Race Ethnicity and Education

Taking the bull by the horns: the critical perspectives and pedagogy of two Black teachers in Anglophone Montreal schools

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Taking the bull by the horns: the critical perspectives and pedagogy of two Black teachers in Anglophone Montreal schools

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In the midst of the complicated racial-linguistic landscape that is Montreal, Quebec, the educational experiences of the relatively small population of Anglophone Blacks are often invisibilized within the education literature, and relatively little attention is paid to the nature of Black students' and educators' struggles with racism and Eurocentricity within Anglophone schools in Montreal. This article makes a contribution to the empirical literature concerning these groups. It shares the experiences of, and racism witnessed by, two Black teachers in Montreal. Their narratives paint a compelling picture of the consequences and effects of educating Black students within a colour-blind context in Montreal schools, as well as the pedagogies and personal philosophies they work through to resist and challenge the context of denial within Canadian education. The article ends with a discussion of the ways in which the teachers' pedagogies align with critical anti-racist praxis, and nascent forms of African-centred pedagogy.

Keywords: Black teachers; Montreal; Anglophone; denial; politically relevant pedagogy; Black students; African-centered schools

Introduction

The racial landscape in Montreal, Quebec is a complex one. The lives and educational experiences of the multiracial, multicultural populace, and the relationships between students and the state, are organized by debates around Quebec nationalism or distinct society status, which privilege (at least within Quebec) the white Francophone settler population (*Quebecois de souche*), and by linguistic divisions between the Francophone majority and Anglophone minority.[1] Further defining school experience are the ideologically significant, if not otherwise substantive (Taylor 2012), distinctions between, on the one hand, Canada's multiculturalism policy with its superficial attention to racial and cultural difference amid a tendency to erase histories of inequality and exclusion, and, on the other hand,

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Quebec's interculturalism policy popularly understood to be more assimilationist – particularly in the wake of the reasonable accommodations debates in Quebec. Finally, student experiences are shaped by access to education as prescribed through Bill 101, which draws on matters of mother tongue, immigration status, parental education, when Canadian citizenship was first acquired in a family (pre- or post-1977), and in some cases, special education status. In the midst of this milieu, the experiences of the relatively small population of Anglophone Blacks are often invisibilized within the education literature, and relatively little attention is paid to the nature of Black students' and educators' struggles with racism and Eurocentricity within Anglophone schools in Montreal. This article makes a contribution to the empirical literature concerning these groups. It shares the experiences of, and racism witnessed by, two Black teachers in Montreal, along with the strategies that they use and propose to undertake politicized pedagogy that will mitigate the effects of racism upon Black students.

The state of the education of Blacks in Canada: the context of denial

Canadian history is replete with racism against non-white groups. Indeed, racism represents one of the key foundations upon which the Canadian nation-state has been built (see for example, Henry and Tator 1994; Razack 2002). Further, Canadian racism is certainly not just a thing of the past, but the racist structure of Canadian society is still in evidence today. With respect to people of African ancestry in Canada, one need only consider, among other things, the ongoing racial profiling of Black men (Chung 2010; Rankin et al. 2002; Tanovich 2006), and the evidence that the unemployment rate for Black university graduates is equal to that of white Grade 10 dropouts in both Montreal and Toronto (Chung 2010; Solyom 2001; Torczyner 1997).

However, varying levels of institutional forgetting and denial, characterize the contemporary discourses around race and racism in Euro-North America. This reality is particularly significant in Canada where, in contrast to the United States, it is difficult to get the average person to admit that there is a problem of structural racism at all (Aylward 1999, 12, 14). Thus, despite the fact that racism is, and has always been, everyday business in Canada, Canadian national stories and mainstream common sense do not admit this (Razack 2002, 1–3), and indeed, create an illusion of a tolerant, multicultural society that operates equitably in the interest of all regardless of race. Consequently, there are serious strictures around whether, when, and under what circumstances the racist character of Canadian society can be addressed, much less confronted.

Education systems in Canada are certainly one area in which there is an unwritten prohibition on speaking about the racial reality of the Canadian state (see for example, Dei 2000, 26). Instead, through the general

exclusion, or at least devaluation, of all but European histories, and the predominantly Eurocentric character of formal and hidden curricula in schools, a sanitized, rose-coloured version of both Canada's history and its present reality is advanced. This has profound effects upon the nature of education in Canada.

Critical theories of education hold that effective education involves teaching students to read both the word and their worlds, that these literacies are interdependent, and that neither can be adequately accomplished in the absence of the other (see for example, Freire 1972; Freire and Macedo 1987). Further, the education of the racially minoritized ought to include a politicized education that helps students to understand their place in the world and to act against social injustice – both that which affects the students and that which affects others (see for example, Beauboeuf-Lafontant 1999; Ladson-Billings 1995). If these premises are accepted, the Canadian context of denial and forgetting is antithetical to the effective education of all students. Speaking of just this type of education (in the United States), Thompson posits that education in the context of the denial of racism:

> …is miseducative insofar as it ignores the social fact of racism in a society. In so doing, it teaches students not to think about race, promoting ignorance as if it were innocence. Indeed, it is not merely that such education prepares students to misunderstand the conditions of their society, but that [...] it does so in collusion with prevailing power relations, thereby reinforcing racist social structures. (1997, 15–16)

For Black students, the situation is worse to the extent that education systems *themselves* mistreat Black students, for while within these systems there is an unspoken insistence upon colour-blind discourse, racism is a very normal part of what happens in schools. In particular, the anti-Black racism in Canadian schools is evident in the mistreatment of Black students and their parents, the over-representation of Black students in lower streams and special needs programs (see for example, Cheng, Yau, and Ziegler 1993), astronomical push-out rates for Black students (see for example, Dei et al. 1997), the inequitable and discriminatory application of 'zero-tolerance' and other discipline policies to Black students (Falconer 2008; Ontario Human Rights Commission 2004), and the attendant criminalization of these students (Solomon and Palmer 2004). In their cases, then, Black students in Canada are not only miseducated with respect to reading the world outside the school, but since the school is part and parcel of that world, they are also ill-prepared with respect to understanding their own experiences within schools.

