

**ENACTING A BLACK EXCELLENCE AND ANTIRACISM CURRICULUM IN
ONTARIO EDUCATION**

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If you had asked me at earlier ages what I had thought was possible for myself, this likely would not have made the list. If you had asked many of my family and friends, they would assure you of the contrary. The fact is that this is all only possible because of those same people's support and indefatigable belief.

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ABSTRACT

Given the ongoing persistence of anti-Black racism in Ontario education, I enact a curriculum of Black Excellence and antiracism. In partnership with the Ottawa Carleton District School Board and propelled by calls to action from The Ministry of Education and Black advocacy organization, I ask how The Sankofa Centre of Black Excellence course and program may address these systems of racism. I draw on Critical Race Theory as both a theoretical framework and overarching methodology of analysis for my thesis. In the first of three articles within this thesis I begin by framing my understanding of antiracism with an overview of the possibilities and limitation of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy in Ontario public schooling contexts. In the second article, I draw on the literature and method of Critical Race *Currere* to understand antiracism and Black excellence in relation to teaching the Sankofa course. In the third article, I draw on a social action curriculum project research methodology to analyze and synthesize the course curriculum-as-planned and -lived. Finally, I suggest that the continued engagement with Aoki's (1993) concept of a curriculum-as-lived serves as a departing point for engaging with broader conversations surrounding Black excellence and antiracism curriculum in the Ontario educational system.

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CHAPTER ONE

Living Beyond the Anachronisms

In this nation that has ostensibly advanced beyond Black and white, it is the Black that becomes anachronistic, and impediment to the realization of American's national-popular imagination of who "we" want to be. Even as the nation (and indeed, the world) embraces certain kind of multiculturalism, people strain against the dark.

(Michael J. Dumas, 2016)

For much of the history of Canada's colonial education system, Blackness was antithetical to schooling's greater pursuit. Dumas (2016) contends that the policy of such a system is an explicit site of antiblackness. During the age of enslavement, it was considered an unlawful "assertion of humanity" to strive for the mobilities that learning offered and would often result in severe punishment (p. 16). The hope for educational promise has not been lost, however. Despite the unwelcoming nature of this site of antiblackness, education has continued to act as a beacon of success for African and Caribbean Black Youth. As James (2021) describes, Canada has successfully produced the facade of a "Canadian dream." Taken in most sincerely by Black immigrants in the latter half of the 20th century who were promised an easier hand with each generation. As James notes, "this has not held true" due to the "persistence of anti-Black racism" (p. 12). It's been almost two centuries since emancipation throughout the British Empire (Henry, 2010). And yet, while we may live unfettered, the systems of racialization continue to preside.

The continual site of antiblackness in Canadian education is a "struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools" (Dumas, 2010, p. 16). From segregation policy in education, both in Canada (Henry, 2021) and in the United States (Delgado, 1999) to the streaming of Black children in special education programs without parental consultation, to disproportionate suspensions of Black children for wearing certain clothes (James, 2021). Racial violence has Black children fearing school, and Black parents fearing for their children (PoBC,

2022). We are in an age where the institutionalized barriers to Black success are paralleled by well-intended systems of whiteness.

In March of 2022, a report published by Parents of Black Children (PoBC) outlined the systematic abuse taking place to Black children and educators in Ontario schools. Funded by the Ontario Trillium foundation, the group collected case study data, surveys, and information from their racism reporting tool, and have submitted an official call to action to the Ministry of Education and the Ontario Human Rights Commission. One of the central findings was that the vast majority of students from this report, who identify as Black, feel deeply uncomfortable navigating the schooling system for the amount of instances of racial violence (PoBC, 2022; [City News, 2022](#)). This is all unsurprising, given what has continued to surface in recent years from both students ([CBC, November 2021](#)) and teachers ([CBC, November, 2021](#)) saying the n-word to, or in the presence of Black children, to young Black children being handcuffed in classrooms ([CBC, 2022](#)). According to the document, 57% of Black students and/or teachers reported one or more instance of anti-Black racism across Ontario schools (PoBC, 2022). Similar information presented over the last few years parallels this information. For example, one review of Peel District School board illustrated targeted suspension rates to Black students despite Ministry directives at addressing this discrepancy and these acts of racial prejudices ([CBC News Toronto, 2022](#)).

As a result of the PoBC report (2022) and its subsequent calls to action, the Ministry of Education has confirmed it has received and is reviewing the necessary information (City News, 2022). I remain hopeful yet critical at these possibilities but bolster all efforts made by Ontario school boards and their willingness to address previous and ongoing calls to action regarding anti-Black racisms.

Proposal

The proposed thesis by articles centres around my experience as a racialized educator and post-graduate learner/(un)learner over the course of the last two years. During such time, I navigated a systematically white schooling system while advocating for an antiracist curriculum wherein I found myself an educator, curriculum designer, and researcher. I endeavour to demonstrate the importance of centring the lived experiences of racialized students within the Ontario curriculum, and ultimately beyond, in ways that go beyond assimilative and multicultural methods. I argue the

importance of bringing forth the identities and inquiries of such students as the primary guide for one's pedagogy.

Research Questions

The course and program upon which this thesis is based is titled the Sankofa Centre of Excellence, later referred to as the Sankofa Summer English Course. Conceived initially as a program which strived to support Black youth in two pilot schools (OCDSB, 2022), this program developed into a full credit, de-streamed, Grade 9 English summer course at the Ottawa Carleton District School Board. The aim of both the pilot project and the course was to centre the lived experiences of Black youth within the Ontario curriculum, increase academic engagement for Black learners, and mobilize Black excellence as a response to the calls to action by the Ministry of Education and Black advocacy organizations (OCDSB, 2022). Having had the opportunity to co-create the curriculum, and later teach this course I now ask the following research questions: How, specifically, is the OCDSB mobilizing the concept of Black Excellence in relation to the policy put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education, as well as the body of Canadian literature on the topic? 2) How is Black excellence being conceived through the Sankofa Centre of Excellence by the leaders involved in the course? I sought to address these educational research questions in the form of three articles.

Outline

The first paper I've included, titled "Is CRRP Enough? Addressing Antiracism(s) in Teacher Education," was conceptualized in early 2019 at the beginning of my graduate studies and was later published in the Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies. Approached by my thesis supervisor: Dr. Ng-A-Fook, he, myself, and PhD Candidate Mark Currie attempted to ask about the potential of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) for addressing anti-Blackness in Ontario Teacher education programs. By examining programs, policy, and literature we conclude that CRRP may serve as a useful guide for examining the importance of antiracism within Ontario schooling, but as a stand-alone practice is likely insufficient. Though this article was produced prior to my involvement with the Sankofa Centre of Excellence, it serves as a useful foundation for understanding my efforts to address the ongoing

calls for antiracism and Black Excellence in the proceeding articles and thus takes the place as my first article. The second article in the thesis is titled “Centering Black Excellence: Critical Race Currere and The Sankofa English Course” which was accepted for publication in the Currere Exchange Journal early in 2022. In this article, I acknowledge the limitations of broad macro applications of praxis such as CRRP but move on to ask how Pinar (2017) and Taliaferro-Baszile’s (2021) methods of *currere* and Critical Race *Currere*, respectively, have been useful for my individual efforts to address anti-Black racism and promote Black Excellence in The Sankofa Centre of Excellence.

Here, I call for the continued utilization of life-writing research in Critical Race Studies in hopes that its renewed potential may assist educators in providing more complete and engaged forms of antiracism education. The third and final article of the thesis is titled, Sankofa and the Centre of Black Excellence: A Social Action Curriculum Project. I will be submitting this article to the Canadian Journal of Curriculum Studies. In this article, I frame the centre as a Social Action Curriculum Project (SACP) and provide a deep systematic overview of the course and its creation. I include interviews and data from the administrators, co-curriculum designers, and leaders involved in the program and highlight the importance of adhering to the needs of racialized students within Ontario schooling. I utilize the four key themes, or ‘impacts’ as they are called henceforth, which emerged in the centre’s initial research as a framework for the units within this course and our efforts to align the Ontario Curriculum with the calls to action by the students involved in the SACP.

Finally, I draw on Critical Race Theory to frame my understanding of racisms and systems of racializations in Ontario schools, documentation, as well as ask how Sankofa Centre of Excellence combats (or does not combat) these systems of racialization. Specifically, I utilize Critical Race Theory in two ways. Firstly, as a methodology to position myself within the research as a racialized, primary teacher, researcher, etc. Secondly, I use Critical Race Theory to frame my analysis and interview questions with participants in relation to the systems of racism we (myself, and Sankofa) have sought to combat. I apply Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework to analyze the documentation of Black Excellence Programs, and critical race scholarship in order to understand what Sankofa is doing to dismantle racisms, and achieve Black academic success, and well-being.

CHAPTER TWO

Is CRRP Enough? Addressing Antiracism(s) In Teacher Education¹

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Abstract

Anti-Black racism continues to exist as a troubling reality for many students across all levels of Ontario schooling. These systemic and targeted racisms perpetuated and perpetrated by students, educators, and the school community, are sometimes acknowledged but remain undisrupted. In this article, we unpack Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) and examine some of the ways it contributes to the ongoing resistance of anti-Black racism. We also ask how CRRP acknowledges and enacts antiracism in Ontario teacher education programs, public schools, and communities. We begin by providing an historical overview of CRRP, followed by outlining the ways it has been taken up in Ontario literature, policy, and practice. In our examination we find that CRRP can play an effective role in the work against anti-Black racisms but doing so requires understanding and engaging ‘culture’ in relational and non-tokenistic ways. We conclude that CRRP may contribute to helping educators understand the relationships to communities and the pathways where antiracism can be enacted.

Introduction

Anti-Black racism(s) are still prominent in the various levels of education in Ontario from kindergarten to post-secondary, with targeted and systemic incidents

¹Currie, M., & Ng-A-Fook, N. & Drake, S., A. (2021). Is CRRP Enough?: Addressing Antiracism(s) in Teacher Education. *Journal for the American Advancement of Curriculum Studies*, 14(2), pp. 1-28.

occurring in classrooms and in wider campus environments. Such incidents are perpetrated by students and educators alike and remain largely undisrupted by those in positions to make systemic changes. For example, as reported by *CBC News Ottawa*, in June 2019, Jamal Boyce a student at the University of Ottawa who is Black, was detained on a curbside in handcuffs by campus security for two hours. Why did the campus security officers think this was warranted? He was skateboarding. Boyce shared his experience on social media and with news reporters, describing how the security stopped him and immediately asked for identification. When Boyce replied that he did not have identification and walked—not skateboarded—away, security followed, arrested him, and cited the Trespass to Property Act. While Boyce sat on the curb in handcuffs, a white student rolled past the scene on a skateboard. But, when bystanders asked why security did not also arrest the student, security responded that the white student was not “doing any tricks.” In her memoir *They said this would be fun: Race, campus life, and growing up*, Eternity Martis (2020) writes about her encounters with anti-Black racism at Western University (London, Ontario). She describes how students created university-specific Instagram accounts to share their stories, including incidents in Ontario universities such as but not limited to Queen’s University (Kingston), York University (Toronto), and the University of Ottawa.

In March 2020, *CBC News Toronto* reported that after looking into anti-Black racism(s) within the Peel District School Board (PDSB), reviewers found that although Black students make up only 10.2 percent of the secondary school student population, 22.5 percent of that Black student population have received school suspensions. The external reviewers were told how some principals impose suspensions when Black students wear hooded sweatshirts or certain kinds of earrings, claiming that the attire violates the school dress code. Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce issued over two dozen directives to the board’s members for addressing the crisis. Lawyer and human rights advocate Arleen Huggins concluded from a separate investigation of the PDSB that “The board still, after the review report and the directions, has a misunderstanding of anti-Black racism” (as quoted by Carter, 2020, June). She added, “further, there is no evidence that the board has a willingness to engage in the necessary work to gain such an understanding, nor does the board understand the urgency of the need to do so” (Carter, 2020, June). While anti-Black racism in schools warrants urgent

attention at the administrative level, it also needs to be addresses for its prevalence within individual classrooms.

In York Region, north of Toronto, Kearie Daniel found that her seven-year-old daughter's vision of her own Black identity changed over the 2019/2020 school year. Daniel's daughter began the year drawing a self-portrait in which she coloured her image to match her physical features and racialized herself as Black. Daniel told *CBC News Toronto* (2020, September) that "By the end of the year, she was drawing herself as white, or colourless even, with yellow hair and blue eyes," and believes that the change is at least in part due to her daughter not seeing herself represented in the school curriculum. While this occurrence is not a case of targeted racism against Daniel's daughter, it suggests how everyday systemic anti-Black exclusion works to omit the identities of Black students from the curriculum. The lack of diverse representations not only leads Black students toward feeling and experiencing marginalization. It also affords students opportunities to justify the active exclusion of their Black classmates consciously, and unconsciously, from the school curriculum here in Canada and/or elsewhere like the United States (Henry, 2019; Taliaferro Baszile, 2009).

In response to such ongoing systemic racisms and curricular exclusions, Ottawa community group *Parents for Diversity* organized as "a collective of parents committed to achieving inclusive and non-discriminatory learning environments" who "advocate for schools and families to promote diversity and inclusion and to take meaningful steps to address and eradicate discrimination and bias" (*Parents for Diversity*, 2020, About Us). The group began as a response to the experiences of racism and discrimination faced by the children of the organizing parents. Co-leader of the organization Mante Molepo stated that even in early grades, her daughter—who is Black—was excluded by other children at school. When Molepo addressed the issue with her daughter's teacher, the teacher "categorically denied that children at the kindergarten level are aware of race" (*CBC News Ottawa*, 2018, September, online). Molepo added that this was the teacher's stance "despite the countless studies that prove otherwise" (*CBC News Ottawa*, 2018, September, online).

These examples from various levels of education are not isolated or rare incidents. Rather, they represent experiences that are all too common. "In addition to promoting European classical knowledge, the university served as a site for the development of racial ideology, that aimed," as hampton (2020) makes clear, "to justify slavery and

colonization without contradicting European Enlightenment ideals about freedom and equality” (p. 17). Today, universities in Canada, and the public schooling system, continue to “classify as Predominantly White Institutions,” or what Gershon also refers to as Ridiculously White Institutions (RWI) in the United States (p. 52). For Gershon (2020), higher education and public schooling institutions have created equity, diversity, and inclusion policy (policing) “feedback loops that at once acknowledge everyday oppressions and aggressions for students of color at an RWI while often using the very neoliberal discourses and material practices that serve to reinforce the continuing nature of their marginalized status” (p. 52). “In other words, “to serve and to protect,” from the perspective of antiblackness has,” as Taliaferro Baszile’s (2021) research makes clear, “always meant to discipline black bodies to protect white privilege and power in all areas of life” (p. 3). As teacher educators and educational researchers (some of us with experience in administration) then, how might we unlearn and learn to recognize the individual, systemic, and societal contexts and relationships among what is taught and practiced in a teacher education program, the curricular and pedagogical strategies employed by educators in the public schooling systems, and the events and experiences of a wider Ontario Anglophone-majority settler-colonial society? These are not siloed spaces. When anti-Black racism(s) need to be addressed in one space, they also need to be acknowledged, disrupted, and abolished across all these institutional spaces (Hampton, 2020). As part of the response to discriminations such as anti-Black racism(s), one of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (OME) efforts has been to prioritize a student-centered, equity-based approach to education through a push for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP).

In this article, we seek to understand some of the ways CRRP can contribute toward confronting anti-Black racism, and how it also sometimes falls short here in Ontario, Canada. To lead our analysis, we consider Milner’s (2017) question, “Where’s the race in culturally relevant pedagogy?” Milner’s contention is that since Ladson-Billings (1992; 1995) introduced her conceptual discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), it has been taken up and adapted by educators to address a wide variety of student identities and cultures. However, in doing so, the central focus on race—particularly students racialized as Black—has faded, if not disappeared. With CRRP being an adopted government policy in Ontario, we provide some examples of different educational stakeholders doing CRRP and antiracist education work. We highlight how

these stakeholders can build different kinds of antiracism and equity relationships among teacher education programs, public schools, and communities.

And yet, we still ask, is CRRP enough? Is it enough to address individual, systemic, and structural forms of anti-Indigenous or anti-Black racisms?

A Situated Historical Overview of CRRP

The historical, curricular, and pedagogical evolution of Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) began in the mid-1970s. CRRP has taken different forms and names since its introduction, such as *culturally responsive education* (Cazden & Leggett, 1978), *culturally appropriate instructional events* (Au, 1980; Au & Jordan, 1981), *culturally congruent pedagogy* (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), *culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1992; 1995), and *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2000), along with a number of other variations. Although several use different terminologies, all promote the importance of recognizing, acknowledging, and becoming more responsive and relevant to the different students that belong to any school community. Continuing debate, however, has centered on the following questions: What should culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies “be” like in relation to specific educational settings? As Canadian curriculum scholars, educators, and educational researchers, we seek to understand how we might situate our current work in teacher education in relation to historical and contemporary conceptions of CRRP.

