

BLACK CANADIANS AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

A SCAN OF ELEMENTARY
AND SECONDARY SOCIAL
STUDIES CURRICULA

BY TANA TURNER

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) acknowledges that its offices, located in Ottawa, are on the unceded, unsurrendered Territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin Nation, whose presence in this area reaches back to time immemorial.

CCUNESCO also recognizes the Algonquins as the customary keepers and defenders of the

Ottawa River watershed and its tributaries. We honour their long history of welcoming many Nations to this beautiful territory and we uphold and uplift the voice and values of our Host Nation.

We affirm our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation and to the full implementation of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT ON SOLIDARITY BETWEEN BLACK AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

African Canadians are grateful to be on this land and give respect to its first inhabitants.

Canada was founded on the theft of Indigenous lands, the genocide and displacement of Indigenous Peoples, and the stolen labour of African people.

Our shared history is one of displacement, loss and oppression. It is also one of resilience, resistance and reclamation of our histories, cultures and traditions.

Canada's history of anti-Indigenous racism and anti-Black racism is deep, and the two forms of

racism are intertwined. To end anti-Black racism, we must also work to end anti-Indigenous racism.

African Canadians stand with Indigenous Peoples to fight colonization as well as structural and systemic racism in Canadian society and institutions.

The fight for sovereignty echoes loudly in our fight for equity.

–Tana Turner
President & CEO
Turner Consulting Group

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The terms **African Canadians**, **Black Canadians**, **Black people** and **people of African descent** are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to all people of African descent residing in Canada, regardless of whether they arrived in Canada directly from their ancestral homeland on the continent of Africa or from other parts of the world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores how the presence and contributions of people of African descent are included in the provincial and territorial curricular documents that inform what students are taught in K-12 classrooms across Canada. Thanks to the increased acknowledgement of the existence and impact of systemic anti-Black racism, governments and school boards have recognized the need to close gaps in the academic achievement and well-being of Black students and address the role that educational institutions play in perpetuating anti-Black attitudes in Canadian society.

While the need to dismantle anti-Black racism has resulted in many public policy responses, developing a curriculum that more accurately and fully reflects and recognizes the contributions of Black Canadians is an important contributor toward improving academic outcomes for Black students, increasing their sense of belonging, shaping attitudes toward Black Canadians, and fostering a more equitable and pluralist country.

The need for and benefits of incorporating Black representation in curricula have long been known. However, this study finds that provincial and territorial curricular documents across the country could do more to include Black representation in comprehensive and meaningful ways. This review found that Black Canadians are included only sporadically in curricula, with no mandatory expectations about including Black representation. As a result, it is up to individual teachers to include Black representation in their curricula—a task that depends upon each teacher’s knowledge, willingness, interest, race literacy and comfort in doing so. In addition, sporadic mentions of Black Canadians and history are

disconnected from a more comprehensive narrative of the presence of Black people in this country. These explore neither the experience of anti-Black racism nor resistance to it.

In fact, much of today's curricular content fails to explore anti-Black racism in Canada, although it does focus some attention on the experiences of Black people in the United States. In fact, in some curricular documents, more attention is paid to the experiences of African Americans and their fight for civil rights than to the parallel experiences of African Canadians. This not only effectively denies the presence of anti-Black racism in Canada, but ignores both the struggles here for human rights and the contributions of Black people to Canada's human rights framework. This means students are not sufficiently preparing students to understand the social inequities they see or the need for social movements that seek to address them, such as Black Lives Matter.

When education systems fail to provide students with an understanding of the presence and contributions of Black Canadians through a comprehensive curriculum, they not only do a disservice to students—who learn an incomplete history of Canada—but may also inadvertently reinforce anti-Black racism among students.

This report contributes to the work being done by academics and Black historical societies to document and preserve Black history across Canada and advocate for its inclusion in the K-12 curriculum. These academics and historians have advocated for incorporating Black history into lessons throughout the year rather than confining it to Black History Month.

Incorporating Black people into the curriculum more fully will help Canada realize the promise of diversity. The resulting educational experiences in all Canadian classrooms—not only classrooms in which Black students are present—will provide better opportunities for students to learn about the rich and diverse history of Canada. A more complete curriculum can be a vehicle to create greater social cohesion and respect for racial differences, preparing learners to enter a diverse, multiracial, multicultural society and world. Making sense of current events and exercising critical literacy when dealing with the material presented in various media sources and public discourse requires this broader understanding of history and lived experiences.

Incorporating Black people into the curriculum more fully will help Canada realize the promise of diversity.

Recommendations

Education ministries and school boards/districts should:

1. Explore ways to improve the representation of Black Canadians and communities in learning materials to provide students and teachers with a coherent story of their experiences and contributions. Include Black representation in textbooks, teacher education programs, and other aspects of the education sector in addition to the curricular documents provided by ministries of education.
2. Integrate the experiences of Black people in Canada more comprehensively into elementary and secondary social studies curricula. This includes establishing curricular expectations about how students can best learn the long history of Black people in Canada. While our focus in this report is on elementary and secondary social studies, Black representation should be incorporated in all subject areas.
3. Better diversify teaching staff. Both Black and non-Black students benefit from seeing Black people reflected in the curriculum, in classrooms as teachers, and in leadership roles throughout the education system.
4. Embed anti-racism competencies into the qualifications for all teachers to ensure they can better support the success of an increasingly diverse student population. All teachers must be better equipped with the knowledge and confidence they need to integrate Black history, Black representation, and discussions of anti-Black racism into lessons. This can be achieved through ongoing professional learning, teacher training and resources, and lesson plans.
5. School districts should seek out and welcome the involvement of local community organizations and Black historical societies. Schools should encourage Black student alliances to play a role in organizing and facilitating student-run activities that combine learning about Black history and culture with educating others about the issues that Black people face daily.

In implementing these recommendations, ministries of education should remember that it is not enough simply to have a coherent narrative about the presence of Black people in Canada. While that is a good starting point, it must be supplemented with a recognition of the contributions and accomplishments of Black individuals and communities in the broader world, including their resistance to slavery and anti-Black racism. This would improve students' understanding and appreciation of the important contributions that people of African descent have made to the world.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO (CCUNESCO) helps Canadians share knowledge locally and globally to create better societies and build peace. The Commission addresses some of the most complex challenges facing the world today by facilitating cooperation in education, science, culture, communication and information. Through its initiatives and networks, CCUNESCO supports the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other UNESCO priorities, such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education¹ and the UN International Decade for People of African Descent.²

The International Decade for People of African Descent (2013 to 2024) and CCUNESCO's priority to fight racism have helped guide its work in the education sector. In 2020 and 2021, CCUNESCO worked with the Global Centre for Pluralism to deliver anti-Black racism training to teachers³ and published a policy brief (*[From Reflection to Action: Addressing Anti-Black Racism in Canadian School](#)*) that presented recommendations based on feedback from training session participants.⁴ During this training, teachers spoke of the need for resources that integrate diverse perspectives and experiences in all courses,

1 Inter-Agency Secretariat. (n.d.). *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)*. <https://sdg4education2030.org/the-goal>

2 United Nations. (n.d.). *International Decade for People of African Descent, 2015–2024*. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent>

3 Global Centre for Pluralism. (2021). *Webinar: Taking action to address anti-Black racism in Canadian schools*. <https://tinyurl.com/4nx5ntxh>

4 Global Centre for Pluralism & CCUNESCO. (2021). *From reflection to action: Addressing anti-Black racism in Canadian schools*. <https://tinyurl.com/4kveyn54>

from language arts and carpentry to history, science, music and physical education. Teachers also spoke of the need to ensure diverse representation in teaching tools and activities and the importance of sharing diverse stories and perspectives.

In 2022, CCUNESCO sought to continue this work—and to better understand the range and depth of the changes needed—by commissioning an assessment of the extent to

... teachers spoke of the need for resources that integrate diverse perspectives and experiences in all courses.

which K-12 curricula across Canada address anti-Black racism and incorporate Black history and representation. CCUNESCO contracted with Turner Consulting Group to review K-12 curricula across Canada; interview ministry of education leaders to contextualize the issues; and facilitate focus groups with Black teachers across the country to hear their insights and identify promising practices for integrating Black representation into the curriculum.

Turner Consulting Group also compiled a list of open educational resources outside the formal curricula that support teaching about

anti-Black racism and integrating Black representation in Canadian schools. The resulting resource list is a separate document that accompanies this report.

This report summarizes the findings from our review of curricular documents and the consultations we held. It documents where and how elementary and secondary social studies curricular documents include Black people and address anti-Black racism, and points out missed opportunities for both.

