

**University of Alberta**

How Academic Streaming is failing Black Students in Ontario Schools

by

Amal Duale

A capping exercise submitted to the Faculty of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

in

**Educational Leadership and Administration**

Faculty of Education

Edmonton, Alberta

March 17th, 2025

### **Abstract**

This capstone paper explores academic streaming and how it has historically affected Black students within Ontario secondary schools. This type of streaming occurs when students' choose a stream or pathway in grade 9, opting for academic, applied or workplace focused courses. The course choices of students at this level have great significance to their academic careers in secondary school and beyond. Historically, Black students in Ontario schools have consistently been overrepresented in lower-level streams (Livingstone, 2017; James & Turner, 2017). This topic will be explored using the Critical Anti-Racist Theory framework (CART) which will center race as the standpoint from which to discuss this issue (Dei & Lordon, 2013). This framework will take into consideration racism, history, power relations and various systems of oppression which will provide a holistic view into the intersecting factors that affect the stream choice and ultimately academic success of Black students in Ontario secondary schools (Dei & Lordon, 2013).

Keywords: *academic streaming, black students, Ontario secondary schools, racism, ability grouping*

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## **Introduction**

Academic streaming or ability grouping has been around in Canada since the early 1900's, but the effectiveness of the practice has been thoroughly debated (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). The purpose of academic streaming is to divide students according to their abilities or interests (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). In the early 1900's "ability-grouping" excited the minds of those in the educational world (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). In the 1950's, educational leaders and scholars commended streaming as a method to "ensure quality education for the nation's gifted" (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, p.424). However by the 1980's, many condemned the practice for restricting access to a quality education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). More recently, in 2020, the Ontario government pledged to de-stream schools due to the process "disproportionately impacting racialized students by lowering test scores and graduation rates" (McQuigge, 2020).

Throughout this paper, I will focus specifically on the type of streaming that occurs as a student begins high school. At this stage, students in Ontario are streamed into academic (university preparation courses), applied (college or workforce) or basic-level (workforce courses) streams. These streams then lead to variable academic or career opportunities later on. Black students in Ontario schools have consistently been overrepresented in lower-level streams (Livingstone, 2017; James & Turner, 2017). This phenomenon indicates that the secondary school stream that Black students choose has less to do with their abilities or interests but is more

related to their identity and circumstances. Some factors that affect the academic success of Black students include, but are not limited to: racism, language barriers, socioeconomic status, unfair biases/stereotypes, parental involvement or lack thereof and low self-concepts (Livingstone, 2017; James & Turner, 2017).

### **Positionality**

This topic holds a special significance for me as a second generation immigrant, with parents who immigrated from Somalia. I also identify as a Black woman who is also visibly Muslim. Throughout my secondary school experience, it did not escape my notice how many students from my background wound up in lower-level or applied streams. I remember my own brothers being encouraged by counselors and teachers to take applied courses while they themselves expressed interest in taking academic courses. Some of the school personnel were particularly adamant about this and tried to convince my parents that they would not be able to handle academic coursework. My parents refused and my brothers were able to attend postsecondary. Similarly, many people in my community feel that their children were tricked into taking the applied stream by school personnel. As a teacher, I have witnessed Black students consistently subjected to low expectations and discriminatory treatment by school staff which impacts their academic performance. The issue of streaming bias is multifaceted and complex, however I am interested in learning more about the factors at play. I would also like to investigate possible solutions to ensure that marginalized students have equitable access to a valuable education.

The following questions will guide my paper,

1. What are the factors that are leading to disproportionate amounts of Black students in lower-level streams?

2. How can anti-racism and social justice leadership improve the outcomes and self-perceptions of Black students?
3. Do we need to stream students? If the outcomes of this practice are discriminatory, what are the possible alternatives?