Black education in Montreal, Quebec: a literature review

The English-language academic literature on the education of Black students and the experiences of Black teachers in Quebec is extremely sparse, and is

even more so when the focus is narrowed to that of Anglophone schools in Montreal. Even within works taking on Black education in Canada, the attention paid to issues in Quebec is scant compared to that paid to Black education in Ontario and Nova Scotia (see for example, Dei et al. 1995; D'Oyley and James 1998). Nevertheless, what literature there is indicates that there are indeed issues of race and inequality within Anglophone education in Montreal. Caldas, Bernier, and Marceau (2009) point to a significant Black achievement gap. This study explains this achievement gap in terms of family income, family structure (i.e proportion of households headed by a single parent), and parental age, claiming that these factors rather than race, are responsible for the achievement gap. This is a reductive account using a typical strategy that conflates racial inequity with other demographic factors – most often socio-economic status (see Dei 1996, 260). Its attempts to dismiss race as a significant variable do not explore the reasons that Blackness might be correlated with poverty, nor the mediating factors that may cause school achievement to correlate with what ought to be irrelevant factors such as parental marital status. The argument is, therefore, circular and the relevance of racial inequity to Black education cannot be so easily dismissed.

In a study of Caribbean and Filipino youth in French and English high schools in Montreal, Rousseau et al. (2009) note that Caribbean youth are caught in a contradiction: they have high educational aspirations in order to meet the expectations of their parents and communities who bank on education as the route to their families' Canadian dreams, yet they also want to be realistic in the face of the disconnect for Blacks between educational achievement and commensurate employment (728; see also Chung 2010). Rousseau et al. (2009) focus on the reciprocal relationships between these realistic student attitudes and their family cohesion – the latter often protecting youth from the harshness of societal racism, and the former sometimes disrupting family cohesion. However, it is not difficult to imagine how these dynamics impact schooling and student achievement. Further, we might ask, 'what might protect students from racism within the school setting, and who might provide this protection?'

Knowles (1996, 2003) investigates the experiences of a Black teacher in the Francophone system in Montreal, pointing to the egregious racist treatment he suffered at the hands of students, and subsequently by his school administration and school board once he challenged this student behaviour as racist. Within the Canadian discourse of denial, racist student behaviour – ranging from their shouting 'Nigger crisis' at the teacher, to their kicking him or holding him down to wash his 'dirty' face – was reinterpreted and re/presented in terms of the teacher's supposed poor classroom management and therefore professional incompetence (Knowles 1996, 300). Notably, in this situation, another Black teacher at the school, likewise a Black man from Ghana, did not suffer similar treatment at the hands of the school

– apparently, Knowles concludes, because he chose not to overtly challenge the students' behaviour as racist (2003, 24). Given the severity and overt nature of the racism this teacher faced, Knowles's work appears to point to the risks that a Black teacher takes when s/he decides to challenge racism in Montreal schools, where few want to even acknowledge its existence.

Finally, Hampton (2010) highlights the work of the Steering Committee for an Afrocentric School in Montreal. This bid was ultimately rejected by the English Montreal School Board – ostensibly on the basis that there were not sufficient numbers of Blacks in its jurisdiction to warrant such a school (107). While the validity of such an objection is debatable, Hampton does indicate that the push for Africentric schooling in Montreal is complicated by linguistic differences and Quebec's language laws, and, unlike in Toronto and Halifax, received significant opposition from 'established' Black educators (107). In terms of the educational reality for Black students, Hampton indicates that close to 50% of Black students do not complete high school on time, and that this is an issue not only for recent immigrants, but for Black students whose families have been in Canada for many years (106). Particularly indicative of the context of the denial of racism in Canada and the Canadian tendency to displace racism to other places and times, critics of Africentric schooling in Montreal claimed that 'Québec's Black population was *different* from that of Toronto and the US, so that African Quebecers were not regarded as needing the kind of ethno-cultural initiatives that appealed to Blacks elsewhere' (Hampton 2010, 107).

The general silence or dismissal of the reality and effects of racism toward Black students and teachers in Montreal schools that is demonstrated (Caldas et. al. 2009) or critiqued (Hampton 2010; Knowles 1996, 2003; Rousseau et al. 2009) by these articles are partially what motivate this article. In what follows, I add to the empirical literature around the experiences of Blacks in Quebec education by presenting the stories of two Black educators concerning the racial inequity they have witnessed and experienced during their careers, as well as strategies they use and propose to resist this racism.

Methodology

In the Canadian context of institutional denial and forgetting of racism discussed above, we can expect to find both:

(a) hegemonic justifications of this inequity in order for it to continue to exist within the context of Canada's claim to democracy and egalitarianism (Henry and Tator 1994). One important site where these justifications will be sedimented is 'common sense' (Gramsci 1971; Hall 1981; Hall 1986 [1996]; Lawrence 1982);

(b) discourses of resistance (see Dei and Asgharzadeh 2001).The data presented in this article is drawn from a study the purpose of which was to:

    (a) document occurrences of racism that the educators had witnessed or experienced during their careers,
    (b) identify and explore hegemonic common-sense arguments and thinking espoused among these educators, and
    (c) identify and explore discourses and strategies of resistance employed among these educators (Howard 2002).

Since the study attempted to explore and understand the meanings that educators make of the racial status quo, then how participants speak about race and racism is extremely important. Vygotsky posits that 'every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness' (cited in Seidman 1991, 1). Further, Desimone (1993) suggests that '[h]ow people talk about race can be an indication of their attitudes, prejudices, and their socialization toward racial issues' (414). Data collection was therefore through in-depth interviews ranging from one to three hours in length. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes.

