Closing the Achievement Gap Via Reducing the Opportunity Gap

YAAACE's Social Inclusion Framework Within the Jane and Finch Community

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Abstract

This chapter uses comparative spatial analysis and Critical Race Theory to outline an overview of systemic and institutional barriers impeding academic achievement of racialized students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living in under-resourced racialized communities in Toronto, Canada. *Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education* (YAAACE), a nonprofit community organization in the Jane and Finch neighborhood, is examined as a case study in closing the achievement gap in the community by investing in minimizing the inequality of opportunity impacting young children, youth, and

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families in the area. The collaborative synergic model of YAAACE from a Social Inclusion Strategy framework that takes into consideration participants' identities and developmental needs and the community's spatial dynamics and demographics exemplifies an effective approach to mitigating systemic and structural barriers impeding academic achievement of racialized students for upward social mobility. YAAACE's unique model for teaching and learning and offering holistic services can be used as a tool and a spark for further discussion in how we can use alternative approaches to close the achievement gap and expand the limited hegemonic definition of success that is normalized and perpetuated in schools focusing exclusively on academics which marginalizes and oppresses racialized identities and their needs.

Introduction

This chapter outlines alternative non-hegemonic methods and approaches to closing the achievement gap for racialized students living in under-resourced racialized communities such as the Jane and Finch community in Toronto, Canada, by shifting the discussion toward minimizing the opportunity gap. The works of *Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education* (YAAACE), a nonprofit organization in the Jane and Finch neighborhood, are examined as a case study to demonstrate the effectiveness of closing the achievement gap by creating more accessibility to opportunities for the members of the community. The collaborative synergic model of YAAACE as an organization from a Social Inclusion Strategy framework, which takes into consideration participants' identities and developmental needs and the community's spatial dynamics and demographics, exemplifies an effective approach to mitigate systemic and structural barriers impeding academic achievement of racialized students in the community (YAAACE 2018). YAAACE's model for teaching and learning and offering holistic services can be used as a tool to close the achievement gap and expand the limited hegemonic definition of success (People for Education 2018) that is normalized and perpetuated in schools today which often marginalizes and oppresses racialized identities, cultures, and practices.

Methodology and Conceptual Framework: Comparative Spatial Analysis and CRT

This chapter uses comparative spatial analysis and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to identify currently existing systemic institutional barriers for residents of the Jane and Finch community particularly as it applies to inequality of opportunity for racialized

young children, youth, and families and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. From a spatial analysis, the demographics and sociocultural living conditions of the Jane and Finch neighborhood are examined and compared to other neighborhoods to gain an in-depth understanding of how the social conditions within the community impact accessibility to opportunities and social services for the residents. The spatial analysis is supplemented and guided by CRT as a theoretical framework. I use Knoester and Au's (2017) definition of CRT which is outlined as:

> [A] conceptual framework useful in understanding how racism operates, including within institutions such as schools, by paying careful attention to the differential resources and opportunities available to students of different races, as opposed to the more common form of racial theorizing, focusing on individual acts of hatred or racism. (p. 4)

Hence, CRT from an ecological place-based framework provides the means to piece together lived experiences of racialized identities living in Jane and Finch to identify systemic barriers that impede the progress of the residents for upward social mobility by limiting their accessibility to opportunities for progress and betterment of their living conditions and circumstances. From a CRT perspective, one has to inquire about how racism operates as collective processes embedded within the DNA and social fabric of our institutions, represented within the dominant discourse as neutral policies and practices that proclaim equality of opportunity for all (Eizadirad and Portelli 2018; Giroux 2003; Kearns 2008).

Knoester and Au (2017) deconstruct how to identify subtle racism within educational institutions by explaining,

> [A] key tenet of Critical Race Theory is that such inequality is regularly obscured under the guise of race-less or race-neutral laws and policies and is instead framed around individual equality as expressed through concepts such as meritocracy – that success is purely the result of individual hard work and not the function of social, historical, or institutional processes. Thus, within a Critical Race framework, it becomes important to consider issues surrounding segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation of schools as part of a larger conversation about white material advantage and the material disadvantage of communities of color, often under the guise of non-race specific and sometimes rhetorically anti-racist policies. (p. 4)

The notion of "meritocracy" and its individualistic judgmental lens contributes to advancing a deficit model within education where students' characteristics and family dynamics are exclusively blamed for their failures and shortcomings (Masood 2008). This simplistic interpretation takes away from a more holistic systemic analysis where root causes of problems can be situated within the conditions created and perpetuated by inequitable institutional policies and practices. Hence, from an ecological equity perspective, one has to constantly inquire about how power is enacted from the macro institutional level and dispersed at the micro level across different spatial geographies impacting distribution of opportunities, resources, and access to social services.

Race(ing) to the Top: Educational Achievements of Racialized Students and Inequitable Accessibility to Opportunities

Canada is a country with a population of approximately 37,067,011 as of April 2018 (Gatehouse 2018, Para. 2) and consists of 10 provinces and 3 territories. Ontario is Canada's largest province, and it "represents approximately one-third of the nation's population" (Pinto 2016, p. 96). In Canada, there is no federal department of education. Instead, each province and territory has its own exclusive legal jurisdiction over educational policies and practices (Volante 2007). Educational policies for governance are established at the provincial level and communicated to local school boards. Local school boards and individual schools have the authority and flexibility to implement Ministry of Education-approved policies and practices using various approaches to achieve the intended outcome-based results. This multifaceted approach to governance of education in Canada provides provinces, territories, and school districts with the power to be flexible in using different approaches and strategies to address local needs of students within their unique spatial geographies relative to the needs of the larger surrounding community.

