



Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: The Gateway to Retention of Students of African Descent in Nova Scotia

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Abstract

This paper is informed by ongoing research on the effect of racism on the health and retention of students of African descent (SAD) in universities and colleges in Nova Scotia, Canada. The research participants, comprising 20 students (including both current and former students), identified as immigrants, African Nova Scotians, and international students with the narratives of social work students included for this paper. The research participants allowed us to understand what racism means to them and how they experience it, as well as the effect of racial tensions on their health, professional careers, academic success, and retention. Students' narratives showed a disconnect between equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) statements and claims projected by their institution or program, and actual classroom culture and dynamics which affected their health and well-being. Participant narratives highlighted unhealthy classroom dynamics, the need to put in additional effort to succeed, experiencing racism from anti-racism advocates, faculty composition, the absence of inclusive institutional support networks, and the inconveniences of becoming the face of diversity. Information derived from the study will provide concrete evidence for improving student success and retention in post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia.

Keywords: Retention of Students of African Descent, Students of African Descent, Social Work Students, Racism, Health and Retention, EDI, Nova Scotia

Introduction

As Canada becomes more ethnically diverse due to immigration, the social work profession is expected to be transformative in representing the needs of service users. Achieving this requires social work programs with the capability to attract, retain and train a diverse student body competent to meet the demands of the communities that social work

practitioners serve (Weinberg & Fine, 2020). For instance, Mbuva (2011) found that having positive role models and a supportive staff able to address the concerns of enrolled students supported greater retention. Moreover, program coordinators should ensure that racialized students are not dealing with systemic or institutional issues that may lead to disillusionment and negatively impact their retention (Weinberg & Fine, 2020). Furthermore, Neville et al. (2004), found that emotional and racial stress experienced by Black students attending predominantly White institutions were associated with psychological distress, while these perceived academic stressors resulted in lower grade point averages. To effectively examine the retention of students of African descent in Canadian social work programs, this paper begins by understanding factors that influence their career choice and success in professional settings. The paper also explores the implications of these factors on the retention of students of African descent with attention to the outlined expectations of the International Decade for People of African descent (2015-2024) and operating Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives that guide admissions policies in social work institutions in Canada.

Career Choice in Social Work for Students of African Descent

Studies have found a link between personality traits such as altruism (Wilson & McCrystal, 2007), and a traumatic or turbulent family history, such as history of psychopathology and violence (Sellers & Hunter, 2005), and increased motivation to pursue a career in social work. A study conducted by Sellers and Hunter (2005) in the United States, found that family history and family problems had a profound influence on students' decision to pursue social work, inspiring their areas of specialization within the field. They reported that student applicants with a troubled family history are more likely to choose careers related to mental health. However, as the ethnic makeup of study participants was not explicitly stated, we cannot confirm whether the study included students of African descent, or what their career motivators may have been. Daniel (2011) examined the experiences of minority students enrolled in social work programs in the United States and found that many were motivated to pursue a social work degree for a variety of reasons, including the desire to address social justice issues in their communities, the appeal of perceived job flexibility, positive and negative experiences with social workers, a desire to counter the negative stereotypes associated with social workers, and a passion for working with poor or vulnerable populations. Understanding the motivators of students of African descent for careers in social work will aid in the development of positive and structured career development plans (Daniel, 2011) and promote much needed diversity in social work practice.

Daniel (2011) also highlights certain concerns raised by minority students regarding their social work education. These concerns included doubts about upward

mobility in the profession (Bie et al., 2020; Daniel, 2011); relatively lower income of social workers; a perceived lack of respect accorded to social workers (Daniel, 2011); and unaddressed field placement encounters (Bie et al., 2020). Racialized social work practitioners in Canada that participated in the study by Weinberg and Fine (2020), shared their challenging experiences with daily workplace encounters involving clients who did not want to work with them due to their race; White colleagues who accused them of bias towards minority users of social services; while racialized practitioners in higher positions shared that their White subordinates sometimes questioned their authority. Others reported that they were often overlooked for higher positions and passed over in favor of underqualified White colleagues; received sanctions or were met with silence from management when they spoke out about issues of racial encounters or cultural insensitivity; and dealt with the psychological impact of deciphering the true intentions of a wrongdoing meted out by a White colleague - that is wondering whether it was a racist encounter or just an unfortunate encounter (Weinberg & Fine, 2020).

