

**Signaling Belonging in the Classroom:
Examining Outcomes of a High School Course Designed to Deconstruct Anti-Black Racism**

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Abstract

The current research examined the experiences of Black and non-Black adolescents enrolled in a high school elective designed to deconstruct anti-Black racism, or a comparison class. Students reported psychological well-being, academic orientation, and racial attitudes at the start (Time 1; $n = 125$) and end of the semester (Time 2; $n = 103$; $n = 88$ at both times). Controlling for their responses at Time 1, the only difference to emerge between classes was their curriculum knowledge. Additionally, Black students in the anti-racism course expressed greater social belonging and positive racial attitudes than non-Black students at the end of the course. Exploratory analyses conducted with Black students using their Time 1 data ($n = 56$) revealed that racial regard predicted their life satisfaction, partially mediated by social belonging. The results of this study support the need to revisit course design and curriculum to better support the success of Black students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Method.....	13
Research Question 1 Results	19
Research Question 2 Results	27
General Discussion.....	30
Conclusion.....	38
References.....	40
Appendices.....	49

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Descriptive Means for Research Question 1 by Time and Class.....	20
Table 2: Descriptive Means for Research Question 1 by Time and Race.....	21
Table 3: Correlation Matrix for Research Question 2 (Black students only).....	28
Table 4: Correlation Matrix among all variables for Black Students at Time 1.....	29

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Estimated Time 2 Social Belonging for Black and Non-Black Students in the Anti-Racism Class.....	22
Figure 2: Estimated Time 2 Curriculum Knowledge Between Classes.....	24
Figure 3: Estimated Time 2 Attitudes Toward Black People for Black and Non-Black Students in the Anti-Racism Class.....	26
Figure 4: Mediation Between Racial Regard and Life Satisfaction Through Social Belonging..	30

Signaling Belonging in the Classroom:

Examining Outcomes of a High School Course Designed to Deconstruct Anti-Black Racism

Anti-Black racism remains an ongoing social problem in Canada. Despite the dominant narrative of multicultural acceptance, Black people in Canada continue to encounter structural and interpersonal racism throughout their lifetime (Matheson et al., 2021). Experiences of anti-Black racism begin early and have been documented throughout the educational sector (Codjoe, 2001). In their pursuit of education, Black students encounter numerous systemic barriers that negatively impact their academic and social experiences at school. These barriers can manifest in numerous ways, from a lack of Black representation among staff and in the curriculum, to discriminatory school policies and discipline (Cheng, 1996; Dumas, 2016; James & Turner, 2016).

Among these issues, disparities in disciplinary actions stand out, with Black students being significantly more likely to be suspended (James & Turner, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) or expelled than their White peers (Zheng & DeJesus, 2017), even for similar behaviours (Owens & McLanahan, 2020). The introduction of legislation like Ontario's *Safe Schools Act* in 2001 ironically led to teachers and administrators disproportionately suspending and expelling Black students through "zero tolerance" policies (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Although this legislation has since been largely replaced with a "progressive discipline approach" (Winton, 2013), these earlier policies set a foundation for how Black students are treated in education, with downstream effects on Black students' academic and social belonging that are still being experienced today (McPherson, 2022). This disproportionate disciplinary action toward Black students systematically deprives them of education (i.e., removed from the

classroom; Sojoyner, 2013), and is associated with lower social belonging (Bottiani et al., 2017) and academic achievement (Davis & Jordan, 1994; James & Turner, 2017).

Beyond disciplinary measures, Black students also face marginalization within the classroom, as curricula often reflect and centre Eurocentric perspectives that typically exclude or misrepresent Black histories, contributions, and culture. Williams (2023) found that experiences of curricular exclusion were associated with a lower sense of belonging, self-concept, and academic fit among Black high school students in Southern Ontario. These findings align with data showing that Black students do not perform as well or persist in the education system to the same extent as their White or non-Black counterparts (Assari et al., 2021; Carpenter & Ramirez, 2007).