"Closing the achievement gap" as an outcome has become a popular buzz word used among educational policymakers and politicians to discuss inequities impacting various social groups in society, yet what is often silenced or not talked about are the disparities in the opportunity gap which as a process leads to the achievement gap as an outcome. Examining the state of Ontario schools in the early 1990s, Curtis et al. (1992) point out that, "Working-class kids always have, on average, lower reading sores, higher grade failures, higher drop-out rates and much poorer employment opportunities" (p. 7). This trend continues to exist today largely due to inequality of opportunity. From an intersectional perspective, being racialized and working class further exasperates the likelihood of underachieving. Race is a significant factor that impacts one's access to opportunities (Block and Galabuzi 2011), particularly when systemic discrimination is embedded within the fabric of institutional policies and practices. Within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), "schools with high dropout rates are those with the highest number of racialized students" (Colour of Poverty 2019, p. 4). According to Brown (2009), in the TDSB which is the largest and one of the most diverse school boards in Canada with 583 schools and serving more than 246,000 students, "students of African ascendance experience a 38% dropout rate and students from Central and South America had a 37% dropout rate" (p. 4).

Student achievements across various social groups are often judged and compared via standardized test results. Although theoretically standardized tests are intended to help identify inequities in the education system and areas for improvement at the individual level as well as broader areas in school and school board district levels (Volante 2007), in practice it has not led to closing the achievement gap along the lines of race and socioeconomic status over the years since its inception in Ontario (Dei 2008; Hori 2013; James 2012). Similarly, examining the historical impact of standardized testing in the United States over time, Au (2010) explains,

> The historical roots of high-stakes, standardised testing in racism, nativism, and eugenics raises a critical question: why is it that, now over 100 years after the first standardised tests were administered in the United States, we have virtually the same test-based achievement gaps along the lines of race and economic class? (p. 12)

Although the context is different to a certain degree between how standardized tests are used in Canada in comparison with the United States (EQAO 2015), the outcome of racialized students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds doing more poorly relative to their white counterparts within the education system remains a persistent pattern in both countries.

Nezavdal (2003) critiques standardized testing as ineffective arguing that standardized assessments are "a social construct" (p. 69). He goes on to explain, "these norms are not incidentally held but deliberately upheld to stream students to propel some forward while systematically impeding others" (p. 67). The use of standardized test policies as a normalized accountability tool in schools at all levels has "not improved reading and math achievement across states and have not significantly narrowed national and state level achievement gaps between white students and non-whites students or gaps between rich and poor students" (Au 2010, p. 11).

Similarly, Hori (2013) argues standardized tests have not assisted in closing the achievement gap in Toronto and it has instead contributed to intensifying and widening the achievement gap by systemically closing accessibility to certain opportunities for racialized students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In his report controversially titled *vi-o-lence = The Toronto District School Board*, Hori (2013) argues "the Toronto District School Board commits structural violence against its most marginalized students" (p. 1). Hori (2013) defines structural violence as "unequal distribution of power" which leads to uneven distribution of resources and consequentially in the long term to "unequal life chances" (p. 6) in terms of upward social mobility.

Using the Fraser Institute ranking of schools, which is a score out of 10 based on individual school's performances on annual standardized tests, Hori maps on a graph TDSB's 73 secondary high schools' ranking averages calculated over a 5-year period from 2007 to 2011. It is significant to note that the Fraser Institute annual school rankings have gained so much currency within the public sphere that they largely impact the property values within various communities, driving the prices up or down relative to the school rankings (Fraser Institute 2018). The overall rating of schools is calculated by taking into account the following factors: average level achieved by students on the Grade 9 academic and applied mathematics tests administered by Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), the percentage of eligible Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) writers who successfully complete the test on their first attempt or on a subsequent attempt administered by EQAO, and the percentage of tests below provincial standards which refers to overall percentage of students who wrote EQAO administered tests, whether the math test in Grade 9 or the Grade 10 OSSLT test, who were below the Level 3 provincial standard of performance. Hori (2013) concludes,

> Toronto has a very visible socio-economic divide between its residents. As a matter of fact, most of the schools which had ratings above 6 were located in affluent neighborhoods. On the other hand, the worst schools were located in the low-income areas. Toronto is generally presented as one city; however, the truth of the matter is that there are 3 different cities within Toronto. David Hulchanski's 3 cities report captures the divisions and segregations which define the city of Toronto. (p. 18)

Hori (2013) is referring to a study conducted by David Hulchanski (2007) titled *The Three Cities within Toronto* which provides the means to contextualize development of different neighborhoods across the city spatially relative to important factors such as level of income, race, and socioeconomic status. The study provides a comprehensive examination of income polarization among Toronto's neighborhoods from 1970 to 2005 taking into consideration neighborhood demographics. Findings indicate the emergence of three distinct cities within Toronto based on income change. "City #1" makes up 20% of the city and is generally found in the downtown core of the city in close proximity to the city's subway lines. The neighborhoods under "City #1" are identified as predominantly high-income areas where the average individual income has increased by 20% or more relative to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area average in 1970. "City #2" makes up 40% of the city and is characterized by middle-income neighborhoods. Individual incomes in "City #2" have fairly remained the same having undergone an increase or decrease of less than 20%. "City #3" makes up 40% of the city, and the individual incomes in these areas have undergone a decrease of 20% or more. Other than income, there are other major differences between "City #1" and "City #3" particularly in terms of number of immigrants and visible minorities living in the areas. Eight-two percent of "City #1" is white compared to 34% of residents in "City #3." As well, percentage of foreign-born people in "City #1" declined from 35% to 28% between 1971 and 2006, whereas in "City #3," the number of immigrants increased dramatically from 31% in 1971 to 61% in 2006 (p. 11). Hulchanski's (2007) data demonstrates drastic differences in long-term neighborhood trends in Toronto and more importantly deconstructs the fallacy that neighborhoods simply evolve "naturally." Long-term trends from the study, supported with data, demonstrate investments and resources are distributed inequitably throughout neighborhoods in City of Toronto. Neighborhoods composed of majority of white residents are privileged at the expense of neglecting neighborhoods composed of majority of working-class racialized immigrants.