It also summarizes our observations, identifies opportunities for ministries of education and school districts to take action, and makes recommendations to support the needed changes.

CONTEXT, OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

People of African descent have been in Canada since the early 1600s. Although Canada was the site of freedom for many previously enslaved African Americans, slavery also existed in Canada, and enslaved African Canadians sometimes sought freedom in parts of the United States where slavery was illegal. Black people have fought in all Canadian wars, and played a key role in defending Canada from Americans in the War of 1812. Black Canadians' advocacy for social justice and efforts to live free from racial discrimination have been important to the development of human rights legislation across the country.

Most Canadians know that slavery existed in the United States. They know about the American civil rights movement, the fight to end segregated schools, and the sit-ins to ensure equal access to services. They are also familiar with key figures and events in the American civil rights movement, including Rosa Parks, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and *Brown v. Board of Education*. Yet few know that slavery and segregated schools also existed in Canada or that sit-ins took place in this country to end discrimination in access to services. Few have heard the names and stories of important figures like Viola Desmond, Fred Christie, Hugh Burnett, Bromley Armstrong, Leonard Braithwaite and Mifflin Gibbs.

When educators do celebrate Black Canadian history in February, the content is too often presented as separate and distinct from Canadian history—as something that is acknowledged during Black History Month, but that remains outside the curriculum

for the rest of the year. Educators may treat Black Canadian history this way in part because they do not write or control the curricula, but also because many don't know the history themselves: like other Canadians, they are products of an educational system that has long ignored Black history. As a result, they lack the knowledge of and comfort with the subject.

Arguments for improving Black representation in Canadian curricula: A timeline

In recent decades, many studies across the country have documented the continuing presence of anti-Black racism in education systems and its impact on the academic achievement and general well-being of Black students. These studies have made a number of recommendations to address the identified issues and close the opportunity gaps. Consistent among these recommendations is the need for Black students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

In 1983, the Graham Commission in Nova Scotia examined the provincial curriculum and found that “the Black community hardly seems to exist at all.”⁵ A decade later, the Black Learners Advisory Committee found that little had changed and reiterated the need for African Nova Scotians to be reflected in the curriculum:⁶

Despite numerous reports it is accepted that school curriculum in School Boards across Nova Scotia does not adequately reflect the diversity of the Canadian population. In general, the presence of Blacks in Nova Scotia and Canada as a whole receives scant attention. Further, the little information which is available is often inaccurate and stereotypical.

This report goes on to state that:⁷

We heard the same cry over and over again across the province during the past two years. Consequently, one of the most common recommendations made was the necessity to change the curriculum by introducing Black studies and integrating Multicultural/Anti-Racism education into the Nova Scotia education system.

In response, in 1996, the African Canadian Services Branch of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was established. In 2002, African Canadian Studies courses began to be offered to high school students. In 2018, the

5 Graham, J. F. (1974). *The Royal Commission on Education, Public Services and Provincial–Municipal Relations (The Graham Commission Report)*.

6 Black Learners Advisory Committee. (1994). *BLAC report on education* (Vol. 1). <https://www.ednet.ns.ca/acs/files-acs/docs/blacreportoneducationvoll-3.pdf>

7 *BLAC report on education*, p. 41.

Council on African Canadian Education recommended the development of an educational framework to support the achievement and well-being of Black students in Nova Scotia. This recommendation was accepted by the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development in 2019, and led to the development of the *African Nova Scotian Education Framework* to support equitable education for Black learners.⁸

Meanwhile in Ontario, a report issued by Stephen Lewis in 1992 after the Yonge Street riot noted that:

Everywhere, the refrain of the Toronto students, however starkly amended by different schools and different locations, was essentially the refrain of all students. Where are the courses in Black history? . . .

The students were fiercely articulate and often deeply moving. Sometimes angry. They don't understand why the schools are so slow to reflect the broader society. One bright young man in a Metro east high school said that he had reached grade thirteen, without once having a book by a [B]lack author on the curriculum . . . It's absurd in a world which has a positive cornucopia of magnificent literature by [B]lack authors.

The year 2022 marked 30 years since the release of that report. Yet the lack of Black representation in the curriculum continues to be noted in Ontario.

Despite receiving little attention by education systems, Black communities and Black historical societies across the country have been preserving their local histories and have advocated for Black history to become a mandatory part of the curriculum. They have been restoring historical buildings, preserving graveyards, documenting local histories, and offering tours to share local Black history.

In 2021, the Ontario Black History Society explored the inclusion of Black people in a grade 8 Canadian history textbook. It found that of the book's 255 pages, only 13 mentioned the presence of Black people in Canada. Natasha Henry, president of the society, stated the following in an interview:⁹

It's an example of systemic anti-Black racism in the country. There isn't a level of recognition that's consistent as it relates to the 400-year presence of Black people here in Canada . . . It should no longer be an optional topic where teachers can choose what to teach and what not to teach. It really is about ensuring Black history, the 400-year presence of people of African descent here in this country, is integrated into the curriculum from K through to 12.

8 Nova Scotia Department of Education. (2021). *African Nova Scotian Education Framework*. <https://www.ednet.ns.ca/acs/files-acs/docs/africannovascotianeducationframeworkenfinv36.pdf>

9 Katawazi, M. (2021, February 26). *Ontario government urged to add Black history to education curriculum*. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-government-urged-to-add-black-history-to-education-curriculum-1.5326049>

The situation today

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the United States and the racial reckoning that is occurring on both sides of the Canada–US border, advocacy by Black communities has resulted in greater focus on the experiences of and outcomes for Black students across the country. For example, teachers with the Toronto District School Board developed an interdisciplinary course, *Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism in the Canadian and North American Context*, after hearing from Black students that their Blackness felt like a burden to them.¹⁰ Initially available to grade 12 students at seven schools in the board, the course has since been offered by other Ontario school boards. Despite these small gains, students, parents and educators continue to raise the lack of Black representation in the curriculum continues as a concern.¹¹

Teachers and teachers' federations across the country have also identified the need to integrate Black representation into the curriculum. The training on anti-Black racism for teachers that CCUNESCO and the Global Centre for Pluralism launched in 2020 and 2021¹² was well received by teachers, who shared that they recognize the importance of addressing anti-Black racism in the classroom while also feeling that they lack the skills to confront it.¹³ Some teacher federations, such as the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), have developed teacher resources to support the integration of Black Canadian history, culture, identity and reality into the curriculum. The federation's *365 ETFO Black Canadian Curriculum Junior Teacher Resource* celebrates Black Canadian athletes, community leaders, musicians, politicians, scientists, difference makers, and Black Canadian firsts along with discussions of racism and discrimination.

Although numerous studies have explored the issues facing Black students across the country, these have focused on individual school boards or provinces. There has yet to be a comprehensive analysis of whether and how Black people are reflected in curricula across the country. This report hopes to contribute a national perspective on the issue. It is also hoped that policy-makers and school boards will use this report to build on the momentum of this pivotal moment to address anti-Black racism and embrace the reality that Black history is Canadian history, and that developing a more complete and accurate understanding of this history will benefit all students.

10 CBC News. (2021, February 3). *TDSB to offer anti-Black racism course for Grade 12 students at 7 schools next year*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-district-school-board-anti-black-racism-course-grade-12-secondary-schools-1.5898585>

11 See for example, York Region District School Board. (2021). *Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy: Creating anti-racist and Black-affirming learning and working environments. Part 1: Background Report*. <https://www2.yrdsb.ca/sites/default/files/2021-03/ABR-STRATEGY-Part1.pdf>; Turner, T. & Henry N. (2022). *GECDSD Dismantling Anti-Black Racism: Background Report*. Greater Essex County District School Board. <https://www.publicboard.ca/en/family-and-community-support/resources/Documents/Dismantling-Anti-Black-Racism-Strategy/Dismantling-Anti-Black-Racism-Background-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

12 *Webinar: Taking action to address anti-Black racism in Canadian schools*. <https://tinyurl.com/4nx5ntxh>

13 *From reflection to action: Addressing anti-Black racism in Canadian schools*, p. 5.

OUTLINE OF THIS REPORT

This report consists of six sections.

- » **Section 1** (the current section) introduces background information to contextualize the need and rationale for this report.
- » **Section 2** provides the context of the education system in Canada to help readers understand the roles and responsibilities of the provincial and territorial governments, teachers and school boards (or service centres)¹⁴ in determining what students learn in the classroom.
- » **Section 3** summarizes the research methodology and its limitations.
- » **Section 4** presents the observations from this research.
- » **Section 5** discusses opportunities for action.
- » **Section 6** makes recommendations to support these opportunities.

