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Dealing with Incidents of Racism in Ontario Public Schools

by Tana Turner

A Black child experiences racial harassment from classmates. He tells the teacher, who does nothing to stop the harassment. The harassment continues and gets worse. The child grows increasingly depressed and angry. He again tells the teacher, who still does nothing. The harassment escalates further, with the child being called the N-word.

The Black child responds by punching the harasser. The Black child is then suspended or even expelled for assault. The police may also be called and, depending on the child's age, he can now become involved with the criminal justice system.

Racist incidents in the public school system have a history that goes as far back as the 1830s, when Black children first started attending Ontario's public schools. Unfortunately, this type of scenario is repeated hundreds of times a year across Ontario.

While there may be many variations to this story, the general trajectory is the same. There are times when the issue is appropriately handled at the school level or by the superintendent. Sometimes a trustee has to get involved. Other times the parents must take the issue to the media or the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal to be taken seriously and receive some form of resolution.

Yet these incidents continue despite the significant pain and trauma inflicted on Black children. These incidents continue to occur without an appropriate response by schools and school boards. They continue in spite of formal school policies and campaigns against such behaviour and in spite of the law. Why? Because the school system fails to recognize this type of bullying for what it is — racial harassment — which is a form of violence. This ongoing violence points to a systemic failure to protect the safety and well-being of Black children.

Children who should be protected from racial harassment are left to deal with these incidents on their own. Teachers' lack of willingness to interrupt and address racial harassment sends the message to the harasser that they can continue their harmful behaviour. It also sends the message to the victim that they, their physical safety, and their feelings don't matter, and that these behaviours are acceptable in Ontario schools.

When Dr. Carl James and I conducted community consultations for the report *Towards Race Equity in Education*, we repeatedly heard from both parents and students about Black children's experiences of racial harassment. They reported that it was ignored by teachers who either witnessed it or were

told about it. Being called the N-word, being told they are ugly or dirty, being isolated, or enduring relentless taunts can seriously harm any child's mental health.

Left to endure this racial harassment without any support, even from their own teachers, Black children may internalize the bullying and become angry, bitter, frustrated, and lonely. These incidents trigger anxiety and mental health issues that present themselves in different ways. In the United States, there are increasing numbers of Black children who die by suicide because of the relentless bullying they experience at school. Racist bullying of Black children appears to be contributing to an increased suicide rate for Black children ages 5 to 11. These suicide rates have risen dramatically in the last 25 years. A 2018 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that while suicide rates are lower for African Americans overall, Black children between the ages of 5 and 12 are dying by suicide at double the rate of White children (Cunningham, 2018). Because race-based data on deaths are not collect, it is unclear what the situation is in Canada.

Some Black children may externalize their anger and lash out at the bully, either verbally or physically. When they do react, teachers are quick to respond and punish the Black child as the perpetrator, not the victim, of violence.

The role of parents

Black children experience anti-Black racism throughout Ontario's education system. They need the support and advocacy of their parents if they are to not simply survive the system and graduate, but graduate with the confidence and emotional health with which they entered the school system.

While there are some teachers who are quick to respond to racist bullying, not all do. Some teachers leave Black children to endure relentless harassment alone. That is why it is critically important that parents talk to their children everyday, not just about schoolwork but also about what is happening in the school. Parents need to

know as soon as any racial harassment of their children begins to take place so that they can intervene. Because Black students don't have the protections of teachers and other adults in the school, they rely on their parents to be their advocates.

The school board's responsibility

Under the Ontario *Human Rights Code*, schools have a duty to ensure that educational spaces are free from racial harassment. When they fail to meet this obligation, parents can take their issue to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal by contacting the Human Rights Legal Support Centre.

The teacher's responsibility

Teachers also have a duty of care to protect children from abuse. In addition, in Ontario, you may report a teacher to the Ontario College of Teachers if they knew about and failed to stop abuse, including racial harassment, from occurring.

According to the Professional Advisory issued to Ontario teachers – Responding to the Bullying of Students – in their position of trust, teachers must demonstrate their responsibility to ensure all their students feel respected, valued, and safe, and that their students treat others with respect, courtesy, and consideration (Ontario College of Teachers). They have a duty to report to their principal any serious incidents or behaviour for which a suspension must be considered, including bullying. Principals have an obligation to investigate all reported bullying incidents. The Professional Misconduct Regulation notes that members may have committed professional misconduct if they have failed to protect students from bullying.

