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# Fighting a 'Public Enemy' of Black Academic Achievement—the persistence of racism and the schooling experiences of Black students in Canada

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**ABSTRACT** *This article adds to the growing literature on the Black education experience in Canada—a subject that has not been a priority in mainstream Canadian education. The author shares a significant part of the results of a study that investigated, documented and analysed the experiences of academically successful Black students in Alberta's secondary schools. Drawing from the experiences of these students, the article highlights the issue of systemic racism in Canadian society as a significant barrier that stands in the way of Black academic achievement. The article also shows how Black students cope with racism and the impact of racism on Black student academic achievement. It argues that if we are to address the chronic underachievement of Black students, the issue of racism must be tackled aggressively by educational institutions and school administrators. For too long, educators have greatly underestimated the effects of racism on Black youths in Western multiethnic societies like Canada.*

The most important issues facing [Black] students and that present enormous difficulties in adaptation are the structural and attitudinal barriers within the education system itself. Systemic racism and the differential treatment of [Black] students by teachers, administrators, and other students is a significant problem that directly contributes to the lack of achievement. (Yon, 1994, p. 134)

## Introduction

As my opening quotation demonstrates, structural and institutional dimensions of racism continue to affect adversely the educational achievement of Black students in multiethnic societies like Canada. Indeed, it has been rightly observed that the psychological effects of racism on the education of Black youths remain greatly

underestimated. The problem is exacerbated by neoconservative thought that 'the racism/discrimination explanation of black underachievement is no longer viable' (Harrison, 2000, p. xxi); and that it is 'black culture' which is mainly responsible for Black underachievement. I reject this view, as numerous studies have shown ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination affect Black students and their learning (Gougis, 1986; Taylor, 1991; Walters, 1994; Alladin, 1996; Steele, 1997, 1999; Solorzano, 1997). For example, Taylor (1991) found out that, to the extent that teachers harbour negative racial stereotypes, the Black student's race *alone* is probably sufficient to place him or her at risk for negative school outcomes. Yet, despite attempts to address the issue, persistent racism in the lives of Black learners in North America endures. If we are to address the chronic academic underachievement of Black students, teachers, parents, and school administrators must tackle aggressively the issue of racism and the negative thoughts associated with it. As Dei (1996a) correctly notes, 'to deal with the [racist] concerns expressed by students, educational institutions and school administrators should increase efforts to develop race and antiracism policies' (p. 57). This is critical, especially in Canada where racism as a social issue continues to endure but is denied (Moodley, 1985; Reitz & Bretton, 1994; Clarke, 1998; Chigbo, 1998; Codjoe, 2001).

Just like other Western societies, race continues to be a problem in Canada. Like the USA, Canada is a race-conscious society (Barrett, 1987; Campbell, 1989; McKague, 1991; Lewis, 1992; Cannon, 1995). The concept of race persists, and its permanent feature is shown by 'the presence of a *system* of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology' (Omi & Winant, 1998, p. 17). This form of modern racism, as Flecha (1999) calls it, 'occurs when the rules of the dominant culture are imposed on diverse peoples in the name of integration ... and presumes that different races have unequal levels of intellectual, cultural, economic, and political progress, rather than simply different ones' (p. 154). Racism is manifested when the 'ideology that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics [is] linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and that on this basis distinguishes between superior and inferior racial groups' (Feagin & Feagin, in Codjoe, 2001, p. 281). Within current North American educational practices, the image of the Black student as an academic failure is thus viewed in this context, and it is 'manifested in discriminatory treatment by teachers, counsellors and administrators, and in curriculum and school practices that excluded Black students' (James & Brathwaite, 1996, pp. 18–19; also Head, 1975; D'Oyley & Silverman, 1976). I contend that because Black youth abound in many North American secondary schools, colleges and universities, the issues of race and racism must be significant issues of discussion and policy-making in the education of youths. On this, I agree with Giroux (1994) that:

Within the next century, educators will not be able to ignore the hard questions that schools will have to face regarding issues of multiculturalism, race, identity, power, knowledge, ethics, and work. These issues will play a major role in defining the meaning and purpose of schooling, the relationship between teachers and students, and the critical content of their

exchange in terms of how to live in a world that will be vastly globalized, high tech, and racially diverse than any other time in history. (p. 280)

## Research

Having lived in North America for more than 20 years, first in Canada and now in the USA, and been involved in the education system as a student and a professional, I have developed a strong interest in the education of Africans in the diaspora. It is this interest that inspired my research into the educational experiences of African-Canadian youth at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada (Codjoe, 1997, 1998, 1999). My research was part of a larger and comprehensive study of factors underlying successful educational attainment of Canada's Black youth. I was motivated in part to do the study because studies rarely document and investigate the successful educational experiences of Black students in North America. The tendency, as the research in North America shows, is to emphasise the poor academic performance of Black students. This has led to the observation that 'the disproportionate school failure of minority-group children has become one of the most active research issues in education as researchers attempt to understand the underlying causes and to provide policymakers and educators with reliable and useful information' (Ogbu, in Foreword to Solomon, 1992, p. vii).

As well, just like other Canadians of African origin interested in research in the Canadian public school system (e.g. Thakur, 1988; Brathwaite, 1989; James, 1990; Dei, 1993, 1994; D'Oyley, 1994), I was disturbed by the 'marginality and depersonalisation' of Canadian students of African origin. There is what Dei (1996b) has termed a 'racial, cultural and gender "othering" of [Black] students' (p. 44). Black educational theory and practice have not been a priority in mainstream Canadian education. For example, the theoretical knowledge about education of African-Canadian children advanced in Ontario by such Black theorists as Carl James (1990), Enid Lee (1992) and Patrick Solomon (1992), to name a few, is rarely read or cited by Euro/Anglo-Canadian scholars in critical ways that challenge the status quo. In fact, there is minimal educational literature about Black students in Canada (Henry, 1993).

My research presented a small but positive effort to highlight certain aspects of the Black educational experience not commonly known to the public. It was trying to speak 'about the silences that often are registered but not so often highlighted and analyzed' (Sultana, 1995, p. 113). As Orange (1995) points out:

Concerned educators and administrators must first believe that we can win against the enemies of Black achievement, then be willing to keep trying until we do win. The educational imperative is that paying attention to Black students may garner the attention of significant others who can be helpful but who may not otherwise pay attention. We must know that Black children—all children are more than worthy of our efforts. (p. 4)

Indeed, one of the greatest myths promoted about people of African origin is that, as a people, they lack 'the values of scholarship and study' and that they see

‘academic achievement as forms of “acting White” ’ (D’Souza, 1995, p. 499). This perception of Blacks as genetically inferior when it comes to academics is reinforced in the minds of some educators and the public at large, partly because of the achievement levels of young Blacks in the school systems and the overemphasis in the literature of school failure and underachievement among Black youth. But as Macias (1993) reminds us, Black underachievement is a ‘complex social [phenomenon that] must be explained within a historical, socio-structural view’ (p. 411). Nonetheless, ‘scholars’ like Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and D’Souza (1995) continue to produce ‘research’ that continues to denigrate African peoples. Reed (1993) correctly perceives this as ‘propaganda in which one denigrates the achievements of those considered an enemy, or problem people’ (p. xvi). With this in mind, my study, carried out in Alberta, western Canada, focused on the successful secondary school experiences of Black students. The primary purpose of the study was to examine the experiences and narratives of Black/African-Canadian students in order to learn and document some of the significant factors that influence and contribute to Black educational achievement. The basic issue and common concern, which underlined the research, was the academic and personal success of Black students. I do not intend to share all the research findings of my study here. What I want to do here is to highlight a major aspect of the study—the institutional dimensions of racism—that speaks to what it means for Africa’s youth to be educated in North American elementary, middle and secondary schools.

