

Proceedings of the 2017 Atlantic Universities' Teaching Showcase

Volume 21 | Pages 99–114 | <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/auts/index>

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*Association of Atlantic Universities/
Association des universités de l'atlantque
Editor-in-Chief: Donovan Plumb
www.atlanticuniversities.ca*

*Volume 21 | Pages 99–114
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Abstract

While there are studies that explore the achievement gap from the educators' perspective, there is limited research on students' schooling experiences from the perspective of parents. In the current study, data collection was gathered through focus groups with parents of African Nova Scotian students, giving voice to their perspectives of their schooling experiences and those of their children. The overarching question examines the strengths and barriers to learning from the perspective of parents' own schooling experiences and the present experiences of their children. Semi-structured questions were used during the focus group sessions (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) to explore the strengths and barriers of the educational system for African Nova Scotian learners. For example: What is working for your child in their schooling? What needs to be done differently? What experiences promote or suppress student achievement for African Nova Scotian learners?

Keywords

achievement gap; students of African descent; education; parents/guardians

Introduction

African Nova Scotian learners continue to experience inequities within the education system. Students with the best of intentions and an eagerness towards their success in school begin to feel disenfranchised and find a lack of resources and supports that are reflective of their lived experiences (Halifax Regional School Board [HRSB], 2003; Irvine, 1990; Smith, Schneider, & Ruck, 2005; Varma-Joshi, Baker, & Tanaka, 2004). On the other hand, school administrators often report concern over frequent absenteeism, lateness for class, poor academic performance, truancy, and discipline issues with African Nova Scotian students (Dei, 1996a; HRSB, 2003), particularly with male students (Brathwaite, 2010). These students are at risk of becoming early leavers, being "pushed out," and/or suspended from high school (Black Learners Advisory Committee [BLAC], 1994; Dei, 1996a; HRSB, 2003; Varma-Joshi et al., 2004). The purpose of this study was to explore the perspective of parents of African Nova Scotian children in grades six to nine.

Educational Background

Nova Scotia is home to the largest historical African descent population in Canada. According to the Canada 2006 Census, approximately 4% of the total population in Nova Scotia are racially visible (Statistics Canada, 2009). Within Nova Scotia, 44% of the racially visible population are African Nova Scotian, and 28.3% are students under the age of 15 (African Nova Scotian Affairs [ANSA], 2016).

African Nova Scotian students are less likely than their peers to finish high school or attend university (ANSA, 2016). Educational inequities and the ability to access post-secondary education for African Nova Scotians remains limited and unchanged after 30 years of school integration (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). For the most part, students receive a Eurocentric education with little knowledge of the culture and history of people of African ancestry, or the role their ancestors played in the history of Nova Scotia and Canada (Finlayson, 2015). African Canadians, particularly African Nova Scotians, continue to be marginalized in the education system (Calliste, 1996).

Programs to help empower African Canadian students to overcome obstacles and succeed in the public school system have been established in major cities across Canada (Brathwaite, 2010). For instance, the Cultural Awareness Youth Group (CAYG) of Nova Scotia was established as an initiative to foster educational and cultural awareness development of Black youth, focusing on Black culture and heritage in the province (Calliste, 1996). Several other community initiatives and various organizations targeted broader policy statements, such as bullying in schools (Varma-Joshi et al., 2004).

The Black Learners Advisory Committee (1994) noted that many Black students continue to experience academic difficulties, especially at the high school level. Responses from community groups indicated that the study accurately identified many of the challenges related to the achievement gap of African Nova Scotian students (HRSB, 2003). They however expressed frustration at the lack of progress in implementing recommendations made in the BLAC report, but acknowledged that some of the initiatives stated, such as the pre-school Four Plus programs, breakfast programs, student support workers, new curriculum materials in African Studies, and the Black Educators' Association programs, were effectually addressing barriers of success for African Nova Scotian learners (HRSB, 2003). Despite these initiatives, parents still felt that their children face systemic and systematic realities of racism (HRSB, 2003).