Western curriculum has a long-standing history of centering White men as the key knowledge holders and decision makers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2017). This narrative of White androcentrism marginalizes the contributions and histories of other groups, particularly Black people, whose knowledge and agency are either omitted or framed through deficit-based perspectives. Such narratives can reinforce a hierarchy of cultural value, implicitly teaching students that White and male-dominated viewpoints are inherently correct, whereas others are peripheral. This can result in the alienation of Black students, and this focus deprives all students of a comprehensive and accurate understanding of history, science, and culture. Courses designed to reframe Black history as an integral part of Canadian history, and that discuss Black culture in a positive light, have the potential foster a sense of belonging among Black students and challenge biases held by their peers. Such courses are beginning to be developed but have not typically been evaluated in terms of their potential to improve the academic and psychological well-being of Black students.

The primary goal of the current research was to examine whether enrolment in a high school course designed to affirm Black students and “deconstruct” anti-Black racism would lead to better psychological well-being, academic-based perceptions, and racial attitudes among Black and non-Black adolescents. To do this, I recruited Toronto high school students from different sections of a recently created grade 12 elective course called “Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism,” or a comparison classes. During class, students were asked to complete a survey designed to assess specific aspects of their academic orientation, psychological well-being, and racial attitudes. Using a pre-post design, measures were administered both at the beginning and end of the term. This allowed me to examine whether these variables improved across time, in the Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism class relative to the comparison classes, and for Black students in particular. An additional goal was to better understand the experiences of Black adolescents by examining the relationship between racial regard, social belonging, and life satisfaction. Specifically, in post-hoc exploratory analyses, I examined whether positive racial regard predicts life satisfaction, and whether this is mediated by social belonging.

Academic and Social Belonging among Black and Racialized Students

For many students, forming a positive academic identity can be challenging. How adolescents perceive themselves as a student can be shaped by the school environment, social relationships, and individual self-esteem (Edgerton & McKenchie, 2023; Maxwell & Chmielewski, 2008). Unfortunately, the less than favourable conditions that Black students encounter can contribute to an increased sense of stigmatization throughout their education (Howarth, 2006), and evidence for this has been provided by a number of experiments. For example, Walton and Cohen (2007) tested the stability of social belonging for Black and White college students in the face of a possible threat. To do this, they led college students to believe

that they would have few friends in an intellectual domain, and then asked them to generate a list of either eight or two friends who would fit well in that domain. They observed an interaction between race and condition, whereby Black students who listed eight friends had a lower sense that they would fit in and succeed than Black students who listed just two friends. In contrast, White students were unaffected by the manipulation. Consistent with this finding, Walton and Cohen (2007) also found, in a pilot study, that minority college students report greater belonging uncertainty, making them more susceptible to reduced belongingness in response to adversity. In a second study, they introduced an intervention for Black college students that de-racialized belonging doubts. Participants read a vignette that framed belongingness concerns as a common experience of most students, regardless of race. The student in this fictional vignette then described how these concerns dissipate over time, and how belongingness can be found. The researchers found that this intervention buffered social belonging from academic adversity and increased achievement for Black, but not White, students up to seven days later. The findings of their research highlight the interconnected nature of race, achievement, and belonging, at least for Black university students.

Similarly, Mallett and colleagues (2011) recruited White and racialized high school students and asked them to respond to a measure of ethnic identity before or after responding to measures of belonging and educational expectations. They predicted that prompting students to reflect on their racial or ethnic group membership would heighten their awareness of stereotypes associated with their group membership. Consistent with this prediction, racialized students who first completed the ethnic identity measure subsequently reported lower feelings of belonging and had lower educational expectations, compared to those who completed it after. These findings were replicated in a sample of diverse college students, where reflecting on experiences

of discrimination also reduced feelings of belonging. Together, these results demonstrate how the salience of racial identity in academic contexts can introduce a sense of uncertainty about belonging for racialized students, potentially undermining their academic aspirations and achievement.