Hori (2013) uses Hulchanski's (2007) report as a foundational framework to explore whether the same argument about inequitable spatial developments across neighborhoods can be applied to quality of education received by students attending different schools in various neighborhoods in the City of Toronto. Hori (2013) conducts a comparative spatial analysis where he maps the overall rating of secondary schools as ranked by the Fraser Institute and looks for spatial patterns relative to whether the schools are labelled as low or high achieving. In order to provide some context, it is important to note that in 2005, the City of Toronto identified 13 "Priority Neighborhoods" to receive extra attention for the purpose of neighborhood

improvements in various capacities. In March 2014, the city expanded the program to 31 neighborhoods and renamed them from "Priority Neighborhoods" to "Neighborhood Improvement Areas" (City of Toronto 2018). Given that Hori's study was conducted in 2013, he makes reference to "Priority Neighborhoods" as part of his findings.

After mapping the overall ranking of schools across various neighborhoods and searching for spatial patterns, Hori (2013) concludes "the most vulnerable individuals in Toronto (the socioeconomically and ethnically marginalized youth who live in the 13 priority neighborhoods) attend the worst high schools in Toronto" (p. 1). It is important to contextualize what Hori (2013) means by using the phrase "worst"; he is referring to schools based on how they perform on standardized tests, a statistic that has high currency value in the public's eye as often schools are judged based on their overall EQAO test scores. He supports this claim by pointing out that underperforming schools with the lowest rankings are predominantly located in "Priority Neighborhoods" which spatially are located in Hulchanski's City #3 where the demographics of the neighborhood is predominantly made up of immigrants and racialized and visible minorities whose individual incomes have undergone a decrease of 20% or more. On the other hand, schools that had an overall school ranking of 6 or higher by the Fraser Institute were located in affluent high-income neighborhoods which spatially are located in Hulchanski's City #1 where demographics of the neighborhoods is 82% white and whose average individual incomes increased by 20% or more relative to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area average in 1970. Hori (2013) concludes "TDSB provides a low quality of education to its most disadvantaged students, while providing a higher quality of education to its most privileged students" (p. 28) further reproducing social class disparities. Hori (2013) identifies this disparity in quality of education received by students from different socioeconomic classes as a form of systemic structural violence as "education serves as a tool to oppress the most vulnerable individuals, and it serves as a tool to maintain, reproduce, and engender socioeconomic disparities" (p. 29). This process is labelled as "structurally violent" at a systemic level because "it denies students upward social mobility and therefore socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded students get streamed towards less desired labour jobs" (p. 37). Hori (2013) and Hulchanski's (2007) findings collectively provide a holistic picture of the disparities and inequities that exist across neighborhoods in the City of Toronto and how racialized identities and communities are marginalized with respect to access to quality education, opportunities, and social services, while neighborhoods occupied by predominantly white bodies and those from higher socioeconomic status are privileged.

Williams et al. (2013) similarly conducted a spatial analysis collecting and compiling data from multiple sources including the Department of Justice Canada, Toronto Census Tract, TDSB Learning Opportunities Index, and the Fraser Institute. The authors aggregated all data collected by postal code and found major disparities between neighborhoods located in City #1 and City #3 (Hulchanski 2007). For example, a comparison of the Jane and Finch neighborhood, with postal code starting with M3N located spatially in City #3 and being one of the identified

Priority Neighbourhood: Jane-Finch	
Incarceration Costs (2008)	$36,856,603 (Postal Code M3N)
Police Expenditures (2011)	$30,576,947 (31 Division)
Data for Census Tract 0312.04 (2005)	Percentage of families with one parent: 39% (+22%)
	Total population 15 years and over with no certificate, diploma or degree: 47% (+27%)
	Unemployment: 12.1% (+5.4%)
	Median income (All private households): $37,056 (-$27,072)
TDSB Learning Opportunities Index School Rankings (2011)	Westview Centennial Secondary School (1/109) Brookview Middle School (15/479) Shoreham Public School (3/479) Driftwood Public School (9/479)
Fraser Report Rankings (Secondary Schools 2011-12)	Westview Centennial Secondary School (696/725)

Fig. 1 Jane and Finch neighborhood (Williams et al. 2013)

"Priority Neighborhoods," to the Rosedale neighborhood with postal code starting with M4T located spatially in City #1 and being an affluent neighborhood showed major disparities in neighborhood incarceration costs, police expenditures, percentage of families with one parent, total population 15 years and over with no certificate, diploma or degree, unemployment rate, median income, TDSB Learning Opportunities Index school rankings, and Fraser Institute school rankings (see Figs. 1 and 2 for specific numerical and statistical differences).

Overall, findings by Hulchanski (2007), Hori (2013), and Williams et al. (2013) using comparative spatial analysis indicate a trend over time that all neighborhoods are not treated equally at a systemic level; white identities and spaces are privileged at the expense of marginalization and oppression to racialized identities and communities (Eizadirad 2017).

