

Three Major Issues, Black Youth Encounter

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Essay

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First Major Dilemma

School System Barriers: Introduction

Historically, Canadian schooling has been shaped by systems of exclusion. The residential school system, created by the Canadian government and Christian churches, attempted to assimilate Indigenous children by stripping them of their culture and identity. While today's schools are not residential schools, subtle forms of assimilation and bias persist. These systems established patterns of exclusion that continue to influence institutional structures, expectations, and policies across Canada.

Behind classroom doors across the country, Black students navigate an educational landscape that often includes systemic obstacles their peers rarely encounter. These obstacles do not operate in isolation. They are interconnected and reinforce one another. A student who lacks representation in their school's teaching staff may internalize negative stereotypes while simultaneously experiencing harsher discipline or being streamed into lower academic tracks. Over time, the emotional and academic impact compounds.

Educators who lack understanding of Black students' cultural identities may rely on stereotypes, influencing expectations, discipline, and academic placement. This problem is considered a school system barrier that has carried into today's generation due to a lack of Black teachers and mentors, a limited culturally relevant curriculum, streaming into lower academic tracks, and a lack of programs and groups to support troubled Black youth.

Lack of Black Teachers and Mentors: Why This Occurs

The underrepresentation of Black teachers does not happen by chance. It is the result of systemic hiring barriers within predominantly White school districts, limited recruitment from diverse teacher education programs, and workplace environments that often lack strong anti-racist cultures. Hiring processes may unintentionally favour candidates who already have professional networks within majority-White communities. Additionally, Black educators who do enter the profession often report feelings of isolation, increased scrutiny, and limited promotion opportunities, which contribute to higher attrition rates.

This creates a cycle: fewer Black teachers mean fewer role models for Black students, which may discourage young Black students from entering the teaching profession, further reducing representation in future generations.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

To fully understand how these barriers persist, this analysis is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), a framework developed by legal scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw and Derrick Bell. Critical Race Theory argues that racism is not merely the result of individual prejudice but is embedded within laws, policies, and institutional structures. CRT emphasizes that systemic inequities are normalized within institutions, including schools, and that race-neutral policies can still produce racially unequal outcomes.

Applying CRT to Canadian education reveals that streaming practices, teacher hiring systems, disciplinary policies, and curriculum design are not isolated problems. Rather, they operate within a broader structure that historically privileged White, Eurocentric norms while marginalizing Black and Indigenous identities. CRT also introduces the concept of intersectionality, developed by Crenshaw, which explains how race intersects with class, gender, and disability to compound disadvantage. This is particularly relevant when examining the overrepresentation of Black students in special education and non-academic streams. By situating school barriers within Critical Race Theory, this essay moves beyond describing disparities and instead identifies them as predictable outcomes of systemic design.

How Lack of Black Teachers and Mentors Is Part of School System Barriers

Representation matters deeply in educational spaces. When Black students do not see themselves reflected in positions of authority, expertise, and leadership, it subtly reinforces harmful societal messages about who belongs in those roles. Research demonstrates that when students are matched with teachers of the same racial or ethnic background, teacher perceptions improve and student academic and behavioural outcomes increase (Redding, 2019).

Beyond academic performance, mentorship is crucial. Black teachers are often better able to understand students' cultural contexts and to advocate for them when bias arises. Without these mentors, Black students may lack trusted adults who can validate their experiences with discrimination and guide them through systemic challenges.

A real-world example can be seen in school districts that have implemented targeted recruitment programs for racialized educators. Some Ontario school boards have introduced equity-based hiring initiatives and affinity groups for Black educators to increase representation and retention. These initiatives demonstrate that when districts are intentional, representation can improve.

One structural barrier is the underrepresentation of Black teachers. While Canada promotes multiculturalism, representation within education systems does not reflect student diversity. According to the Ontario College of Teachers (2021) demographic report, approximately 69% of Ontario teachers identify as White, while only about 2% identify as Black, despite Black students representing a significantly larger proportion of urban school populations.

In the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Black students represent roughly 10–12% of the student population, yet Black teachers remain significantly underrepresented (James & Turner, 2017). This representation gap limits mentorship opportunities and contributes to racialized perception patterns in discipline and academic expectations.

Research by Gershenson et al. (2016) found that Black students who have at least one Black teacher are more likely to graduate from high school and consider post-secondary education. Within a Critical Race Theory lens, this disparity reflects structural hiring pipelines and credentialing systems that disproportionately exclude racialized educators.