Strategies for addressing racial harassment

The official route for parents to address racial harassment is to discuss the situation with the child's teacher. If the teacher does not act to stop the harassment, the next step is for the parents to contact the principal. If the harassment is still not addressed, they can go to the superintendent, Director of Education, or a trustee.

Sometimes, if the issue is serious enough, parents should not wait to follow the official route. Instead, they should contact the Director of Education or trustee immediately. Parents shouldn't wait for months to deal with individuals at each level of the organization while their child continues to be traumatized and their mental health deteriorates.

The grandson of Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, a professor of sociology at Georgetown University, recently experienced bullying at a private school in an affluent part of Washington, D.C. Dr. Dyson took to Twitter to share his experience and some tips for advocating for Black children when they face harassment and other unjust situations at school.

Dr. Dyson reminds Black people that although we may feel vulnerable while interacting with the school system, we must remember that we are also taxpayers and citizens and that our children have the same right as White children to access public education free from harassment.

Dr. Dyson offers the following strategies, which he adapted from Michelle Jean-Paul, a Ph.D. student in Canada:

1. Know your rights. As a parent, you have the right to request a meeting with your child's teacher and/or principal.
2. Communicate your concerns. Write down your thoughts prior to the meeting to help you stay clear and focused.
3. If possible, bring an advocate. This might be a family member or friend who can provide positive support but also be a second set of ears, as your emotions may be running high.
4. Demand clear next steps and a timeline. Set an expectation for the timing of a follow-up conversation.
5. Don't be afraid to move up the food chain. If you feel that you are being stonewalled, move up to the next senior person. This might be someone from the school board, the Director of Education, or a school board trustee.
6. Document. Take your own notes during conversations, ask for action items/next steps to be summarized and shared in an email, and keep track of names and titles and times of calls or meetings. This could prove useful if there is a discrepancy along the way.
7. Be relentless. Our children deserve our very best. You may not always encounter willing and open individuals on the other side of the table. Draw strength from your community in these moments.

To this, we add the following options:

Contact the police: If the bullying includes a threat of violence or physical assault, then the bullying is a criminal act and parents need to immediately contact the police, if they feel safe to do so.

Hire a lawyer: You may also need to hire a lawyer, particularly if the school is trying to punish your child for reacting to a situation they helped create by not addressing the racial harassment when it occurred. There are a number of lawyers who practice education law who can offer assistance to deal with the school board. Some community legal clinics, including the Black Legal Action Centre, may also be able to provide legal advice and assistance.

File a human rights complaint: You may also consider filing a human rights complaint through the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal. The Human Rights Legal Support Centre is available to provide information and to complete the required paperwork.

Discussion Questions

Why does racial harassment get labelled as "bullying" by schools? What impact, if any, does this have?

What impact, if any, would it have if these behaviours were labelled racial harassment and as human rights violations?

In recent years, there has been an increase in hate crimes against Black people across Canada. What can be done to address hate crimes and racial

harassment in communities and schools, at a systemic level?

Additional Resources

Additional information on how to engage with the school system to support Black children is available through a series of Information Sheets, The Engaged Parent: Navigating the School System for Black Student Success. They can be downloaded from <https://edu.yorku.ca/research/jean-augustine-chair/jean-augustine-chair-resources/>

References

Ontario College of Teachers. Responding to the Bullying of Students – Professional Advisory. Retrieved from <https://www.oct.ca/Home/Resources/Advisories/Bullying>

Cunningham, A. (2018, May 22). Black children commit suicide at twice the rate of white kids. Science News. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/black-children-commit-suicide-twice-rate-white-kids>

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For the past 17 years Tana has led her own consulting firm, Turner Consulting Group. Tana has worked with a number of organizations, including school boards, to review their employment policies and practices, conduct surveys to better understand the diversity of their workforce, and develop programs to address the identified issues.

Tana has completed several groundbreaking studies, including an assessment of the experiences of Black educators in Ontario and a report on the experiences of African Canadians with the child welfare system in Ontario. Most recently, she worked with Dr. Carl James to examine the experiences of Black students in schools in the Greater Toronto Area, summarized in the report titled *Towards Race Equity in Education*.