Polanyi et al. (2017) provide more recent statistics about how the aforementioned disparities across race, class, and socioeconomic status continue to persist relative to child poverty rates across different neighborhoods in Toronto. They point out,

> Between 2010 and 2015, low-income rates among children have decreased significantly in many downtown and southern Etobicoke neighborhoods, while low-income rates have remained the same or increased in a number of Scarborough and other inner-suburb neighborhoods. (p. 19)

Polanyi et al.'s (2017) outline how racialized neighborhoods continue to be marginalized and oppressed through institutional systemic discrimination which consequentially impacts children's learning and achievement levels in schools starting from a young age. Similar statistics emphasizing disparities between

Affluent Neighbourhood: Rosedale	
Incarceration Costs (2008)	$0 (Postal Code M4T)
Police Expenditures (2011)	$20,965,401 (53 Division)
Data for Census Tract 0344.02 (2005)	Percentage of families with one parent: 11% (-6%)
	Total population 15 years and over with no certificate, diploma or degree: 7% (-13%)
	Unemployment: 5.5% (-1.2%)
	Median income (All private households): $179,935 (+115,807)
TDSB Learning Opportunities Index School Rankings (2011)	Northern Secondary School (104/109) North Toronto Collegiate Institute (105/109) Whitney Junior Public School (479/479)
Fraser Report Rankings (Secondary Schools 2011-12)	North Toronto Collegiate Institute (14/725)

Fig. 2 Rosedale neighborhood (Williams et al. 2013)

racialized and non-racialized neighborhoods were outlined more than a decade ago by the Colour of Justice Network in 2007 stating, "racialized communities experience ongoing, disproportionate levels of poverty" supported by the fact that "between 1980 and 2000, while the poverty rate for the non-racialized European heritage population in Toronto decreased by 28 percent, the poverty among racialized families rose by 361 percent" (Colour of Justice Network, 2007, p. 1). This is troubling given that "more than half of Toronto's population identify as racialized (51.5%)" (Polanyi et al. 2017, p. 1), and as Block and Galabuzi (2011) in their report titled *Canada's Colour Coded Labour Market: The Gap for Racialized Workers* point out, "Racialized Canadians earn only 81.4 cents for every dollar paid to non-racialized Canadians" (p. 11). These disparities at the systemic level along the lines of race, class, and socioeconomic have real-life implications and consequences particularly for those living in under-resourced racialized communities. As the Racial Justice Report Card for Ontario (2014) states, "Statistics show that racialized children, and in particular First Nations and African Canadian children, are significantly over-represented in CAS [Children's Aid Society] care and federal and provincial correctional institutions" (p. 3). As well, "Racialized and immigrant workers tend to be overrepresented in precarious, temporary types of employment and thus are more likely to lack dental insurance coverage" (p. 8).

Disadvantages constructed systemically by institutional policies and practices which create the social conditions and processes that perpetuate inequality of opportunity have real-life implications and consequences on the lives of racialized students and their families both in school and outside of school within their community (Eizadirad 2016). The "structural violence" (Hori 2013, p. 4) enacted within

schools through the use of standardized tests and its domino effect of streaming students into nonacademic fields has contributed to:

> The over-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded youths in the prison, the over-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded youth in non-academic, special education, skill-oriented and essential curriculums in Secondary schools, and the under-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded students in gifted and academic curriculums in Secondary schools. (Hori 2013, p. 42)

Brief History of Jane and Finch

Within this section, I will provide a brief historical perspective of the Jane and Finch neighborhood and its developments. Jane and Finch is a neighborhood located in the former city of North York in northwestern Toronto, Ontario, Canada. It is centered around the intersection of two arterial roads: Jane Street and Finch Avenue. The area is roughly bounded by Highway 400 to the west, Driftwood Avenue to the east, Grandravine Drive to the south, and Shoreham Drive to the north (Leon 2010; Narain 2012). Starting in 2005, the City of Toronto identified 13 "Priority Neighborhoods" to receive extra attention for the purpose of neighborhood improvement in various capacities. In March 2014, the City of Toronto expanded the program to include 31 identified neighborhoods and renamed the program from "Priority Neighborhoods" to "Neighborhood Improvement Areas" (City of Toronto 2016). According to the City of Toronto (2016) website, the 31 neighborhoods were selected through the Toronto Strong Neighborhoods Strategy 2020 which identified areas falling below the Neighborhood Equity Score and hence requiring special attention. Since inception of these neighborhood improvement initiatives, Jane and Finch has always been one of the neighborhoods identified as requiring special attention whether as a "Priority Neighborhood" or a "Neighborhood Improvement Area" (City of Toronto 2016).

According to the City of Toronto "Jane-Finch: Priority Area Profile" (2008), the neighborhood has "an approximate population of 80,150 living within an area span of 21 kilometre squared with an average population density of 3,817 persons per kilometre squared." The neighborhood is characterized by unemployment, single parent families, and high percentage of visible minorities, which makes Jane and Finch a constant target of negative media depictions. Within dominant narratives in the media, the social problems of the neighborhood are often blamed on its residents without much attention being given to the systematic and structural conditions, which have influenced the neighborhood's trajectory of development leading up to its current conditions (Eizadirad 2017).

Jane and Finch underwent massive development by the Ontario Housing Commission in the 1960s to keep up with rapid rates of newcomers entering Canada (Narain 2012). Jane and Finch represented an ideal choice for many new immigrants due to low rent costs and relatively close proximity to the downtown core of the city. At the time, immigrants that were moving into the Jane and Finch area were

predominantly from West Indies, Asia, Africa, South America, and the Indian subcontinent (Richardson 2008, p. 3). High-rise apartments and townhouses were built at a rapid rate. This linear style of hollow urban planning, without much thought to the internal infrastructure of the neighborhood, leads to the population of Jane and Finch expanding from 1301 in 1961 to 33,030 in 1971 which included establishment of 21 high-rise apartment buildings in the neighborhood. Jane and Finch continued its exponential growth in the 1970s and 1980s, with the majority of its residents working-class immigrants and visible minorities (Narain 2012).

