Persistently Present, Yet Invisible? Exploring the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area

Rhonda C. George
York University

Abstract

Through employing critical race theory, seen-invisibility, and circuits of dispossession as theoretical frames, this article complicates discourses around equity and Black student achievement by examining the underexplored experiences of high-achieving Black Canadian students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Drawing on focus group data with four adolescent participants, the study finds that they experienced violent forms of racialization in their educational environments through a lack of physical, social, and intellectual space to exist as both Black and high-achieving. This rendered them persistently present due to their race, yet invisible in the perceptions of their intellect.

Central to this article is an articulation, unpacking, and thus granular analysis of the particular ways that racialization can operate within education systems to *still* marginalize Black students and erect complex barriers—*even when* they demonstrate strong academic performance. These emerging insights inform a need for a broader and more holistic understanding of Black Canadian student experiences and a rethinking of intervention and resistance strategies.

Keywords: Black students, racialization, high-achieving, enrichment, belonging

Résumé

En utilisant la théorie critique de la race, l'invisibilité vue, et des circuits de dépossession comme cadres théoriques, cet article complique les discours sur l'équité et la réussite des étudiants noirs en examinant les expériences des étudiants Canadiens noirs qui sont très performants dans la région du Grand Toronto (RGT). S'appuyant sur des données de groupes de discussion avec quatre participants adolescents, l'étude révèle qu'ils ont subi des formes violentes de racialisation dans leurs environnements éducatifs en raison d'un manque d'espace physique, social, et intellectuel pour exister à la fois en tant que noirs et très performants. Cela les a rendus constamment présents en raison de leur race, mais invisibles dans les perceptions de leur intellect.

Au coeur de cet article se trouve une articulation, une explication, et donc une analyse granulaire des façons particulières dont la racialisation peut opérer au sein des systèmes éducatifs pour marginaliser encore les étudiants noirs et ériger des barrières complexes, même l'lorsqu'ils démontrent de bons résultats scolaires. Ces idées émergentes informent le besoin d'une compréhension plus large et plus holistique des expériences des étudiants noirs canadien et de repenser les stratégies d'intervention et de résistance.

Mots-clés : étudiants noirs ; racialisation; haute réussite scolaire; enrichissement académique; l'appartenance

Introduction

The sizeable and diverse population of Black Canadians within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)[1] in Ontario is largely comprised of an English-speaking Caribbean diaspora—who mostly gained entry into Canada and settled in the region through the West Indian Domestic Scheme[2] and gradual shifts in Canadian immigration policy, which began to allow non-White immigration in 1962 (Barber, 1991; Calliste, 1989, 1993; Canadian Museum of Immigration, 2018; F. Henry, 1968; Johnson, 2012)—and continental African diasporic communities (Statistics Canada, 2017a, 2017b). More broadly, Black Canadians have been present in Canada since the 17th century as enslaved people, indentured servants, and descendants of Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, and runaways from American slavery via the underground railroad (N. Henry, 2022).

However, despite their long presence in Canada, Black Canadians experience social, economic, and racial stratification that is in part informed by systemic educational exclusion, which contributes to intergenerational socio-economic disparities and employment barriers (MacDougall, 2010; United Nations, 2017a, 2017b). Decades of Canadian research documents how structural racism shapes this problematic relationship between Black Canadians and the education system. Scholars contend that Black students experience alienating schooling cultures that have low expectations of them, are Eurocentric, stigmatizing, and ultimately end up streaming them out of university pathways (Bailey et al., 2016; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Cheng, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015; James et al., 2017; Lewis, 1992; Toronto Board of Education, 1988; Wright, 1971). Research also shows that Black Canadian youth are less likely to attend university than other racial groups, have lower high school grades, have higher rates of suspension, and are disproportionately placed in special education, while comprising a scant proportion of those in gifted programming (James et al., 2017; Robson et al., 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018).

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1   The GTA is the nation's most densely populated (6.2 million) and racially diverse region and includes the regions of Peel, York, Durham, and Halton in addition to the city of Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2023).

2   The West Indian Domestic Scheme was a mid-20th century federal Canadian endeavour, seeking young Black women from various Caribbean islands to perform domestic labour in Canadian homes. Through the scheme, large numbers of women emigrated and settled mostly in the GTA and Montreal, receiving permanent residency after one year of service (Arat-Koc, 1997; Gopaul-McNicol, 1993; Johnson, 2012). An earlier Caribbean domestic scheme existed beginning in 1910, recruiting approximately 100 women from the island of Guadeloupe (Calliste, 1994; Johnson, 2022).

While much of the literature examines the constellation of factors perpetuating racialized achievement and opportunity gaps for Black students generally, this study engages the under-examined experiences of *high-achieving* Black GTA students. In using the term high-achieving, I gesture toward Black Canadian students who demonstrate strong academic potential and performance via traditional measures (grades, graduation rates, university matriculation) but for a host of reasons—including potential racial bias—may not have been formally identified as gifted or granted entry into any enrichment programs. A common euphemism for these students is *bright*. I contend that if the goal is to improve access to opportunities, outcomes, and the educational experiences of Black students, examining *all* levels of academic achievement and performance is essential. What is it like to be both Black and high-achieving in a GTA school?

I begin by theoretically and methodologically grounding the article. Next, I discuss and analyze three findings, which elucidate how processes of racialization were operating via a lack of physical, intellectual, and social space for the students to exist as both Black and *bright*. Lastly, I discuss the implications of these findings and make recommendations.