¹⁴ Some provinces have eliminated school boards (i.e., New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec). In some cases, these have been replaced with service centres, and elsewhere with school advisory councils.

SECTION 2

CONTEXT

FEDERAL CONTEXT

Under the Canadian Constitution, all levels of education are the exclusive responsibility of provincial governments. While the three territories—Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut—do not have the same constitutional status as the provinces, the federal government has delegated the responsibility for education to the territories. This delegation means that, unlike some other countries, Canada does not have national standards that govern what should be taught in elementary and secondary school curricula. Decisions are left entirely up to the provinces and territories.

Through the Council of Ministers of Education Canada, ministers of education across Canada share and network with their counterparts in other jurisdictions to identify and advance priorities in education. Current priorities include Indigenous education, global competencies, and post-secondary education sustainability. In 2016, the provinces and territories agreed on six broad [global competencies](#) that students should gain from K-12.

PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL ROLE

Provincial and territorial ministries of education develop curricula expectations in consultation with education stakeholders and partners. The ministries set mandatory expectations for what students must know and be able to do at the end of every grade or course. They regularly reviewed curricula to ensure these remain current, relevant and developmentally appropriate.

Each province and territory take a different approach to developing these expectations. Some provide broader, higher-level expectations, while others provide more detail. For example:

- » British Columbia’s curriculum documents identify core competencies and “big ideas” to be covered in classrooms. They also specify curricular competencies that students are expected to have acquired by the end of the course and content that they are expected to know.
- » Nova Scotia’s curricular documents identify specific outcomes and are supplemented by a guide that provides more detailed information about units of study, contexts for learning and teaching, and assessing and evaluating student learning, along with sample activity sheets and other resources.
- » Ontario’s curriculum documents are among the most detailed and comprehensive in Canada. They highlight the priorities for education in the province, the importance of each subject area, and the ideas that underlie the curriculum. They provide an overview of the curriculum expectations and strands as well as guidance on assessing

and evaluating student achievement. Expectations are accompanied by examples and “teacher prompts” to clarify the requirements and illustrate the kinds of knowledge or skills that the expectation entails.

SCHOOL BOARDS, PRINCIPALS AND TEACHERS

School boards (or service centres) and teachers are responsible for designing lessons and assessments that help students achieve the established learning outcomes. School boards/service centres have curriculum departments that develop the philosophies that govern instruction, including the scope and sequence of learning. These organizations also design resources for teachers based on the priorities of the board or centre.

School principals play an important role in curriculum development, given that they are expected to be the instructional leaders within schools. They support and supervise effective teaching and learning practices. They also work with teachers to select textbooks and other learning materials from approved Ministry of Education lists.

Teachers are expected to use the resources provided by the ministry and school board/service centre to plan units of study, develop teaching approaches and strategies, and select appropriate resources to address the curriculum expectations and meet the needs and abilities of the students in their classes.¹⁵ Teachers are expected to use their professional judgement to determine what is taught and how. In Ontario, professional judgement is defined as:¹⁶

Judgement that is informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, methods of instruction and assessment, and the criteria and standards that indicate success in student learning. In professional practice, judgement involves a purposeful and systematic thinking process that evolves in terms of accuracy and insight with ongoing reflection and self-correction.

While the ministries of education and the school boards/service centres establish learning outcomes, they do not mandate how individual teachers should meet curricular expectations. It is up to teachers to determine how these outcomes will be met. As a result, what is taught in classrooms across the country varies not only from province to province, but also from school district to school district, and even across classrooms within a school.

15 Ontario Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Curriculum development and implementation*.

<https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/what-is-curriculum/curriculum-development-and-implementation>

16 Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. (2016). *Understanding your professional judgement*.

<https://www.etfohp.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/Understanding-your-Professional-Judgement.pdf>

SECTION 3

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

METHODOLOGY

We used a number of methods to achieve the objectives of this research.

Review of curricular documents

We conducted a review of the published and available curricular documents, with a focus on social studies, for all provinces and territories to identify:

- » Where and how Black people are included in elementary and secondary social studies curricular documents in Canada
- » Where and how anti-Black racism is addressed
- » Missed opportunities to address anti-Black racism and include Black people in the curriculum

“Social studies” courses include history, geography, civics and citizenship courses.

We used a keyword search to locate and review the curricular documents that each province or territory had made available on its website. The goal was to determine the existence and frequency of certain words, themes and concepts in the curricula and analyze whether and how these include and address Black people and anti-Black racism.

CCUNESCO and Turner Consulting Group staff jointly selected the following keywords in an effort to ensure that the search was sufficiently broad yet also manageable (therefore limited) in scope:

- | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| » Africa | » Inclusion | » Pullman porters |
| » Africville | » John Graves Simcoe | » Racial |
| » Apartheid | » John Ware | » Racism |
| » Black | » Josiah Henson | » Segregation |
| » Black Loyalist | » Louisa Ann Johnson | » Slave |
| » Caribbean | » Marie-Joseph Angélique | » Social justice |
| » Chloe Cooley | » Martin Luther King | » Underground Railroad |
| » Civil rights | » Mary Ann Shadd | » Viola Desmond |
| » Discrimination | » Mathieu Da Costa | » War of 1812 |
| » Equity | » No. 2 Construction Battalion | » World War 1 and 2 |
| » Harriet Tubman | » Olivier Le Jeune | |
| » Human rights | | |
| » Immigration | | |

Some of these keywords were included to document where the curricula addressed Black people and significant events (e.g., Mathieu Da Costa, slavery). Others were used to look for opportunities to include Black Canadians in curricula. For example, discussions of World War I would be an opportunity to discuss the country's resistance to allowing Black Canadians to enlist as well as the formation of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, a segregated unit. Other keywords and the names of people (e.g., civil rights, Martin Luther King) were included to explore and compare whether and how curricula included African Americans versus African Canadians.

Consultations

To supplement their review of curricular documents, we obtained information from:

- » Ministry of Education staff (through interviews) to identify issues and opportunities related to including Black Canadians in curricula
- » A professor of history whose research focuses on resistance to slavery
- » A teacher who educates other teachers about Black history
- » Staff from a community organization that conducts research to inform policy-makers, educators, parents and the general public on how to best improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Black students
- » 10 classroom teachers from Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia (through two focus groups)

These individuals' perspectives are included throughout this report.

LIMITATIONS

Although the goal was to conduct a review of curricula across Canada, the approach did have some limitations. First, the review was limited to English-language documents. It did not review documents designed for classes delivered in French in Quebec or New Brunswick or for French curricula and French immersion courses in other parts of the country. However, it is worth noting that in most provinces and territories, French-language curricula are very similar to their English-language counterparts.

The review was limited to documents available online in searchable formats. We also used keyword searches to examine content, given that we were not able to read the thousands of pages of curriculum documents. Therefore, there may be instances we overlooked where African Canadians are referenced without the use of any of our selected keywords. In addition, the names of many other Black historical figures were not included in the keyword search. As a result, this review likely does not include every instance in which Black people are included in a curriculum.

Our curricula review also does not capture the resources produced by school districts, service centres or teachers' federations that may focus on Black Canadian history and anti-Black racism. Nor does the review capture the good work being done by individual teachers to incorporate Black representation in their lessons and to welcome Black scientists, artists and storytellers into their classrooms to supplement students' learning.

A final limitation concerns scope. This review explores curricula across the country broadly, but does not conduct a deep examination of the curriculum for any or every individual province or territory. As such, this report is meant to contribute to the discussion about the need for Black representation in curricula and encourage additional research to delve more deeply into each province's and territory's curriculum.

SECTION 4

OBSERVATIONS

During our review, we made several important observations that ministries of education and school districts should reflect on if Black history and Black representation in all its diversity are to be integrated into the K-12 curriculum. These observations are discussed in this section.

We have framed our findings as observations rather than as conclusions, given that our methodology did not include an exhaustive review of all K-12 curricular documents. The issue of Black representation in curricular documents across the country warrants much deeper analysis and should be part of a curriculum review and revision process in which ministries of education routinely engage. School districts, school leaders and educators—all of whom have important roles to play in shaping what is taught in Canada’s classrooms—should consider undertaking this deeper analysis.

Our curriculum review led us to make observations pertaining to:

1. The curricular landscape
2. The exclusion of African Canadians from the curriculum
3. The need to address anti-Black racism
4. Missed opportunities to include Black experiences and contributions

THE CURRICULAR LANDSCAPE

Observation 1: Curricular documents give teachers the flexibility to integrate Black representation, explore Black history, and discuss anti-Black racism—or not

The provincial and territorial curricular documents are not prescriptive: they provide teachers with a great deal of latitude in what to teach and how to assess whether learning objectives are achieved. Teachers have the opportunity and agency to focus on areas of interest to themselves and their school community, and can integrate Black history and Black representation and discuss anti-Black racism as they choose.

