

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

## **Who Cares? Racial Identity and the Family-School Relationship**

KelleyAnne Malinen<sup>a\*</sup> and Tina Roberts-Jeffers<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Sociology & Anthropology, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada;*

*<sup>b</sup>Community Activist for Education, Halifax, Canada*

[\\*KelleyAnne.Malinen@msvu.ca](mailto:KelleyAnne.Malinen@msvu.ca)

Funding: This research was supported by Mount Saint Vincent University

DRAFT

## **Who Cares? Racial Identity and Family-School Relationships**

This article presents a grounded theory analysis of interviews with eight Black and nine white teachers in Nova Scotia, Canada. Patterned differences emerge between discourses used by Black versus white teachers to understand the roles of Black students' families in academic achievement. In varying degrees and respects, Black teacher interviewees viewed Black families positively, while white teacher interviewees usually viewed Black families negatively. Both perspectives have implications for family-school relationships: The negative perspectives reinforce the status quo and are characteristic of cultural racism as described by Bonilla-Silva, while positive expectations resist the status quo by identifying strength in Black families and communities. Our suggestions include dedicating resources to increasing the numbers of Black teachers in our schools and developing teacher training focused on how to relate to families across race and culture, in anti-racist and culturally sensitive ways.

Keywords: Family-School Relationship; Achievement Gap; Deficit Perspective; Strength-Based; Black Students; Color-Blind Racism

This article reports on findings generated through qualitative analysis of interviews with eight Black and nine white teachers in Nova Scotia, Canada. Our interviews and analysis focused on educational disparities effecting Black students in Nova Scotia. Our analysis revealed that Black teacher interviewees tended to view Black families as sources of knowledge, strength, love and/or support for Black children who must navigate racism and white privilege in the schooling system. On the other hand, white teacher interviewees frequently located the cause of educational disparities in Black families and communities, thereby, however unconsciously, insulating from blame the predominant whiteness of the education system. Our work is one answer to Howard and Reynold's (2008) call for research investigating 'relationships between parents, school personnel, space, and capital' (p. 94).

We begin by providing a brief overview of Nova Scotian racial inequities in education and beyond. We then draw on the literature to explore relationships between

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

race and the family-school relationship. We provide theoretical and methodological context in line with critical race theory by introducing the notions of racial narratives and counter-narratives, and by positioning ourselves as mothers of Black children in the Nova Scotia school system. Finally, we outline our methodology and present findings.

## **Theory and Context**

### ***The Context of Nova Scotia, Canada***

White American history of enslaving Black people is widely known. In contrast, Canada is imagined as the endpoint of the Underground Railroad to freedom. Whitfield (2007) suggests that because the history of slaveholding white Loyalists contradicts the ‘American slavery to Canadian freedom’ narrative, American and Canadian historians alike have instead emphasized the history of free Black Loyalists. In fact, slaveholding ‘expanded and intensified’ in Nova Scotia with the Loyalist influx and ‘freed’ Black Loyalists were often re-enslaved in the Canadian Maritimes.

Similarly, racial segregation is popularly linked with Jim Crow practices of the United States. It is widely known that, in 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ruled segregated schools unconstitutional in the US. It is far less recognized that Canada’s last segregated school closed its doors in Lincolnville Nova Scotia in 1983. Perhaps this lack of recognition is due to the fact that, in Canada, segregation was neither mandated nor disallowed by law. It was simply permitted. School desegregation occurred through community activism rather than legal change.

Partially because of severe underfunding of Black schools (Winks, 1969), Black communities in Nova Scotia were engaged in education-related activism by 1820 (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994). Desegregation, one objective of this activism, did not come without costs. Black schools were closed and students were bussed to formerly white-only schools that were convenient for white families (Maynard 2017),

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

and where racism became part of the school experience for Black youth (Hamilton 2007, 2011).

‘In 1989 a race riot at Cole Harbour High School caught the attention of the nation’ and led African Nova Scotians to organize for ‘a public inquiry to expose and redress racism in the Nova Scotia education system’ (Africentric Learning Institute, n.d., p. 3). In response, the Nova Scotia Department of Education ‘funded the establishment of the Black Learners Advisory Committee,’ or BLAC (ibid.). In 1994, the BLAC released a three-volume report on the status of Black learners, which remains an essential reference for researchers and activists. The Minister of Education and Culture responded to the report by recognizing ‘the historic failure of the educational system to address the needs of the Black community’ (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1995).

