
RACIAL INEQUITY, COVID-19 AND THE EDUCATION OF BLACK AND OTHER MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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Abstract

COVID-19 is functioning to exacerbate inequities not only on the health (especially mental health) of racialized students but also on their educational, social, and recreational lives. I argue that it is important to give attention to how the coronavirus and racism align in order to address the disparities in schooling and education for these students – noting their access to food, academic supports, physical contact with educators, and computers, online and reliable internet. I conclude by suggesting that the current context presents an opportunity to reimagine schooling and education that is accessible and responsive to all students and parents especially those for whom existing policies, programs, curricula and practices have silenced their voices, stifled their potential, and limited their successes.

Black community members, parents and students have long protested the inequities that have contributed to the social and educational conditions in which they find themselves. Today, the Novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, has added yet another layer of complexity to their problems in society. In fact, the pandemic has not only added to the social and educational inequities among young people, it has exacerbated the racial injustice with which racialized and Indigenous youth must contend. In a *Globe and Mail* article (September 6, 2020) on “How race, income and ‘opportunity hoarding’ will shape Canada’s back-to-school season,” education reporters Dakshana Bascaramurty and Caroline Alfonso write, “Before the pandemic forced a crisis in the education system, many school boards had committed to addressing systemic racism and inequity by re-evaluating programs, such as French immersion (which attracts a higher proportion of affluent, white students) and streaming (which routinely put Black children on a path to applied courses, which limit their options after graduation), that have disadvantaged students from low-income and racialized communities. Now with educators focused on the basics of opening schools, reimagining the system seems impractical, if not impossible.”

So, it is understandable that racialized parents would ask the question that was put to *Toronto Star* columnist Amira Elghawaby (September 8, 2020), “how do we best help our children, who are now going through two different types of stress and anxiety?”

Our concern here is with the sources of stress and anxiety of racialized students, which has exacerbated the institutional inequities they encounter as they journey through schooling at a time of crisis in health and well-being. In addressing this situation, we must scrutinize how institutional policies, programs and practices serve to sustain the educational, health and social systems of Black, Indigenous and other racialized youth.

Setting the Context: The lives of Black and other racialized youth in Canada

The 2016 census of Canada indicated that children under 15 years old represented 26.6 per cent of the Black population while only 16.9 per cent of the Canadian population were in that age group (Statistics Canada, February 2019; see also Houle, 2020). That slightly more than one-quarter of the Black population is being schooled at this time means that COVID-19 is not merely having a major long-term effect on the schooling and education of Black students, but also on the social, economic and political welfare of Black communities, and by extension, Canadian society as a whole (James, 2019/2020). The situation of Black students at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Canada's largest school board (and the only board that provides relevant data), serves as a useful reference. According to that board's data, Black students make up about 12 per cent of high school students; however, they were more likely to be overrepresented in the lowest level of educational programs (including special education) and less likely to pursue postsecondary studies. Those who did, more often chose to attend college. Much of this has to do with teachers' low expectations, the streaming of students into non-academic programs, more punitive disciplinary practices toward Black students, and the absence of Black, Indigenous and other racialized people in class materials and curriculum. Black students were also suspended and expelled from school, and dropped out at higher rates than other students (James & Turner 2017; Szekely & Pessian, 2015).

A recent investigation of the situation of Black students in the Peel District School Board (PDSB), Canada's second largest school board, produced similar findings. In their report "Final Report: Review of the Peel District School Board", the Ontario government commissioners expressed what they considered to be a "consistent failure" of the school board to address "the poor outcomes of too many of our Black children" (Chadha, Herbert, & Richard, 2020, p. 7). In Nova Scotia, home to most of the oldest Black communities in Canada, studies have reported on the long years of students grappling with the "adversity of racism" (Mackey, 2018). In speaking to the detrimental impact of racism on Black students' learning and their overall life trajectories in Edmonton, Alberta, Henry Codjoe (2001) surmised that race is not merely a contributor, but in many cases, a major, if not sole, determinant of their inadequate educational outcomes as well as their emotional well-being and mental health (see also Patel 2015).

How COVID-19 exacerbates educational inequities among racialized students

Added to the educational issues with which Black youth have to contend, is the impact of COVID-19 on their health, social and educational lives. Reporting on the how the disease disproportionately affects marginalized communities, reporters Bascaramurty and Alfonso (2020) referenced one located northwest of downtown Toronto "which has become the epicentre for COVID-19 infections." They report that it is a community where "many students live in cramped housing, have parents who are essential workers and rely on public transit to get around, all things that contribute to the high infection rate – which is 10 times that of the least-infected parts of the city. The average annual income for residents in the area is \$27,984 – half of what it is for Toronto as a whole." The high school in this community is said to have "the largest Black student population in the country."