Equitable Admissions Policy as the New Gatekeeping

Equitable admissions policies (EAPs), developed to support marginalized communities, can lose their purpose if they are not implemented correctly within institutions. Although institutions may pay lip service to principles of equity, diversity, inclusion and recently accessibility, through buzzwords, they often fail to recognize that genuine incorporation of these principles requires comprehensive policy and structural changes. Such is the case with post-secondary admission policies that refuse to diversify admission boards or committees and inadvertently perpetuate discrimination regardless of the existence of EAPs. Accordingly, the notion of homophily, whereby admissions policies, structures, and boards exude similar Euro-American-centric views should be acknowledged. According to Bowman and Bastedo (2017), homophily can lead to “higher degrees of segregation and stratification of equity and opportunity” (p. 432). In fact, their study found that admission recommendations varied based on the reviewer’s social location (Bowman & Bastedo, 2017). Given the diversity of applicants within social work programs, it is crucial to ensure adequate representation among the admission reviewers to match the populations served and the larger community.

Admissions policies and criteria must be examined and adjusted away from favouring dominant notions of merit toward those grounded in lived experiences, leadership qualities, motivation (Essack, 2012), and service. Although some institutions and programs have developed EAPs, unconscious bias within them can still deny entry to racialized persons, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Admission requirements that include exams and essays inadvertently segregate those from high socioeconomic backgrounds (Essack, 2012) due to their increased probability to score

higher based on access to better school curricula in high-income neighborhoods (Mardones & Campos-Requena, 2021), as well as access to tutoring and examination preparation (Lockyer, 2021). This further creates a post-secondary environment where White and racialized students are essentially differentiated only by their race, thereby reinforcing a homophilous environment rather than one that is rich, diverse, and genuinely equitable.

Social Work Education and International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024)

The United Nations declared 2015-2024, the International Decade for People of African Descent with the theme of “*People of African Descent: recognition, justice and development*” (United Nations, 2013). This declaration builds on the work conducted by the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (United Nations, 2013), which was established in 2002 to focus on “problems of racial discrimination faced by people of African Descent living in the African Diaspora” (United Nations, 2021b) while simultaneously working to eliminate “racial discrimination against people of African Descent” (United Nations, 2021b). Thus, it is timely to focus on race, health, and retention as experienced by students of African descent within post-secondary education in Canada, and more specifically, in Nova Scotia. Canada is a signatory to the United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Department of Justice, 2019). Therefore, the country, must be cognizant of, accountable for, and work to uphold systems that are based on equity and strive to eliminate all forms of discrimination (United Nations, 2021a).

Moreover, with the end of the International Decade for People of African Descent aimed at advancing access to education and social services for people of African descent, post-secondary institutions must be held accountable for efforts to reduce racism and develop inclusive policies and curriculum within Euro-American-centric institutions. This is particularly applicable to social work education as students of African descent are already more likely to face barriers in accessing not only education, but also education that can be applied to their communities of being and belonging, when compared to their White counterparts. These barriers experienced within social work classrooms extend to professional or practice environments, where graduates of these programs fail to possess practice or relational understanding beyond Euro-American-centric ideologies. The monolithic nature of current social work practice often leaves White graduates feeling ill-prepared to work with racialized communities (Wilson & Stith, 1993). It is evident that the disconnect within the social work profession will lead to misunderstandings among professionals, further creating rifts and distrust within racialized communities. A case in point is the overrepresentation of racialized communities within the child welfare system (Daniels & Jean-Pierre, 2020; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Mbakogu, 2013; United Nations, 2017)

which could be attributed to the limited understanding White social workers have of the needs of racialized children and their families (Mbakogu, 2013).

