

# “I Was Also Dying Silently...”: Black Graduate Students’ Mentorship Experiences at a University in Western Canada

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Article abstract

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# **“I Was Also Dying Silently...”: Black Graduate Students’ Mentorship Experiences at a University in Western Canada**

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## **Abstract**

This discussion examines the mentoring experiences of Black graduate students enrolled in a Faculty of Education at a university located in western Canada between the years 2010 and 2020. The students were pursuing masters’ and doctoral degrees and were asked to reflect on the mentorship and support that they received during the course of their graduate programs. Drawing from critical and interdisciplinary perspectives about Blackness, the paper analyzes these experiences as narrated by the participants through semi-structured qualitative research interviews. Findings point to the pervasiveness of systemic racism in a culture of whiteness, along with the lack of mentorship and its impacts on the Black graduate experience. The discussion concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

## **Introduction**

When many Black students embark upon graduate school in Canada, they enter an environment that is new to them in terms of norms, values, culture, and expectations. Thus, they need to learn to adjust to this stressful environment that was never designed with Black students in mind (Bell et al., 2021). Canadian educational institutions were historically structured to serve White people and to validate Eurocentric knowledges and cultures (Bell et al, 2021; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, 2000; Henry, 1998). For a lot of Black students, systemic racism and marginalization pose significant challenges to pursuing graduate studies and achieving academic success (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Mentoring can be a liberatory and transformative experience for Black graduate students as they pursue their education. The few available studies on Black student mentoring in Canadian post-secondary education indicate that the students experience numerous barriers in their education. This article reports on findings from a study that examined the mentoring experiences of predominantly international Black graduate students in a Faculty of Education in western Canada between 2010 and 2020.

## **Literature on Black Graduate Students in Canada**

Within Canadian graduate schools, there is limited scholarly work examining the experiences of Black graduate students enrolled in universities. The majority of the available research,

largely conducted in the United States, shows that Black graduate students have to cope with complex systemic barriers, including marginalization, lack of mentorship, unwelcoming campus environments, and racism (Brunsma, et al., 2017; Harper, 2012; Lilly et al., 2018; McKinney, 2020; Milner, 2004). These experiences contribute to feelings of alienation, invisibility, and lack of belonging (Haskins et al., 2013; Lilly et al., 2018; Milner, 2004). Studies on Black graduate student experiences in Canada point to isolation, invisibility, and inimical learning environments, all of which undermine the students' pursuit of academic excellence (Bunjun, 2021; Hamilton & Shang, 1999; Hampton, 2017; Henry & Tator, 2009; Noreiga & Justin, 2020; Paul, 2012). Anti-Black racism and the "lack of access to safe spaces, educational cultural capital, and financial advancement opportunities" (Yusuf, 2020, p. 55) are prevalent. Black students are often seen as "bodies out of place" in the academy (Bunjun, 2021, p.4). Most Canadian universities lack culturally responsive and critical race scholarship (Bunjun, 2021; Carter, 2007). Everyday racism is widespread (Moore, 2021), and Black students experience otherness vis-à-vis a normative whiteness; hyper-visibility; stereotyping; and racial micro-aggressions (Park & Bahia, 2022). They are often burdened with educating their White peers and speaking out against racism and colonialism (Daniel, 2019; Henry, 2017; Park & Bahia, 2022).

While this body of literature is insightful, the mentorship experiences of Black graduate students as a group by themselves is not well-documented. Yet, the existing literature shows that mentoring plays a critical role in fostering Black students' personal and professional development (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Patton, 2009). Black graduate students who are mentored fare much better in both academic achievement and career success, providing them an advantage for future faculty jobs, as opposed to those who do not receive mentoring (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Patton, 2009). It should also be noted that cultural connections are key to facilitating mentorship (Corneille et al., 2005). As Okawa (2002) illustrated, it is easier for Black graduate students to connect with mentors who have similar backgrounds and are therefore more likely to understand their distinctive experiences and challenges. However, in Canada, this cultural connection is lacking because Black faculty are grossly underrepresented in Canadian post-secondary institutions, comprising only 2% of the full-time professors (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2018).

### **Understanding Mentorship**

The literature contains various descriptions of mentorship. Anderson and Shannon (1988) view mentoring as a nurturing process in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages and counsels a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development. Mentors share experiences and offer expert insights to mentees. They strive to promote mentees' careers and well-being, and advance academic and professional goals in directions most desired by the mentees. They do so while remaining sensitive to the latter's life experiences and sensibilities, which have been conditioned by culture, race, ethnicity, gender and other factors (Alvarez et al., 2009).