There were nine participants in the study – four Black, four white, and one Asian (by self-identification). There were five men and four women. A 'maximum variation sampling' method (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, 56–57) was used in order to build into the study a variety of relevant perspectives.

Data analysis turned up diverse discourses along a spectrum from hegemonic to resistance. The nature and meaning of these discourses is taken up in the report on the original study (Howard 2002). However, for the purposes of this article, two Black participants' narratives stood out in terms of their vivid description of the racial inequity they have witnessed within Montreal Anglophone schools, and in terms of the coherence of their critical analyses of these conditions. Their narratives paint a compelling picture of the consequences and effects of educating Black students within a colour-blind context, as well as the pedagogies and personal philosophies they work through to resist and challenge the context of denial within Canadian education. The following sections present these perspectives.

Bearing witness

There was no shortage of accounts about racism in Anglophone schools in Quebec among study participants. All the participants were able to name instances of racism that they had either witnessed or experienced. The stories of Mr Bernard[2] and Mrs Matthews, however, included nuanced understandings of racism that involved instances of both interpersonal bigotry and insti-

tutional/systemic forms of racial inequity. They speak of mistreatment of students, the under-valuation of students' academic ability, the effects of Euro-centric curricula, and teacher apathy toward Black students.

During his interview, Mr Bernard, a school principal and former teacher, speaks several times of the culture shock that children recently immigrating from the Caribbean would experience at school. He speaks of the callous treatment that he has seen these students receive:

> I remember an example of a child in some very low grade…in an elementary school. This child was in shock and was hiding beneath the desk. Now, this child needed reassurance and comfort, and support and this type of thing. Instead of this, the teacher saw this as disruption and reported it to the principal, and the principal's response was to call the mother of the child who was very pregnant at the time…and say, 'Look here, Ma'am, your child is disturbing the class. Come and get your child from the school.' And the poor mother, new to the country, not really knowing her rights and so on, rushed over to the school, got there just in time to see the caretaker pushing the child out the building.

This incident speaks not only of lack of sensitivity toward even very young students and the unique issues they might experience as a result of immigration, it also demonstrates lack of concern for the basic safety of the child. Another instance further demonstrates this lack of concern.

> There are so many instances of racism in the classroom, in the school, in what goes on in the schools. I can think of an instance – this is just one example. A friend of mine…had to intervene very actively just recently. A little incident in school, something with equipment, not having equipment, or some little thing like that. The teacher's reaction was to detain that child, have that child miss the school bus on a cold day, and then *didn't give a damn* how that child got home…deliberately made that child miss that bus, and then just ignored the child from there on in. The child had to walk home on a very cold day. Fortunately the child was old enough to find his way home, but here you have an instance where a teacher shows such callous disregard for the well-being of the child, and when we see these instances, we've got to recognize them as the iceberg where, you know, only a small part of it is above the water.

It must be remembered that Montreal school boundaries are very flexible, and a student does not necessarily attend her/his neighbourhood school. Thus, a teacher's disregard for a student's transportation arrangements is grave.

In identifying racial inequality in the school system, Mr Bernard also points to the under-representation of Blacks on school and school board staffs:

> Blacks do not see themselves represented in the school system. There is some effort on the part of some school boards to get some Black faces there, but they have not really worked on this as aggressively as they should. Until the school system gets around to having their staff represent the face of the population,

having roughly the same ethnic breakdown on the staff as there is in the population at large, we are going to continue to have these kinds of problems. Now am I saying only Blacks can teach Blacks? No! What I'm saying is that it's very important to have Black faces represented there, and to have Black input into decisions that are made at the level of the school. It's very important. And I don't think, by and large, that this is happening. There was some movement toward this maybe ten, fifteen years ago. I don't know if it still exists. But, when Blacks look around in the school system, they do not see themselves represented and a lot of everyday decisions which are made in school may be made differently if Blacks are part of the decision making process.

Mr Bernard points toward the way that hiring practices that are not sufficiently progressive contribute to climates that are not sufficiently inclusive. Further, he points out that there has been a decline in the attention paid to school board equity initiatives – in this excerpt, in relation to employment equity, and in other places in his interview in relation to eradicating central roles charged with the oversight of equity affairs throughout the board.

In addition to lack of representation on among teachers, both participants also recognize that Blacks are not represented in school curricula, and they indict the entrenched Eurocentricity of the curriculum. However, what strikes them as racist is the apathy they witness in other teachers who ought to know better, but do not attempt to make the curriculum relevant to students. Mrs Matthews, a teacher who has taught in both secondary and elementary schools, says:

Take for example, right now, Black History Month. How many teachers deigned to do one thing for Black History Month? So, what you are doing with this type of attitude is you're downplaying the history of others; you are, at the same time, promoting your history. So if you are downplaying other histories and promoting yours, which one do [students] attach importance to? The one that you are constantly being taught! I mean, even though February is designated as being Black History Month, the teachers give that no validity, no recognition. The onus always falls on Black teachers to be doing Black History Month because, of course, 'it concerns you because you're Black!' Any history of any group should concern every other group…. That is racist. That is a racist, because, knowing that the curriculum is racist, you are so willing to reinforce that…you are so gung ho on enforcing it because you think it's the best way to do things, so therefore your understanding of societal change is not there. You have not caught up with the ever-changing society. You are still willing to follow this racist curriculum and give everybody the same thing no matter where they come from. And you are shortchanging a group of kids who will end up failing – who end up failing because they did not have the same background as Joe on Shakespeare. I'm not saying we shouldn't learn about Shakespeare, but I'm saying, to bank a kid's entire English mark on their lack of understanding of Shakespeare is terribly, *terribly*, racist.