How is a limited culturally relevant curriculum a part of the school system barriers

A limited culturally relevant curriculum is connected to school system barriers because students tend to find their academics easier when they are able to relate to assignments that were assigned to them, due to the fact that the assignment has aspects that remind them of their culture and personal experiences. Students' culture and lived experiences, or what influences how they understand and make sense of the world or themselves as an integral part of who they are as learners.

Researchers have found that culturally responsive teaching can improve students' academic performance, critical thinking skills, and overall confidence. It recognizes that students learn best when content is relevant to their experiences and identities, promoting engagement and retention of knowledge. This shows that a limited, culturally relevant curriculum is a barrier in schools because it does not incorporate assignments that resonate with students' cultures and life experiences.

Peer-reviewed research strongly supports this claim. Ladson-Billings (1995) first conceptualized culturally relevant pedagogy and found that when instruction affirms students' cultural identities while maintaining high academic expectations, students demonstrate stronger engagement and achievement. Similarly, a large-scale study by Dee and Penner (2017) found that participation in culturally relevant ethnic studies courses significantly improved attendance,

GPA, and credit accumulation among marginalized high school students. Their quasi-experimental study demonstrated measurable academic gains, providing empirical evidence that a culturally responsive curriculum directly impacts student success.

Further, Gay (2018) explains that culturally responsive teaching strengthens cognitive processing because students are better able to connect new information to prior knowledge rooted in their lived experiences. When Black students are excluded from curricular representation, the disconnection reduces engagement and may contribute to lower academic persistence. Therefore, a limited culturally relevant curriculum is not simply a matter of representation. It is a structural barrier that restricts academic performance, belonging, and long-term educational outcomes.

How is streaming into lower academic tracks a part of the school system barriers

Streaming into lower academic tracks is a significant school system barrier because it institutionalizes lowered expectations and limits access to opportunity. Academic streaming refers to the practice of placing students into different course levels, such as applied or academic programs, based on perceived ability. Although presented as neutral, research consistently demonstrates racial disproportionality in placement decisions.

In Ontario, provincial reviews have shown that Black students are disproportionately placed in applied-level courses compared to their White peers, even when achievement levels are comparable (James & Turner, 2017). Their report, based on race-based data collected from the Toronto District School Board, revealed systemic disparities in course placement and disciplinary action affecting Black students.

Peer-reviewed research further confirms that tracking contributes to long-term inequality. Oakes (2005) found that students in lower tracks receive less rigorous instruction, fewer critical thinking opportunities, and reduced access to experienced teachers. Once placed in a lower stream, upward mobility becomes difficult, effectively narrowing post-secondary options. Gamoran and Mare (1989) also demonstrated that tracking widens achievement gaps over time rather than reducing them.

Additionally, teacher expectations significantly influence track placement. Research by Gershenson et al. (2016) found that teachers often have systematically lower expectations for Black students compared to White students with similar academic records. These expectations shape recommendations for advanced coursework, reinforcing racial disparities.

Streaming, therefore, functions as a systemic barrier by:

- Limiting access to university preparation pathways
- Reinforcing racialized stereotypes about ability
- Creating segregated academic spaces within schools
- Restricting long-term economic mobility

Rather than supporting equity, streaming often reproduces existing inequalities embedded within the school system.

How is a lack of programs and groups to support troubled black youth a part of the school system barriers

A lack of programs and groups to support troubled Black youth is another significant school system barrier because it reduces access to culturally affirming mentorship and mental health supports. Students who experience racial discrimination benefit from identity-affirming spaces and trusted mentors who understand their lived realities.

Research shows that school belonging is strongly associated with academic success and psychological well-being. A meta-analysis by Allen et al. (2018) found that students who report higher levels of belonging demonstrate significantly higher academic motivation, engagement, and lower depressive symptoms. For Black students, culturally specific support programs enhance a sense of belonging by validating racial identity.

Mentorship is particularly impactful. A longitudinal study by Hurd et al. (2012) found that natural mentors (non-parental adults) positively influenced African American adolescents' academic attitudes and reduced depressive symptoms. When schools fail to provide mentorship programs or affinity groups, they remove protective factors that buffer against racism-related stress.