Mentorship is sometimes confused with supervision and the provision of advice. However, as Bird (2001) points out, in graduate school, both supervisors and advisors are often mentors. Lindén, Ohlin, and Brodin (2013) note that some scholars use the terms “advising” and “mentoring” interchangeably, whereas others differentiate between the two. Santiesteban et al. (2022) suggest that an advisor supports students, based on departmental and institutional guidelines, to complete their program requirements (see also Bird, 2001). Mentoring involves “more personal relations, besides interaction relevant to the student’s professional socialization, while advising is restricted to questions concerning research tasks” (Linden et al., 2013, p. 640). Supervisors support graduate students in the process of becoming scholars and researchers in their respective fields within academic and non-academic settings (Pearson & Brew, 2002). Although graduate advisors and supervisors may be conceived slightly differently in various international contexts, research also shows that overall, their role is to facilitate the academic development of the graduate student (Hodza, 2007; Watson & Blair, 2018).

The participants in this study often referred to their advisors and supervisors as mentors, while acknowledging the power differentials between them. Manathunga (2007) observed that because of the power relations between students and supervisors, mentoring is never a neutral or innocent practice. On the other hand, some scholars assert that positioning supervision as mentorship removes those power differentials and hierarchies between graduate students and their supervisors (Pearson & Brew, 2002).

We adhere to the concept of mentorship presented by Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, and Kearney (1997), which emphasizes guiding and supporting graduate students during the course of their research programs in activities such as honing their research and writing skills, advising them on how to network and present at conferences, and securing career-related employment opportunities. We also draw on Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, and McClendon’s (2011) emphasis on culturally grounded mentoring approaches that center the unique experiences of Black graduate students. Most graduate school mentoring programs are based on White, middle-class norms (Corneille, et al., 2005). Spalter-Roth, Shin, Mayorova, and White (2013) argue that meaningful mentoring should recognize and utilize cultural values and differences lest it exacerbate isolation and marginalization of racialized students. It is worth noting that, at the institution under study, there exist no formal mentorship arrangements for graduate students. However, it is usually the case that upon admission to a program, graduate students are assigned an advisor who may, at some point, become that student’s supervisor and eventually their mentor.

### **Design and Methodology**

This study shows how race and racism are normalized in daily life and, in this case, in educational institutions (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Consequently, Black lives reveal unique and often troubling experiences in White supremacist institutions (Henry, 2015). We used critical narrative approaches to emphasize the importance of validating Black experiences (Etter-Lewis & Foster, 1996; Williams, 2019). To analyze the Black graduate experience, we used an intersectional lens (Collins, 2019) and examined the various ways that the students experience the complexities of power relations in their programs,

including across nationality, immigrant status, language background, gender, class, and race. The students provided oppositional stories or counterstories as they shared their troubling accounts of marginalization and exclusion. We used an interpretive design and an in-depth interview methodology (Gallagher & Tobin, 1991; Schwandt, 1998). Themes and patterns were analyzed inductively and presented in narrative form. The focus was to share mentorship experiences that could not be known without the participants' oppositional stories, or counterstories (Henry, 2015).

## **Selection of Participants**

We used a combination of purposeful sampling and a snowball strategy to recruit the study participants. The target population was Black graduate students who were willing to take part in the study. To be included in the sample, potential candidates had to be either a Black graduate student currently enrolled in the Faculty of Education, or a former Black graduate student who had graduated from the Faculty between 2010 and 2020.

Recruitment began in August 2020, with two research assistants mailing recruitment letters to potential interviewees, inviting them to consider participating in the study. All respondents were provided with an explanation of the study's significance and goals, and an invitation to sign an informed consent form indicating their willingness to take part in the study. During the initial interview, the candidates were notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any time or for any reason, as well as to refrain from responding to any question without experiencing any negative consequences. Since the Faculty of Education did not collect race-based data, we relied heavily on the research team members' social networks to contact current and former Black graduate students. Those who initially agreed to participate were invited to refer other Black graduate students who might be willing to participate. Those recommended were contacted by the two graduate research assistants and invited to take part in the study. The insider status of the graduate research assistants was crucial to the success of the recruitment process, since they had access to current Black graduate students, as well as those who had previously graduated.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted remotely as opposed to face-to-face. Thus, the virtual qualitative research conducted for this study were contingent on technology (Archibald et al., 2019; Moylan et al., 2015). This proved to be a strength given that ten of the participants (33% of the sample) had either returned to their home countries in Africa or relocated elsewhere to the USA or other parts of Canada. A total of 37 participants were recruited via email, telephone, or in-person contact. Thirty-three (73%) of them, including 18 (55%) males and 15 (45%) females, returned consent forms and were subsequently interviewed. Four dropped out of the study and were therefore not interviewed. Of the 33 candidates who agreed to participate in the study, twenty-six (79%) had graduated. Fifteen (45%) had graduated with a Master's degree, 11 (33%) with a PhD, and 7 (21%) had yet to graduate. Thirty of the participants were international students and identified as Black African. Most of them were professionals with high social standing in their home countries, who had come to further their studies at the university. The other three were Canadians. The study participants represented all of the Departments and Units within the Faculty of Education. The research assistants were also