Black Students and Access to Enrichment in Ontario[3]

The educational experiences of high-achieving students in Ontario are poorly understood. This is especially so for high-achieving *Black* students. Broadly speaking, when an Ontario student is high-achieving and/or gifted and/or talented, they can receive educational enrichment through modified Individual Education Plans (IEPs)[4] and/or Gifted Programming and/or Specialized Programs offered by school boards such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), the Arts, and specialized programs in business, technology, and athletics.

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3   Within Canada, the education system is decentralized, meaning that the "delivery, organization, and evaluation of education" is the responsibility of the nation's jurisdictions (10 provinces and three territories) (Robson, 2019, p. 208).

4   Within Ontario, IEPs are a written plan that can serve many functions and articulate a student's particular learning needs, strengths, and expectations. IEPs may also be used to identify a student as exceptional and/or will outline how the school board will accommodate those needs via an array of strategies, which may include program modifications, varied instruction and assessment, and/or alternative expectations or programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). The process of obtaining an IEP can be initiated by both parents and the teacher/school and may also include the IPRC process.

Giftedness. Ontario's Ministry of Education (2017) defines giftedness as a learning exceptionality that denotes "an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated" (p. A16). Gifted students can be identified through a combination of some or all of the following: standardized psychometric testing,[5] teacher identification, and principal- or parent-initiated Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRC), which determine if "a student should be identified as exceptional and, if so, [shall be placed in an educational setting] that will best meet the student's needs" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017, p. D2). Because the ministry allows for "autonomy over determining the criteria for identification" (Parekh et al., 2018, p. 4), great variability in identification practices exists among school boards. Identified gifted students are then afforded a high-status label that offers enriched learning environments with smaller teacher-student ratios, high expectations, and "additional academic advantage" (Parekh et al., 2018, p. 5).

However, as Parekh and colleagues (2018) argue, the gifted label can be contentious, abstract, and a reflection of class privilege and/or a student's mimicry of "schoolhouse giftedness,"[6] with little empirical evidence that gifted identification significantly informs long-term achievement outcomes (Brown & Parekh, 2010). Canadian research shows that within various school boards in the GTA, including the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)[7], gifted programs disproportionately contain White and East Asian middle-class and upper middle-class students to the exclusion of Black, Latin American, and/or Southeast Asian students of any class background (James et al., 2017; Parekh et al., 2018; Toronto District School Board, 2012), which may suggest race and class bias within identification, testing, and placement processes. While scantily documented in On-

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5   Scholars have argued that high stakes testing such as intelligence and standardized psychometric tests can be deeply flawed, racially and culturally biased, overly deterministic, and ultimately exclusionary—especially for those from historically marginalized groups (Borland, 2005, 2013; Clandfield et al., 2014; Ford, 2005; Ford & Helms, 2012; Kempf, 2016, 2017; Oakes, 2005)..

6   Defined by Renzulli (1998) as a student's ability to perform numerous desirable and easily measured behaviours (test-taking and lesson-learning) at high levels within a classroom, which suggests that giftedness tends to be poorly understood and misapplied in educational settings due to a commitment to a belief that some are born with innate intellectual gifts and superiority. Similarly, Borland (2003, 2005, 2013) calls giftedness a social construction, invention, and educational response rooted in the eugenics movement and its psychometrics, aimed to quantify and rank intelligence, while measuring behaviours that can easily be learned and practiced by most students, especially those with smaller class sizes and teacher-to-student ratios, which ultimately support students' performance.

7   Canada's largest school board and the only one to collect quantitative data and make public its findings.

tario, these racial disparities—which exclude Black students—mirror trends in the American educational context (see Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Collins et al., 2020; Ford, 1998; Ford et al., 2016; Frasier, 1987; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Rhodes, 1992).

Enrichment programs. Similar trends exist within enrichment programs designed for high-achieving, but not necessarily identified gifted, students, such as AP, IB, the Arts, and other selective specialized programs. However, because disaggregated race-based data collection is not a provincial or nationwide practice, disparities, access rates, and outcomes for racialized Canadian students are poorly documented, if at all. For example, an assessment of Peel District School Board (PDSB)—the nation's second largest school board—by Ontario's Ministry of Education found "gross underrepresentation" of Black students in specialized programming, describing their inclusion as "abysmal" (Chadha et al., 2020, p. 14). Within Arts programs offered by the TDSB, Black students were also significantly underrepresented, as access pathways into these programs "were largely shaped by structural inequality" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017, p. 19). American research also shows that, like giftedness, these programs tend to exclude Black and Latin American students (Béhague, 2006; Hasslund, 2020; Klopfenstein, 2004; Kyburg et al., 2007; Perna et al., 2015; Theokas & Saaris, 2013; Whiting & Ford, 2009). In 2022, the TDSB introduced the Student Interest Programs Policy for admissions to their specialized programs in order to increase accessibility and equity by only requiring an "active interest or passion" rather than portfolios and auditions (Alphonso, 2022; TDSB, 2022). However, this approach is currently limited to the TDSB and has controversies that may threaten its permanence (Alphonso, 2023; Kennedy & Teotonio, 2023; Teotonio, 2022, 2023).