In 2018, there were two incidents where government representatives in positions of authority made controversial comments about the Jane and Finch neighborhood which contributed to perpetuation of a stereotypical negative image about the community within the public discourse. The first incident involved Michael Tibollo, the Community Safety and Corrections Minister heading Ontario's anti-racism directorate who is also a lawyer and new Member of the Provincial Parliament for Vaughan-Woodbridge. In July 2018, in response to a question in the legislature, he stated,

> I want to reassure everyone that the focus of this government is to ensure that safety is paramount in all communities. Personally, I went out to Jane and Finch, put on a bulletproof vest and spent 7 o'clock to 1 o'clock in the morning visiting sites that had previously had bullet-ridden people killed in the middle of the night. (Ferguson and Benzie 2018. Para. 3)

By inferring that he needed to wear a bulletproof vest simply to take a tour of the Jane and Finch neighborhood, it perpetuates the ideology that Jane and Finch is so dangerous that it is not safe to enter its boundaries without thinking about the potentiality for violence and death.

Similarly a month later in August 2018, Giorgio Mammoliti who was the City Councillor representative for Ward 7 York West which included the Jane and Finch neighborhood referred to some of the residents in the neighborhood as "cockroaches." As part of his reelection campaign when asked about his plan and approach to deal with criminals living in social housing buildings in communities like Jane and Finch, Mammoliti responded by stating, "I see it like spraying down a building full of cockroaches," referring to his preferred option of evicting tenants who are involved in crime (Rieti 2018, Para. 4). He further stated, "Scatter them. Evict them. Get them out of Jane and Finch completely" (Rieti 2018, Para 5). Mammoliti expanded on his comments by explaining that he advocates for a plan to completely knock down the area's social housing buildings and replace them with mixed housing similar to what has occurred in the Regent Park community located in the downtown core area of Toronto. The Regent Park neighborhood revitalization project, although not complete yet, has led to the displacement of many residents who lived in the neighborhood and gentrification of the community space where those from higher socioeconomic status and income gain access to the new developed space and its increased property values.

Comments made by Michael Tibollo and Giorgio Mammoliti supplement and exasperate already existing negative media depictions about the Jane and Finch

neighborhood and its residents. These simplistic negative representations and over-generalizations about issues that impact the Jane and Finch neighborhood infer that residents of the neighborhood are to be blamed for the social problems of the area without any discussion about institutional failure and inequitable practices that create the social conditions that gravitate youth and young adults toward a lifestyle affiliated with guns, gangs, and crime (Eizadirad 2017).

T(Race)ing and Mapping Institutional Anti-black Racism: Racialized Children and Neighborhoods as Expendable

Racial tensions were high in Toronto, Ontario, and it reached its tipping point in May 1992 following two incidents: the shooting and killing of a 22-year-old black man named Raymond Lawrence by a white police officer who was wearing plain clothes in the streets of Toronto and the acquittal of four white police officers caught on video brutally beating black driver Rodney King in the streets of Los Angeles (Paradkar 2017). On May 4, 1992, people took to the streets to protest and resist the systemic discrimination racialized bodies were experiencing living in Ontario and to show solidarity with the people in Los Angeles who were experiencing similar issues in a different context where the systemic discrimination was more explicit and magnified. The protests in Toronto occurred along Yonge Street and escalated and became violent involving "looting, fires, smashing of windows, and pelting of police" leading to "30 people arrested and 37 police officers injured" (Paradkar 2017, para. 4).

Immediately after the incident, the Premier at the time, Bob Rae, assigned Stephen Lewis as his Advisor on Race Relations and delegated him to consult local communities and produce a report shortly with recommendations to work toward solutions. The following month on June 9, 1992, Stephen Lewis produced his report titled *Report of the Advisor on Race Relations to the Premier of Ontario, Bob Rae*. Lewis (1992) outlines that in the span of 1 month, he held "seventy meetings with individuals and groups in Metro Toronto, Ottawa, Windsor and beyond, supplemented by innumerable phone conversations" (p. 1). As one of his key observations, Lewis (1992) states,

> First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of "multiculturalism" cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target. (p. 2)

Lewis is describing how systemic discrimination, specifically anti-black racism, within institutions trickles down to impact the daily lives of racialized bodies and communities leading to inequality of outcome in various settings including the education system. The various examples mentioned in the report demonstrate that race plays a key role in accessing opportunities.

Fast forward to 2008 and similar findings were expressed by Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling (2008) in their report titled *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*. Youth and gun violence were a hot topic in Toronto following the death of 15-year-old grade nine student Jordan Manners on May 23, 2007 at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute, a public high school located within the boundaries of the Jane and Finch neighborhood (Eizadirad 2016; James 2012). Manners died in the school hallway as a result of a gunshot wound to the chest. This incident was the first of its kind in the City of Toronto where a student had died within a school.

In the aftermath of Jordan Manner's death, the Premier at the time, Dalton McGuinty, approached Honorable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling to "spend a year seeking to find out where it (youth violence) is coming from- its roots- and what might be done to address them to make Ontario safer in the long term" (p. 1). This led to the 2008 publication of *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*. The report identifies numerous immediate risk factors that "create that state of desperation and put a youth in the immediate path of violence" (p. 5). The report goes on to further outline "the roots" of youth violence, referring to "the major conditions in which the immediate risk factors grow and flourish" (p. 6). These include poverty, racism, poor community planning and design, issues in the education system, family issues, health issues, lack of youth voice, lack of economic opportunity for youth, and issues in the justice system. As Eizadirad (2016) states, "Review of the Roots of Youth Violence report dares to speak the truth by naming race and racism and putting a face to it in terms of institutional practices" (p. 178). The report predominantly names racism and poverty as major systemic barriers contributing to youth gravitating toward violence; "Alienation, lack of hope or empathy, and other immediate risk factors are powerfully, but far from exclusively, driven by the intersection of racism and poverty." (p. 19).