Today, stark inequities persist. Data released in 2016 showed Black students being disproportionately suspended (Woodbury, 2016) and placed on individual program plans (IPPs) that differ from the standard curriculum. Furthermore, Black students have more often been placed on IPPs in the absence of evidence that an IPP is the best option (Nova Scotia, 2016). In addition, our schools have seen a recent uptick in racist bullying (Colley, 2018). Nevertheless, Black parents, like parents of other cultural and racial communities, ‘look to education as the means by which their children might become academically successful, socially responsible, and productive citizens’ (James, 2012, p. 476).

### ***White Teachers, Black Families, and the Family-School Relationship***

The BLAC Report (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994) noted that many Black parents ‘felt “unwelcome” and often “talked down to or belittled” by school personnel’ (p. 47), a finding consistent with other research. Parents belonging to racialized groups

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

are often perceived as threats to the school fabric and assumed to have values conflicting with those claimed by schools: In contrast, 'good parents,' typically constructed as 'white and middle class,' are 'empowered' by teachers and administrators to intervene on behalf of their children (Crozier 2001, p. 333; see also Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009; Kainz & Aikens, 2007)). Meanwhile, student achievement is taken to represent parental status and care (Landeros 2011). In the words of Howard & Reynolds (2008),

From a deficit standpoint, parents are assumed to have little knowledge or capital to advocate on behalf of their children. Parents may also be viewed as the primary reason why children are not better prepared academically, and are viewed overall as a significant part of the problem with school underachievement. (p. 84)

Negative racial stories about Black parents adversely impact not only the parents concerned, but also Black students as well as the schools they attend. Teachers' negative perceptions of 'students, parents, and community' have been statistically linked to teacher attrition and mobility, while teacher outflow from schools has been mitigated by increasing teacher diversity (Djonko-Moore, 2006). One connection between these observations may be that teachers of color tend more than other teachers to understand the struggles, opportunities, and day-to-day lives of students of color, while holding high expectations for these same students (Durden, Dooley, & Truscott 2014). Perhaps it is partially because teachers of color more often positively perceive students, families, and communities of color that teachers of color are statistically more inclined to remain in racially diverse schools.

Teacher attitudes also impact parental involvement. Parents tend to report feeling comfortable only when working with teachers who treat ‘children and families with respect and high regard’ (Sewell 2012, p. 260). Healthy relationships between families and schools involve trust, respect, sensitivity, and reciprocity (Minkle et al., 2014). As Buchannan & Buchannan (2017) put it, ‘Equipping teachers [...] to build meaningful relationships with families lays the foundation for the kinds of collaborative work that impacts student achievement’ (p. 244). Any significant racial inequities on the level of family-school relationships must therefore contribute to educational disparities. In our research, white teachers more often narrated negative views of Black families, whereas Black teacher interviewees advanced positive views of Black families and the roles of Black families in supporting their children in the context of Eurocentric education.

### ***Racial storytelling***

The ‘Blame Black Families’ narratives we identify are, in Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) terms, part of an ‘intellectual road map’ for navigating the ‘always rocky road’ of racial domination (p. 54). ‘Blame Black Families’ relies on a logic of cultural racism rather than biological difference to rationalize white dominance. Cultural racism in turn is a form of color-blind racism. According to Bonilla-Silva (2018), color-blind racism has emerged in the United States as explicit racism has lost social acceptability over the historical span from the Jim Crow era to the post-Civil Rights era. As discussed above, Canadians too inhabit space between formal racial segregation and post-civil rights, although Canadian anti-Black racism has been better concealed than its American counterpart.

Our stories function to ‘narrate our status[es]’, our ‘biases,’ and our ‘beliefs about the social order’ (p. 555). Dominant groups maintain and rationalize the social order in

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

part by appealing to ‘stock explanations that construct reality in ways favorable to [them]’ (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). White educators’ narratives have often proven ‘academically and emotionally debilitating to the “racial other”’ (Solomin, Portelli, Daniel, & Campell, 2005, p. 147).

Outgroups resist domination by invoking counter-narratives that ward off internalization of oppression and that contest the social order. Counter-stories ‘can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power’ (Delgado, 1989, p. 2415).

### **Methodology**

In the tradition of Critical Race Theory, we do not consider our participants or ourselves neutral with respect to racism in Nova Scotian schools (Delgado, 1989). Instead, we challenge ‘the construction of whiteness as an unmarked narrative’ (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005, p. 148) while highlighting Black teacher counter-narratives to the ‘Blame Black Families’ perspective. We centre the voices of Black teachers who ‘speak with experiential knowledge about the fact that our society is deeply structured by racism’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13).

As mothers of Black children commencing their journeys through the school system, the authors are alarmed by educational disparities in Nova Scotia and beyond. In 2016, we began this Grounded Theory study to learn about how teachers see racial diversity in their classrooms and communities, and how teachers explain disparities negatively effecting students of African descent. Our central research questions were: 1) How do Nova Scotian teachers talk about Black students, families, and communities? And 2) How do teachers think about the ‘racial achievement gap’?

