth from being successful in high school intensify the barriers and challenges to meaningful employment. Low academic achievement leads to limited access to post-secondary education, which, in turn, leads to limited options for meaningful employment (James & Turner, 2015). Generations of poverty continue as a consequence of an education system characterized by mistrust and low expectations that harshly disciplines Black students and pushes them into Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses that statistically disadvantage those who take them. Streaming students into Applied and Locally Developed Compulsory courses creates disadvantaged, less educated groups and reproduces racial disparities (Sium, 2014). As Sium (2014) concludes after twenty-four years of research on race, class, and immigration in Ontario classrooms, "The school system may not have created a class system in Ontario, but [...] it has worked to reinforce it" (p.130).

The Role of Pathways to Education

Below are some of the supports provided by the Pathways Program that mirror recommendations outlined in the literature on how to best support Black youth:

- Having an adult or mentor to encourage students has been found to establish a foundation for youth success by building self-confidence, self-esteem, positive identity, and self-reliance (Codjoe, 2007; James & Turner, 2015; James & Turner, 2017; Cooper & Cooper, 2008).
- Part of the role of Pathways program staff, including Student Parent Support Workers, is to support students in exploring career interests. This encourages students' academic perseverance and helps them achieve long-term goals.
- Participation in community programs has been found to combat the exclusion that immigrants or visible minorities may face. Community programs help youth build leadership skills, self-confidence, peer-friendships, and community engagement (Cooper & Cooper, 2008). A study by Abada & Tenkorang (2009) found that almost twice as many respondents involved in two or more organizations obtained a university education compared to those not involved in any.
- Pathways to Education provides financial supports, including a scholarship for post-secondary education. These supports act as objects of possibility and motivation.

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