Black Africans, and drew on their networks for recruitment. To protect their identities, and to honour their ancestry, we have used Black African pseudonyms. Because of the small number of Black graduate students who enrolled in the Faculty during the 10-year period under consideration, we will not mention their Departments, Units, or any other identifying information.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Between August 2020 and February 2021, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data with the study participants. The aim was to elicit in-depth responses to questions about their graduate school experiences. The participants were asked to respond to questions relating to: (a) their decision to study at this particular Faculty of Education; (b) the curriculum; (c) the classroom environment and interactions; (d) relationships with peers and professors; (e) funding; and (f) mentorship. They were also asked to recommend ways and means to improve the experiences of Black graduate students. As stated earlier, this paper focuses on mentorship.

The interviews, which lasted between 60 to 120 minutes, were conducted online using the University's Zoom platform. On occasions when internet connectivity was interrupted, the interviews were conducted via telephone. The participants were asked to share their mentorship experiences in teaching and conducting research, as well as to offer recommendations for future Black graduate students wishing to study at the institution.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the research assistants. Next, the research team reviewed the interview transcripts in order to identify emerging patterns from which preliminary themes were drawn. Meeting bi-weekly, from early March to early July 2021, the research team analyzed and categorized the themes that were identified. The majority of the following students' narratives pointed to the lack of mentorship, a hostile and anti-Black learning environment, and to a culture of whiteness.

### **Black Students' Mentoring Stories**

One of the most important resources within graduate departments is faculty mentorship (Davis, 2007; Reddick, 2011). We wanted to gain insights into mentoring experiences that included opportunities to work as teaching assistants or course instructors, collaborate with faculty on research projects, co-author papers, develop research grants, and receive support with applying for fellowships. We have summarized the participants' experiences with these activities under the themes relating and connecting with mentors; mentorship through course work; mentorship in teaching and research; racism and anti-Blackness; and the importance of Black peers and Black faculty mentors.

It is important to note that even though the majority of the Black graduate students in this study were international students, their experiences were inextricably related to those of Black graduate participants who identified as Canadian in that both experienced anti-Black racism, which negatively impacted their academic success (Jean-Pierre & James, 2020; Mullings et al.,



2016). Research shows that in North American contexts, the social constructions of Blackness tend to homogenize Black people, while ignoring their diverse ethnicities and nationalities (George Mwangi, 2014). However, international Black students encountered different socialization experiences, and by virtue of being new to Canada, they might not have experienced Canadian racial structures and racism in the same ways as local Black students. Moreover, international Black students faced unique financial challenges, as their tuition was often double that of local students, and they could not access student loans, certain jobs, scholarships, and bursaries due to their immigration status (George Mwangi, et al., 2019).

### **“If it doesn’t work, I will go home”: Lack of Mentorship**

All of the participants referred to their advisors and supervisors as mentors, despite the lack of mentorship that they actually received. Study participants reported that they valued mentors who were cordial, who valued them, who were good listeners, and who were compassionate, caring, supportive and accessible. As to what makes a good mentor, Kaisa remarked:

Certain professors, you know, ask ... “How are you or how are you doing?” And that goes a long way. ... but when you see someone who tends to ignore you, ... you feel ... that supremacy or ... hierarchy over you.

Kaisa's remarks point to the linear power structures existing within graduate schools. Faculty members are not always aware of the power they wield as mentors, nor do they interrogate the hierarchical relations with graduate students with a view to enhancing mentorship experiences.

At the graduate school level, meaningful mentoring often assumes the form of a sustained relationship between mentor and mentee. However, this cannot be achieved if the mentor is cold, distant, and not culturally aware of the students’ needs. The participants reported different degrees of relations with mentors. Some recounted experiencing difficulty accessing and engaging White faculty advisors or supervisors. This is not to say that White professors cannot be good mentors. Nonetheless, Amri reported:

... my professor was very careful, ... maybe not to offend me or not to make .... cultural mistakes. ... in most cases, my supervisor did not like to speak a lot and I had difficult times ... I had to ask other friends who were also supervised by the same professor and ... they told me, like they [students] never cared ... Some of the students said... they changed the supervisors... but I continued with that same supervisor.

Amri references the discomfort and caution some White faculty members might feel in the presence of Black students, which, in turn, fosters reservations and creates distance on the part of students, leading to limited possibilities for collegiality and mentorship. These experiences left Amri feeling alienated, and consequently he became reluctant to seek mentoring opportunities with the professor. Amri’s experiences confirm research reports that show how lack of mentorship and unwelcoming academic environments contribute to alienation of Black graduate students (Gooden et al., 2020; McKinney, 2020). In spite of these experiences, Amri decided against changing mentors.