The phrase ‘racial achievement gap’ refers in provincial reports and policies to standardized testing data that show fewer students of African Descent performing at or above expectation across subject areas. Problematically, this term implicitly

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

problematizes what Black students do or don't do rather than the barriers they confront. Additionally, students not engaged by Eurocentric schooling may be less motivated to perform on evaluations, meaning that results may indicate motivation more than knowledge or ability. Despite such reservations, we asked teachers about the 'achievement gap' because this term constitutes a focal point of provincial conversations about racial disparities in education.

We began recruitment by placing posters online, for example using listservs and Facebook pages where teachers congregate. A teachers' strike erupted as we initiated recruitment, slowing response rates. We also learned from potential participants that many were concerned about career implications if they were identifiable in final reports, a worry we suspect influenced response rates. Given these issues, we added a snowball or 'chain referral method,' which is often used for qualitative work on sensitive subject areas. We asked participants, as well as friends or acquaintances with connections to the school system, to pass along recruitment information to potential interviewees. As is typical, our 'chain referral method' was neither a 'self-contained' nor a 'self-propelled phenomenon" (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, p. 143). Multiple chains were initiated, some successfully.

We recruited eight self-identified teachers of African Descent and nine self-identified teachers of European descent. Teachers of other cultural identities were also invited to participate, but none volunteered. Most participants were seasoned teachers. Exceptions were two interviewees of European descent in the first five years of their careers. Most participants had taught in racially diverse schools that included many students of African descent and in predominantly white schools. Exceptions were two teachers of African descent who had worked exclusively in racially diverse schools and

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

one teacher of European descent, who had taught exclusively in predominantly white schools.

Our interview guide raised race-related matters throughout. We asked questions including, but not limited to, the following:

- Have you noticed any differences between your Black students and students of other backgrounds?
- How do you explain these differences?
- Why do you think there is a racial achievement gap?
- What role – if any – do you believe students need to play in reducing the achievement gap? (This question was then asked with respect to families, communities, teachers, and schools.)
- If you could make education better for Black students by changing any one thing, what would you change?

Seven Black teachers were interviewed by Roberts-Jeffers, who is Nova Scotian and of African Descent. One Black teacher and nine white teachers were interviewed by Malinen, who is Nova Scotian and of European descent. The “race-matching” strategy that we employed where possible is common for researching racial attitudes (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, Lewis & Embrick, 2004). ‘White talk’ often ‘happens “naturally” among white people’ (McIntyre, 1997, p. 46, see also DiAngelo, 2011) while the ‘day-to-day reality’ of racism can leave Black interviewees ‘suspicious of disclosing personal views to a white researcher’ (Crozier, 2003, p. 80). Thus, shared ethnic or racial backgrounds between interviewer and interviewee are known to facilitate the development of rapport conducive to ‘rich data’ (Ochieng, 2010, p. 1729). The same interview guide was used

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

for all interviews, which were semi-structured and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours.

We used a grounded theory method of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). We each performed close readings of transcripts, used MAX-QDA for initial and focused coding, and met regularly to reflect on emerging results. Most of the focused codes we created to describe the data fell into the following categories: 1) Perceptions of Black students, 2) Educational strategies practiced or endorsed, and 3) Locating responsibility for the gap. Five research assistants supported us in recruitment, transcription, and/or analysis tasks.<sup>1</sup>

Due to small sample size, our research did not achieve the point of saturation. As such, we hope to extend our database in a larger Canadian city with more teachers and greater anonymity. Thus far, we have focused on publishing about two themes. The first is the family-school relationship, a key aspect of our ‘locating responsibility for the gap’ category, and the focus of this article. The second is Black teacher representation, an aspect of our ‘Educational strategies practiced or endorsed’ category, which is presented in a second article, currently under review.

To maximize confidentiality, transcript passages have been anonymized in written reports, including for gender. Names have been replaced with initials that do not correspond to participant initials. Initials are followed by ‘-ED’ where participants are of European descent, and “-AD” where participants are of African descent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Our thanks to Chelsea Tobin, Bria Symonds, Jojo Nkrumah, Natasha Bagh, and Hugh

## **Results**

We have divided our results into three sections, each labelled with a pair of differentiating terms. Positive terms come first in each pair and categorize perspectives more often held by Black teacher interviewees; negative terms follow, and categorize perspectives more often held by white teacher interviewees. Positive terms include ‘allies’, ‘caring’, and ‘strength’, while negative terms include ‘assailants’, ‘careless’, and ‘deficit’. Each section includes two passages from Black teacher transcripts followed by two passages from white teacher transcripts. This organization is centres the perspectives and expertise of Black teachers, and leads with perspectives we believe can improve family-school relationships regardless of teacher racial identity.