Although concerted efforts to embed a focus on culture into education started in the 1970s, Ladson-Billings (1992; 1995) is largely credited with establishing the foundations of the current approaches to the relationship between culture and education (Dodo Seriki & Brown, 2017). For this reason, rather than re-produce extensive overviews and critiques of the iterations of CRRP prior to Ladson-Billings, we provide a partial and situated overview of past efforts and look at the critiques that Ladson-Billings made of such efforts. We draw on her critiques in response to our analysis of the ongoing systemic barriers for different students racialized as *non-White* here in Ontario. When Cazden and Leggett (1978) first conceptualized *culturally responsive education*, they drew on anthropological and psychological concepts of culture and learning aptitudes. After reviewing studies focused on “cultural differences in sensory modality strength” (p. 9),

the authors made recommendations that culturally responsive education should include multisensory curriculum and modes of instruction to ensure connecting to a range of cultures. Au and Jordan's (1981; see also Au, 1980) *culturally appropriate instructional events* begins with a focus on the context of the educational instruction, stating that "a context is inappropriate for a certain group of children if its construction violates their cultural norms" (p. 92). They envisioned students as not just recipients of knowledge, but rather the producers of it through forms of cultural communication. Mohatt and Erickson (1982) introduced the concept of *culturally congruent pedagogy*, which endeavored to underpin all teaching practices with the use of cultural languages, practices, and values in any context.

Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff (2017) state that "these scholars' work must be recognized, because they were instrumental in moving away from the cultural deprivation and deficit explanations that had become entrenched in the professional literature about students of color" (p. 5). Indeed, early conceptions of culture in, and for, education contributed to the foundations of CRRP as Ladson-Billings would later come to establish it. However, these approaches did not themselves become the basis for CRRP because they at first failed to trouble existing social structural hierarchies within the educational systems. Of these proposed approaches and others, as Ladson-Billings (1995) stressed more than 25 years ago,

...each suggests that student 'success' is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in schools. Thus, the goal of education becomes how to 'fit' students constructed as 'other' by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a *meritocracy*. However, it is unclear how these conceptions do more than reproduce the current inequities. (p. 467)

Consequently, Ladson-Billings' (1992; 1995) initial push for *culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy* began with an acknowledgment of the real rather than desired demographics of teacher candidates. At the time of her writing, she suggested that despite growing calls to "increase minority teachers," the numbers showed that the next generation of teachers would predominantly consist of white teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 102). From our vantage point as teacher educators in Ontario, not much has changed (Petrarca & Kitchen,

2017). Still pertinent, then, is Ladson-Billings' (1992) question, "What will this [white] teacher need to know to be an effective teacher of minority students" (p. 103)? Here we begin to see an initial consideration of race within conversations about pedagogy within teacher education.

And yet, as Milner (2017) suggests, race has never been given the attention that Ladson-Billings was calling for, and instead has been situated within culture. During the 1990s conversations and curriculum policies focused primarily on implementing multicultural education. Ladson-Billings (1992) reminds us that such conversations represented "an attempt to make the curriculum more responsive to the educational needs of all students" (p. 112). However, at that time, what "multicultural education" looked like was unclear. For her, the initial conceptions of multicultural education focused on including marginalized cultures in ways that continued to "Other" those cultures. Early multicultural education exoticized and added them to the curriculum as feasts and festivals (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2010), rather than reconceptualizing multicultural education toward becoming a culturally relevant and inclusive relational pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992). As Ladson-Billings (1995) stressed then, "a culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling, and society" (p. 483). In turn, Ladson-Billings called on teacher educators and educational researchers to create opportunities for teacher candidates to examine their dispositions and the educational environment they are preparing to enter.

At the turn of the 21st century, Gay (2000) presented the pedagogical concept of *culturally responsive teaching*. She stressed that "no ethnic group is culturally or intellectually monolithic" (p. 18). Here, her conception of "responsive" pedagogy envisioned cultures in flux and not as static categories. Gay (2000) contended that teachers must present their expectations for all students, regardless of culture or ethnicity, in pedagogical ways that strive to achieve high academic standards. To do so, culturally responsive teaching, for her, should move away from *ideological management*. Instead, she reminds us that the school curriculum seeks to reproduce "the deliberate exclusion or addition of information to create certain images, to shield consumers from particular ideas and information, and to teach specific moral, political, and social values" (p. 152). In turn, Gay suggested that culturally responsive teaching strives to address "the 'cultural capital' (i.e., the informal, tacit knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to

negotiate the rules, regulations, protocols, and demands of living within educational institutions) needed to succeed in schools” (p. 249). The concept of “cultural capital” points to the ways that public schooling is designed to reproduce, recognize, and validate the academic appropriation of certain white settler colonial norms and values. The challenge, however, is that taking up CRRP or CRP as a pedagogical strategy in the classroom does not necessarily disrupt the wider system that continues to reproduce systemic barriers such as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms embedded within and across public schooling and its respective government mandated curricula.

A decade later, Paris (2012) suggested that CRRP does not go far enough toward addressing the different aspects of a given culture such as the diverse linguistic registers, cultural literacies, and cultural practices of different Black, immigrant, refugee, and/or First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. “It is quite possible to be relevant to something or responsive to it without,” as Paris (2012) reminds us, “ensuring its continuing presence [...] in our classrooms and communities” (p. 95). In response, he put forth the concept of *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, which “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). In short, Paris calls on educators to stop the *add’n’stir* approach that fails to disrupt an explicit, implicit, and null settler colonial curriculum. Instead, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to recenter students’ cultures as the core of the curriculum-as-planned, -implemented, and -lived (Aoki, 1992). It seeks to sustain evolving cultures, rather than positioning cultures as static categorical reference points along the way.

Our partial historical overview of CRRP’s ongoing evolution in the United States is certainly not the first attempt for us to learn and unlearn from this body of scholarship. That there have been several iterations of the pedagogy is indicative of academics’ active grappling with its evolving cultural, historical, and political contextual dynamics. In a recent concerted effort, Seriki and Brown (2017) revisited the possibilities and limitations of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by publishing a special issue for *Teachers College Record*. There, Dodo, Seriki, and Brown explain that their overarching aim was to identify, examine, and understand CRRP’s foundations. In turn, they propose promising ways of taking it up within teacher education, public schooling systems, and respective classroom communities.

We depart from their collective, American situated and contextual discussions by examining the ways CRRP has been taken up (or not) in relation to an Ontario Anglophone teacher education program and the public schooling system it seeks to serve. Moreover, we problematize CRRP by suggesting that it be viewed as one of several components within a wider dynamic system, and not a *fix-all* approach. We suggest that as an individualized teacher pedagogical strategy, it can only promise so much. The options moving forward, seemingly, are: 1) to make use of it but to see how it links to other necessary aspects of re-creating education systems, or 2) to continuously adjust and add to CRRP to a point that it bears no resemblance to its foundations and warrants a different name and theorization. Given that the Ontario Ministry of Education currently touts the use of CRRP in the province's schools, and we as teacher educators are tasked with preparing teacher candidates to work within the Ontario system, we thought it best to address the first of the two options. We discuss what CRRP can achieve and where it needs to be linked to elements of education that are beyond its scope.

In a retrospect similar to what we presented above, but framed in relation to Australian education contexts, Harrison and Skrebneva (2020) note that the common emphasis in all forms of culture-focused pedagogy is that “culture counts,” meaning that cultural inclusion is thought to be the key to disrupting student exclusion (p. 18). Indeed, culture does count, and this attitude has contributed to creating paths forward in the work of breaking down systemic and practical barriers that hinder student success. However, in the current social and political climate of Canada, where we teacher educators and higher education leaders recognize systemic racism as a central feature within society and its schooling systems, it is no longer good enough—if it ever was—to assume that tending to cultural marginalization will inevitably address racism. Until recently, CRRP was largely developed and studied in American contexts, in dialogue with US sociohistorical issues with anti-Black racism(s), suggesting the need to avoid a *cut-n-paste* approach to promoting and utilizing a CRRP pedagogy. We therefore turn next to efforts made to implement CRRP in its most recent versions in the Ontario context with its own struggles with anti-Black racism(s).

Understanding Localized Contexts of CRRP in Ontario

In 2005, The Centre of Urban Schooling (CUS) was founded in partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (UofT). The intention of CUS was to connect urban schools with communities and provide research on “how to better serve historically marginalized and racialized children and youth in public schools” (Hudson, 2015, p.1). The CUS brought Nicole West-Burns in as the Director of School Services, with her previous work and research focused on anti-Black racism, for several initiatives (Hudson, 2015), including the *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy Initiative*. Alongside West-Burns, experienced principal and teacher educator Jeff Kugler provided valuable insight into the CRRP project. Citing the works of Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Jacqueline Irvine, West-Burns and Kugler’s framework included the seven CRRP components 1) classroom climate and instruction, 2) school climate, 3) student voice and space, 4) family/caregiver relations, 5) school leadership, 6) community connections, and 7) culture of professional development. Though the Ministry’s Area of Focus does not explicitly mirror West-Burns and Kugler’s CRRP Framework, numerous principles do align.

In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education released Policy Memorandum No. 119 titled: “DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS.” This memorandum was an amendment to the almost 6-year-old policy of the same name that had arguably limited practical traction. The new memorandum was intended to centralize the importance of equitable and democratic educational practices in Ontario schools and to reduce the educational achievement gap for marginalized students. Policy No. 119 required boards to create change in the areas of racism, sexism, ableism, - Indigenous racism, homophobia, and any form of discrimination set forth in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and several corresponding documents (Ontario Ministry of Education , 2013b). This policy also called for boards to conduct close consultation with students, parents, Special Education Advisory Committees, and the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Advisory Committee. The Ministry considered this policy document a guideline for Ontario School Boards. Alongside the policy stood another document titled the “K-12 Capacity Building Series: Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools” which also made explicit the necessity for ongoing support in antiracism policy and practice. This initiative was intended to create school environments that brought forth three guiding principles for change and transformation: institutional, personal, and

instructional change (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). Shortly after the “K-12” policy document was announced by the Ontario government, a CRRP pilot program commenced at Irma Coulson Public school, northwest of Milton, Ontario. CRRP was part of the school's core principles. Hurley (2019) reminds us:

CRRP is not a program that can be delivered to schools in a box and distributed at a staff meeting or even on a single professional development day. Instead it is a dynamic framework that provides a set of tools and lenses that, if taken seriously, can lead to thoughtful unpacking, personal reflection and honest dialogue among staff, students, and communities. (p. 1)

The school therefore ensured that CRRP was at the forefront of each teacher’s curriculum-as-planned, -implemented, and -lived (Aoki, 1992). The Ministry of Education deemed this CRRP pilot project a success that centered “the cultural assets that students bring with them to the classroom” (Hurley, 2019) and worked to ensure that students’ cultural assets were reflected across the school and curriculum. Over the next few years, the Ministry took steps toward implementing CRRP across the entire provincial education system. It began with releasing the K-12 Capacity Building Series titled *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Towards Equity and Inclusivity in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). This document provided suggestions for bringing CRRP to their individual classroom.

The Ministry of Education then created the Education Equity Action Plan (EEAP) which endeavored to provide an outline for providing more equitable opportunities for students across the Ontario public schooling system (Ministry of Education, 2017). CRRP is called upon throughout the document. One area, for example, includes action items pertaining to “Strengthening inclusive and culturally responsive and relevant teaching, curriculum, assessment and resources” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22). This action item in the EEAP is further defined as making substantial modifications to board policies and curriculum by reflecting “diverse perspectives and experiences,” as well as mandatory implementation of lessons that speak to Canada’s history of “residential schools, treaties and the legacy of colonialism” (p. 22). The document goes on to provide performance measures and a timeline for ensuring that these outcomes were achieved.

The following year, in April 2018, the Ministry of Education sent out a memorandum titled *Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) – Expression of Interest 2018- 2019 Cohort* to the Directors of Education across Ontario. This 2018-2019 document invited schools of the province to apply to receive “four-day intensive training on CRRP, led by Dr. Nicole West-Burns and Jeff Kugler” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 1), as well as “on-site support throughout this past school year as they implemented their CRRP initiative, funded by the Education Equity Secretariat” (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 1). To apply, each board would be required to provide a report on the needs of the school and how it would participate in addressing the needs of the community. Examples provided by the Ministry include “anti-racism work to address systemic racism experienced by Indigenous, Black, and other underserved and/or racialized communities/students; LGBTQ2S inclusion; disproportionality in special education programs; and/or issues connected to socioeconomic status” (p. 2). Furthermore, according to a funding policy memo (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018) that was released by the Ministry of Education that same year, each school accepted into the CRRP cohort would receive an additional \$35,000. Any chosen school would have to create and release a plan for how the school would budget this grant and provide next steps to implement CRRP in its board. Since Ontario’s Ministry of Education began taking up CRRP, 13 boards across Ontario have been provided support for their CRRP initiatives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). Unfortunately, minimal research has been conducted on Ontario schools and teachers utilizing CRRP explicitly in their teaching and institutional practices, or on how these policies and respective practices are fulfilling the calls for antiracism set forth by the Ministry of Education’s Memorandum No. 119 and other corresponding documents.

In the research done so far, scholars take up the theoretical implications of antiracist curriculum policy and how they are employed on a practical level by teachers in Ontario who are inadequately equipped with resources to enact these policies. Alaca and Pyle (2018) at the UofT’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education conducted a study of how CRRP was implemented by kindergarten teachers in five different schools in the Greater Toronto Area. In their findings, teachers felt unsure about how to incorporate CRRP into the classroom, which results in inconsistencies in understanding what CRRP exactly looks like. Additionally, teachers were also unsure of their abilities to create lessons about cultures with which they did not identify. For example, one teacher

expressed difficulties preparing a lesson on Kwanzaa simply due to a lack of knowledge and experience. Alaca and Pyle (2018) note that many teachers express frustration at the lack of professional development (PD) workshops provided to them, stating that often any professional learning opportunities are reserved for administrative staff and school leaders.

In terms of our ongoing professional learning as educators, we reflect on the relationships between what we present in our own classrooms and the professional positions teacher candidates will take on within a range of their future community contexts. Our responsibilities include preparing teacher candidates to enter classrooms ready to create practices and pedagogies that can disrupt reproduction of individual, systemic and structural inequities (James, 2010). Brainwashing teacher candidates into apathetically following the steps of a CRRP or becoming an antiracist educator without question, can become another dogmatic governmental discursive regime. In short, training teachers to use CRRP just because they are expected to be ineffective. Our goal is to create opportunities for teacher candidates to critically assess approaches such as CRRP and to problematize how it does, and does not, enhance the lived experiences of teachers and students.

A Missing CRRP Piece in Ontario: Addressing Antiracisms

A key shortcoming of CRRP, at least in Ontario, is that it does not necessarily call on school board administrators, school administration, and/or teachers to question and/or disrupt the systemic barriers and exclusions that contribute to anti-Black racism(s). CRRP works within the structural parameters within what remains, what Stanley (2011) refers to as, a systems of racialized and racists exclusions. Although CRRP can provide everyone with a seat at the table, it does not create a new table altogether, or even equitable access to the room which hosts that table (James, 1992). More specifically, to borrow the message of a March 4, 2020, Twitter post from @Drawn2Intellect,

Culturally responsive pedagogy is not the same as anti-racist education. Being culturally-responsive creates a more inclusive space. Anti-racism intentionally exposes and challenges systems of power, such as white supremacy, with the intention to dismantle & abolish the system.

Here we consider the argument that those in charge of ministries and boards of education push for CRRP and promote it as being an all-inclusive and antiracist approach is because the dominant Ontario white settler colonial culture with which schools align is, as Sleeter (2012) stresses, afraid of losing power. Antiracism is, as part of its core, anti-settler-colonial-state (Razack, 2002). The education system is a tool within and for the state structure. To attack racism within the formal schooling environment is to attack formal schooling (Lentin, 2008). It therefore remains “easier to promote diversity than to oppose racism, especially if that racism is the racism of the state [school] itself” (Lentin, 2008, p. 326).

Antiracism is not a fixed adjective or noun. Moreover, an environment is not forever antiracist, and a person is not permanently antiracist. Antiracism is the action of supporting and enacting policies and practices that combat racist policies and practices. “Being an antiracist,” as Kendi (2019) notes, “requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (p. 23). Antiracism means not just adapting but significantly overhauling and creating change to the education system. Furthermore, changes require consistent efforts that are not always guaranteed to work (Stanley, 2014). CRRP, then, can be seen as a response with immediate tangible points of inclusion, but becomes inclusion into a system built on white, colonial dominance (Ahmed, 2012). In comparison, antiracist practices actively disrupt the tools of exclusions, thereby seeking and working to disrupt and re-structure the system itself.

