

Book Review: #BLACKINSCHOOL

by Stephanie Fearon

Book under Review: Diallo, Habiba Cooper. 2021. *#BlackInSchool*. Regina SK: University of Regina Press.

Author: Dr. Stephanie Fearon joins York University's Faculty of Education as the inaugural assistant professor of Black Thriving and Education. Her research draws on Black storytelling traditions to explore the ways that Black mothers and educational institutions partner to support Black student wellbeing. Stephanie uses literary and visual arts to communicate, in a structured, creative, and accessible form, insights gleaned from stories shared by Black mothers and their families. Her publications have appeared in several scholarly journals, including *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, and *Journal of African American Women and Girls in Education*. Stephanie has worked nearly fifteen years in public education systems assuming leadership positions in France, Guadeloupe, and Canada. Most recently, she was the program coordinator for the Equity, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Team and the Model Schools for Inner Cities Department at the Toronto District School Board. In this role, Stephanie provided leadership to administrators and system leaders in implementing policies and practices that promote student academic achievement, wellbeing, and belonging in schools.

A burgeoning body of literature investigates the academic achievement and engagement of Black youth in Canadian schools. This scholarship further reveals the violence waged by an education system long committed to the exclusion and surveillance of Black students and their families (Aladejebi 2021; Litchmore 2022; Maynard 2017). Data collected by large school districts in the country point to the wide array of injustices faced by Black students. For example, Black students are overrepresented in special education programs and experience high rates of suspension and expulsion (Toronto District School Board 2019; Peel District School Board 2022). Academic and public discourse, however, continues to prioritize the educational performance and disciplinary experiences of Black Canadian boys (Litchmore 2022, 233; McPherson 2020, 150). A limited amount of scholarship on Black students' schooling experiences intentionally centres the voices of Black Canadian girls. Moreover, such work fails to advance Black Canadian girls as experts on the schooling lives of Black students.

Habiba Cooper Diallo's #BLACKINSCHOOL presents a much needed gendered perspective into the manifesta-

tions of anti-Black racism in the education system. The book comprises a series of journal entries, spanning from 2012 to 2014, written by Diallo during her teenage years. The author leverages her lived experiences as a Black teenage girl to expose the racism inflicted on "the physical, mental, and emotional bodies of Black students" (2). Diallo's journal excerpts trace her schooling experiences in the wake of her father's death and a subsequent family relocation from Ontario to Nova Scotia. The book is organized into three sections and documents the unabating acts of racism ravaged against Diallo and other Black students in her final two years of high school.

Diallo's intimate narrative focuses on the perpetuation of anti-Blackness through school practices, policies, and curriculum. Diallo's journal entries invite readers to witness the varied ways Black girls process and resist the violence levied against Black students in the Canadian education system. In so doing, Diallo repositions Black girls as social theorists and change makers committed to cultivating affirming learning spaces for Black students. #BLACKINSCHOOL upholds the integral role Black youth play in the "the long and ongoing fight to bring

an end to anti-Black racism and ultimately create a loving, respectful, and inclusive world for everyone” (2).

Section I

#BLACKINSCHOOL opens with a poignant account detailing school practices that dehumanize Black students. In the first section of the book, Diallo documents the barrage of school assignments, presentations, videos, and images that portray Africa and Blackness as primitive, backward, and inferior. Reflecting on those schooling experiences, Diallo writes, “I was horrified, humiliated, and indignant all at once” (3). Diallo argues that this “constant, mundane discrimination” (14) contributes to Black students’ disengagement in schools. Echoing Diallo’s stance, student and parent census data collected by school districts reveal that Black students are less likely to view school as a welcoming place (Yau 2017; Peel District School Board 2022). Section I also examines the relationship between schools and the police. After witnessing the arrest of a Black student at her school, Diallo interrogates the criminalization and abandonment of Black youth by the education system. The section documents the creative ways Black students, especially Black girls, heal from the onslaught of racism and epistemic violence endured at school. Diallo’s journal entries depict her use of the arts, namely Reggae music and Wassoulou dance, to reconnect culturally and spiritually in the safety of her bedroom.

Section II

In Section II, readers continue to witness the ways Black girls resist injustices within the education system. In a series of concise journal entries, Diallo recounts the Eurocentrism expressed in educators’ pedagogies, school-wide events, and course textbooks. This section also introduces readers to the ways Black girls are hypersexualized when engaging with the curriculum. Diallo uses petitions and conferences to incite change at her school and assert her personhood. She also boldly addresses peers and educators who espouse racist discourses and practices in the classroom. Diallo’s journal entries locate Black girls as educational leaders committed to reimagining schools as affirming learning sites for Black students. Diallo challenges educators to adopt culturally sustaining pedagogies that honour the complexities and beauty of Black life in Canada. Diallo argues, “all teachers should be racially aware and should have the tools and terminologies to discuss race with their students” (30).

Section III

Much literature explores the schooling experiences of Black students in special education (non-gifted) classrooms (Anderson 2020). Few scholars investigate the academic journeys of Black girls in enriched academic programs (Anderson 2020; Evans-Winters, 2014). #BLACKINSCHOOL extends the educational scholarship by centering the unique and nuanced voices of high-achieving Black Canadian girls. This final section focuses on Diallo’s graduation from the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. The journal entries capture the strategies Diallo and other high-achieving Black students draw on to navigate deficit thinking, hyper-surveillance, and negative stereotypes. This section offers readers a glimpse into the ways Black mothers help their high-performing children, in particular their daughters, hold firm to their Blackness amid attempts by the school system to dismiss their identities and achievements.

Concluding Thoughts

#BLACKINSCHOOL is an invaluable read for all those who wish to understand the complexities of anti-Blackness in the Canadian school system and comprehend how it is perpetuated through policy, pedagogy, and curriculum. The author offers an accessible, yet intimate account of contemporary acts of resistance led by Black Canadian girls in high school. #BLACKINSCHOOL concludes with a series of calls to action directed at Black students and education workers. The book challenges Black students to assert their voices at school, even when educators attempt to diminish their histories, realities, and futures. The author urges Black students to take a stand against institutionalized racism in their schools and communities.

Scholars, education workers, and Black families have long decried the injustices faced by Black youth in Canadian schools. Indeed, data garnered by educational institutions report that Black students are less likely to feel supported and respected by school staff (Toronto District School Board 2019; Peel District School Board 2022). #BLACKINSCHOOL adds to such scholarship by providing education workers with an insider view into the adverse impact of anti-Black racism on Black students’ academic achievement, wellbeing, and development. Diallo’s book is an impassioned call to those working in the Canadian education system. It summons edu-

cators, administrators, and policy makers to partner with Black students and their families to cultivate learning spaces where Black youth will “not be hurt, stigmatized, hindered and nullified...” (132). #BLACKINSCHOOL invites us all, irrespective of our identities, to heed the following demand: Affirm Black students culturally, spiritually, and intellectually.

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