I will address these questions by doing a critical literature review.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For the purposes of this paper, I will be using an anti-racist discursive framework. Dei (1996) defines anti-racism as an “action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression” (p. 26). Anti-racism is a critical discourse of race and racism that illuminates how social groups are racialized for differential and unequal treatment (Dei, 1996). “Through the process of racializing society, social groups are distinguished and subjected to differential and unequal treatment on the basis of supposedly biological, phenotypical and cultural characteristics” (Miles 1982 as cited by Dei, 1996, p. 26). The historical legacies of colonialism allow a deeper understanding of how these past injustices created current complex environments involving racism (Dei, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, I will not be making the point that Black students' stream choices are a completely a direct result of racism. However, it is certainly an important factor and an essential standpoint from which to view the issue. For any Black student, issues relating to race and racism are not separate but a fundamental part of their schooling and educational experiences (Dei, 1996). Therefore, it is impossible to separate these students' secondary school streaming experiences from race because it is an integral part of it.

“Anti-racism calls for putting power relations at the centre of the discourse on race and social difference” (Dei, 1996, p.26). Another aspect of the anti-racism framework that deals with

this is known as integrative anti-racism (Dei, 2008). Integrative anti-racism deals with uncovering the ways in which race intersects with class, gender, ability and sexuality (Dei, 2008). Integrative anti-racism still centers race as the primary standpoint but broadens the scope by opening a discussion on other related social justice issues (Dei, 2008). A Black student is an individual and only by addressing their identity holistically will we be able to accurately discuss the factors affecting their schooling and importantly how to create positive social change for this particular demographic.

Additionally, Critical Anti-Racist Theory (CART) has several tenets which will allow me to delve deeper into researching academic streaming from an anti-racist standpoint. The first tenet of CART is that the concept of race is made visible by racism (Dei, 1996). Meaning that race exists because of racism and that the job of anti-racists is to identify and discuss its implications (Zareey, 2017). The second tenet of CART is that in order to discuss racism in our modern society, it is essential to acknowledge history (Dei & Lordan, 2013 as cited by Zareey, 2017). The power dynamic created by European colonialism continues to perpetrate racist mindsets and actions (Dei, 1996). This power dynamic can be found within every aspect of our society including our school systems, which continues to negatively affect Black and minority students. The racism is particularly acute for Black individuals with anti-Black racism usually being the most severe of its kind (Zareey, 2013). The third tenet of CART acknowledges the other systems of oppression that usually coexist with racism including class, ability, gender and sexuality (Dei & Lordan, 2013). Looking closely at how these systems of oppression intersect with racism provides a balanced view from which to view issues.

Throughout this paper, I plan to use an anti-racism discursive framework and the CART framework in order to explore how secondary school streaming is affecting the schooling of

Black students in Ontario. My goal is to understand how we can create better outcomes for Black students in Ontario and carefully consider the gap in knowledge about how Black students in Alberta are being affected by the same practice.

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review will investigate some of the factors that affect the streaming choice of Black students within Ontario schools.

#### **Streaming and Racial inequalities**

Black Canadians have been in Canada since the 1600s. However, recently the growth in the Black population in Canada has been through immigration. According to a 2013 census, immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa and their kids and grandkids make up the majority of the Black Canadian population (Stats Can. 2013a as cited by James & Turner, 2017). A survey done in 2015, on the Toronto District school board found that 90% of Black students enrolled were either first or second generation immigrants (James & Turner, 2017). These students, in particular, face a plethora of challenges within the Ontario school system.

Black students have historically been overrepresented in lower-level streams (Livingstone, 2017; James & Turner, 2017). In the 1980s the Toronto School Board initiated several programs to assist in educating an increasing multicultural population (James & Turner, 2017). Even with these programs in place, the negative trends for Black students continued. “In fact, a Grade 9 Student Survey conducted in 1982 showed that of the 444 Black students, 24% were taking Basic Level programs, higher than any other racial group, other than Indigenous students” (Wright & Tsuji, 1983 as cited by James & Turner, 2017 p. 12). By 1991, the Every Secondary Student Survey found that 55% of Black students were enrolled in the Advanced level as compared to 74% of all students (Cheng, 1993). More recently, in 2015, a survey done in the



Toronto and Peel district revealed that 53% of Black students were enrolled in academic streams as compared to 81% of White students (James & Turner, 2017). Additionally, it was found that 39% of Black students were enrolled in applied or basic level streams in contrast to 16% of White students (James & Turner, 2017). This achievement gap is large and we can see that there is a lengthy history of Black students performing significantly worse than their peers. It is important to look closely at the reasons for these discrepancies in order to see the factors at play.