Addressing CRRP beyond Multiculturalism

As Alaca and Pyle (2018) have shown, despite the Ministry’s provision of professional development workshops introducing educators to CRRP, teachers feel uncertain about “implementing” the pedagogy. Although it is meant to help students develop a deeper socio-cultural consciousness, CRRP often translates to tokenistic teaching practices (Nieto, 2010). In turn, it becomes a form of *liberal multiculturalism*, which “does acknowledge and celebrate differences. And yet, it tends to categorize ethnic and racial minorities into fixed identities, which in effect reproduces stereotypes by essentializing difference” (Sato & Este, 2018, p. 331). There is a canon of critical multiculturalism and multicultural education in the American context that more directly

addresses antiracist ways of teaching and learning (for examples, see Banks, 2009; Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Nieto, 2009, 2017). However, this approach is beyond the scope of our discussion here. Our critique of multiculturalism above is directed at the Canadian context.

The official *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* was adopted as part of the Canadian constitution to “recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage” (Government of Canada, 1985, Section 3.1.a). This language of promotion and sharing of cultural heritage suggests a systemic embrace of all identities; however, the Act works as lip-service. Dominant Eurocentric White supremacist structures remain. Their effects are that systemic inclusions of cultures and racialized identities beyond White French and English communities are state-sanctioned—*permitted* rather than accepted outright—meaning they are always conditional (Bannerji, 2000; Kymlicka, 2018). Additionally, CRRP assumes that the main challenge is including all cultures existing in the same socio-political context. This assumption risks perpetuating the marginalization of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, if these cultures are not represented in the school community.

The cultural identities of Black and Indigenous students and Students of Color are pitted against a Judeo-Christian, Anglo-Saxon, White settler-colonial *norm* reproduced across the public schooling systems (Hampton, 2020). While this can have negative consequences for any students who are marginalized, in the face of anti-Black racism in particular, the message becomes that inclusion of Black students means merely ensuring Black representation in the forms of images in the classroom and literature in the syllabus. These actions are positive and should be encouraged, especially when students do not see themselves represented in the school curriculum. However, these culturally responsive actions alone do not address the individual experiences of racist exclusions. Dlamini and Martinovic (2007) point out that assertions regarding the necessity for self-examination of teacher candidates of colour (TCC) is assimilationist in its effort to create a more culturally responsive pedagogy. These scholars note that TCC feel as though they are not permitted access to the same opportunities to express concerns in the Teacher Education field due to other teacher's negative perceptions of the TCC's cultures and languages. Even if CRRP is touted within teacher education classrooms, or classrooms at

any level of education, it is ineffective if cultures of TCC or students of colour are the only ones being spotlighted (i.e., made to appear exceptional rather than included as part of the norm).

Furthermore, CRRP is also ineffective if the pedagogy is promoted but TCC and students of colour cannot feel safe to share and express themselves through the lenses of any cultures with which they identify. If CRRP is to be implemented, administrators and practitioners need to move well beyond merely claiming to use CRRP but not developing it *with* students.

Throughout a 2017 evaluation of the transition of Ontario teacher education programs from a two- to four-semester structure, “culturally responsive” is alluded to only five times (only one of the five is “culturally responsive and relevant”) in the descriptions of the institutions’ courses and approaches (see Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017).¹ When looked at in relation to the feelings of the TCC above, and with the continuing incidents of racisms in education, such cursory mention of CRRP suggests it has been inserted into programs but not critically developed. CRRP does not have to be so tokenistic. There are elements of the pedagogy that, when enacted purposefully, can afford students opportunities to participate in challenging issues of power and privilege and creating antiracist school environments. These elements, however, need increased emphasis and must be understood as ongoing efforts, rather than a curriculum box to be ticked. Moreover, in Ontario the continued support from the Ministry of Education must remain consistent, resolute, and indifferent to changing political parties. Ongoing financial support must be provided to boards, schools, and then educators, if CRRP is to be anything more than multicultural essentialism. As we have seen in the research thus far, teachers have crucial roles to play if CRRP is to break down barriers, but the onus is not exclusively on teachers.

How Can CRRP Become more than a Professional Disposition?

¹ Despite growing availability of critical research examining the history, advantages, and privileges of CRRP, nowhere in those five references is CRRP defined or explained. With further evaluation of the Ontario programs in the works, it is possible that more detailed discussion of CRRP within teacher education is forthcoming. At this moment, however, there is no discussion of how Ontario teacher education programs take up CRRP, or of how it can/should be addressed for its relational effects in the classroom.

If we can generally understand culture as experiences lived, interpreted, and defined (Hall, 2016), then educators can recognize why CRRP insists upon acknowledgement that educators and their students live in, experience, and learn from communities outside of the school setting. Everyone brings their experiences and identities into the classroom. This may seem like an obvious statement to make, but the obvious is often taken for granted rather than being used to actively inform educational practices. Scholars who address different forms of the links between experience, identity, and learning warrant consideration. Speaking more specifically to Black women, but sharing a message applicable to all educators, Baszile (2018) promotes an ongoing development of a pedagogy of self-love. She states that “Self-love blossoms out of a willful self-knowing or a journey that always underscores the fact that we teach—in a classroom or a community center or a book—who we are and who we are always becoming” (p. 267). The role of the educator, Baszile (2018) suggests, is to provide an opportunity for students to have serious dialogues [...] and to draw on intellectually and affectively rigorous texts to understand and articulate in more depth what ails them and what drives them as young people who live in the wake of a legacy of trauma and triumph and ongoing struggles. (p. 277-278)

Supporting the push to reconsider the variety and complexity of lived experiences, Berry (2017) calls for us to re-story education with counter-Western narratives. She contends that “We must move beyond the master narrative and honor the multiple stories we bring to our learning experiences ... we must acknowledge that our stories come from our own cultures, histories, and language, deeply nested in time and space, while accepting that in many ways we are interconnected and interdependent” (p. 63). In a similar vein to Baszile (2018), Berry (2017) suggests we need education that can take students “back to their communities and carry with them throughout the world [...] We must allow education to start with who we are and where we are” (p. 63). Indeed, these approaches speak the language of a CRRP that sees and addresses students as culturally, racially, and intellectually dynamic, and as coming from places and spaces of complexity, perhaps including issues of racism. They are curricular and pedagogical strategic approaches that can help make real connections between a student’s lived, interpreted, and defined experiences and their schooling. However, even affiliating these approaches with CRRP only goes as far as acknowledging the ways students live in the world. It does not ask why the system is such that CRRP and antiracism are needed in the first place.

Fasching-Varner, et al. (2014) examine the school-to-prison pipeline, highlighting schools as neoliberal institutions linked to the capitalist economy, and suggesting that “without school failure there is no opportunity for an educational reform-industrial complex, and without people to punish, similarly, there is no need for the prison-industrial complex” (p. 411). They argue that despite a long-existing discourse about the relationships between race, failure, and poverty, and the push to close achievement gaps between Students of Color and their White peers, “there is no crisis in schools or prisons—each institution is functioning per their design and the demands of the society” (p. 420). The divisions and racist exclusions of people are ingrained in the systems. Baszile’s (2018) insistence that educators need to model self-love such that students learn to examine their embodied experiences within their daily contexts can and perhaps should be taken up as part of CRRP’s insistence on considering lived experience.

Berry (2017) more pointedly links education, the self, and community as phenomena that inform and shape each other. In relation to CRRP, Berry’s points are indicative of how education being ‘responsive’ and ‘relevant’ must mean being relational to a given group of students and not just generic identity labels. These insights should indeed be taken up, but they should not be seen as solving racism in education. Beyond teaching students to embrace and connect with their cultures, identities, and histories, we need to eliminate the need for them to navigate a system structured to diminish them. When Fasching-Varner, et al. (2014) write of the school-to-prison pipeline, they address it in the American context. However, scholars here in Canada are having similar conversations in relation to unpacking and disrupting the historic systems of education that enable and perpetuate anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.

Brant-Birioukov, et al. (2020) seek to reconceptualize teacher education in ways that make possible a more cohesive education system working toward reconciliation between Indigenous nations and Canada. The authors posit that “the existing tensions surrounding an inherited Eurocentric curriculum cannot be reduced to best practices but involves an honest engagement with the historical particulars that came before” (p. 56). They call for educational leaders “to foster a teacher education agenda that destabilizes Settler-dominant narratives, ethical engagement and the nurturing of historical consciousness must be continuously re-centred at the forefront of teacher education curricula” (p. 56). While these scholars focus on Indigenous education, their perspectives

are transferable to wider antiracism, as racist exclusions of any kind can be traced through the “historical particulars” to understand and dismantle the dominance of Whiteness settler colonialism. ² More specifically addressing anti-Black racism, Aladejebi (2021) shows that prior to and throughout the 20th century, Black educators, and community members in Canada,

...emphasized a continued commitment to social justice and equal access to education by working inside and outside of public schooling institutions to combat the problematic streaming of black [sic] students into lower level programming, high dropout rates and student disengagement from ministry-mandated curricula. (p. 180)

Evidently, Black educators and community members have long understood the importance of engaging connections between schooling and community, particularly in the work of challenging racisms. Education systems—the people and institutions with power to support such connections—have not embraced (to put it mildly) the antiracist potential through school-community links. As hampton (2020) states of post-secondary education at McGill University, “Black people have attended and worked at the university for well over a century. As in Canada more broadly, this presence and the contributions of these people have largely been erased from institutional histories” (p. 14).

In 2020, the Ontario Black History Society initiated the #BlackedOutHistory project, in which they redacted any content *not* related to Black history in the Nelson 8 History textbook, a Canadian history textbook commonly used in Ontario Grade 8 classrooms. Of 255 pages, only 13 remained with readable content about a racialized group with an over-400-year-long history in what is now Canada. While textbooks on their own can enact antiracism, this balance is indicative of the wider lens of what the education system supports and promotes in Ontario. The Ministry can encourage, and

² Donald (2009) uses the metaphor of the colonial frontier fort to address colonial-rooted ideas of which and how knowledges and identities belong in the ‘fort’ (read dominant system). His research illustrates that settler-colonial education structures have adopted the fort mentality and the system is “conflated with ways of organizing and separating people according to race, culture, and civilization” (Donald, 2009, p. 4).

any individual educator can use CRRP, but the underlying structure of the education system remains one of settler-colonial dominance. In response, hampton (2020) calls on educators to take up critical race counter- storytelling, not just for the sake of presenting Black narratives that de-center Eurocentric/White narratives, but rather to identify and trouble White supremacy in even the most seemingly antiracist systems and practices. She states, “We must ensure that histories of African enslavement and the presence and experiences of Black people are also considered part of the national conversation regarding ‘truth and reconciliation’ in Canada” (p. 26). In this sense, antiracism becomes something that links history with the present, emphasizes connections between different people, groups, and communities, and is not done *to* BIPOC but with and for people of all racialized identities. If this is the case, then CRRP must be implemented in relational ways that engage and critically examine the interconnections between people, identity, education, community, and the power structures that underpin it all. To do so, Carl James (2017) has proposed a relational way forward called a *community- referenced approach to education* (CRAE). This approach is not yet another iteration of CRRP with a different name; instead, the idea is that communities each have their culture(s), meaning that CRRP can still be used. CRAE plays on the understanding that culture is always in flux and is shaped differently by context. As James (2017) states, “Communities shape, and are shaped by, group affiliation based on shared norms, values, interests, and practices— all of which are interrelated to social, political, religious, and economic circumstances” (p. 39). He adds that “Community is neither homogeneous nor stable, but is necessarily complex, contextual, changing, multilayered, relational, and sometimes temporary, differentially serving its members who exercise their agency based on their beliefs, ethics, and mores” (p. 39).

Educators essentialize students’ identities when they make cultural connections all about the generalized cultures connected to predetermined conceptions of students’ nationalities. If “culture” is alive, meaning it is never static and grows with and through the influences of context, educators attempting to include essentialized visions of cultures will always fall behind and, at best, only be partially attuned to students’ lived experiences. James (2017) advises that “Educators [...] need to take every opportunity to co-create curriculum with students helping them to develop their critical analytical skills, learn language to articulate *their* understandings of their lives, make sense of their community and social circumstances, and acquire understandings of the structures that

support their circumstances” (p. 40, emphasis in original). CRAE is indeed an approach that individual educators can draw on in ways that acknowledge the complexities of the systems and structures in which students, schools, and communities are situated. It calls on teachers and students to develop the necessary critical lenses to question and restory the (dis)connections between their education and their lived experiences. How can we then, as teacher educators, create opportunities for future teachers to create community relevant and relation curriculum and pedagogies?³

In his discussion of CRAE, James (2017) states that “education and schooling must take into account the needs, concerns, interests, expectations, and aspirations of students and parents in terms of having CRRP, curriculum, and resources informed by the communities in which students and parents reside” (p. 52). CRRP, then, is not inevitably a strategic pedagogical counter or silver bullet when addressing anti-Black racisms. Rather, it contributes toward seeing that a community is composed of different people with their unique histories and lived experiences who in turn are in the processes of co-creating their community cultures. The ongoing evolution of these cultures frames how people experience and/or counter anti-Black racism(s) inside and outside of a settler colonial public schooling system.

³ In 2017, the Government of Ontario announced a three-year strategic plan to tackle systemic racism in the government and public programs and services – including schooling. This work included research and consultation, advanced reporting on hate crimes, increased funding for antiracism educational resources, and other outreach strategies (Government of Ontario, 2017). Three years later, perhaps inspired by the late 2010s and now early 2020s (re)ignition of attention to racisms in Canada, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) announced that they supported the Government’s antiracist initiatives (OCT, 2020[a] July). In July 2020, OCT announced its plan to publish a public advisory to all OCT members in addition to amending the OCT Act and producing an anti-Black racism Additional Qualifications (AQ) course for educators (OCT, 2020[b] July). In November 2020, OCT announced its amendments to the OCT Act’s Professional Misconduct Regulation. This regulation now considers the following as misconduct: “making remarks or engaging in behaviours that expose any person or class of persons to hatred on the basis of a prohibited ground of discrimination under Part I of the Human Rights Code” (OCT, 2020 November, Online). In this same issue, they note that participation in the announced AQ is voluntary, but an important first step in leadership development in Ontario. While a good step, we cannot assume any trickle-down antiracism will occur from the OCT regulation changes. Building working relationships between teacher education, schools, education governance, and communities can offer avenues forward that reflect the lived and changing experiences of students and educators.

Addressing CRRP and Antiracism as Teacher Education in Ontario

In Eastern Ontario, we have been involved in partnerships that exemplify approaches to CRRP and antiracism in educational institutions. In November 2017, in line with the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Education Equity Action Plan*, the Réseau de Savoir sur l'Équité / Equity Knowledge Network ([RSEKN](#)) was launched as a pan-Ontario initiative hosted by the University of Ottawa and including regional leaders in the Eastern, Southern, Northern, and Greater Toronto Area regions of the province. The overarching mandate of [RSEKN](#) was knowledge mobilization through connecting teacher candidates, teachers, administrators, researchers, parents, students, and community groups, for the purposes of developing and promoting equity in education. While all regions of [RSEKN](#) supported each other, the network was regionally divided to better respond to the different requirements in the various provincial areas. We (the authors of this paper) were situated in the Eastern Ontario region and found that in responding to the needs of the communities within the area, our focus became primarily on developing practices of antiracism.

In partnership with the Ottawa school boards, the *Urban Community Cohort* (UCC), connects teacher candidates at the University of Ottawa's Bachelor of Education program with schools that have been identified as 'urban priority' based on the diversity of cultures, languages, and residency status in Canada (UCC, n.d.). The priority of the UCC, like we have seen with CRRP practices at Irma Coulson Public School, is to "teach in dynamic environments and strive to create safe schools, increase student achievement and build sustainable community partnerships" (UCC, n.d.). Student teachers involved in the UCC program are encouraged to focus on strategies related to critical engagement, student success, and agency through three key priorities outlined in the UCC mandate (UCC, n.d.). These priorities are 1) taking a critical approach, 2) creating inclusive school environments, and 3) teaching responsively. In accordance with the Government of Ontario and Ministry of Education, 40 high schools in 12 school boards in many cities across Ontario received funding for such initiatives related to student achievement, violence, bullying prevention, as well as community and family engagement (Ministry of Education, 2019). Prior to such initiatives and identifications, and perhaps even still (given the insubstantial amount of research, it is hard to say), these schools faced higher

rates of suspension, expulsion, poverty, and academic achievement (Ministry of Education, 2019).