Hence, at minimum, research suggests that the perception or formal identification of students as gifted or as possessing some kind of high potential, followed by the granting of access to enriched educational opportunities and spaces—can be highly subjective, racialized, and shaped by various socio-economic factors. Even in non-enrichment streams, race continues to be a structurally marginalizing factor for Black GTA students, as TDSB data shows that they "are much less likely than their White counterparts to be enrolled in university-track (academic) classes and more likely to find themselves in trade-oriented (applied) classes as early as grade nine" (Onstad, 2018, para. 3). It cannot be overstated how a lack of disaggregated race-based Canadian data collection thwarts a robust quantitative assessment of the extent of these disparities within gifted, enrichment, and regular programs and streams across the region.

Conceptual Frameworks

Three conceptual frames shape this article. First, I use critical race theory (CRT) to attend to the nuanced logics of anti-Blackness[8] within formal educational systems in the GTA. CRT uses counternarratives or "experiential knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13) to "provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13) the effects of racialization[9] on racialized others. In so doing, CRT challenges notions of race-neutrality to highlight the assumptions made within schooling processes such as assessment and access to enrichment, which may propagate disproportionalities *within* enriched educational spaces. As such, this article uses counternarratives to examine the specific ways that anti-Blackness shapes schooling experiences, sense of belonging, and access to educational opportunities.

Second, this article engages with Fine and Ruglis's (2009) circuits and consequences of dispossession to think through the participants' positioning and lack of space to exist within formal educational spaces. This lens facilitates the examination of how educational environments and/or policies tend to laminate credentials of merit onto mostly White and Asian elite youth, while simultaneously "tattooing material and psychic scars of 'lack' onto most Black, Latin American, immigrant, and/or poor students (Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 20). I particularly engage with how "[critical geographies] of youth development and dispossession" (Appadurai, 2004 as cited in Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 21) may enable particular ideologies and a lack of opportunities to be "map[ped] onto adolescent bodies" (Appadurai, 2004 as cited in Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 21) in ways that may threaten to "redistribute their dreams and aspirational capacities" (Appadurai, 2004 as cited in Fine & Ruglis, 2009, p. 21). This frame works to expand the racial analysis of the participants' experiences in their educational environments and its potential implications.

Lastly, this article employs the concept of seen-invisibility, which through a series of vignettes (W. E. B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon, Audrey Lorde, Ralph Ellison, and others) examines the mechanics and impact of the White gaze on Black people, who are often penetrated with inferiorizing logics and then returned to themselves in distorted and unre-

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8   Ross (2020) describes this as beyond just experiencing racism as a Black person and as fundamentally defined by society's refusal and inability to recognize the humanity of those Black people in disdainful, marginalizing, disregarding, dismissive, ambivalent, and disenfranchising ways (Ross, 2020, as cited in Madkins and Morton, 2021).

9   The ascription of particular racial meanings (see Gonzalez-Sobrino & Goss, 2019).

cognizable states of being. This felt invisibility "is a form of ontological and epistemic violence…initiated through White spectatorship—a generative gazing that attempts to violate the integrity of the Black body" (Yancy, 2016, p. 73). Through this concept, Yancy (2016) articulates the "fundamental phenomenological slippage [which] occurs between one's own felt experience of the Black body and how others (Whites) understand, construct, experience, and see that "same" Black body" (p. 68). He also describes this dyadic and violent relationship as one where Blackness is hyper-visible, while the individual and their potential is invisible, as a paradoxical state of being, and where "the Black body is a 'seen absence'" (Yancy, 2016, p. 68). The role of Whiteness, its ideologies, and histories in informing this process is rendered invisible (Yancy, 2016, p. 58). Invoking seen-invisibility provides a lens through which to make sense of the participants' counter-narratives and the ways in which the responses to their intellectual potential affected their belonging within school.

Together, these frames conceptually orient this article to unpack the specific ways that processes of racialization ultimately shaped the experiences of the participants.

Methodology

This study is drawn from focus group data from a larger exploratory qualitative project, which used a phenomenological approach to examine the perspectives of Black youth on Africentric high school options in the GTA. At that time, an elementary Africentric Alternative School had already opened in 2008 to much controversy—despite being open to all students to attend— and a high school stream had been later introduced (CBC News, 2015; Frenec, 2013; Gee, 2011a, 2011b; Hammer, 2011; MacDonald, 2010; Toronto District School Board, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Using purposive sampling in the larger study, I sought out self-identified Black participants, who were between the ages of 16 and 20, attending high school in the region, and willing to share their broader perspectives on local Africentric offerings. I found four participants (two male and two female) who were attending GTA public high schools and were either 16 or 17 years of age. Incidentally, all of the participants self-reported as being of Afro-Caribbean descent (second- and third-generation), high-achieving (A-range grades), and university-bound. The study found that the participants' perceptions of Africentric schooling options were largely shaped by (a) the impacts of their broader schooling experiences, (b) a lack of clarity around the program's

curriculum and application of Africentricity, and (c) a fear of marginalization and stigmatization of the school's credentials if they chose to attend. Data were analyzed using Creswell's data analysis spiral, which uses a cyclical—rather than a linear—approach to analyzing data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

It was in the open and axial coding stages (Creswell & Poth, 2016), when examining the participants' rationales for their interest (or disinterest) in attending Africentric schools, that great insights parenthetically emerged regarding how their shared positionalities as ambitious, Black, high-achieving, and university-bound students shaped their broader schooling experiences. While these codes and themes were outside the scope of the initial study, they were particularly salient. As such, I revisited these codes and themes, refocusing my attention on how the particular intersection of Blackness and high-achievement shaped their broader schooling experiences. I built on the initial codes and themes to capture complexities and to ultimately develop a textured understanding of the participants' experiences. Given the small sample size and scope, this study is not generalizable. Direct quotes have been edited for clarity.

