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Anti-Black Racism in Ontario Schools: A Historical Perspective

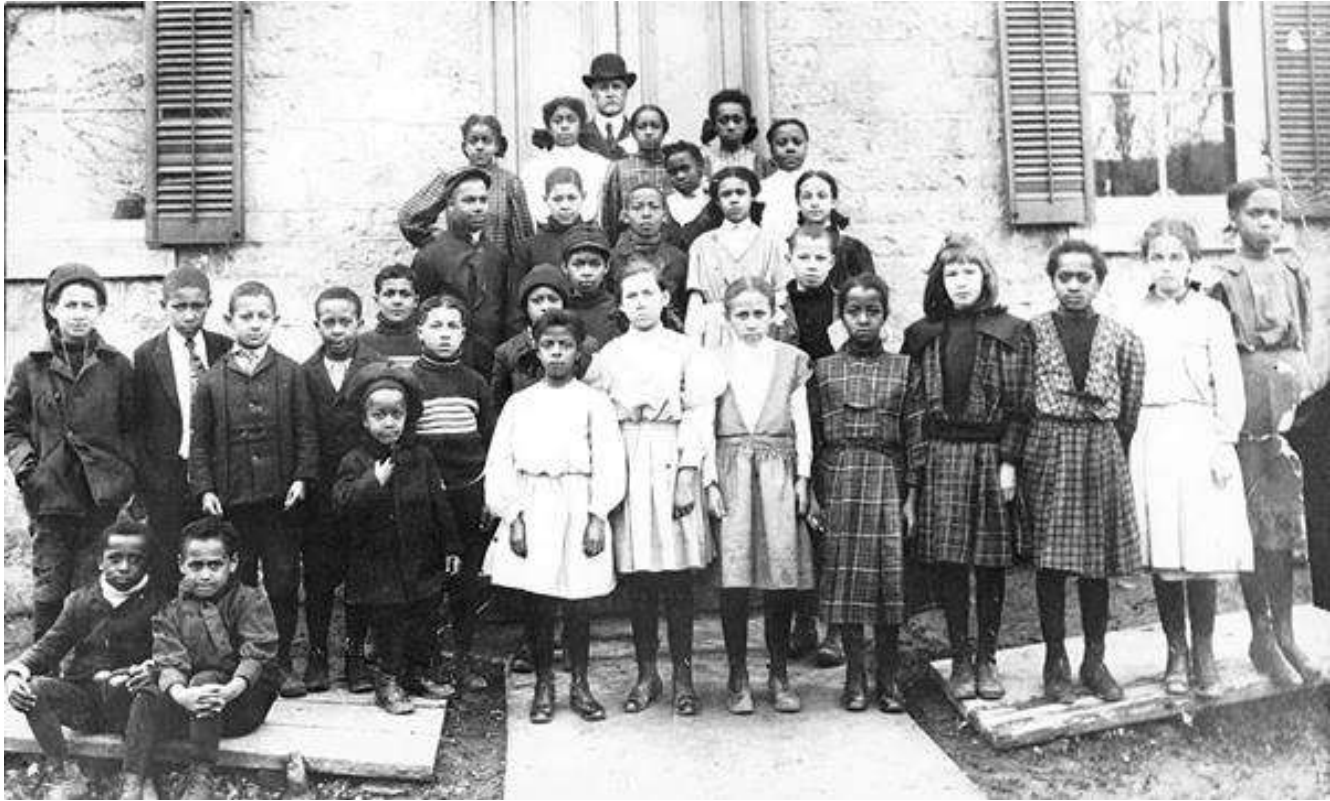
by Natasha Henry

Access to education for Black children in Ontario has historically been marred by exclusion and struggles for equal access (Hamilton, 2007). During slavery, which was legal in Canada until 1834, enslaved children were denied an education because of their status as property. During the process of the establishment of Ontario's public education system that began in the early 1840s, Black students quickly became marginalized and excluded. Black children were turned away from schools almost immediately in London and Hamilton, because many White settlers were opposed to Black children attending school with their own children (Backhouse, 2007). This was counter to the policy in the Common School Act of 1843, which maintained that it was illegal for school board officials to refuse access to education to "any class or description of persons resident within the school district to which such common school may belong" (McLaren, 2003, p. 35).