This review also found that, across Canada, ministries of education have developed curricular documents that are inclusive and reflect the diversity of the provinces, territories and country. K-12 curricular documents include sections on equity and social justice as well as mandatory learning related to anti-racism, anti-discrimination and inclusion.

This content gives teachers the flexibility to provide students with an understanding of the rich history of Black people in Canada, provided that they have the knowledge, skills and desire to do so. In our conversations with teachers, some shared their appreciation that the curriculum is not prescriptive and allows them to shape their lessons to reflect the diversity of the students in their classrooms.

Some have taken full advantage of these opportunities to integrate Black history and Black representation in ways that are identity-affirming and help all students to counter the negative stereotypes that society teaches them about Black people.

In our conversations with teachers, some shared their appreciation that the curriculum is not prescriptive and allows them to shape their lessons to reflect the diversity of the students in their classrooms.

Speaking about their use of opportunities to integrate Black representation throughout the curriculum, one teacher told us, “For me, Black history month is from September to June.” This teacher noted that they integrate rich local history into daily lessons with students and frequently take students on field trips to visit local historical sites.

However, this curricular latitude can be a double-edged word: some teachers we spoke with pointed out that the lack of expectations regarding the teaching of Black history and Black representation means teachers can also opt not to include these topics in the classroom:

I don't see many expectations related to Black history. A lot of the expectations are very broad. It really gives teachers the option to include Black history and Black representation or not. I think that's why a lot of it falls to the wayside. Teachers maybe don't know the history or don't believe it to be important to include at certain junctures. . . In primary, they're learning about families, community structures, and neighborhoods. But I don't see a lot of Black history infused in any of that. As teachers, we have to bring that in on our own, and that gives us a lot of power.

If teachers are not familiar with the history, then they're uncomfortable trying to include it because they might do something wrong. There's always that insecurity around curriculum with teachers. And if it's not something that's emphasized in the curriculum, then it could easily be overlooked. It's not well planned. It's very hodgepodge. So, if a teacher is comfortable, they'll do it, and if they're not, they can skip that unit and do something else.

More explicit and comprehensive integration of Black representation in curricula would help ensure that Black history and contemporary contributions to Canadian society and beyond are taught to all students and do not depend on the teacher's personal level of interest or knowledge.

Observation 2: To integrate Black representation and explore Black history, teachers need better initial training, ongoing professional learning, and classroom-ready resources

While teachers have considerable curricular leeway to integrate Black representation, explore the history of Black Canadians, and discuss anti-Black racism in their classrooms (see Observation 1), the problem is that they may not use it—because most teachers were not taught this information themselves in public school, university or teacher education programs.

In our conversations, teachers noted that improved racial literacy is important if they are to appropriately facilitate discussions about anti-Black racism. Racial literacy refers to the capacity of teachers to understand the ways in which race and racism operate in society. It also involves having the language, skills, and confidence to use that knowledge in teacher practice.¹⁷

Teachers will need resources and ongoing professional learning if they are to take full advantage of the opportunities provided in the curriculum to integrate Black representation and explore Black history. In fact, some respondents felt that unless teacher education programs catch up, modifications to the curricular documents would be ineffective. A professor who teaches at a faculty of education went further, saying that it might be irresponsible to change curricular expectations without making corresponding changes to teacher education programs for students and ensuring that teachers already in the profession have the necessary resources and knowledge:

I don't see how people could responsibly teach about Black history with the knowledge they currently have. They have no notion of what racism really is. They have no idea of the roles Black people played in the construction of society . . . I think it's irresponsible to ask educators, even the best ones, to teach about Black history because they don't have the knowledge to do it well.

Some teachers we heard from used even stronger language: in their view, asking teachers who lack the knowledge, skill or desire to integrate identity-affirming Black history and representation will not only not have the desired impact, but could, in fact, cause harm. These teachers also expressed concern about the impact of teaching the written curriculum when the “hidden curriculum” so often undermines Black students’ success:

It's not just about including expectations in the curriculum or providing the resources to teachers. Because if [teachers are] racist, or don't feel the need, or don't want to, then

¹⁷ Guinier, L. (2004). From racial liberalism to racial literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the interest–divergence dilemma. *Journal of American History*, 91(1), 92–118.

Teachers will need resources and ongoing professional learning if they are to take full advantage of the opportunities provided in the curriculum to integrate Black representation and explore Black history.

they're going to resist or they're going to teach these lessons, but probably not in the best way.

I was thinking about how we also understand curriculum, because we're talking about curriculum in a sense in a very narrow way. And so, we need to understand that curriculum can be transmitted in the hallways and in different settings. So, we need to think about what is represented in the hallways and in the class in terms of physical space, posters, and stuff like that. But also how Black students are supported when they congregate or don't congregate. What are the interactions in the cafeteria spaces? All of those things are inviting you into learning or making you feel excluded from learning.

So, curriculum is about the content of the materials. It's about the pedagogy, how you present these materials and incorporate them in the way you teach. It's about the environment that you create in the school and in the classroom, the relationship that you have with the community.... Michael Apple talks about the hidden curriculum that pushes our kids away from school. I think most of the time this is the most important aspect of it.

Changing the curriculum will have little positive impact if Black students continue to be streamed into courses below their level of ability, if they experience disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion, and if teachers continue to hold low expectations of them.

The teachers with whom we spoke told us that while some very good work is being done in schools across the country, it is often entirely dependent on individual teachers and school leaders and requires a good deal of additional learning and work on top of already-demanding workloads. These teachers reported spending countless hours of their own time supplementing their education to feel confident enough to teach Black history and integrate Black representation in the classroom. They shared their perspective that if Black history and Black representation are to be integrated, classroom-ready resources and ongoing professional learning should be made available to teachers.

Some also shared that many of their colleagues are interested in incorporating Black history and Black representation, but lack the competence, confidence and courage to try.

I think most of the time you're on your own. Over the last several years, our board has tried to create documents that they shared with us to go through some history and historical events in our local area. But the time to explore those resources isn't given. We have PD assigned but it is not sufficient... There is no follow-up, there's no lessons created to help us use the resource. Even books I'm purchasing with my own money. I'm doing my own PD. I'm joining conferences to learn on my own. So, a lot of it is your own legwork, and it does take a lot of time.

We need more teacher education. If our teachers have gaps in their education concerning the Black Canadian experience, then our students are going to have gaps. If they don't know about it, you can't expect them to teach about it. The apprehension is real and the knowledge is lacking. I was born in Canada; went to school from K to 12. I went to

post-secondary and I had to look for this information myself. Afua Cooper said that it's possible for an individual to get a degree in Canadian Studies and not know that there was enslavement here for 200 years. So, educators go through this system and receive teacher training and are not taught the Black Canadian experience. They get into the classroom and now we expect them to teach it?

We need to insist on providing easy access to the resources and high expectations around knowledge; the same as you would any other discipline.

Two exceptions to the general omission of Black Canadians in curricula are courses offered by Ontario and Nova Scotia that focus on Black history.

Nova Scotia's grade 11 African Canadian Studies course is designed to help learners understand the legacy of slavery and effects of colonialism on the continent of Africa and the African diaspora; develop insights into the history of the African Canadian community in Nova Scotia; understand the socio-economic and political dynamics as they relate to the African diaspora; and reflect on the contributions of African Canadians to their own community, Canada and the world. The course underscores the need for socio-economic and political reforms to achieve social justice for all members of Canadian society.

Ontario also offers a Black history course, but it is an elective—and some teachers were of the view that electives cannot be seen as the solution to integrating Black history into curricula. Some felt that these courses are offered too late in students' learning journeys (i.e., after they have already learned a great deal about Canadian history). Others told us that in their view, having separate Black history courses sends the message that Black history is separate from Canadian history.

Nova Scotia Department of Education. (2009). *African Canadian Studies 11 Guide*. <https://tinyurl.com/yre7tk3p>

THE EXCLUSION OF AFRICAN CANADIANS FROM THE CURRICULUM

Observation 3: The curricula do not provide a coherent narrative of the presence of Black people in Canada because they include few African Canadians or Black histories

Overall, our review found that notable African Canadians and Black histories were not meaningfully included in provincial and territorial curricular documents. For example, many do not mention Black Canadians like Mathieu da Costa, Olivier Le Jeune, Josiah Henson, Chloe Cooley or John Ware, to name a few—and where they do, it is generally

in ways that disconnect these figures from a coherent narrative of the history of Black people in Canada and the persistent anti-Black racism that Black people have experienced here.