To fulfill the recommendations outlined in the International Decade for People of African Descent, systemic changes within the educational system are deemed not only appropriate but also necessary. The incorporation of *Ubuntu* within social work education and practice for instance, would foster intersectional and intercultural practices that draw upon African ways of knowing and understanding. Van Breda (2019) states that *Ubuntu* “gives expression to deeply-held African ideals of one’s personhood being rooted in one’s interconnectedness with others” (p. 438), and argues that with the incorporation of *Ubuntu*, social workers would be mindful of the impact of their interventions on generations - past, present, and future. When *Ubuntu* is adopted within post-secondary institutions, a shift occurs away from Euro-American-centric modalities of practice toward the incorporation, appreciation, and understanding of varied ways of being. This transforms to informed social workers who are better equipped to support racialized communities, therefore working to repair the strain, distrust, and rift.

This paper is largely informed by ongoing research on the effect of racism on the retention of students of African descent (SAD) in universities and colleges in Nova Scotia, Canada. The research participants are individuals who identify as African immigrants, African Nova Scotians, and international students, with the narratives of social work students used in this paper. The research aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences of SAD registered in social work programs and the likely impact of these experiences on their academic and professional careers. Information derived from the study will provide concrete evidence for improving student success and retention in post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia.

Additionally, this paper explores two crucial factors for student retention. The first is the students’ efforts or persistence in remaining in the program, regardless of the hinderances, and the second, is the university’s efforts to ensure that students remain in the program. Within the context of this paper, *student persistence will refer to*: Students continued enrolment and participation in the requirements of their program of study until graduation that is rooted in their desire to achieve their goals. This includes students’ ability to respond to the influence(s) of academic, institutional, and personal experiences in completing their degrees. While *Institution facilitated persistence will refer to*: The efforts made by educational institutions to ensure students continued enrolment, successful completion of their studies, and application of their qualifications to meet career goals beyond the university, that begins with the institutions’ anticipation and attention to students’ needs before admission to their programs of study. The voices of student participants in the study are presented as expressed to ensure that their issues related to retention and well-being within the context of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are acknowledged, validated, and addressed. This paper specifically examines what students

of African descent mean when they discuss racism and how they experience it, and the effects of racial tensions on their health, academic success, and retention.

Relevance of African-Centered Perspectives

Although it has been well-documented that racialized communities are over-represented in a variety of social service systems and remain underrepresented in preventive programming (Graham, 1999), social work education continues to focus on Euro-American-centric modalities of practice which develops and perpetuates this system. This view and its theoretical basis only serve to uphold colonial worldviews. Further, when students are trained to view the world through a single lens, all outliers raise questions for concerns, which then leads to over-representation within social systems. Ironically, the very structures that social workers are expected to dismantle in their careers are often reproduced within social work education. Since the 1980's there have been calls for anti-racist practices to be incorporated into social work practice (Graham, 1999). For instance, Graham (1999) notes that "a lack of understanding of the cultural orientation of Black families often results in social work operating against the interests of Black children" (p. 252) which further works to perpetuate dominant Euro-American-centric viewpoints.

To address these challenges, many scholars have suggested the indigenization of social work (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). This concept is based on ensuring that practices and theories are developed to reflect the values, culture, norms, philosophies, and social realities of those in a particular country (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018) and supports the nature of social work practice among different groups (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Considering the increasing cultural diversity within Canada, social workers are not upholding the overarching ethical principles set forth by the International Federation of Social Workers, that emphasize promoting social justice by challenging institutional oppression (IFSW, 2018). Relatedly, the call to incorporate Afrocentricity within social work education serves to decrease the cultural hierarchy that has been created through Euro-American-centric epistemologies of practice. Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) argue that the use of Afrocentrism does not create racial hierarchy but rather centres respect and the philosophy of all cultures.

Utilizing theoretical frameworks rooted outside of Euro-American-centric practices facilitates the recognition and understanding of diverse perspectives and realities. When racialized and non-racialized students get trained through a lens that does not consider or minimizes the oppression and lived experiences of racialized communities, a severe disconnect and lack of understanding occurs that is carried into professional practice. This misunderstanding further exacerbates the individualistic, self-blaming system, overlooking how society has contributed to these challenges particularly by promoting systemic oppression. Graham (1999) questions how the overall fight for equality

can be achieved when social work interventions are historically conducted through the lens of the dominant cultural group, rather than recognizing the diversity of human realities and experiences. Furthermore, current social work has been described as a theory of practice that silences marginalized voices and focuses on the ideologies of European and American practice, without the recognition or link to different cultures (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Barriers that have been cited include reluctance (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017) and uncertainty about how to incorporate an Afrocentric framework of practice among social work students, educators, and practitioners (especially supervisors). The challenges faced by Afrocentricity in social work education may be reinforced by the desire for empirical evidence on its applicability and benefits, which only serves to stall its advancement as it faces another Euro-American-centric blockade (Lateef, 2021; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011).

