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Wanda Thomas Bernard
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CELEBRATION OF DIVERSITY has long been touted as the foundation of Canadian identity; however, more careful reflection into our nation's central institutions reveals a more troubling character. Racism and discrimination have been ever-present in our society's framework, evolving with policy and dominant discourse to remain concealed from exposure. To elucidate the insidiousness of such attitudes, we will explore the formation of the school to prison pipeline, which connects the educational and criminal justice systems through discriminatory policies and practices specifically targeting African Canadian youth, and making it a human rights issue that should concern all Canadians. The focus of this paper, therefore is the experience of African Canadians: a group of Canadians that comprise a diversity of identities and experiences, a long history in Canada, and a binding experience of anti-black racism (James, Este, Bernard, Benjamin, Lloyd, & Turner, 2010). We conclude with a discussion regarding how we may address these systemic issues, using Africentric practice as a foundation. Our dominant discourse has effectively denied the basic human rights of marginalized populations throughout our history, and must be addressed publicly at the individual, community, and institutional levels if we are to live up to our imagined identity of a just and equitable nation.

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Systemic Anti-Black Racism and the Criminal Justice System

The existence of systemic prejudice and the degree to which it impacts decision-making, both within, and outside the criminal justice system is highly contested. Those who deny the existence of systemic issues when presented with evidence to the contrary often minimize and attempt to contain the impact of such cases as the result of nothing more than "a few bad apples." Even the decision as to whether to collect race-crime statistics in this country is cause for dispute, with arguments on either side of the issue (Roberts & Doob, 1997; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2009). Our understanding of, and engagement with, these phenomena are stunted if we as a nation are not even able to concede that discrimination exists within our society.

While the debate may still be waging, the evidence to support the existence of racism and discrimination within our criminal justice system is written throughout our history. Within the American context, freed Black citizens left a period of enslavement to enter into segregation and incarceration through policies and practices that specifically targeted racialized individuals (McElligott, 2017). Canadians may wish to argue such systemic racism is not part of our history, however, there is an almost direct connection between the advance of the settler frontier in Northern Ontario and the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in the first female prison, the Mercer Reformatory (McElligott, 2017). The residual impact of colonialism in Canada persists today, as African-Canadian Ethnocultural offenders are still overrepresented in correctional facilities (Bernard, 2016). This systemic discrimination characterizes the modern criminal justice system.

Racism creates the conditions that limit the life opportunities for those seen and marked as 'other.' The term Anti-Black Racism calls to attention the failings of the Canadian government to respond to the unique and pervasive nature of system discrimination against African Canadians (James et al., 2010; Warner, 2006). Refusing to collect data that would undermine the claim that Canada is a beacon of diversity and acceptance allows this targeted discrimination to exist unchallenged. The criminalization of racialized minorities is a traditional practice that remains an integral part of our criminal justice system and clearly a human rights issue. Where differential treatment exists, so too does the value that some are not worthy of the same basic rights awarded to others. Racism and discrimination appear to be woven into our cultural fabric; their presence revealed not just within our criminal justice system, but within our educational system as well. These institutions form a complex web of practices that differentially supports pathways to success or incarceration depending on a person's social location and identity.

School to Prison Pipeline

The school to prison pipeline has been used to refer to the disciplinary policies and patterns of socialization utilized within school settings to differentially target minority students (particularly young African-Canadian males) away from educational success, and towards incarceration (Swain & Noblit, 2011). To better understand the impacts of this phenomenon on the life course of marginalized youth, we explore both school socialization patterns and disciplinary actions. What becomes clear in this analysis is that education, like the criminal justice system, is a site of control within society, where racist values are enacted from elementary school onwards (Swain & Noblit, 2011). The Eurocentric values that have characterized the formation of our institutions have led to the criminalization of children's behaviour in classrooms, creating a pipeline that funnels racialized students to imprisonment.

Socialization of children is an integral part of the educational system in Canada. Early childhood education helps teach acceptable behaviour throughout a student's life course. Messages students hear about themselves and their abilities will shape their trajectory throughout their education. Unfortunately, many Canadian teachers continue to believe and adhere to rhetoric of being "colour-blind" (Daniel, 2017). Such a worldview is problematic, because it discourages self awareness needed to challenge the oppressive social narratives that surround the behaviour and identity of minority populations, particularly young black males (Daniel, 2017). James et al. (2010) found a high response rate for experiencing racism in the classroom across Canada, demonstrating the universality of discrimination within our school systems. Subtle or overt, systemic discrimination and micro-aggressions frame our daily interactions, especially if we are unaware or unwilling to acknowledge its presence.