This means even when students learn about individual Black people and their stories, they do not necessarily learn about the broader history of Black people in Canada, their long presence in the country, or their important contributions. Some of teachers with whom we spoke reflected on the sporadic nature of the inclusion of Black people in curricula:

These names are in the curriculum and they're floating. What are they connected to? I think if we started from kindergarten, then we would be able to build knowledge and students would see the connectivity. They would see the value and the importance of Black history and it would make sense.

Whether [notable Black people] are included in the curriculum or not, they are seen as exceptional. They're not central to the narrative. The attitude is that there are too few of them; so few that we should actually be interested in their lives or their political philosophies or their projects or the way they actually contributed to society.

In addition, while some Black historical figures are included in individual provinces' curricular documents, not one single African Canadian is included in every provincial and territorial curriculum. This is a notable omission given that many of the 730 people currently on the list of Persons of National Historic Significance in Canada¹⁸ are of African descent.

Just as notable individual Black Canadians are not uniformly represented in curricula nationally, Black histories appear only sporadically in curricular documents—even though a number of national historic events involved Black Canadians, including the Black Pioneer Migration to Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Underground Railroad, the Upper Canada Act of 1793 Against Slavery, Black Pioneers in British Columbia, the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Black Militia Units in Upper Canada 1812–1850, the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, the Enslavement of African People in Canada, and the West Indian Domestic Scheme.

Ontario and Nova Scotia do a better job than other provinces of including such events. For example, Ontario does mention the Underground Railroad in its elementary school

...not one single African Canadian is included in every provincial and territorial curriculum.

¹⁸ Parks Canada. (2023). Directory of federal heritage designations. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/dfhd>

curriculum,¹⁹ and Nova Scotia explores the experiences of African Nova Scotians, including discrimination and their fight for human rights. However, the Black people and events that are of historical significance to other provinces—such as the arrival of the Exodusters and John Ware in Alberta (who was influential in the early years of the province’s ranching industry)—go unmentioned.

We also found that curricula are not making the most of opportunities to use local history in experiential learning. In fact, some provinces’ curricula focus more on Black histories in other provinces than on their own. For example, British Columbia’s exploration of discriminatory policies and injustices in Canada and the world lists topics like the *Chinese Immigration Act*, the *Indian Act*, and Africville, yet we found no mention of the African Americans who migrated to British Columbia at the invitation of James Douglas, the Governor of the Colony of Vancouver Island,²⁰ or of the experiences of the residents of Hogan’s Alley.²¹

Highlighting local Black history would encourage teachers to access local resources to enrich students’ learning. The rich local histories that are being preserved by individuals and Black historical societies across the country provide opportunities for teachers to incorporate on-site learning experiences (such as field trips) to help bring the curriculum to life for students. However, the educators with whom we spoke commented that teachers don’t always know about or take advantage of these opportunities:

In the town that I’m in, we have a Black museum. I believe it is a 10-minute walk from our school, but classes don’t go. I take my students. My students have more opportunities and are brought to the museum more than the other classes. And it’s because their teacher is Black... Just recently, I was speaking to a Grade 7 student who struggles with being Black. There’s not a high Black population in her school. I was talking to her about the museum, and I asked her, “Have you been?” She said, “No, I’ve always wanted to go, but I’ve never been yet.” And she’s in Grade 7 and it’s a 10-minute walk away.

19 Eight mentions are made in the Ontario elementary curriculum (pp. 130–162): two in Grade 6, one in Grade 7, and five in Grade 8. There are no mentions in the secondary school curriculum.

20 Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. (n.d.). *1858—First Black settlers arrive in Victoria*. <https://www.leg.bc.ca/dyl/Pages/First-Black-Settlers-Arrive-in-Victoria.aspx>

21 Hogan’s Alley Society. (n.d.). *What was Hogan’s Alley?* www.hogansalleysociety.org/about-hogans-alley/

THE NEED TO ADDRESS ANTI-BLACK RACISM

Observation 4: Equity and social justice are covered in many curricular documents, but anti-Black racism is not specifically mentioned, and the experiences of Black people are not always explored in discussions about equity and social justice

The curricular documents we reviewed for each province and territory cover important and challenging topics, such as equity, social justice, racism and various forms of oppression. In some grades, whole sections or courses are devoted to these topics. Some curricular documents also provide guidance to teachers on creating inclusive classrooms and discussing social justice. Although there is considerable variation among provinces and territories, some do a very good job of addressing these issues in the supporting documents for teachers and in the curriculum documents.

While these and other curricular documents do not shy away from exploring a variety of historical and contemporary examples of inequity and social injustice from Canada and around the world—prompting teachers to explore the experiences of a number of groups—they often fail to include Black Canadians.

Discussion of the racism faced by Black people is included in some of these documents, but none actually use the term “anti-Black racism.” This may be due in part to the age of the documents, given that some were published in 2005, long before the term “anti-Black racism” was in common usage. However, the term was also not found in documents that had been updated in the past two to three years.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO INCLUDE BLACK EXPERIENCES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Our review of the curriculum also identified a number of missed opportunities to include and a fuller picture of the history of Canada in curricula—one that includes the experiences and contributions of African Canadians.

Observation 5: Not all curricular documents acknowledge slavery in Canada

The first notable omission related to the history of Canada is slavery. There are key moments in the curriculum covering the history of the country where the Canadian experience of slavery should be mentioned, but is not. For example, in a grade 12 course in Ontario entitled “Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice” (The Ontario Curriculum: Secondary, 2013), many examples are presented to allow students to “analyse the rationale for specific instances of social injustice in Canadian history.” Racial segregation is included in these examples, but slavery is not.

In addition, many times when slavery is mentioned in the curricular documents we reviewed, it is in reference to its occurrence in the United States or ancient civilizations in Greece or Rome. For example, in the curricular documents from British Columbia, slavery is mentioned in the context of ancient cultures,²² while the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in Canada are given no mention. Similarly, the Prince Edward Island curricular documents discuss slavery in the United States and the fact that “slaves escaped from the United States to Canada.”²³

In addition, Canada’s role in the transatlantic slave trade is not mentioned. For example, salted cod from Newfoundland and Labrador was an important part of the economy of this British colony. Cod that was not suitable to sell to Europe was instead salted and sent to the Caribbean and became an important staple of the diets of enslaved people.²⁴

In the Equity, Diversity, and Social Justice course offered in Ontario, a section of the curricular documents covering equity and social justice in Canada specifies that by

22 British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2016). *British Columbia Social Studies Grade 7 Curriculum document*. https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/sites/curriculum.gov.bc.ca/files/curriculum/social-studies/en_social-studies_k-9_elab.pdf

23 Prince Edward Island Department of Education. (2007). *Canadian Studies 401A curriculum*. https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/sites/default/files/publications/eelc_cas401a.pdf

24 CBC News. (2019, August 18). *Artist highlights N.L.'s slave trade connection in Bonavista exhibition*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/camille-turner-nl-slave-ships-connection-1.5240589>

the end of the course, students will describe a variety of historical and contemporary examples of inequity and social injustice in Canada. (Some examples include historical immigration policies, including the *Chinese Exclusion Act*; Canada's response to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism; the internment of Japanese Canadians; living conditions in urban slums and First Nation communities; and the destruction of Africville). In no part of this course is slavery in Canada mentioned.

Among its curricular documents, Prince Edward Island includes a teachers' guide to the play *Prince Edward Island History: The Old Stock*.²⁵ In this guide, the fact that slavery existed in Prince Edward Island is addressed along with the existence of racism toward people of African descent. While it is not a curricular document, it does provide useful information and lessons that teachers can use. Another exception, from Nova Scotia, is included in a high school course called African Canadian Studies.²⁶ This course looks at the conditions of enslavement, strategies of resistance, and the implications of enslavement for African Canadian settlement.

However, such discussions of slavery in Canada are the exception, not the rule. As a result, many students will graduate from a Canadian high school not knowing that slavery was practised in Canada. As the professor with whom we spoke shared, this becomes a larger issue when these students arrive at university without a full understanding of Canada's history:

The students I see arriving from secondary school have pretty much no knowledge of slavery as a system, slavery as a machine within which men and women existed, resisted, lived, survived, created families, cultures, created religions. All this does not exist for them. Last year, I taught a couple of workshops in a secondary school... And the kids I had in front of me, about 80 of them, they knew pretty much nothing, really... They had heard about slavery in the antiquity period. They had heard about slavery in Mesopotamia, you know, like 2500 years ago. But slavery as a system constructing race, they had no idea about that.