Even those white interviewees whose discourses aligned most consistently with the negative categorizations below shared warm thoughts and feelings toward their Black students, which often appeared to motivate participation in interviews. However, feelings of warmth toward Black students pose no logical contradiction with the negative perspectives expressed toward Black families. Indeed, negative discursive framings of Black families are no less damaging of Black communities, including Black students, for the fact that they present within a halo of warm feelings for students.

### ***Caring or Careless?***

#### ***Black teachers***

According to James (2010) ‘Black parents, like all other parents [...] are quite keen about their children’s upward social mobility’ (p. 205). Black teacher interviewees in our study most often framed Black families as wellsprings of care, support, and knowledge about how to confront racist social structures in schools and beyond. Interviewees of African descent recognized that Black families experience racism when dealing with school systems, care about “their children’s school achievement” and

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

provide their children with “an education on how to respond [to racist practices and policies] in a way that maintains their humanity and dignity” (Reynolds, 2010, pp. 158-159). According to one study, strong relationships between teachers and Black African immigrant families can develop where a school’s culture includes belief that care of children ‘transcend[s] cultural differences’ (Dryden-Peterson, 2018, p. 500). In our study, many Black interviewees (and no white interviewees) emphasized that all parents love their children:

MK-AD: Parents love their kids. I'll leave it at that. I think that most of my experiences with parents have been positive: they all want what's best for their kid. Sometimes I feel that the parents that you need to see don't make it to Parent-Teacher. People probably make the assumption that's because they don't care, but we have no idea. Maybe they're working that night; maybe something's going on, right? So, I never make that assumption.

Another interviewee of African Descent adamantly expressed that the “racial achievement gap” is no fault of families, nor of individual intellect, but rather of racist biases and structures, and that all families care about their children’s education:

JT-AD: I don't buy into that it's the family's fault. I refuse to buy into it. People say, ‘Well, you know, if the mother read more to the child.’ Yeah OK, that's fine – I wouldn't *not* want mothers and fathers to read more – but that's not why there's an achievement gap. There is an achievement gap *because you're Black*. This is what we've got to get at, because kids who know how to read, kids who know how to write, kids who have a big aptitude still face problems – it has

nothing to do with intellect. I don't buy into that crap. Like, I *know* it not to be true. I know people that don't make a lot of money; that are on, you, know social assistance; that may have had trouble with the law – you know, go down the line of all the things you can say – they care and love their kids like everybody else and care about their family and they want their kids to achieve in the greatest way.

With the phrase 'I don't buy into that crap,' this passage marks blaming of Black families as a false ideology being sold to teachers and/or the public more broadly. Although some Black teacher interviewees wished for greater involvement of Black parents in schools, most presumed investment of parents across racial identity and socioeconomic statuses in their children's education.

#### *White teachers*

As Henry (1993) has put it, "Rarely is the Black family conceptualized as a site of political, cultural, and spiritual resistance." Rather, "The Black family, especially the poor and working-class Black family [has] been distorted as [a] site of pathology and oppression" (p. 209). In line with this thought, white teachers more often presumed a lack of care on the part of Black families about their children's education. These presumptions were often expressed using the 'slippery' language of color blind racism. They were 'speckled with disclaimers such as "I don't know, but..." or "Yes and no"' (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 77) and showed a propensity to explain 'the products of racialized life [...] as non-racial outcomes' (p. 87).

YN-ED: I don't know - if the African Nova Scotian population - I don't know if there's some aspect of valuing or not valuing education culturally that gets

relayed to youth. It doesn't seem right to me to say that it's a population-based thing versus a family-based thing, but, some families value education and some don't. It would be interesting to find out statistically what that looks like. It's certainly been my experience as a teacher, seeing the difference between any student that's read to as a young person, and a student whose parents are excited about things they do in school and expresses that to their child, versus, you know, the 'We don't really care what you do at school.'

The teacher of European descent cited above creates deniability about holding that the lack of care about education on the part of African Nova Scotian parents might account for the achievement gap by stating that she 'doesn't know but' and by leaving the question up to science ('it would be interesting to find out statistically what that looks like'). This passage begins by speaking about African Nova Scotians but shifts from discussion of 'populations' to discussion of 'families,' seemingly to avoid appearing to judge African Nova Scotians as a group.