And teacher apathy does not seem to only be related to the teaching of culturally relevant or critical curriculum. Mr Bernard relates:

There's a Black elementary school right now…where when the children move on to high school, children of average and above average intelligence, every single one is failing French. And at that school, it's a predominantly Black school, teachers simply do not teach, and the children are doing very poorly in French. And you know what that means…if you don't pass French you don't graduate[3]. Ahm, and these are the kinds of built in things that are there which prevent Black children from achieving. And they are there!

Likewise, Mrs Mathews opines about teachers who are unwilling to do the work of modifying their teaching plans to challenge and meet the needs of the particular students they have in front of them:

…the teacher said, her argument was, 'Well, you can't teach that book because, in case we go to another school, then that curriculum is set up, that can only be taught in grade ten.' So I said, 'It can only be taught in grade ten,' I said, 'but supposing I have a group of grade nines who are really able to absorb this information, why can't it be taught in grade nine?' 'Well, you mess up the whole plan. You mess up the whole literature plan.' So I said, 'Well, couldn't the teacher just take another book?' 'Oh, but you mess up the whole literature course.' … So it's this, 'We teach this way and we'll teach this, and for God's sake don't upset anything!' Really! I feel that you've been teaching too long if that's your standard of teaching literature or anything – that we cannot mess up the sequence. 'Don't give it to 'em in grade nine. They take that book in grade ten.' Well let's advance them a bit and try them in grade nine with this. Let's advance them!

The participants also speak of students who are placed into academic streams and schools that do not match their academic capability and potential. In separate interviews, they relate:

Mr Bernard: Blacks are over represented in the lower streams for the same reasons, a lot of the things that we discussed earlier on.

Mrs Matthews: When you look at high school I cringe because a lot of what you're gearing the Black kids, and preparing them for is not college and university. You're saying, 'Well you know, we have a good vocational program over here, and you know, if you get to grade ten in your academics we can put you over here, and maybe this will be interesting to you, and maybe this will be better for you, and maybe vocational is the way to go.' So I find that they're still channeling young people in high school into vocational education. They are miscoding, still miscoding, and putting kids in classes that say they're slower than everyone else. So, once they're placed in the classes that say they're slow, their chances of college and university go down. If you put them in vocational education and they get trades, a lot of them are not going to be worried about or interested in going to college and university because they can make a decent living as a mechanic, a cabinet maker, whatever. You won't feel cheated because you come out with skills and abilities that you can make a living. So, I still think that the system is set up that although they're saying the access for minority group members is greater, I don't know if that's

quite true…because if you're channeling them into special groups, or you're putting them into vocational, you are taking away their chance to have access. You really reduce the number of kids, Black kids, who will follow those paths.… It's amazing to me that you need grade ten academics to go to vocational and you're one year shy of your graduation.[4] One shy! So, if you need grade ten to go to vocational, why can't you get grade eleven and try college? Why can't you just get them through grade eleven. Offer whatever resources they need. If they get to grade ten, pull out the resources, get them to grade eleven and give them the chance to go to college and university.

It is not that Mrs Matthews feels that all students must go to college or university, or that there are no Black students with special needs. However, both participants see a disproportionate number of Black students steered away from college and university. Mr Bernard relates a specific instance:

> I remember best when I was teaching at either Manor Place or Central High. The Black Liaison Officer was Jerry Mohais in those days. He got in touch with me and said, 'Look, there's a student from Trinidad who is living over on Hyman Drive and he's having some problems at the school up there. This is a fairly capable young man who came from Trinidad, but he is put in a class for retarded [*sic*] students. He's put in the very slow stream and doesn't know what to do. His mother has approached the school about it and that type of thing.' Well we eventually got him into the regular stream. Then in grade eleven, he was placed in the slow math stream, and we made representation to the school and said, 'Look, this guy should be in Functions.' And they refused; so again we made representation and said, 'Look, I will personally take responsibility for this young man, and I will work with him.' Well, I had to write a letter to Jackson High School saying that I was the department head of mathematics at Central High, and I would be responsible for working with this young man and seeing that he keeps up with the rest of the class if he's put into functions. And they accepted that. Well this young man eventually scored in the mid nineties in math, and not only that, he went on to university and majored in mathematics, and the last I heard, he is an actuary in Toronto.

These are some of the ways that the participants see racism in education in Montreal. The next section deals with how the participants see this racism as affecting Black students.

Death at school

The consequences of educating Black students within a colour-blind context that is simultaneously so deeply shot through with racial inequality are devastating and far-reaching. This section paints a picture of the participants' impressions of these effects.

After relating the incident of the student who was channelled into a lower stream, Mr Bernard uses intensely descriptive language to communicate what he feels is the attitude of Montreal educators toward Black youth:

> **Mr Bernard**: The genius of the child is being denied at a very early level. If that child found himself without strong home support, very strong home support, very *determined* home support, that refused to accept what they were saying out there about this young man. Here is this child being brutalized, really, at a very early age. This child is being turned and channeled in a very negative direction. This child is being denied his native abilities. 'You are not what you think you are; you are not what your parents claim you are; you are what we say you are. Go out and sell dope, we'll feel much better about that, or, ah, they'll just have to bail you out of jail or…' or some such thing. You are not allowed to become what you can!

Here, as elsewhere, Mr Bernard points out that the 'brutalization' of Black students by a racist education system begins when students are very young. In another excerpt, he points to the effects of this early exposure to racism:

> And what's unfortunate about this is this: that because we are dealing with children, they do not really differentiate and recognize the nuances of what's going on in this society. 'Teacher A doesn't like me in grade one so I begin to unload and discard. School is an environment that's hostile, and I'll react in this kind of way. I'll protect myself.' And this child gets to grade three and may have a very conscientious and caring teacher but the damage has been done.… After you do that damage in grade one, or grade two, or grade three, that child is dead. That child is dead, that child is hostile, that child cannot really achieve in school.