When I reached third year, .... I said it’s the same, I will not change supervisors. ... I will take the risk and if it doesn’t work I will go back home... I think my professor

understood my frustration and suggested I speak with other senior students... one senior student...really helped me a lot.

Amri continued with his studies despite his frustrations, and sought advice and support from peers. The peers provided the academic, social, and emotional support and stability for Amri, and they served as critical anchors that contributed to his retention and eventual success in graduate school.

### **“When I have this class it’s like I am traumatized”: Hostile Learning Environment**

The graduate programs in which the study participants were enrolled required completion of preliminary course work prior to writing a thesis or a comprehensive research paper. During this period, a few shared their experiences of racism in the classroom. Mosi, for example, recalled one learning environment that can only be described as hostile and racist: “I think that Prof doesn’t like Blacks and people of colour.” Mosi further explained that, “in class you could tell that everybody, apart from the White students, was having tension and that made us feel so bad. ... she just had no business with students of colour, be it Black or Asian.” Students were constantly anxious because of the inimical learning environment as described by Mosi:

People always sat quietly and we were always full of tension. ... a student – we always sat together – commented... “Oh, my God, when I have this class it’s like I am traumatized and then I have a whole week of healing then again get traumatized.” And that was the experience of every person of colour in the class apart from the White students who were comfortable with her.

Mosi shows how the emotional and academic well-being of racialized students was being undermined by the professor’s preference for working with White students. This was compounded with racial micro-aggressions, that is, the subtle verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual insults directed toward racial minorities, often automatically or unconsciously (Solórzano et al. 2000). These behaviours aroused such fear among racialized students that they were reluctant to even ask the professor questions:

[A]nd even if you put your hand up, she would choose White students only to answer... So whenever that professor taught us something, we feared to ask questions because she was always rude and that pushed us back to our supervisor to ask questions that we would have asked in the class. (Mosi)

White privilege was normalized in the class. The unspoken discourse was that White students were better and better belonged than racialized students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Even though the professor’s actions were evidently racist, the students feared that reporting her would prove futile. Race and power worked to keep the professor’s behaviour intact without fear of reprisal. Consequently, racism became bodily immobilizing for racialized students. The students did, however, inform their supervisor, noting that, “we are stressed. This class is stressing us!” While the supervisor acknowledged this and remarked, “I can see it on your face,” there was no intervention from the professor.

Although the Faculty has established equity policies and guidelines, they rarely address racism and discriminatory practices such as those which Mosi referenced. When asked why she and her classmates chose not to pursue the matter further, she explained:



I didn't want to entangle myself in anything. I was also dying silently but when she [a friend] mentioned it of course it was a relief. I think in this part of the world, if you don't give a lot of information, they also don't pursue it, so it stopped at that.

The fear of not being believed, and vulnerability as a Black student, and as a woman, in a system of power can discourage students from reporting racism. Consequently, this experience of racism was not addressed, and as Mosi said, students “die silently” in inimical classrooms.

### **“I didn’t have anyone mentoring me”: Supervisors’ Lack of Course Guidance**

Some participants shared a sense of disappointment regarding the lack of appropriate support when selecting courses, particularly those courses which were intended to prepare them for completing theses or other projects. Supervisors, advisors and mentors were notably absent in this respect. As Amri recalled, his supervisor did not provide course guidance, and their interactions were minimal. Dada agreed, saying, “I didn’t have anyone teaching me, mentoring me, guiding me my first year, as in ‘This is what to expect, this is what to do, this is how you navigate your way in terms of course lectures and so forth.’” Amri’s and Dada’s observations highlight gaps in mentorship, particularly in the areas of ease of access, support, and feedback. The professors might have assumed that Amri and Dada, despite being new to Canada, were aware of the specificity of the university and Faculty culture, as well as expectations of international graduate students attending a Canadian university and did not require guidance in relation to their courses. International Black graduate students’ adjustment experiences could benefit from targeted supports as they try to understand the structure and workings of Canadian universities, which may be different from those in their countries of origin (Trice, 2004).

### **Mentorship through Teaching and Research Assistantships**

Teaching and research assistantships offer graduate students opportunities to supplement their income and savings, as well as acquire teaching and research experiences at the university level, which are indispensable for an academic career. The participants noted that such opportunities were scarce. Very few of them succeeded in gaining university-level teaching and research experience during their graduate programs. For example, Zawadi had no opportunities to teach, apart from voluntary work, despite applying repeatedly for a teaching assistantship (TA). She described the lack of TA experience as a missed opportunity in her graduate education:

I applied to several, I never got any. I was putting in good applications. I'm not just saying that because it's me, but because I've asked people to look through my application and they thought it was good, but I just never hear back. I don't know what I have done wrong, but it never worked for me...