Other white participants also invoked the stereotype of the uncaring Black parent in narrating interactions with Black students:

QJ-ED: This kid [who is of African Descent] will probably not be successful at graduating, but I will not give up on this kid because he might not have anybody else on his side, I don't know. His mom has never come in to parent-teacher. She's a single mom, she works two jobs, I can't get her on the phone. That's his reality.

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

While QJ-ED's commitment to this student is laudable, such a discursive erasure of motherly care relies on a logical leap: the fact that a parent is working two jobs and not visible to a teacher does not mean that the parent is not on her child's side. Kim (2009) notes that such perspectives have 'double jeopardy' in that there is a mistaken 'tendency to assume that parents' lack of participation in the school also means a lack of interest in their children's education" (p. 80). In contrast, to a teacher operating on an assumption of parental investment in education, working two jobs might be taken as evidence of commitment to meeting the needs of one's child.

### *Allies or Assailants?*

#### *Black teachers*

Black teachers overwhelmingly presented Black families, and families of other racial groups, as helpful allies in the process of educating children. Unlike most white teacher participants, Black teachers spoke of parents' support for teachers and students. Teachers, parents, and students were represented by Black teachers as sharing a community of learning, in which Black communities bear particular burdens.

JN-AD: Black parents as a whole tend to be very respectful of the teacher and very interested in what the school has to offer. Contacting Black parents for the most part, almost 100% support. Some parents might take a strong hand and say 'the student must do so and so,' or sometimes they talk more, 'Okay, we'll have a chat,' so more of a soft approach, or a more sort of gentle approach. But for the most part, I find they are very, very supportive of students. I think Black parents almost have more respect for education and educators than white parents, on the whole.

Thus, this teacher envisions Black families as valuing and supporting education without stereotyping Black families in terms of the ways in which they support students through school, arguing rather that some take a strong approach, others a soft approach.

DS-AD believed that African Nova Scotians have expertise essential to the learning of Black students in our province, suggesting that Black students have been best supported when alliances have been established between schools and community programs:

DS-AD: We need to coordinate efforts that are being done in the community with what's going on in the school. The community programs that were successful were the ones where there was a good relationship and good communication between the school in that program and with the parents to follow, 'How can we support our children in their educational experience?'

From this perspective, the question is not whether Black parents and communities care about their children's schooling, but whether quality relationships are in place between these actors and schools. DS-AD's view resonates with the finding of Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009), that parental involvement in schools is advanced through the intermediary of Community Based Organizations with "deep roots in the lives of families" (p. 2210).

#### *White teachers*

Several white teachers presented Black families as physically, emotionally, or professionally threatening. These perspectives ranged from claims of physical threat, to the view that Black families knowingly and falsely undermine teachers' professional

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

reputations with accusations of racial bias. Some white teachers (but no Black teachers) reiterated representations of Black people as 'loud' and 'domineering' (Henry, 1993, p. 209):

RB-ED: In the inner city schools, parents will barge through the door in the middle of a lesson and they'll maybe yell at you and you just have to escort the parent out of that room so the yelling stops. Even if they're not mad at you, they're yelling, 'cause it's just what they do.

Researcher: What are they yelling about?

RB-ED: Anything. About work, like they need more work for their kid, or their kid didn't do well. I think I'm getting better at not being so intimidated by the Black families and the Black parents. I think it's just because they present themselves in a more intimidating way. I think it's probably culturally they feel they have to do that. But yeah, so I think that I probably interact differently. They're trying to throw around their authority a bit and they're trying to intimidate the teachers.

Ironically, this same interviewee later cited parental requests for extra homework as an example of what is 'good' about middle class, racially homogeneous (white) schools:

RB-ED: The parents are calling and saying 'send home extra work,' because they didn't do well. You don't really get that a lot in the inner-city schools.

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

Another white participant's narrative of threatening parental figures referred to a white mother of Black children:

BW-ED: Mom is white. Mom pulls the race card any time she can. 'Oh you're picking on him because he's a Black boy.' I see. She accused the teacher in the elementary school of being racist. But yeah, that's how she would use it: she would scare people with it, because we as White people are scared to death to be called that. Point blank, we are terrified.

This passage seems paradoxically to position the white mother as the threatening, racialized other who 'pulls the race card' and to simultaneously undermine the credibility of her race-related concerns by pointing to her whiteness. It supports Twine's (1999) view that racial privilege is not fully extended to 'those whose families of reproduction transgress the prescribed ideas of their local communities' (p. 186).

### ***Strength or Deficit?***

The white teachers and Black teachers we interviewed all recognized to some degree a relationship between racist social structures and schooling experiences of Black learners. However, there emerged two distinct ways of discursively inserting Black families into this relationship: in one case as a source of strength, in the other as a source of deficiency.