With our relationships between the teacher education program and the local educators growing in strategic ways, we sought to ensure that students were directly included in the broadening partnerships. In 2018 and 2019, through RSEKN, we provided our support to the first and second annual *Black Youth Conferences* (BYC) in connection with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB). We also continued our support for the planning of the 2020 conference, but it was postponed due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. With some guidance from OCDSB staff, the BYC was organized by a team of Black students—Grades 9 to 12—from a variety of schools across the board. Each conference included a schedule of panel discussions, musical performances, and workshops, all of which were led *by* students for a participating audience *of* students. While the student organizers did not declare the conference an event only for Black students, the vast majority of participants were Black students, and the conference became a space of sharing and exchange and for confronting the experiences of anti-Black racism that the students faced within their schools. The discussions went beyond merely airing grievances and were developed to identify what about the school system needs to change, as well as what students can do to initiate the changes.

Our initial support was in the form of funding, helping to cover any costs accrued as part of developing and successfully facilitating the Black Youth Conferences. Additionally, and more in line with the relational understandings of CRRP, in the lead-up to the conference and during the conference itself, we used our social media tools to promote and bring awareness to the work the students were doing. As part of sharing the goings-on of the event with the online world, we targeted our social media output at teacher candidates who would soon be taking on teaching practicum positions in the very schools that the BYC student organizers and participants attended. The conference was an opportunity for Black students to represent their lived realities and for (future) educators to understand the education culture that includes anti-Black racism, not as a disconnected occurrence *out there*, but as an issue where they and we live and learn. It was an experience where Black students could use their voices of excellence and be sure they would be heard.

In 2018, school boards in Ontario were granted permission to collect race-based data (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Alongside TDSB and the OCDSB, 7 other boards in Ontario collected such data, and created a Graduation Program designed to provide support, mentorship, and Afrocentric Culturally Responsive Pedagogy for Black students. *The Sankofa Centre of Excellence* was created to “address issues and concerns that impact the graduation rates of Black students in the district” and provide culturally relevant and responsive ways to align the individual experiences of Black youth in these schools with the curriculum as taught (Sankofa Document, 2020, p. 4). Meanwhile, the Sankofa Centre continues to focus on combating micro and macro ways racisms manifest across the K-12 public education system. The Sankofa Centre of Excellence pilot began in two schools in the Ottawa region. The Black Graduation Coaches’ role in these schools was to begin to identify Black students who would be interested in participating in the program, identifying administration and teachers who would liaise with students and coaches, as well as maintain frequent status updates from the Human Rights and Equity Division to the schools (Sankofa Document, 2020). While the BYC and Sankofa are examples of understanding community culture in connection to education, the call for educators to pay attention should not always have to come from the students. For this reason, we developed other partnerships where new teachers were introduced specifically to CRRP.

The Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) partnered with RSEKN to identify equity as the organizing framework for its *New Teacher Induction Program* (NTIP). New teachers were able to enact a social action curriculum project within their classrooms which in turn sought to address equity, diversity, and inclusion. Part of the professional learning that the OCSB organized for new teachers involved reading and enacting the different curricular, pedagogical, and relational strategies put forth in *Hammond’s Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain*. Over the course of the year, new teachers were able to collaborate with each other as professional learning communities in partner schools in ways that encouraged them to address existing systemic barriers for the different students they sought to serve. Several guest speakers with an expertise in CRRP were invited to support their ongoing professional learning that year. Here, the school board administration recognized that part of organizational change in its culture requires disrupting its cultural responses even within its New Teacher Induction Program. Such professional learning is part of a new teacher’s transition toward becoming a professional

educator in terms of the school board leadership's commitment to be part of the systemic and structural changes required to disrupt different societal, structural, and individual racisms. This initial CRRP pilot project has now become part of the professional learning for all newly hired OCSB teachers.

Despite these different efforts, however, students, teacher candidates of color, and educators at the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education, continue to feel the impacts of institutionalized racism and its structural prohibitors (Teachers Candidates of Colour, 2021). In 2019/2020 the *Teacher Candidates of Colour (TCC)* Collective was created and continues to be taken up each year by new members with similar objectives. The TCC Collective recognizes the lived experiences of teachers of color in the faculty and provides solidarity through "active learning and unlearning" processes (TCC, 2021, p. 1). In 2020, for example, the TCC Collective hosted a Slam Poetry and Spoken Word event that facilitated the artistic dialogue of BIPOC teacher candidates and the University community. Alongside this event, the TCC Collective has hosted several webinars pertaining to anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms in the classroom (TCC, 2021). The Collective states their aims in saying:

The TCC Collective aims to come together and work on projects that focus on the following goals: (1) decolonizing the body, mind, and spirit, which focus on learning and unlearning our own assumptions and biases, (2) decentralizing hierarchies and power dynamics to empower marginalized communities and individuals, and finally, (3) removing and reducing systemic and structural barriers that exist. (TCC, "Our Mission", 2021)

Similarly, we see the work of *Education Graduate Students of Colour (EGSC)* in University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education as inspired by the TCC Collective's growth, with equal intents to provide space for solidarity and combat Anti-BIPOC racisms. In partnership with the TCC Collective, the EGSC created an academic space for graduate students of color to publish in EGSC's independent journal titled *Counter Narratives* (EGSCUOttawa, 2021). Additionally, the EGSC hosts webinars and workshops on antiracism. What is evinced by these collectives is the "structural, institutional, and individual mechanisms of anti-Black racisms" that continue to persist within teacher education and graduate studies programs (p. 220-221).

CRRP alone is not enough here at our Faculty of Education to adequately combat individual, systemic, and societal forms of anti-Black racism students and colleagues continue to experience at the University of Ottawa. Such student collectives have strategically sought to create curricular and pedagogical opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom to enact critical race counter-storytelling by and for their respective communities. And yet, current enactments of CRRP fail to disrupt the "Ridiculously White institution[al]" structures and respective conceptions of what it might mean to become a teacher here in Ontario (Gershon, 2020, p. 52). We do, however, see promise in the actions we have described (RSEKN, UCC, BYC, Sankofa Centre of Excellence, NTIP, TCC, EGSC), because each initiative was built on and continues to develop through emphasis on community engagement. Beyond taking on aspects of CRRP (e.g., inclusion: providing critical spaces for voices of otherwise marginalized people), they work to bolster and connect those voices for naming and dismantling institutional and systemic barriers. CRRP is too often enacted on individual levels and not as a collaborative approach connecting educators, students, and community. Indeed, more social action research in collaborating with teacher education programs here in Ontario and elsewhere is needed to understand a way forward.

The relationships we built, supported, and now work to maintain are evidence of antiracist possibilities when education is looked at as linked to and positioned within a dynamic community (James, 2017). Voices of marginalized students become heard, not in combative ways, but through open and honest communication *with* educators. Future and new educators are provided with professional development opportunities that engage with CRRP as more than a checklist and, rather, put the pedagogy into practice within a relational and social action focus. The challenges to this type of work, however, are that, firstly, it requires a buy-in, not in the monetary sense—although there are some financial costs—but in the sense that students and educators at all levels need to want to learn and use CRRP even before they really know how it works.

Educators should see themselves connected to the work of actively interpreting CRRP and disrupting anti-Black racism in non-tokenistic and purposeful ways (James, 1992). Racisms occur in sociohistorical contexts (Goldberg, 1993), so there cannot be a *one-size-fits-all* or a *one-and-done* antiracism education. The spaces we create and occupy, even if intended to be antiracist, cannot and will not be eternally antiracist. Antiracism must be active and ongoing (Hage, 2016). This can require some students and educators to shift

from positions of comfort. There are no guarantees in the disruption of racialized exclusions (Stanley, 2014). This uncertainty can cause hesitancy in taking up the continuously shifting work while strategically connecting with students' lived experiences. As Stanley (2012) says elsewhere and we agree, using an antiracist approach "offers a better picture of reality, and is more alive to the complex social dynamics that continually reproduce and circulate certain people's meaning while excluding the meanings of most of the people in the world" (p. 326). If CRRP is to contribute to antiracism work, it needs participation from all facets of a community where our meanings are created, enacted, and embodied.

Conclusion

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy can play a key role toward disrupting anti-Black racism(s). However, doing so requires understanding 'culture' in relational and non-tokenistic ways that unsettle the systemic "fixity" of settler-colonial structures. The evolving cultures of a community and school are underpinned by meanings stemming from racialized identities, and many other facets of our identities such as gender, sexuality, religion, class, and others. Moreover, the fact that there are so many possible identifications that in turn inform one's cultural relevance speaks to the shortcomings of addressing "culture" in essentializing ways. Enacting CRRP should, in theory, involve co-creating a classroom community and curriculum with students that can support and sustain relations with them and their communities. This curricular approach may not disrupt the systems and structures that perpetuate anti-Black racism(s). It might, however, enhance our capacity to identify and address past, present, and future anti-Black racism(s) across the curriculum-as-planned, - implemented, and - lived.

Not every elementary and secondary school has a teacher education program nearby. And so, the partnerships that we highlighted here are not always replicable. For this reason, ongoing investigation needs to be done not only on how CRRP is being conceptualized across Ontario, but also on how it is being taken up both within teacher education programs and by teachers in the classroom. Strategies for disrupting anti-Black racism(s) cannot use a 'copy-n-paste' approach, uncritically implementing antiracist practices from one community/school cultural context in a different community/school


cultural context. The recognition and incorporation of nuanced culturally referenced contexts through CRRP can contribute to understanding anti-Black racism in its place. Enacting antiracism in a school setting cannot be done *to* students or *for* students, and must be done *with* students (James, 2017).

To answer our title question, CRRP is not enough, as a stand-alone strategy for disrupting and unsettling antiracism education. On its own, this pedagogy as it is often taken up in Ontario teacher education programs, does not address systemic and structural racist exclusions and inclusions. However, it need not be abandoned. CRRP can be understood and implemented with reference to community, where cultures are complex, unfixed, and (re)created within context (James, 2017). If CRRP is employed as relational and ongoing, perhaps it can help educators and students understand their relationships with each other and the communities in which they live and teach in deeper ways and suggest pathways toward enacting a less racist society together.

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CHAPTER THREE

Centering Black Excellence: Critical Race *Currere*³

Aaron Sardinha

As we entered the new year in 2022, our attention began to shift. Instagram, once saturated with Black squares, now hosted winter pictures, holiday photos, and glee. Not to say I was entirely free from this; my first few pictures of the year were exactly that. I think back to the year we put behind us and remember the activism, the protests, and vitriol. The shift in our public discourse away from the persistent and ongoing threat of anti-Black racism is far from indicative of our need to remain silent. Last year (2021), for example, in Windsor ([CBC, August 2021](#)), Barrie ([CTV, 2021](#)), and Toronto ([CBC, November 2021](#)) instances of anti-Black racism continue to resurface and remain, in many cases, insufficiently addressed. With the holiday season closely in our rear-view, I can't help feeling like we're driving into this new year woefully unprepared for any collective resolution. While in the United States, there is a push to remove any semblance of Critical Race Theory in K-12 as well as college classrooms ([Washington Post, 2021](#)). I feel a very real, tangible fear at the imminent threat of losing the little space in between the curricular cracks (Schultz, et al., 2013) I have left to advocate for my existence.

So, I am here, writing, perhaps as a response to this fear, to the existence of my Black body in a pedagogically white space. I take a currerean journey in relation to my lived experiences with co-designing and teaching the Sankofa Centre of Black Excellence curriculum. In traversing this journey I draw on critical race theory (CRT) and William Pinar's (1975, 2004) *currere* methodology to dissect and (re)interpret the autobiographical racialized self, to situate "I and ask

³ This article has been conditionally accepted to the *Currere* Exchange Journal for the Fall 2022 issue upon completion of editor's feedback.

about the possibilities of *currere*'s role in antiracism education. At times, I draw upon poetry I create or have created during my currerian journey. Like other currerian scholars (Woodford, 2021, Daspit, 2021), I may do this to analyze and synthesize my autobiographical academic experience in its many existing forms. In doing so I highlight the importance of Critical Race *Currere* concerning curriculum studies and a Canadian education system. At times, my steps through Pinar's (1975, 2004) *currere* may seem obvious and explicit. At other times I move across these steps more subtly to evoke a closeness to my own experience and lean away from any dominating epistemological structural inhibitions.

Currere

Self-exploration, transformation, movement. These are all words that have at one point been used to describe *currere* (Pinar, 2004, Baszile, 2017). A method of moving from one point to the next, not so much on a line, not forward, nor backward in the traditional sense of movement, but through situated temporary moments, in and out of moments, *of* moments (Pinar, 1975, 2004). *Currere* asks the currerian to be aware autobiographically of one's lived experience historically, culturally, politically, and socially (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). In my understanding *currere* takes the writer through four phases of reflection and internal dialogue (Baszile, 2017). Remembering in the *Regressive*, Reflection in the *Progressive*, Interpretation in the *Analytical*, and Re-engagement in the *Synthetical*. Stated plainly, while we travel through these moments we think autobiographically about our past, reflect on its meaning, think about its significance for our future, and weave these moments together for greater clarity and understanding.

Currere is one such methodology situated within a larger body of life writing research. Autoethnography emerged in the 1970s as a necessary response to feminist and post-modernist

thinkers calling into question the politics of ethnographic cultural representation (Reed-Danahay, 2001). Autoethnography differs from ethnography in that it offers up a subjective self's narrative inquiry in place of "dominant cultural claims of neutrality, objectivity, colour blindness, and meritocracy" (Hughes, 2020, p. 155). As a research methodology, autoethnography seeks to describe one's own experience about a cultural experience (Hurstun, 1995; Jewett, 2006; Ellis et al., 2010). However, autoethnographic research is not free from ethical concerns. Dauphenee's (2010) study has looked at how a writer, though seeking to describe one's own experience, is bound by the academic lens and all its expectations. Teliarferro Baszile (2015) refers to this as "epistemological dimensions of domination" (p. 3). *Currere* offers further possibilities in that it asks the researcher to remain mindful of our point of view in relation to all external expectations and look at it, loosen ourselves from it, detach from it, and bracket it (Pinar, 1975). Pinar notes:

What conceptual gestalt is finally visible? That is, what is one's "point of view?"

Can one bracket and thus escape from the conceptual, take it into one's hands as it were, examine it and see its relation to one's psychological, physical, biographic condition. (p. 27)

Currere invites the researcher through these stages in this loosened way by asking them to write free-associatively while thinking about the present, past and future sometimes exclusive of each other, "but inclusive of responses to them" (Pinar, 1975, p. 25). While doing *currere*, it is the hope that researchers engage in deeper conversations with themselves to better understand their lived experience as educators and commit fully to more present and intentional teaching practice.

Though initially conceived in the 1970s, *currere* has continued to evolve and invite us to consider the lived experiences of our students and selves with all our collective histories. As Pinar (2019) notes "Curriculum theory speaks from actual individual's subjective experience of history

and society, the inextricable interrelationships among which structure but do not determine education experience” (p, 17). As such our curriculum(s) have continued to build and change with our experiences and remain mindful of imposing curricular structure. The most recent edition of Pinar’s *What is Curriculum Theory* (2019) explores how education has become increasingly ‘authoritarian’ because of such structure. By the linking of technology and teaching and the service of technological standardized testing tools, Pinar (2019) argues that teachers have been transformed into technicians. Serving only the economy and government as an ever-expanding business, the curriculum has been described as “school deform” no longer in the hands of the educator (Pinar, 2019, p. 4). What remains for Pinar’s *curre* after more than four decades is the pursuit of the autobiographical subjective within our curriculum. Pinar (2019) states:

Through the subjective preservation of academic knowledge and lived experience - each informs the other- we enable understanding of the public world, as we discern our private path within it. In ways small and sometimes large, neither stays the same. (p. 25)

In this way, we must remind ourselves of the subjectivity continuously endangered in our present-day curriculum, and how conservation efforts may reinvigorate our understanding of the public world, and our path within it. Specifically, *curre* may remind us of the ways racisms in North America have been “displaced and deferred” in our school systems and curriculum (Pinar, 2019, p. 7).

The symbolism behind the course which has inspired this piece, The Sankofa Centre of Excellence, and the eponymous creature are best reflected in *curre*’s ideological wrestling of time. Like Pinar’s articulation of *curre* as an allegory of the present, the Sankofa bird represents returning to the past, returning to the present, as one reimagines the future. San (return) Ko (Go)

Fa (Look, seek, and take), from the Akan, Ghanaian language translates literally to “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind” (Berea.Edu, 2021). Similarly, Pinar’s (2019) *currere* understands time as that which can bridge connections among those who practice it, and the potential of one’s pedagogy. Pinar (2019) notes “It is the past that can dislodge us from submersion in the present, and its articulation can serve as an allegory-of-the-present. No longer a flat line between what is no more and can never be...” (p. 27). In my currerian praxis, I remember, and I look back, like the Sankofa bird and seek wisdom from that which can reimagine mines and students’ futures as Black excellence.