### **Class and Socioeconomic status**

According to Livingstone and Weinfeld (2017), the predominant factor to determine a student's academic success in school is socioeconomic status. It is important to recognize that class and socioeconomic status are not separate but are integral. According to Livingstone and Weinfeld (2015), Black families in Canada face higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, which is due in part to racial discrimination, employment barriers for immigrants, low wage work and biases related to gender or class (as cited by Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017). “There is a consistent over-representation of racialized individuals in low-paid, low-end, unregulated and precarious temporary work” (Galbuzi, 2006 as cited by Zareey, 2013 p. 25). This in turn, leads to poor academic performance for Black and other racialized students.

Curtis et al (1992) concluded that “students are not streamed in any random way; rather ethnic/racial minority and single parent families end up in the lower streams in highly disproportionate numbers” (p. 25). Often these families do not realize that “the deck is stacked against them” (Curtis et al, 1992, p. 25). According to Curtis et al (1992), a method that is often used to stream students in schools is standardized testing. This is problematic, because according to Oakes (2005) these tests both in terms of content and administration, are culturally biased

towards White middle class students and racialized students are less likely to do well on these assessments.

Wealthy parents, due to having more social capital, have the power to influence the curriculum, school boards and schools. It is not surprising therefore, that affluent students are often overrepresented in academic streams. The Every Student Survey conducted in 1970, found a strong correlation between parental profession and the stream their child was enrolled in: children whose parents were labourers or unemployed were overrepresented in the vocational streams, while the children of professionals were overrepresented in academic streams (Wright, 1970 as cited by Zareey, 2013). Unfortunately there has not been another Every Student Survey with information on streaming since 1975.

Although these results are dated, it is important to understand the factors that have historically affected the schooling of Black students in Ontario schools and identify gaps for research within our current contexts. The economic discrepancies found with streaming in part, arise because middle-class and affluent families often pressure schools to provide streaming opportunities and ensure that their children are placed in top streams (Curtis et al, 1992). Wealthy parents also have the opportunity to register their children in gifted programs, immersions and private schools. This allows students from high socioeconomic backgrounds to enjoy access to a high quality of education with peers similar to them (Curtis et al, 1992). Additionally, students from wealthier families will have more access to tutoring, clubs, sports, music lessons and supplementary programming to ensure their academic success in school (Curtis et al, 1992). These are benefits that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded from.

## **Teacher Bias and Racism**

In Ontario, at the end of grade 9, students register for high school courses in their chosen stream. The choice of their stream is dependent upon their marks in grade 9 as well as teacher or counselor recommendations. Another factor that influences the streaming choice and overall academic success of Black students is teacher bias or low expectations of students. Evidence demonstrates that a teacher's ability to teach effectively is related to that teacher's perceptions about students' intelligence or learning potential (Bartalome, 1994 as cited by Cooper, 2003, p. 101). James and Turner (2017), argue that in part due to media and society creating and propagating negative images and stereotypes of Black people, teachers and school staff are influenced by these "subtle and subliminal messages and are subjecting Black students to discriminatory treatment" (p. 40). "This bias in turn leads to poor educational outcomes for Black students through the under-estimation of their abilities to achieve the same outcomes as their White and other racialized counterparts" (James & Turner, 2017, p.40). James (2012) also discusses the ways in which the stereotypes of Black males as immigrants, fatherless, athletes, troublemakers and underachievers work to categorize and disenfranchise them as they navigate through the school system (as cited by James & Turner, 2017, p. 40). Similarly, a study done in 2003, investigated how teacher biases affected African American students through the standpoint of their mothers. The mothers found the majority of teachers to be uncaring or biased against their children and that they associated deficiency with being Black or lacking economic resources (Cooper, 2003). They also found that negative teacher expectations lead to a decrease in self-esteem within their child and low academic achievement (Cooper, 2003). This is an example of students being pathologized due to their differences (Shields, 2004). This is when the

responsibility for students' academic success is placed on students' living situation or circumstances instead of on the education system itself (Shields, 2004).