In her book, *Black Students and School Failure*, Irvine (1990) stated that "Blacks and other racially visible students are being systematically and effectively excluded from the benefits of educational opportunities" (p. xiii), and that "[t]he stated curriculum does not discriminate, but the hidden, or latent, curriculum does" (p. 5). Although not directly addressed, the hidden curriculum consisting of values, attitudes, and social knowledge not intentionally transmitted through prescribed curriculum, is influential in reinforcing societal prejudices that view Black children as "incapable and inferior" (Irvine, 1990, p. 8).

The 2003 Halifax Regional School Board report, *Improving the Success of African Nova Scotian Students*, identified the need to address issues and barriers to academic achievement of African Nova Scotian students, and to recognize and implement strategies that support all students to succeed academically, culturally, and socially. Parents responding to the study felt that despite some exceptions, both teachers and principals do not have the sufficient training, education, or experience in appreciating challenges their children face in schools (HRSB, 2003). Many parents of African Nova Scotian students indicate their children still experience some form of racism and racial discrimination, as well as a lack of sensitivity on the part of schools. Low teacher expectations and a lack of cultural sensitivity create patterns of differential teacher-student interactions within the classroom, with the potential outcome being school failure (Irvine, 1990). Teacher expectations are regarded as powerful contributors to the success in school achievement, but often are interceded by factors such as characteristics of both teachers and students (Irvine, 1990).

Despite reported claims, students state that they value education and seem to be optimistic about their future success, but feel there should be more resources and support available to assist them in their academic work (HRSB, 2003; Smith et al., 2005). Many students find that they still underachieve, and that their beliefs and behaviours do not contribute to their academic success. They claim they "are thwarted by closed doors or social inequalities" (Smith et al., 2005,

p. 355). Students have identified the curriculum as one reason why teachers do not understand their culture, and they claim that teachers do not have the relevant training in Black history, race relations, and cross-cultural understanding. Teachers and administrators have been described as "insensitive" (HRSB, 2003, p. 23) and lack an understanding of African Nova Scotian students and their communities. Teachers do not seem to understand or respond to the difficulties and enormous challenges students face in getting an education (BLAC, 1994; HRSB, 2003). Cultural misunderstanding and tension between teachers and students of different backgrounds often result in conflict, distrust, hostility, and possible school failure (HRSB, 2003; Irvine, 1990).

To help overcome the gap in achievement, culturally sensitive pedagogies must play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning processes. Changing school curriculum, for instance, could make a positive impact in the learning outcome of students of African descent (Brathwaite, 2010). Effective use of culturally sensitive curriculum is needed to support African Canadian students to combat "self-perceptions of inferiority, unworthiness and being inconsequential in the world they live in" (Brathwaite, 2010, p. 307), and to better reflect the daily realities of racially visible students that are not represented in classroom discourses and texts (Dei, 1996b).

Study Design

This study examined the lived experiences of parents of children of African descent in the public school system and their interpretation of their child's educational experience. Participants had to have children who were in grades six to nine (approximately 11–15 years of age), and the children had to be of African descent. This study used an inductive logic aimed at creating contextualized findings through the participants' voices. This approach allowed the researchers to explore not only the "what" and "how" of a topic, but also the reasoning behind the participants' contributions (Morgan, 2010). Potential participants were recruited through community organizations and invited to participate. Ten parents participated in semi-structured interviews (1–1.5 hours in duration). All data was collected in person and within the participant's community at a community-based organization.

Data Analysis and Findings

Analysis of data was done through coding and identifying key themes. Transcriptions were coded and analyzed using an inductive approach (Reinharz, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996) that identified patterns, similarities, repetitive and shared experiences. The coded data was then grouped into categories that allowed for key themes to emerge. The semi-structured interview guide contained open-ended questions examining parents' interpretations of their child's education, as well as the

lived experience of the parents in the public school system. The study shows that the children and parents had similar experiences regardless of when they attended school. Also inherent within these dialogues were the families' experiences of the challenges in receiving an education that was culturally sensitive to students of African descent.

Using a content analysis method, transcripts of the recorded interviews were analyzed. The three authors coded the data, and by constantly comparing transcripts, explored similarities and differences between interviews and inductively built the coding tree. The themes to emerge from the data were: a) Student-Teacher Relationships (STR); b) Teacher Support, or lack thereof (TS); and c) Transitions (T).