In Toronto, Public Health data shows that while Black people make up 9 per cent of the population, they account for 21 per cent of COVID-19 cases (FR24News, July 31, 2020; also see the essays by Allen; Henry; and McKenzie in this volume) . Contributing to the high incidence of the disease are inequities related to, among other factors, socioeconomic status and place of residence. Relatedly, the risk of virus transmission has to do with individuals’ living situation (apartment housing, residing with elderly relatives), type of employment (of parents and youth if working), the schooling context (number of students in classes), state of health (pre-existing illness, e.g., asthma), and education delivery method (in person or online) — all of which have implications for the students’ education (see Khunti, Singh, Pareek, & Hanif, 2020; Egede & Walker, 2020). The point is, COVID-19 serves to exacerbate the inseparable systems of embedded inequities — of which education is a major foundational pillar — thereby adding to the problems of those most vulnerable to its effects in educational, social, economic and other areas. In any event, ignoring racial inequities and not attending to how the coronavirus and racism align, noting their specific effects on particular racial groups, will not produce the outcomes needed. As Gaynor and Wilson (2020) proffer, racism is itself a rampant epidemic which restricts individuals’ airflow, stifles their ability to breathe and move freely, and constricts their health and productive life.

Issues of inequity: Nutrition, academic supports, mental health, and online learning

It is understandable that school closures have the greatest impact on students living in poverty, particularly in terms of access to food, academic supports, mental health and schooling arrangements..

Access to nutrition: For some students, attending school means not only engaging in learning, but getting at least one meal. Hence, school closures for these students contribute to lack of access to nutritious meals and hunger (Miller, 2020). The absence of meal programs on which some low-income students depend will contribute to their lowered attention to and motivation for learning or a lowered capacity to engage in a productive education process (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). Indeed, a nutritious diet is integral to one’s ability to learn, therefore a lack of much-needed nutrients will likely further disadvantage poor racialized students, who are already academically behind their peers. Bascaramurty and Alfonso (2020) reference a Toronto educational advocate in the Latinx community saying “she worries about the way children from low-income neighbourhoods will fall behind this year if they are educated at home: They’ll be less engaged, it will be more difficult for them to finish their homework and, crucially, many will miss out on all the non-academic parts of school that keep low-income communities afloat, such as breakfast and lunch programs.”

Inadequate academic support: Studies have long shown that breaks from school are notorious for widening achievement gaps. For instance, gaps in mathematical and literacy skills between children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds often widens during vacation periods from school (Parolin and Lancker, 2020). These gaps tend to be a result of low-income families inability to afford supplementary academic or extracurricular programs that could contribute to their children’s intellectual development while away from school. So being out of school and accessing fewer hours of learning, and/or engaging in learning through a methodology, curriculum and pedagogy (online and/or in person) that disaffirms their needs, interests and ambitions could further these students’ lowered school participation, academic performance and educational outcome.

The fact that a significant proportion of Black and other racialized people tend to be precariously employed as essential and frontline workers means that having to work is a must, for otherwise they would have no income (Gaynor, & Wilson, 2020). Some Toronto low-income parents see this situation as forcing them “to choose between their health and their kid’s education” (Yang & Kennedy, 2020). For some parents, such choice “comes at a steep price” since to properly support their children’s learning at home means being able to help with curricula materials as well as the needed equipment for remote learning — something that “working from home” and/or affluent parents are able to do in addition to providing their children with “learning pods” (see Bascaramurty & Alfonso, 2020). The fact is, accessibility to extra academic and extracurricular support (especially for grade nine students who were transferred, and not promoted, into high school) is important to helping students continue with or maintain their learning so they meet the expected educational level; and in doing so, realize good mental health and emotional well-being.