According to Zareey (2013), teachers and counselors often encourage students to join a particular stream (p.68). In fact, he found that “in cases when parents or students preferred a stream that opposed the opinion of either a teacher or guidance counselor, the preference of the school staff member dominated” (Zareey, 2013, p. 68). School staff therefore exert a strong influence over the stream that students enroll in. If staff members hold low expectations of these students, this could be contributing to the high number of Black students that have historically been found in lower-level streams. Zareey (2013), also found that both parents and students do not often have sufficient knowledge about streaming or their rights. “It is particularly low-income minority families who have the least knowledge about streaming and often comply with the fallacious advice of school personnel” (Zareey, 2013, pp. 127-128). Due to the majority of Black students being also immigrants, this lack of cultural knowledge is even more pronounced. Both the students and their families are lacking social and cultural capital, to the detriment of the students' learning.

One avenue to combat negative stereotypes and teacher biases would be to have diverse staff in schools. Teacher diversity is falling further behind as Ontario becomes increasingly multicultural (Abawi, 2018). Research indicates that when asked to judge students' potential, attitude or motivation, “White teachers tend to place disproportionate numbers of Black students in lower-level groups” (Gillborn, 2005, p. 496). Teacher diversity is important because students may be able to connect better with their teacher, have access to culturally relevant pedagogy and these teachers can inspire students (Ryan et al, 2017). Furthermore, Black students do not often see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and are often subjected to pathologies of silence. This

is when we pathologize “differences and cultures by remaining silent about them as we perpetuate the implicit knowledge that certain lived experiences are more normal and hence more acceptable than others” (Shields, 2004, p. 112). By doing this, we isolate students and prevent them from fully entering into the “conversation that makes sense of things” (Shields, 2004, p.112). A consequence of pathologizing students’ cultures and experiences is that it can cause them to feel invisible and disengage from learning altogether.

### **Student Self-Concepts**

One of the most detrimental consequences of academic streaming is damage to students’ self concepts, self-esteem as well as future aspirations. According to Rosenbaum (1976), students in high tracks have been labelled as “bright or more intelligent by their peers and engaged and easier to teach by their teachers” (as cited by Byrne, 1988, p.50). On the other hand, students in lower tracks have been labelled dumb or lazy by their peers and unmotivated and frustrating to teach by their teachers (Byrne, 1988, p.50). According to Tsuchida (2016), students typically associated academic streams with being smart and being registered in applied streams as being dumber or below those enrolled in academic streams. Undeniably, these labels have a lasting impact on student's self-concepts, with students in lower tracks having lower self-concepts regarding their own ability (Byrne, 1998). Additionally, Zareey (2013) found “in terms of the negative connotations associated with lower streams, students recognized them, and either actively opposed such a label, or if they felt this was fruitless, eventually succumbed to these labels” (p. 81). Essentially, the negative connotations associated with lower streams can work as a self-fulfilling prophecy if students begin to believe in them. Black students, due to being overrepresented in lower streams, are therefore more often exposed to these harmful labels about their abilities.

## Immigrant Students

In 2015, 90% of Black students registered in the Toronto District School Board were either first or second generation immigrants (Zareey, 2013). Challenges faced as an immigrant or child of an immigrant is therefore another significant factor that has historically affected the stream choice of Black students. The practice of academic streaming can be more detrimental to immigrant students as compared to non-immigrant students. “This occurs because immigrant students and their parents are less likely than native-born students and their parents to be familiar with the educational system of their new country, in general, and with tracking systems in particular” (Rosenbaum and Rochford 2008 as cited by Chykina, 2019, p. 369). According to Rosenbaum et al (2008), this lack of knowledge may unintentionally hinder the educational careers of immigrant students (as cited by Chykina, 2019). “There is some evidence that immigrant students whose parents are not knowledgeable in how the school system works might enroll in lower tracks or less academically oriented schools because they or their parents fear failure in academic schools, even if their school achievement indicates that they should succeed” (Pásztor 2009, as cited by Chykina, 2019, p. 369). The lack of knowledge about how the educational system works does not cause immigrants to be optimistic; but instead causes immigrant parents and students to overestimate the difficulty of completing academic tracks in school (Chykina, 2019). “Furthermore, even if placed in higher tracks, immigrants often report being silenced in their classes, and feeling uncomfortable about speaking up” (Gibson and Carrasco 2009, as cited by Chykina, 2019, p. 369). However, according to Chykina (2019), usually the knowledge gap about academic streaming is less significant for second-generation students than for first generation students. While Black students’ status as immigrants has

historically been an important factor regarding their stream choice in Ontario secondary schools, it's important to note that this may not be the case moving forward.