Student-Teacher Relationship (STR)

Escayg (2010) examined the significant influence that racialized teachers had on African Canadian students in terms of academic achievement and social benefit. African Canadian teachers serve as role models for students of the same race by making them feel more comfortable and showing them that academic success is possible (Escayg, 2010). Escayg (2010) also refers to past literature that focused on culturally relative pedagogy and the important component of being a culturally relevant teacher which involves forming a relationship with each student. Despite racial similarities, individual differences still exist and therefore it is important for teachers to get to know all their students so that everyone feels important and capable. Research suggests that positive and caring classroom environments fostered by teachers can positively influence student confidence and success (Escayg, 2010). One parent recalled the positive experience she had with one of her teachers: "It was the bonding with her [Mrs. Smith] that kind of gave me the interest in school and made me interested in going as a young girl....It was building the relationship with her." This experience made the parent excited about wanting to go to school and learn. Similarly, her child(ren) would talk about their positive experience and relationship they have with a Black teacher:

He [the parent's son] talks about a teacher non-stop, I don't even have to ask what race he is. I know, and it's somebody that he can relate to. It's a person of color. It's who he sees himself comfortable with, and so I will say that [school], they're getting more male role models that these young guys are looking up to.

Decker, Dona, and Christenson (2007) examined the importance of student-teacher relationships for African American youth. All participants in this study were considered to have had school behavioural problems in the past. However, once the quality of the relationships between the teachers and the students reportedly increased, so did students' positive behaviour, classroom engagement,

and academic achievement. These findings suggest that positive student-teacher relationships have an effect on African American students' educational outcomes (Decker et al., 2007). One parent, who also identified as a lunch monitor, noted that:

We've had more African Nova Scotian staff at the school, not necessarily teachers. There are more teachers as well, but staff just doing lunch monitoring and EPA, so I find the kids [African Nova Scotian students] are responding better.

Additionally, this parent noted:

If you have a certain kid that refuses to work with anybody in the learning centre, and then they're very willing to work with an African Nova Scotian, somebody that's not even a teacher, it kind of you know, and then they [the school/administration] don't make it a point to continue that, it's like it's not important.

These findings support the research by Decker et al. (2007) in terms of the positive response of students towards the presence of additional persons of African descent in their schools, regardless of the position the person may have, such as teacher, student support worker, lunch monitor, or janitor.

Gibson (2002) examined the relationships between high school African American males and their teachers. This study took place in New York, where classroom observations, as well as student, parent, and teacher interviews were conducted. The results indicated that positive student-teacher interactions decreased the likelihood of these students becoming delinquent (Gibson, 2002).

In Finlayson's (2011) study, African Nova Scotian educators not only emphasized the importance of teacher support, but also how forming positive student-teacher relationships contributed to their educational success. The participants stated that having African Nova Scotian teachers whom they could trust and communicate with really benefitted them. One of the educators mentioned that "being able to explain things through a different set of eyes is probably the most effective way to make that change" (Finlayson, 2011, p. 98).

Teacher Support or Lack Thereof (TS)

Trotman (2001) examined African American students' educational success and found that parental involvement in schools can positively influence students' academic achievements. When teachers and/or other school personnel have low expectations for African American students, this decreases the likelihood of parents getting involved in their child's education (Trotman, 2001). This suggests that teacher support not only directly influences African American students' academic success, but it can also influence parental involvement, which plays a role in students' educational achievement.

Trotman (2001) suggests that getting to know parents, forming positive relationships with them, and using parents as teaching partners will increase involvement, which positively increases the educational success of African American youth.

Although the previous study is based on the experience of African American students, Finlayson (2011), after interviewing African Nova Scotian educators, reported that the support they received from their teachers contributed to their educational success. Participants stated that both African Nova Scotian and White teachers who believed in, cared for, encouraged, and respected them contributed to their academic achievement (Finlayson, 2011). Consistent with the present study's findings, participants in the Finlayson (2011) study stated that "to aspire to be in that position, you have to know that it is possible and to know this, you have to see somebody that looks like you in that role" (p. 96). Parents in this study referenced the positive impact in their children's learning when they had a teacher who took the time to get to know their family and their child:

When you have a teacher that knows what they're doing, it's so beneficial. So not to single out some teachers versus others, however, there are some teachers that make an impact. You can tell that they're there because they want to be there, and that they want to teach, and that they're not there just for a pay cheque. And that makes a long-lasting effect.