Zawadi ends by questioning what she has done wrong:

I brought it to the attention of my supervisor. I was looking for this position, because I wanted to do a PhD afterwards... Plus, the whole COVID thing, we don't see each other, and I don't want to keep sending emails to professors... Before COVID we were seeing each other in class; I would mention that I was looking for a TA [position] and they would just wish me well, that was it.

Zawadi demonstrates an example of gendered racism. The lack of support from her supervisor evokes literature that points to ways, both in the classroom (Henry, 1998), and in the workplace (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998), Black women are ignored, overlooked, and lack support towards advancing their opportunities. When asked to reflect on research mentorship and the importance of accessing graduate research assistantship (GRA) opportunities, Zawadi highlighted the importance of bridging theory and practice and thus the need for GRA experience. She noted that “I’ve taken a lot of research courses, but I strongly believe courses don’t equal experience.” She lamented that her research experience amounted to merely synthesizing research literature. The little experience she had was as an undergraduate student back in her country.

Although she worked as a Teaching Assistant, Safiya had minimal experience with research mentorship and consequently received few opportunities to work as a graduate research assistant. As she explains, “I have applied for jobs. I didn’t get any apart from getting opportunities for conferences, for workshops and some of the training. But saying mentorship per se, that I’ve been engaged in, with some research, no.” According to Safiya, the lack of GRA opportunities obliged some graduate students to seek opportunities outside the Faculty of Education: “I was looking forward to having opportunity as a sessional, ... to have opportunity to teach in class and get that experience as an instructor, but I didn’t get the opportunity. Maybe I will get the opportunity to do so.” Ever hopeful, Safiya was turned down for research mentoring and teaching opportunities.

There are fewer teaching assistant opportunities in this Faculty of Education than other Arts and Science Faculties, as they [Faculty of Education] do not have many undergraduate programs that could employ graduate students. Thus, it is even more difficult for “outsiders” who come to the university without the cultural and symbolic capital to attain these positions. In addition, academic and corporate research on women and sponsorship and promotion to positions of leadership suggests that Black women “are treated as virtually invisible” (Hewlett & Green, 2015; Smith et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). While Safiya remained “hopeful,” Zawadi thought it would be “too much” to “keep sending professors emails,” perhaps suggesting the ways that girls and young women are socialized not to be a bother, and to acquiesce. Different cultural norms regarding interacting with professors may also have played a role.

On the other hand, Sefu was one of the few Black graduate students who was able to garner a research assistantship. He believed that this opportunity proved to be a milestone in gaining research and publishing experience because he was “exposed to different research activities... and also conducted several studies within schools.” Sefu was also mentored in preparing abstracts for conference presentations and publishing with supervisors and colleagues.

Considering their lack of, or limited, experiences as TAs and GRAs, Kipande commented that faculty should support Black graduate students, noting:

The faculty should do better. ... professors tend to hire post-docs but that leaves graduate students with no experience creating a gap. If you want us to become good researchers, then provide us with the resources to support us in becoming good researchers...

A lack of TA and GRA opportunities limits Black graduate students' career prospects, networks and opportunities to work with leaders in their fields of interest.

### **“Somebody is behind somewhere blocking that opportunity for you”: Anti-Black Racism**

The Statistics Canada 2016 report showed that 30% of graduates who earned a degree from a Canadian institution from 2014 to 2017 were racialized. However, enrolment numbers, particularly for Black students, remain low compared to other groups (cited in Turcotte, 2022, p. 2). Among Black boys aged 13 to 17 in 2006, approximately half (51%) had attained a postsecondary qualification in 2016, compared with 62% of other boys (Turcotte, 2022, p. 2-3). Additionally, although young Black women were more likely than young Black men to complete postsecondary studies, they were also less likely than other women in the same cohort to have a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree in 2016 (Turcotte, 2022, p. 3). This might be one contributing factor to Black underrepresentation as one ascends the university hierarchy (Smith, 2022). Little wonder the students in this study never encountered a Black faculty member at seminars or had the guidance and knowledge of a Black dissertation committee member, let alone a supervisor. This underrepresentation has implications for mentoring and the very direction of students' work.

In recalling their experiences as teaching assistants and instructors, the participants reflected on the anti-Black racism they experienced – racism veiled in the subtle or covert questioning of their abilities (Benjamin, 2003). Some participants drew attention to how anti-Blackness shaped the way their students responded to them as teaching assistants and course instructors. White students appeared to be interrogating their Black instructors' knowledge, expertise, and abilities. Sefu explained:

Being a Black teacher teaching in a mostly White class was an experience in itself. Although you can't really tell it directly, you could just see how the students are interacting with you... how they are responding during the instructional process. You wonder if some of the questions the students are asking is because they don't know or they just want to see if this Black African fellow is competent enough?

