

# DEBATING VALUES: RACE, CLASS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Recently, in Gütersloh, Germany, Gerry Connelly, Director of Education of the Toronto District School Board, accepted the 2008 Carl Bertelsmann Prize on behalf of the Board for outstanding achievement in "Integration through Education: Fairness for All". Prize winners were chosen after an intensive international search. The Bertelsmann's profile for Canada ends with this statement: "Notwithstanding the exemplary results achieved by the Canadian education system in international comparative studies, the political and scientific debate is increasingly critical of the status quo. According to the critics, the integrative effectiveness of the Canadian system only covers certain immigrant groups, which achieve above-average results, whereas allophonic immigrant children (children whose native language is neither English nor French), in particular, are increasingly left behind. Central demands are that educational policies should concentrate much more on disadvantaged immigrant groups and other minorities in Canada than is the case under the existing multicultural programs."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps no one understands that challenge better than the leaders of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), which for several years has wrestled with its response to members of Toronto's Black community who are no longer willing to wait for solutions to the issues their students confront in schools.

Toronto's student community is the largest in Canada and likely the most complex. In 2006 the TDSB conducted a detailed student census of elementary students in Grades 7 and 8 and secondary students in Grades 9 and 12, enabling it to link demographic data with student achievement data. The majority of students – 70 percent in Grade 7-8 and 58 percent in secondary – were born in Canada. The remaining had emigrated from more than 200 countries with 2 percent from Africa and 2 percent from the Caribbean. While the majority of TDSB's students were born in Canada, only one fifth have both parents born here, and 71 percent have parents who were foreign born. Although White students are the largest racial group at 33 percent, no racial group is in a majority. The three other largest racial representations are East Asian (20 percent), South Asian (19 percent), and Black (12 percent).<sup>2</sup> In correlations between racial background and measures of

achievement, Black students were found invariably to be at greater risk for failing to meet provincial standards.<sup>3</sup> Although TDSB has not yet published multivariate analyses of student background characteristics and achievement, earlier Toronto Board of Education surveys concluded that over one third of Black students (36 percent) and nearly half of Aboriginal students (46 percent) were at risk for poor educational outcomes. Importantly, these findings held true after controlling for factors such as parents' educational level and socio-economic status.<sup>4</sup>

The relationships among race, class and academic achievement are complex, yet have been well documented in Toronto for the last thirty years. And generations of students have experienced them – lowered expectations for achievement, gross generalizations about parents' backgrounds and aspirations, negative stereotypes of communities, and curricula that exclude students' personal and cultural knowledge.

Tom, a Grade 1 student at a midtown Toronto public school answered the proverbial parental question, "How was school today?"

"Bad. Michael's left."

"Why did he leave?"

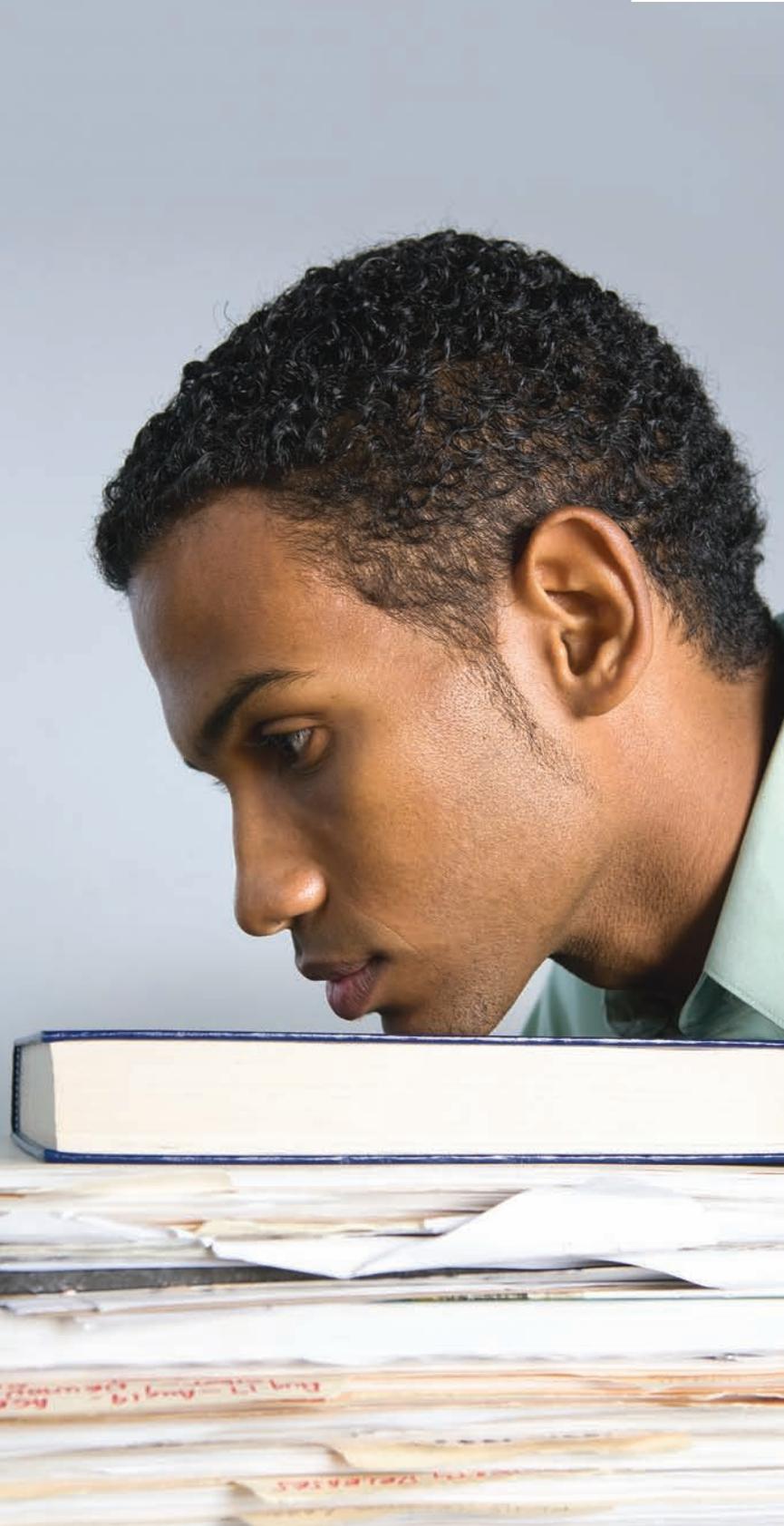
"Cos he's Black. I think his Mom just got fed up. He keeps getting into trouble. Our group gets noisy and when Ms... wants us to quiet down she looks over and just sees Michael. He stands out, you see."