Importantly, Dei (2000) deconstructs what racism is and how it works by emphasizing, "Racism is more than an ideology and structure. It is a process" (p. 36). *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* reiterates this definition of racism and guides the discussion toward examining the consequences arising from consistent exposure to racism:

> But while race is not something that can create the immediate risk factors for violence involving youth, racism is. Racism strikes at the core of self-identity, eats away the heart and casts a shadow on the soul. It is cruel and hurtful and alienating. It makes real all doubts about getting a fair chance in this society. It is a serious obstacle imposed for a reason the victim has no control over and can do nothing about. (p. 9)

The report also emphasizes that the most harmful impacts are experienced within neighborhoods plagued with poverty, making the connection that "when poverty is

racialized, and then ghettoized and associated with violence, the potential for the stigmatization of specific groups is high" (p. 4). As 2018 wraps up, 10 years later after the publication of *The Review of the Roots of Violence* report, the state of violence in the City of Toronto has intensified to record numbers. As of December 27, 2018, Toronto has set a new all-time homicide rate record with 96 victims; 46 of the victims killed were under the age of 30, 10 were minors, 75 men and boys, and 21 women and girls. The majority of the victims are racialized visible minorities (Canadian Press 2018, Para. 5).

From this vantage point, we can begin to understand how unequal power relations and practices are perpetuated through racialization of specific social groups and neighborhoods leading to inequality of opportunity. Connecting this to the achievement gap argument, these statistics contextualize how unequitable living circumstances and distribution of resources and social services across spatial geographies make it unrealistic to expect all children to achieve at the same level, as they do not all have access to the same privileges given their unique identities and the neighborhood they live in. As Ng (2003) puts it,

> The frequently used and well-meaning phrase, 'I treat everyone the same,' often used by teachers and administrators to indicate their lack of bias in a diverse educational setting, in fact *masks* unequal power relations. Similarly, educational policies that assume that people are the same or equal may serve to entrench existing inequality precisely because people enter into the educational process with different and unequal experiences. These attempts, well meaning though they may be, tend to render inequality invisible, and thus work against equity in education. (p. 214)

Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education; Using a Social Inclusion Strategy Framework to Close the Achievement Gap Via Reducing the Opportunity Gap

In 2007, being fed up with the violence plaguing the community and the constant negative media exposure affiliating Jane and Finch with guns, gangs, and crime, Devon Jones an elementary school teacher within the Jane and Finch neighborhood decided to create a nonprofit organization to mitigate the inequality of opportunity that was consuming many of his students toward a life of crime leading them to being incarcerated or dying. Jordan Manners and Kwasi Peters were his students who were killed at a young age due to gun violence among many others where he attended their funerals and was heartbroken by them dying at such a young age (Williams et al. 2013).

Being an elementary school teacher in the Jane and Finch community, Jones recognized that children are largely influenced by their surrounding environments from a young age in terms of their identity development and decision-making. When he was planning the design of a logo for his organization which would be called Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE), the color of the logo was chosen as purple with intentionality (see Image 1) as a

Image 1 YAAACE logo
(YAAACE 2018)

means to mitigate the turf war that was making children choose sides from an early age, with the Crips dominating the housing projects in Finch's south side and the Bloods dominating the housing projects on the Finch's north side (Friesen 2018, Para. 5). Friesen (2018) further expands, "It's a segregation expressed mainly through clothing, blue for Crips and red for Bloods, and it has existed for a decade. Nor is it limited to serious criminals, but extends all the way to 13-year-old wannabes" (Para. 6). Jones selected the color purple both for its neutrality and its symbolism for togetherness as when the colors red and blue are mix, you get purple. It was intended to bring youth from both sides of the community into a neutral space where they can learn and grow together without worrying about turf confrontations. Selecting and hiring respected leaders from the community as staff, the programs offered through YAAACE intended to break the ideological concept that one had to choose between either the Bloods or the Crips; the children and youth needed hope and faith that there could be a better alternative.

In terms of programming and services offered, Devon Jones merged school and community to one socioculturally relevant and responsive enterprise that offers holistic services focusing on increasing accessibility to opportunities for members of the Jane and Finch community. What makes YAAACE stand out and be unique from other programs available within the neighborhood or across the City of Toronto is its synergic collaboration with external organizations and agencies at the local community level involving practitioners from other sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socioculturally relevant and holistic services relative to the needs of the community members and program participants. The objective of YAAACE is to help marginalized, racialized, and poor children and youth from under resourced communities through "year round comprehensive programming and activities" (YAAACE 2018, para. 1). YAAACE strives to close the achievement gap by focusing on minimizing the opportunity gap through its Social Inclusion Strategy. According to YAAACE (2018),

> YAAACE's social inclusion strategy is a socio-mechanism co-constructed by frontline workers, educators, researchers, academics, law enforcement personnel and stakeholders

with a vested interest in children, youth and community. The objective of the social inclusion strategy is to nurture and incubate the vast potential of children and youth becoming twenty first century learners and global citizens. The program design pivots on the provision of comprehensive year round programming (academics, athletics, recreation, technology and the arts). The operational framework is as follows: outreach and wraparound; arts, athletics and expanded opportunities; academic intervention and support (the Weekend Academy and Summer Institute); research and curriculum development (specifically, the creation of a curriculum that targets reflective education and seeks to mitigate negative environmental factors that compromise academic engagement for students in racialized communities. (Para. 3)

Through "comprehensive year round programming," YAAACE via its "social inclusion strategy" seeks to neutralize the negative social conditions and circumstances plaguing the Jane and Finch neighborhood impacting predominantly the racialized population of the community manifested through inequitable access to resources and social support services.