Sefu's experience points to ways in which Black people are often stereotyped regarding their academic expertise and qualifications (Johnson-Bailey, et al., 2009). A Black instructor in front of the classroom is often viewed as unqualified, incompetent, or as an anomaly, one that disrupts the status quo.

Bakari also shared his experiences of ways Black people are stereotyped and their teaching capabilities trivialized. To be appointed a teaching assistant, he had to prove that he was pedagogically proficient. Though universities claim to espouse equity and inclusion, in practice, they fall short, as demonstrated by their reluctance to accept Black graduate students' teaching qualifications. Breaking into teaching was very difficult, as he discussed:

... there were instances when some professors thought that I should be given a chance to teach a class but others thought no, I shouldn't be given... They were not explicit enough but you could tell that somebody is behind somewhere blocking that opportunity for you not to go in. I don't know whether they think that you can't do it, or what they think.

Bakari's story reminds us that barriers are structural, cultural, and interpersonal (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Initially, some of Bakari's advisors had low expectations regarding his teaching abilities. However, after being assigned to teach one course, he excelled, and this outcome, along with positive student feedback, earned him future opportunities to teach.

While reflecting on how difficult it was to secure a teaching assistantship, Bakari emphasized the need to provide Black graduate students with opportunities to obtain teaching experience, noting that he was denied twice, but he persisted. On his third attempt, he attained the assistantship, and he excelled in his teaching. He understood how racism shaped the ways Black students are perceived and positioned in the Faculty and the implications for mentorship, noting:

It's very important for everyone to be given a chance... after all we are not in a surgical lab where somebody will die [both interviewer and participant laugh]. And even if the person started and it is not going well in the class, that is why we call it mentorship. A professor can step in and help out ... and support that person to make their classes successful.

Bakari observed that limiting teaching assistantships for PhD candidates denies them important mentorship to teach, and as a result, they will never learn how to do it.

From our small-scale study of thirty-three participants, it seemed that the men were more likely to secure research and teaching assistantships and more likely to persist until they achieved their goals. Zawadi and Safiya addressed the issue of not wanting to bother professors who were not proactive and "just wished [them] well."

### **"There should be an understanding of where the student is coming from": Peers and Black Faculty Mentors**

Peers played a critical role in the mentorship experiences of study participants. As Amir explains, "most of my mentorship was from senior students, which I am very grateful for." When it came to mentorship, all of the participants shared the same concerns: the paucity of Black professors in the Faculty of Education and the implications for Black graduate student mentorship. The few who had been fortunate to interact with, and be mentored by, Black faculty described the difference that this made. For example, when asked about mentorship, Dada took a deep breath and said, "so, mentorship," and laughed, reflecting her complex and disappointing experience. "I started with a particular professor who really didn't spend time mentoring and facilitating and coaching, but was always asking about my family situation, finances and my ability to stay in the program. And I had to part with that professor." She took another deep breath, smiled and added, "Most of my mentoring has come from someone out of the department." Here, Dada highlights ways in which the intersections of her gender, immigration status, and motherhood, along with her race and nationality, shaped her lack of mentorship. The advisor assumed that she came from a foreign country with a low socio-economic background, could not afford tuition for graduate school, and would not be able to handle the demands of graduate school. Instead of providing academic support and encouragement, the advisor evoked the racialized, classed, and gendered stereotypes of Black mothers, as the advisor knew that

Dada was supporting a family. This is an example of racial micro-aggressions and an advisory relationship that lacked cultural responsiveness (Thomas et al., 2007).

Eventually, Dada changed supervisors, and she felt more supported, noting that the new supervisor allowed her “to be my best in what I want to research, how to go about it, who to contact, and how to develop my proposal. I’m just having that one-on-one relation and am comfortable working with him.” The supervisor also took into consideration Dada’s schedule as a busy mother. Dada also sought mentorship from a Black faculty member outside of her department, who was better able to relate with her Black female experiences:

I really appreciate [name of professor] because [pause] the professor has created a lot of balance for me, has been open and done everything to ensure I am aware of who I am and what I can achieve... the wealth of learning experiences I have had with the professor have allowed me to overcome fear and anxiety. The professor has bridged the gap for me... there were many things I was not familiar with because they were not taught to me.