It is possible that because of the stigma and negative academic stereotypes associated with Blackness, the classroom can become clouded with a threat “in the air” of being devalued (C.M. Steele, 1997). Cues from the environment at school may serve to remind Black students that they are a stigmatized group in the academic domain, providing a psychological threat to their belonging and academic abilities (C.M. Steele et al., 2002). When confronted with cues that remind students of their potential to be negatively stereotyped or devalued, cognitive and physiological vigilance can increase and academic performance and social belonging can decrease (Murphy et al., 2007; Wout et al., 2009). In one classic series of studies, C.M. Steele and colleagues (1995) found that Black participants underperformed on a verbal test when it was framed as an assessment of intellectual ability (versus non-diagnostic). Even when the stereotype was not directly relevant or primed, the mere salience of racial stereotypes impaired their performance, highlighting how stereotypes can negatively affect academic outcomes. In support of this, a meta-analysis of 116 studies by Nguyen & Ryan (2008) found that minority participants underperformed on tests when they were framed as assessments of intellectual ability, with an average effect size of $d = .26$. They also found that minority participants consistently underperformed compared to majority participants, with moderately explicit cues producing the largest effect, followed by blatant and subtle cues. Similar results were found in a more recent meta-analysis by Appel & Webber (2021), where exposure to negative stereotypes led to

underperformance among members of stereotyped groups, while non-members were unaffected, with an effect size of $d = .28$.

Similar effects are found for women in STEM. In one series of studies, women consistently performed worse on an engineering test following an interaction with a sexist (versus non-sexist) man (Logel et al., 2009). These findings are consistent with literature suggesting that priming negative stereotypes reduces working memory capacity and academic performance by inducing a social identity threat (Schmader & Johns, 2003; Spencer et al., 1999). However, it is possible that, due to the salience of race cues, stereotype priming may occur in an implicit fashion. Building on findings such as these, Hammarlund and colleagues (2022) suggested that classroom contexts that provide a psychological threat in the air (Steele, 1997), such as those detailed above, are where belonging interventions are most effective.

More recently, a growing body of work suggests that targeted interventions can have a positive impact on sense of belonging across different contexts and social categories (LaCrosse et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2015). In some cases, an intervention as brief as one hour had a positive impact on Black students' academic outcomes (GPA) and health throughout college (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Specifically, Walton and Cohen (2011) randomly assigned Black and White college students to an intervention framing social adversity in school as shared and short-lived, or to a comparison class. This time, they measured actual GPA in addition to belonging, following up with participants twice each year until they graduated. Black students in the intervention group, compared to those in the comparison group, experienced steady improvements in both well-being (i.e., belonging) and GPA over three-year period, whereas White students again remained unaffected.

In a follow up to this study Brady and colleagues (2020) recontacted participants from Walton and Cohen's (2011) intervention seven to eleven years later. They found that Black adults who received the intervention reported greater career satisfaction and success, psychological well-being, community involvement, and leadership compared to those in the comparison class. They also reported more frequent interactions with peers and mentors. Brady and colleagues (2020) suggest that by providing a narrative that framed social adversity in a non-threatening way, the intervention enabled students to more confidently seek out and build relationships within their school community.

In another intervention study, Murphy and colleagues (2020) implemented an intervention to increase social belonging among racialized students at a broad-access college. Students read stories from racially diverse upper-year peers detailing challenges to belonging and the strategies they used to eventually feel a sense of belonging. One year later, the racialized participants who received the intervention were more likely to remain enrolled in their program compared to the comparison group, and the former also reported steady increases in social belonging and academic fit across the next two years of study. Although this work highlights the lasting power of belonging interventions, there is limited research on long-term interventions that address the social challenges Black students face while incorporating counter-narratives and strategies that position Black students as agents of change.