While segregated schools were against the law prior to 1850, public school officials continued to deny African Canadian students admission to publically-funded schools to appease complaining Whites who were against integration (Winks, 1997, p.373; Walker, 1999). Local school board trustees played a key role in the practice of segregating students based on race by gerrymandered school boundaries (a term often associated with the United States) to intentionally exclude Black families from school districts (Winks, 1997, p.374). Their actions represented the prevailing attitudes and beliefs that Black people were socially and intellectually inferior and, in order to preserve racial purity, should not commingle with Whites (McLaren, 2003).

In Ontario, school segregation took different forms. In instances where African Canadian children were permitted to attend a local public school, they were kept apart from the White students and forced to sit on separate benches, along with keeping their bags, coats, and lunches separate. Even when taking class pictures, some Black children were made to stand apart from their White classmates.

As the Black population grew rapidly across southwestern Ontario with the arrival of freedom seekers from the United States, the practice of excluding Black children from attending local schools became common place and widespread. Many White parents were vehemently opposed to Black children attending school with their children. The minutes of a meeting of the Coloured Ratepayers of Amherstburg in 1846 referred to White local trustees and parents



Students of King Street School in Amherstburg Ontario with their teacher, J. H. Alexander, [ca. 1890s], F 2076-16-7-4, Archives of Ontario.

expressing that "sooner than they will send to school with niggers they will cut their children's heads off and throw them into the roadside ditch" (Rice, 1846).

White people also began to lobby the government for legislation to legalize racial segregation in public schools. The superintendent of schools for Canada West, Egerton Ryerson, complied with their demands by codifying racially segregated schools in Canada West in the *Common Schools Act* of 1850. This Act added a provision to the separate schools clause, allowing for separate schools based on race and religion. The legislation allowed for Catholic and Black people to request a separate school based on need and numbers. It also allowed White school trustees to decide to form separate schools for these groups, even if they objected.

Not only were Black children not welcomed in local schools and Black residents referred to using racial epithets, school taxes were collected from Black

property-holding residents to help pay for the public schools their children could not attend (Archives of Ontario, 1843; Archives of Ontario, 1851). In some places, a rate bill (fees) was also charged for Black children to attend separate schools. Levied taxes for schooling could be one or the other, or a combination of both. Black parents could not withhold the school tax to pay for White schools, but could refuse to pay the rate bill, which supported Black schools (Hill, 1852).

Separate schools for Black children were established in numerous towns in southern Ontario with larger Black populations including Amherstburg, Windsor, Chatham, Sandwich, Harrow, Charlotteville, West Flamborough, St. Catharines, and Brantford. These schools did not receive equal funding. The school buildings were old and dilapidated. The books and supplies they received were old and in poor condition, if they received any at all (Cooper, 1994). While not all White teachers agreed with excluding Black children

from public schools, those who tried to accept Black students against the community's wishes, faced reprimand by White parents and possible job loss by school board officials.

Not only was Ontario's public education system largely segregated, so too was the teaching profession. Only a handful of Black teachers were employed in schools in Ontario. As a result, where Black students were accepted by the public schools, they were taught primarily by White teachers. Black teachers primarily taught in the segregated schools. In Toronto, while the student body of schools were integrated, no Black teachers were employed in the city's public schools until 1952 when Wilson Brooks was hired. For the most part, Black teachers throughout Ontario faced poor working conditions and lower pay than their White counterparts (Cooper, 1994).

Toronto Gets First Negro Teacher

When 34 boys and girls went back to their books at Brock Avenue School in Toronto, Canada, they found they had a new teacher—a Negro—the first of his race to be hired by the city's public schools. Wilson Brooks, a 28-year-old graduate of the University of Toronto, noted: "On the opening day, the first thing my pupils noticed about me was my color. Now they know me as a teacher and a person, and I think the first impression has disappeared. They can see that the color of a person's skin is not important." Brooks is a former Royal Canadian Air Force officer, taught school in Bermuda before returning to his native Toronto.

Jet Magazine. September 25, 1952.

Adding another layer to the mistreatment of Black children in Ontario schools, their academic abilities and intelligence were questioned by some school officials. Poor test scores of children in Kent County were attributed to their genetics and race, not to the unequal learning conditions or to the racism Black families endured in society (Tanser, 1939; Winks, 1997, p. 381).