Dada is alluding to the hidden curriculum, which encompassed learning about racism as well as learning through relationships, the learning environment, social norms, values, beliefs, practices, and routines (Webb et al., 2022). Miller (2016) found that the hidden curriculum impacts students’ feelings of belonging, their self-image and consequently their educational outcomes (cited in Webb et al., 2022). The Black faculty mentor, another woman, was critical in unpacking the racial capital of whiteness with Dada, as well as affirming her identity and navigating the institutional structures (Margolis & Romero, 2002; Webb, et al., 2022). Unfortunately, Amir and Dada’s institutionally assigned supervisors and advisors seemed to assume that students entered their programs with the cultural capital to navigate the hidden curriculum and therefore did little to help them decode what was left unsaid.

Mosi was also fortunate to learn from the wisdom of a Black faculty member she encountered outside of her unit. She explained that the professor encouraged her to work hard lest others view her as unintelligent. Mosi’s comments reveal that Black faculty mentors necessarily engage in “radical honesty” (hooks, 2004) – that is, truth telling to help Black students navigate the institutional racism. Black mentors are more likely to know and understand that racialized students’ experiences in the academy cannot be described as typical (Thomas, 2020; Thomas et al., 2007). Overall, the participants’ narratives remind us of the importance of good mentorship for retention, confidence and affirmation, acquisition of research skills, and eventual academic success of current and future Black students.

## Discussion

This study has provided unique findings about the Black graduate student experience. The participants reported receiving minimal to no mentorship during their graduate education. A range of structural and institutional factors contributed to a lack of adequate mentorship: the lack of professors who understood the students’ cultural backgrounds racism and anti-Black racism, and inimical learning environments, to name a few. Indeed, the participants expressed disappointment with the lack of Black professors in their various units and programs, and the majority did not find mentors of any race. All participants acknowledged the significance of cultural relevance in mentoring, which they felt could best be provided by Black faculty. For

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those who were lucky to have a Black faculty mentor, like Dada and Mosi, the mentors proved to be a critical source of empowerment for the participants (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989).

Research has shown that Canadian universities lack adequate representation of Black faculty (Henry et al., 2017; Henry, 2015; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). Historically, limited efforts have been made to recruit, retain, and promote Black scholars in these institutions, including the one under study (Henry et al., 2017). It remains to be seen what outcomes the national call-to-action through Canada's *Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Inclusion in Higher Education* will actually effectuate. This document has been signed by over 50 Canadian universities who have pledged to make changes toward "Black Flourishing" (Scarborough Charter, 2022, p. 9), including the hiring of Black faculty. The Charter, then, supports the findings of this study, that is, that hiring Black professors is not only an issue of representation and inclusion but is also important for the health of the university community.

The Black students in this study expressed realities that are corroborated in other research, that is, the Black professorial presence helps them to develop an alternative ideal of graduate school experiences and academic success. It also helps them to affirm their sense of belonging and maintain their cultural identities (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). Factors such as nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, class, immigration status, and other identities intersect in a complex power matrix and affect the experiences and academic outcomes of Black students. Black professors, however are more likely to share cultural understandings and lived experiences that could support Black graduate student success.

The narratives aligned with the research literature, which shows that mentorship for Black graduate students requires creating culturally supportive community networks, collaborations, and co-mentoring opportunities for the students (Johnson, 2015; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). Wholistic mentoring requires developing and implementing mentoring approaches that go beyond supporting the students to decipher the Eurocentric graduate program requirements. It also involves creating opportunities for the Black students to support and learn from each other and exchange knowledges and experiences. Further, it requires creating safe, brave, and nurturing spaces for counter-storying, celebrating their successes, and collectively reflecting on their needs and the challenges that they face (Gooden et al., 2020; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011).

The participants identified various ways in which racism was normalized in daily routines, and a culture of whiteness was firmly in place. The participants reported experiencing covert racism, racial micro-aggressions, and prejudice that intersected with sexism and classism. These expressions are rooted in anti-Black racism, the assumption that Black people are inferior. The participants' anti-Black experiences echo what scholars have reported regarding the systemic challenges and barriers Black students confront in graduate schools, including hostile environments, marginalization, erasure, and institutional racism (Bunjun, 2021; Milner, 2004; Pope & Edwards, 2016). These exclusionary experiences can deny Black students opportunities to succeed fully in their education (Haskins et al., 2013; Milner, 2004).



Some participants recalled being subjected to classroom environments wherein their views were devalued (Felder & Barker, 2013; Gasman et al., 2008; Haskins et al., 2013; Milner, 2004), while the perspectives of their White counterparts were validated. These experiences echo McKinney's (2020) observations that higher education, historically, has been inimical to Black students. While highly visible in the form of images in university recruitment materials and within the halls of academe, Black students remain largely marginalized and subordinated in their programs (McKinney, 2020). Meaningful mentorship needs to include a commitment to creating and implementing antiracist classroom learning environments across all Faculty departments and units where all students, not just White students, belong and thrive.