Although it may appear that short interventions can alter feelings of belonging, targeted belonging interventions may only have academic benefits when students are afforded opportunities to belong (Walton et al., 2023). These opportunities to belong can be difficult to come by, especially for Black students. This highlights the importance of sustained efforts to foster belonging over time, rather than relying on short-term interventions. Importantly, fostering

belonging extends beyond the social environment and also involves affirming students' identities through curricular engagement with their cultural and historical contexts. For example, Nasir and colleagues (2009) found that Black students who reported having positive school experiences also reported greater understanding of African American history. This underscores that culturally affirming environments and/or conversations may function as a key mechanism promoting sustained feelings of positivity and belonging at school.

Despite growing attention to issues of racial equity in education, relatively little is known about the impact of early interventions designed to support Black students' academic and social experiences—particularly those implemented prior to college/university. This gap in the literature is concerning given the well-documented disparities in access to post-secondary education for Black students (James & Asres, 2024; Zhou & Pan, 2023). Although much is known about these systemic barriers, less is understood about how a semester-long course might influence academic motivation, social belonging, and self-perceptions as learners. A course that explicitly addresses anti-Black racism and cultivates an inclusive classroom space may offer both direct support for Black students and broader benefits to all students by reshaping peer and institutional dynamics. These shifts, in turn, could influence students' academic trajectories, sense of belonging, and overall educational engagement. Recognizing the potential for such a course to influence key student outcomes, a primary goal of the current research was to examine the impact of a high school elective course, entitled *Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism*. Specifically, we investigated the influence of this course on students' academic orientation, psychological well-being, and racial attitudes. I was interested in how an identity affirming course such as this might improve the experiences of Black students. An additional goal of the current research was to better understand the experiences of Black students by examining the

relationship between racial regard, social belonging, and life satisfaction. Specifically, I examined whether having positive racial regard predicts life satisfaction, and whether this is mediated by social belonging.

The Role of Social Belonging for Black and Racialized Students

Previous research has linked social belonging to several positive outcomes. Across several studies, those who felt they belonged reported greater academic motivation, better performance, higher self-esteem, and better well-being (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Hurem et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2012). One theory, the State Authenticity as Fit to the Environment model (SAFE; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), outlines the implications of three types of belonging or ‘fit’, specifically self-concept fit (*sense of being your ‘true self’*), goal fit (*feeling institutionally supported in pursuing your goals*), and social fit (*sense of acceptance and validation*). For people with advantaged social identities, these three types of fit are more likely to be met, promoting experiences of cognitive, motivational, and interpersonal fluency, which in turn promotes a motivation to approach new activities and experiences. However, those with devalued social identities (e.g., Black students in education) have a lower likelihood of fit across categories. According to this model, this can evoke an avoidance motivation in a variety of domains, including at school, resulting in lower participation and ultimately disengagement.

Aday and colleagues (2024) found practical support for this idea in their studies validating a measure of the SAFE model, whereby each type of fit predicted willingness to return to one’s educational institution. These findings suggest that when students perceive alignment between themselves and their educational environment, they are more likely to feel authentic, and more inclined to persist in that environment. For Black students, misalignments such as a lack of representation (social fit), environments that do not affirm their racial identity (self-

concept fit), or institutional goals that do not resonate with their personal goals (goal fit), may contribute to disconnection and decreased motivation. In addition, Pope and Miles (2022) conducted a correlational study of 55,000 American elementary and high school students in which they examined how social belonging related to affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of student engagement. Students who felt a greater sense of being in a culture of equity and inclusion, whereby students feel agentic and fairly assessed, was linked to a higher sense of belonging and academic engagement at school.

Similarly, and of greatest relevance to my second research question, Yap and colleagues (2011) investigated the associations between racial identity (i.e., centrality, public regard, private regard), community belonging, discrimination, and life satisfaction using a community sample of Black adults. The researchers hypothesized that perceived belonging within one's community and experiences of racial discrimination would mediate the relationship between racial identity and life satisfaction. Their findings supported this model. Specifically, community belonging mediated the effects of centrality and private regard on life satisfaction, whereas perceived discrimination mediated the effects of public regard on life satisfaction. These results highlight the complex duality of internal identity processes and external social experiences in shaping well-being for Black people. Although Yap and colleagues focused on an adult population, their findings may also hold important implications for younger demographics. In particular, Black students may experience similar barriers to life satisfaction not solely rooted in racial identity itself, but in how their identity fits in with their social environment (e.g., school climate, peer inclusion). This raises questions about the extent to which adolescents' sense of social fit within educational contexts mediates the relationship between racial identity and well-being during the critical years of cognitive, social, and emotional development of emerging adulthood.

