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Presentation of the Special Issue Regarding African Canadian Educational Excellence

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Introduction

The *United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent* (2015-2024) provides an opportunity to recognize the necessity of promoting the human rights of Black populations across the globe, to enhance their access to justice, and to further the development, and promotion of their well-being (United Nations General Assembly, 2013). Regarding Canada, the *Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent* states the need to “implement a nationwide African Canadian education strategy to address the inordinately low educational attainment, high dropout rates, suspensions and expulsions experienced by African Canadian children and youth” (United Nations 2017, p.19). The report also underscores the importance of further developing an Africentric curriculum and an accurate portrayal of Black Canadian history in textbooks and course materials, to avoid the perpetuation of negative stereotypes (United Nations 2017, p. 16). This bilingual special issue is one answer to the United Nations’ recommendations, with a specific intention of informing reflections, policy-making processes, and practices that foster African Canadian learners’ educational success.

African Canadians are often assigned a subjective social identity that varies contextually across the country. When we refer to this population, we refer to all Black Canadians of African descent, from communities that have been in the country since the onset of the transatlantic settlement, to relatively recent immigrants from the African continent, the Caribbean, and the vast diaspora. Given that education is a fundamental human right and a key social determinant of health, citizenship, civic participation, and life chances, including employment outcomes and social mobility, this special issue expands an existing body of literature about the educational journeys of African Canadian students. It consists of scholarly theoretical and empirical articles, in English and in French, that contribute to advancing the state of knowledge regarding what promotes their overall educational achievement, success, and well-being. In order to introduce this collection, a brief overview of the literature will be presented, followed by a summary of each article, and a conclusion entailing the implications for future research inquiries, and recommendations.

A brief overview of the literature

In this collection, we build upon existing literature regarding African Canadian students, which generally falls within the four following categories: 1) educational trajectories and transitions across grade levels and systems, 2) parent-school relationships, 3) the role of culturally relevant and responsive education (including Africentric curriculum, pedagogy, or schools) and, 4) enablers of, or barriers to educational access, engagement, or academic achievement.

Firstly, many scholars have explored African Canadian student narratives pertaining to their educational journeys (Adjei, 2018; Codjoe, 2007; Dlamini et al., 2009; Lafortune, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2014; Schroeter & James, 2015; Smith et al., 2005; Zaami, 2015) and transitions from one grade level or system to another (Briggs, 2018; Collins & Magnan, 2018; James, 2019; Kamanzi & Collins, 2018; Lafortune, 2019; Munroe et al., 2019). This body of research which primarily consists of (but is not limited to) qualitative inquiries, can touch upon enablers of, and barriers to education, often entails an analysis of life transitions that includes the voices of Black Canadian learners. Several of these studies highlight the importance of centering, amplifying, and valuing African Canadian students' voices to better support their learning.

Secondly, parent-school relationships and parental perspectives have also been explored empirically, notably, the various forms of support and socialization employed by Black parents (Codjoe, 2007; Dei, 2008; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017; Lalonde et al., 2008) and teacher perceptions of these parents (Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2019). One of the main implications of this body of literature is that school administrators and teachers are encouraged to foster constructive relationships with Black parents and community organizations to work collaboratively towards success (Livingstone et al., 2014; Malinen & Roberts-Jeffers, 2019).

In order to promote the educational engagement and success of African Canadian students, the value of critical pedagogy (Thésée & Carr, 2014) and culturally relevant and responsive education, such as an Africentric curriculum or pedagogy (Brathwaite, 2010; Dei, 2008; Finlayson, 2015; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017; Henry, 2017; Howard & James, 2019) have been put forward. These educational practices are associated to increased engagement and motivation, and the affirmation of a positive racial identity in a world where several mediated discourses and stereotypes of Black people are

negative, and positive role models in and outside of schools are scarce (Codjoe, 2006; Howard & James, 2019). In addition, the activism and responses to the possible opening of an Africentric school, along with the public responses that resulted from such a contentious debate have also been analysed, in order to unpack commonly held beliefs about representation, racism, and inequality (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Hampton, 2010; Johnson, 2013). Critical culturally relevant and responsive education are often discussed as enabling access to, and engagement in education, and thus, overlap with the most prevalent theme in the literature: educational enablers and barriers.

By far, enablers of and barriers to education that affect African Canadian students is the theme most often explored in the academic literature. Among these barriers we find anti-Black sentiment, racism, racialization, Eurocentricity, low expectations, and stereotypes (Adjei, 2018; Briggs, 2018; Codjoe, 2001; Collins & Magnan, 2018; Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1997; Howard, 2014; James, 2012; Thésée & Carr, 2016; Zaami, 2015), acculturation, integration, or post-migration related challenges (Dlamini et al., 2009; Kanu, 2008; Schroeter & James, 2015; Usman, 2012), disproportionality in punitive school discipline (Salole and Abdulle, 2015; Sibblis, 2014); special education placement and academic streaming (James & Turner, 2017; Robson et al., 2018; Mc Andrew & Ledent, 2008); and sociodemographic factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic background, as well as other factors specific to regional and social contexts (Abada, Hou, & Ram, 2009; Adjei, 2018; Robson et al., 2018; Caldas, Bernier, & Marceau, 2009; George, 2020; Livingstone et al. 2014; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017; Munroe et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2005).