Current theoretical frameworks within social work have “been ineffective and oppressive in addressing the needs of African people” (Graham, 1999, p. 253). Failure to effectively address and incorporate Afrocentricity into social work education will continue to produce or perpetuate a cycle of ill-prepared, Euro-American-centric trained and focused social workers. The goal is that by de-homogenizing the theoretical foundations of social work education and practice, institutions will incorporate curriculum content that promotes students’ understanding of the needs of diverse clientele and fosters the potential to retain a diverse student base. Utilizing a homogenized approach perpetuates a Euro-American-centric knowledge base, overlooking the ontological interconnectedness of society, which creates larger barriers and systemic oppression in the field of social work. To advance the field, support graduating students, and be relevant to communities (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017), it is necessary to incorporate diversified theoretical lenses and modalities of practice.

Methods

The exploratory study used Afrocentricity as the basis for projecting the experiences of 20 students (current and former students included) who identify as immigrants, African Nova Scotians, or international students of African descent with racism and its impact on their health and retention. The purposeful sampling technique was used to select participants, highlighting and assessing the intersection of their identities, statuses, and backgrounds with their experiences of racial tension. The participants were recruited through email invitations using outlets within and external to Dalhousie University, all targeting communities of African descent. The recruitment email contained details on eligibility, tasks participants would perform, and the research objectives. Interested participants contacted the lead researcher, Dr. Mbakogu, using the email address on the recruitment notice. The researcher then set up an introductory phone call with interested

participants.

Given that research into participants' experiences of racial tension or stress may constitute difficult conversations or memories for participating students, the research allowed for gradual interaction and sharing by participants. To address the risk of emotional distress resulting from memories of racial tension or stress, participants were told prior to the interviews that they may skip questions they are uncomfortable with, take breaks when needed, and terminate the interview at any stage of the interview process. Due to prevailing COVID-19 restrictions, interview sessions with participants were conducted online via Zoom; therefore, the researcher obtained verbal rather than written consent from participants. Each research activity lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour and was audio-recorded with the permission of participants. Furthermore, effort was made to ensure that participants' involvement in this study was confidential and that the personal details and identifying information of research participants were not shared with anyone outside the research team. The generated data informed the discussion of findings based on seven major themes: the face of diversity, class dynamics and resistance, putting in much more to succeed, experiencing racism from anti-racism advocates, racialized trauma too big to be addressed, faculty composition, and inclusive institutional support and support networks.

Findings and Discussions

The findings show the interplay between the nature of instruction, classroom and practice engagements, student inclusion and community wellness, and their impact on the retention of students of African descent.

The Face of Diversity

Some participants contemplated whether their enrolment in social work classrooms symbolized the embodiment of racial diversity. This perception came with mental health implications, placing them in difficult situations where they were expected to assume, even when not emotionally or physically ready, the responsibility of serving as a living encyclopaedia of racism by educating their White classmates or professors on appropriate societal interactions, thereby retraumatizing themselves:

It was kind of about a couple weeks in, so we had already gotten the chance to ... meet the professor and ...get familiar with the content but after one class in particular, I had a teacher come up to me and my colleagues who were also individuals of African descent and she had basically said that she wanted us to talk more in class about our experience of racism to help our

White classmates understand. This was very harmful and triggering because for some folks, it's not easy to talk about their experiences of racism and I really feel personally that we shouldn't be approached by a faculty member. It kind of caught me off guard and I was really shocked by it, and I think I was so shocked by it that I was puzzled and didn't really know what to say until after I got to unpack it.

I know for me I didn't really share experiences per se, but I spoke about the advocacy part and kind of the need for folks to educate themselves on how to work appropriately and interact appropriately with racialized folks.