The Present Research

In the current research, through a multi-year partnership with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), I examined the academic orientation, psychological well-being, and racial attitudes of grade 12 students enrolled in the course, “Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism”. The course was developed by four Black educators in 2020 and was officially integrated into provincial curriculum in 2021. This grade 12 university stream elective seeks to disrupt patterns of structural and educational racism to legitimize the experiences and history of Black students. The present research sought to investigate if identity affirming curriculum may promote a sense of belonging for Black students at school.

To do this, I recruited students enrolled in this course at the start and end of the semester, as well as students from a matched “comparison” course. Using a pre-post design (i.e., beginning and end of term), I examined the psychological well-being, academic orientation, and racial attitudes of students enrolled (versus not enrolled) in the course, with a particular interest in the experiences of Black students. As a secondary goal, I conducted post-hoc exploratory analyses to examine whether having a more positive sense of racial regard predicts life satisfaction, and whether this is mediated by social belonging for Black students.

This study took place across three academic years (Year 1: 2022-2023, Year 2: 2023-2024, Year 3: 2024-2025) at several high schools offering the course across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In this course, students complete four units of study that address the historical and modern underpinnings of anti-Black racism: Exploring Language and Discourse; People and Cultures Before Colonization; Black Agency, Activism, Resistance; and Resilience (Toronto District School Board, 2021). Each unit defines key terms and gives voice to many of the covert barriers faced by Black individuals. Students learn how to identify racism, learn how systems of

power perpetuate racist ideology, discuss the Eurocentric framing of Canadian education, and go over historical contexts with the understanding that the past is never far from the present.

In this research, my primary goal was to examine whether differences would emerge on measures of psychological well-being, academic orientation, and racial attitudes at the end of this course, and whether effects would be more pronounced for Black compared to non-Black students. I predicted that Black students in the course would report better psychological well-being (i.e., social belonging and life satisfaction), greater academic orientation (i.e., greater self-efficacy, academic motivation, and curriculum-based academic knowledge) and more positive racial attitudes (i.e., attitudes toward Black people, private regard, collective action) compared to non-Black students or students in the comparison class, after controlling for Time 1 responses. I further predicted that Black and non-Black students in the course would report more positive attitudes toward Black people, higher willingness to engage in collective action, and greater malleability of prejudice at the end compared to those in the comparison course. Given the uneven samples obtained from the different courses, I altered my analysis plan slightly. To address these questions given sample constraints, I instead compared all students in the anti-racism and comparison classes at the end of the course (Time 2), controlling for their start of term responses (Time 1). I then compared Black and non-Black students within the Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism course.

As a secondary goal, I also made use of all of the data from Black students at the first phase of data collection to gain a deeper understanding of social belonging among these youth. Specifically, I first examined if any of our measures predicted sense of social belonging. I predicted that social belonging would be positively related to life satisfaction and racial regard because of the interconnected nature of identity and belonging. Second, I examined whether

racial regard was positively correlated with life satisfaction and predicted that it would be. As noted earlier, previous research suggests that belonging may play a mediating role in identity and well-being (Yap et al., 2011). In an exploratory post-hoc analysis, I examined whether social belonging mediates the relationship between racial regard and life satisfaction. Such a finding would provide evidence that racial regard and a sense of belonging are critical mechanisms through which Black adolescents experience greater life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were high school students living in the greater Toronto area (GTA) who were enrolled in either the grade 12 elective course *Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism* or a grade 12 “comparison” course (English, Politics, or Canadian and International Law). The comparison courses were always selected in collaboration with the teacher of the focal course, based on availability at the same grade level (Grade 12). I recruited as many students as possible across this three-year period.