So according to Mr Bernard, while children are quite aware of the inequitable and racist treatment they receive, their young minds often do not have a framework for naming and analyzing what is happening to them, and therefore do not have the tools to resist and respond in productive ways that do not sabotage their school achievement. Mr Bernard points out that while the students may not understand why they are being marginalized and mistreated, what they do know is that school is not a friendly place, and they express their resistance to this in various ways. He suggests, then, that the hostile environment of the school often produces hostile reactions from the student. Mr Bernard is referring, of course, to the defiant demeanour that, understandably, many Black students develop and enact toward school systems and school personnel. He notes that this becomes more pronounced as they advance through the system. The students reject the constant negativity that the school system seems to be offering them, and this is one way that they may use to cope.

  While many Black youth find appropriate venues to express their resistance, many others do not manage or channel their resistance in the wisest ways. Mrs Matthews details how this works against them:

> …the Black kids 'go off' and they confront the teachers, the principal, they confront anybody. And what they're doing is reinforcing a teacher's dislike of them. Then the teacher has you already marked. Because you swore at her or

something, she will not tolerate – . 'I don't tolerate that child in my class. I want that child out of my class!' So, you, you've killed yourself.

It is to be expected that any form of Black resistance to racism in an education system that denies it is unlikely to be looked upon positively by that system. However, Mrs Matthews tells us that by responding in hostile ways, Black students often enter a cycle of action and reaction that school personnel then use to justify their own discriminatory behaviour that initiated the cycle in the first place.

The result of this dynamic in schools is that in the process of developing strategies to insulate themselves, students like these are primed to under-achieve. They may become antagonistic and unreceptive or they may mentally withdraw and detach themselves, not applying themselves to school-related tasks. For some, this culminates in full withdrawal, physical and otherwise, from schooling. As Dei et al. (1997) note, and quite contrary to the oft-heard notion that these students underachieve and 'drop out' because of low ability or low self-esteem, many Black students who choose to leave school do so in order to *preserve* a sense of self-esteem (162–63). They realize that their identities and humanity are violated in the school context and feel they have no choice but to leave if they are to avoid this constant negation. In essence, they have been 'pushed out' (Dei et al. 1995)!

It is significant that Mr Bernard and Mrs Matthews, in separate and independent interviews, both use a powerful metaphor of death to refer to the effects of an education system that treats children in this manner – particularly one in a state of denial and offering no critical analytical framework for students to understand their experiences. The result is 'death' to the child's opportunity to realize her/his academic potential, and presumably also refers to the inevitable 'spirit injury' that students suffer.

Providing a critical framework for Black students

Is there any way that this academic 'death' of Black students who have been victimized by racism in school can be forestalled? Mrs Matthews asserts that an indispensable part of doing this is to provide children with a framework to understand their experiences and strategies to navigate their schooling:

> So, these are the things that have to be done for kids. It's difficult to be Black in these schools, but it can be a little bit easier…to get a child – , throw a child in there totally defenceless is cruel. Awh! Elementary! I taught pre-K, for God's sake! I taught pre-K and school can be so horrific! And to expose kids to that without preparing them is cruel. Yeah, it is! … What you need to teach your child is how to negotiate a racist system!

What Mrs Matthews seems to be suggesting is that children should be equipped early, in age-appropriate ways, with an analytical framework for

understanding their experiences of racism. To discuss these matters with children is to implant in them a political awareness and preparedness that will serve to guide their understanding of and responses to a racist society. It is a survival strategy to which the alternative, from Mr Bernard's and Mrs Matthews' perspectives, is a form of death.

What are the implications for intervention?: parents' roles

From Mrs Matthews' perspective, the equipping of students with a critical race analytical framework for understanding their realities is primarily a parental responsibility:

> What you need to teach your child is how to negotiate a racist system! While other parents are teaching their children all kinds of nice things, you need to prepare your child; you need to equip your child with the skills to deal with a racist system.… And that's the best thing you can do for your children is to prepare them to negotiate that racist system. You do your kids an injustice if you try to make them think that they are going to get the same treatment as the White students in the class. I don't care who they are! They can be Martin Luther King's children! They are going to be treated differently. They need to learn how to negotiate. That's what they need to learn.

Mrs Matthews, herself born and educated in Canada, points out that her experience of Canadian schooling as a student gave her both the knowledge and the motivation to teach her own children how to understand their school experiences. She says:

> I taught my kids how to negotiate [the system]; because I knew the system hadn't changed much from when I was a kid. It didn't change. People were still racist. Teachers were still racist. I knew they hadn't changed, so I prepared them to enter that system and succeed. And that's the greatest thing you could do for kids at school. You see how [some of] these kids they don't have that preparation. And my kids were not going to kill themselves in the school. So, these are the things that have to be done for kids.

However, she acknowledges, by the same token, that some parents cannot or do not provide this preparation. This may be because of their lack of familiarity with the system, and/or their sometimes naïve willingness to believe the best of the system in which they are forced to school their children, and/or because they buy into colour-blind discourses of denial and devalued views of their own Blackness. With respect to the first of these reasons Mrs Matthews says:

> And the problem is, a lot of people, a lot of Black people…did not go to this school system. They didn't go. And their children experience racism that is unbelievable. They had no idea. They didn't go to this school system. Why would you think your child was getting the same education as the White

student? But a lot of Black parents didn't go to school here; the children were born here and went to school here. Because my husband, he's from Dominica so I know the horror stories. I know them…he was, they were unprepared. His mom and dad came from Dominica. He was born in Dominica. He was not prepared for this type of system, and that's part of the culture shock. Wasn't prepared. Parents didn't do anything. What could they do?

Despite the pervasive and ongoing effects of colonialism on curriculum and education in many Black nations, it is, in fact, likely that Black parents who have migrated to Canada from these countries will understand education and schooling in ways that are somewhat more cooperative and community-based than the systems they encounter in Canada. They are often accustomed to situations in which the school was primarily a community organization, and school personnel were understood as a part of the extended family. Parents could leave education to the 'experts' – that is, to educators – confident that they had the child's best interest at heart. Many, then, ill-advisedly but understandably transfer their trust in these school systems to Canadian schools.