Mental health and social distancing: Further to the point of mental health concerns of students, is the awareness that being out of school and isolated from friends have heightened the deleterious effects of COVID-19 and coping efforts (Parolin & Lancker, 2020). In a national survey of “what Canadians are reporting about their mental health and substance use during the pandemic,” the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that from May to July 2020, about one-quarter of people between 18 and 39, reported experiencing anxiety, and feeling lonely and depressed during that period; and about 30 to 32 per cent were engaging in binge drinking, a practice that went down 5 per cent in June. And adults with children in the home, tended to have higher levels of anxiety and depression, typically in the range of 25 to 30 per cent which lessened in June and increased in July. Adults without children in the home had lower levels of anxiety and depression. While the data does not show racial differences, we can surmise that given systemic inequity, Black Canadians, for example, likely experience higher levels of anxiety and depression insofar as they have to cope with anti-Black racism as an additional mental health stressor.

After months of physical distancing, social separating, and in some cases, self-isolation, many parents (like their children) are becoming increasingly concerned with their children’s education and mental health. In their article about the experiences of low-income parents who reside in an area of Toronto that is “hardest hit” by COVID-19, Yang and Kennedy (September 12, 2020) write that for one Black single mother of two children, “remote learning in the spring was manageable for her 17-year old son, but a nightmare . . . for her eight-year old daughter who she tried to keep on track while also working.” The reporters indicated that poor internet connections and “late nights prepping for next day lesson plans” caused this parent to discontinue her daughter’s schooling saying, “it was causing high amounts of stress in the household.” Concerned that her children might academically and socially fall behind their peers, she added: “I am worried for my mental health (and) my kids’ mental health” (p. A20). The reality is that a student’s psychological condition plays an incalculable role in their learning process and has long-lasting effects on their social well-being, particularly for those more vulnerable. Moreover, in the absence of the socialization and sensory feature of in-person schooling, students are likely to experience critical loss in peer-to-peer learning opportunities, teacher to student instructions, having little to no physical activities, and not being able to socialize with friends at lunch and/or on sport teams — all of which are important to their emotional and social development (Bhamani, Makhdoom, Bharuchi, Ali, Kaleem, & Ahmed, 2020).

Remote learning, online schooling, and in-person teaching: As September 2020 approached for students to return to school, parents and their children had to decide between online and in-class teaching-learning arrangements --t formats was vastly different from what teachers were used to, hence especially problematic since teachers were never prepared to teach as required in today's schooling context (Bhamani, Makhdoom, Bharuchi, Ali, Kaleem & Ahmed, 2020). American studies have shown that teachers consistently reported that they were unprepared to teach online; were working less hours (7 versus 9) per day; and taught less new "standard-aligned material" to their students; and students were increasingly disengaged from learning (a significant percentage of them did not even log in, or make contact with the teacher). These issues were especially evident in high-poverty, urban schools (Herold & Yettick, 2020). According to Middleton (2020):

Classroom assessment, teaching and learning, and measurement and interpretation of student growth are among the numerous areas that have been affected by the sudden switch of schools to online instruction that will require much thought in order to examine the impact of the significant deviation from the classroom norms There are many unknowns that remain as schools plan to move forward with instruction (p. 41).

He also makes the point that deviation from usual classroom instruction practices have created "additional variance in test scores so the ability to compare the same student's test performance relative to others across last year and this year will be problematic" (Middleton, 2020, p. 42).

Explaining the cost, such as tiredness, anxiety or worry, resulting from communicating or learning through Zoom, Brenda Wiederhold (2020) writes that technology is disrupting "our normal intricate human communication methods that have been finely tuned over centuries to help humans survive." And having relied on "vocalizations, gestures, and movements" (and not just a person's face as on zoom) to communicate means that individuals are now lacking access to many of the nonverbal cues of the whole body, hence they have to work harder to try and overcome whatever differences exist between themselves and the communicator, and in doing so, understand what is being communicated in their interactions. "So, there is an element of mental exertion and performance involved with online communication that can be taxing." Wiederhold refers to this as "zoom fatigue" (p. 437; see also Noonoo, 2020).

Clearly, students without the language, and the social and cultural capital of the school (as represented through the teacher) -- for instance, lower income and racialized students (and those with disabilities like autism) — will have to work harder to pick up on the subtitles, nuances and slight delays (or nonsynchronous) expressions of teachers (and their peers if they show their faces on screen). It is understandable why such students would be less engaged and counted among those most likely to be truant. Yang and Kennedy (2020) mention that some of the Toronto teachers they interviewed for their newspaper article "watched helplessly as certain students simply disappeared" and in the case of one elementary teacher, "she lost touch with nearly half of her students." One high school teacher is quoted as saying, "there were some students, no matter how hard we tried, we were unable to reach them." A grade three teacher who "lost touch" with one of her students emailed the parent, stating: "All I knew is the last email I sent was to let them know I was thinking about their child, and I wish them well" (p. A20). Therefore, in the current context with lack of access to learning materials, quiet spaces, computers or tablets, and reliable internet, students in low-income families, particularly Black and other racialized students, will struggle to keep up with their learning.