Whereas YAAACE began as an organization predominantly offering recreation and sport programs for youth, over the years it changed its mandate to offer programs to young children as early as 4 and 5 year olds starting kindergarten, recognizing that the early years are crucial for development. As the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) document *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* states, "children's early experience last a lifetime" because "During our first years of life, the brain develops at an astounding rate. Scientists now know this process is not just genetic but is dramatically influenced by our early experiences with people and our surroundings" (p. 4). YAAACE recognized that the negative pull factors in the community such as guns and gangs try to consume the children into the lifestyle at a young age. Hence, the Social Inclusion Strategy intends to surround the children and youth from the community with as much intentional quality programming as possible within any given week in a year as a means to offset exposure to negative pull factors. By creating accessibility to quality programs and services, YAAACE seeks to support community members to be resilient and develop the character traits and life skills required to overcome the systemic challenges plaguing the neighborhood.

One of the most popular programs offered by YAAACE is its Summer Institute program which operates during the July and August summer months. It operates based on a school within a camp model. Whereas children from higher socioeconomic status stay or improve in their reading and writing scores over the summer months due to exposure to quality programs and experiential learning opportunities, children from lower socioeconomic status often decrease in their academic competencies due to lack of accessibility or affordability to quality programs. In single parent households or dual household where both parents are constantly working multiple jobs to support their families, watching television or playing outside become common activities for the children to occupy themselves for the summer months. As Lalani (2016) reports, "The summer program was created in part to address educational attrition during the summer months which many students experience, while also providing a fun and safe environment. It takes in around 300 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 each summer for a relatively affordable

price of $150" (YAAACE 2018, para. 9). Children's reading, writing, and mathematics levels are assessed at the beginning of the YAAACE Summer Institute and once again at the end in order to track their academic progress over the weeks as well as provide extra support for the children and their parents during the school year from September to June. The assessment data has been collected for participants in the YAAACE Summer Institute over the last 5 years, and the results have indicated that it has made a big difference in some of the children's academic competencies. The data is currently being compiled as part of a larger academic study in the near future.

YAAACE's collaborative partnerships are synergic in nature as each collaboration builds on another and contributes to enhancing the overall programs and services offered by YAAACE in a manner that is socioculturally relevant to the members of the Jane and Finch community. At the heart of all programs offered through YAAACE is the philosophy of making it accessible and affordable. There have been many cases where children have been taken in free of cost or on subsidized payment plan to accommodate the needs of the family. Currently after 11 years as an organization, YAAACE has long-term partnerships with the following organizations and agencies which offer it funding, goods, or services in various capacities: Toronto District School Board, Toronto Police Services, Solaro, Canada Elite sponsored by Under Armour, Canadian Tire Jumpstart, Canadian Youth Basketball League, Leslois Shaw Foundation, Telus, Laidlaw Foundation, Second Harvest Food Rescue, City of Toronto, Province of Ontario, Service Canada, Black Creek Community Health Centre, Department of Justice Canada, and Michael "Pinball" Clemons Foundation.

Some of these aforementioned partnerships and collaborations play an essential role in creating quality comprehensive programs and services offered as part of the YAAACE Summer Institute where the participants are members of the Jane and Finch community and are predominantly racialized, minoritized, and from lower socioeconomic status (Williams et al. 2013). The TDSB supports educational programs offered by YAAACE by providing Ontario Certified Teachers to work at the summer camp which is known as the Summer Institute. Students are grouped by age, grade, and maturity level and led by a TDSB teacher and multiple counsellors who are high school students for 7 weeks. The Summer Institute follows a school within a camp model where students receive educational instruction within a classroom for part of the day in a fun, hands-on, inquiry-based, experiential manner and the remaining time to participate in recreational and cooperative learning activities such as swimming, basketball, music, and arts and crafts. One day a week is devoted to outdoor experiential learning through field trips. Funding from Service Canada and TDSB's Focus on Youth program allows high school youth from the neighborhood to be hired as Summer Institute camp counsellors to support the teachers in the classrooms. This gives an opportunity for the older youth to earn an income and to develop their leadership skills by giving back to the community in which they live. The reality is that many end up resorting to selling drugs or committing crime due to lack of sustainable jobs within the community. Second Harvest Food Rescue donates healthy snacks and sandwiches on a daily basis to the Summer Institute program

which are given to children who cannot afford snacks or lunches every day to facilitate a healthy child development. Funding secured from various other partnerships goes into buying equipment and supplies to offer quality educational and sport programs such as the robotics program offered to the children as part of the Summer Institute where they learn to code and program robots to complete various tasks. More recently, within the last few years, a partnership with University of Waterloo has created the opportunity for the children within the Summer Institute to have their eyes checked and if needed provided with glasses free of charge.

Conclusion and Future Directions

YAAACE's Summer Institute is a prime example of various partnerships working collectively in a synergistic manner to address the needs of the Jane and Finch community members particularly as it applies to accessibility to opportunities such as quality programs and services. By engaging members of the Jane and Finch community, particularly the racialized, minoritized, and lower SES demographic, in various educational and sport programs offered year round, YAAACE creates sustainable change within the community by providing access to quality programs at an affordable and minimal cost. This type of holistic and interdisciplinary programming is what is needed to minimize the achievement gap via focusing on aligning the opportunity gap between those from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. What YAAACE offers is an alternative pro-active approach to minimizing the achievement gap impacting racialized students by providing the means for them to get access to academics, athletics, and character education opportunities. This aligns with their Social Inclusion Framework.