Tom learned early that the experience of school for White and Black students is not the same. That was in 1978.

Some thirty years later the Canadian Education Association engaged drama educator, Kathleen Gould Lundy to co-create with students a dramatic anthology of their stories of life and learning, *Imagine a School...*<sup>5</sup> Black students from an inner city school told a number of stories of racism. After reviewing the scenes that the students had prepared, Kathy said, "But I was surprised that we didn't see a scene about race." Sudi, a Somali-Canadian student in a Toronto public school replied, "We didn't want to do it." "Why would you not take this opportunity?" asked Kathy. Sudi explained, "No, we wouldn't – we didn't want to do that because we didn't want to make it seem like a Black person's way out is to say that some (teachers), that a teacher



**EN BREF** Deux débats récents dans le milieu canadien de l'éducation illustrent l'importance d'encourager la discussion au sujet des conflits de valeurs, de visions et de convictions. Tant la décision d'éliminer l'immersion précoce en français au Nouveau-Brunswick que celle du conseil scolaire de Toronto d'offrir un programme mettant l'accent sur la culture noire ont soulevé les passions au pays. Dans le deuxième cas, la controverse semble opposer l'obtention de meilleurs résultats aux enjeux d'intégration et d'équité, mais il s'agit d'une fausse dichotomie, car de meilleurs résultats rehausseront en fin de compte l'intégration et l'équité. Lorsqu'on traite de telles controverses en éducation dans le respect, avec des esprits ouverts explorant de nouvelles perspectives et valeurs, il en émerge souvent de nouvelles idées. Ainsi, le développement par les commissions scolaires de la maternelle, de la prématernelle et de la maternelle à temps plein, de centres de compétences parentales et de programmes de repérage précoce ont précédé l'établissement du large consensus public essentiel à la formulation de politiques provinciales.



is racist. That's the reason I didn't want to do it. Because I didn't want them (an audience of educators) to think that every Black person says, 'Oh it's because I'm Black – that is why I can't get that mark.'<sup>6</sup> Sudi had learned that some matters are better not spoken of publicly.

Conversations about race, class and academic achievement are inherently difficult for Canadians. Educators share a commitment to equal educational opportunity, but we are less certain about making a commitment to equal educational outcomes. Even if we do believe that 'every student can learn' or that our job is 'success for all', there is little consensus about how much difference schools can make. These conversations are difficult because they involve disagreements about what happened or should happen; they involve personal feelings about the matter at hand; and they involve identity – what the situation means to each of those involved.<sup>7</sup> Often an exploration of the facts will allow people of goodwill to acknowledge their disagreement and move on. But when public policy requires a choice that will favour one position over another, the outcome is often less satisfactory. The facts may not be in dispute. Instead, competing visions, values and beliefs are at stake.