Participants[10]

At the time of interviewing, Chantée[11] was a 17-year-old female in her final year of high school (Grade 12 in Ontario). She attended a suburban school in a middle-class neighbourhood in the GTA. She described her schooling environment as having predominantly White staff and a majority South Asian and White student population, with a small but sizeable number of Black students. Her school was also home to a language enrichment program (French Immersion), which trains students for French fluency upon graduation. However, Chantée was enrolled in the English stream. Keon was a 17-year-old male in Grade 12, who also attended Chantée's school and was part of the French Immersion program. They both describe their school as having moderate academic standards.

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10 It should also be noted that Chantée and Keon attended school together, while Malia and Mervyn attended another school together.

11 To protect the identity of the participants and the schools they attended, pseudonyms have been used and descriptive geographical information has been omitted.

Malia was a 17-year-old female student in Grade 12 who attended a suburban upper-class and upper middle-class school that housed a specialized Regional Arts program (RAP). The school was described as having predominantly White staff and a White, East Asian, and Middle Eastern student body, with a miniscule Black student population.

Melvyn, a 16-year-old male in Grade 11, also attended Malia's school. He described the school similarly to Malia, marvelling at the abundant selective abstract and advanced courses in the social sciences, humanities, languages, and arts that significantly extended learning and experiential opportunities. These offerings were exclusive and not available at most other high schools in the region. Their school was also described as a highly competitive academic environment with very high academic standards. Both Malia and Melvyn transferred into their current elite school after moving into the area and it incidentally being their neighbourhood school. They were also both in the regular stream.

Findings: Learning Blackness Through Educational Racialization

Upon analysis, it became clear that the participants experienced violent forms of racialization, which revealed a lack of physical, social, and intellectual space to exist as both Black and high-achieving. The participants learned this through their observations of how their Blackness and presentation as high-achieving, articulate, ambitious, and with broad interests was often marked as something intellectually inferior and taken up as an oxymoronic oddity. These experiences were also compounded by their observations of voluntary racial segregation and cliques, social exclusion, and being labelled as "acting White."

Schooling in the GTA Context: Observing the Racialization of Physical Spaces

In comparing schools, Malia and Melvyn revealed stark educational and social differences that often juxtaposed access to educational enrichment with social belonging. Their previous school—located in a working/middle-class Black and Southeast Asian neighbourhood—offered significant social options but at the expense of poor educational opportunities and intellectual stimulation. Conversely, they described their new, more affluent, and "significantly further ahead" school as offering deep intellectual stimulation via rigorous, expansive, and exclusive course offerings, experiential learning, enrichment

opportunities, and academic supports. However, these academic opportunities came at the cost of poor social belonging for them and a minuscule Black population (less than a dozen students out of a few thousand). They also described the school's strict residency requirements and address verification policies, which regularly reassessed residential eligibility to remove students who had moved away or were not actually living in the neighbourhood. As Melvyn observed:

> Class and neighbourhood. If you're in a very bad neighbourhood, you're not going to get the same level of education as a person in a higher-class neighbourhood, so when you go to university you're going to be at a huge disadvantage. When I went to [the first school] we had a certain level of education, but after we went to [the second school], I had to catch up A LOT because the education gap was pretty big. The stuff we learned in Grade 10, they learned it in Grade 9, so…

Not only did Malia and Melvyn notice stark differences in the quality of education they received, including an extensive array of rigorous multidisciplinary course offerings that far surpassed anything offered at their previous school, they also noticed persistent racial dynamics within both educational settings. Each of their schools were largely segregated by race, with students from racial and ethnic groups clustering together. These designated physical spaces, which were well-known among students, were also observed by Chantée and Keon in their school. With specific names like the *Asian circle, Brown Hall,* or the *Black corner* within the microcosms of their schools, all the participants noticed these racial dynamics of space.

Despite a multicultural societal veneer in the Canadian context, scholars posit that the GTA is segregated into racial and ethnic enclaves that intersect with socio-economic status and can, thus, become socio-geographical determinants that shape access to resources and opportunities for better or worse (Hou & Picot, 2003; Hulchanski, 2010; Kataure & Walton-Roberts, 2018; Shizha, 2019; Tan, 2007). As Tatum (2017) argues, adolescence marks a shift in identity development where racial-ethnic-cultural (REC) identity becomes realized and many non-White racialized youth concretize their identities relative to Whiteness, which is constructed as the societal norm. For Black youth, this process is defined by the development of a heightened awareness of the salience and per-

sonal impact of race and by environmental cues[12], which "reflect their Blackness back to them more clearly" (Tatum, 2017, pp. 134–135) or in devaluing ways.

This devaluation was made clear in Malia and Melvyn's observations of how the glaring differences between their schools' racial and socio-economic composition overlapped with academic opportunities. Additionally, the new school's aggressive gatekeeping[13] suggested a particular scarcity, exclusivity, and elitism in the enriched learning environment, constructing some students and families (usually affluent and non-Black) as being deserving of the quality of education offered, while marking outsiders as ineligible or undeserving. As Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh (2017) argue, Specialized Arts Programs (SAPs) like the one attended by Malia and Melvyn tend to be consciously chosen, self-selecting, and "[racially] homogenous environments in which socioeconomically privileged *mostly* White students benefit from the high status, added resources, and focus on the arts that [they] provide" (p. 19). As such, Malia and Melvyn were experiencing the ways in which the boundaries of who has access to enriched educational experiences were being maintained in real time, and how those systemic and institutional boundaries often worked to keep Black and/or working-class students out.