Of course, not all Blacks are recent immigrants, and the inability or unwillingness to see the racism in schools is not confined to those who did not themselves attend school in Canada. In a separate interview, Mr Bernard, who was not born in Canada, but who has worked most of his career here points, somewhat tongue in cheek, to other reasons:

Black parents are trusting souls, and although they would go out and work and experience all kinds of racism in their lives and in their working lives, they will still trust their children to the schools – ah, implicitly, you know.

And elsewhere:

I don't think I know of a Black family who has not experienced racism in the schools with their children, although they [don't] want to believe it.

In a somewhat cynical fashion, Mr Bernard is pointing to the reluctance that some Black parents exhibit with respect to accepting that their children's schools may not treat them equitably. Nevertheless, in a context where racism is understood as individual acts of bigotry only, and not in its institutional and societal manifestations also, and where Canada's official narratives are invested in the fantasy of a multicultural utopia, it is not surprising that many have bought into these marketed versions of the Canadian reality that defy their actual experience. Their commitment to this ideal in order to maintain hope in the face of a reality they may feel powerless to change causes them to turn a blind eye to the insidious workings of an inequitable system. They may feel that they would be poisoning their children against the school system if they were to prepare them in advance to face

racism at school. Further, given that education systems are important propa-
gators of these national mythologies and understandings of racism, and since
many of these parents are themselves products of these systems, they may
not have developed the tools for analysis that would cause them to identify
the systemic inequity that their children face. Finally, in a context that does
not value difference, some parents may also feel that opting for critical race
pedagogical perspectives in their children's schooling might further margin-
alize them. However, this last position fails to recognize that politically and
culturally centering Black students in a critical framework provides the
grounds that best helps them to 'relate socially and psychologically to other
cultural perspectives' (Asante 1991, 171) and to act in their own and their
communities' best interest.

Whatever the reasons parents may have for not preparing their children
to navigate racism in school, what Mrs Matthews and Mr Bernard seem to
be saying is that to give the educational system the benefit of the doubt and
to wait to equip children for it may be to wait too late. Recalling what both
these educators have said about how early children face racism in schools, a
late intervention *after* parents acknowledge or become fully aware of the
things their children are facing (which may be long after they have begun to
occur) may be to try to intervene when much damage has already been
done.

I feel it necessary to emphasize here that I am not suggesting that all or
most Black parents are passive with respect to racism in the education of
their children. Indeed there is a rich, ongoing activist history across Canada
of the Black community expressing our dissatisfaction with the way our
children are educated, and of our intervening accordingly. So, it is clear that
most Black parents are not uninvolved or overlooking inequity within
schools. Instead, what I am suggesting using these educators' narratives is
simply that with respect to arming children – particularly at a young age –
with a critical race framework, and strategies for understanding and resisting
the racism they experience in school and in society, there are many parents
who, for various reasons, do not do so. What I am pointing to, then, is the
fact that this kind of critical preparation for school, and indeed the world, is
not equally available to all Black students. Therefore, to rely solely upon
parents to prepare their children for the education system and to guide them
through it would be an ineffective strategy for the students who need it the
most.

What are the implications for intervention?: educators' roles

In keeping with logical principles of equitable schooling, if there is a
resource that is identified as having bearing on student success, but that is
not equally available to all students outside school, there should be a
mechanism for providing that resource at school. However, in the case of

the education of Black students in Canada, this creates a dilemma. How are Black students to be provided, within schools, with a framework for critiquing those schools? Clearly, the onus for doing so falls to educators who understand the gravity of the inequitable conditions of schooling, and who have a sense of social justice and/or a sense of accountability and responsibility to the Black community. While not every educator in this category is Black, it is also true that this role has most often fallen to Black educators. The literature on successful teachers of Black students agrees, pointing out that while not all successful teachers of Black children are Black, and not all Black teachers are successful teachers of Black children, most of the educators identified in this literature as successful teachers of Black children are, themselves, Black (Foster 1997; Ladson-Billings 1994). This is not surprising, for if Mrs Matthews and Mr Bernard are any indication, then for Black educators who have any appreciation of the inequitable conditions of schooling, the plight of Black children is no trivial matter. Mr Bernard's and Mrs Matthews' use of the metaphor of death, and words such as 'brutalization,' 'cruel,' 'horrific,' etc., demonstrate how deeply and personally disturbed they are about these conditions. For Black teachers and educators with community commitments and critical understandings of their work, there is no room for the objections I have often heard from other teachers such as, 'We are educators, not social workers,' for their understanding of their responsibility to their students and to the Black community/ies of which they are a part is integral to their work. Politically conscious Black educators feel compelled to take action to protect and support Black children and to provide them with a framework to understand their experiences.

This intervention has occurred in Canada in two main ways – formal organizational intervention, or less formal, individual intervention. Black teachers may organize outside of school among themselves and with other Black community members to support Black children's education. Summer School, Saturday School, and After School programs run by Black educators for Black students are widespread within Canada. Specifically, in Montreal there is a well-established system of after-school programs and summer schooling initiatives for culturally relevant enrichment and remediation that are run by Black educators. Mr Bernard himself has been involved with these types of community-driven initiatives. We have seen how he intervened through such an organization to tutor a student who was not getting sufficient academic support at school. He is also involved in his organization's advocacy work. These types of organizations often also take it upon themselves to be intermediaries between the community and mainstream educational institutions on behalf of Black students. We see an example of this from Mr Bernard:

> When we began the organization, we very quickly discovered that the distance
> from Burgundy where many Blacks live in this city, the distance from