### ***Black Teachers***

Black teacher interviewees typically understood Black parents to be advocates, sources of strength, and/or purveyors of knowledge who advance Black student success even in conditions of white supremacy or Eurocentrism. For example, some described Black

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

families as purveyors of culturally specific knowledge needed to negotiate racialized barriers to academic recognition:

VM-AD: I'm speaking as if I was a student: If the person who was looking at my work is coming from a European descent lens, if I have the ability to code switch my academic production, that then it makes it easier for the person who's assessing it, but makes it more difficult for me. So it's a bit more of a burden for me because I have to produce it in a way that is not my quote unquote home language or my own personal lens. Right? So it's different. [Black families] have to figure out a way to show [children] that code switching is what is necessary to go to the next step. They have to show their kids there's a way of producing work, there's a way of speaking academically that is different from their way of speaking at home.

Recognizing the racialized realities of stereotyping and deficit perspectives, another teacher of African Descent advocated nourishing family-school relationships and empowering Black students' families as advocates:

YF-AD: My philosophy is, you have to get to know the parents. It's about knowing and having a sincere, respectful relationship with parents, as well as students. So, I guess just getting to know people, because growing up I was stereotyped. I went to one of the worst schools; it had a really bad reputation, and I knew there weren't a lot of expectations for me. I knew that based on the relationships I had with the majority of my teachers. And then there were those few that I could count on one hand that actually made a point to tell me that I

had what it takes – that I could do it and that I could go on to university and all these things [...] So my growing up as an African Nova Scotian student – its impact on me is that I teach my students and I teach their parents. We have conversations about being able to advocate – being able to ask for what you need, and more importantly, being able to advocate for those who can't.

### *White teachers*

Rather than viewing Black families as sources of strength and resilience, white teacher interviewees were more likely to imagine that Black families have become deficient under the pressure of oppression, and pass these deficits on to children. The emphasis here is on ideas about what Black parents can't or won't do rather than on ideas about what Black families can and do offer:

ZN-ED: There's the lack of family supports and sometimes intergenerational reliance on the system [...] Kids who might be getting sugar in the morning before school, and coming hyped-up, and can't sit still in their seats [...] There's definitely larger societal, intergenerational issues that are the result of a group of people being historically oppressed that you kind of see play out in ways that kind of just look negative in society.

As Henry (1993) describes, 'In dominant paradigms, the attitudes and values of Black people have been given as explanations for their economic and educational plight,' sometimes reducing 'racism to a perception in the minds of African people' (p. 208). Asked what one change would make education better for Black students, one teacher of European descent argued that Black parents' mistaken belief that racism remains a problem in schools is the primary barrier Black students face:

RB-ED: I would break down the barriers from the past that aren't allowing them to succeed – so those barriers that the parents are putting up for them, and their guardians – whether it be by inviting them into the schools, or watching how the day proceeds – showing them that school's actually a safe space, and no one is being racially insensitive to these students.

This perspective adheres to the story line Bonilla-Silva (2018, p. 98) refers to as 'The Past is the Past,' a storyline that denies continuity between current and past racial and racist structures.

***Not an Entirely Black and white issue***

*Exceptions to the pattern*

The picture that emerged from our study is not entirely 'Black and white.' Bonilla-Silva (2018) recognizes that 'racial progress in America has always transpired because of the joint efforts of racial minorities and white progressives' (p. 142). While he found that most whites in his sample (88%) deployed the color-blind frame of cultural racism, about a quarter of Blacks did the same (p. 160).

Likewise, we observed occasional exceptions to the racialized patterns outlined above. For instance, in articulating the role of Black families in the relationship between social class structures and educational experiences of Black students, one teacher of African descent took what we have referred to under the heading "Strength or Deficit?" as the "deficit" perspective:

Researcher: So why do you think there is an achievement gap?

SE-AD: I've been thinking about it and I think it has a lot to do with poverty

[...]. Like generation after generation, and I find that a lot of families are – they're frustrated with education, they don't believe in the education system. They'll say 'It didn't help me!' They don't worry about what their marks are for their children. Like they don't really push the education on them – that it's important and your way to getting out of certain situations.

On the other hand, two white participants saw Black parents as allies and leaders in the education of their own children:

GN-ED: The Black families seem more statistically in our school involved than a lot of the white families are. I think they are more supportive and more involved and want to be active in the school community.

NR-ED: There's this sense of – as any oppressed group – you may have to work twice as hard to gain the same recognition. On one hand, I feel like there is a stereotype of students who are acting out because their parents are incompetent or not present or something like that. But, the experience I've had with Black parents is often that they're more strict or demanding of their children.