The contributions in this thematic issue build upon this rich literature, with a deliberate focus on what promotes educational success and excellence among African Canadian students, thus shifting our gaze away from deficits or challenges. We strive to bring attention to transformative practices, interventions, conditions, and contexts that can build upon and expand the abilities and creativity of Black Canadian learners, and encourage policy-makers and administrators to embrace a strength-based approach with a critical-equity lens.

Contents of this special issue

This special issue is comprised of four articles (one theoretical, three empirical) based on qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Ontario. In the first, Dr. Gina Thésée draws from critical race theory to offer an insightful conceptual and theoretical reflection that challenges epistemological racism and paves the way to alternative epistemological, ethical and methodological approaches for the conduct of research in education with Black youth and communities. In the second article, using a quantitative approach, Dr. Pierre Canisius Kamanzi presents the resilience displayed by Black students in Quebec from immigrant backgrounds throughout their postsecondary journeys. The third article, presents the recommendations of Black Nova Scotian parents' for improving learning experiences for Black students in public schools, through a qualitative analysis conducted by Dr. Hamilton-Hinch and her colleagues. In the fourth and final article, Dr. Alana Butler uses a qualitative approach to illustrate how mentoring circles are spaces of community wealth and care that can engage low-income Black parents, and operate as sites where strong family-school ties can be consolidated.

Moving forward: Educational research regarding African Canadians

This collection of works synchronizes with the International Decade for People of African Descent, which sets the stage for a differential conceptualization of 'Africanness', that pushes us to reframe and rearticulate the ways in which we language discourses regarding Black students and their families. The ways ideas or concepts are articulated frame the manner in which we engage and interact with them. Although bringing attention to the challenges faced by Black students has been necessary in a colour-blind society, this deficit-oriented emphasis has also been a limiting and devastating practice that has curtailed the futures of generations of Canadian children and youth. This collection seeks to reposition the dialogue regarding Black students while underscoring the need to explore the factors that are promotive of success, thus setting a solid foundation for replicating it amongst Black students. Centering the perspectives of parents and students and providing empirical evidence regarding the strategies they employ to

successfully navigate Canadian educational institutions and their obstacles can reframe deficit narratives and inspire school personnel to adopt strength-based perspectives and practices. Providing a true and holistic portrait of African-Canadian people's investment in education both from historical and contemporary perspectives, can change their educational trajectories, career pathways and options, and can enhance the long-term stability of Black Canadians. Black educational success, which is a foundational social indicator of wellbeing, is not only central to ensuring the survival and the maximization of the human potential of Black communities, but it is also essential to Canadian society overall. As such, this collection is one step in the movement of promoting and propelling Black excellence forward.

As we conduct research centering and promoting excellence, it is important to avoid conflating race with culture. Nationally, there is great linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity among African Canadians along with a shared sub-Saharan African ancestry, and often, a desire to learn about the various Black diasporic cultural and historical heritages, as well as a shared commitment to challenge anti-Black racism. Studying African Canadians exclusively through the prism of their migration status results in a partial overview of the agency and resilience that they mobilize in the face of structural barriers such as anti-Black racism, in addition to immigrant and refugee status related challenges (Thésée & Carr, 2016). Similarly, there is increasing recognition that an intersectional analytical approach can enrich our understandings of how to best support African Canadians who experience multiple forms of oppression (George, 2020; Lafortune, 2019; Munroe et al., 2019). Most importantly, it is important to conduct research led by, for, and with African Canadian scholars and community members. In the same spirit, we encourage scholars to familiarize themselves and draw from the rich scholarship authored by numerous African Canadian scholars (many of which are cited in this introduction) to build upon previous research findings. Research design with a focus on practices, interventions and policies that build upon the strengths, capacities, skills, and cultural wealth of African Canadians can be challenging because researchers' training emphasizes addressing problems and a commitment to report participants' voiced preoccupations, which sometimes tend to emphasize challenges, concerns, and gaps. As such, this thematic issue is an invitation to adopt a paradigm that centers African Canadian educational excellence in empirical studies.

Conclusion

The bilingual special issue, *African Canadian educational excellence*, sought to provide researchers and theorists with the space to rethink how we work with, collect, and analyze data related to the educational experiences of Black communities. The authors have adopted a range of methodologies and theoretical orientations designed to provide broad perspectives related to the educational success of Black students. The contents of this issue collectively provide us with the opportunity to envision and create possibilities for Black students and their families. They invite us to rethink the focus of our research projects, our methodologies and our analytical frameworks, all in an effort to engage with the language of possibility, and with practices of success and excellence for African Canadian students and their families.

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