The shaping of students' identities begins with their first contact with school systems, thus teachers wield a great deal of power in determining the life course of their students. Young African-Canadian male students are more likely to be cast in the role of "bad boy," based on the subjective meaning assigned by teachers to their observed behaviour (Daniel, 2017; Hatt, 2011). According to Hatt (2011) racialized youth received negative messages throughout their education, as well as experienced dismissive attitudes from teachers about their abilities and future opportunities. Through discipline, special programs and other means of exclusion, racialized students are taught they are failures, and higher education is not a viable option (Swain & Noblit, 2011). As a result of this socialization, many African-Canadian students believe they have limited options available to them upon graduation to ensure their success and well-being. African-Canadian students are often steered away from courses that would lead to college or university education, and towards basic courses that

satisfy only the minimum requirements for graduation (BLAC, 2009; Bernard, 2009; James, 2012). A study conducted in the Toronto District School Board, found that more than a third of graduating African-Canadian students are leaving high school with limited resources to ensure their long-term economic stability (Daniel, 2017).

School disciplinary polices also discriminate against African-Canadian students and help to form the school to prison pipeline. The enactment of the Safe Schools Act in 2001 has had a significant impact on the lives of racialized youth in Canada. The goal of the act was to limit the prevalence of "bad behaviour" in schools and effectively conferred teachers the authority to suspend and expel students, as well as mandated police involvement for behaviours previously handled by school administrators (Daniel, 2017). In 2012, Bill 212 repealed some of the more harmful sections of the Safe Schools Act, though the effective criminalization of some student behaviour and underlying values have remained intact. Zero tolerance policies have emerged in this new policy environment both within Canadian school systems and within the criminal justice system. These policies echo political rhetoric of being "tough on crime" by outlining that some behaviour is not acceptable (and even criminal) (Daniel, 2017; Hatt, 2011; Swain & Noblit, 2011). As a result of these policies, rather than giving students an opportunity to learn from their mistakes, the outcome is to punish and criminalize their actions, thereby limiting further educational opportunities (Swain & Noblit, 2011).

The policies are disproportionately used against racialized students, in a way that obfuscates the responsibility of the individual applying the policy (Swain & Noblit, 2011). Within this policy framework, African-Canadian males are suspended at a rate four times higher than their White classmates, from kindergarten to twelfth grade (Daniel, 2017). Racialized students are often targeted as responsible for school disturbances, perhaps in part due to administrators' hyper vigilance of the behaviour of African-Canadian male students (Daniel, 2017; Swain & Noblit, 2011).

Within higher education, Black students must also contend with the exclusion and racism that still very much characterizes the ivory tower of such institutions (Bernard et al., 2013; James et al., 2010). Black teachers have responded to these experiences and to their perceived obligation to uplift the Black community through practices such as othermothering (Bernard et al., 2013). These teachers are concerned with helping their students succeed, and endeavor to support their students in fulfilling their psychological and educational needs (Bernard et al., 2013). This work is essential to coping and resisting the oppression enmeshed in academic institutions and reflects Africentric practice, which can be foundational in responding to such systemic exclusion and violence. At the crux of this response is a resistance and revocation of the external identity wrongfully imposed through years of systemic oppression (Bernard, 1999).

Perspective is a powerful force when framing these discussions. If we are to expose and analyze the values that underlie our Eurocentric society, we must broaden our perspective beyond our oversimplification of individual behaviour. In engaging in such a practice, behaviour that has previously been rooted in the individual might be reframed as the result of societal forces enacted through discriminatory socialization and disciplinary patterns (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1995; Hatt, 2011). Thus, where previously a student was labeled a "drop out," they may now be seen as "pushed out" of formal education through systemically oppressive institutions (Dei et al., 1995). The purported colour-blindness of some teachers offers important insight into how our society has permitted such oppressive treatment of marginalized people for centuries. In order to formulate a meaningful response to the systemic racism within our current institutions, it is important to explore what particular societal values protect these deeply harmful and Eurocentric perspectives.

Given the current context of normative identity construction and denial of systemic discrimination, any meaningful response to the current state of such institutions as the criminal justice system in Canada must begin with acknowledgement. We as a society must expose the oppression embedded in our social discourse and Canadian identity. Starting with our history we must begin to critically analyze which voices are used to tell our story, and which voices are being excluded (Este & Bernard, 2003). We must also work to broaden our perspective to see the context within which Canadians are living their lives, and how life circumstances are differentially impacted by the oppressive, Eurocentric discourse that dominates. Africentrism then emerges as a central model around which we can organize a meaningful response that addresses the oppression that exists at the individual and collective levels within our society.