#### **CURRENT CONTROVERSIES IN EDUCATION**

Two recent education debates illustrate the problem. Both New Brunswick's plan to eliminate early French immersion (related to its goal of ensuring that "Every child will leave Grade 5 having mastered the tools to learn – reading, writing and numeracy") and the TDSB's plan to support the development of an Africentric Alternative School<sup>8</sup> produced debates that spanned the country and garnered international interest. These issues have more in common than might appear on the surface. At their best, both debates were about how to disrupt the correlation between social class and educational attainment, about whether specific program choices should be available to students and parents, and about how the broader public interest in public education is to be served.

In Toronto, parents Angela Wilson and Donna Harrow proposed the establishment of a K-12 Black focus school. After a year of community consultations, research reviews and advisory committee work, the TDSB, by a slim majority, approved the creation of a K-5 alternative Africentric school to be housed in an unused wing of an existing K-6 elementary public school. In New Brunswick, parents Paula Small and Patrick Ryan sought a judicial review of the actions of the Minister of Education. Mr. Justice H.H.

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McLennan ruled that the Minister's decision to phase out early French immersion was unfair and unreasonable because the decision-making process did not provide time for "a full debate".<sup>9</sup> Minister Kelly Lamrock subsequently established a consultation process, and on August 5, 2008, under the headline, "Consultation results in improved French second language program", he and the Premier announced a revised plan, including a new entry point to French immersion at Grade 3 and an introduction to French language and culture for all students in K-2.

The new program is a necessary political compromise. Educational controversies are essentially political because they are not only about the allocation of limited resources but also about what we want for our children because of what we believe to be the purpose of public education in relation to our aspirations for society.

Like the Africentric Alternative School today, early French immersion resulted from parent advocacy, with the first immersion class opening in Montreal in 1965, and also like the Africentric school, it established a voluntary program that segregates participating students for educational purposes. But the recent debates about the two plans have been very different. In New Brunswick the focus was largely on empirical evidence: what the research says about achievement in French immersion, whether early immersion is the best (or only) route to bilingualism, whether early immersion results in streaming that is detrimental to the achievement of non-immersion students. In the Toronto case, the empirical evidence about the achievement of Black students is widely accepted so that the debate has been about concepts: segregation versus integration; inclusion and exclusion; the place of culture in education; and definitions of public education. These ideas defy simple description.

Some opponents of the Toronto plan compared it to racial segregation in the United States and for emphasis even declared, "Martin Luther King would turn over in his grave". In her recent book, Beverly Daniel Tatum points out that while many people may remember the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that led to desegregation, few know about the several other U.S. Supreme Court decisions that have facilitated the re-segregation of American schools. She argues that the fight for school desegregation was not simply a symbolic fight for civil rights but was fundamentally a struggle for equal access to publicly funded educational resources.<sup>10</sup>

Canada has its own story of segregation and desegregation. In some Ontario communities the first Separate School Act, itself the means of providing separate settings

for Roman Catholic and Protestant minorities, was used to justify the establishment of separate schools for Black children. A court challenge brought by parents in 1873 resulted in a ruling by the Chief Justice of Upper Canada, John Beverly Robinson, that where a separate school had been established, all Black students must attend it no matter what the quality of education. The last segregated Black school closed in Nova Scotia in the 1960s. The opposition by Black parents to the forced segregation of their children in the past focused on the demonstrably inferior quality of Black schools when levels of resources and teacher quality were compared to those in the public schools. Today parents supporting a Black focus school make a different claim – that resources available to their children in public schools are qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, inferior in that they do not offer their children culturally meaningful curricula, high academic expectations and learning environments in which they can achieve them, nor sufficient adult positive role models to support identity formation.

The correlation between socio-economic status, racial background and academic achievement amounts to double jeopardy for students who are both Black and poor. De-facto school segregation based on income already exists as a result of public policy that concentrates social housing, thus creating neighbourhoods of dense poverty. In schools that draw their students from local communities, the ethno-racial and class composition of the student body reflects that of its neighbourhood. Although Blacks make up only 12 percent of the total student population in Toronto, the percentage rises to 60-70 percent in a few Toronto schools because Black families are more likely to be poor. Interestingly, this concentrating – if not segregating – impact of housing and urban planning policies seems to be passively accepted in Canada. As a result, the educational impacts of separation by race and socio-economic background are hopelessly tangled. In the U.S., several districts have recognized this complex interaction by choosing to 'integrate' schools based on family income and student achievement rather than race in the aftermath of a Supreme Court decision that forced integration based on race was unconstitutional. In Canada, the value to poor students of being educated in socially integrated settings has been well documented.<sup>11</sup> The initial New Brunswick plan to eliminate early French immersion was designed to address this issue by reducing streaming by socio-economic background. It is too early to tell whether the open and voluntary enrolment of students in the Africentric Alternative School will generate a student community with greater socio-economic diversity than that currently experienced in many Toronto schools.