## **Methodology**

The sample for my study was drawn from a population of Black students in the metropolitan area of greater Edmonton. It was not a random sample, but rather, I sought—with the help of Black youth, community and student groups—Black students for this purpose. I did this because, unlike cities like Toronto, Halifax or perhaps Montreal, there is no concentration of Black students in specific areas of Edmonton. I chose the students from an extensive list of individuals supplied to me by a Black community group. There were 30 students on the list and later, more responded to requests to take part in the project. Since I could not involve all 30 and more students, my first task was to make a selection of the required number of students needed for the study. After some discussions with a number of the students and advice from my dissertation supervisor, I selected 12 students from the pool. The major reason or rationale for choosing these students is that they were those who showed more awareness of the issues concerning Black education and could articulate their feelings, experiences and thoughts as compared to the other students. Although I chose participants mainly on the basis of race, academic success and urban experience (Edmonton), there were other important criteria. Chief among them were (1) successful graduation from an Alberta high school and entry into one of Alberta’s colleges or universities; (2) gender; (3) place of birth or country of origin; (4) student availability and willingness to participate in the study; and (5) that they were conversant with Black educational and other social issues. My primary aim here was to ensure a wide range of the Black student experience in

Edmonton, as well as to keep the study at a manageable size, making in-depth inquiry possible.

The sample selected four students who had been born or who had origins in continental Africa, four born in the Caribbean region, and four born in Canada. They were young men and women who had had a variety of experiences in schools in Canada and, in some cases, in other countries as well. About half graduated from high school in the last two years before I conducted my study, the other half graduating in the last three or more years. The participants represented a number of linguistic and social class groups, as well as both sexes, and there were an equal number of men and women. They were also first-, second-, or third-generation Canadians and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some of the students were from single-parent families, although the majority were in two-parent families. In this way, I can argue that my student sample provided important dimensions of the diversity within the Black community.

The one common characteristic of my student sample—which may not be true of many of their peers—was that they could be considered ‘successful’ students. As Nieto (1992, 1994) points out in a similar study, although there may be disagreements about what it means to be successful, the students in my sample had been able to develop both academic skills and positive attitudes about themselves and about the value of education. They generally had excellent grades, graduated and enrolled in Alberta’s post-secondary institutions. In fact, all but two enrolled at the University of Alberta, and two have actually completed a first degree. In retrospect, I agree with Nieto’s (1992) observation that ‘it seemed logical that students who are successful in school are more likely to want to talk about their experiences than those who are not’ (p. 11). The students’ perspectives provide an opportunity to:

explore what it was about these specific students’ experiences that helped them become successful in school, focusing on home, school, and community resources, attitudes, and activities... By focusing on successful students, we can gain a clearer understanding of the conditions, experiences, and resources in their schools, homes, communities that have helped them succeed. (Nieto, 1992, p. 11)

To seek answers to the questions posed by the research, I utilised a qualitative research method. With the help of an Interview Guide, I conducted in-depth personal interviews with the 12 informants. My questions were not necessarily structured as interview questions as I permitted questions to emerge from my discussions and interactions with the participants. Indeed, I gave informants the opportunity to introduce new and other themes that would throw light on the Black experience in Alberta schools. There were both individual and focus group interviews. In the former, each student participated in about an hour-long semi-structured interview. In the latter, I used the interviews to encourage students to build on and react to comments of their peers, creating a dialogue around each question. I used open-ended questions in both the individual and focus group interviews because they are ‘important when you want to determine the salience or importance of opinions to people, since people tend to mention those matters that

are important to them' (cited in Spencer, 1995, p. 17). Data from the individual and focus group interviews were further supplemented and corroborated by secondary data to give a holistic picture of the Black school experience in Canada. There was so much interest in the subject matter that it led to many hours of non-structured, informal conversations and discussions after the structured interviews. Because some of these informal conversations contained important information that was not recorded during the structured interviews, I wrote and kept a notebook for later use. In the end, the study used four distinct sources of data: (1) 12 individual students' interviews; (2) two focus groups interviews with students; (3) personal notes based on informal conversations and discussions; and (4) summary and reading notes from a variety of secondary published written material. All these personal memos, observer comments, conversations and students' interview transcripts make up what has been referred to as the case study database (Yin, 1984). The student interviews generated perceptions about ethnic and racial identity, self-esteem, personal academic expectations and achievements, home-cultural expectations, multiculturalism, racism, stereotypes, parental influence, knowledge of Black culture and history, school experiences, peer groups, extracurricular activities and more.

My overall data analysis drew on the student narratives as well as relevant secondary sources and my own experiences. My theoretical and empirical support for my study came from the broader theoretical framework of schooling, education and social reproduction theories, multicultural/anti-racist education, race/class and social conflict, sociology of education, international and global education, Black sociology, and sociological/political analysis of the experiences of racial and cultural minorities in the West.

Finally, a quick note on the definition of 'Black' used in my study. I used the term Black to mean 'all Black peoples of African descent—continental Africans and those of the African diaspora—and their world views in my notion of 'Africanness' or "Africanness"' (Dei, 1994, p. 4). It is based on the philosophical foundation and belief that 'people of African descent share a common experience, struggle, and origin' (Asante, 1985, p. 4; see also Henry, 1993, p. 219). In this context, it is realised 'that there exists an emotional, cultural, intellectual, and psychological connection between all Africans, wherever they may be' (Dei, 1994, p. 4). I also used the term 'Black' interchangeably to mean 'African-Canadian,' 'African-American,' and 'African'. My use of the term 'Black' did not include others sometimes called 'Black' in the UK (e.g. Asians) or other 'people of colour' as used in the USA to refer to all other racial/ethnic groups other than Whites. The term preferred by the students in this study and which many used to describe themselves was 'African-Canadian'.

### **Research Findings: racism and the schooling experiences of Black students in Canada**

Although the primary focus of my study was successful Black student experiences, it became clear during the interviews that these students had to contend with, cope with and overcome what might be described as 'racialized barriers', i.e. 'the pervas-

ive incidence of discrimination and demarcation predicated on assumptions of “race” ... often embraced by groups which we call “Black” and “White”’ (Small, 1994, p. 36). In this regard, five primary concerns pervade the student narratives about their school experiences in Canada and form a significant part of the study: differential treatment by race; negative racial stereotyping; the lack of representation of Black/African perspectives, histories and experiences; low teacher expectations; and what can be described as a hostile school environment. All constitute part of the racism and racist behaviour in schools. Indeed, they point to the structural and institutional dimensions of Canadian racism. Let me expand on these concerns as my main focus for this article, using the narratives of the students and other supporting research as points of illustration, discussion and analysis. Before I do that, a brief discussion of the relevant aspects of the Canadian school system would be in order.

Under Canada’s federal system of government, enshrined in the Constitution Act, 1867 (formerly known as the British North America Act), education falls under provincial jurisdiction. As a result, a variety of curricular programmes and school systems exist to meet regional, linguistic and religious (separate) needs. Nonetheless, in general, the Canadian educational structure is remarkably similar (Wotherspoon, 1987). For example, every province provides three levels of education: elementary, secondary and post-secondary. The language of instruction in Canadian schools is either English or French, and in some jurisdictions both. School systems are generally given public support, but there are also private schools. Elementary school usually starts in the first grade and ends in the eighth or ninth grade, depending on the province. Secondary school begins in grade 8 or 9 and continues through grade 11, 12, or 13. Ontario is the only province that requires grade 13 studies for a secondary school diploma. There have been discussions to do away with the grade 13 requirement in Ontario. Post-secondary institutions range from one to three years for two-year colleges and three to four years for university programmes.

### *Racism and Racist Attitudes*

The successful educational experiences of the Black students I interviewed for my study did not come easy. All the students in the study said they experienced racism (both subtle and overt) in one form or another. Their experiences show racism and racist attitudes in school and out of school, the impact of racism on them, and how they coped with it. Ama (I have used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of participants) recalled the difficulty of dealing with racism for the first time. Having been born in West Africa and remembering ‘how so nice we’re to White people’, she could not believe, when she came to Canada, ‘there’s just a reverse and you think, how can anybody be so mean?’