Furthermore, exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately affect Black youth. Skiba et al. (2011) found that Black students are suspended and expelled at significantly higher rates than their peers for similar behaviours. Without restorative programs or culturally responsive interventions, troubled Black youth are more likely to be punished than supported, reinforcing disengagement and increasing dropout risk.

Therefore, the absence of targeted programs is not neutral it actively contributes to systemic inequity by:

- Increasing vulnerability to mental health challenges

- Reducing academic resilience
- Limiting access to mentorship and advocacy
- Reinforcing punitive disciplinary cycles

Providing culturally responsive support systems is not supplemental; it is essential for dismantling structural barriers within education.

School System Barriers: The Problem

One structural barrier is the underrepresentation of Black teachers. Research demonstrates that when students are matched with teachers of the same racial or ethnic background, teacher perceptions improve and student academic and behavioural outcomes increase (Redding, 2019). Another barrier is the difficulty of developing and sustaining anti-racist school cultures. Institutional resistance often limits meaningful transformation efforts (Chikkatur, 2021). While some schools embrace diversity initiatives, these efforts are sometimes surface-level, limited to assemblies, cultural celebrations, or one-time workshops, without addressing deeper structural inequities. Staff turnover, budget constraints, and lack of leadership accountability often derail sustained equity efforts.

Black students also experience academic profiling and racialized tracking practices, where placement decisions are influenced by stereotypes rather than demonstrated ability (Wallace, 2024). Once placed in lower tracks, students receive less rigorous instruction, fewer opportunities for advanced coursework, and reinforcement of lowered expectations. For example, Black students are disproportionately placed on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) under behavioural categories compared to their peers, while being underrepresented in gifted programs. These disparities reflect systemic bias rather than differences in ability.

Furthermore, professional learning and curriculum alignment significantly influence whether culturally relevant and ambitious instruction occurs in classrooms (Desimone et al., 2025). Without sustained training, teachers may unintentionally reproduce inequities through curriculum choices and instructional strategies.

How Can We Resolve These Issues?

Implementing culturally responsive and ambitious instruction increases student engagement and supports equitable outcomes (Desimone et al., 2025). Literacy curricula that center students' full humanity and lived experiences promote inclusion and belonging (Braden et al., 2024). For example, incorporating Black Canadian history beyond slavery, such as the

contributions of Black Loyalists, the history of Africville in Nova Scotia, or contemporary Black Canadian leaders, helps students see Black excellence as integral to Canadian identity rather than as a marginal footnote.

To address teacher diversity gaps, districts must examine systemic hiring barriers in predominantly White districts and implement intentional recruitment strategies (Sulsky, 2022). This includes partnerships with universities that have diverse teacher education programs, mentorship pipelines for Black high school students interested in education careers, and retention programs that support Black educators once hired. For example, mentorship initiatives in which experienced Black educators support new hires, and scholarship programs designed to increase Black teacher representation. Removing structural hiring barriers expands representation and strengthens mentorship opportunities for Black students.

Additionally, dismantling rigid tracking systems or delaying streaming decisions until later grades can reduce racialized academic segregation. Schools must also use race-based data responsibly to identify disparities and create accountability.

Second Major Dilemma

Racism: Introduction

Throughout history, racism has manifested in numerous forms, from slavery and segregation to contemporary systemic discrimination. Leaders such as Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King Jr. fought to dismantle systems that denied Black individuals their humanity and equal opportunity. Yet in today's classrooms, racism has not disappeared; it has evolved. For example, a Black student who consistently earns high grades may still be questioned about whether the work is truly their own, while another may be disciplined more harshly than peers for the same behaviour. These everyday experiences, often dismissed as misunderstandings, accumulate and shape how students see themselves and how schools see them. Racism occurs because of stereotyping by teachers, lower academic expectations, a lack of empathy across racial differences, higher chances of being accused of wrongdoing, and underfunded schools in predominantly Black communities.

Why Racism Occurs in Schools

Racism in schools occurs due to a combination of historical inequality, implicit bias, systemic policies, and societal stereotypes. Canada often promotes multiculturalism as part of its national identity, yet systemic inequities persist beneath this narrative. Implicit biases and

automatic associations shaped by societal messaging affect even well-intentioned educators. Without critical reflection and anti-racist training, these biases influence discipline decisions, grading practices, and academic recommendations.

Funding disparities also contribute. Schools are located in lower-income neighbourhoods. Where Black families are disproportionately represented due to systemic socioeconomic inequities, they often have fewer resources, outdated materials, and reduced extracurricular opportunities. These structural inequalities reinforce racial disparities in educational outcomes.