A total of 143 participants were recruited from the anti-racism class ($n = 89$) and the comparison class ($n = 54$), across six separate schools. Participants were recruited from 7 anti-racism classes and 5 comparison classes. The comparison classes were all at the Grade 12 level and included English (2 sections), Law (2 sections), and Politics (1 section). Most participants identified as female ($n = 95$; male $n = 41$; non-binary or prefer not to answer $n = 7^1$), and participants had a mean age of 17 years (range: 16 – 19 years). Participants with data at Time 1 only ($n = 38$), or Time 2 only ($n = 15$), and those who failed attention checks ($n = 2$) were removed from analyses for the first research question. After exclusions, a total 88 participants (n

¹ Gender selections used were in accordance with the REB guidelines provided by the school board.

= 39 Black, $n = 49$ non-Black) were retained to address the first set of research questions as they completed all measures at Time 1 and Time 2. The majority of non-Black students were non-White ($n = 22$ Asian, $n = 12$ biracial/multiracial², $n = 2$ Latinx, $n = 5$ White, $n = 8$ Not listed). In addition, all Black students with Time 1 data ($n = 56$) were retained for the second set of analyses.

Measures

Measures were adapted and shortened to maximize the number of measures that could be included and to ensure they were age appropriate. Measures that were introduced in the second year of the study are noted. The full survey (from Years 2-3) can be found in Appendix A.

Psychological Well-Being

Sense of Social Belonging. To assess school belonging, participants responded to three items ($\alpha = .72$) chosen from the 14-item Sense of Social Fit Scale³ (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In Year 1, participants responded to all 14 items on the scale. In subsequent years, the scale was shortened based on items with the highest reliability, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha. Participants rated their agreement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with these statements: "People at [school name] accept me," "I fit in well at [school name]," and "I belong at [school name]."

Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale. Three items ($\alpha = .80$) from the six-item Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale (Margolis et al., 2018) were used to measure participants' general well-being and life satisfaction. Items were chosen based on the age of participants. These items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*): "I like how my

² Participants who identified Black as one of their racial backgrounds ($n = 6$) were categorized as Black (versus non-Black) when race was included in analyses.

³ The sense of social belonging measure was reduced from the full 14 items in Year 1, to 3 items in Years 2 and 3. Thus, only these 3 items are used in our analyses.

life is going,” “I feel optimistic about my future,” and “I am satisfied with where I am in life right now.”

Academic Orientation

Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning. To gauge self-efficacy, participants responded to four items ($\alpha = .81$) from Zimmerman and colleagues’ (1992) 11-item Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning Scale. In Year 1, participants responded to all 11 items on the scale. In subsequent years, the scale was shortened based on items with the highest reliability, as indicated by Cronbach’s alpha. Participants rated how well they could complete four school-related tasks on a scale ranging from 1 (*not well at all*) to 7 (*extremely well*). Participants were presented with, “How well can you [study when there are other interesting things to do, plan course work, organize course work, and motivate yourself to do course work?].

Academic Motivation Scale. Two items ($r = .33$) from the academic motivation scale (Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, 2018) were used to examine participants’ motivation to engage in academic behaviours outside of their school-assigned tasks⁴. Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which they 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) with the following statements, “I am willing to work hard in a course to learn the material even if it won’t lead to a higher grade,” and “I frequently do more reading in a class than is required simply because it interests me.”

Curriculum-Based Academic Knowledge (Years 2-3). This two-item scale ($r = .53, p < .001$) was created and introduced in Year 2 to evaluate participants’ understanding of material taught throughout the academic term. Participants were presented with, “Please read the following statements and indicate how well you think you could explain each concept to a friend

⁴ The academic motivation scale was reduced from 4 items during Year 1 to 2 items during Years 2 and 3. As such only the 2 items are retained for our analyses.

or family member based on information that you have learned at school.” Participants then rated how well they could explain from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely well*), the items, “Black agency and activism in Canada” and “Dominant or Deficit narratives and counter-narratives.”

