

Excerpt taken from Major Research Paper entitled: “Breaking the Habit: Whiteness, Afrocentricity, and the Toronto District School Board” by Nastassia Subban

Full Article can be found at the York University Education Resource Centre

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

As an African-Canadian female formally educated by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for thirteen years, I was never truly engaged in the learning process. I was generally a quiet and reserved student other than the one or two times I found myself in trouble. One of the times I remember vividly took place in my Grade 10 history class. I asked my teacher the following three questions; “Why are the Indians (only vocabulary I knew at the time) only shown in the textbook with feathers in their heads? Why is Harriett Tubman the only black person we learn about in class, and why are there only three paragraphs of information about her in the textbook?” As a result of my naïve inquiries, I was immediately sent to the office. Needless to say, I never again felt comfortable asking questions in that class. Fortunately, I passed the class, although not with an exceptional mark, to say the least.

My next negative encounter with a teacher came when I was in Grade 12 physics class. It was then when I inquired what the point was of learning any of the content that centred on white physicists. Were no black physicists that contributed anything to the science? Once again my questions were unanswered and I was sent down to the office. It took me until Grade 12 to realize that my inquisitive nature was going to hinder my progress in school more than aid it.

Thus, I was left no other option than to remain silent for the remainder of my high school career or not show up for class.

Throughout my TDSB school career I have read several William Shakespeare plays such as, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*. I read novels from the 'English canon'<sup>1</sup> such as, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Stone Angel* by Margret Laurence, *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* written by Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only text I recall that included a character of African descent<sup>2</sup>.

In my history class I vaguely remember discussing anything about World War One and World War Two. However, I do remember studying Canadian 'legends,' such as John McCrae, William Lyon McKenzie, and Sir John A MacDonalD. Unfortunately, the content taught about African-Canadians in both my History and English class was miniscule. We looked at the Underground Railroad and Harriett Tubman and learned how Canada was a safe haven for the enslaved Africans coming from the United States of America.

In my science class the closest we came to any discussion of a non-white person was when I completed a project with a partner on sickle cell anaemia, a disease which often affects those of African descent. I put a large amount of effort into my presentation. When it was complete I achieved a mark of zero because my biology teacher believed I did not contribute to the project as it was

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<sup>1</sup> 'English canon' refers to what I have heard some educators describe as 'must reads' in any English curriculum. These works have not be removed as they are considered 'classics' by educators.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper I will use the terms African, African descent or African-Canadian to describe persons considered to be black. The reason for this is because these three terms are a constant reminder of those considered to be black and their relation and connection t o the continent of Africa. As well, black was used during African enslavement by European slave owners to describe all Africans in order to easily classify and group them rather than acknowledging their humanity, family, tribe, country of origin, etc..., thus it is colonial language that should no longer be used.

done very well. Thus, he gave all of the credit to my partner who was of Asian descent.

With all my efforts, and all that I read and wrote throughout high school, the lack of African representation in my learning left me with a void. Also, the way I was treated by teachers left me feeling inadequate and unwelcome. I proceeded through my senior years of secondary school in a very passive manner besides my aforementioned 'outbursts.' When the time came to select a university, which too was an unenthusiastic process. I, in actuality only applied because my peers were applying. Also, I applied because the importance of post secondary education was instilled in me and my siblings by my parents at a very young age, and thus, it was expected of me.

Upon entrance into university, I began to read the works of Toni Morrison, Bell Hooks, Cornell West, Didi Khayatt, George Dei, Sherene Razack, Carl James, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and it was during this time that I acquired a true passion and desire to learn. What I comprehended in class I yearned to discuss and share with others. The hatred I had for history dissolved and soon I had immersed myself in as many history classes as my sociology degree would allow. All my questions that were silenced in elementary and secondary school were slowly being answered. Finally, I was able to give definitions and terminology to the feelings that I experienced and the observations which I encountered during high school.

My strong feelings of exclusion and inadequacy in secondary school, I discovered in university were due to racist practices committed all across the

TDSB. At my school in particular, the curriculum was Eurocentric. The staffing was Eurocentric. The walls were Eurocentric. The norms, values and ideals emphasized were Eurocentric. There was no space allocated to any other groups (i.e. cultural, racial, religious groups) belonging to our society.

This experience of racism is what led me to pursue a career in teaching. I never had a teacher of African descent until my third year of university. I wanted to instigate a change in a school board that educates thousands of students yearly. I wanted to prepare and equip my students with the concepts and theories that I learned in university, so unlike me, they would not have to wait until then before they were exposed to these terms. I wanted to be able to tell students of African descent that post-secondary education is attainable even though a guidance counsellor or teacher may tell you otherwise.

Though I knew the task would be great at any school I taught, I did not expect the inequities to be at the magnitude I found them at. In returning to York University to complete my masters degree in education, I came to realize that the problem which exists in the TDSB was much larger than what I had envisioned. What I had observed in my 13 years of schooling and in my current teaching career was institutional racism<sup>3</sup>. What pervades and seeps in the walls of the TDSB, however is white supremacy<sup>4</sup>.

This realization has led to my journey of writing this paper. Sadly, white

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<sup>3</sup> Institutional racism is the systematic production and reproduction of racial inequalities in institutions such as, schools, churches, prisons, regardless of whether or not the person or persons maintaining those inequalities has racist intentions (Alladin, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> White supremacy, I believe, is interchangeable with the terms white privilege and whiteness. The idea behind these three concepts is the idea that white people, skin, or what is associated with white culture, is superior to any other race in society. This term will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

supremacy is very prevalent and habitual in TDSB schools. So much so, that its impact is detrimental to the livelihood and psyche of the students. White privilege infringes drastically on the human rights of students of African descent and until it is addressed these students will have to seek another space to obtain their education.