Racism in Schools: The Problem

Teacher bias and racialized attribution patterns significantly shape classroom experiences. Research shows that teacher education students' implicit racial attitudes influence how they interpret and respond to Black students' behaviour (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2023). Behaviour seen as "assertive" in one student may be labelled "aggressive" in another based solely on race.

Discrimination not only affects directly targeted students. When ethnic and racial discrimination occurs in the classroom, it negatively impacts overall classroom climate and even the academic adjustment of students who were not directly targeted (Toro et al., 2024). Racism creates environments of mistrust, fear, and hypervigilance.

National data from the 2023 Youth Risk Behaviour Survey reveal that students who experience racism in school report significantly higher rates of depression, substance use, and suicide risk (McKinnon et al., 2024).

Racism in Schools: Solutions

Racism in schools is not simply a historical issue; it continues today in what can be described as modern acts of racism. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2018), Black students are disproportionately disciplined compared to their white peers, even when committing similar infractions. A 2018 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that Black students represent a significantly higher percentage of suspensions and expulsions nationwide. Research by Skiba et al. (2011) further confirms that these disparities are not explained by more severe behaviour, but by systemic bias in disciplinary decisions. These patterns demonstrate that racism in schools operates structurally, not just individually.

In addition to systemic disparities, individual acts of racism continue to occur in school environments. For example, imagine that during Black History Month, a time meant to celebrate

Black history and contributions, a student tells a Black classmate, “All Black people should sit at the back of the bus.” This statement directly references segregation during the Jim Crow era, when Black Americans were legally forced to sit at the back of buses. Such a comment is not merely a joke; it reflects historical dehumanization and reinforces racist ideologies rooted in the denial of equality. When incidents like this occur, they create hostile learning environments, negatively impacting students’ mental health, sense of belonging, and academic performance. Studies show that experiences of racial discrimination are linked to increased stress, lower academic engagement, and decreased psychological well-being among Black youth (Benner et al., 2018).

This is why schools must take immediate and structural action. Mandatory anti-racism and implicit bias training for staff can help educators respond effectively to racist incidents rather than minimizing them. Clear anti-discrimination policies must outline consequences for racial harassment. Safe reporting systems should allow students to report incidents confidentially. Schools must also implement curriculum reforms that teach accurate history about segregation, slavery, and civil rights so students understand why statements like “sit at the back of the bus” are harmful and unacceptable.

Silence allows racism to persist; accountability disrupts it. If schools fail to act, they risk repeating patterns similar to those experienced by Indigenous communities, where education systems historically reinforced racial hierarchy and exclusion. To prevent modern acts of racism from continuing, schools must commit to measurable equity goals, transparent discipline reviews, and early anti-racism education beginning in elementary grades. Racism will not stop on its own. It must be actively confronted through policy, education, and accountability.

Third Major Dilemma

Mental Health Challenges: Introduction

Mental health is not separate from educational equity. It is deeply intertwined with it. For many Black students in Canadian schools, mental health challenges are not simply individual struggles but responses to systemic barriers, racism, and chronic stress within educational environments. When students repeatedly experience stereotyping, exclusion, lower expectations, and discrimination, the psychological impact accumulates. Schools, which should function as safe spaces for growth and development, can instead become sources of stress and trauma.

Research demonstrates that students who experience racism in school report significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidal ideation (McKinnon et al., 2024). These mental health consequences are not accidental; they are predictable outcomes of prolonged exposure to discrimination and inequitable systems.

Why Mental Health Challenges Occur

Mental health challenges among Black students occur because of repeated exposure to racial stressors and systemic inequities. Racism operates not only through overt acts but through subtle daily microaggressions, lowered expectations, and institutional practices such as racialized discipline and academic streaming. These experiences trigger chronic stress responses in the body.

When students constantly question whether they belong, whether they will be unfairly disciplined, or whether their achievements will be dismissed, they experience psychological strain known as racial battle fatigue. Chronic stress affects brain development, particularly areas responsible for memory, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. Over time, this can impair concentration, reduce academic performance, and increase emotional dysregulation.

Additionally, when schools lack Black teachers, culturally competent counsellors, or safe spaces for racial identity affirmation, students may not have trusted adults to validate their experiences. Without support systems, feelings of isolation intensify, increasing vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

Socioeconomic inequities also contribute. Schools in predominantly Black communities are often under-resourced, limiting access to school psychologists, social workers, and extracurricular programs that support well-being. When mental health services are available, they may not be culturally responsive, leading students to feel misunderstood or dismissed.