Burgundy to McGill or Concordia was far greater than the distance from the Caribbean to those universities. Why, when we looked around, 99% of the Blacks at university, were from, ah, the Caribbean, and there was always a Black population in Montreal. Why weren't they getting to university? Was there something, or is there something endemic in the system, that prevented these Blacks from getting to university? So, we took this up and approached the existing institutions of higher learning, and the Protestant School Board, of course, and made this case to them. And we mainly dealt with the question, 'What is there in the system that prevents Blacks from getting to university, native-born Blacks?' We know immigrant children have all kinds of problems, ah, with, with, the system, and, ah, obviously part of it is due to the fact that there is a tremendous culture shock on entering, and the cultural differences, and so on, and the adjustments and so on they have to make, but even so, some of the immigrant children were making, and did make, their way to university. What is there in the system that prevents native Blacks from coming out? And, we approached them on this issue and we said, Look, we don't know whatever the real causes are, but what we will propose to you is that you help us to establish a school this summer (and that was the first Summer School) where we'll go out and recruit all those Blacks who dropped out of high school, give them an upgrade during six weeks of the summer, and at the end of that time, those we believe that can be successful at the post-secondary level, we'll recommend them. And McGill, and Sir George, and Dawson, and one or two of the other CEGEPS that were coming on stream agreed that they will accept all the students that we'll recommend to the post-secondary institutions. And they did this, and we were able to go out and recruit people out there who were born and grew up here and went to high school, and were pushed out of high school for all kinds of reasons.

On a less formal, but still very important level, many Black educators intervene on an individual basis at the school and classroom levels. They invest time in individual Black students through mentoring, counselling, and tutoring, which is most often done on the teachers' own time during lunch breaks, or before and after school, or they may creatively adapt the formal school curriculum by infusing politically and culturally relevant material. This would include, for example, working around the theme of Black History Month which, as Mrs Matthews opined, though formally recognized by many school boards, is seldom observed except upon the initiative of Black teachers. Many also work to infuse culturally and politically relevant, critical material across the curriculum and throughout the school year.

However, these interventions by Black teachers – whether the more formal, organized interventions or interventions at the school and classroom levels – have their implications for teachers' professional relationships and careers. Formal interventions can often be a source of great friction and misunderstanding between Black educators and their white colleagues. For example, after describing a project undertaken by one such organization of Black teachers to control the administering of intelligence tests to (and consequent misplacement of) children who had recently migrated from the West Indies, Mr Bernard relates:

> But after we worked out that agreement which said that children would not be given intelligence tests within two years of coming to the province, I sat in *many* a staffroom and heard teachers complain bitterly, 'You can't test that child because he's Black! I don't know what to do with him, he can't do the work, we can't test him.' And we would explain again and again in all kinds of memos and in staffrooms all over the place, 'We are not saying that you cannot test the child. You can give an achievement test to determine the child's level at this time, an achievement test whether he can add, multiply, subtract or whatever, and then you can work with that child.' But although we had this agreement outside, in the schools itself, this was used as an excuse to ignore the children.

Similarly, intervention at the school level is fraught with risk where Black students are a minority in the classroom – which is the case in most government-funded schools in Quebec. To teach in politically relevant, race-cognizant ways in a mixed-race classroom within a context of denial, where white privilege is invested in the normalization of racism and politically sanitized discourse, goes against the grain and causes discomfort for those who benefit most from the status quo. Consequently, many interventions that Black teachers make in the classroom are met with resistance from other educators, non-Black students, and their parents (as well as from Black parents and students who would rather not 'rock the boat'). Resistance often comes in the form of complaints that the teacher has her/his own agenda, or that the teacher is taking valuable teaching time from the 'real' curriculum to teach material which, 'however interesting,' they condescend, 'is not a part of the "required" material.' This latter complaint becomes even more salient when the teacher is teaching a subject, or in a year, that is tested through external standardized tests, or that has great currency toward graduation or university admission. These complaints do not acknowledge the extent of banter, digression, and diversion that routinely occurs in all classrooms, or the value of pedagogy that promotes critical thinking toward students' ultimate academic success.

Where these students and parents decide to complain to the powers that be, matters can become emotionally taxing for the teachers, and especially so – with consequences for their careers – when their interventions are not supported by educational administrators who are like-minded. In fact, in many instances, those who complain about culturally and politically relevant pedagogies can often count on being able to tap into school and school board administrators' discomfort around racial issues, and upon playing to racialized power imbalances in order to undermine and discredit Black teachers. After all, the type of politically aware teaching that we are talking about here would seldom be endorsed by the school systems they criticize. In these situations, the teacher is often either left to fend for her/himself against parents, or ordered by administration to stop the intervention. At this point s/he is forced to either abandon the interventions, and consequently

silence her/his critical-antiracist commitments and sense of responsibility to the Black community, or continue them surreptitiously at great risk to her/his job and career advancement. Thus, one area of future research that may need to be explored is the ways that Black educators navigate this fraught terrain. I have explored this question elsewhere with respect to Black anti-racist workers collaborative relationships with their white co-workers (Howard 2009). Further work needs to be done with respect to the school context in Anglophone schools in Montreal.

Discussion

Given the experiences and pedagogy of Mr Bernard and Mrs Matthews, it is not difficult to interpret their work in terms of a grounded anti-racist praxis (Dei 1996). Dei asserts that '[t]o be an antiracism worker is to be a theorist and a practitioner for social change' (1996, 253). The way that theory and practice inform each other is evident in the work of the two educators discussed in this article. As in any antiracism work, their working frameworks understand racism to be more than individual prejudice (see Dei 1996, 252), and they interrogate and challenge the normalized privilege, racial dominance, and abuse of racial power that is prevalent in the contexts in which they work (see Dei 1996, 256). They also challenge the academic canon and received knowledge (see Dei 1996, 249). Dei writes that 'effective antiracism praxis means avoiding an oversimplification of the notion of identity that narrowly dwells on the "individual self," and ignores the significant issue of how the inner self is connected to the outer self and to the larger structures of society' (1996, 257–58), and more recently that '[w]e can develop the ability to help our learners theorize anger as part of everyday experience. Anti-racist advocacy requires that we develop an emotional and visceral reaction to racism and social oppression' (in press). I read the work of Mrs Matthews and Mr Bernard as excellent examples of a theorizing and working through their anger and personal connection to the issues – not only for themselves, but also insisting on this for their students so that their students can come to informed critical perspectives on their lives, as well as expressions of their indignation that are not self-defeating.