### **Personal Reflections**

Throughout this paper, I have discussed some of the numerous factors that affect the secondary school streaming choice of Black students. As a prospective social justice leader, I am interested in actively looking to improve outcomes for this group of students. The first step is usually establishing the problem. Sheurich (1994) asks a thought provoking question, "by what process does a social problem gain the 'gaze' of the state, of the society and, thus, emerge from a kind of social invisibility into visibility?" (As cited by Olssen et al, 2004, p. 55). Often many are unwilling to care or change their mindsets and this can present a challenge as well. This can make equity work quite frustrating and feel quite negative and demoralizing. As Sara Ahmed (2012) said, it sometimes feels like "banging your head against a brick wall" (p. 26). An integral part of equity work is looking for ways to look forward and make actual strides towards equity even within one's own limited context.

In Canada, our education system as a whole is based upon a white colonial hegemony and with this in place, equitable change is difficult to achieve. Therefore, there must be a push towards decolonization. However, the term decolonization is often misused as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). On the contrary, it means a breakdown of colonial settler structures, a repatriation of land to Indigenous peoples and the decentring of settlers in this issue (Tuck & Yang, 2012). From Tuck and Yang's (2012) paper, comes the understanding that equity work is not making minor changes within the settler society but completely taking down these structures and systems that benefit some and harm everyone else. While reading through this paper, it brought light to how we really have to critically question some of these structures and practices

(i.e. academic streaming) and completely get rid of them when looking towards a more equitable future.

The education scene in Ontario provides an example of this in action. In 2021, Ontario began de-streaming grade 9 Math in an effort to de-stream their high school education system. Due to the fact that academic streaming has been around in some way or form since the early 20th century, this move created a lot of controversy. There has been quite a bit of pushback from teachers, parents and administrators with this change. However, I think that whenever we are making an equitable change there is often chaos that comes with it. As Ahmed (2012) says “habits save trouble and diversity work causes trouble” (p.26). It’s not a linear or clear path but a more equitable one that we are creating. Building resilience and capacity to deal with the inevitable resistance and conflict is an integral part of being a social justice leader.