While there is debate within Canadian scholarly literature regarding educational marketization and school choice (Allison, 2015; Bosetti et al., 2017; Bosetti & Gereluk, 2018; Davies et al., 2008; Dei & Karumanchery, 1999; Yoon & Gentry, 2009), their relations to Black educational navigation, decision making, and, as Aladejebi (2021) articulates, the "quality [and diversity] of choices available" (p. 30), requires further study. This is especially true in Ontario, as the extent to which parents can exercise school choice varies among provinces. Some American research suggests however, that educational decision making and navigation vis-à-vis school choice and the ability for Black families to access perceived high-quality schools is a complex negotiation of trade-offs that seek to reduce anti-Black racial harm and can be mediated by race, socio-economic status, parent education, geography, and curricula (Cooper, 2005; Dougherty et al., 2009; Erickson, 2017; Mickelson et al., 2008; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021; Roda & Wells, 2013; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008; Tomlinson, 1997).

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12 This includes messaging from media, social and familial environments, and within schools through group exclusion from advanced or enriched curricula (Tatum, 2017).

13 These gatekeeping practices go to great lengths to prevent students who do not live in the (usually affluent) catchment area from gaining access and have been well-documented in both Canadian and American contexts (Alphonso & Grant, 2013; Brown, 2013; Canning & Tanglao, 2011; Hammer, 2012; Joldersma & Perhamus, 2020).

At the very least, the participants had some awareness of the GTA's racialized educational landscape, where physical racial groupings of space can influence both the academic and social quality of one's educational experiences, trajectories, and futures unequally (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017). Further Canadian research is needed to better understand the relationships between outcomes, the educational quality of schools, and the racial/ethnic demographics of neighbourhoods.

A Lack of Intellectual and Social Space: Low Expectations, Acting White, and Social Costs

Complicating the lack of physical space in their schools to exist as both Black and *bright*, the participants also experienced a lack of intellectual space to exist via cultures of low expectations. This emerged in a number of ways across schooling contexts, and usually through outright exclusion or teacher and peer ambivalence and disbelief in the participants' academic performance and abilities. Chantée described instances where racial jokes were made at her expense by a teacher in front of the class. When she would try to express her discomfort, the teacher would blatantly discuss her unsuitability for university-level courses despite her high academic performance:

> This English teacher that I had last year, she was like…it wasn't racist, but sometimes she would say things [racist things] and she thinks it's funny and everyone else would laugh and I was like, 'it's not funny.' There was only me and one other Black person in the class, so she'd say it and I wouldn't call her out straight. I would make a joke of it, and she started to be mean and tell me that I shouldn't [even] be in this level of courses [university-level].

Keon shared similar experiences of low expectations when he would submit work and was met with disbelief and accusations of plagiarism by his teachers because of its high quality:

> I've experienced it with my writing. I've been accused of plagiarism. Not because it was connected to something, but just because I wrote a certain way [sophisticated use of big words] and I was just thinking that I like to write and using a big word doesn't mean that you took it off the Internet. It doesn't take a lot of work to take a word from the dictionary and use it. I get

mad at that because it's happened three times in my life, and it was *before* high school. In high school, it's kind of expected that you write a certain way. I just feel like teachers expect you to…they want you to be at a certain level. Maybe being Black has something to do with it, but it hasn't been obvious enough for me to identify it and say [it was] racist or prejudicial.

Melvyn shared similar experiences. In reflecting on his former school, he points out that for Black students, poor academic performance was expected, and less support was offered:

They [don't] expect it from you: academically…I saw this happen when we went to [previous school]…when a Black kid is doing [poorly], the teachers kind of, "yeah, yeah, you're doing badly" and they don't pay attention. But when another kid [non-Black] is doing badly they try to help them more and bring them up [their grades]. I see that more.

For Malia, despite her high academic performance, low expectations showed up as people showing more athletic support than academic support, without proof of her athletic abilities:

There's this time when we first moved to [the new school]…I signed up for the basketball team at our school and I was like almost guaranteed [by a teacher] a spot even though I SUCK at basketball, really bad! I'm really terrible. It was so weird because everyone expected me to be extremely good…I even felt like the teacher (coach) was nicer to me on the team. Well, before he saw me play, that is.

In sharing these experiences, the participants highlighted how their teachers often expected little from them intellectually both directly and indirectly. For Chantée, it was overtly being told she did not belong in university-level classes despite strong academic performance, and for Keon it was disbelief and penalization when he submitted excellent work. The participants noticed the differential treatment, but sometimes its subtle nature made them uncertain if it was rooted in anti-Blackness.

These demoralizing experiences damaged their sense of belonging, particularly as Melvyn noticed different levels of teacher investment across racial groups and Malia experienced a teacher's projection of an athletic disposition onto her without any evidence of athletic ability. This projection could suggest racial stereotyping, which invokes a set of logics that read Black youth as innately athletic and more suited for physicality at the expense of their intellect, while endowing others with having intellectual capacity

(Carrington, 2010; James, 2012; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Given these logics, it was perhaps easier for Malia's teacher to imagine her embodying athleticism sans evidence, but the participants shared many stories that suggest that even *with* evidence of strong and consistent academic performance, teachers still struggled to see them as intellectually adept. It is through these experiences of a lack of belonging, penalization, and stereotyping that the participants were learning how they were being read by their teachers. As Chantée shared, some would even read their academic achievements as "un-Black":

> It's really hard because if you're smart…if you get a really good grade, sometimes they will say that you're not Black. My friend told me that the teacher is always so surprised when she gets really good grades, so it's like they're expecting us to fail.