Considering that students of African descent are enrolled in social work programs to enrich the quality of service delivery to their communities of belonging, it is only natural for them to express concerns regarding the type of social workers that will be deployed to work in their communities:

We had a guest speaker who was from North Preston and she (a classmate) was making fun of how they spoke. Actually, my friend had overheard her and her group making fun of how they were speaking. I've had a classmate talk about how they were told to refer to Gottingen Street as "Got a gun" street, yeah, just a lot of privileged White people who don't understand the privileges they hold. I was baffled by the fact the school must have picked out of like 40 or 50 people, the majority of the White people were like this. It was terrible and for me it was even scary because I knew that these people were going to graduate and work with me, with folks who look like me and it was just really challenging.

Based on this narrative, it is not surprising that some professionals of African descent are reluctant to honour invitations to guest lecture, especially when they bring their expertise and lived experiences into the classroom, only to witness side conversations, snickering, and humiliating exchanges during their presentation. It has become commonplace for students to engage in labeling, bullying, and microaggressive behavior in social work classrooms. When such incidents go unaddressed, they are often perceived as acceptable behavior. These normalized attributes are replicated during field placements and eventually professional interactions. Courses that emphasize the use and application of practical verbal and non-verbal communication skills should be an integral part of the social work curriculum.

Class Dynamics and Resistance

Negative preconceptions held by educators and classmates about people of African descent can manifest in hostile classroom dynamics for racialized students (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2020):

When I started school at Dalhousie three years ago. I expected to be in a welcoming environment. It is the general myth worldwide, everyone believes that Canadians are very friendly, helpful, and very nice. I went into school with that notion, and when I started school, it was very difficult. I was the only person of African descent but not Indigenous. I really did feel alone in class. You said hi and people didn't respond. When I asked my classmates questions, they would say, "I don't know, just email the prof." But during conversations in class, they would speak up and seem to appear very knowledgeable. The few I could talk to and ask questions would be like I'm not sure... I don't know, just email the prof. So, there was a lot of pushback...

For some students of African descent, it appeared that, in addition to striving to excel academically, they needed extra energy to enter academic spaces and be accepted as authentic students with equal rights of belonging. The participant expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation resulting from complicated interactions with classmates, some of which could have been alleviated by the instructor, as these interpersonal difficulties hindered the attainment of program goals:

If the professor did not create groups, I would never get into a group. But I'm usually forced on who doesn't have the numbers to make up their group. I see the class being asked like, "Hey do you want to be in a group to do this assignment all through my Bachelors?" Or like they go from group to group or there is no one else or ...there is an even number in the class, or the group is not complete, so I just get in the group. Sometimes I had to go with whatever they decided to do because that was the only option. I did have a couple of students who are friendly but when it comes to things like that they just get themselves into groups. I saw that as discrimination because I'm always left out. It was like that all through the Bachelor it's still the same in the master's program.

Wei and Bunjun (2020) described a similar experience in which a racialized student notified their instructor that she was without a group and was thereafter, publicly rejected from joining an available group on account of her race. The authors attributed this

blatant discrimination to the assumption that racialized students lack requisite English proficiency and would be liabilities within the group. To address this, the researchers randomly assigned students to groups, resulting in more diverse group formations. However, even with this approach, incidents of racism within groups were reported, including an international student who was excluded from group meetings, and another whose work was excluded from the final report (Wei & Bunjun, 2020). This solution may not be effective in cases where affected individuals are the only students of African descent in the classroom, as was true for some of our participants. This further reinforces segregation within social work courses as affected students may only feel welcome by specific people or groups. Educators must prioritize the issue of exclusion, as it has a detrimental impact on the mental well-being of racialized students.

Putting in Much More to Succeed

To break through the glass ceilings presented by their minority status and the scarcity of diverse individuals and perspectives within their classrooms, some research participants chose to exert additional effort to achieve success compared to their non-racialized classmates:

We believe that when it comes to academics, that people should be graded based on merit. At the end of the day, while we want to maintain ~~the~~ quality education, we also want to improve. But how can that happen when we are not graded based on merit? It becomes a problem. Apart from that, we have told ourselves that when a white person puts in 100% effort, I have to put in 150% effort for me to get the same grade.

Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2020) conducted a study in which young male African immigrants residing in Ontario were interviewed regarding their experiences of racism. The findings indicated that schoolteachers and counsellors held negative preconceptions about these young men, labelling them as “troublemakers” and “underachievers” without evidence or justification, due to the colour of their skin. To counter these negative stereotypes associated with being African immigrants in the Canadian educational system, the young immigrants, including our study participant, employed various strategies, such as “working twice as hard” to prove their abilities and prove them wrong.

Experiencing Racism from Anti-racism Advocates

The irony of experiencing racism within a profession such as social work, which emphasizes social justice and anti-oppression, has not escaped the notice of many.

Weinberg and Fine (2020) identified the possibility that White social workers may view themselves as incapable of harboring racist views or biases which prevents them from recognizing their racist tendencies, opinions, and behaviors.

I think it is painful. It is not a good feeling. It is painful, especially when they suppress you such that you don't get to disclose or get to voice or that your voice is shut. I think it's actually painful. But if you encounter racism and are given room to air your views, I think that would be a bit fair. But when they try to suppress you and not listen to your grievances, I think it becomes problematic...if it happens from the ones that you think are the advocates for anti-racism. Especially if people in social work who should be at the forefront of advocating for equality and social justice are the ones suppressing your voices then you begin to see that it is embedded in all institutions, and it will never end.

A recurring narrative is that the concerns of students of African descent remain shut down, are often unheard, or not given proper consideration, except for instances where White students raise similar issues.

The truth is that, throughout my study time here, it's become more evident with fellow students and professors that I'm not being heard. Anytime I raise any concerns I am always being shut down without anyone looking into it the first time...

The goal of social work education is to create a space for students and professors to share their voices and learn from one another. With such interactive spaces provided in classrooms, there is room for positive engagements within practice spaces that translate to spaces to voice and learn from their future clients.

Racialized Trauma Too Big To Be Addressed

It appears there is a limit to the attention given to experiences of racial trauma brought up during school town hall discussions. School town hall deliberations typically focus on concerns affecting White students, which differ from those affecting racialized students. This skewed approach raises questions about the equity and inclusivity of these proceedings (Mbakogu, 2013, 2020; Mbakogu et al., 2021):

I remember we had a kind of debrief session. The head...asked students to share their experiences, and I had the courage to talk about mine of not

feeling welcomed and not being treated fairly by classmates and professors and I was ignored... There was a kind of comment made that what I was saying was too big to talk about at that point in time, but that they would address it later, which they never did. This was said in front of the students. It was after the students' hearing that we went into our smaller discussions. The racialized students advocated for us to talk about it because that was our experience, that was what they wanted, because it was clear to them that what I said was not validated in anyway. It was just kind of ignored and disregarded because it was too big of an issue to talk about at that point in time.

The participant's experience raises questions about the treatment of EDI and EDI-related issues in institutions that advocate for these values. It appears that, in some instances, the commitment to EDI is limited to promoting diverse student enrolment, which, as noted by several participants, may not be reflected in actual classroom demographics, curriculum content, and classroom discussions.

Faculty Composition

Dependable data on racialized faculty are not readily available, as many universities are unwilling to collect or publish disaggregated data on racialized faculty. However, existing research on the subject indicates that there are considerable inequalities in this regard (Henry et al., 2012). Research suggests that a more inclusive faculty is better equipped to attract and retain students from diverse backgrounds (Henry et al., 2012; Leggon, 2010). A study by Leggon (2010) found that students are more inclined to perform better when taught by people like themselves and who can relate to their experiences.

I think one thing that can be improved is having more Black lecturers. So far, I have seen just one Black person serving as a TA...

Data from the 2016 census revealed that only 21% of full-time faculty in Canadian universities were racialized individuals, while the proportions of racialized graduate and undergraduate students was 45% and 40%, respectively (Universities Canada, 2020). Although this does not provide specific details on the proportion of African-descended students and faculty members specifically, it underscores the apparent disparity in the representation of racialized faculty in Canadian universities.

Well, I think having more professors who are racialized. Definitely having more courses that are mandatory that talk about these subtle

microaggressions, discrimination and instances of racism to really help folks ... You really need someone that's very forward in the way they talk but also respectful because most of the White people in my program whom I interacted with sounded uncomfortable talking about race, so they really need to be challenged on why they think that way to help them learn. I think there should be...like support groups which may not work for some. I find folks may be uncomfortable sharing their experiences in front of everyone, so whether it's a support group or a mentorship group where there is someone whom Black students or racialized students can talk to about their experiences (Sally, social work alumna).