Further, in light of the thrusts for Africentric education across Canada, and the, so far, frustrated initiative for an Africentric school in Montreal (Hampton 2010), I also suggest that the work of the educators discussed in this article is, in fact, a nascent form of Africentric education.[5] To the extent that African-centered perspectives are community-based such that 'the concept of *individual* makes sense only within the concept of *community*' (Dei 1994, 12, emphasis in original), and that 'the individual cannot be understood separate from other people' (Schiele 1994, 154), the work of Mr Bernard and Mrs Matthews is African-centered. Their community-conscious commitment to Black students, and the way it works to shape their pedagogy

within and outside of school is clear. Further, Mrs Matthews' and Mr Bernard's understanding of knowledge can also be identified as African-centred. As Schiele explains, the African worldview sees knowledge as having an integral affective component which counterbalances conceptions of knowledge as purely rational (1994, 153, 156). Knowledge thus understood exists and is sought for human and community benefit rather than for its own sake. Further, the teacher is expected to 'emphasize and foster a subjective as well as a cognitive experience of knowledge,' both in the student as well as in her/himself (Schiele 1994, 156). African-centered education is overtly politicized and transformative, centering the agency of Africans and seeking racial equity and social justice (Asante 1991, 171; Dei 1994, 17). African-centered education therefore involves helping students to understand and challenge societal inequity. The educators' insistence on a critical framework through which students can understand their school experiences and construct meaningful knowledge of school curricula meets these standards.

To be sure, even while the way that African-centredness will take shape in Canadian schooling is still a work in progress, there are aspects of Mr Bernard's and Mrs Matthews' anti-racist pedagogy that would need to be supplemented in order for their work to be clearly understood as Africentric. For example, African-centered education is not achieved simply by expanding curriculum content to include 'a bit of Black History,' nor is it solely about making Black students aware of a few stock Black public figures, past or present, to whom one might hope Black students will look as positive role models. While interventions like these may be well-intentioned and have some tenuous merit, by themselves they represent superficial attempts to address the needs of Black students without interrogating the educational framework within which the interventions are being introduced. In other words, they often amount to superimposing African-related topics onto a system shot through with Eurocentric conceptions of education. The incongruence of such attempts to support Black students within Eurocentric frameworks, which by definition marginalize Africans (Asante 1991, 171), results more often than not in the failure of these attempts. Further, an African-centered curriculum would take up the work of Black individuals, organizations, and movements that have worked and/or do work in the interest of Africans. Naturally, this would require that students be given opportunity to engage, in age-appropriate ways, in critically evaluating whether a particular project is in the interest of Africans or not, and in debates to establish criteria for doing so. This would not require either that students adopt a singular grand narrative for making such evaluations, or that Africanness be defined monolithically. It would only require that students be exposed to and involved in the variety of perspectives and debates about African interest and identity.

Very importantly, I argue above that the choice that politically conscious Black teachers make to teach Black students how to navigate schools and

society and to engage in politically relevant pedagogy in multiracial schools is usually a choice to gamble with one's career. The ostensibly colour-blind, yet racist context of Canadian schools and schooling therefore functions to curtail the liberatory pedagogy of Black teachers, and this dynamic is referred to in American educational literature on Black teachers of Black students (see for example, Beauboeuf-Lafontant 1999; Foster 1990). For the Black teacher with a critical understanding of her/his profession, the African-centered school provides the context within which s/he can engage in the kinds of culturally and politically grounded, critical antiracist practice that best serve Black students. S/he can now freely weave the multiple and diverse histories and cultural perspectives of African peoples directly into her/his pedagogy. S/he can now freely engage students in lessons that critique the structures that impinge upon Black students' lives, and which clarify the courses of action and responsible choices that students can take. Further, the African-centered school frees this kind of teacher from the dilemmas presented by taking up this pedagogy in mainstream schools. S/he is no longer forced to choose between career advancement and African-centered, politically relevant pedagogy. While Africentric schools are likely to produce other, not-yet-clear challenges for educators in Canada, and while African-centred schools are not here proposed as the only educational option for Black students or career option for Black teachers, we do know that at this site the critical Black teacher will be able to freely take up greater levels of the obligations implied by being a responsible member of an African/Black community without fear of the penalties and reprisals arising from resisting complicity with a racist system.

In light of the struggle for Africentric schools in Montreal, and the opposition from Black educators, these factors may be well worth consideration.

Notes

1. The unique linguistic landscape in Canada has also given rise to the term *allophone*, which refers to those who may speak French, English, or both, but whose first language is neither French nor English.
2. Names used for these participants and the schools they mention are all pseudonyms.
3. Grade 11 French is a requirement for graduation in Quebec.
4. Secondary school in Quebec comprise Grades 7 to 11. Students graduate from Secondary school after Grade 11 and are then eligible to enter the CEGEP system, which may end in a terminal college diploma (to be distinguished from a university degree in Quebec) or be part of a pathway to university.
5. In fact, in her interview, Mrs Matthews proposes what she calls Black-focussed schooling as one way to resist the inequitable terms of mainstream schooling in Anglophone schools in Montreal. The term 'Black-focussed' is a term that was used in the early days of the thrust for Africentric schools in Toronto, though it has since been abandoned because it is prone to misinterpretation as segregationist.

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