Social experiences and costs. The participants continued to share experiences where the lack of physical and intellectual space also intersected with a lack of social space to exist, as they also struggled with social alienation and stigmatization from both their Black and non-Black peers. For example, the participants were often accused of *acting White*, given their academic achievement, self-expression not using vernacular, and interests in broad topics, outside of hip-hop culture, and in different television genres, such as Japanese anime. Malia recounted being labelled in narrow ways:

> Me personally, I'm known as a "cracker," well "Oreo" [everyone laughs]…I listen to like rock music and watch anime and stuff, so I'm definitely not under the music category.… An Oreo is someone who is Black on the outside and White on the inside. I don't believe [in] that because there isn't one particular way that Black people should be. I mean I'm Black everywhere. It's just the way I act, I guess.

When I asked Malia who was calling her this, she said it was everyone. She continued:

> I guess it's because of people's perceptions of what Black people are supposed to do or act a certain way and because I don't conform to that certain thing and the way I speak and dress and stuff…I guess they immediately associate me as not being Black. I mean I do look Black, of course. I guess that's why.

Keon had similar experiences, but pushed aggressively against these imposed limitations:

> Like if you dress or talk a certain way and that way is *uneducated* [refer-
> ring to vernacular or patois] [everybody laughs knowingly], people think
> "Black," [but if you speak without vernacular/patois]…they'll say, "you
> don't sound Black." When people say that it's actually ironic, because the
> people that say these things usually aren't Black, they're… White. They say
> they that you don't talk "Black"; so, there's this whole thing. I don't like
> being associated with that because I feel like I'm as Black as it gets [laughs
> and gestures to phenotype], so for someone who's not Black to tell you that
> you belong or subscribe to another group that is outside of your ethnicity…
> to tell you that you're not Black when you look at yourself every day in the
> mirror and you see a Black person, right? And you live a Black life? There's
> no such thing. Even if you listen to rock music or watch anime, that doesn't
> make you White. If you have more of an eclectic palate for culture, that
> doesn't mean that you're not Black. It just means that you're more diverse
> [in your interests].

The participants also experienced peers and teachers being surprised at their articulate-
ness, finding it intimidating, and often constructing them as "not Black" or *acting White*
when they used "big words." They described how teachers and peers alike "just didn't
like it," as the initial assumption was that they were "stupid." In these ways, the parti-
cipants learned that there was a culture of low expectations *for them* that also expected
them to perform their Blackness through an embodiment of hip-hop culture in dress,
style, and parlance, coupled with poor intellectual abilities. Given this knowing and the
smaller Black populations in their schools, the participants became proficient in code-
switching to adapt and conform to these exclusionary spaces. To survive socially, they
also opted to become "floaters," oscillating from group to group as the need arose or as
interests matched, without having a core group of peers and few if any, who shared their
racial, cultural, or ethnic background. As Malia described:

> Because there's not a lot of Black people, I *have* to weave in and out be-
> cause if I just hang out with the Black people, there's none in your class, so
> it's just a select few, right? For me, personally, I've always been okay with

talking to everyone from other cultures. I have a lot of Asian, Somalian, and Persian friends. To be honest, I have less Black friends than Asian friends [because there's so many].

By encountering hegemonic ideas and values, which uncoupled intelligence from their bodies through being told that they "acted White," the participants demonstrated a learning of what their Blackness meant through the eyes of others and an awareness of the power of Whiteness within educational contexts (Dei, 1997). *Acting White* refers to a cultural phenomenon where engaging in behaviours or with symbols and events as a Black person that are defined as falling within a White cultural frame of reference, are considered strange, gauche, and/or offensive (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 182). One can experience psychic stress and social exclusion when thought to be "acting White." While Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) *acting White* has been highly contested, critiqued, expanded, and clarified since its original publication (see Akom, 2008; Cokley, 2013; Fordham, 2008; Harpalani, 2002; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Ogbu, 2004; Stinson, 2011; Tyson et al., 2005), I contend that Black Canadian experiences with this phenomenon have been undertheorized. As such, I still find Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) original definition of *acting White* as a social dynamic that can marginalize Black students in schooling environments, useful to unpack the projection and explicit labelling of this identity in this study.

While the participants rejected and were offended by these assertions, I argue that underpinning these projections was a rejection and discomfort from others regarding their lack of conformity to limited stereotypical conceptions of Blackness, rooted in popular culture depictions, and defined by a narrow scope of interests. These environmental cues can be understood as a form of violating "ontological and epistemic violence…initiated through White [or racial others'] spectatorship" (Yancy, 2016, p. 73), which characterizes seen-invisibility. Intrinsic to these violences was an insistent linking of the participants' Blackness with intellectual inferiority through their finding themselves socially excluded or punished via a lack of social belonging and peers *because* they embodied Black identities coupled with high achievement, a broad vocabulary, and diverse interests. In these ways, the participants frequently came up against others' rendering of their bodies as illegible and, in response, often coped via code-switching.

These experiences negated their being, which Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe as "experiences of inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance" (p. 177). Implicit in marking their interests and aptitudes as White, was an assertion that Black people could

not also be smart, which could work to devalue and dismiss their intellectual abilities and efforts (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). While outside the scope of the original research study, I wonder which additional survival strategies and agentic and adaptive behaviours were developed by the participants to grapple with these narrow identity constructions, projections of *acting White*, and broader negative experiences. Were those strategies congruent with academic achievement, emotional well-being, and a healthy sense of self?