Many might think that online learning allows for equal opportunities and reduces inequities; but it is not the case. Rather, it operates as an extension of an inherently disadvantageous system that further exacerbates the conditions in which social and cultural hierarchies are entrenched, and racial diversity as a value obfuscated or minimized. Based on her research on the “promise of e-learning in the Toronto District School Board,” Farhadi concludes that the approach to e-learning is premised on a “meritocratic political philosophy” in which students’ differences are obviated; course content is delivered “as one-size-fits-all across a diverse range of learners;” and contradictory assessment practices conflate “mastery and feedback with quantifiable outcomes—or grades” (p. 187). Whereas before COVID-19, teachers might have accessed students’ Ontario Student Record (OSR) and/or their Individual Education Plan (IEP) to familiarize themselves with the students’ needs, concerns, interests and expectations, the onset of remote and online learning makes that no longer possible. And rightly so since in this new schooling context, new protocols to protect the privacy and security of students must be developed.

Where do we go from here? An opportunity to imagine education differently

Given the schooling and education issues we are forced to confront today, we should concede that while schooling might have worked for some, for others—particularly Black, Indigenous and other racialized students and parents—schooling has not been working. As such, the current context presents an opportunity to reimagine schooling and education that is accessible and responsive to all students and parents especially those for whom existing policies, programs, curricula and practices have silenced their voices, stifled their potential, and limited their successes. It is imperative that, as we contemplate a program of education that will best serve the needs and interests of all students and parents, it is important to give special attention to racialized low-income people whom the systems of education have consistently failed (Cote-Meek, 2014; Farhadi, 2019; James & Turner, 2017, Shah & Shaker, 2020).

Whatever happens to racialized students is never solely of their own or their parents’ making, but involves individuals charged with providing an education that will make them productive citizens of the society as well as institutions (political, economic, social, cultural, media, child welfare, judicial) that wittingly and/or unwittingly, sustain a system that pathologizes, instead of better preparing them for productive lives as adults. We must build a schooling and education system that values, and hence serves, Black, Indigenous, other racialized and low-income students and families on the basis of their lived experiences, just as it does for white and affluent students. Doing so will benefit all of society since we will not see such failed citizens in remedial classes, employment insurance offices, hospital emergencies, healthcare facilities, police cruisers, courts of justice, and correctional institutions.

Recommendations:

- Education policies, programs and practices, at school, board and provincial levels, must be assessed to ascertain the ways in which they help to maintain schooling structures that keep racism in place and operate as barriers, such as streaming, transfer instead of student promotion, disciplinary protocols suspensions and expulsion, to the educational participation, performance and outcomes of racialized students.
- Schools should create accessible partnership programs with universities, community and other neighbourhood agencies. These wrap-around programs should be stable and supportive as well as culturally relevant and responsive to students’ needs and interests, especially those of racialized students.

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- In the period of COVID-19, provide information to students and their families in order to enable easy access to health-care services. Rather than merely mitigating social risk, special accessible social and recreational programs should be established to support structural interventions that will help students and families cope with the current uncertainty in education.
 - School curricula should incorporate relevant curated online courses in which the academic goals also take into account the psychosocial aspects of students' lives.
 - Parents must be seen as partners in the educational process of students and should be informed of their children's educational programs, and how they might support their children not expecting them to be their children's teachers. Further, during the time of COVID-19, educators must ensure that parents are fully informed about the best schooling program for their children (online or in-school) so they are able to make informed choices and decisions to maximize their children's learning.
 - Teachers must be more invested in making their lessons, in terms of curricula content and pedagogy, accessible to all of their students especially those whom have been identified as in greatest need of social and educational supports.
 - School boards should periodically collect data pertaining to the online attendance, educational participation, academic performance, and learning assessments of students. Working with, and interpretation of, such data should include researchers with relevant lived experiences.
 - Teachers must be provided with the appropriate education, training and support on various online software equipment, programs, and resources; and they must ensure that the online platforms which they use are both materially and academically accessible and available to all learners.
 - Education workers teachers, principals, teaching assistants, support workers, and guidance counsellors with the support of social workers — must become informed about the specificity of the mental health and social well-being concerns of racialized students, and be able to help address students' questions, worries, and anxieties.

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