Critical Race/Feminist *Currere*

The challenge for myself is that the *currerian* conversations generated around the pursuit of self-understanding take place primarily around “ideas, concepts, and texts that emerge almost exclusively from the male psyche, from the white psyche, from the white male psyche” (Taliaferro Baszile, 2015, p. 2). In 2015 Denise Taliaferro Baszile published *Critical Race/Feminist Currere* which posited the need to center the voices of women of colour, in academic domains. These voices, Taliaferro Baszile (2015) notes are those that “have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculums that shape our lives, the curricula of schooling and media, in particular” (p. 2). I ask, what is my lived experience as a Canadian Black educator creating a course for/with/by Black students? How do their/our stories and experience coalesce, harmonize at the intersection of Excellence? What moments in their life, in their/our schooling have been silenced and pushed aside systemically? “What racializing laws, rules, and norms [are] woven into the social system”? (Tator & Henry, 2000, p. 373). bell hooks (1993) notes in *Teaching to Transgress* that to (re)enact antiracism in schools, we must begin with the student’s lived

experience. hooks notes “Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community” (p. 8). Simply put, Critical Race *Currere* invites a dialogue between two theoretical schools of thought and practice: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Curriculum Studies. By bringing these fields together one hopes that we can bring race, knowledge, and power back into conversation with the self and our lived experiences (Taliaferro Baszile, 2015).

One of the central limitations of my study of critical race *currere* is that I have removed the “/Feminist” out of my title. This is not to say I don’t identify as a feminist - I do. Rather, I have removed the feminist out of this piece, because I do not identify as a woman and that is a voice in a field to which I cannot contribute my own *lived* experience. Moreover, I ask what I might learn from Black feminist scholars by positioning myself, respectfully, outside of these experiences. In Canada, we are far from gender equality, and that gap lengthens with the (very necessary) inclusion of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993). For example, at the time of writing only 53% of the 572 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls cases have been ‘solved’ (Native Women’s Association, 2020; [CTVNews, October 2021](#)), while Black and Indigenous women of colour are at higher risk for violence (Seng et al., 2012; West, 2008; [CTVNews, June 2019](#)). During this pandemic, which is still a part of our lived reality, Black and Indigenous women continue to be the most impacted by domestic violence, and employment scarcity ([CBC March 2021](#); [RBC Economics, 2020](#)). In this article, I have made all efforts to cite women of colour wherever possible, and actively encourage other BIPOC folks who identify as women and varying gender identities across the global majority to contribute their voices in this evolving and emergent field. There is a poem that comes to mind, written by a local Prince Edward Island artist and activist

Kxng Kendi (2021) on the importance of honouring Black and Indigenous women across the globe.

They write:

For we make life. For we started life.

Therefore we understand life.

Black womxn are your foremothers,

Indigenous womxn carry the world's Indigenous wisdom we so desperately need to get us into the next world.

The path to saving the Mothership, Earth, including protecting the Oceans, Whales, and Forests. It equally includes protecting Black, Indigenous Womxn of Colour

Globally (p. 1)

Okello (2019), has looked at the ways Black men ethically engage with afro-feminism(s) through auto/ethnography. She notes that although the primary concern of feminism is not to 'rescue' Black heterosexual cis-gendered men, "men's ethical participation in and with Black feminisms can assist in creating the alternative ways of being that Black feminisms call for and may facilitate communal healing projects in and beyond educative spaces" (p. 343). Though I don't identify as heterosexual, and my cis-ness remains interrogated, I ask about the possibilities for Black feminism to continue to facilitate my engagement with *currere*, and ultimately my pedagogy. I write, as I teach, I actively work to dismantle and decolonize my thinking through the process of *currere* and question how my autobiographical pursuits can/must include making space for not only antiracism but feminism.

Regressive: Nowhere to Hide, Yet Still Unseen

It's June of 2020. I've driven an hour outside of Ottawa for the first of a five-day Substitute Teacher Contract. A school, tucked away in a rural small town in Ontario, quiet, homey in most ways, but uncomfortable in others. Here, at this school, I am aware of my exclusions, my Blackness which has no doubts. Even despite the innocuous staff room chatter surrounding "the new Black student"—the only Black student in a school of 200 or less. He's five years old, and the teachers assure each other that they don't see colour—that it won't be an issue. I bite my tongue which begs to sermon the tenets of antiracism. I remember the issues facing many Black students across Ontario. "My daughters have to straighten their hair to feel like it's not going to be touched, it's not going to be spoken about, it's not going to be ridiculed," One parent at the Simcoe school board notes "[They've] even been called Medusa when they wear their hair in braids" (CTV, November 2021, p. 1). I stand still with my coffee in hand remembering my 12-year-old self lathering dollar store gel through my hair, slicking it back in hopes of finally fitting in. I hadn't even made my full walk to school that day when an eighth-grader shouted out to me surrounded by my friends "Look at Mocha Elvis!"

"Good morning Aaron" another teacher walks by me in the staff room as I return to the present. I wear only dress clothes here, I've tightened my hair back in an imperceptibly curly bun, sure to have flattened out any stray curls from my temples—the likes of which I would have called endearing any other day—now they are exposing, inconspicuously Black. I lean on, what Downey (2020) refers to as, my White Seeming Privilege to 'fit in.' I smile behind my medical mask and head to my class. I feel the gel in my hair. 13 years later.

At home, my scalp aches from the day and so I untie my hair - free from any perception. I open my laptop to continue to work on the papers I've been assigned for my curriculum studies

course. Every time I write, I think of George, and I think of the recent protests after the murder of Abdirahman Abdi in Ottawa, Ontario. I think of the uprising of anti-Black racism and I struggle to find the words. As I think back to this day, I'm reminded of James Baldwin (1962) and his letter to his nephew: "Dear James, I have written this letter five times, and I have torn it up five times" (p. 3). Taliaferro-Baszile (2020) cites similar struggles in her writing:

I had not figured it out yet, my trouble with getting it out in a way that moves beyond the basic requirement of being informative, contributing something thoughtful to the field. After an hour or so, the word that I have erased several times now comes out again, it refuses - it seems - to go away, to be silenced. The word is *I*." (p. 486)

I refuse to go away, I silence(d) myself today, but in writing, how can I now? I call Dr. Ng-A-Fook, my academic supervisor, and the professor of my curriculum studies course. He assures me that my priority is to take care of myself. So, I write, and I write about George, I write about Abdi, and I write about *I*.

Sankofa Centre of Excellence

Not long after my call with Dr. Ng-A-Fook, I received an email from him putting me in touch with the Equity and Diversity Coordinator for a local Ontario school board. Interested, I forwarded my information to her and within a few hours, a meeting had been established. One week later, we spoke for upwards of an hour about the state of North America, the state of curriculum (on which I'm still not confident I have any authority), and the state of teaching. She had explained that she wanted to design a course that focused on Black Excellence in many different facets from Well-Being, Financial Literacy, Community Outreach, and Career Development. In my mind, I was

panicking. “Can such a course exist? What an opportunity that would be! That's exactly what I would want to do.” Masked by Zoom (hopefully) my composure was kept, and I nodded professionally. “That sounds like quite the opportunity, please let me know if there is any way I could be of assistance,” I responded politely. And, thinking truly that there is nothing *I* could do to help. *Silenced*. Later that week I received an email. The email: a deadline and a few resources for me to create the Sankofa Black Graduation Course Curriculum.

The Sankofa Centre of Excellence, also referred to as the Sankofa Summer English Course, was initially proposed as a Black Graduation Mentorship program in 2019 after a \$157 million investment from the Ontario Ministry of Education. Nine school boards across Ontario were chosen for this pilot program to provide mechanisms of culturally responsive support for Black youth in Canadian schools (Sankofa Document, 2020).

Led and supported by members of the school board’s teaching and administrative team, the Sankofa Centre prides itself on its focus on well-being and learning for Black youth in Ottawa (Sankofa Document, 2020). The Sankofa Centre of Excellence was created to “address issues and concerns that impact the graduation rates of Black students in the district” (Sankofa document, 2020, p. 4) and provide culturally responsive ways to align the individual experiences of Black youth in these schools with the planned curriculum while combating micro and macro ways racisms may manifest in education.

Living a Critical Race *Currere* in a Canadian Context

Critical Race Theory (CRT) made its initial impact in the field of law in the mid-1970s. CRT argued against the harmful systems of law (Parker, 2015; Valdes, 2002; Bell, 1976) and subsequently education, by inviting historical narratives and storytelling to better understand the

national consciousness of racisms (Valdes, 2002; Taliaferro Baszile, 2015). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1999) notes that embedded within our culture are “myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that invariably (re)assert racism and marginalization” (p. 213). As a result, CRT scholars resist the cultural hegemony of well-intended ‘non-racists’ who write and reproduce racisms through “history books, Sunday sermons, and even case-law” (Delgado, 1999, pp. 45-46) by honouring and giving space to the ‘counternarratives’ of Black personal experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Taliaferro-Baszile, 2015) and the possibilities that may arise as a result of self-understanding.

For curriculum theorists and scholars this journey inwards in pursuit of racialized understanding promises similar possibilities (Wang, 2015; Taliaferro Baszile, 2021). For Wang (2015) who uses ‘multicultural *currere*’, she articulates the need for both white and marginalized teachers to learn and unlearn through the process of *currere*. By doing so, Wang (2015) notes, *currere* can help “students understand the power dynamics of contemporary American society” and question “the existing injustice at school and in society” (p. 3). In Canadian CRT research what we can consistently see is the return to the lived experience to invoke further understanding and challenge systemic racism (Dei, 1996; Brathwaite & James, 2000). For example, Anthony Q. Briggs (2017) from the University of Toronto uses CRT to explore the obstacles facing second-generation Caribbean Black youth in schooling and employment. Andrew M. A Allen (2019) from the University of Windsor uses CRT to provide a narrative analysis of his experience as a Black professor in the Faculty of Education and Teacher Education programs. Though CRT is one way that educators have sought to address anti-Black racisms in educational institutions, other theories and practices should be acknowledged.

Other Canadian scholars have tackled issues of racism in Canadian education using varying theoretical frameworks and methods of analysis (James, 2019; Dei, 2008; Collins & Magnan, 2018) including CRT. Phillips (2004) for example, using a theory of Critical Antiracism has studied the re-articulation of white ‘racism’ and how the markers of it invariably point to and reproduce anti-Black racisms. Ibrahim’s (2005; 2017) work on racialization in Canada may help us understand the process and barriers put in place for Black students who have immigrated to Canada. In one analysis Ibrahim (2017) describes the process by which people *become* Black upon immigration to North America, no longer identified by the membership of their country of origin. In another discussion, Ibrahim (2005) describes the conditions of hospitality with which Black people are met in Canada. While out of the control of Black educators, Ibrahim describes how as teachers we are hierarch-ed differently than students and as such we are given the opportunity to remove these conditions of hospitality and create a more welcoming classroom environment.

Ibrahim (2017) calls on Black educators to arm our students with the knowledge to analyze, decolonize, and deconstruct the racializing structure that identifies our Blackness on our behalf. Finally, taking Flinders’ (1986) concept of the null-curriculum (that which is not taught in schools), Dei (2000) commends Ibrahim’s (2014) articulation of Black hip-hop culture as an antiracist means to address Black students’ feeling of alienation in the Eurocentric curriculum. Aoki’s (1993) reassessment of curriculum challenged the role of western epistemology in education. Specifically, Aoki remarked upon the metaphorical geographical topography of curriculum in schools striated with privileged subjects (science, math, etc.), and desolate with absent Subjects. Aoki (1993) presented the idea of a curriculum that is taught (enforced) in schools as different from the curriculum *we* all live out in our daily lives. “Without the agency of

subjectivity,” Pinar (2019, p. 23) writes “education evaporates, replaced by the conformity compelled by scripted curricula and standardized tests.”

In the Sankofa Centre of Excellence we as educators and curriculum designers found ways to return to the question of “who am I? How has my understanding of Black Excellence changed or evolved?” to center the curriculum as lived (Aoki, 1993) amongst the curriculum-as-planned? How might this centre work to facilitate CRT’s counter-narratives (Delgado, 1999)? How might these voices fill in, or take spaces amongst the incomplete narratives (Cordi, 2021) and honour the lived experiences CRT seeks to accompany? Although *currere* is not the only methodology for autobiographical research, *currere* encourages the centring of our narratives in a way that is ongoing and intended to promote daily well-being. On the topic of autobiographical teaching Pinar (2019) makes clear that *currere* is not to carelessly create a space where students must share personal matters, rather it is the threading of the subject in the subject matter. This nuanced practice must be approached gently to not cause harm. In Sankofa, space is held that allows room for our students' lived experience, but does so with all necessary considerations - namely a curriculum that reflects our collective needs.

Progressive: I Can’t Hear Your Racism, I’m Busy Retexturing Landscapes

“Mr. S, how do you confront microaggressions?” One of my students asked me one day about a week into our month-long course. I was assigned to a group of 13 bright students, all of whom identified as Black and who had all expressed eagerness at engaging in conversations about their lived experiences as racialized youth. For many, having their curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 1993) welcomed into the curriculum-as-planned was novel. I had spent so long doing what Brian D. Schultz (2017) refers to as *Teaching in the Cracks*, finding opportunities to work in between the

mandated, racializing curriculum that such an explicitly forward question had taken me aback (Coble, 2020, Stanley, 2000). It had dawned on me in the vacuous moments of silence after I was asked that question that I had spent so long away from what Maxwell and Roofe (2020) refer to as the Heart of the Protest that any semblance of an enacted curriculum as lived would require more than a simple answer. “When curriculum is understood as being constructed narratively through the construction and reconstruction of experience, what is valued are the stories lived and told by teachers and students of what is important, meaningful, relevant, and problematic for them” (Maxwell & Roofe, 2020, p. 28). I opened the conversation to the class, inviting responses the likes of which only further silenced me. Here, among the “retextured landscapes, populated by a multiplicity of curricula” I am reminded of the curriculum-as-lived and how it transforms teacher to learner and creates space for the faces of “faceless people” (Aoki, 1993, p. 258).

At this progressive point in the currerian journey, I think more of identity and the deconstruction of the terminology of it all. I think of Aoki’s (1993) reconsiderations of identity as presence, this notion that identity—in our case—Blackness is a static, present identity. It is the other side of the binary, the other side of the rigged coin—unequal probabilities fated against this flip. We are aware in the Sankofa class that our identities are in production “in the throes of being constituted as we live in places of difference” (Aoki, 1993, p. 260). For Dumas (2016) it is a shared set of “histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships” (p. 12-13). Whereas for James (2019) it is breaking out of the perceived constructs of Blackness, taking a deep and unguarded sigh at not being perceived as present identities, as “disrupters, trouble-makers, lawbreakers” (p. 384). In the Sankofa class, we have deep and meaningful conversations about what it means to be Black in a world that at one time denies the existence of Blackness and in the same breath shackles us to it. We no longer need to hold our breath at the prevailing white

utterances of colour-Blindness (Hampton, 2010). Rather, we know “no amount of intellectual gymnastics and skirting around issues can evade or deny the powerful social and political currency of race” (Dei, 2000, p. 14). We know that ignoring our struggles is not a way to leave room for excellence.

Currere in Sankofa Centre of Excellence

We travel through time in this curriculum. The Sankofa Summer English course contains five units. In Unit 1: The Power of Your Pen we look at what Black Excellence means to us as Canadians of African descent. It asks us to consider the challenges and adversities faced by Black Canadians such as Marie Joseph Angelique, Harriet Tubman, Mary Ann Shad, and Carrie Best. We are introduced to the concept of resilience in relation to our ancestors and the path they have carved for us. Regressive, remember “we return to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present” (Pinar, 1975, p. 21). In Unit 2: The Power of Your Voice, we learn about Dudley Laws, Keosha Love, d’bi Young, ProofRock ShadowRunner, and other Canadian activists, spoken word artists, and artists who have used their voices to imagine possibilities for the future. Students are given the opportunity to write a speech while thinking about the future they want to create. Progressive, “we look the other way. We look, in Satre’s language, at what is not yet the case, what is not yet present” (Pinar, 1975, p. 24). In Unit 3: Short Stories Resistance and Triumph and the 4th Unit: Brother - Novel Studies we begin to look at Black Resistance through stories. In this unit, we begin to analyze how stories and their structures allow us to understand our present, our past, and our future. Reading African folklore, Jamaica Kincaid, David Chariandy, and Lawrence Hill. In these units we analyze how plot and story act as a collective imagination while bracketing our past, situating our present, and declaring our future. Finally, in Unit 5: Media Studies we learn

about the tools to bring our learning together and synthesize. In this unit we work with a production company to answer the questions “What does Black Excellence Mean To Me?” “to underline the biological concreteness of being. Who is that? In your voice, what is the meaning of the present” (Pinar, 1975, p. 26)?