Yet clearly, simple inclusion in the local school is no guarantee of equal achievement. Daniel Tatum calls for the ABC's of inclusive learning environments that affirm identity, build community and cultivate leadership. Full inclusion in a school where students feel they belong, are cared for as individuals, and are respected for who they are, and where their parents are welcomed, not judged, is surely a worthy vision for public schools. This has not been the experience of the parents, students, educators, community leaders and academics who support the proposal to create such a school for Black students.

The recent debate about race and school achievement in





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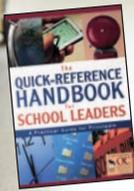
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Toronto has focused almost exclusively on the idea of the Black-focused school (now named the Africentric Elementary Alternative School) that, according to polls, the majority of the population opposes. Some perspective is warranted. Current plans are for an alternative school of perhaps 200 pupils, K-5; the establishment of a three-year pilot program to implement a model for integrating the histories, cultures and contributions of people of African descent into the curriculum in three other public elementary schools; and a staff development, research and innovation centre for improving school achievement of marginalized and vulnerable groups, to be established in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and community agencies. The school will be open to all students, use the Ontario curriculum in a culturally supportive environment, provide for an understanding of the cultures, experiences and histories of peoples of African descent, and encourage parental participation. The school will be set up under the TDSB's already-existing Alternative School Policy that supports the establishment of schools that provide unique pedagogy, forms of governance and staff involvement, and strong parental and/or student involvement.

The Africentric Alternative School will not provide a systemic solution to the problem of the underachievement of Black students. However it may well take its place among innovations from which we learn more clearly how schools can serve all students well.

#### THE VALUE OF CONTROVERSY IN EDUCATION

Controversial issues have been discussed in the classroom for many years because their study can lead to an understanding of the difference between empirical and conceptual questions and promote an attitude of inquiry, the 'critical spirit' so necessary for critical thinking.<sup>12</sup> When educational controversies are addressed with respect, with inquiring minds that explore alternative perspectives and values, new ideas and opportunities arise from which valuable innovations emerge. For example, the development of kindergarten, junior kindergarten, all-day kindergarten, parenting centres, and early identification

programs by school districts all preceded the emergence of the broad-based public consensus essential to support provincial policy. International language programs and the shift from solely Christian religious observance in public schools in response to growing multicultural and multi-faith communities, now widely accepted in Canada, also had their origins in local controversies.

In a number of provinces, the role of local school boards has changed through amalgamation of districts, elimination of local taxation as a direct source of revenue, clearer accountability for student achievement, and stronger provincial policy direction. Their function is becoming more corporate, and their effectiveness is being questioned in a number of places. In the search for improved education governance, we ought not forget that the messy local politics of controversial issues is the ground on which differences in community values can be resolved. If any country is able to crack the so-far intractable problem of the under-performance associated with race and class, it is Canada. The current debates in Toronto and New Brunswick may help us get there. |

**PENNY MILTON**, CEO of the Canadian Education Association, was an elected trustee of the former Toronto Board of Education, 1978-87.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For a discussion of racism as a social construct and the impact racism on educational expectations and outcomes, see the article by Ratna Ghosh in this issue.

#### Notes

- 1 Bertelsmann Foundation. *Country Profile Canada*. 2008 Carl Bertelsmann Prize: "Integration Through Education — Fairness for All". [http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-0A00F0A-3315D2A7/bst\\_engl/hs.xml/85815\\_85869.htm](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xchg/SID-0A00F0A-3315D2A7/bst_engl/hs.xml/85815_85869.htm)
- 2 M. Yau and J. O'Reilly, 2006 *Student Census, Grades 7-12: System Overview* (Toronto District School Board. October 2007). [http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/about\\_us/external\\_research\\_application/docs/2006StudentCensusSystemOverview1.pdf](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/about_us/external_research_application/docs/2006StudentCensusSystemOverview1.pdf)
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- 4 R. Brown, S. Manning, J. O'Reilly and M. Yau, *Summary of Student Achievement and Its Relationship to Demographic Variables* (Toronto District School Board).
- 5 *Imagine a School...* (DVD), Canadian Education Association, 2007.
- 6 *Student Voices* (DVD), Canadian Education Association, 2007. Unpublished.
- 7 D. Stone, B. Patton, and S. Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999).
- 8 The terms 'Africentric' school and 'Black-focused' school are used interchangeably.
- 9 Small & Ryan v. New Brunswick (Minister of Education) 2008 NBQB 201.
- 10 Beverley Daniel Tatum, *Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).
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- 12 S. Sheppard, "The Merits of Controversy. Introductory Essay," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 1, no 1 (Winter 2006).

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