### *Areas of Agreement*

This paper focuses on the area of our data in which the starkest difference between Black- and white-identified interviewees emerged. However, elsewhere in our analysis three major areas of agreement across interviewees of African and of European Descent were evident: 1) Most interviewees saw teachers as positively-motivated and hard working under difficult conditions. 2) There was widespread agreement that barriers faced by many Black students relate in some respect to socioeconomic inequalities. 3)

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

As reported in a second article (currently under review), teachers of African and of European descent consistently spoke of a need for more Black teachers in our schools. Despite differences in rationale, interviewees belonging to both identity categories saw Black teachers as best positioned to challenge anti-Black stereotypes, recognize the struggles and strengths of Black students, and gain the trust of Black students and communities.

### **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this article suggest that, overall, relative to white teacher interviewees, Black teacher interviewees presented as better prepared to develop and maintain positive relationships with families of African descent. On the other hand, nothing in our data suggested to us that Black teacher interviewees might struggle to form relationships with white families, or would hold white families in low regard. While consideration of historic race-based oppression is not absent from the discourse of Black or white teachers, teachers of African descent in our study were far more likely to describe positive roles that Black families play in supporting their children's studies and equipping their children to deal with ongoing racial oppression.

While particular discourses may become relatively consistent components of our interactions with the world, we also deploy discourses selectively and in the moment to respond to the demands of our lives. Blaming Black families for deficiencies imagined in Black students solves two problems white teachers may confront: First, it allows deficit views of Black people to coincide with an image of self as an educator who cares about and understands Black students and Black student contexts. Second, it avoids recognizing implication of white teachers in white-centric structures, including schooling (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). As one researcher has put it, 'it is much easier to place the blame on those full of blame already than to admit that

one is not prepared adequately to be the best teachers of these children' (Shannon, 1996, p. 8, cited in Kim, 2009, p. 91).

Blaming Black families does not, however, solve the problems of racism and negative bias encountered by Black students. On the contrary, imagining Black families and communities as deficient, and as causing deficiency in Black students, reiterates deficit view of Black students, families, and communities. One key to engaging parents in schools identified by Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009) is a school culture that views parents as "assets" rather than "deficits" (p. 2241). The world cannot be opened for a child by a teacher who lacks positive regard for adults of that child's community, among whom the child will come to belong.

The presumption of positive parental investment in education that most often characterized discourses of Black interviewees lays groundwork for engaging parents as allies by building relationships with parents and communities. We suggest that teacher training and professional development include substantial attention not only to the question of how to relate not only to students but also to families across race and culture, in anti-racist and culturally sensitive ways. As argued by Kim (2009), to increase minority parent engagement, it is better to focus on barriers within the school than on the supposed problems of parents and families. "Schools have more capacity in the pursuit and initiation of greater collaboration than parents in terms of money allocation, educated staff, and established ways for training staff" (p. 81). To this end, we second Kim's (2009) suggestion that schools should develop policies that promote family involvement and support teachers in translating policies into practices.

In addition, we suggest education policy makers in Nova Scotia dedicate resources to increasing the ratio of Black to white teachers in schools, a suggestion also advanced by most teacher interviewees, Black and white. Given the attitudes of Black

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

teachers found in our research and the literature, this approach may enhance family-school relationships, slow teacher attrition from schools attended by many Black students, and address race-based inequities of educational and employment opportunity that prevail in our schools under color-blind racism.

## References

- Africentric Learning Institute. n.d. *A Decade of Development: Leading, Learning, & Launching*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cace.ns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ALI-Decade-Report-WEB.pdf>
- Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. 1981. Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10, no. 2: 141-163.
- Black Learners Advisory Committee. 1994. *BLAC report on education: Redressing inequity empowering black learners*. Retrieved from <https://acs.ednet.ns.ca/sites/default/files/BLAC%20Report%20on%20Education%20Vol%201-3.pdf>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. 2018. *Racism without racists: color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, E., Lewis, A., & Embrick, D.G. 2004. "I did not get that job because of a Black man...": The story lines and testimonies of color-blind racism. *Sociological Forum*, 19, no. 4: 555-581.
- Buchanan, K., & Buchanan, T. 2017. Relationships with families: Have educators overlooked a critical piece of the puzzle? *Improving Schools*, 20, 3: 236-246.

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

Charmaz, K. 2014. *Constructing grounded theory (2. Ed.)*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Colley, S.B. 2018, January 10. Racist, discriminatory incidents on the rise in Halifax-area schools. CBC News. Retrieved from:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/racism-discrimination-report-school-board-students-behaviour-1.4481087>

Crozier, G. 2001. Excluded parents: The deracialisation of parental involvement [1].

*Race Ethnicity and Education*, 4, no. 4: 329-341. 10.1080/13613320120096643.