Synthetical

When I was 9 years old, I asked my Trinidadian Granny a question she thought was in jest, and just in an instant, she insisted I ingested my worry and ask her my query.

I pulled out the chair and looked up at her hair. Black curls, like mine, spun me in time, I would stare in the mirror and question my skin.

I sat beside her and asked, "Granny are we Black?"

The Sardinha smile is our strongest trait see,

And in that moment

I realized that we, and the entire family smile from our eyes like blinding sun's on the sea

Unlike our ancestors our smiles are free.

So we smile like it's our currency.

She laughed just like so,

and pulled me close

Maybe the answer was so

obvious to her,

But I wasn't sure

see

I could count nights from before

Where I'd stare at the floor

And I beg for skin covered clarity

“Half Black - Half white”

So binary like red/white wine is very sweet for some but unpalatable to many.

This racial ambiguity begs to ponder some too blind to nuance for wonder.

Though bi-racial, I am singly racialized. Though mixed, I am whole. Though half, I am no longer fragmented. Like Fanon's (1952) *Black consciousness*, my Blackness claims “absolute density, full of itself” (p. 114), “I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am” (p. 115). I look around my class and see my students of the Sankofa summer course in their fullness, their absolute Blackness. I rid myself of the racializing language of “academia's dominant epistemological paradigm” (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2009, p. 488), the “lure of Western epistemology” (Aoki, 1993, p. 256), striating our curricular landscapes and the language upon which we traverse its elitism and exclusions (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2009, p. 488, Stanley, 2000). Our ontological pursuit is in itself, not onto us. Terms that divide me, which subjugate and categorize our skin, these are not our words (Karklis & Badger, 2020), not our language of otherness (Ibrahim, 2017). This is an onto-epistemological dilemma of the Black body and mind. All I see are smiles in this class, gratitude at a curriculum that reflects their lived experience (Aoki, 1993). We read Viola Desmond and Desmond Cole, learn of Mary Ann Shad, and Dudley Laws, we think about Black Excellence in its many forms, in our media, in our queerness, in our art, poetry, and dance, and most importantly we circle back to two questions presented to us. Firstly, as Pinar (1975) asks, “What has been and

what is now the nature of my educational experience” (p. 20)? Who am I? (Talliaferro-Baszile, 2015). We are aware of its difficulty: speaking and thinking beyond and outside of the language domination (Talliaferro-Baszile, 2015). Yet as Adams & Buffington-Adams (2020) call for in *On/Beyond Currere*, this transformative and collaborative process must continue to hold the mirror up to each other, “no matter how painful the experience or how bitter the knowledge” (p. 68). We talk about our pasts, we ponder its meaning, we think about our future, and we come together, we synthesize to imagine the possibilities of our excellence.

Departures

Like the Sankofa bird, I look back once more. While traversing my currerian journey in this piece, I began by providing a brief overview of *currere* as a methodology both historically and contemporarily. As one such methodology of autoethnographic life writing research, I situated *currere* amongst Black feminist scholars who have asked about the possibilities for understanding the self in relation to our differing pedagogies. Furthermore, I drew upon the praxis of antiracism to frame my approach to (re)reading the course upon which this piece is based, the Sankofa Centre of Excellence. If, as Pinar (2019) points out, curriculum theory is concerned with the educational significance of “school subjects for self and society in the ever-changing historical moment” (p. 16) and other curriculum theorists are right in noting that curriculum is a critical social/political/historical project) then how might curriculum theory benefit from a commitment to intersecting CRT with our present reality? Such onto-epistemological intersections have been acknowledged elsewhere (Downing, 2021; Taliaferro Baszile, 2021). Yet as it stands more research is needed at the life-writing crossroads of these intersections. If, as Downing (2021) notes, our diffused agencies can renew *currere*’s potential for social and political change, then let us listen

to the changing and ever-present voices of advocates across the globe asking for that change. Though Sankofa gazes back to gain wisdom from the past, we learn and continue onward, flying forward as we “aim towards freedom” (Pinar, 1975, p. 22).

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CHAPTER FOUR

Sankofa and the Centre of Black Excellence: A Social Action Curriculum Project⁴

Abstract

This article endeavors to provide a systemic analysis of the Ottawa Carleton District School Board's Sankofa Centre of Black Excellence course as a Social Action Curriculum Project. Drawing on a document that was put forth by the board to the Human Rights and Equity Division outlining four key targets, or *Impacts*, I seek to understand how this course addresses (or not) these impacts as well as the greater Calls to Action by local Black-led advocacy groups. I first provide an overview of Social Action Curriculum Projects as well as situating my understanding of Black excellence in the history of Afrocentricity and antiracism in Ontario scholarship. Finally, I call for continued implementation of programs that provide Black youth in Ontario schooling with curriculum projects, programs, or courses, that address the lived experience of our racialized youth, and (re)centre Blackness in our curriculums across Canada.

Introduction

The birds are louder this afternoon. A characteristic Song Sparrow sings from an oak tree in my neighbour's yard. It's been around all summer, but today feels like an apotheosis; of what, I'm not sure. Looking around the room (Google Meet) of my class, 13 bright and attentive students, all of whom epitomise Black Excellence, get ready to exit their class for their last day. My office (formerly known as my kitchen table) has been gracious to host classroom discussions of beauty standards, queerness, racializations, police violence, ambitions, sports, music, art, books, resilience, resistance, and all of that which defines, or has been used to define Blackness for us, and from us. I wave goodbye to my students for the last time and send them off from this digital landscape back into a post-covid world, to individual schools, away from each other and into their futures. Hopeful that the tools they've gained have given them the strength to navigate what I

⁴ This article will be submitted in the Canadian Journal of Curriculum studies in 2022.

know is likely coming to them. In Stanley's (2019) words, I've witnessed the exclusions of racism, and ask if this course has been enough to mitigate the consequences.

To centre the lived experiences of some Black youth across the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) in a reach-ahead Grade 9 English summer course. I was hired to be a co-curriculum designer for the course and its subsequent teacher. Consequently, as the teacher and an educational researcher, I am interested in the following social action curriculum inquiry: How are we mobilising Black Excellence in relation to the Ontario Ministry of Education policy and the body of Canadian literature on the topic? 2) How is Black excellence being conceived through the Sankofa Centre of Excellence as a Social Action Curriculum Project by the leaders involved in the course? 3) How does the Sankofa Centre of Excellence address the ongoing calls to action by local, Black-led advocacy organisations, as well the Ministry of Education? In turn, I sought to study and now understand these curricular questions, in relation to my ongoing commitment toward creating curriculum-as-planned, -implemented, and -lived that centres the lived realities of Black youth in Ontario schools.

This article then endeavours to provide a descriptive overview and analysis of the Sankofa Centre of Excellence in relation to the ongoing calls for Black Excellence in Ontario curriculum and schooling. I do this by utilising the initial research conducted and put forth to the Human Rights and Equity Division by the OCDSB. Within this document, four key 'impacts' on Black students' access to academic success and well-being emerged: Matters of Identity, Matters of Representation, Culturally Relevant, Responsive Strategies, and Matters of Allyship. I use these four key impacts as my framework for analysis and outlining of the Sankofa Centre of Excellence's Summer English Course and how it may or may not have sought to address these impacts. I

structure the following paragraphs to respond to these impacts. I draw on qualitative research that took place over 2 years, personal interviews with the administrators, teachers, and curriculum designers of the course, as well as historical and contemporary literature put forth concerning these ongoing calls to action. I frame the Sankofa Centre of Excellence as a Social Action Curriculum Project and draw on scholarship to characterise the action that I believe has been conducive to the centre's success.

A Social Action Curriculum Project

Action research's history extends into the 20th century when social-psychologist Kurt Lewin devised a methodology to assess and solve the social conditions of his community after World War II. As a research design, it was taken up by various universities and institutions in the latter half of the 1900s – such as Tavistock (Creswell, 2012), and scholars like John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick (see Ng-A-Fook et al., 2013). Today, one such conceptual framework for Action Research, known as Social Action Curriculum Projects (SACPs), is beginning to reemerge in educational research. More recently scholars (Schultz, 2009; Schultz & Baricovich, 2010; Ng-A-Fook et al., 2013) have utilised SACPs to democratise the curriculum-making process within a classroom environment. Some literature points to the significance that youth organising may provide when implemented in classrooms (Arthurs, 2018). Within an SACP, students and teachers work closely to assess their needs, and the needs of the community, determine issues of importance, and work towards providing answers and finding solutions.

As a curriculum studies scholar and teacher, I've found myself drawn to SACPs for their ability to remain flexible in an environment of teaching which is historically rigid (Schultz & Baricovich, 2010). At the intersection of student interest, and what is not taught in the subjects

of our classrooms lies a space where students can learn to become more engaged societal citizens. Echoes of these sentiments are espoused by theorists like Aoki (1993) who posit the importance of teaching within the space of the lived-curriculum, or that which is outside of the planned ministry mandated subjects. I draw upon Aoki's (1993) concept of a curriculum which favours the privileged subjects of science, math, etc. while neglecting the lived reality, or curriculum-as-lived, of our students. This framework for thinking about a striated curriculum is useful for imagining the possibilities of teaching which pays more regard for the latter, rather than the former. Similarly, Flinders & Nodding's (1986) conception of the null curriculum acknowledges that attention should be paid to what schools *do not* teach to better evaluate our student's success. Other scholars like Mohatt & Erickson, (1981), Ladson-Billings, (1992; 1995), and Gay (2000) have garnered the focus of curriculum theorists over the last few decades for their conceptions of a curriculum that focuses on what is relevant and responsive to our student's realities.

Schultz (2010) is careful to convey that a SACP should not be taken as a panacea for curriculum theorising. It is useful in allowing us to remain flexible while taking into consideration our student's needs and bringing them to the forefront of classroom practices. Schultz & Baricovich (2010) note "A SACP pushes students to not only learn but also to practise mainstream aspects of participatory democracy" (p. 49). Within our Sankofa Centre of Excellence we've made all effort to call upon the framework of an SACP by asking our students what is important to them, and how they would like to affect change. This is done first by the Black Graduation Coaches in the Centre's initial endeavours with the school board, and then secondly by taking these issues and applying them to, what Aoki (1993) would call, our curriculum-as-planned.

Learning on Delpit's (2006) assessment of learning in the context of a SACP, and reaffirmed by Schultz & Baricovich (2010), we remain steadfastly aware of the importance of language learning for Black student success. Delpit (2006) notes "skills are a necessary but insufficient aspect of [B]lack and minority students' education. Students need technical skills to open doors, but they need to be able to think critically and creatively to participate in meaningful and potentially liberating work inside those doors" (p. 19). I'm reminded of early 20th century debates between Washington (1900) and Du Bois (1902; 1903) called for and advocated against the persuasion of the systems of whiteness through good merit and academic success. Still today, we hold great consideration in these schools of thought as we promote well-being and success of our racialized youth in the Sankofa Centre. Stated plainly by co-curriculum designer Audrey Riley⁵⁵, and a teacher at the OCDSB in an interview on the Centre:

I wanted the students to realise that writing, oral advocacy, and media were and are important tools in the lives of Black people and our continuing struggle for equity. We hoped that students would feel empowered and represented by the course. We also hoped they would realise that the skills learned in English have and can be used in the struggle for equity.

By drawing on SACP framework for this study, we were able to ask about the possibilities and limitations of utilising our current Ontario curriculum in new and integrated ways to promote Black Excellence with our students, respond to the calls to action for antiracist education, and answer--with eagerness--the needs of the students within our board. In Schultz's (2009) words, with "orchestrated efforts" we endeavour "to make their communities better places to live and learn" (p. 10). First, however, we must acknowledge the issues in place in Ontario schooling to understand where we hope to go.

⁵ All of those involved in the course have been provided pseudonyms for anonymity.

Understanding the Past & Present: The Problem

The discrepancy between the academic success of Black and non-Black youth here in Canada is often attributed to a varying number of contexts. For example, one study conducted on the efficacy of Afri-centric schools in the Toronto area indicates that not only do external factors such as economic status, family and personal matters affect Black students, intra-school related factors such as a curriculum and pedagogy challenge Black success (Howard & James, 2019). Given that curriculum has historically been designed primarily to serve the needs of white middle-class students and deny the existence of racializations, this is no surprise (Dragnea & Erling, 2008). Further research points to Black youth being over-represented in behavioural disciplinary programs within schools and the impact this has on Black youth's ability to imagine their success (Agyepong, 2010; Baldrige et al., 2011; Codjoe, 2001; James, 2021; James & Turner, 2017).

Other scholarship pushes back against discourse which focuses solely on Black student deficit in favour of a curriculum of agency and excellence that acknowledges the lived experiences of individual Black youth (Warren, 2016; Howard, 2013). Conversations of Afrocentricity, as initially brought forward by Molefi Kete Asante in 1980, and supported by present scholars (Howard & James, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Gay, 2000; Ibrahim, 2017) ask: Is a curriculum that does *not* centre such deficit experiences possible? What place then do intervention programs like the Sankofa Centre of Excellence have in this conversation given the contested discourse surrounding models of schooling for, and against, a curriculum of explicit anti-Black racism? In the report by York University (2017) titled *Toward Race Equity: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area*, it was made clear that

until issues impacting Black students in Ontario public schooling were addressed, outcomes of success in higher institutional levels will be increasingly difficult. These ongoing dialogues are both nuanced and complex and are conglomerated best in Carl James' *Colour Matters* (2021). In this collection of essays with youth workers, policy makers, and educators, James provides an overview of the state of Canadian schooling for racialized youth. For example, in one chapter titled *Historical and Social Context of the Schooling and Education of African Canadians* James analyses the ubiquitous educational racializations across Canada over the last 5 decades. He notes on the process of "streaming Black students had a significant impact not only on their academic achievement but also on how they perceived the educational and occupational possibilities that their schooling provided them" (p. 31). He continues, "Black students tended to become more ambivalent and discouraged with the school system because they did not believe the reward system afforded them opportunities to realise their educational goals" (p. 31). Consequently, for James (2021) and as readers will see later in this essay, colour does matter in relation to the different individual, systemic, and societal contexts of public education.

Background for Sankofa Centre of Excellence

In 2017, former Premier of Ontario, Kathleen Wynne and appointed Minister Michael Couteau announced Ontario's 3 Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan titled *A Better Way Forward* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). To address the policy and services across multiple facets of the government and public service that contribute to systemic racism, a comprehensive document was released (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). This plan is categorised into the following initiatives: Policy, Research and Evaluation; Sustainability; Public Education, and Awareness and Community Collaboration. Under Public Education, the Ministry of Education established the

Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy which included an Anti-Black Racism Strategy and Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (BYAP) which sought to address the over-representation of Black youth in the Criminal Justice System and provide support to Black youth in terms of graduation and academic success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). BYAP was allotted \$47 million to support 10,800 Black youth each year across Ontario through wellness programs, parenting initiatives, and mentorship programs.

In 2019 the Black Graduation Mentorship pilot was announced to provide mechanisms of culturally responsive support for Black youth in schools. \$157 million was invested in nine school boards to pilot this program including, but not limited to, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. The nine school boards are:

1. Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario
2. Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board.
3. Greater Essex County District School Board.
4. Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board.
5. Ottawa Carleton District School Board.
6. Ottawa Catholic School Board
7. Peel District School Board.
8. Toronto District School Board.
9. York Region District School Board. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019)

Led by Equity and Diversity Coordinator Jane Laury and supported by two Black Graduation Coaches Jessica Jameson and Amira Badr, the Sankofa Centre prides itself on its focus on well-being and learning for Black youth in Ottawa (Sankofa Document, 2020). The Sankofa Centre of Excellence was created to “address issues and concerns that impact the graduation rates of Black students in the district” and provide culturally responsive ways to align the individual experiences of Black youth in these schools with the Ontario curriculum while combatting micro and macro ways racisms may manifest in education (Sankofa document, 2020, p. 4). The Sankofa Centre of

Excellence pilot began in two schools in the Ottawa region. The Black Graduation Coaches' role in these schools was to begin to identify Black students who would be interested in participating in the program, identifying administration and teachers who would liaison with students and coaches, as well as maintain frequent status updates from the Human Rights and Equity Division to the schools (Sankofa Document, 2020).