Observation 6: A number of curricular documents fail to include the Underground Railroad and stories about African Americans seeking refuge in Canada

For many African American refugees, their journey on the Underground Railroad ended somewhere in Canada. Their destinations included New Brunswick, Quebec,

25 Prince Edward Island Department of Education. (2011). *The Old Stock: A teacher guide*. https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/sites/default/files/publications/eelc_his621b_oldstock.pdf

26 Nova Scotia Department of Education. (2009). *African Canadian Studies II Guide*. <https://tinyurl.com/yre7tk3p>

Nova Scotia, and Ontario.²⁷ More than 30,000 refugees came to Canada from the United States on the Underground Railroad, making it the largest anti-slavery freedom movement in North America. Descendants of these migrants continue to live in communities throughout the country. Despite its significance in Canadian history, the Underground Railroad was mentioned by only half of the provincial and territorial curricular documents we reviewed.²⁸

Observation 7: Black people are not fully included in discussions of Canada's role in international conflicts

As a former British colony and as a country, Canada's role in international conflicts is one of the few subjects covered by the curriculum in every province and territory. Given the role of Black Canadians in these wars, there is an opportunity to include African Canadians in the curriculum. For example, enslaved Africans were promised full protection, freedom and land in British North America if they fought for the British during the American Revolutionary War. At the end of the war, about 1,500 Black Loyalists settled in Nova Scotia; they were the largest group of people of African birth and descent to come to Nova Scotia at any one time.²⁹ Although many curricular documents discuss the migration of the Empire Loyalists, they don't always include references to Black Loyalists or the fact that some Empire Loyalists were slave owners.

Black Canadians also played a significant role in defending Canada from the Americans during the War of 1812. The Coloured Corps was a militia company of Black men that served as a fighting unit, contributing to the British victory at Queenston Heights and the defence of Fort George. They also served as part of a unit that contributed to the construction of Fort Mississauga, which was strategically important during the war.

In terms of World War I, we found references to the contributions of Black Canadians and the No. 2 Construction Battalion in only one curricular document each for Ontario and Nova Scotia. Not mentioned is the fact that about 1,300 Black Canadians served in combat in nonsegregated units during the war.³⁰ In addition, our review found no specific mention of any individual Black Canadians, despite the fact that a number of them served with distinction while also experiencing segregation and discrimination. Black Canadians earned medals during some of the fiercest fighting in the war, including the battles of Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, Passchendaele and Ypres.

27 Henry, N. (2020). *Underground Railroad*. The Canadian Encyclopedia. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/underground-railroad#>

28 Reference to the Underground Railroad was found in the curricular documents for Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, and, by extension, Yukon.

29 Nova Scotia Museum. (n.d.). *Who were the Black Loyalists?* <https://novascotia.ca/museum/blackloyalists/who.htm>

30 Mathieu, S.-J. (n.d.). *Black Canadians and Canada's military*. Canadian War Museum. <https://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/black-canadians-and-canadas-military/>

While some curricular documents explore the social changes that occurred following World War II, we did not find that a connection was made to the fight for human rights spurred by the returning Black men, who were unable to receive service in businesses in Canada after fighting for democracy in Europe. Of note is Hugh Burnett, who, despite being dressed in his military uniform at the time, was refused service in a café in Dresden because of the colour of his skin. His advocacy was instrumental in bringing about legislation in Ontario that was a precursor to the Ontario *Human Rights Code*—the first such legislation in the country.³¹

World Wars I and II are often looked at from a nationalist perspective while human rights are explored from a global lens. This approach omits the violations of Black Canadians' human rights.

Our review found that curricular documents across the country more often include explorations of the American civil rights movement than the same movement in Canada.

Observation 8: Black Canadians' fight for human rights and contributions to Canada's current human rights framework are not fully explored

Black Canadians were at the forefront of the fight for human rights in this country, with events paralleling those occurring in the United States. However, our review of the curricula found that where the struggle for human rights and social justice movements are included, either the role of Black Canadians is often omitted or the content focuses on the United States, overlooking the parallel movement in Canada.

For example, the Nova Scotia curriculum includes an activity in which students are asked to write a short description of what some Canadians have done to improve or protect human rights, but does not include Black Canadians among the examples. Most notable is the omission of a reference to Viola Desmond, whose court case against segregation was an inspiration for the pursuit of racial equity across Canada.³²

31 Macnab, M. (2018, April 19). Hugh Burnett. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/hugh-burnett>

32 Bingham, R. (2021, April 16). Viola Desmond. In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/viola-desmond>

In addition, our review found that curricular documents across the country more often include explorations of the American civil rights movement than the same movement in Canada. We found that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is mentioned 21 times and Rosa Parks 11 times, yet there is no mention of Fred Christie, Hugh Burnett, Bromley Armstrong and others who played an important role in Canada’s human rights movement. Viola Desmond is included in the curricular documents of four provinces.³³

This focus on the American experience leaves students with an understanding that African Americans experienced discrimination, including segregation and discriminatory laws, without any understanding that African Canadians had similar experiences. Similarly, the focus on African Americans who advocated for social justice leaves students with the false impression that African Canadians did not experience anti-Black racism and therefore did not need to fight injustice in Canada.

In Quebec’s History of the 20th Century course, in a section that explores demands related to human rights, students are expected to “Nam[e] players in the movements that defended the civil rights of Blacks in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, African National Congress).”³⁴ Again, the focus is on American experiences of racism and segregation rather than on the similar experiences of Black Canadians.

Observation 9: Africa could be better represented in the curriculum

In the curricular documents we reviewed that explore world events and history, Africa is mentioned somewhat less than other continents. We found that the kingdoms of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, China and Mesopotamia were included, while African kingdoms—such as the Kingdom of Aksum, the Mali Empire or the Songhai Empire, among others across the continent—were omitted. The curricular documents we reviewed also contained very few references to the colonization of most of Africa by seven western European countries from 1881 to 1914 or to the impact of colonization on the continent as a whole. Very few references are made to the wealth that Europeans made from 400 years of slavery or how colonization delayed economic development in Africa.

While the focus of this review is on the representation of Black Canadians in the curriculum, this observation is relevant because students should be able to situate their experiences within the broader global story of people of African descent. As such, how Africa is represented in the curriculum contributes to how both Black and non-Black students view all people of African descent.

³³ Viola Desmond was mentioned in the following provinces: Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.

³⁴ Quebec Ministry of Education, Leisure, and Sport. (2014). *Learning to be acquired in secondary school—History of the 20th century*. <https://tinyurl.com/22pjujyz>

Observation 10: Black Canadians should be represented in the curriculum beyond social studies

Although this review did not explore curricular documents beyond social studies, some teachers with whom we spoke identified the need to include Black representation across all subject areas, not just social studies. As one teacher commented:

I think the media really pushes this one-dimensional view of blackness that we need to counter... For example, we have a movie, the “Colored Hockey League,” yet we still have this belief that hockey is a white man’s sport and we’ve still got hockey attached to Canadianness. And if we’re not a part of the hockey world, then how Canadian are we? However, we have this hockey league that was the first organized hockey league in North America and it was Black. It could be talked about in physical education, but it’s not. So again, I think places like math and science, physical education, drama, and other places outside of the typical language arts, social studies and social sciences are where we’re really lacking in Black representation.

SECTION 5

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

There are many positive aspects to the various provincial and territorial curricular documents we reviewed. Many include a focus on equity, inclusion and social justice, and present various opportunities for teachers to reflect the diversity of students in their lessons. While this broad focus on equity is commendable, we have identified a number of opportunities for action for ministries of education as they review and revise their curricula. These can also help school districts better support teachers to include Black history, Black representation (in all its diversity), and discussions of anti-Black racism in their classrooms.

Because these opportunities for action arise from a relatively limited curricular review, it is vitally important that this report not be seen as the final word on these issues. Instead, we hope it contributes to the work already underway in ministries of education, school districts and classrooms to better represent Black people and their contributions to Canada. In addition, we hope it supports Black historical societies, communities and individuals in their advocacy efforts.

1. Include Black representation in the curricula more comprehensively so students learn a more complete and accurate history of Canada

People of African descent have been in Canada since the 1600s. They have made significant contributions to this country's defence and formation along with its political, cultural and athletic histories. What is called Black Canadian history is simply Canadian history. As a result, we cannot have a full and accurate exploration of Canadian history without the inclusion of people of African descent.

Despite this reality, Black people are not fully reflected in the curricular documents we reviewed. In fact, none of the curriculum documents we reviewed included Black people in Canada in a comprehensive way. Instead, individual African Canadians are peppered throughout the documents, disconnected from any overarching narrative about the presence, experiences and contributions of people of African descent. While a number of events related to African Canadians have been identified as having national significance—including slavery, the Underground Railroad, and the Black Loyalists—most Canadian students will graduate without learning about these events.