Discussion and Implications: Chilly Racializing School Climates in the GTA

The participants described undergoing processes of racialization that inscribed a lack of intellectual ability and power onto them through a lack of physical, social, and intellectual space to exist, and at a key time in their development (adolescence) when REC identities were being concretized relative to Whiteness (Tatum, 2017). These experiences worked to put Blackness in its place, as the students learned to make sense of their identities through interpreting the psychic distancing of intelligence from Blackness via teacher and peer relations that were suspicious of their academic abilities and, thus, reinforced and reified the notion that [proximity to] Whiteness is smartness (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). This racialization was also further instilled through environmental cues and how participants continually unearthed hidden curriculums[14] (see McCutcheon, 1997) of Black inferiority and unbelonging in the segregation of their schools both physically and socially (racial cliques), ascriptions of inferiorizing traits, assertions of *acting White*, differential treatment, and cultures of low expectations enacted through a disbelief in their intellectual abilities, and the inability to find substantive and validating peer groups. The rigid embeddedness with which these discourses negated the participants' embodiment of high-achievement or intelligence by positioning them as oddities and rewriting and redefining them as either non-Black, Black-adjacent, or fraudulent, reflect the constitutive power of racialization, which served to reinforce and insist on the intrinsic linking of intelligence with Whiteness or one's proximity to it.

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14 The *hidden curriculum* functions and operates implicitly and encompasses what students learn informally and unintentionally through everyday activities and interactions in school (McCutcheon, 1997).

Yancy (2016) describes experiences like these as *seen-invisibility*—a bifurcated existence or double-consciousness that reinforces anti-Blackness. In this case, seen-invisibility was enacted through the dispossession of high intellect from these students, prioritizing the beliefs and projections of others onto their bodies rather than their comfort, dignity, or realities. Throughout this study, the participants described experiences of transmogrification or being taken up of as oddities in school—as some*thing* strange, exceptional, or ill-placed (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Yancy, 2016, p. 53). These damaging experiences reflect the granular ways that cultures of low expectations operate and are reinforced by institutions and peers, as well as how these cultures necessitate dextrous identity performance for survival.

Integral to experiences of seen-invisibility is the White gaze and its definitional power. In this study, the White gaze can be understood as systemic educational logics, which determine the educational rules of engagement based in Whiteness. These rules determine who gets into which schools and why, who learns what, where, and how, and which opportunities flow from those decisions. Yancy (2016) describes this gaze as being able to strip one of their self-perception and return to them a distorted sense of self and reality. Definitional power also lies in the ability to erase what is actually happening, or in the case of the participants, their actual academic abilities (also see Parekh et al., 2021). This erasure often happens through a series of "humbling experiences," which exert racial violence through *death blows*, which Yancy (2016) argues, serve to put one in their place (p. 55). These death blows were exemplified through the participants' descriptions of educational gatekeeping, social isolation, low educational expectations, and, in the case of Malia and Mervyn, experiencing starkly superior educational opportunities in a space where Black people were virtually absent. Hence, even when one meets the criteria (grades, skills, talent, etc.) to belong or gain access to enriched spaces, one's Blackness can still render them an outsider. In these ways, racist historical imaginaries and asymmetric power relations can function to prohibit students from belonging as Black *and* high-achieving through gazes, erasures, humbling experiences, and disqualifications (Yancy, 2016). As Fine and Ruglis (2009) argue, the participants were being returned to their bodies as fundamentally incompatible with intelligence or high achievement and potentially "disposable, [dangerous], worthy of dispossession, or in need of containment" (p. 31), rather than something representing worthiness or merit.

It is in these ways that a lack of physical, social, and intellectual space to exist can also be understood as hidden curriculums, which are part of the mechanics of racialization and work to reproduce and maintain limitations on Black student achievement through an insistence on their unbelonging. Even with demonstrated academic potential via performance, Black students are still often not rewarded, lack opportunities, or, as Gaztambide-Fernández and Angod (2019) argue, are precariously and awkwardly included, as is evidenced by their poor access or outright blockage from elite schools and programs. Therefore, this othering and racialization happens through "meaning-constituting activities" (Yancy, 2016, p. 77), which reinforce exclusion[15]. Moreover, by failing to foster development, protection, or supports, these learning conditions may also imprint deficiency onto their bodies and can potentially truncate future possibilities and restructure their aspirational capacities (Fine and Ruglis, 2009). This implicit and persistent messaging may also potentially work to exhaust Black students—breeding a sense of futility and apathy because it appears that they are "overdetermined from without" (Fanon, 2008, p. 95), with *few* expecting brilliance from them or knowing what to do with it when encountered, while also summoning them to alter themselves for a chance at belonging.

Therefore, I posit that seen-invisibility can mark high-achieving Black students as hyper-visible, while simultaneously rendering their intellect unintelligible, invisible, undeserving, and unsuitable for intellectually rigorous environments. This can limit Black students' ability to access and fully benefit from the rewards and opportunities offered in enriched academic spaces, while also potentially constraining aspirations and self-realization and actualization. The particular ways in which this study's participants were made to feel unwelcome in academically rigorous spaces and were left to navigate and grapple with poor school climates elicits further study. These explorations could include examinations of the impacts of processes of racialization on the sense of belonging, connectedness, and socialization of Black students, which research shows shapes emotional well-being, academic performance, and outcomes (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; George et al., 2021; Pena-Shaff et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013).