We, as educators, caring adults, and community activists, need to shift our focus to realigning the opportunity gap in a more equitable manner as a long-term sustainable approach and strategy to closing the achievement gap between racialized and non-racialized students and those from higher and lower SES. This approach goes beyond a microscopic focus on outcome-based standardized test results to considering synergistic collaborative efforts between schools and outside organizations in the community offering holistic interdisciplinary services to address the needs of the community members and mitigate the systemic barriers and inequities impacting the community. We must continue to engage in dialogue about whether standardized testing or an equality paradigm within schools is contributing to closing the achievement gap or further perpetuating and intensifying the disparity between the haves and the have-nots. As Nezavdal (2003) states, "Educating students is about maximizing learning by meeting needs, by propelling passions, and by nurturing human curiosity, not closing doors forever because of one test" (p. 72).

TDSB's *Enhancing Equity Task Force Report and Recommendations* released in December 2017 is a good starting point to acknowledge some of the current systemic barriers that exist within the educational system and work toward identifying specific areas needing change to create more equitable policies and practices. The report (2017) states,

> The Enhancing Equity Task Force's mandate is to support the TDSB as it seeks to ensure that the framework of "equity for all" infuses every aspect of the Board's work, for students and staff alike. Equity is a question of fundamental human rights; it is also the foundation for excellence for all students, and for student achievement, well-being, and belonging. (p. 4)

Under the subheading "Recommendations," as a means of aligning TDSB's practices with the mandate and vision of "equity for all," the Task Force "made recommendations in the following six areas, so as to":

1. Ensure equitable educational access, experiences, and opportunities for all students in all schools.
2. Make students whole: effectively addressing school incidents and complaints
3. Ensure equitable access to funding and resources among schools
4. Meaningfully engage students, families, and communities in building a culture of equity at school
5. Ensure equity in staff employment, transfer, and promotion
6. Provide professional learning on equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression for all (p. 5)

These identified six areas can serve as starting reference points where new changes can be implemented to make education policies and practices more equitable for racialized and minoritized students.

Overall, through examining the work that YAAACE is doing in the Jane and Finch community as a case study, it is argued that we need to invest in more equitable practices at the grassroots level to close the opportunity gap as a means of achieving the outcome-oriented goal of closing the achievement gap. This requires a policy and praxis shift from equality to an equity lens. We are currently focusing too much attention on equality of outcome symbolized by standardized test scores as a signifier of overall student achievement. As long as we continue to abandon examining the processes that lead to the outcome, vis-a-vis the opportunity gap, the achievement gap will not close and instead further intensify. As Curtis et al. (1992) argue, "the school system convinces many working-class kids that they are stupid, incapable, incompetent, and that their aim in life should be to show up at work on time while being polite to their bosses. This is part of the violence that streaming does to working-class kids" (p. 3). This aligns with what Anyon (1980) found as part of her ethnographic study where she spent time in working-class and affluent schools and concluded that students in affluent schools receive more challenging and interdisciplinary curriculum that promotes higher level thinking, whereas students in working-class schools receive lower level thinking curriculum that focuses on rote memorization and learning appropriate behaviors and mannerism.

I will conclude this chapter with two recommendations to work toward as future directions:

Recommendation #1

The Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools should invest in creating and maintaining sustainable long-term synergic collaborations with external organizations including grassroots nonprofit organizations such as YAAACE at the local community level involving practitioners from other sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socioculturally relevant holistic services relative to student identities and needs of the local community. An effective program that can serve as "best practices" to be replicated having shown results in closing the achievement gap through minimizing the opportunity gap are *Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education's Summer Institute*.

Recommendation #2

The TDSB needs to set yearly timelines to review their findings and update the public on new changes proposed and implemented in the six specific identified areas as part of their *Enhancing Equity Task Force Report and Recommendations* to ensure "equity for all" (TDSB 2017, p. 4). It is recommended for the TDSB to work closely with the recently renewed provincial Anti-Racism Directorate Office which has outlined a 3-year strategic plan that "targets systemic racism by building an anti-racism approach into the way government develops policies, makes decisions, evaluates programs, and monitors outcomes. It calls for a proactive, collaborative effort from all government ministries and community partners to work toward racial equity" (Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate 2016, para. 34). The Ontario 3-year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan outlines various approaches and strategies that can be utilized by school boards via synergic collaborations to ensure better equity for specific social groups including racialized students. The plan groups initiatives under four categories: Policy, Research, and Evaluation, Sustainability and Accountability, Public Education and Awareness, and Community Collaboration (Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate 2016). Some of the relevant action-oriented suggestions listed under these four categories that can be implemented as part of school board policies and practices are disaggregated race-based data collection, passing on anti-racism legislation, publicly reporting on progress of goals, public education and awareness about various social issues, an anti-racism conference, and most importantly implementation of population specific anti-racism initiatives. The three population specific areas that the strategic plan identifies as a priority to focus on are anti-black racism, indigenous-focused anti-racism, and Ontario public service anti-racism. As part of implementing indigenous-focused anti-racism, school boards and schools should look for opportunities to enact new changes that align with the Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).

In conclusion, the process of making education more equitable begins with a willingness of the government, and I would add other institutions, to acknowledge that there are systemic barriers within their policies and practices that impact each neighborhood to a different extent and that something needs to be done about it

through a collective approach that focuses on minimizing the opportunity gap across different social groups. It requires commitment, effort, and energy from various stakeholders to collectively and collaboratively work toward creating sustainable change with equity and social justice at the heart of the decisions and new actions being implemented to close the achievement gap. Minimizing the opportunity gap through synergistic collaborations at the grassroots community level is a great place to start the change.

Cross-References

▶ Between Cultural Literacy and Cultural Relevance: A Culturally Pragmatic Approach to Reducing the Black-White Achievement Gap
▶ Curriculum: The Science of Teaching
▶ Integrating Community-Based Values with a Rights-Integrative Approach to Early Learning through Early Childhood Curricula

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