In many provinces and territories, students are taught about Canadian history throughout elementary school and are required to take one history or social studies course in secondary school. Secondary students are also required (or have the option) to take additional social studies, civics and social justice courses that shape their perceptions of Canada, their place in it, and the place of others. The scope and content of what they learn in these subjects provide ample opportunities to explore the experiences and contributions of Black Canadians. However, the prompts provided to teachers in these documents often do not use the opportunities provided. This is important given that too often, teachers themselves do not have a grounding in Black history.

Without Black representation in the curriculum, students learn an incomplete history of Canada and receive the message that Black people have been inconsequential to this country. The omission positions Black people as outsiders benefiting from the fruits of this country, not as contributors who were foundational to the building of it.

For many students, the only time they learn about Black Canadian history is during Black History Month in February. While celebrating Black History Month is important—and may be the only opportunity many students have to learn anything about Black Canadians—confining the teaching of Black history to a single month sends the message that Black history is distinct from broader Canadian history and not worthy of being integrated into the curriculum throughout the year.

In addition, Black History Month lessons often focus on teaching students about the achievements of individual Black people rather than providing students with a holistic understanding of the presence, experiences and contributions of Black people.

2. Increase Black representation in the curriculum and among teaching staff to better support Black student success and well-being

As noted earlier in this report, many studies have concluded that closing gaps in outcomes for Black students requires these students to become more engaged with the curriculum, which can be achieved by enabling them to see themselves and their experiences reflected there. These studies have found that culturally responsive curricula increase student engagement, attendance and grades. When Black students find themselves reflected in the curriculum, it makes them feel seen, creates a sense of belonging, and strengthens their engagement. Not seeing themselves reflected reduces their opportunities to connect with the curriculum in the ways that other students can.

Black representation is also identity-affirming: it instils students with pride and inspiration. A British researcher made the following strong point that is relevant in Canada as well: “When young people aren’t being taught about their history within Britain, their sense of identity and belonging is negatively impacted, as well as their social relations.”³⁵ These studies echo what educators have known for years—that it is hard for children to learn when they feel undervalued, unimportant and unsafe.³⁶

Black representation in the curriculum also improves academic achievement across all subject areas. One study found that Black students improve in all academic subjects, sometimes by as much as two letter grades, with increased knowledge exposure to Black history.³⁷

The content of school curricula sends strong messages about who belongs in Canada, who is important, who is not, and who contributes positively to the world. These messages are reinforced across society by television, movies, advertising, daily interactions and everyday words and expressions. Because these ideas are constantly reinforced, they are easily believed and internalized by their targets.

35 Four Nine. (n.d.). *Failing to teach Black history in schools is harming children more than you may realise*. <https://fournine.net/failing-teach-black-history-schools-harming-children>

36 Davis, J. (2016, February 2). *4 Reasons why it’s critical to teach black history*. SheKnows.com. <https://tinyurl.com/32h3pk94>

37 Wang, M. T., & Huguley, J. P. (2012). Parental racial socialization as a moderator of the effects of racial discrimination on educational success among African American adolescents. *Child Development*, 83(5), 1716–1731. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01808.x>

Therefore, including Black representation throughout the curriculum can help Black students develop a positive racial identity, which is a protective factor against mental health issues and antisocial behaviours. Research highlights that a positive racial identity is a psychosocial protector in both mental health functioning and health risk behaviours, such as substance use.³⁸ Another nationwide study representing African Americans found that those who reported higher levels of racial self-esteem also had higher levels of personal self-esteem.³⁹

The teachers we spoke to expressed the need for both Black and non-Black students to learn about Black history and see Black representation in order to counter negative messages from society and peers. Included in these discussions was the value of Black students having Black teachers:

I feel many of our Black students [have] a lot of self-hatred already at six, seven, eight years old. The number of conversations I've had with young kids who say, "I hate my hair," "I hate my skin colour," "I hate the way I look." I have these portraits of kids from around the world by our window and they'll point to the kid that's maybe from South Asia, they're like, "Oh, they're beautiful," or this child from Ukraine is beautiful. And this child from Africa, from Kenya specifically, is not beautiful. And I say, "Why do you say that?" And they describe what they are seeing and what they think. I can see the positive shift from the beginning of the year until the end where we have done a lot of work. I think being a Black teacher is not just about curriculum. It's like an embodied existence and you're doing a lot of spiritual work. You're doing a lot of healing for these kids because they're outside in the world where they're being told all these negative things.

A lot of the boys are being told they're dumb. They're six or seven and say, "I'm dumb. I'm not going to be anything. I can never be a scientist. I can never be these things." I allow them to see that presently they are these things because what do those people do? They experiment, they tinker, they try. I tell them, "You're doing all those things, which means you're embodying that right now." ... The classroom should be an insular protective space for them where they can say, "I'm worthy and I deserve to learn safely. I can bring my grievances about the world and my Black teacher is going to listen to me and understand me." I think that is incredibly powerful for them.

The impact that I've seen on Black students is definitely pride and they are able to share their knowledge. And I've been asked before by young Black students, "Miss, are you going to teach us about Black history?" They see a Black teacher and they think they're going to learn about themselves. They don't get that with other teachers.

38 Caldwell, C. H., Kohn-Wood, L. P., Schmeelk-Cone, K. H., et al. (2004). Racial discrimination and racial identity as risk or protective factors for violent behaviors in African American young adults. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 33, 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:AJCP.0000014321.02367.dd>

39 Hughes, M., & Demo, D. H. (1989). Self-perceptions of Black Americans: Self-esteem and personal efficacy. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 132–159.

The research also suggests that instilling racial pride in Black teens reduces their vulnerability to the effects of racial discrimination and contributes to better mental health and educational outcomes. Racial pride and preparation for possible bias was found by one study to be a protective factor against the damaging effects of racial discrimination by teachers and peers.⁴⁰ This study found that racial pride was directly and positively related to grade-point averages, educational aspirations and cognitive engagement. It was also directly related to resilience in the face of discrimination.

One educator from Chicago commented on the disempowering effects that a lack of representation can have on students:

When I started teaching, I taught white-centric classics. As a result, my students never saw themselves as powerful storytellers. They disconnected from the curriculum and we lost the chance to have meaningful discussions in our classroom.”⁴¹

She recounts that when she introduced Black literature that resonated with her students, they became “completely different learners.” She said, “Students believe what we tell them. If we tell them, implicitly, that their voices and experiences are not valid or important, they believe us. We have a responsibility to our students to create a learning environment where all human experiences are allowed to add value.”

Studies also show that not only do students benefit from seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, but they also benefit from learning about inequality, anti-Black racism, and the ongoing struggle for equity. One study found that taking a course that focused on themes of social justice, discrimination, stereotypes and social movements resulted in an increase in students’ marks, attendance and credit accumulation.⁴² (In addition, the study found that the gains in marks were larger for boys than for girls, which is an outcome not typically seen in education reform measures.⁴³)

In fact, a 2017 study found that believing society is fair can lead marginalized students to act out and engage in risky behaviour.⁴⁴ The study found that students

40 Wang, M. T., & Huguley, J. P. (2012). Parental racial socialization as a moderator of the effects of racial discrimination on educational success among African American adolescents. *Child Development*, 83(5), 1716–1731. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01808.x>

41 Team XQ. (2021, March 2). *A holistic approach to teaching Black history year-round*. XQ: The Super School Project. <https://xqsuperschool.org/rethinktogether/teaching-black-history-year-round/>

42 Dee, T. S., & Penner, E. K. (2017). The causal effects of cultural relevance: Evidence from an ethnic studies curriculum. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 127–166. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216677002>

43 Kim, A. (2016, February 18). *A culturally rich curriculum can improve minority student achievement*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/culturally-rich-curriculum-can-improve-minority-student-achievement>

44 Godfrey, E. B., Santos, C. E., & Burson, E. (2017). For better or worse? System-justifying beliefs in sixth-grade

who grow up believing the myth of meritocracy—that hard work and perseverance will naturally lead to success—showed a decline in self-esteem and an increase in risky behaviours during their middle school years. Not engaging in discussions of inequity does not protect children, as this study found. It is more beneficial to incorporate concepts such as racism, classism and other forms of oppression into lessons to help students better understand the world in which they live.

The lack of adequate Black representation in the curriculum can also reinforce teachers' negative perceptions of Black people, including their Black students. This may facilitate low expectations among some teachers, which can “subsequently damage pupils' motivation and confidence, thus planting the seeds for underachievement throughout the school journey.”⁴⁵ Having a better understanding of the role of Black people in Canada and equipping teachers to engage in conversations about anti-Black racism can help them unearth and unlearn the biases they may hold.