For one teacher, I really like her at my daughter's school because in with her school she kind of doesn't really have a main teacher, but she has her for two or three classes. So she's kind of like her main focus teacher. What I do like about her, that she's always advocating for her. She knows if she's starting to struggle or if she's having problems, and she's always there to help support her.

Asante (2005) emphasized the importance of teachers being pedagogically culturally responsive so that they can better serve all students. In order to educate everyone to the best of their abilities, teachers must take into consideration all student needs, and then tailor their teaching to meet those needs. Asante (2005) focused on this student-centered approach in elementary classrooms, and stated that the needs of African American and African Canadian students differ from the needs of White individuals. Instead of focusing on the predominately White curriculum, teachers should expand their teaching to other cultures and races so that every student can be included and supported (Asante, 2005). One parent reflecting on her experience in the school system remembers how absent Black teachers were and the absence of Black history throughout

the year:

As a student, you didn't see many Black teachers in the younger years going through school. And if you did, it may have been a gym teacher or someone here or there, or a guidance counselor. It was never someone that was actually your classroom teacher. So for me, I don't know, when I think back on that growing up, that always stayed with me. How come we don't get to see our own representation, and how come I feel like I'm Black every day, and how come it only has to be only one month that people feel like, oh, this is your month and this is what you have to celebrate, and you should be happy, you have this whole month. And I'm like, but I'm Black every day and I wanted to learn about cultural things every day, not just one month out of the year.

The lived experiences of all students needs to be integrated into the curriculum, in all subjects throughout the academic year. A culturally sensitive curriculum would in turn contribute positively to the learning of all students.

Students need to feel like they matter to the teacher. One parent compared the experience of two of her children. One child felt very supported and the other did not receive the same support:

One child, she has a really good teacher. She's had the teacher for two years, and she sees the potential in her, and she knows how smart she is. And she's like, you know, you can do great things. You should be able to do this and that. My other child, not so much. They're like, no, maybe you should do this with her and that with her, almost as if I should dumb it down, and I should accept that. And that's not me.

Based on these two different experiences, one child was more engaged in their learning than their sibling. Harber et al. (2012) examined the positive feedback bias, which is when "Whites give more praise and less criticism to [racially visible people] than to fellow Whites for equivalent work" (p. 1149). This bias was tested for in public middle and high schools and it was found that teachers do display this bias towards African American and Latino students. Although the positive feedback bias may seem harmless to racialized students, it can lead to lower academic achievement. When teachers have lower expectations for racialized students, these individuals are not provided with as much constructive feedback to learn and grow, resulting in less academic challenges and therefore lower achievement (Harber et al., 2012). One parent noted the importance of the teacher being able to teach the way her child learns which may be different than other students:

If she [the daughter] needs help, she struggles with something, I want to be able to deal with the teacher that you're trying to learn from, because if that's who's teaching you, then that's who needs to be able to help you, I feel, do your work. Because your teaching style is different from a resource teacher's style, so if you're struggling, but then okay, you get this, but then you're struggling with something else because like I said, maybe the teacher has to adapt the way he's teaching you to the way he's taught all his other students, and now you get it, you know what I mean, so that's not such a struggle.

The relationship between school structure and support was examined by Gregory, Cornell, and Fan (2011) in relation to high school suspension rates for African American and White students. The results suggested that when schools were low on structure and support, suspension rates for African American students were significantly higher than those of White students. It was found that when teachers had high expectations while also being supportive, students were more focused and cooperative in the classroom, resulting in lower suspension rates overall. Additionally, even if the overall school climate was low in support, the teachers that were rated as having high expectations for students were related to lower suspension rates. This shows how important teacher support and high expectations are for African American students, even in isolation of other school factors (Gregory et al., 2011). This relationship is equally relevant for African Canadian students and is especially important when students transition from elementary school to junior high school.