Racial Attitudes

Attitudes Toward Black People. Four items ($\alpha = .74$) from the Allophilia scale, developed by Pittinsky and colleagues (2011), were used to measure participants’ positive attitudes toward Black people. Participants rated these items⁵ on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): “I am interested in hearing about the experiences of Black people”; “I am comfortable when I hang out with Black people”; “In general, I have positive attitudes about people who are Black”; and “I feel a sense of belonging with people who are Black.”

Racial Regard. Three items ($\alpha = .55$ for Black students) from the Multidimensional Inventory for Black Identity-Teen (Scottham et al., 2009) were used to measure participants’ perceptions of their race/ethnicity in terms of private (1 item) and public regard (2 items)⁶. The scale was generalized to be administered to all students in Year 2 (i.e., “Black people” was replaced with “People of my ethnic/racial background”). Using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), participants rated the following items: “I am a proud member of my racial/ethnic group” (private regard), “Most people think that people from my race/ethnicity are as smart as people of other races/ethnicities” (public regard), and “People think that people from my racial/ethnic group are as good as people from other races/ethnicities” (public regard).

⁵ Although a fifth item was included in Year 1 it was removed for Years 2 and 3. As such only the 4 items are retained for our analyses.

⁶ The MIBI-T was reduced from 9 items in Year 1, to 3 during Years 2 and 3. As such only the 3 items are retained for our analyses.

Malleability of Prejudice Scale (Years 2 and 3 only). I used a reduced version of Carr and colleagues' (2012) scale to determine participants' beliefs that people's prejudicial beliefs can change. Items were chosen based on the age of participants. On a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*), participants rated their agreement with two items ($r = .24$) including: "No matter who somebody is, they can always become a lot less prejudiced", and "People's level of prejudice is something very basic about them that they can't change very much" (reverse-scored).

Willingness to Engage in Black-Specific Collective Action. Participants indicated how willing they were to engage in three different collective action behaviours ($\alpha = .84$) related to the Black Lives Matter movement, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The items were adapted from Uluğ and Tropp (2020) and included: (1) protesting on the streets during Black Lives Matter protests; (2) attending forums, meetings, or discussion groups related to Black Lives Matter protests; and (3) posting messages on social media about the Black Lives Matter protests.

Additional Measures

Students also completed reduced versions of a number of additional measures. These included the Concern about Discrimination Scale (Devine et al., 2012), Bias Awareness Scale (Perry et al., 2015), McArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status – Youth Version (Goodman et al., 2001). Additional reduced measures that were added in Year 2 included the Adolescent Measure of Empathy and Sympathy (Vossen et al., 2015) and Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Ho et al., 2015). As these scales were not the focus of this thesis, they are not discussed further.

Participants were also asked to provide demographic information. Please see the Appendix for the full survey administered in Years 2 and 3.

Procedure

A total of nine schools were contacted and invited to participate for the 2022-2023, 2023-2024, or 2024-2025 academic years. During this time, confirmation was received from six schools. Four schools participated in Year 1 (2022-2023). In Year 2 (2023-2024), I returned to two of the schools from Year 1 and recruited two additional schools. In Year 3 (2024-2025), a single school, that had been involved in all three years of the study, participated. Data from Year 3 participants were excluded in the analyses due to the absence of Time 2 data. Parental permission forms were provided to the schools in either hardcopy or softcopy (Qualtrics survey) format. Students with signed parental consent (students under 18) and student assent, or student consent (if 18 or older), were asked to complete a survey toward the start of the semester⁷ and again toward the end of the semester. The exact timing for this initial data collection was coordinated by me (9 classes) or another student (3 classes) in collaboration with the course teacher.