Africentrism

Africentrism does not exist just in opposition to Eurocentrism, rather it goes beyond such a limited hierarchical worldview (George & Dei, 1998). At its core, Africentrism is built on three central beliefs: human identity is a collective identity and context is central to this identity; spirituality is as important as material aspects of life; and affective knowledge is valid and essential in understanding the lived experiences of all people (Schiele, 1996, as cited in Stewart, 2004). Within Canada, the context that surrounds African Canadian identity is racism (Bernard, 2016). This context is inescapable at the individual, community, and structural levels. It is extremely damaging as these values are enacted both directly, and vicariously through collective identity (Bernard, 2016; James et al., 2010). Spirituality then takes on an integral role in making sense of this context and in coping with its impacts (Beagan, Etowa, & Bernard,

2012). Spirituality and the church are sites of community, where collective identity can be rewritten in a positive context of survival, perseverance, and transcendental connections (Beagan et al., 2012; Warner, 2006). The affective role of knowledge is also central in problematizing the Eurocentric assertion of objectivity. Objectivity is a dangerous myth within Eurocentric culture, and protects the hierarchy of dominance. Truly hearing the lived experiences of oppressed citizens in Canada is an essential starting point in dismantling the denial and resistance that characterizes the current oppressive discourse (James et al., 2010). African Canadians must be afforded the same right to self-determination, and the same basic human rights as all other Canadians. It is not for a Eurocentric society to define African-Canadian identity, we must instead listen to, support, and follow the values and guidance we hear from this community (Bernard, 1999). Through an Africentric worldview, we are able to reframe and reveal the impacts of our criminal justice system on marginalized populations.

In challenging the perspective and values of a Eurocentric society, we are able to see how alienation and oppression of racialized minorities leads to a sense of hopelessness (Stewart, 2004; James et al., 2010). Within the school to prison pipeline, we have seen this alienation translated into the negative messages students hear as well as their exclusion from resources to help support their success (Stewart, 2004). Othermothering has become a strategy through which connection is utilized to support individual and community growth. Educational institutions need to confer guardianship over its students, and celebrate and publicly espouse values of anti-oppression and empowerment (Bernard et al., 2013). Africentrism creates a foundation from which we can challenge the validity of objectivist pretentions, where we can critically analyze our theoretical framework, and engage meaningfully with the social values that underpin our policies and practices (Warner, 2006).

Officials within our major institutions could benefit from incorporating an Africentric perspective into their daily practice. Doing so would help combat resistance and allow for more open engagement with the racialized citizens they serve. Members of dominant society need to learn how to connect to their social location and critically analyze the impact of their positionality on the relationships they have with others. Within our criminal justice system, rather than a "tough on crime" stance, we should advocate for a "tough on the causes of crime" stance (Bernard, 2016, p. 4). Such a policy perspective would consider the social history of individuals and focus efforts on alleviating the causes of crime, rather than punishing individual "deviants" (Bernard, 2016). Turning focus away from mandatory minimum sentences, and toward programs that are truly aimed at rehabilitation re-humanizes individuals and acknowledges the context within which they live (Bernard, 2016). Community is central to both the Africentric perspective and to real solutions to crime and incarceration

(Bernard, 2016). Policy needs to reflect and honour the reality exposed through the lived experiences of marginalized populations. Connection, community, and a holistic approach, as advocated through Africentric practice helps to heal the harm done through the alienation of punitive and empirically invalid policy.

Further, our approach to racism should exist not only at the policy level, but also at the individual level (Warner, 2006). Public servants, including school officials and correctional staff, should engage in ongoing cultural humility training to support individual introspection and awareness of their social location and power in the lives of others. We argue for training that removes any notion of "competency" that would claim proficiency is attainable. Rather we suggest training that educates and continuously exposes the oppression that is often hidden within our institutions. These approaches would help shift dominant discourse in ways that could drastically alter (and hopefully dismantle) the school to prison pipeline and every point along the educational and criminal justice systems.

Conclusion

Within the scope of this paper, we have endeavoured to highlight the school to prison pipeline as a consequence of systemic anti-Black racism, and a human rights issue. The denial of opportunity and the apathy of educational system are truly best defined as a denial of human rights. African Canadians are refused the same opportunities awarded to their classmates, and meaningful discussion of these issues is often shut down before it can even begin. In the name of preserving our national identity as one of diversity and acceptance, we have feigned "colour-blindness" to avoid exposing the discrimination that is deeply rooted in our history and current identity. Africentrism has been offered as a foundation in which to root meaningful responses (at micro and macro levels) to the oppression found in our current systems. We have focused specifically on the experiences of African Canadians to illustrate their unique history and social location within our country. It is our hope that this exploration can help inform future approaches to education and justice, which decentralize Eurocentrism and dismantle the racism that has pervaded our Canadian identity for far too long. We can be the nation we imagine ourselves to be, if we are willing to acknowledge our past and present, and listen to all voices to guide our future.

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