Reflecting the diversity of students will also help provinces diversify their teacher pipeline. When Black students see themselves in what they're learning, not only are they supported to graduate from high school and attend university, but they're also more likely to consider entering the teaching profession. As the dean of a School of Education in the United States commented, building a diverse teacher pipeline begins with students:⁴⁶

The curriculum within a school does much more than just provide opportunities for rigorous learning. For students of color, it is also a window into the world of education, which means it is vital that they see themselves in it. If students of color cannot see reflections of themselves in the curriculum, they are more likely to overlook teaching as a career option because of the perception they cannot add value to the job and the discontentment they may feel if they try. Teaching is about a love for learning. If students of color can find passion through representation and relevance in the curriculum, they will be one step closer to envisioning a career in education.

predict trajectories of self-esteem and behavior across early adolescence. *Child Development*, 90(1), 180–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12854>

45 Weekes-Bernard, D. (2014) *History Lessons: Making British Histories. A Guide for Teachers*. London: Runnymede Trust.

46 Chism, D. (2022, October 1). *Building a diverse teacher pipeline starts with students*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/building-a-diverse-teacher-pipeline-starts-with-students>

3. Discuss anti-Black racism in the classroom to help dismantle it

The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020 ignited global reflections on systemic anti-Black racism around the world, including in Canada. It has resulted in all orders of government as well as leaders in the health care, mental health, child welfare, policing and education sectors to reflect on their roles and the actions needed to confront and combat anti-Black racism.

One effective way governments can dismantle anti-Black racism is by more fully including the contributions of Black Canadians and discussions about anti-Black racism in the K-12 curriculum. Many argue that positive representation of Black people throughout the curriculum helps cultivate respect and appreciation for Black people.⁴⁷ By gaining a deeper understanding of the role and contributions of Black Canadians, non-Black students will recognize that everyone has unique contributions to make and no one is superior or inferior.⁴⁸ Students learn to value and respect Black history and Black people. It also helps them understand racial inequities that have lingered over time and the ways in which laws and government policies have contributed to these inequities. Black representation in the curriculum is crucial if students are to be educated to engage with increasingly diverse populations and with people in a globalized world.

In our discussions with teachers, they reflected on the impact that integrating Black history into the curriculum has on non-Black students, particularly in the way it helps address some of the myths they may have learned:

Last year, I did some work around Harriet Tubman, and students shared with me that they learned. Some used to think that slavery was a good thing and they were glad to learn it wasn't. They also thought that Black people weren't as valuable as [non-Black people], but they've learned that they are. This is how important the learning is and the need for it.

There are many parts of Canada where students can grow up without ever interacting with African Canadians. What they know about Black people will come primarily from what they learn in school and see online and on TV. If they do not learn about Black people in school, they will possess little, if any, accurate information to counter the negative messages they encounter elsewhere. This, in turn, affects the perceptions they hold and how they treat Black people when they do encounter them.

47 Afriware Books. (2022, May 4). *Why teach African American history*. <https://www.afriwarebooks.com/blog/why-teach-african-american-history>

48 Afriware Books. (2022, May 4). *Why teach African American history*. <https://www.afriwarebooks.com/blog/why-teach-african-american-history>

4. Give all students a better understanding of Canada's history of anti-Black racism to help them understand current racial inequities

Black Canadians' experiences of anti-Black racism, often resulting from government actions and public policy, is an important part of their story. As such, a more complete history of Canada—one that includes Black people—would include systemic racism, recognize that the racial history of this country is distinct from that of the United States, and tell a distinct story of oppression, resistance and overcoming. Without these elements, history perpetuates the myth of a Canada that is not racist, which in turn perpetuates misperceptions about the inequities that exist in Canadian society today. Including this information will also help students make sense of the world they live in and help them navigate it.

One American teacher shared the benefits of this knowledge for students:

Without understanding what happened and is still happening to their people, they won't know how to maneuver in society once they step out of my classroom and into the real world. It's like going into a fire not knowing that you'll get burned. I want to prepare them for the harsh realities that they're going to face every day as they become adults.⁴⁹

Many of the curricula that we reviewed do not ignore inequities and injustices. However, discussions of inequities often exclude the experiences of Black people. In addition, rather than explore slavery in Canada, some documents focus on slavery in the United States or ancient civilizations. In other parts of the curriculum, rather than exploring social injustices in Canada, teachers are prompted to explore the experiences of African Americans in the United States or those of Black South Africans during apartheid in South Africa. Where inequities in Canada are examined, Black Canadians are often omitted from the discussions.

Shifting this focus away from Black Canadians not only ignores their struggles for equity and contributions to Canada's human rights framework, but also shapes students' misperceptions of the continued need for social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter. It can also reinforce the myth of meritocracy and the idea that present-day inequities are the result of a lack of ambition and hard work by Black people rather than the result of systemic racism.

While some people will argue that children should be shielded from the knowledge of racism, as noted earlier, studies have found that ignoring the topic doesn't protect

⁴⁹ Crawford, A. (2022, February 1). *Making space for Black history in the classroom*. *American Civil Liberties Union*. <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/making-space-for-black-history-in-the-classroom>

them. In fact, avoiding it can cause Black children to internalize racism when they do encounter it, which in turn can affect their long-term development and well-being.⁵⁰ For non-Black children, failing to directly discuss Black history and anti-Black racism leaves them vulnerable to internalizing a biased view of the world. In addition, this argument ignores that fact that provincial and territorial curricular documents do address issues of equity, social justice, and racism. They simply don't explore the experiences of Black Canadians.

Exploring Canada's history of anti-Black racism invites students of all racial backgrounds to make sense of the world around them—the world they will inherit—and helps them reflect on their responsibilities to create a more just society. It can help all students better understand the inequities that exist in today's society, connect current social issues to past events, and understand that while progress has been made, the struggle for equity and social justice continues.

50 UNICEF. (2020, June 9). *Talking to your kids about racism*. <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/talking-to-your-kids-about-racism><https://www.unicef.org/parenting/talking-to-your-kids-about-racism>

SECTION 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings and analysis, we make the following recommendations for ministries of education and school districts to enable them to more fully incorporate Black people throughout the K-12 curriculum. These recommendations are not exhaustive, but are meant to inform the ongoing review and revision of the curricula and support provided by school districts.

1. Explore ways to **improve the representation of Black Canadians and communities in learning materials** to provide students and teachers with a coherent story of their experiences and contributions. Include Black representation in textbooks, teacher education programs, and other aspects of the education sector in addition to the curricular documents provided by ministries of education.
2. **Integrate the histories and experiences of Black people in Canada more comprehensively into elementary and secondary social studies curricula.** This includes establishing curricular expectations about how students can best learn the long history of Black people in Canada. While our focus in this report is on elementary and secondary social studies, Black representation should be incorporated in all subject areas.
3. **Better diversify teaching staff.** Both Black and non-Black students benefit from seeing Black people reflected in the curriculum, in classrooms as teachers, and in leadership roles throughout the education system.
4. **Embed anti-racism competencies into teacher training and professional development** to ensure they can better support the success of an increasingly diverse student population. All teachers must be better equipped with

the knowledge and confidence they need to integrate Black history, Black representation, and discussions of anti-Black racism into lessons. This can be achieved through teacher training and resources, ongoing learning and lesson plans.

5. School districts should **seek out and welcome the involvement of local community organizations and Black historical societies**. Schools should encourage Black student alliances to play a role in organizing and facilitating student-run activities that combine learning about Black history and culture with educating others about the issues that Black people face daily.

In implementing these recommendations, ministries of education should remember that it is not enough simply to have a coherent narrative about the presence of Black people in Canada. While that is a good starting point, it must be supplemented with a recognition of the contributions and accomplishments of Black individuals and communities in the broader world, including their resistance to slavery and anti-Black racism. This would improve students' understanding and appreciation of the important contributions that people of African descent have made to the world.

CONCLUSION

Ministries of education and school districts have a responsibility to examine the representation of Black Canadians, and indeed all Canadians, in curricula as student bodies become increasingly diverse. Incorporating Black people more fully into the curriculum not only reflects this country's history more accurately, but will help Canada realize the promise of diversity. Positive representation of Black people in curricula supports better outcomes for Black students and fights anti-Black racism by countering negative messages that may have been learned by non-Black students.

This work will require bringing Black people in from the margins of classroom discussions and including Black people and communities in the revision of curricular documents. While it will not be easy, it is necessary if Canada is to strengthen its public education systems and ensure that all students benefit equitably from the educations they receive.