Mental Health: The Problem

The core problem is that schools often individualize mental health struggles instead of recognizing them as responses to systemic conditions. Black students experiencing anxiety or depression may be labelled as "unmotivated," "disruptive," or "defiant," rather than supported through a trauma-informed and anti-racist lens.

Research from the 2023 Youth Risk Behaviour Survey found that students who reported experiencing racism at school were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms and

suicide risk (McKinnon et al., 2024). This demonstrates a direct link between school-based discrimination and mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, Black students are less likely to access school-based mental health supports.

- They are more likely to face disciplinary action than counselling referrals.
- Cultural stigma and lack of representation among mental health professionals create additional barriers to seeking help.
- Without systemic intervention, mental health disparities widen, academic outcomes decline, and long-term socioeconomic inequities persist.

Mental Health: Solutions

Addressing mental health inequities requires systemic, evidence-based approaches that move beyond surface-level wellness initiatives.

Implement Culturally Responsive and Trauma-Informed School Models

Research shows that trauma-informed school practices reduce behavioural incidents and improve emotional regulation when implemented consistently. Schools must train educators to recognize racial trauma and respond with restorative approaches rather than punitive discipline. Evidence indicates that restorative justice programs reduce suspension rates and improve school climate, particularly for Black students. By replacing exclusionary discipline with restorative practices, schools reduce both academic disruption and psychological harm.

Increase Access to Culturally Competent Mental Health Professionals

Studies demonstrate that students are more likely to seek and remain in counselling when providers reflect their cultural background or demonstrate cultural competence. Districts should:

- Hire more Black school psychologists and counsellors
- Provide anti-racist mental health training for all staff
- Partner with community-based Black mental health organizations
- Access to culturally competent care improves treatment engagement and outcomes.

Eliminate Racialized Discipline and Tracking

Reducing disproportionate discipline decreases exposure to school-based trauma. Research consistently shows that exclusionary discipline practices are linked to increased anxiety, depression, and school disengagement. Districts should conduct equity audits of discipline data and implement accountability measures to eliminate racial disparities. Delaying or

removing rigid academic streaming also prevents the psychological harm associated with lowered expectations.

Integrate Identity-Affirming Curriculum

Students who see their histories, cultures, and identities represented in the curriculum demonstrate stronger academic identity and higher self-esteem. Identity-affirming education reduces internalized racism and strengthens resilience. For example, integrating comprehensive Black Canadian history across subjects, not just during Black History Month, reinforces belonging and pride. Research shows that culturally relevant pedagogy increases student engagement and academic persistence.

Create Safe Affinity Spaces and Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs connecting Black students with Black educators and professionals improve academic motivation and psychological well-being. Affinity spaces provide environments where students can process experiences of racism without judgment. Evidence from mentorship initiatives demonstrates increased graduation rates and improved self-efficacy among participating students.

Mental Health as Educational Justice

Mental health inequities among Black students are not isolated health concerns. They are educational justice issues. When systemic barriers and racism remain unaddressed, mental health harm becomes inevitable. However, research-based solutions demonstrate that change is possible. By implementing trauma-informed practices, increasing culturally competent mental health services, dismantling racialized discipline and tracking, integrating identity-affirming curriculum, and building mentorship structures, schools can interrupt the cycle of systemic harm. Educational equity must include psychological safety. Without mental well-being, academic success cannot be sustained. If schools are truly committed to equity, mental health reform must be central, not supplemental, to dismantling systemic barriers facing Black youth in Canadian schools.

Conclusion

The three interconnected barriers facing Black youth in Canadian schools, systemic exclusion, racism, and mental health harm, are not inevitable. They are the result of historical

patterns and contemporary policy choices. The cost of inaction is measured in diminished potential, emotional harm, and inequitable futures.

Education has the power to reproduce inequity or to interrupt it. Meaningful change requires recruiting and retaining Black educators, implementing culturally responsive curricula, dismantling racialized tracking systems, addressing teacher bias, and supporting students' mental health through trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches.

The time for meaningful transformation is now. Black students deserve educational environments where their humanity, brilliance, and potential are fully recognized and supported, not limited by systemic barriers that can and must be dismantled.

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