Transition (T)

The junior high school years are of critical importance to students' long-term academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Xie, Dawes, Wurster, and Shui (2013) determined that transition into junior high school can create multiple challenges both academically and socially for youths. Changes such as school context, different classroom organizations, less opportunity to form close relationships with teachers, and differences in classroom instructions and management strategies (Xie et al., 2013) become challenges for students during transition into higher-level grades. One parent in the current study remarked that, when their child entered grade eight, "we started to see marks not as good, and we didn't have the same connection with the school as well, to be right on top of it." Another parent noted, "the transition from elementary school after grade six to grade seven, you started to see it became a little more difficult for them."

Xie et al. (2013) noted some common areas of difficulties for students resulting from transitioning into junior high school are declines in academic motivation and performance, lower

self-concept and confidence, and decreased classroom engagement. Critically setting a pattern for future achievement, parents understand the risk of their child's continual struggle with school. One parent explained, "If the kids feel like they're not exceling or they're bringing home bad grades, what's the next thing that's going to happen? They're just going to continue not to want to do good."

Hill and Tyson (2009) noted that parental involvement in schools changes due to aspects of the junior high school structure not supporting home-school strategies in the same way as elementary schools.

One parent explained the difficulties of not finding support in the school in "not knowing who to talk to and how to approach people." Another parent described the difference they felt in their experience in parent-teacher interviews:

If you go to an elementary school and it's parent-teacher interview [time], the child is interacting with you, the child is showing you what they did. When you go to a junior high, you're just given this piece of paper and it says, this is your child's marks. Do you think that you would be able to get him to work on his math a little more?

Coupled with cognitive changes, students' sense of efficacy increases in their ability to make decisions about course selection and extracurricular activities in relation to their goals and aspirations, thereby decreasing their dependence on direct parental involvement (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Students finding more freedom and responsibility in junior high school have parents concerned that schools are not preparing students for this transition: "It doesn't prepare you for all the freedom.... [and] you don't know kind of how to take it." One parent said, "I guess it's that transition that they're becoming independent and maybe that's something that we're instilling on them, but I do find that once grade seven hits, they tend to hold back." In leaving elementary school, parents noticed how differences in school contexts affected their child's ability to adjust to changes: "You've spent all these years with one teacher, then you get to junior high and you have different teachers, then you get to high school and you have different teachers and different classes." Parents suggested that if students have a better understanding of the differences in school context at the junior high and high school levels it "would help kids more when they're going into it, to know what to expect, to know how to see things." One parent explained:

I just find for even my kids, the gap from going one to another, it doesn't adequately prepare you for the readiness of those classes for the next grade on. It's just not another grade, there's so much maturity in the next step that comes with that grade.

I think that's one thing that's so lacking, that if kids were aware of that, I think there would be less dropouts. They would be better educated and...more well-rounded. They could be thinking in their head early, what is it I like to do?

Parents also related their frustration to the “fix-all” solution schools seem to have in solving challenges faced by their child in suggesting placing them in a lower academic stream which diminishes their chances at a post-secondary education. One parent related, “I felt like for the Black children, you struggled in math, the first thing they say is, oh, you should step out of this class and go in this class.” Brion-Meisels (2015) stated that providing students with a set of social, emotional, and academic resources supports their ability to access everyday curricula and enables the central task of learning.

Gutman and Midgley (2000) analyzed the supportive factors that contributed to African American students' academic achievement as they transitioned from elementary to middle school. Through parental interviews and student surveys, one finding was that students with a combination of both school and parental support had higher grade-point averages than those with one or none of these supports.

Recommendations and Implications for Higher Education

Engaging African Nova Scotians in education involves engaging them in culturally sensitive curricula and classroom resources; however, specifically in Nova Scotia, there is a lack of African Canadian heritage in schools (Finlayson, 2015). To help overcome the achievement gap, curriculum must reflect the daily realities and experiences of all students (Brathwaite, 2010). Implications for higher education, particularly teacher education, suggest that programs need to explore ways of educating and diversifying current faculty, staff, and students.