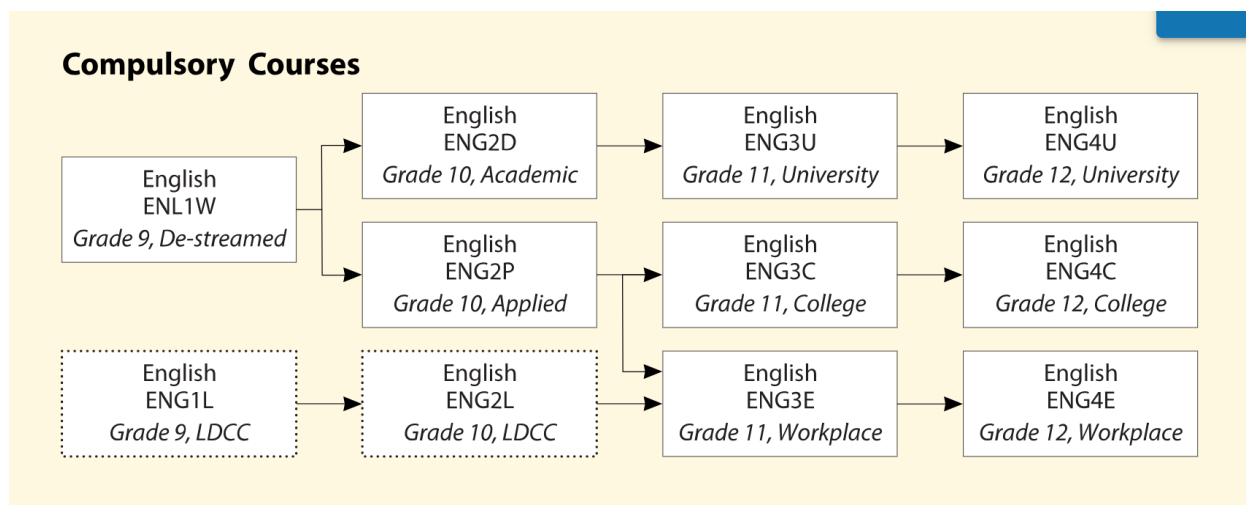
When addressing issues of racism and equity it is important to engage with critical perspectives. According to Duggan (2017), these perspectives directly reject positivism, assume structural inequity, disrupt taken for granted truths, envision agency within structure and advance social change. Throughout his work, Duggan (2017) also explains that critical theories have aspects of deconstruction of and reconstruction and that they cannot exist without each other. This reminds me of my experience reviewing the literature regarding academic streaming. It was mainly focussed upon deconstructing and shedding light upon the systemic racism and barriers faced by Black students. Without the process of reconstruction it becomes a “discourse of bankruptcy, a language devoid of resistance or agency” (Duggan, 2017, p. 43). In order to reconstruct, we must build interest convergence, cultivate agency, attend to power and disrupt normalcy (Duggan , 2017, p. 43).



My hope is to become a social justice leader with a particular focus on equity for Black students within our education system. As a leader it is important to expect resistance and that it is an intrinsic part of diversity work (Ahmed, 2012). While working through this resistance, capacity to handle conflict must be built. Since everyone is situated within their own life and experiences, they have their own ideas and core beliefs (Verhoeven and Metze, 2022). Differing core beliefs are natural but must be addressed through a nuanced approach. In his book *Facilitating Breakthrough*, Adam Kahane (2021) shares numerous insights on how to work with the enemy to move forward together within the same organization. In this case, the enemy is not an enemy in a traditional sense but instead how to work with someone with opposing or differing core beliefs. Kahane (2021), advises against a top-down approach and instead pushes for a transformational leadership style which focuses not only on the good of the organization but also the good of the parts. This cyclical approach requires the leader to cycle back and forth between the whole and the parts of the organization while making changes (Kahane, 2021). Through attending to both the interests of the whole and the parts of the organization, the leader can move the organization towards an equitable change.

### **Policy Discussion**

The following is the course sequence for High School English as put out by the Ontario government.



(Image retrieved from: <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/course-descriptions-and-prerequisites/english#prerequisite>)

This policy clearly outlines how students may progress from course to course throughout their high school careers. Clear prerequisites and pathways are outlined with solid arrows and possible progressions are outlined with broken arrows.

The course sequence policy is rigid in the sense that there are barriers that make transferring to a higher course sequence more challenging. Along with meeting the transfer criteria mentioned above, students must repeat at grade level which can cause them to fall behind and possibly fail to graduate on time. These barriers can work to discourage students from moving upwards in terms of their initial stream choice when entering into high school. Therefore, the decision made in grade 9 on which courses to take in high school becomes a particularly weighty one. By deciding upon a specific course sequence, students are also choosing the pathway of their academic careers as well as what post secondary options will be available to them. In grade 9, many students are not well educated about the far-reaching effects of their course choices and make decisions based on input from teachers, parents, family members or friends.

## **Conclusion**

According to Livingstone (2014), “university is now widely seen as the preferred path to a successful life in this country”. However, due to unfair and biased streaming practices, students from low SES backgrounds and racialized students, including Black students, are effectively being kept out of it (James & Turner, 2017). As Leithwood and Steinbach (1991) concluded, “the effects of ability grouping are the same as the effects of inflation — the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (p. 84). How then can we work towards improving outcomes for Black students in particular as well as other racialized students? Is this seen as an issue or problem in the first place? Do we really need to stream students if we know that it is a process that recreates social inequality? (Krahn & Taylor, 2007).

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