When we first came to Canada, when I was going to school I’d see these three kids walking way down the road, and then I’d hear ‘nigger’, then they’d run away. I was hurt, I can’t believe it. I’ve never done anything wrong to these people, I can’t believe this is happening. I came home, and

again it's usually through the parents; my parents talking to me, going, 'Well, you can't always take these things and internalize it, you have to get over it. These people just don't know. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 145)

For Abena, born and raised in Alberta, racism started very early for her in grade 1. She recalls the experience:

I was just minding my own business and there was a boy a few grades older than me. Every day he would come and harass me, call me 'nigger'. And so from day one, I kind of knew that I wasn't going to be accepted. I found the older I got the less overt it was ... I had a close group of friends that I was always with. That group was there for me. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 146)

Racism also started young for Alberta-born Kwadjo and his brother, who were the only Black children in the school. He sadly remembers how 'people would stick their tongue out at me; and I've been spit on the forehead and I've been called liver lips' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 146). What was especially galling for him was that one of the name-callers was 'a kid that was Black too. He was kind of light-skinned Black and one of his parents was White so maybe he had perception problems or something of who he was' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 146). In some other ways, the racist attitudes take on dimensions that are least expected, as illustrated in this personal narrative by Kwabena, an African immigrant:

What I always did, especially in class, was I'd always want to be the best or do the best in the classroom, disprove all those beliefs that Blacks can't do this, can't do that. A lot of cases, I'd come up with the top mark and a lot of students would be surprised. I remember in one of my math classes, I had one of the highest marks, and this one girl came up to me and she goes, 'You got the highest mark'. I'd go, 'Yes I did'. She goes, 'I didn't think that was right'. 'Why not?' She says, 'I thought you were dumb originally, and stupid'. I just laughed but I just brushed it off. [These incidents] always make me try to do my best and disprove that Blacks can't be smart like Whites. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 147–148)

Kofi, another African-born student, also tells about his experience in an English class in high school. He prided himself on his command of the English language because of the rigours he underwent in his native country before coming to Canada. He was always arguing with his teacher. In the end, he believed it was because 'I think she had a problem with someone from Africa challenging her in class' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 148). Having an African student excel in English in her class was just too much. It was just unthinkable. Echoing this experience, Kwesi, born and schooled in Alberta, makes the important point that sometimes it is that 'silent treatment' that is at the heart of racism for Black students in the secondary school system. He emphasises:

I don't think most of the teachers that I had would ever have thought of themselves as bigots. None of them would have said 'Oh, I hate this group', except as a joke. They would have all thought of themselves as very

enlightened people who believed in social justice and equality. Now whether they truly did or not is a different matter. So I didn't ever have a teacher say to me, 'You can't do this', or 'You won't be any good at this'. But I look at the difference between what I do as a teacher now and what they did. I don't think in the twelve years that I was in public school I had a single teacher tell me that I should pursue an English degree or I should pursue a History degree or I should become a doctorate of such and such. Not one of them encouraged me. I'm always telling students, 'You should go into this in university' or 'You'd be really good at that, you have talent here, or you have ability, apply yourself, you'll be great'. I don't remember one teacher ever telling me that or that I should be a writer—none of them. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 148)

Words cannot describe the psychological damage, emotional pain, and the personal humiliation conveyed in these student narratives. Indeed, most of the students interviewed expressed the impact of racism on them. For example, Kwame, born in Alberta, described how:

to this day, it [racism] still affects me. It was a big hindrance. I dropped out twice as a direct result of that and other stuff, like problems in high school with security guards and principals, and when one Black person does something the whole Black population in the school gets to go to the principal's office and stuff like that. You get fed up and want to quit. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 149)

Another student, Kwadjo, also states how racism affected him:

It [name-calling] affected me, but then I got past it. It made me angry because in the beginning I heard it so much. So I thought the majority of people must think that I'm like this and I know I'm not like this but nobody will listen to me. Then it got to the point where I realized that my overt concern for what they were saying in a way represented my actually caring about what they thought, which I didn't. So my realization of the fact that I didn't really care what they thought helped me sort of push them back into the corner and get on with whatever I wanted to do. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 149)

In all these instances, the students described how they coped with the racism they faced and how it did not stop them from achieving academic success. This is how Akosua, born in Canada and adopted by White parents, described how she coped:

When I was younger, basically I tried to pretend I didn't hear it [the name-calling in school]. I actually wrote poetry and that kind of thing and humour has always been a big part of my life. I always had my nose in a joke book or something so I think part of it I responded to with humour and part of it I sort of pretended I didn't hear it but I would write poetry and I've got quite a bit of poetry written. I think at first I just pretended I didn't hear it and I would be suffering inside but not say anything and then

when I got older I think I dealt with it with humour and I think because my parents really tried to give us the confidence [to cope with it]. I think, I don't know when the big revolution of 'Black is Beautiful' was, but I know our parents really tried to make that a big point to us. I think we felt beautiful even though we didn't necessarily look it, we felt it because I think that they gave us that, they helped us to get that confidence and so even when somebody was saying something to me, like even when I got older, it really just started to roll off my back. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 149–150)

The role played by parents was particularly effective in coping with racism. Just like Akosua, Ekua (born in Alberta of mixed African and Canadian parentage) noted how her mother, a teacher:

always helped me, especially in elementary school, because I had to deal with a lot of name calling: 'Nigger', 'Blacks are coming', 'What did your mom do, did she stick you in an oven, cooked you too long?' and all that kind of stuff. I'd come home crying and she'd be the one saying, 'Oh don't listen to them, you are way better than any of them could possibly be, just keep your head up'. My dad would always share information with us and he'd explain it [racism] to us so we could understand. So I think that [parental support] helped. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 150)

In addition to parental support, the determination to succeed and prove Blacks are capable of academic success also helped students to cope with racism. Ama explains:

I think it just helped me be stronger in determining that no, this was not going to make me go the other way, I'm going to show them that I can do this and I'm better than anything they are. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 150)

This point of view is also supported by another student who said:

I hated it when people would tell you that you can't do well and you initially never did well in the first place either because they told you you weren't able to do well or just because you had no reason for doing well in the first place. Personally, I've always had that inspiration or motive to be the best I can and do the best I can no matter what was involved. What I always did was to be the best or do the best in the classroom. I always have that desire to do as good as I can. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 150)

Others said they coped by being 'very anti-social' and being with Black friends for emotional support.

### *Negative Racial Stereotyping*

In addition to experiencing racism, the students interviewed believe that part of the barriers they have to deal with as Black youth in Alberta's school system is negative societal labelling and stereotyping of Black people. The student narratives and discussions—both during the individual and focus group interviews—confirm that there was a general and deep concern about how Black students were viewed by

society in general. There was the sentiment expressed that ‘to a certain extent, society as a whole has placed us [Black students] in a position [that makes] some of us feel like we weren’t supposed to be able to make it because that’s the way it is’ (Codjoe, 1997, p. 158). During the focus group discussions, many of the students felt that the media has contributed to the negative stereotyping of Black students. It was the view of some that images of Black people from the USA broadcast into Canadian homes have compounded an already serious situation. Indeed, the student narratives showed ‘how everyday interactions are loaded with assumptions made by educators and mainstream society about the capabilities, motivations, and integrity of low-income children and children of color’ (Book Notes, *Harvard Educational Review*, 1995, p. 510). For example, Akosua recalls the time when her teacher asked her to leave the class because the class wanted to discuss slavery and would not want to offend her by that discussion:

I know when I was in elementary school here in grade 5, we had to do school reports and someone did a report on slavery and the teacher asked me if I wanted to leave while they discussed it so I wouldn’t have to hear it. At that time I really didn’t have much of a Black identity and I don’t think I had a lot of confidence in myself. I was the only Black student for miles. I don’t even remember at this point whether I stayed or whether I left. It seems to me I was in the Library when they did do it and I think I sort of had a confused look and he [teacher] said maybe you’d feel better if you did leave and I think I did end up going to the Library while they discussed it. (Codjoe, 1997, pp. 158–159)

Furthermore, I noted a conversation I had with one of the students, Ekua, whose experience again shows how teachers steer Blacks into roles best suited to their ‘natural ability’. According to Ekua, she had mentioned to her science teacher that she would like to study medicine. Sounding incredulous, the teacher suggested she look to another career as he wasn’t sure a Black could study to become a doctor. Lucky for Ekua, her parents helped her overcome the hurt the teacher’s expression conveyed about her academic abilities. I am pleased to say that Ekua is completing her first degree in science and on her way to becoming a doctor. This anecdote brings to mind another point raised by the students in their narratives. As I previously noted, almost all the participants attended the University of Alberta. Time and time again, some expressed the view that people are shocked to see Black students in university. It just does not fit the prevailing stereotype about Black academic success. According to one such narrative:

To this day, people are shocked [to see Black students on campus]. There are a lot of Black students in university and we all hang out in one section ... They’re shocked that we’re all here. They still to this day don’t think we all go to university, but we do and most of the Black students here are not the bottom level. At the university [grade] level, they’re not just passing, most of them are getting 7s and 8s and going into Law, Medicine and stuff like that. They’re succeeding well and this is from all backgrounds

not just the African nations, but the Caribbean and students born in Canada. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 159)

Another student also recalls the incident in his senior high years when some of his schoolmates expressed amazement to see Black students enrolled in mathematics and science classes:

I think I was with another Black student and we saw that we were being followed by some students. They were wondering what we were doing or where we were going. So they walked around and still followed us into the math class. Then they confronted us in person. We were told we're not supposed to be doing math and science. We are supposed to be playing sports and stuff like that. We were absolutely shocked by this, and I think that just serves to show that there's a lot of stereotyping involved. It is the case of portraying Blacks as just entertainers or sports people. It serves to portray us as just being that sort of way instead of being a scientist. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 160)

As we can see, 'the stereotyping involved here is systematic, elaborate and based on assumptions of separate racialised groups possessing distinct mental and physical abilities' (Small, 1994, p. 105). No wonder that the most talked-about and discussed issue by the study participants regarding stereotypes and Black students was the perception of Blacks as athletes. The students believe that the general view of Blacks as only excelling at sports has contributed to the perception of the Black student as an academic failure. One student put it thus:

In North American society, Black kids are supposed to be good in things like basketball. A lot of who you see up there, they're either rappers or basketball stars or involved in some area of sports. The only time you see more Black people on television in Canada is during the Olympics. That's something that I could never fully understand. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 160)

He further elaborates on this point by noting that:

Paul Robeson was a football star, he was an actor, he was a writer, he was a singer, he was a man of letters in college; he was, I think a lawyer, too. He went to Rutgers and Columbia. His grades rank the highest in the school's history. It's like, we have to focus on the fact that he was a football star in College. The man did so much more and there's so much more than physical exertion but if you're Black it's considered that's what you're supposed to do. (Codjoe, 1997, pp. 160–161)

Consequently, these students viewed sports with some contempt, and as one described, as a way out, tried to avoid sports altogether even though she liked sports. In fact, the stereotypes of Blacks as nothing more than athletes bothered her so much that:

I didn't want to do track anymore because of this. You see lots of Black people doing track and field. It's not a bad thing, but I always wondered,

‘Did they do anything else other than this?’ It is this focus that bothered me. Even if I could throw, I could do that better than most of the other things I did, but I thought what if this is all I’ll be doing. Before I know it, I’ll be pushed into it more than anything else. [So] even though I liked sports, it was not really my number-one focus. It’s always been education—reading, learning, the sciences. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 162)

### *Biases in School Curriculum and Textbooks*

Perhaps no other area in the education of Black students in Canada attracts more concern than the attention on the curriculum. As James and Brathwaite (1996) correctly note, ‘the curriculum concerns are some of the most damaging elements in our students’ schooling, and this is an area that has attracted much attention in the Black community and among educators’ (p. 29). Not surprisingly, it was also an area that generated the most discussion, and sometimes anger and emotion, among the students in my study. In fact, the question of racial bias in the curriculum content as well as Eurocentrism in school courses and texts were also recurring themes in the student narratives. All complained that the curriculum had little relevance for their lives and, as one of them put it:

I really didn’t feel as though I got any education from school as far as Black education was concerned ... I didn’t learn anything about Black history in high school. There was no subject [in Black studies] for you to take, and in regular social studies classes they didn’t discuss anything Black or African. They might have said something about slavery once or twice but they didn’t really say anything in depth and they didn’t say anything positive. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 172)

This theme was echoed again and again by the students. Having grown up outside Canada before immigrating to Alberta with her parents, Akosua thought courses in Canadian schools would be more inclusive and reflect all of its people. However, she found out in high school that:

Canadian history just seems to be concerned about White Canada. Except maybe the States because they’re so close to the States, they’re not really concerned about other countries. I never knew anything about the history of Blacks in Canada until I joined Ebony [a Black youth club in Edmonton]. That’s when I started to realize, ‘Oh, Blacks have been here for this long’. I’ve talked to some Black families too here in Alberta and found that their roots have been here for a long time and it’s like I never knew. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 172)

Kwabena, also born outside Canada, found that:

A lot of the history was about World War I, World War II—European history. There was very little African history. You find that a lot of the students hardly knew anything about Africa whatsoever. All they knew was

what they saw on TV or what portrayed Blacks in the most negative way. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 172)

One student found this Eurocentric emphasis ‘frustrating’ at times:

because we heard so much about the French and English and stuff. Amazingly, they don’t even talk very much about the Natives. You’d think there’d be a lot more on that. It is frustrating because I mean the Blacks here did contribute a lot. We [Blacks] were one of the first immigrants here in Canada. I do feel that there should be a lot more mentioned about us, most definitely. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 173)

This last point was often mentioned by the Black students born in Canada. They are hurt by what one of them, echoing Willis (1995), called ‘a sin of omission’. For example, Abena, born in Alberta, narrated that:

in some of my classes, in social studies, when they did mention anything that had to do with Black people, it was generally that the Blacks came over. They were slaves. In English you’d read a book, Tom Sawyer or something, and it is ‘Nigger this’, ‘Nigger that’, every second word and I found that in the end, I started to verbalize how, why do you always portray the negative aspects of Black life. I found that a lot of my teachers just would almost automatically say something and they’d turn to me because they would expect me to give them a response because I wasn’t going to be quiet about it. So, I thought it just made me more outspoken in the end, which was to my benefit. It made me learn more about Black history on my own than in school. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 173)

For Kwesi, also born in Alberta, making some sense of this, he said he does not think ‘the big problem is that the teachers are hidden Klansmen, [although] you still find teachers who have really bigoted attitudes and that sort of thing’. He believes that ‘the real problem is that we’re just invisible to the curriculum’. He explains further:

I took social studies in high school and the history course—that was supposed to be an enriched history course. The history course was actually subtitled, ‘History of Western Europe’. They didn’t even make a secret out of it. So all the civilizations of the earth that were brown and black were left out. We didn’t discuss China until the 20th Century. The first mention of Africans was not Egypt, or Nubia or Mali or Songhai or great Zimbabwe. The first mention was the slave trade. (Codjoe, 1997, pp. 173–174)

On this last point, it also came out unanimously during the focus group discussions that Black education in Alberta’s schools, if mentioned at all, ‘tends to start and stop with Martin Luther King. That’s about it. There are a whole lot of other historical Black figures—music, science, you name it. Even in this country alone, there are a lot nobody knows about’ (Codjoe, 1997, p. 174).

