

Students aren't free from racism

Canada's minorities: can they fit in?

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Canadian University Press

Colour. That's what this story needs. Canada's colleges and universities are mainly white. Native Indians are not in university, nor are members of Nova Scotia's 200-year old Black community. And not many of the most recent immigrants to Canadian cities from the West Indies, the near and far east, are working their way up through the education system.

The country's grade school and high school teachers are not trained to teach the country's remarkable new multi-racial classrooms. So the students are dropping out and doing poorly in high school. They are not getting the chance at a university degree.

The federal government and several schools have set up programs to guide these disoriented students through university. But now, when native and coloured participation is at last improving, Conservative budget philosophy could mean the end for any university subsidies for disadvantaged students.

While several Montreal high schools have large black populations, these students disappear from the educational ladder before the post-secondary rung.

Daniel Kabaselle, who has taught Black Studies at LaSalle High School for seven years, is worried about what will happen to the students in his classes if and when they graduate. He says students' strong feelings about racism in the classroom become the method of their own academic destruction.

"Black students come into the class with confused ideas about Black power and racism," Kabaselle said. "They know in the back of their head that white people consider themselves superior... So the kid says 'they think I'm inferior, they're racist (before giving the teacher a chance to prove them wrong) so I'm going to do nothing.' They use that as a weapon."

"Some white teachers are racist," he said. "They look at these students as low achievers and say 'sure do your work later'... they let them drag it out and that's damaging."

A lot of students from the Caribbean start school with high expectations but their education and career goals shrink with increased awareness of racial discrimination, wrote Don Carlos Keizer for a doctoral thesis in Comparative Education at McGill.

Keizer concluded that Caribbean high school students set low career and educational goals on what they see as acceptable careers for Blacks, rather than what they would be good at.

According to Retna Ghosh, Director of Graduate Studies in McGill's Faculty of Education high school, teachers have to become more sensitive to the differences in student background and behaviour.

"Teachers are not to teach to a class that is entirely homogeneous... students are judged by one standard," said Ghosh. They (teachers) have not looked at the special differences... to be different is not to be a problem, not to be inferior." Ghosh said the teachers' ignorance of students' different culture sometimes affects academic streaming, which places students at different ability levels in the same grade. Special education teacher Philip Taylor has seen the results of improper streaming. "A class that I had last year, some of the black students were in the situation of having been streamed there because of language, behaviour or personality," said Taylor.

Ghosh teaches a graduate course on dealing with minorities in the classroom and has convinced McGill to offer an undergraduate course for the first time this year. She hopes the courses and the incorporation of multicultural themes in other education courses will train teachers to better deal with cultural differences. "There's a high correlation between streaming and race," said Ghosh. "Even guidance counsellors have tended to stream kids into vocational courses."

A Toronto study by Sanuda and Crawford found that 25 per cent of West Indian students were put in technical/vocational programs. The National Black Coalition of Canada discovered a similar situation in Montreal.

Not only do fewer black students make it to university, but fewer even graduate from high school. According to Keizer's survey, 21 per cent of Caribbean students planned to drop out of high school.

Tuesday, March 18, 1986



University students see lots of people of colour on their campuses and think those communities are well-respected. In fact, many university students who are not white are foreign students.

"The attitude of the dominant culture doesn't expect you to achieve except for one student here, one there... so when you go to university all the pressure is concentrated on one or two students. The dominant society is not helping at all; they are also afraid of competition," said Kabaselle.

University students see lots of people of colour on their campuses and think those communities are well-represented. In fact, many university students who are not white are foreign students. "I taught microbiology and biochemistry at the University of Windsor from 1959 to 1977," said Howard McCurdy (NDP - Windsor-Walkerville, Ont.), currently Canada's only black M.P. "In that time, only three Blacks passed through my department."

Problems of representation cannot be proven because neither Statistics Canada nor the universities gather data on the racial breakdown of students.

Asked about the racial makeup of students at McGill University in Montreal, registrar Jean-Paul Schuller said, "we have no basis on which to give any response. We're expressly forbidden under the Quebec charter of rights from collecting those statistics."

Schuller doesn't think people of colour have a problem with higher education. "We're all aware of a common impression that people who immigrate make great efforts to improve their condition, and I wouldn't be surprised if a well-conducted survey showed the children of immigrants did quite well (getting to CEGEP and university)."

The editors of Toronto's Currents — Readings in Race Relations seemed to have Schuller in mind when they wrote in a fall 1984 edition "We seem to be quite willing to talk about dress, diet and unfamiliar customs, but not about race. We are quite prepared to enjoy a pleasant international flavour to education, but we can't talk about hate, oppression, class, poverty, prejudice and discrimination."

Even without stats, the administration at Dalhousie University in Halifax knew in 1969 that something was wrong. An ad-hoc committee of the school, formed after pressure from Nova Scotian groups of people of colour, reported "there are very few Black or Indian Nova Scotians with a university degree."

The report noted a "high proportion of poverty among Blacks and Indians and a long history of discrimination and social injustice directed against both these people."