The Human Rights and Equity Division (HRED) is a key partner for the Sankofa Centre of Excellence. HRED has been responsible for the training of the Black Graduation Coaches and school staff in relation to the centre's objectives, as well as covering any travel and minor capital costs related to the program. Alongside the HRED, the Ministry of Education is a key partner for the Sankofa Centre of Excellence, responsible for providing continuous support to the schools involved in the program as well as providing an overview and outline to the Graduation Coaches. Ultimately, the Sankofa Centre of Excellence asks: will providing support to Black youth in Ottawa schools help to improve well-being and academic success? After the Black Graduation coaches spent time within their respective pilot schools, key elements of their visits were communicated to the Equity and Diversity Coordinator who then created the Sankofa Centre of Excellence: Human Rights and Equity Division Document in May 2020. Within this document the information gathered by the Black Graduation Coaches was summarised and the emergent themes from the mentorship visits were enclosed. The themes, titled impacts are Matters of Identity, Matters of Representation, Matters of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Strategies, and Matters of Allyship.

The First Key Impact: Matters of Identity

It's the first day of class. In many ways, being a student and being a teacher are similar. We all ask, “what will others think of me?” “Will I do or say the right thing?” “How should I best present myself?” I arrive early, virtually, but early. I’m an hour ahead of the students in Ontario, as I sit in my comfortable home office space in Prince Edward Island. The students start to enter the Google Classroom. Even behind the little 2 to 3 inch squares on the learning platform, I suspect similar emotions which I’ve suspected of students in every first class - eagerness, nervousness, excitement, fear. We all want to be seen. I smile and welcome all the students by their names, being sure to ask for the correct pronunciation (writing it down phonetically so that they will never have to hear their identity misspoken, by me, their teacher). 13 students enter the classroom, all of whom identify as Black, and I feel what I feel in any Black space—seen, heard, safe. I hope, confidently, they do too.

In the HRED Sankofa Document, students from the Black Graduation Program and the OCDSB Black Youth Forum had reported instances of racist language being used by both students and teachers alike, some of whom were allegedly unaware of the impact of violent language like the n-word. This is consistent with reports from organisations like Parents of Black Children (PoBC) of anti-Black racist violence and systemic abuse. In their final report ‘A Call To Action’ which collected data from case studies across Ontario school boards - PoBC indicated that 57% of the parents and students reported one or more instances of racist actions or comments towards them.

One conversation that resurfaced consistently in our creation of the Sankofa curriculum was how to approach the topic of Black history related to enslavement. Though this was a part

of our history—it did not start there, and we questioned where we might begin. Given that this was a 4-week summer English course, every day counted. How might we capture the immensity of African diaspora history? After much discussion, we opted to begin with ourselves. We asked, “What does Black Excellence mean to you?” And so it went, that many days the books and lessons were set aside, and the students and I would converse about our histories, our stories, their ambitions, their goals, their fears. Within the flexibility of the SACP, it became evident to us that these key impacts should continue to guide our teaching practices, and so when there were opportunities to let the students find themselves situated within the topic of discussion, I would let that space remain open. So often, our curriculum would not allow the individuality of our students to exist (Flinders, et. al., 1986), and even more often our racialized students were marginalised and pushed outside of this curriculum (Phillips & James, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2008), in the Sankofa course, we made this possible.

Within our first unit, we discussed historical Black figures and the power they had in creating their own identity through the written word - we called this unit: the power of our pen. We discussed figures like Mary Ann Shadd, Carrie Best, Harriet Tubman, and Marie Joseph Angelique. Within the framework of an SACP, we asked students to identify issues that they felt were both pressing and related to their own life experiences, and how they might work through solutions (Schultz, 2008). Here, students utilized ‘the power of their pen’ to describe and reinstate their concerns related to Matters of Identity. They articulated their frustrations with other students who had expressed fear of Blackness, teachers who were ignorant of Blackness, and issues of their safety within educational spaces. One student articulated “Even with everything going on, we have to keep our heads up and continue to put in our heads that our

blackness is not a weapon even when others think it is” (Anonymous, 2021, written in assignment). Within the Sankofa course, our goal was to create a curriculum that acknowledged the lived reality of the students within our class, rather than teaching and planning for “faceless people, students shorn of their uniqueness” (Aoki, 1993, p. 258), and to ensure our history spoke to the subjective experience of *our* history and society “and the inextricable interrelationships among which structure but do not determine our education experience” (Pinar, 2019, p. 17). Therefore, as we created the Sankofa curriculum, student identity was at the front of our minds.

If the literature continues to illustrate that Black youth will either resist or adapt perceptions of their own identity in relation to their Blackness (James, 2018; Warren, 2016), how might we provide youth with the opportunities to define themselves? Positioning theory reminds us that Black youth must be provided with ‘events’ to define themselves against stereotypes (Allen, 2017), misconceptions, and prevalent deficits of Blackness (Howard, 2013). Notably, these positioning events, and attitudes regarding Black youth self-perception occur most for students who do not have Black teachers. As James (2019) notes “teachers of Black males are generally white, middle-class and female, and that they regularly draw upon dominant pathologizing discourses when thinking about, interacting with, and talking about their Black male students” (p. 378). How then, might students see themselves not against, or with these stereotypes and deficit models, but rather, absent from these perceptions entirely in the presence of representation; in the presence of Black educators.

The Second Key Impact: Matters of Representation

Born and raised in Toronto, Ontario, it was commonplace to see Black teachers walk through the halls of the school. I remember two of my homeroom teachers from Grade 2, and Grade 3 were

Black. I failed to recognize how important this was for me until I moved to a small rural town about 2 hours outside of Toronto called Peterborough. Peterborough, Ontario is a small town of 84,000 people - compared to the almost 3 million Torontonians. Peterborough is a retirement town, close to the Kawartha lakes, it makes a popular destination for older (often white) folks, looking to dock their boats after a day of fishing on the Otonabee River. When I moved to Peterborough at the age of 10, I had spent my entire life at that point surrounded by melanin. At the schools where I spent the remainder of my youth, I had not encountered a single Black teacher. For that matter, I look at my graduating class of 2014 and see myself situated near the top, one of 3 Black students. The isolation I felt was intolerable and the disruption to my sense of self was jarring. How was I to fit in when I couldn't see myself in any teacher, nor share my experiences with any student. One recent study conducted by the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators (2015) found that of the 205,135 elementary and secondary school teachers in Ontario, only 13% were Black.

In the HRED Sankofa Document (2020) students articulated how important it was to have the Black Graduation Program in place given that they were able to “open up” and have people understand their perspectives. Students had also expressed the importance of having Black teachers at the school to improve their learning experience. Other students articulated, “I opened up today because of this (representation). When I speak to white peers, they look through a (different lens) and Black students know where I’m coming from” (Sankofa Document, 2020) Another anonymous student stated, “I’ve seen teachers of colour after school (come) for interviews but not get hired” (Sankofa Document, 2020). Other students noted that many teachers at these schools would be hired either short-term or were being replaced by white

teachers. In my interview with Curriculum designer and English teacher at the OCDSB Kyla Harley when asked why it was that Black teachers were not in these teaching positions, she stated:

Because still, the people who are the gatekeepers are white. So we have very few BIPOC [...] people who are in a position of authority to make those choices. And so we can talk about affinity bias, which is a nice way of just saying, you know, people are still... white folks are still hiring other white folks. That's the bottom line.

In November of 2020, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) released a memo titled the Professional Advisory on Anti-Black Racism wherein it articulated sentiments Headley and these students continue to echo today. The profound lack of racialized teachers is acknowledged in this document:

Urgent action on anti-Black racism is needed since racism and its prevalence in public and private institutions have been studied for many decades with recommendations that resonate today as they did in generations past. *The Stephen Lewis Report on Race Relations in Ontario* from June 1992 addressed racism in education and the same questions asked then are still being asked almost 30 years later: “Where are the courses in Black history? Where are the visible minority teachers? Why are there so few role models? (OCT, 2020, p. 2)

I’m reminded of Alissa Trotz definition of schooling in Carl James’ (2021) *Colour Matters* wherein she defines it as:

School (noun). A space where Black parents are acutely aware that our children spend most of their waking weekdays. Where big pieces of them are (de)formed. A space of damage. Where we are yet to understand the spiritual and psychic costs, even as we know that racism and mental health are inextricably linked. (p. 5)

These spaces of damage, and (de)formation, are one of the many places of, what Stanley (2019) refers to as, (re)articulated racisms, subjected to original and contemporary forms of systematic violence whether psychologically, spiritually, or in many cases, physically. Such is the case in many Ontario schools which turn a blind eye to police handcuffing and removing six-year old Black children from their classroom ([CBC, 2020](#)). What was made clear to us from the HRED

(2020) document is that for our students, these issues are not far removed from their experiences of Ontario schooling. One of the ways they expressed navigating this was by being in educational spaces where educators, particularly of colour, understood these issues and were able to advocate for them, if not - assist students in processes of self-advocacy.

In our second unit: Power of Your Voice, we brought the attention of our students to advocates and Black Canadians who used their voices to speak out against issues of importance. Canadian Black activist Dudley Laws, speakers Koesha Love, Aaliyah Arab-Smith, and spoken word artists like PruFrock Shadowrunner, and d'bi Young. Embedded within this unit, we were able to teach about narrative stylistics, proper paragraph structure, style, and other elements of the English language as mandated by the Ontario grade 9 English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). This brings us back to the Sankofa English course as an SACP. Here we were able to take the Ontario Curriculum, or Curriculum-as-Planned and ask our students how they would like to situate their own lived experiences around it (Aoki, 1993). Using the structure of the curriculum objectives, we asked students to write their own speech that took an issue they were passionate about and present it. Students then proceeded to take their learning from the unit, and create speeches about the excellence of Black women, police brutality, colourism, culture, and even topics as mundane as sports and leisure and how important it was in their household.

I think back to my interview with OCDSB Black Graduation Coach and Student Achievement Through Equity Liaison, Jessica Jameson who states the importance of Sankofa:

What we saw was a need of having a place where marginalized youth in particular African Black and Caribbean youth can come into a space and feel safe and feel a sense of belonging, because that's something that we noticed in our work throughout the province, not just in Ottawa, that our marginalized youth have grave concerns in regards to belonging within high schools. And also in regards to feeling accepted, and also a reflection of oneself. This is a huge issue in regards to representation.

Given the articulation of students' feelings of well-being and belonging being inextricably woven into their ability to see themselves reflected within the everyday curriculum the Sankofa English course made all efforts to enact these concerns into our practice. Not only by ensuring that students were given opportunities to respond authentically with their own experiences, but also by ensuring that they were provided with Black educators who did not question their lived realities, and rather understood them. It is worth asking how then, might we take these concepts and apply them on a larger scale.

The Third Key Impact: Culturally Relevant and Responsive Matters

Though there is research on the impacts of intervention programs that serve, prioritize, and focus on the needs of marginalized youth in Canada, typically these programs and ideas address the impacts of marginalization and racializations more broadly, and often through a lens of culture, rather than race (Milner, 2017). The work of Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP), and the theories which preceded, and inspired it (Cazden & Leggett, 1976; Au, 1980; Au & Jordan, 1981; Mohatt & Erikson, 1982) have attempted to tackle the issues facing marginalized youth through the lens of cultural inclusivity (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000) rather than through the disruption of racism. When CRRP was brought to Ontario classrooms in Toronto (Alaca & Pyle, 2018), it was found that educators were not given sufficient resources to understand how CRRP was to effectively address a classroom full of diversity. Concerns were made that CRRP attempted to fit one solution and many student backgrounds under one wide umbrella (Nieto, 2010). This solution seemingly did little to resolve ongoing and persistent anti-Black racism in the Ontario schooling system (Sato & Este, 2018).

In 2021 we published an article outlining how culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has been taken up by teacher education programs in Ontario (Currie, et al., 2021). The history of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy can be traced back to the early 1970s and has continued to evolve through the works of Ladson-Billings, (1992;1995) and Gay (2010). The intended affect, and effects, have continued to shift over time, but the underpinnings of CRRP were to become more responsive to the diverse demographics in our classrooms. The findings of our analysis pointed to the insufficiency of CRRP to address antiracisms on its own in Ontario teacher education (Currie et al., 2021). We stated:

If CRRP is employed as relational and ongoing, perhaps it can help educators and students understand their relationship with each other and the communities in which they live and teach in deeper ways and suggest pathways toward enacting a less racist society together. (p. 22-23)

However, our analysis was limited in that we conducted a broad macro analysis of the existing literature rather than looking at ways in which antiracism can be an individual exercise, or perhaps more importantly, how it might be applied to currently existing programs in Ontario schools.

In our third and fourth unit of the Sankofa summer course, we looked at how resistance and triumph have been taken up by stories, short stories and individual accounts. We looked at multiple short films like New Boy by NITV Shorts and Matthew A. Cherry's Hair Love. We also read short stories such as *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid and *What are you anyway* by Lawrence Hill and read the novel *Brother* by David Chariandy. Within these stories, we had asked the students how antiracism may have been utilised to change the outcome of the story. For example, In *New Boy*, a young boy who recently immigrated from an unnamed African country to Ireland faces harassment, racism, and bullying from the school and peers. In the end, the three boys get in

trouble for fighting (the Black boy defending himself from bullying) and under the scornful eye of the teacher, the three boys laugh in solidarity. “Was this a realistic depiction? Why or why not?” “What elements of racism are present within this story?” “How might antiracism have changed the outcome of this story?” Though the story itself may have appeared, at least at first watch, to be culturally responsive and relevant, further scrutiny magnifies the anti-Black racisms present. Furthermore, where CRRP was insufficient here, the teachers' failure to enact antiracism exacerbated the issues within the story.

While discussing elements of racism and culture, we were also teaching students about plot diagrams, and continuing to help students understand stylistics and elements of narrative writing. The idea here, for us, as Sankofa curriculum creators and educators, is that conversations surrounding racism can be made inextricable in our student's eagerness to learn. Though the lessons inherently followed the tenets of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, we took it a step further to ensure that students were engaged in conversations about their lived experiences with and without antiracism and how it might be affecting their schooling. When asked about the role of Sankofa for cultural relevance, Jessica Jameson, Black Graduation coach had this to say

We have to start to push the envelope forward saying that we as Black people deserve to have a spot and a place at the table to make these decisions with curriculum and that every single subject matter can have cultural relevancy within it, because it's important for our students as they navigate through, especially in high school from grade nine all the way to grade 12 [...] We need to have a better lens of inclusiveness.

What then, might a curriculum that encompasses the concepts taken up by Sankofa, look like for curriculum-as-planned, -implemented, and -lived in relation to the macro contexts of curricular applications school wide? Board wide? Province wide? Only with further support from the wider

community, Ministry of Education may these possibilities be continually imagined. This support may come, I argue, when educators, policy makers, and curriculum theorists enact true allyship and create space for Black voices and Black lives to amplify and articulate our needs.

The Final Impact: Allyship Matters

When the Black Graduation coaches went to the program's pilot schools the final theme that emerged was allyship. Students continued to articulate to us their feelings of isolation and abandonment, not just in the face of racism, but in their holistic pursuit of academics. One of our students stated, "[We] need co-conspirators with you, not peers or teachers who abandon you when it's time to stand up" another echoed "Black students have more difficulty graduating but it doesn't seem to be addressed" (Sankofa Document, 2020, p. 2). When asked about the literature and concepts are drawn upon to reimagine Sankofa on a larger scale, Black Graduation Coach Jessica Jameson stated:

Community is key. You have to have community support, not-for-profit organisations in particular, that are there to support our African Black, and Caribbean youth. They are instrumental immigrants to being the 'ear on the street', I guess you could say, because they also work with the same students and families that the education system does. So we cannot neglect our community organizations, we cannot neglect our post-secondary education's because institutions because those are key and there's a lot of data, as we know, and Dr. Carl James [...] from York University is a front runner. So we look at data that has already been done throughout the province and do our own data.

As a response to the emergence of literature on Black Achievement and Black Excellence, scholars have asked what a school program designed to serve the needs of Black youth, recognize and honour their cultures, as well as combat systemic racism may look like (James, 1997; Schultz & Sontag-Padilla, 2015). One way this has been suggested is through Afrocentric programs. Afrocentricity is the centring of the Black experience in education and educational scholarship (Howard & James, 2019). Brought forward by Molefi Asante, author of *Afrocentricity: The Theory*

of Social Change (1980) and current president of Molefi Asante Institute for Afrocentric Studies, and introduced shortly after to Canadian education by Canadian scholar and activist George Dei (1994; 1997) in the 1990s. Dei's focus was on how "Afro-centric learning calls for the critical examination of the contradictions lived out at the juncture of being black in a white-dominated society [...]" (p. 4). hampton's (2010) chronology of events and research on Africentricity⁶ in Canada suggests that Dei's (1997) publication illustrated the prevalence of anti-Black racism in three facets of Ontario schooling, namely: "differential treatment because of their race, the lack of Black and African-Canadian history and culture in the curriculum, and the absence of Black teachers" (hampton, 2010, p. 104). After much reluctance and resistance by former Premier Dalton McGuinty and then Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne, the TDSB voted eleven to nine in favour of testing the Africentric schooling 11 years later in 2008 (hampton, 2010).