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15 A key meaning constituting activity which also reinforces unbelonging is the need for the participants to develop amorphous and assimilative identities to survive.

Conclusion: Making High-Achieving Black Students Visible

Brimming with energy, ideas, and great potential, the participants operated with an intellectual depth, complexity, insight, and curiosity far beyond their years. I often wonder where they ended up and how different their educational experiences could have been if they were in more supportive and protective environments. Did their resilience and code-switching end up being enough? What about the experiences of all the other *bright* Black Canadian students who are absent from the literature? How much will they have to endure to potentially be the exception to the proverbial rule? In which ways has exceptionalism been the goal? How have we been implicitly defining educational success as proximity to Whiteness and its educational spaces?

This study found that the participants' Blackness and intellect were being constructed paradoxically, often resulting in disruptions (changing schools), ruptures (struggling socially), negotiations (floating among groups), and microaggressions (low expectations and assertions of acting White). There was also the imminent existential threat of unrealized potential, and that these intellectual, emotional, and psychological lacerations may have deleterious effects on the personal development and [mental] well-being of the participants. Where can high-achieving Black students go to feel culturally, emotionally, and racially safe and supported, with high expectations of them, and without needing to develop amorphous assimilative identities to survive? What safe educational options exist for Black families seeking to avoid toxic learning environments? If they exist, are they are accessible? If not, how do we create them? How can the educational decision making of Black families be better supported? How can high-achieving/*bright* Black students be better identified, understood, and supported?

While existing and vital navigational tools, resources, and grassroots organizations in the GTA work to help families navigate and survive existing inequitable conditions (CBC News, 2021; Parents of Black Children, n.d.; Ron Fanfair, 2021), what would it look like to position Black youth beyond a state of survival to a state of thriving? How is the improvement of outcomes currently being defined, and is it enough? If the goal is to facilitate Black student thriving, we must grapple with how and why high-achieving students may still face alienating structural barriers *even when* performing well academically by traditional measures. Moreover, because these educational barriers for Black students have persisted for generations, we must also interrogate the scholarly avoidances

and erasures of high-achieving Black Canadian students in the literature and reckon with what the success-to-failure ratio has been using current approaches to advocacy. How many (generations of) Black potentialities have been lost in the interim? Is the imagined outcome of current advocacy worth the wait? Would community and stakeholder efforts be better spent developing alternative spaces so that students have somewhere to go and thrive both permanently and in the meantime, while the system practices languorous incrementalistic approaches to equity and elusive *change?* How can discourses shift from what can't happen (due to structural barriers) to what can (based on creating new options), as studies show that when given appropriate environmental supports, Black students thrive (Alphonso, 2021; Balingit & Rabinowitz, 2021; Fernando, 2021; Mazama, 2016; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2015; Miller, 2021)?

A collective reimagining, redefining, and rethinking—beyond educational achievement gaps—of how to resist barriers at all achievement levels is needed, with the recognition that as agitation for institutional accountability and transformation continues, Black students urgently need to live, thrive, learn, and grow *now*—not in an undefined future time far beyond their youth. Multi-pronged approaches that offer diverse, viable, and safe options are needed and must grapple with the complex negotiations that Black families face in educational decision-making processes.

Recommendations include:

a) Collecting qualitative and disaggregated race-based quantitative data to determine the complex and intersectional factors shaping high-achieving Black student experiences (in gifted, enrichment, and regular streams) and the roles of school climate, school choice, racial composition of schools, and teacher, parent, and peer relations. This can facilitate comparative and longitudinal analyses, which can drive macro, meso, and microlevel interventions and be used to measure efficacy and accountability.

b) Creating permanent and systemically embedded measures and pathways to identify and place Black students in enriched and gifted programs that stay in place regardless of leadership changes. Research has found that existing measures tend to screen out Black students, and alternative approaches like multifactorial identification, less reliance on standardized testing, and using less culturally-biased tests show promise for creating more equitable access (Ford, 1995, 1998; Ford et al., 2001, 2016; Naglieri & Ford, 2003; Whiting &

Ford, 2009). Beyond access, these spaces must be racially safe pedagogically, ideologically, psychologically, and representationally, as to not simply increase access to harmful spaces.

c) Creating protective public *and* private/independent educational counterspaces and institutions. These spaces may embody a politics of refusal (see Karera, 2021) and/or pragmatically speaking, simply intellectually develop, position, and empower Black students to thrive in safer environments (Case & Hunter, 2012; Chavannes, 2022; Dei, 2016). These counterspaces must provide diverse rigorous academic curricula and opportunities, engage in cultural preservation and appreciation, and foster healthy social relations (Daniel, 2021). Compared to their American counterparts, Black Canadian students have significantly less educational options and infrastructure beyond the public system. While each educational pathway has limitations, Black American students at least have access to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), clearer articulation agreements between community colleges and universities to support institutional transfers, more school choice (vouchers, private, and independent schools), and homeschooling communities and organizations (Mazama, 2016; Mazama & Lundy, 2015; Puga, 2019; Ray, 2015; Robson et al., 2019). Creating more diverse and *viable* Canadian educational options—that do not dichotomize educational opportunity with sociocultural belonging and safety—may more expediently facilitate more successful and diverse post-secondary transitions for Black families, while also offering protection from racial violence and the laborious educational advocacy needed to resist systemic barriers within the existing public system.

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