Crozier, G. 2003. Researching black parents: making sense of the role of research and the researcher. *Qualitative Research*, 3, no. 1: 79-94.

Delgado, R. 1989. Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative.

*Michigan Law Review*, 87, no. 8: 2411-2441.

DiAngelo, R. 2011. White fragility. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3, no. 3: 54-70. Retrieved from

<http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249/116>.

Djonko-Moore, C. M. 2016. An exploration of teacher attrition and mobility in high poverty racially segregated schools. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19, no. 5:

1063-1087. 10.1080/13613324.2015.1013458 Retrieved from

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2015.1013458>.

Dryden-Peterson, S. 2018. Family-school relationships in immigrant children's well-

being: The intersection of demographics and school culture in the experiences of

black african immigrants in the united states. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 21,

no. 4: 486-502.

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

Durden, T., Dooley, C. M., & Truscott, D. 2016. Race still matters: Preparing culturally relevant teachers. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 19, no. 5: 1003-1024.

10.1080/13613324.2014.969226 Retrieved from

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2014.969226>

Hamilton, S. (Producer, Director). 2007. *The Little Black School House*. [Video/DVD] Maroon Films.

Hamilton, S. 2011. Stories from the little black schoolhouse. In A. Mathur, J. Dewar & M. Degagne (Eds.), *Cultivating canada: Reconciliation through the lens of cultural diversity*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Henry, A. 1993. Missing: Black self-representations in Canadian educational research. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 18, no. 3: 206-222.

Howard, T.C., & Reynolds, R. 2008. Examining parent involvement in reversing the underachievement of African American students in middle-class schools. *Educational Foundations*, 22, no. 1-2: 79-98.

James, C. E. 2010. Multicultural education in a color-blind society . In C. A. Grant, & A. Portera (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global interconnectedness* (pp. 191-210). New York: Routledge.

James, C. E. 2012. Students “at risk”. *Urban Education*, 47, no. 2: 464-494.

10.1177/0042085911429084 Retrieved from

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0042085911429084>

Kainz, K., & Aikens, N.L. 2007. Governing the family through education: A genealogy on the home/school relation. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40, 4: 301-310

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

Kim, Y. 2009. Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Moving the focus away from deficiencies of parents. *Educational Research Review*, 4: 80-102.

Ladson-Billings, G. 1998. Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, no. 1, 7-24.

Landeros, M. 2011. Defining the 'good mother' and the 'professional teacher': Parent-teacher relationships in an affluent school district. *Gender & Education*, 23, no. 3: 247-262.

McIntire, A. 1997. *Making Meaning of Whiteness : Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Maynard, R. 2017. *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture. 1995. *Response to the Black Learners Advisory Committee Report on Education*. Retrieved from: <https://blackspan.com/include/docs/Response-to-Black-Learners-Advisory-Committee-Report-on-Education-1995.pdf>.

Minkle, K. M., Sheridan, S. M., Moorman Kim, E., Ji, H. R., & Koziol, N. A. 2014. Congruence in parent-teacher relationships. *Elementary School Journal*, 114, no. 4: 527-546.

Ochieng, B.M.N. 2010. "You Know What I Mean:" The ethical and methodological dilemmas and challenges for Black researchers interviewing Black families. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20, no. 12: 1725-1735

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

Reynolds, R. 2010. "They think you're lazy," and other messages Black parents send their Black sons" An exploration of Critical Race Theory in the examination of educational outcomes for Black males. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 1, no. 2: 144-163.

Solomon, P.R., Portelli, J.P., Daniel, B., & Campbell, A. 2005. The discourse of denial: How white teacher candidates construct race, racism and 'white privilege'. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8, no. 2: 147-169.

Sewell, T. 2012. Are we adequately preparing teachers to partner with families? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 40, no. 5: 259-263.

Twine, F.W. 1999. Bearing Blackness in Britain: The meaning of racial difference for white birth mothers of African-Descent children. *Social Identities*, 5, no. 2: 185-210.

Warren, M., Hong, S., Rubin, C.L., & Uy, P.S. 2009. Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *Teachers College Record*, 11, no. 9: 2209-2254.

Whitfield, H. A. 2007. Black Loyalists and Black slaves in Maritime Canada. *History Compass*, 5, no. 6: 1980-1997.

Winks, R.W. 1969. Negro school segregation in Ontario and Nova Scotia. *Canadian Historical Review*, 50: 164-91.

Woodbury, R. 2016, December 12. African-Nova Scotian students being suspended at disproportionately higher rates. CBC News. Retrieved from:

Pre-publication draft. Please do not cite without permission

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/african-nova-scotian-students-suspension-numbers-1.3885721>

DRAFT