Some of the participants had difficulty accessing and engaging with White faculty advisors and supervisors (Felder & Barker, 2013). Consequently, they lacked academic advice regarding, for example, selecting courses or finding publishers for their scholarly works. They missed out on the mentorship support and networks granted to their White counterparts. Some faculty "played it safe," overlooking both cultural differences and opportunities to assist the students with differing cultural capital to develop the needed knowledges to succeed in academe. This finding supports existing studies that have shown that students of color are less likely to receive adequate support for their research, to be taken seriously as scholars, to be included in collaborative projects with faculty, and to secure teaching assistantships (Brunsma et al., 2017; Gay, 2004; Johnson Bailey, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

In response to being denied mentorship support, the students developed strategies to navigate racism, such as seeking out the few Black professors in the Faculty to help them decipher the hidden curriculum (Brunsma et al., 2017). Many of the White professors who were mentoring the Black students had little incentive to take the time and energy to unpack the hidden curriculum for students who do not come from privileged backgrounds with the social networks that position them for success (Calarco, 2020). Therefore, the professors were unwittingly complicit in reproducing systemic inequities. Study participants sought help from peers to access the hidden subtleties of academic process such as understanding the difference between a Master of Arts and a Master of Education degree. This finding supports Brown's (2008) observations that Black graduate students often support one another by offering the encouragement that would normally be provided by faculty mentors. Concealed within the hidden curriculum, the transfer of such information is the duty of mentors, and the lack thereof has serious consequences for the students, including failure or dropping out.

In sum, the study findings show that Black graduate students have specific mentorship needs and experiences that go beyond advisor/supervisor support and guidance. In addition to regular programmatic supports, Black graduate students would benefit from mentorship relating to navigating systemic anti-Black racism and related barriers to adjusting to new graduate life experiences, while international Black students would also benefit from guidance in adjusting to a new society with unfamiliar norms, expectations, and educational experiences (George Mwangi, et al., 2019; Noreiga & Justin, 2020).

## Conclusion

Our participants offered first-person counter-stories, reflecting the ways in which they were positioned in graduate school and revealing serious consequences of the lack of mentorship at one Faculty of Education in Western Canada. These counter-narratives afforded critical reflection upon the intersectional dimensions of nationality, race, immigrant status, class, and gender which shaped their mentorship experiences at both the individual and institutional levels. Participants' narratives also enabled us to examine the subtle, and not subtle, forms of resistance, which they used to overcome mentorship barriers. This study therefore allowed for a deeper analysis of the inequities that plague graduate programs and of how the programs continue to be shaped by colonial and White supremacist institutional structures and processes that work to disadvantage Black graduate students (Bunjun, 2021; Patton, 2004). The participants' stories highlighted the importance of meaningful mentorship for Black graduate students, and its role in their academic success and emotional well-being (Bunjun, 2021). While we cannot generalize from these findings alone, we have triangulated the results with the extant research literature for more explanatory power (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014).

## Recommendations

The research findings offer a number of practical applications for the Faculty of Education and other Canadian universities. Beyond talking about equity, diversity, decolonization, and anti-racism, universities must indeed act by creating environments that foster Black student success. Based on our findings and the research literature, we recommend that:

- Faculty members take the time to inform themselves regarding the specificity of anti-Black racism (Mullings, et al., 2016) and its effects on students.
- Faculty members understand the ways in which “international” students and “Black students” embrace a range of backgrounds and identities and bring a diversity of talents to Faculties, as well as how they are embroiled differently in the matrices of power and privilege.
- Departments put into practice culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 2014), what Henry (2017) calls pedagogies of Black self-representation, “capable of undoing the deleterious effects of living in a society where one is excluded and made to feel that they have not made important contributions” (p.10).
- Departments hire and retain Black faculty who can support the diverse experience of Black students and who recognize that cultural differences have implications for Black graduate student success and well-being.
- Faculties of Education and departments intentionally recruit Black graduate students as well as create culturally responsive and sustaining mentorship structures capable of addressing systemic barriers that Black students face while completing their graduate studies. This mentorship includes understanding the situations of students' lives outside of the classroom, as for example, Dada mentioned regarding her supervisor.
- Departments create formal peer mentoring spaces wherein students can meet and support one another. There is also an urgent need to increase and diversify teaching and research opportunities for Black graduate students.

- Departments reward exemplary mentoring and provide mentors with the resources to allow the investment of time and energy to mentor graduate students (Brunsma, 2016). Resources can take the form of course buy-outs, financial incentives, or work that can count toward their official workload.
- The Faculty assign significant value to mentoring within the annual review and tenure and promotion process (Thomas, 2020).
- Departments and faculties consider linking mentoring with other aspects of daily practices, “including the graduate curriculum, student culture and climate, the recruitment of new graduate students of color, and the support of graduate students who teach their own classes (Brunsma et al., 2017).

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