I was curious to know how all this made them feel in class and school and so I asked them to tell me about it. Interestingly enough, although they were hurt and

marginalised by the whole experience (one dropped out of school because of this, although returned later), most told me they were not surprised. They had expected it. They have been forewarned. As one said:

I wasn't really surprised because I remember actually being told by someone before I went to [mentions school attended], I was told, 'You're not going to learn anything about Black education'. In fact, they said something about how the teachers there weren't very fond of Black students. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 174)

A few said they were 'furious' because 'if you're willing to learn about other cultures, my culture might as well be known too' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 174). One or two started to get into arguments with their teachers. Kwame relates one such experience:

One time, I got into a big argument with a teacher. We were doing the history of the world. When it came to the history of Africa, the teacher said Africa's history started from 1773 when the White man came. I said this is foolishness. Africa's history didn't start with the arrival of the White man. I pointed out to the teacher that when it came to do the history of Russia he talked about way back in when they were still in [inaudible], that's their history. But when he talked about the history of Africa the only thing he talked about was when the White man came. That's my experience with Black things in Alberta's schools. Always, it's not Black things. It's when the White people came and how the Black people kind of fitted in. That's about it. (Codjoe, 1997, pp. 174–175)

But perhaps the most important aspect mentioned by the students was the damage the impact of the absence of Black studies in the school has on Black students. This comment was typical:

There was nothing on anything that was Black-related or Black successful in the academic area. I think if there was, even if it was just a small thing, a Black child would feel that they had something to associate themselves with in the academic sense. This would make them more motivated to achieve as well, 'cause right now they just feel that maybe some kids feel that education is a White thing. But it's [education] not something that they should be ashamed of. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 175)

Another added that:

I'm no academic genius but when you have a sense of what your people have done it helps you get through the school system too. It helps you get through different things because you feel that your people have made a contribution to where you are. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 175)

What I found remarkable about these students was that though the schools made no effort to introduce or teach them about Black studies, they made the effort on their own and, as one said, 'I learned about Black history more on my own than in school' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 175). Some regretted this and commented that 'it's not fair that

they should have to learn their own history outside school, when European history is being taught in school' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 175).

### *Low Teacher Expectations*

In looking at what actually happens when teaching occurs, there is a growing body of research and evidence to suggest that a teacher's expectations, encouragement, attitudes, and evaluations primarily influence students' perceptions of themselves as learners, and that a student's social class, race or ethnicity is a major determinant of teacher expectations. Some of the students I talked to mentioned teacher expectations and attitudes as one of the racialised barriers they faced while going through the Alberta public school system. I must say that not all of them had negative experiences with teachers. About half had positive and supportive teachers. However, they all related that although they were academically successful themselves, they were aware that some teachers' expectations often doomed their peers to failure.

For the students who said teachers had low expectations of them, their narratives and experiences fall into two areas. One relates to how some of their teachers were not 'sympathetic' and often did not encourage them to develop their full potential. Looking back now, they wished their teachers had encouraged and helped them as they did with White students. The other area in which students spoke about their negative experiences with teachers had to do with what appears to be the surprise on their teachers' faces when they handed in papers or assignments where they had excelled. Often, the teachers would not believe the student had actually done that paper. As one put it, 'a lot of times, I'd do well in Math and Biology and they'd be surprised. I wondered why that was the case but I was told by my parents to do my best (Codjoe, 1997, p. 184). Another related how he had turned in an English essay. His writing and presentation was so well done that his teacher did not believe a Black student could write that well. He had to remind his teacher about the rigour and discipline of essay writing in his native country—an experience that he brought to Canada and which he had used so well. Related to this incident was the one related by Ekuia, where her teachers had told her she could not aspire to become a doctor because of her race and gender. Here is how she related her experience:

What also threw me is I had other teachers, who because I wasn't doing well in their particular class, told me I couldn't do what I wanted to do. One particular teacher, I remember, my Chemistry teacher. I remember he told me that, there was no possible way, he even told my dad, that I could never become a doctor because I just couldn't get the Chemistry in high school. At first it hurt ... then later on it made me angry. So what happened was I figured, I said some day, maybe he could come into a hospital room and I'd be the doctor that would be assigned to him. So I figured, I got to go, I got to go. I had a Math teacher, he said the same thing, that maybe I should find something else, secretarial. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 185)

Ekua's experience is somewhat similar to Kwesi's, who told me he:

always did enjoy the sciences ... and did very well in physics but I had a very bad experience with a math teacher [who doubted my abilities] in junior high and for two years in a row. That undermined my math ability, and if your math ability is undermined, then your physics ability is undermined. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 185)

### *Alienating School Environment*

Finally, apart from the racism, the negative racial stereotypes, an alienating curriculum and teachers who do not expect much of them, Black students are also faced with another racialised barrier: that of a school environment that I can describe as 'essentially solitary', unsupportive, alienating and perhaps racially hostile. As expressed by the students in the study, the most difficult aspect of the school environment they experienced was the social isolation and loneliness as the only Black students in predominantly White schools and the lack of support of those around them. Because the Black or African population in Alberta is very small, all the students said they faced 'intense isolation and deprivation' in school. Sometimes they were abused and racially harassed. Not able to make or form friendships with other Black students made the isolation worse and demoralising, particularly for the students who attended schools in the Catholic (separate) system. This is how one described his experience:

In school, I was faced with isolation, intense loneliness, deprivation. That's really unfortunate. In all of elementary school and junior high, I never had an African peer in my grade level, ever. In high school there was one girl who was in my grade level and then there were, I think, one or two kids older than me and as I got up to grade 11 and 12, there were some kids younger and that was it. I did not have any African peer friends and that was really distressing for me. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 189)

For those like Adwoa, who was coming to Canada for the first time:

adjustment was difficult when I first came here. It was a difficult adjustment through until high school. In elementary I was the only Black girl in my school, in junior high there were about two others. I got called names and stuff like that. It was difficult and it did affect me drastically in that, in grade 12, I almost did not graduate. I was hardly at school. (Codjoe, 1997)

Another aspect of the isolation the students related was the fact that most of them went through their entire public schooling in Alberta without ever having known or been taught by a Black teacher or counsellor. For example, one said, 'I didn't really have a Black teacher of my own until I was in university' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 190). Another said, 'Since I've been in Canada, I've never had a Black teacher' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 190). On the other hand, Abena, who had a Black teacher, recounted how it had an impact on her:

TABLE I. Racialised barriers that impede the academic achievement of African-Canadian students

*Anti-Black racism*

- Name-calling ('Nigger')
- Racial hostility and slurs ('liver lips')
- Prejudice
- Discrimination
- Devalued position/status in Canadian society
- *Negative racial stereotyping*
- Social stigma (Black students seen as 'athletes' and 'entertainers')
- Stigma of intellectual inferiority ('can't do math or sciences'; 'could never become a doctor')
- Streaming and tracking ('steering Black students into roles suited to their "natural ability"')
- Black students as troublemakers

*Racially-biased curriculum/texts*

- Eurocentric (monocultural) curriculum
- Lack of relevancy to Black students' lives
- Invisibility of Black/African studies
- Negative references to African-Canadians

*Low teacher expectations*

- Differential/discriminatory treatment
- Lower expectations and insensitivity
- Doubting of academic capabilities
- No encouragement
- Expect less academically from Black students
- Receives 'silent treatment' from teachers

*Alienating school environment*

- Only Black student in a predominantly White student body
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Lack of Black friends/peers
- Lack of Black role models (teachers, counsellors, administrators)
- Difficult adjustment period

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Partly adapted from Black Learners Advisory Committee Report on Education, 1994, p. 40.

My grade 1 teacher was Black. In elementary school there were two Black teachers in that school. But I'm really glad that I actually did have Miss Buchanan as my grade 1 teacher because I just felt a little bit more comfortable going into the whole school system because it was somebody in a position of authority who was like me, so I didn't feel entirely isolated. I really appreciated that experience. (Codjoe, 1997, p. 190)

Having Black teachers in the school system was seen by all as critical. As one commented, 'The school system should have a bit more Black teachers. Some Black teachers who are sympathetic, knowing the Black history, the Black background, would be quite helpful' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 190). Talking about counsellors, another said, 'if I were to go up to a Black counsellor, I'd relate more than if it were a White person. I think a lot of Black teachers or a lot of Black counsellors would be way easier to relate [to]. I think there should be more Black counsellors in school' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 190). Indeed, the loneliness and isolation made these Black

students 'shy and silent' and 'nice and polite', with the effect that, 'by and large [they could not make] positive contributions in class ... So when the situation required them to set an example of being extroverted, they couldn't do it' (Codjoe, 1997, p. 191). It had a negative impact on their education.