The current realities of racialized faculty in Canadian universities, which is characterized by limited promotions and tenured positions, serves to discourage racialized educators from joining and remaining in higher institutions (Wijesingha & Ramos, 2017). Moreover, this circumstance has a negative impact on the support that racialized faculty can provide to students (Wei & Bunjun, 2020).

Inclusive Institutional Support and Support Networks

To enhance retention rates, schools of social work should support racialized students in attaining their goals by fostering their advancement while bridging the existing gaps (Daniel, 2011).

I remember one time in my first term, during the first week, I cried. I was like, "What did I get myself into?" Is this what schooling is like? Because it felt like a toxic and unfriendly environment, being in class and being alone. Then I remember I couldn't make it to class, we were in groups. You never know when you are going to present and that week, I wasn't feeling well so I emailed the professor and stayed home. My group was called to present that day. When I came to class the next week, one of my group members asked, "Why didn't you come to class last week?" I said I wasn't feeling well. And she was like 'did you just decide not to come to class, and not to do the presentation?' I think they were feeling that whether I come in or not, we will get the same grade. It was like questioning why I didn't come to class, instead of asking if I was okay. "Okay, we did the work, and you were not there, so why should you get the same grade?" [the group member added]. I got a zero because I wasn't present, and I wasn't yet familiar enough with things to know that I could have completed an alternative assignment.

In this instance, the new Black student group member was unaware of the options available to her, and her instructor failed to inquire about her absence or provide guidance that might have prevented her from receiving a zero grade on the assignment. The study by Wei and Bunjun (2020) reported the importance of inclusive support networks, citing that safe spaces for learning emerge when racialized students interact with others who share similar experiences. Further, faculty mentorship and courses that equip students with the knowledge to navigate and adapt to the Canadian educational system are key catalysts in ensuring their success (Myles & Cheng, 2003).

Conclusion

The findings contribute to our understanding of the challenges and experiences of students of African descent in social work programs. An additional aim of the study is to equip program administrators and department heads with greater insight as they attempt to improve the retention rates of students of African descent in their universities. Our findings align with some previous studies that highlight similar challenges faced by racialized social work students and practitioners. The interview questions, which focused on racist encounters at the university level, correspond with the findings of Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2020), also in Canada, that certain instructors hold on to negative stereotypes of students of African descent, in this case, male, who are perceived as troublesome or underachievers. Similar to our study participants, the students felt they were at a disadvantage and needed to work harder than their White classmates. Other studies reported that some graduate students and professors of African descent faced various forms of racialization and racial microaggressions in academia (Bernard et al., 2000; Nakaoka & Ortiz, 2018). The emotional and psychological discontent experienced by our research participants is in line with some previous studies that emphasize the stress and trauma that students of African descent experience in academia. Using path analysis, Forest-Bank and Cuellar (2018) found that microaggressions were associated with increased levels of psychological distress. While using the Racial Battle Fatigue framework, Brown et al. (2019) suggest that academia is male-dominated, exclusionary, and anti-Black, and this has adverse effects on the well-being of Black people in academia.

This paper also recommends potential avenues for improving the retention and general satisfaction of students of African descent in social work programs in Canada. Several students identified the absence of faculty of African descent, a lack of support from instructors, and a lack of diversity in the curriculum. Regarding the underrepresentation of faculty of African descent, Grooms et al. (2021) indicate that a racialized climate contributes to the higher exit rates of racialized educators from academia than White educators. They propose that tackling institutional racism would be critical for retaining racialized educators. These studies allude to a racial climate within social work that makes

it difficult for faculty of African descent to thrive and may potentially discourage racialized faculty from entering academia. Lerner (2021) recommends a framework for helping White students in the social work program understand racial microaggressions, ways for dissociating from color blindness, and mistrust to achieve a more inclusive classroom culture. In addition, there should be constant communication between students and faculty to foster awareness, understanding and management of the racial climate within social work classrooms and practice settings.

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