It Takes a Village – Schooling Out of Place: School Experiences of Black African Youth in Waterloo Region

"Many Black students are excited when they first go to school ... but lose that sense of positivity as the school environment excludes, demoralizes, and wears them down" (p. 97).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The impacts of widespread anti-Black racism on the wellbeing of Black youth are well-documented and include high rates of poverty, unemployment, and criminal justice system involvement. Black youth also experience disproportionately negative outcomes in the education system, including higher dropout rates and lower rates of post-secondary enrolment than their white peers. Since post-secondary education is strongly associated with political, economic, and social inclusion, it is important to interrogate why Black youth leave school at such high rates. This dissertation examines the educational experiences of Black youth, and, in particular, their feelings of alienation, in the context of a medium-sized Canadian city.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in Waterloo Region, Ontario. This location was chosen because it is home to a fast-growing African population, and because there is little research on the experiences of Black youth in small and medium-sized Canadian cities.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This dissertation focuses on the experiences of marginalized Black African youth aged 16-24 who completed at least two years of education in Waterloo Region.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

Afrocentric qualitative research methods allowed the author to collect "rich, deep, layered, contextual data through respectful, culturally affirming participant engagement" (p. 55). Data collection consisted of an elder-facilitated *youth dialogue* with 17 youth (a form of Afrocentric Sharing Circle that emphasizes connections to Africa) and in-depth *individual life stories* with seven of these youth (an adaptation of an interview); the researcher also engaged in reflective journaling throughout the data collection process.

The author chose to engage two Black African elders to co-facilitate the youth dialogue because elders are strongly valued in African cultures. Elders were selected for their ability to embody Afrocentric perspectives, support the research process, and approach race issues critically; they were also required to have lived in the Region for at least three years.

Care was taken to create an African ambiance in the youth dialogue space using African decorations, music, and food, and video clips featuring African youth. Most of the life stories were conducted in the homes of participants.

Data from the transcribed focus group and interviews was carefully analyzed using a *generic thematic approach* (i.e., data was coded and grouped into themes and sub-themes), with attention paid to "the inter-generational contexts, power differentials, and social location of participants" (p. 82). The re-searcher was careful to amplify young people's voices in the process, recognizing that "every voice mattered and needed to be acknowledged" (p. 82).

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

i) Black youth experience discrimination and alienation in the education system, including racism on the

part of teachers, staff, and their peers. Significantly, youth do not feel represented in their schools: most reported never having been taught by a Black teacher or encountering positive representations of Black history and knowledge in the curriculum.

ii) Despite policies that upheld values of diversity and anti-racism, teachers and school staff (including social workers) failed to meet young people's needs. When youth reported acts of racism, they were dismissed, tasked with providing 'proof', and even punished; this furthered young people's experiences of alienation and contributed to underreporting.

iii) Experiences of racism at school contributed to negative physical, social, and psychological outcomes for youth. In response, some youth made a conscious decision to leave school – to take a health and wellness break – in order to avoid further harm, to heal or to explore other avenues of success. Many feared that remaining in school would lead them to respond to racism in ways that they would later regret.

iv) Despite the challenges they face, youth display resilience and maintain high hopes for their futures. Support from parents, extended family, and community members, as well as through their faith, was critical in helping youth "thriv[e] against the odds, through hopes, aspirations, self-determination, and resilience" (p. 143).

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research highlights the importance of addressing anti-Black racism in the education system and supporting teachers, staff, and social workers in meeting the needs of Black youth. The author provides the following recommendations for educational institutions:

- Develop an organizational commitment to anti-Black racism
- Reflect diversity in staffing
- Collect race-based data
- Integrate regular cultural sensitivity training for teachers and school staff
- Engage Black parents and community members in hiring, training, and teaching
- Assign social workers to fewer schools to support relationship-building
- Promote access to post-secondary education

Social work and teacher training must also be reimagined to prepare students to support members of communities experiencing marginalization; it should include anti-oppressive practice and prioritize meaningful field placements that "shake [students'] worldviews, trigger emotions and produce the best reciprocal learning relationships" (p. 204).

Social workers "must go beyond being allies and become active change catalysts or accomplices rather than custodians of the social order" (p. 205). Practitioners who strive to better support Black youth should consider the following strategies:

- Humanize youth and confront negative stereotypes
- Notice and address triggers that may hinder your ability to support youth
- Respect the cultural capital of Black youth and their families
- Take an asset-based approach and focus on relationship-building
- Meet youth where they are
- Work toward the best interests of youth

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