## Discussion

The student narratives provide evidence of the persistence of racism in Canadian schools. This case study strengthens other research findings in Canada regarding the structural and institutional dimensions of racism in Canadian society (see, for example, Oake, 1991; Talbani, 1991; Walker, 1991; Lewington, 1993; Henry *et al.*, 1995; Dei, 1995a). In fact, one picks up similar concerns in interviews with other Black students about their school experiences in Canada. For example, a year-long study in Manitoba concluded that 'racism is running rampant in Winnipeg schools and is forcing many Black students to drop out of the system'. About 81% of more than 200 Black students interviewed by the study authors identified racism as a major barrier blocking integration of Blacks into the Winnipeg school system. According to Jean-Joseph Isme, one of the authors of the report, 'Racism is one of the major causes of dismissals and suspensions of Black youth from schools', and 'the impact of racial insults on the mental health of [Black] youths cannot be ignored' (Canadian Press Newstex, 5 December 1993). A similar study in Ontario discovered that:

Black students encounter discrimination daily on an individual level. They must deal with racial slurs, vicious graffiti, [and] ostracism on the part of their fellow students. Many feel that it is no use complaining to the authorities about this, since they believe that the teachers and the administrators are themselves racist. (Towards a New Beginning, 1992, p. 79)

The psychological effects of racism on Black youths remain greatly underestimated (Walters, 1994). Studies point out numerous ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination affect Black students and their learning. For example, Taylor (1991) found out that, to the extent that teachers harbour negative racial stereotypes, the Black student's race *alone* is probably sufficient to place him or her at risk for negative school outcomes. Teachers who harbour racist attitudes can affect students in a more personal way as low expectations, hostility, and differential treatment can adversely affect Blacks in the classroom. Secondly, results of experiments have confirmed that racism creates what has been described as an 'environmental stressor' for Black students that can adversely affect their academic performance. It has been found that racial prejudice increases emotional stress of Blacks over and above that experienced by other groups in North America, and that:

that stress is likely to adversely affect students' daily academic performance by reducing their willingness to persist at academic tasks and interfering with the cognitive processes involved in learning. As this process continues over a long period, Blacks do not develop the cognitive skills that are necessary for high academic achievement. (Gougis, 1986, p. 147)

Furthermore, according to this study:

recurring thoughts and feelings associated with race prejudice contribute to a reduction in their [Black students'] motivation to learn and to increased interference with the cognitive processes involved in learning. As this process continues over the years, its effects are cumulative. On the average, Blacks will have spent less time trying to learn academic material and will have made less efficient use of their cognitive skills (attention, rehearsal, recall) in doing so. (Gougis, 1986, p. 149)

Gougis thus concludes that, although 'the academic performance of both Blacks and Whites is affected by stress, Blacks are burdened with the added stress of [racial] prejudice throughout their academic careers. Their academic performance is more impaired' (Gougis, 1986, p. 148). Irvine (1990) also adds that 'racism and the devalued position of Blacks in our society cannot be ignored as a primary contributing factor to Black underachievement' (p. 4).

Besides the daily encounters of racism, the Black student experience in Canada also includes 'stereotyping by the dominant power groups whose attitudes are reflected in institutions such as education, the media and the law' (Brathwaite, 1989, p. 206; see also Yon, 1994; Dei, 1996a). Indeed, the same concerns about social stereotyping narrated by the Black students in my study have been borne out in many studies and reports (James, 1994; Spencer, 1995; Lendore-Mahabir, 1995; Dei, 1995c). For example, in his study, *Drop Out or Push Out?*, which examined the attitudes of 200 Black and non-Black students toward school, Dei (in Sarick, 1995) recounts the experience of a Black student who narrates why he dropped out of school:

I can tell you the reason why I dropped out. The school I went to, they made me feel like I wasn't smart enough to do the stuff. They told my parents to send me to a technical school. They treated Blacks like we had no brains ... and that the Chinese were smarter, the Whites were better, so I just said 'Forget it'. (p. A3)

Similarly, in her interviews with Black students in Edmonton secondary schools, Spencer (1995) also found out that:

some students felt there were specific stereotypes that related to their academic potential. As one student stated: '[We have to] ... show them that Black people are not drug dealers, pimps, whores, not just sports people, rappers and singers. We are people that have high intelligence. They see us as someone who can do great 'slam-dunks'. (p. 54)

According to Spencer, 'several students felt even though the teachers did not express any open animosity or direct negative verbal comments, they had to try extra hard to prove themselves in order to overcome the stereotype of Blacks as being non-academic' (pp. 54–55).

Indeed, stereotypes have been found to play a significant role in intergroup relations and serve an important function in the maintenance of racism (Larocque,

1991). When it comes to the stereotypes about Black intellectual capabilities, I share C. Steele's (1992) contention that 'the culprit I see is *stigma*, the endemic devaluation many Blacks face in our society and schools. Blacks fail in school for reasons that have little to do with innate ability or environmental conditioning. The problem is that they are undervalued' (p. 68). According to C. Steele (1992), this devaluation 'grows out of our images of society and the way those images catalogue people' (p. 72), and furthermore, terms like 'prejudice' and 'racism' often miss the full scope of racial devaluation in our society. Logan (1990) further elaborates:

The negative stereotypes connected with education and learning begin at the elementary and secondary school levels and continue beyond college. Black children attend schools where most of their peers, if not themselves, are labelled by the professionals as 'culturally deprived', 'high-risk', 'learning-disabled', 'stupid', and 'crazy' by their classmates. Even when such descriptors do not fit students, the prevailing attitudes still affect their well-being. The negative stereotypes continue and are reinforced through the curriculum and by the school's faculty. From the perspective of teachers and administrators, the tendency is to expect less academically from the Black student and to assume that nearly every Black student does not meet the standard academic requirements. (p. 13)

S. Steele (1989, 1990) has referred to this presumption of Black academic inferiority as 'stereotype vulnerability'—implying that 'everywhere in this new world her skin color places her under suspicion of intellectual inferiority' (C. Steele, 1992, p. 74). The consequence has been that some Black students perform poorly in school because they buy into the stereotype that they cannot compete academically with White students. As well, the psychological costs are such that the burden of stereotypes depress Black academic performance and impose on Black students a self-doubt and aversion to academic competition. Indeed, Black students who have never been victims of racism can perform below expectations academically because of negative stereotypes (Dei, 1993; Gose, 1995; Miller, 1995). In carrying out further research in this area, Steele and Aronson (1995) have recently employed the term 'stereotype threat' to account 'partly for the relatively poor performance of any group widely considered deficient in some ability, such as women in science' (*Report on Education Research*, 6 December 1995, p. 3).

Unfortunately, many, including educators, still believe that Black students' school failure is related to their inferior intelligence and their own inadequacies and problems (Macias, 1993). The so-called 'deficiency approach' alleges the genetic and cultural inferiority of the Black 'race' and has been used historically to support decisions that emphasised vocational education for Black children at the expense of providing them with a liberal education. This has been extremely damaging to the educational advancement of Blacks as it has provided a rationale not to invest as much in the education of minority children as in White children. As well, this kind of reasoning locates the source of Black academic achievement within the 'skill deficits' and cultural background of the Black student and thus participates in 'blaming the victim' (Tyack, 1974; Selden, 1978; Boykin, 1986; Erickson, 1987;

Irvine, 1990; Strickland, 1994; Carlson, 1995; Miller, 1995; Orange, 1995). It is perhaps no coincidence that one of the contemporary manifestations of the racialised obstacles faced by Black students today is the pervasive streaming of them into the Basic and General levels of education—resulting in negative consequences as these lower academic tracks and labels become self-fulfilling (Black Learners Advisory Committee [BLAC] Report on Education, 1994, p. 43; see also Oakes, 1985; Sium, 1987; Hayes, 1996). At the same time, if Black students are not ‘streamed’ into basic or vocational education, the prevalent stereotype still holds that they have a natural ability to excel at sports. Here, physical prowess becomes one of the stereotypes around which ‘Blackness’ is constructed. Thus, it has been observed that ‘P.E. teachers widely assume that Blacks are naturally better at sports, and promote Black participation as an alternative success system for these pupils, as a way of integrating them into the school culture and of gaining prestige for themselves and the school’ (quoted in Small, 1994, pp. 102–103). Spencer (1995) suggests that ‘this stereotype tends to reinforce the idea that physical prowess is divorced from intellectual ability’ and falls ‘prey to the dualism of Western philosophy, where things are seen as “either or” ’—thereby ‘promoting the stereotype of the athletic Black male who doesn’t excel academically’ (p. 56).