In some parts of southwestern Ontario, Black children could not get an education at all because they could not attend their local common school and the separate school for Black children was too far away. Consequently, Black parents had to seek alternatives to educate their children. Some sent their children to mission schools established by Christian churches or enrolled them in Sunday

schools. Some who could afford to, sent their children to Black-operated private schools (Cooper, 1994; McLaren, 2004).

Newspaper editor and activist Mary Ann Shadd Cary opened a racially integrated school in Windsor in 1851. While parents had to pay for their children to attend the school, these schools also received some financial support from the American Missionary Association to help cover the costs for freedom-seeker families from the United States who could not afford to pay. The school became so well known for its high level of academic rigour and student performance that local White parents began to send their children to the school (Frost & Tucker, 2016, p.176). After relocating to Chatham, Shadd Cary also helped to establish a school there in 1856 with her sister-in-law Amelia Freeman Shadd where she also taught. Students received instruction in core subjects as well as music, writing, and art (Bristow, 1994, p.116).

For Black communities emerging out of the vestiges of enslavement, education was viewed as key to a better life. Black parents were vigilant in voicing their objection to the racism they faced in order to ensure that Black children could access public education. Unfortunately, they did not find support in the Superintendent of Education Egerton Ryerson, who did very little to address the anti-Black racism fomenting in the system under his supervision. Instead, Ryerson codified the White community's racism in law.

In pursuit of equal access to education in Ontario, Black parents have taken individual and collective measures to challenge anti-Black racism in public school system in many different ways. Black people in many communities across southwestern Ontario organized community meetings, formed committees to investigate the exclusion of Black children from public schools, and planned strategies to challenge incidents of anti-Black racism. Petitions and letters were written to school board trustees, Superintendent Ryerson, and other government officials to lobby for legislative change. Black parents argued that they were entitled to equal

treatment as British subjects and later Canadian citizens and that it was wrong for them to pay taxes to support an educational system from which their children were excluded (Knight, 1997).

Some Black parents engaged in direct action by bringing their children to White schools in an attempt to force their admission. Some parents refused to send their children to the segregated schools that were established by school boards. Black residents also brought their stories to both mainstream and Black newspapers to inform the public of what was happening and to garner support for their cause.

Black parents also took their fight to the courts, suing school trustees and school boards, in their effort to have common schools desegregated and for Black separate schools to receive equal funding. Between 1850 and 1885, at least six lawsuits were launched by Black parents. In all but one case, the practice of excluding Black children from public schools was upheld by the Superior Court of Canada West (Ontario). The court ruling in favour of only one Black family is demonstrative of how entrenched and acceptable racism in education was.

Access to quality education was of such importance that Black people in Chatham used the August 1st, 1891 annual gathering not to celebrate Emancipation Day, but to organize parents into the Kent County Civil Rights League to fight against segregated education (Shadd, 2007).

The struggles that Black Canadians faced in the education system reflected the struggles they faced in other areas of society such as employment and housing. Historical patterns of anti-Black racism and marginalization existed in colonial public education in Ontario which were supported by laws and court decisions that sought to maintain and reinforce White supremacy. The result was limited educational opportunities or no education at all for Black children in some communities, not to mention the irreparable psychological and emotional damage they endured.

The law was only changed in 1964 when the first Black MPP Leonard Braithwaite put forth a motion for the government to repeal the section of the Act that allowed for racially segregated schools (Morrison, 2015).



Leonard Braithwaite
Ontario MPP 1963 to 1975

The last segregated school in Ontario closed in 1965 in Colchester.

Discussion Questions

In what ways do the experiences of Black students in the 1800s in Ontario's education system reflect the experience of Black students today?

Commenting on legal segregation in education, historian James Walker points out:

By circumstance and public attitude, a colour line was drawn in Canada which affected the economic and social life of the blacks. The various attempts to give legal sanction to the line failed universally except in one important area: blacks were denied equal use of public schools in Nova Scotia and Ontario, and this division was recognized by the law. The most important manifestation of colour prejudice in Canadian history is in education (Walker, 1980).

Why did James Walker call denying Black students access to public schools, "the most important manifestation of colour prejudice in Canada"?

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