Even with a strong emphasis on reflection and self-evaluation in teacher education programs, preservice teachers may still lack an understanding of the importance of culturally sensitive teachings and the need to develop and implement strategies designed to promote an inclusive, culturally diverse classroom learning environment. Lambeth and Smith (2016) found preservice teachers appear “to disregard the idea that culture and race are socially constructed” (p. 52), often expressing the difficulty in adjusting to their students' apathy toward academics, especially those who lack experience in working with people outside their race. These implications recognize the need for preservice teachers to develop strategies to connect with their students in ways that create positive, trusting relationships.

Preservice teachers who do not have self-efficacy in their ability to implement culturally sensitive pedagogies are less likely to use these strategies once they are in their classroom. An important step in designing effective teacher education programs is to supplement self-efficacy building activities into the curriculum (Oginga Siwatu, Osaghae, & Starker, 2011). This implies that teacher education programs need to prepare preservice teachers to envision ways to "value diverse students' knowledge and cultural practices" (Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011, p. 235), while embedding culturally sensitive pedagogies in their academic curriculum. Supplemented through coursework and professional development workshops, preservice and in-service teachers need to be provided with opportunities to perform various tasks and experience realistic self-efficacy appraisals (Oginga Siwatu et al., 2011), where they are given the opportunity to examine and analyze culturally sensitive pedagogies. One such strategy could involve preservice teachers observing role models in their practicum placements using culturally sensitive practices within the classroom (Oginga Siwatu et al., 2011). Mentors could demonstrate culturally sensitive teaching methods to enable preservice teachers to be able to reflect on and adapt their own methods of working with all students (Lambeth & Smith, 2016). There is a need to explore ways in which culturally sensitive pedagogies can be incorporated into all facets of preservice and in-service teacher education.

Implementing curricula should align with diverse cultures. Faculty and staff need to be encouraged to take classes, workshops, and/or lectures addressing issues of cultural sensitivity (Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). Scott et al. (2013) also stress the need to look for more ways to involve parents, such as conducting seminars in the community or schools on issues of financial aid and university admissions, and to address the various needs of families and students. Finlayson (2011) analyzed the factors that contributed to African Nova Scotian educators' educational success. By interviewing ten African Nova Scotians who worked in the education system, it was found that one of the factors that contributed to participants' academic achievement was community and family support. In particular, the family support included encouragement, believing in their academic abilities, school involvement, and financial support when it came to university (Finlayson, 2011). To build on these benefits of family involvement and support, teacher education programs need to provide coursework in how to create meaningful teacher and family partnerships.

Black role models, in particular teachers and instructors, can provide the necessary opposition to the "lack of visibility of people who look like them...performing in the area which they wish to be one day" (Scott et al., 2013, pp. 293–294). Role models have proved to be essential, especially in the role they dream of as an incentive for them to continue their goals (Finlayson, 2011). To create such role models, it is recommended to focus on recruiting Black students in higher education, as they often bring experiences, expectations, and teaching

methodologies to support and enhance the school achievement of Black learners (Finlayson, 2011). These role models could make a positive impact on the confidence and self-esteem of students, and lower the likelihood of students dropping out of high school and continuing towards higher education. Teacher recruitment and retention efforts should be invested at the middle school and high school levels, and at teacher education institutions (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). Diversity of staff at all levels of education has implications on inclusivity and cultural practices in schools (Scott et al., 2013). Practitioners need to keep this in mind when considering their hiring practices and placement of instructors and teachers.

Although it appears that change is slow in the public school system, and that many of the children's current experiences resonated with their parents, there has been some measure of success. Many of the parents noted the importance of staying engaged in their children's education and making teachers more accountable for the learning outcomes and academic achievement of their children. Despite the challenges, parents are hopeful that their lived experience and those of their children will contribute to a positive change in the public school system; however, as Gutman and Midgley (2000) suggest, future research should examine how parents and schools can work together to support academic achievement for African descent students. It is important to stress that more research is necessary to further examine the lived experience of African Nova Scotian students. This research has demonstrated that, regardless of challenges students of African ancestry experience, parents continue to advocate to close the achievement gap.

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