Apart from the negative stereotyping, the continued marginality of Black students has created the situation in which these students lack any sense of identification and connectedness to the school. As a racialised barrier, Alberta’s secondary schools have failed to respond to the direct needs of the Black student and to incorporate Black people’s history and experiences into the existing curriculum. This ‘sin of omission’, as Willis (1995) calls it, has ‘[allowed] the cultural knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse children to be ignored, devalued, and unnurtured as valid sources of literacy acquisition’ (p. 34). According to Giroux (1986), ‘the issue here is that the school actively silences students by ignoring their histories ... by refusing to provide them with knowledge relevant to their lives’ (p. 10). Indeed, there is a feeling among Black educators, students and parents that because the school curriculum is one of the most important elements of education and is the carrier of the philosophy, culture and national agenda of any country, the mismatch between Black students’ cultures and that of Canadian schools goes a long way to ‘reinforce feelings of limited self-worth and cultural isolation by ignoring the historical contributions of African Canadians or devaluing their culture’ (BLAC Report on Education, 1994). The culture in Canadian schools, according to Hoo Kong (1996), is that, ‘in general, textbooks tend to present the perspectives of White, upper-class, Anglo- and French-Canadian males. Consequently, many textbooks do not acknowledge African Canadians as active participants in the shaping of our nation’s history’ (p. 58). In reference to these important omissions from Canadian school curricula, Winks (1971) further observes that:

Indeed, most White Canadians would not have learned that there were Negroes in Canada at all had they relied upon their formal schooling. Textbooks forgot that Black men existed after 1865, and only a few Canadian books gave even passing reference to the influx of fugitive slaves

in the 1850s. Most did not mention Canada's own history of slavery and none referred to Negroes—or separate schools—after discussing the American Civil War. (p. 363)

This impact of the exclusion from the curriculum on Black learners has been analysed by numerous educators and summed up by Asante (cited in BLAC Report on Education, 1994) as follows: 'Lacking reinforcement in their own historical experiences, they [Black students] become psychologically crippled, hobbling along in the margins of the European experiences of most of the curriculum' (p. 40). As a matter of fact, the monocultural content of the school curriculum, including testing and grouping practices, and the expectations of educators for Black and minority children, have been established as the major barriers to educational achievement and equality (King, 1993). Research by Hale-Benson (1986) provides compelling evidence that the underrepresentation of Black culture in the curriculum, and the resulting curricular and instructional inequalities, foster mediocre classroom experiences for Black children and erect barriers to their academic achievement. I would argue that this 'exclusionary curriculum' constitutes a 'hidden curriculum' because it 'often reinforces society's prejudicial view that Black children, particularly low-income Black children, are incapable and inferior' (Irvine, 1990, p. 8). I agree with Yon (1994) that 'the hidden curriculum has received less attention than the formal curriculum because it addresses what is essentially intangible, the very ethos of schooling that is difficult to pin down' (p. 139). My point here, and again agreeing with Yon (1994), is that 'the school's hidden curriculum can cause students to feel marginalized. This is the aspect of schooling through which the subtle and sometimes unintentional forms of racism manifest themselves' (p. 139; see also Gay, 1988).

Furthermore, when one looks at the education of Black students in Canada, the evidence indicates that some teachers, it seems, often have lower expectations of Black students. In fact, research and experience have shown that Black students encounter and still face two institutional barriers: 'teacher insensitivity and low expectations which result in differential treatment. Black students feel ignored by their teachers. They *feel invisible in class, unimportant*' (BLAC Report on Education, 1994, p. 42; original emphasis). In my study and others, Black students express the belief that White teachers view them as academically inferior, discourage their interests in academic subjects, stream them into vocational and athletic activities, and respond to them less positively than to their White counterparts. Consequently, these 'negative expectancies militate against the [Black] students' development and reduce their intellectual performance to a point that ultimately may cause them to forfeit a successful academic experience' (Boateng, n.d., p. 6; see also Good & Brophy, 1973; Garcia *et al.*, 1995; James & Brathwaite, 1996). Very often, many teachers will say 'they are colour blind, that they see the person, not the person's colour' (Richardson, 1995, p. 37). But this approach obscures the fact that, indeed, teachers hold biased and racist views and stereotypical expectations of different groups, and that they consciously or unconsciously have different expectations that are race-related which affect the way they subsequently interact with students

(Braun, 1976; Singh, 1986; Yon, 1994). As Banks and Banks (1991) point out, 'many teachers are unaware of the extent to which they embrace racist and sexist attitudes and behaviours that are institutionalized within society' (p. 156).

Finally, the quality of the school context or environment is an important factor that has implications for school success for Black students. In fact, students' perceptions of the school environment have been known to be positively correlated to their school success. As Maharah-Sandhu (1995) remarks, 'if the child feels alienated, and cannot see his/her world view represented in the school experience, it is unlikely that there will be equality of educational outcome' (p. 16). But the school environment often becomes another barrier for Blacks as they face an acute sense of isolation; indeed, many Black students do not seem to have a sense of belonging or ownership and thus feel alienated from the public school. The continued marginality of Black youths within the school system has created the situation in which these students lack any sense of identification and connectedness to the school (see Maharah-Sandhu, 1995). This has led to concerns by Black parents and communities regarding such issues as the absence of Black teachers and top administrators in schools (Dei, 1995a). So long as cultural domination remains a fact of life for Black and minority students, Sleeter (1991) argues that minority students may need to develop a strong sense of group identity and action, including commitment to common goals, awareness of conflict against a dominant group, and effective organisation in order to overcome the impediments of the dominant culture. As well, 'strategies should recognize the value of bicultural and multicultural identities of individuals and groups, as well as the difficulties confronted by those who live in two or more cultures' (Reynolds, 1993, p. 18).

In a way, the students' narratives, although subjective, lend empirical support to the existing knowledge on race and education and inform the (re)theorisation of race, difference and schooling in North America. In one important respect, they show, for example, that the sociocultural 'skewing' towards a White, majority population operates at many levels within the educational hierarchy, from teaching to research about teaching and schooling. Pedagogical discourse derives in part from an academic tradition created and shaped by western European and Anglo-American thinkers. For instance,:

the language in which we discuss our issues is a language permeated with ideas, beliefs, values, and positionings that have been formulated by the dominant majority. Terms such as 'multiculturalism', 'diversity', 'ethnicity', 'race', and more have been defined and discussed by White, upper-middle-class, male academicians and politicians. Women and minorities who engage in this discourse must do so using a language formed by those who, historically and currently, occupy power positions in our society. (Estrada & McLaren, 1993, p. 28)

It is what Apple (1992) has called the 'selective tradition', i.e. 'someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchises another's' (p. 5). The point here is that, all too often, 'legitimate' knowledge does not include the historical

experiences and cultural expressions of labour, people of colour, and others who have been less powerful (Roman & Christian-Smith with Ellsworth, 1988). For example, the absence of Black knowledge in many school curricula is not a simple oversight. Its absence represents an academic instance of racism, or what has been described as 'willful ignorance and aggression toward Blacks' (Pinar, 1993, p. 62). Indeed, Apple (1990) has argued that the selection and organisation of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups. At the same time, he also notes that this does not mean that the entire corpus of school knowledge is 'a mirror reflection of ruling class ideas, imposed in an unmediated and coercive manner'. Instead, 'the processes of cultural incorporation are dynamic, reflecting both continuities and contradictions of that dominant culture and the continual remaking and relegitimizing of that culture's plausibility system'. The foregoing analyses lead us to the following neglected questions. How has certain knowledge come to be more appropriate for school curriculum content than other knowledge? By what mechanisms have certain realms of knowledge been given higher status than others? Whose class and social interests have been served by the form and content of schools? Why are the views and concerns of Black people so often ignored in the school curriculum? (Apple, 1978; Minnich, 1990; Sarup, 1991). The students' narratives suggest that minority youth have begun to offer a more systematic challenge to the structure of existing school knowledge and the assumptions and practices that undergird the curricula of schools and universities in North industrialised societies. This is very encouraging.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In summary, I have tried to show through my research, and strengthened by other studies, how certain racialised barriers affect or impede the academic success of Black students. It is my view that the psychological effects of racism on Black students remain greatly underestimated. From my study, I can conclude that how African-Canadian students experience their schooling and education is filtered by their race, and, contrary to what is normally believed, racial identity does make a difference. Regardless of the level of awareness of their racial background and gender, Black students in Canada's schools cannot ignore their racial identity, as the dominant group will always view them as 'the other'—Canadian citizenship notwithstanding. Consequently, I also conclude that since racism permeates every aspect of our lives, race must be taken into account in developing a meaningful theory of social reproduction through schooling (see Solomon, 1992). Educators must play an important role in engaging students in discussions about racism. As James (1995) puts it, 'our aim must be to provide an educational climate where difficult issues can be taken up, and all students can voice how they see the issues that affect their aspirations' (p. 53). Most particularly, Roman (1993) suggests that:

White educators have a responsibility to challenge and work with racially privileged students to help them understand that their (our) attempts to assume the positions of the racially oppressed are also the result of our

contradictory desires to misrecognize and recognize the collective shame of *facing* those who have been *effaced* in the dominant texts of culture, history, and curricular knowledge. (p. 84; original emphasis)

I believe, therefore, that by exploring such issues as racism and discrimination and raising awareness to the impact of racism on the educational opportunities of Black students, we can develop a theory and practice of education that is multicultural, anti-racist, comprehensive, pervasive, and rooted in social justice. Commenting on the whole Black school experience in Canada, Solomon (1992) observes that:

Black students in White dominant school structures have not benefited from Canada's policy of multiculturalism. Despite this national policy, dominant-group educators continue to embrace an ethnocentric approach to pedagogy within schools. Although the official policy is multiculturalism, these responses show that the dominant teaching paradigm within Canadian classrooms is cultural assimilation. Teachers are socializing racial and ethnic minority children into the dominant, mainstream culture. (p. 126)

On this note, I share Dei's (1996a) conclusion that 'on both analytical and practical levels, [the students' narratives] bring to the fore the dilemma of searching for an appropriate centrality of the experiences, histories, and cultures of the diverse student body in curriculum and classroom pedagogical practices to facilitate youth learning' (p. 57). In fact, making Black culture empowering in schools now appears to be an indispensable and critical part of any large-scale programme of Black political and economic advancement (Asante, 1992; Boateng, 1997). The current system of schooling and education has to be radically transformed in order to reverse the inferiorisation of Black youths by the historically Euro-centred school system. It is encouraging to note that several attempts are currently under way to develop programmes emphasising Black history and culture (D'Oyley, 1994; Brathwaite & James, 1996). Particularly instructive here is the focus on an anti-racist education within a multicultural education framework. This helps us to understand 'the processes of public schooling [and] acknowledge[s] the role the educational system [plays] in producing and reproducing racial, gender, and class-based inequalities in society'. The anti-racist framework 'also acknowledges the pedagogic need to confront the challenge of diversity and difference in Canadian society and the urgency for an educational system that is more inclusive and is capable of responding to minority concerns about public schooling' (Dei, 1993, p. 49; Dei, 1996c). Anti-racism, then, acknowledges the reality of Canadian racism and other forms of social oppression (e.g., class, gender, sexual orientation) in the organisational life of the school and the potential for change (Thornhill, 1984; Dei, 1995a; Dei, 1995b).

Talking about change, it is also quite clear from our discussion that many Canadian teachers lack relevant training in Black history, race relations and cross-cultural understanding and have little appreciation of the enormous challenges and difficulties Black students face on a daily basis. They make things worse by the tendency to view and treat all students the *same*. But same does not mean fair and very often this 'colour-blind' approach serves only to deny Black students their rights

to define who they are and the experiences that they bring to school. To educate Black learners successfully, teachers need to be trained to successfully teach a multicultural and anti-racist curriculum. This includes developing 'a sense of responsibility to becoming sensitive to their students' emotional, psychological, and physical needs. In addition, teachers must hold similar expectations for all their students and provide Black students and their parents with positive feedback and reinforcement' (BLAC Report on Education, 1994, p. 23). To enhance the academic performance of Black and other minority students, they must also 'provide each learner with academically rich and challenging material and opportunities for growth and learning commensurate with his or her potential' (Garcia *et al.*, 1995, p. 446). Particularly, teachers must have positive attitudes toward racially visible students and have high expectations of African-Canadian youth. Furthermore, teacher education institutions have to tackle fundamental issues of inequity. I believe that student teachers' attitudes, understanding and knowledge are not sufficiently coherent or informed to tackle racial and gender inequalities within schools and classrooms. One way to alleviate this is to ensure that teachers can transmit a sense of tolerance to their class by recognising their own biases. Also, hiring and promotional practices of school boards should give more consideration to visible minorities. It is important that schools reflect the community's composition, as well as provide positive role models for all students. Black teachers are important for they contribute much to society and all areas of education and serve as role models for all children and youth (King, 1993; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Lyons & Farrell, 1994). Finally, teachers' expectations of poor academic work from Black students stem from how these teachers view their relationships with Black parents. It is reasonable to conclude that if so many teachers are inadequately prepared to interact with a culturally diverse student body, they would be less prepared to negotiate with students' parents. Indeed, as Boateng (n.d.) points out:

there are many teachers who are hesitant about communicating students' progress to parents for fear that parents would turn a deaf ear to the reports. This expectation is contrary to all reports which suggest that the Black family is the motivating force that inspires children to value education, even in the face of all the negative stereotypes perpetuated by White teachers. It is critical that teachers understand and capitalize on the significance of the Black family and eliminate the myth that this powerful unit is capable only of transmitting a 'culture of poverty'. It is the Black parent who helps the child to understand that excellence in education is the foundation for success in society. (p. 6; see also O'Malley, 1992; Perry, 1993)

In this respect, my study was a departure from many others, because while addressing racialised barriers in the education of Black students, it also provided personal insights to help us gain an understanding of how some Black students have succeeded in school in spite of the odds against them. It was a departure from previous research which has almost always focused on describing and explaining the low academic achievement of Black students. Rarely do these studies identify Black

students who are academically successful in school and determine what factors are associated with their success. Yes, Black students face and must contend with racism, but contrary to popular opinion and research, not all of them make poor choices about education. In spite of the racism, Black students also can develop successful academic skills (Slaughter & Epps, 1987; Pollard, 1989). A positive Black racial identity, enhanced with an awareness, pride and knowledge of Black and African affairs, is crucial to school success. In fact, it is the antidote to and the coping mechanism for the daily doses of racial hostility and humiliation. The implication—and an important one—is that minority status and identity do not and should not always lead to negative educational outcomes. Indeed, the students in my study represent what Mehan (1996) calls ‘the current generation of minorities [who] reflects a faith in the potential of schooling to solve or at least deal with social problems’. He adds that ‘although they feel victimized by systematic discrimination, they do not dismiss schools. Indeed, they express confidence that schools are or can be sites that foster the opportunity for children to succeed’ (p. 276). In all of this, we can benefit and learn from the spirit of striving and the determination to succeed which characterises so much of the Black experience in North America (Small, 1994). Certainly, my study contributes to this undertaking; but more research is needed. The students in my study make up part of the Canadian Black population that will not be considered *indigenous*; i.e. those who have lived in North America for many generations like the African-Canadian population in Nova Scotia, or African-Americans in the USA. They are primarily children of Caribbean and African immigrants who immigrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. This begs for some questions for future research. For example, did the backgrounds of these students as Canadian ‘voluntary immigrant minorities’ play a part in their academic success? Would they have succeeded if some of them came to Canada as refugees, like the Ethiopians and Somalis? Would that have made any difference? Or, would they have achieved the same success if they lived in the USA, or in Ontario, where there is a large Black immigrant population? Would the same results be achieved if a second or later generations of these students’ families and school experiences were studied across time? And would cultural differences diminish as these Black students move from being first or second to third and fourth generation individuals? These are important new questions that need to be further explored for a fuller understanding of the Black educational experience in Canada.

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