Howard & James (2019) have researched and looked at the ways Anti Blackness and systemic racism in the education system have encouraged parents and youth to seek alternatives in the Africentric Alternative School. At this school, two core principles would inform its practices: Anti Black-Racism and the centring of the Black experiences. One of the central findings of this piece was that the educators within the Afrocentric Alternative School understood Afrocentricity, not as a panacea to racism, but rather to centre the individual experiences of the students at the school and honour the realities of racism experienced both in everyday life and in traditional schooling (Howard & James, 2019). hampton (2010) has also written on the nature of Africentric schooling in Montreal, Canada. In Quebec, she notes that key differences mark the province's

⁶ Throughout my writing you may see the terms Africentric and afrocentric used interchangeably, as is the case in most writing on the subject, according to initial author on the topic, Molefi Asante (thestar, 2008). Africentric learning, Dei (1994) notes, refers to those who are a member of the African diaspora, which includes those in North America and the Caribbean.

engagement with Africentric schooling. Firstly, that of the language division as well as an intolerance to Anglophone and ethnocultural differences which have doubly troubled some English-speaking immigrant students who are forced to attend French-only schools (hampton, 2010). And secondly, there has been a lack of public support from teachers, school administrators and academics which have undermined the commitment and dedication to the incorporation of the Africentric school.

From my interpretation, it's apparent that one of the ways racism can be addressed most effectively in Ontario schooling is through the continued engagement with Africentric schooling. Is all hope lost for traditional public schooling then? While creating the Sankofa summer course the work of Carl James and his understanding of Africentricity was called upon. James, at one point, had joined our curriculum team to consult with us on our approach to creating a curriculum that would take up similar tenets that had made the Africentric schools as effective as they were. It was our goal then, to ensure that students were engaging with historical and contemporary literature from across the African diaspora, and ensure some teachers reflected the tenets of antiracism, worked to understand their experiences, and created learning opportunities that would reflect this.

In our final unit, Media Studies, our students had the opportunity to work with a community organization called Godzspeed Production. With Godzspeed, students were given full autonomy, and the technical knowledge to create, direct, and produce, their own short video (2022). When we consider the literature which created the foundation of the course, it was no surprise that—much like the Africentric course—students centred their individual experiences in

their production. The driving theme of the final video was “Who am I? What does Black Excellence mean to me?”

In terms of the topic of allyship, there seems to be little concern with traditional notions of allyship which centre non-Black voices. Rather, when asked about what that means for students in the OCDSB, students articulated creating systems and opportunities for Black voices to speak up, and out against systems that they feel do not support them. One student stated, “More dialogues, instead of monologues [...] by educators, helps to make us feel what we say is valuable” (Sankofa Document, 2020).

Conclusion

The information presented to us in the form of qualitative research from the Black Graduation Coaches, and the outcomes of the course itself, point to the need for more curricular opportunities that centre Black experiences. Furthermore, continued research, the likes of which is being conducted by the OCDSB and encouraged by the Ministry of Education (2019). By framing the Sankofa as an SACP, we were able to provide the youth involved in the Black Graduation program with the opportunities to articulate their curricular needs democratically. What we see is that the youth involved in the study expressed a desire for a curriculum that centred their lived experiences, advocated for their Blackness, acknowledged, and resisted anti-Black racism, and provided opportunities for greater representation of Black educators.

In terms of Matters of Identity, students expressed to the Black Graduation Coaches that their lived experiences and histories were not being reflected in the curriculum-as-planned. The Sankofa Centre of Excellence endeavoured to address this by centring Black Canadian histories within the context of the Ontario Grade 9 English curriculum. We did this by paralleling Black

Canadians throughout history who had used their written words, their voice, or their art as a matter of advocacy and excellence. Students responded to question such as, but not limited to: “What does Blackness and Black Excellence mean to me?” Moreover, they did so in ways that went beyond deficit models related to narratives of blackness, identity, and academic achievement. Furthermore, students spoke on the instances of racism and an overall lack of awareness from teachers, which not only impacted their sense of identity, but coincided with their need for Black representation in our system of Ontario schooling. As we learned and heard from our students, having little or no opportunities to learn from Black educators made it difficult to feel seen, or centred in their schooling. As a result, the Sankofa Centre drew upon literature in Canada which in turn confirmed the importance of Black representation, our second key impact (Allen, 2017; James, 2018; Warren, 2016). With this information, we provided students with two Black educators to lead the course and welcome opportunities for students to express their lived experiences.

The third impact that was brought to us by our students in this social action curriculum project was that of culturally responsive and relevant strategies. Within this impact, students expressed to us frustration at an uncompromising and non-flexible curriculum. This pointed to dissatisfaction with the standardization that left many of our students feeling in the margins of schooling that did not reflect their lives. What we presented was a grade 9 English course that was dreamed, allowing students from varying ‘levels’ of education to share a space. Moreover, utilizing the issues students had presented to us, we centred those issues, like that of an SACP, in the written and presented curriculum.

Finally, we learned from our final impact: allyship matters, that traditional notions of allyship were less of a concern than what our students perceived as allyship. What students had expressed to us was that they required students who would support racialized students when it was time for them to stand up against injustice and provide ample support for causes important to our students. Due to this information, the Sankofa Centre of Excellence brought in GodzSpeed production and allowed students to create, film, direct, and produce a film that asked, and attempted to answer the question at the heart of Sankofa: What is Black Excellence. In other words, if provided the opportunities and support, racialized students are more than willing to speak up against issues and advocate for what is important for them. These findings are consistent with the ongoing calls to action, research, and data presented by other scholars across Ontario such as that put forth by York University (Howard & James, 2019; James, 2019; Howard, 2013; TDSB, 2020).

Unlike other SACPs, the events of this article have taken place over the course of an ongoing 2-year pandemic. As a result of schools moving to virtual learning, shifting and halting timelines, this SACP were perhaps more unique than usual. The Impacts that matter in relation to this SACP, I have argued, are a curriculum project that enacted the calls to action from both the group of students from the Black Graduation Coach program and the larger calls to action from Black Canadian advocacy groups. Finally, I have spent much of this piece arguing for the importance of hearing and including student voices. Of course, absent from this article are those same voices. Given what is possible for a Masters' thesis, it is my hopes that more research is conducted in higher levels of the academics or within school boards in order to continue to highlight and amplify those Black voices and the importance of Black excellence. Finally, I call for

continued implementation of programs that provide Black youth in Ontario schooling with curriculum projects, programs, or courses, that address the lived experience of our racialized youth, and (re)centre Blackness in our curriculums across Canada.

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CHAPTER 5

Situated *Endeavors*

I near the end of an arduous journey across the “retextured landscapes” of Aoki’s (1993, p. 261) curriculum of multiplicity. Is this the work of re-attuning to which he was referring? Have I done, as Dei (2004) suggests and assisted in legitimizing Africentric knowledge? Or do I remain bound to the planned-curriculum (Aoki, 1993), a vacuous, and perhaps *un*-textured landscape, with little space to teach, save for those curricular cracks (Schultz, et al., 2017)? The place from whence I came surely is different from where I stand. And yet, staring at the doors of the school continues to insight the fear and racial animus that my younger self knew all too well. So, what has changed and what will differ? Like the Sankofa bird, to answer this question, we must look back.

In August of 2021 upwards of 100 people gathered outside of City Hall in Toronto and the Ontario legislature to demand more of the provincial government’s approach to antiracism within the school system (CBC, August 2021). Advocates in the gathering, led and organized by Parents of Black Children, issued 10 demands for the provincial government. Their demands were as follows:

1. Reform the Ontario Education Act to identify Black students as having a right to an Africentric curriculum that represents them, to include Black experiences in all aspects of education, and to promote equitable and equal programs, activities or projects for Black students that are controlled, managed and delivered by Black people.
2. Investigate education school boards that participate in "systems abuse" against Black children. Systems abuse is defined as the collusion of systems to protect one another and it occurs when school boards refuse to investigate issues that affect Black children and their families.
3. Decolonize the curriculum, which means Black experiences must be built into school curriculums and that includes such subjects as math, science and social studies.
4. Eliminate all streaming to ensure that Black students can reach their full potential.
5. Make schools across the province "police free."

6. Collect race-based data on student achievement, discipline and experiences and implement external equity audits of school boards.
7. Train, hire and retain Black teachers.
8. Specify how teachers who display anti-Black racism will be held accountable.
9. End what is called Socio-Emotional Learning. The group wants Education Minister Stephen Lecce to remove "racist and harmful socio-emotional learning pedagogy" from the Ontario curriculum.
10. Implement a student and parent bill of rights.

(CBC, August 2021, p. 1)

As a result of these demands, and specifically the sixth demand, the Ministry announced a \$6 million program that would run for three years called the Students and Family Advocate (SFA) Program (CBC, September 2021). This would allow 17 approved third-party arms-length Black advocacy organisation, or SFAs, to collect race-based data, assist in resource navigation, and amplify the needs and voices of Black youth and parents across Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton (Ministry of Ontario, 2021). Shortly after, the PoBC released its School Racism Reporting Tool where it would monitor, collect, and conglomerate data related to racial violence and systemic abuse occurring within the jurisdictions (PoBC, 2022). With this information, the organization would then compile a detailed report which would go on to be the recent Calls to Action published in March of 2022.

The recent Call to Action published by the Parents of Black Children (2022) is not the first of its kind. For example, reviews conducted at the Peel District School Board in 2020 (CBC News Toronto), to 52 directives and 24 action points set forth by the current Minister of Education (Ministry of Education, 2020) entered public consciousness. PDSB has since released a Community Update where they address the progress they've made regarding the assigned directives (Huggins, 2020). At the OCDSB, similar public statements were made. One post released by Camille Williams-Taylor, the Director of Education at the board and Lynn Scott, the chair, apologized for any fear that may have been incited because of police involvement in schools (OCDSB, 2021). Since then, the board has issued a 3-year strategic roadmap to address antiracism which includes several goals & milestones with specific targets over those 3 years. Included within these targets are: Governance and Leadership Strategies, with a focus on the hiring of policy review

and special advisory committees; Programming and Support; Engagement and Connectedness; and others (OCDSB, 2021b). The Ministry of Education has stated to City News (2022) that they are reviewing the PoBC report. However, at the time of writing no updates or follow-up statements have been made regarding any of the directives, strategies, or calls to action.

A Synthesis: Let's All Hold Hands and Sing [...]

At the beginning of my graduate degree, I was approached by Dr. Ng-A-Fook to co-publish an article with himself and Ph.D. candidate Mark Currie. We spent the following two years asking what in the literature regarding CRRP was so enticing? After providing a historical overview of CRRP, we asked about its possibilities and limitations in addressing anti-Black racism in Ontario teacher education programs. Our findings suggested that despite efforts made to create educational spaces that were more responsive to the varying backgrounds of diverse classrooms, teachers were feeling unsure of how to enact CRRP, improperly trained on how to enact a CRRP, or were using CRRP in ways that essentialized and homogenized cultures within classrooms. We concluded that CRRP “can play a key role toward disrupting anti-Black racism(s). However, doing so requires understanding ‘culture’ in relational and non-tokenistic ways that unsettle the systemic “fixity” of settler colonial structures” (Currie, et al., 2021, p. 22). This informed my approach and understanding of the Sankofa Centre of Excellence, as it encouraged me to ask: if the use of CRRP in Ontario teacher education programs may not be sufficient in addressing anti-Black racisms, how might the Sankofa course go beyond this literature and enact explicit antiracisms? Moreover, given that our initial research on CRRP was a broad-macro analysis, how might I address antiracism through the Sankofa Centre of Excellence as an individual practice?

In my second single-authored piece titled ‘Centering Black Excellence: Critical Race Currere and The Sankofa English Course’ I asked about the possibilities of addressing antiracism through Pinar’s (1975) life writing and autobiographic research methodology. I was able to do this by drawing on Taliaferro-Baszile’s (2015) framing of *currere* as a practice that centres racialized women of colour. By using Critical Race Currere I analyzed the existing literature pertaining to Critical Race Theory both broadly, and within the context of Ontario education. As a framework for my own individual life-writing research, I stepped through Pinar’s currerian phases and analyzed my understanding of the Sankofa Centre of Excellence to address my research questions:

How is Black Excellence conceived by the leaders and educators involved in the Sankofa course?; and how are schools, and school boards mobilizing the concept of Black Excellence in relation to the policy put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education, as well as the body of Canadian literature on the topic? After conceptualizing my understanding of Black excellence in relation to the centre, I called for the continual utilization of *currere* and life-writing research by educators within Ontario so that more attention be paid to how antiracism and Black excellence is, or is not being taken up within our own individual educational pedagogies.

Having been involved with the Sankofa Centre from early 2020, just shortly after the Black Graduation Coaches, I was fortunate enough to have been tasked with the initial draft of the Sankofa English curriculum. Ridden with imposter syndrome, I turned on my Zoom meet to see Board members, professors, curriculum studies scholars, educators, and principals all waiting for my delivery. I felt like I was looking up at giants. One year after presenting on the proposed modules (related to the key impacts discussed in my third article) of the Sankofa summer course, the curriculum team was gathered and a final curriculum document was realized. In my third article, I have provided a deep systematic overview of the curriculum writing and teaching process. In doing so, I frame the Sankofa Centre of Excellence as a Social Action Curriculum Project (Schultz, 2010) which was taken up both initially by the Black Graduation Coaches, and later by the teachers of the course. As a theoretical framework for my analysis, I paralleled the Key Themes (Impacts) that had emerged in the board's initial program visits. These themes were: Matters of Identity; Matters of Representation; Matters of CRRP; and Matters of Allyship (Sankofa Document, 2020). What this document, and the students involved in its creation, had illustrated to us was the need for more Black representation in both educators and curriculum. By doing this, they articulated, it would provide more opportunities for Black voices to enact their lived experiences in school and culminate in their well-being and success.

Finally, these students had informed us that allyship to them should take on the form of creating spaces for Black voices to be heard. In my writing, I made all efforts to support these voices with the ongoing calls to action for antiracism in Ontario schooling. In this article I address my first research question (How is Black Excellence conceived by the leaders and educators involved in the Sankofa course?) by including interviews conducted with those involved in the course. I address my second research question (how are schools, and school boards mobilizing the concept of Black Excellence in relation to the policy put forth by the Ontario Ministry of

Education, as well as the body of Canadian literature on the topic?) by coinciding these interviews with the scholarship pertaining to the topic of Black excellence and antiracism.

Perched, Yet Ready For Flight: The Sankofa Bird

With the sixth wave of the pandemic on the horizon, and many people pretending the all-too-familiar virus is in our rear-view it feels like a perfect metaphor to our current approach to antiracism. It would not be fair to say that steps have not been taken in the right direction with respect to antiracism in education, we have far to go. As Ng-A-Fook et al. (2022) discusses, the last few years have caused us to “Reconceptualize,” and “adapt” our curriculum-as planned” and “pivot” the curriculum-as-implemented” in relation to COVID-19 and what's been required to support mental-health, and student success (p. 349). Our swift reaction time on a national scale is considerable given our seemingly delayed or lagging efforts at educational reform with respect to anti-Black racism. At the University of Ottawa, the Faculty of Education has made reforms to its teacher education programs which create greater space for learning/(un)learning equity and diversity for prospective teacher candidates (Ng-A-Fook et al., 2022).

For practicing teachers, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) has created both a Professional Advisory on Anti-Black Racism, as well as non-mandatory Additional Qualification Courses for learning about anti-Black racism (OCT, 2022). Though these are both important steps, as Ng-A-Fook et al., (2022) notes “we cannot assume that trickle-down antiracist professional dispositions will occur from the OCT regulation changes on their own” (p. 351). I am compelled to return to both Aoki’s (1993) curriculum-as-lived, and Pinar’s (2019) *currere*, which encourage us to further regard the lived realities of our students within our space, and to ask questions of our own individual teaching practice. Until such time as deep systematic change occurs (as seemingly slow as continental drift) I suggest it is important we remain resolute and resourceful to the students around us by taking up such methodologies and theories as I’ve explored in my writing. For Howard and James (2019) this is made clear when discussing Africentric learning as far from a panacea, but rather an individual practice within spaces that remain conducive to it. Regarding the teachers within Africentric schools, they note that “their work delineates how they are interpreting and operationalizing what the Africentric label has come to mean for them, and this school community - that is, affirming Black life” (p. 333). Perhaps then, we can take flight from there, by

asking what Black excellence means for us, and for our schools, and continue to focus on consistently affirming the matters of Black lives.

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