Black loyalists moved to Nova Scotia in 1783, and the community now numbers 34,000. They are very poor: 80 per cent of black Halifax youth are unemployed, according to a New York Times article last year.

Acknowledging a "special need for university-trained people in this segment of the population," Dalhousie started its Transition-Year Program in 1971.

Today 20 Blacks and Natives get into Dalhousie every year under the program, the most the program has ever admitted. The seven part-time staff seek out those Black and Native students they think could hack Dalhousie's curriculum after one transition year.

"We count everything — job experience, maturity, grit, and academic prerequisites," said Carolyn Waterson, director of the program and a French professor at Dalhousie.

Students of the program take Black and Native studies, Student Skills, English and Mathematics as well as orientation and counselling. The program pays tuition fees and up to 25 per cent of living expenses.

Still, four students dropped out this year because they needed more bursary support than the program (total budget \$180,000) could offer. The program turns away 40 per cent of qualified applicants because of lack of funds.

Even though transition-year students have proved more likely to stay on past first year than regular students, stone-broke Dalhousie can barely provide the dollars it does, and the program might be doomed. "I'm more apprehensive about the immediate future unless there's a breakthrough in funding here and elsewhere," Waterson said.

Native Indians across Canada have a better education funding program — but their situation is worse. While nine per cent of Canadians have college or university degrees, only one and a half per cent of Indians do.

This year the federal government will spend \$44 million on the Post-Secondary Education Assistance Programs, providing free tuition, books, and supplies to 9,000 Native students. The program also gives the students \$72 to \$182 a week living allowance, shelter and childcare plans, as well as transportation to and from home, and home for winter holidays.

The program which accepts any Indian that a college or university will enroll has grown to four times what it was in 1976.

David Wattie, who runs the program from Hull, Que., said Indians graduating are guaranteed a job. Because of new legal and commercial concerns of Indians, he said, "Bands and tribal councils are desperate for graduates."

But Wattie is not optimistic this program will survive. Last fall, a study team under deputy prime minister Erik Nielsen reviewed all federal education funding, looking for duplication and waste. The team's secret report went to Cabinet at the end of 1985.

"I've had to fight for the program," Wattie said. "I've had all sorts of comments: 'When I went to university I sat next to an Indian who didn't have to pay anything; and I had to work' and so on."

"The reality is if you don't pay for it, they won't go to college and university," Wattie said. "With the rate of social welfare and rate of unemployment (among Indians) how can a community produce resources to produce a core of university graduates?"

This year there is another program for Native students at Capilano College in North Vancouver. The program, which teaches study skills, college survival skills, Indian studies, and career planning in the computer age, has drawn in 60 Native students to the college compared to seven last year.

But students aren't free from racism once they get to the university. Two years ago at York University in Toronto, where the racial and ethnic mix is changing quickly, a Black residence student claimed she had been racially harassed. The tension over the incident "began to grow, and polarized the whole community," said Frances Henry, an anthropology professor at York. "Other complaints that there were problems with non-white students began to surface, to professors, to deans, and to the president."

In response the president set up the Committee on Race and Ethnic Relations to "suggest ways the university can support an environment of ethnic and racial tolerance."

"We (the committee) surveyed the country as to what they have done. Not only are there no policies anywhere, no one has even examined the question," Henry said. The committee will report in February.

The University of Toronto has backed away from expanding its Task Force on Minority Group Issues in the faculty of Medicine to encompass the whole campus. The provost's office said: "It is unclear whether this is a problem in other faculties."

Chan Shah, a professor in the university's department of preventive medicine and biostatistics, is angry the school won't examine racism at U of T overall. "There are no minorities in the university hierarchy," Shah said. "No deans, associate deans, no heads of departments. Minority groups are conspicuously absent."

Stephen Bonterre, a black certified management accountant student at the University of Ottawa, said racism is very subtle there. "I've experienced certain hostilities in the cafeteria and in the bookstore, like with the cashier sort of dropping the change into your hand instead of handing it to you."

"The whole town is a pretty white town and the school is a pretty white school," Bonterre said. "The Blacks tend to sit in a certain place in the cafeteria. There are certain social cliques and the Blacks don't seem to be fully integrated."

Kamal Dib, a graduate economics student, said he hasn't seen any racial discrimination by professors. "Even if a prof would show it (that they were racist) they would never give you a bad mark," he said.

Equality Now!, the report of the parliamentary committee on equality rights, recommended that schools establish chairs of study to make other races feel welcome. "The committee found the chair of study to be a good model for encouraging cultural retention and supports the establishment of a Chair of South East Asian studies in western Canada and a Chair of Black studies in eastern Canada."

Blacks and Arabs at U of O interviewed for this article, said the real discrimination is on the outside, in the job market. "A bilingual black student who is a friend of mine got an MA in economics and went for an MBA," Kamal Dib, an economics graduate student, said. "He said he needed to show the employer that he was more qualified than the average white to convince the employer to hire him."

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