Surveys were administered with a Black and/or South Asian research assistant present. Research assistants had a standardized script to ensure consistency in delivering instructions to students. Students were fully debriefed at Time 2; they were provided with a debriefing form and given the opportunity to ask questions. Each survey took approximately 30 minutes and no more than one hour for students to complete. Students received a \$5 gift card for returning their permission forms (with or without consent) at Time 1 of data collection and were entered into a raffle for York University merchandise (e.g., water bottle, notebook; totaling ~\$25) at the end of

⁷ The amount of time after the first in-class lesson and completion of the first survey ranged from 2-7 weeks.

the data collection at Time 2. The measures were always administered in a set order (see Appendix A).

Results

Research Question 1: Analytic Approach

I planned to use multi-level random intercept models to account for clustering of participants within teacher (level 1) and school (level 2). In order to test for clustering, I checked the intraclass correlations for null models with each level (i.e., teacher and school) predicting Time 2 outcome variables. These analyses revealed a lack of clustering based on school and teacher ($ICC < .10$) on all variables except for the random intercept assessing teacher in the model pertaining to curriculum-based academic knowledge ($ICC = .18$). All models, except those for curriculum-based academic knowledge, were therefore assessed using linear OLS regression without random effects.

Although I had planned to include both Time and Participant Race (Black vs. non-Black) as fixed effects in all analyses, the number of Black students with complete data in the comparison classes was low (9 Black students vs. 27 non-Black students in the comparison classes, compared to 30 Black students and 22 non-Black students in the anti-racism class). I therefore conducted two main analyses for each of the variables of interest to examine my research questions. For all analyses, I used Time 2 variables as the outcomes (with matched Time 1 scores as a covariate), with dummy-coded class (comparison = 0; anti-racism = 1) as the primary predictor. The primary models were used to assess differences between the anti-racism and comparison classes for psychological well-being (i.e., social belonging, life satisfaction), academic orientation (i.e., academic trajectory, academic motivation, and curriculum based academic knowledge), and racial attitudes (willingness to engage in collective action, attitudes

toward Black people, malleability of prejudice). The secondary analyses were used to assess the differences between Black and non-Black students within the anti-racism class. Race was dummy-coded (non-Black = 0, Black = 1).

Across all models, Time 1 covariates were significant predictors of Time 2 outcomes ($ps < .05$), except for academic motivation within the anti-racism class ($p = .12$). Descriptive means by class are provided in Table 1. Given the relatively low power for these analyses, when reporting my results, I outline both descriptive and statistically significant differences.

Table 1

Descriptive Means and Standard Deviations for Research Question 1 by Time and Class

Variable	Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism		Comparison	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Psychological Well-being				
Social Belonging	3.66 (0.64)	3.61 (0.70)	3.82 (0.77)	3.76 (0.81)
Life Satisfaction	4.95 (1.26)	4.81 (1.29)	5.13 (1.39)	5.25 (1.50)
Academic Orientation				
Self-Regulated Learning	4.38 (1.18)	4.30 (1.20)	4.64 (1.12)	4.38 (1.03)
Academic Motivation	3.54 (0.90)	3.34 (0.90)	3.26 (1.32)	3.23 (1.07)
Curriculum Knowledge	4.03 (1.53)	4.53 (1.23)	3.26 (1.32)	3.27 (1.35)
Racial Attitudes				
Collective Action	3.05 (1.10)	2.75 (1.06)	2.26 (1.15)	2.21 (1.09)
Attitudes Toward Black People	6.39 (0.76)	6.44 (0.82)	6.10 (0.97)	6.04 (1.04)
Racial Regard	2.83 (1.04)	2.93 (1.26)	3.46 (0.81)	3.51 (0.72)
Malleability of Prejudice	3.62 (0.71)	3.79 (0.78)	3.54 (0.71)	3.80 (0.50)

Note. Table depicts descriptive group means with standard deviations in brackets.

Table 2*Descriptive Means and Standard Deviations for Research Question 1 by Time and Race*

Variable	Black Students		Non-Black Students	
	Time 1	Time 2	Time 1	Time 2
Psychological Well-being				
Social Belonging	3.64 (0.70)	3.72 (0.72)	3.72 (0.61)	3.39 (0.69)
Life Satisfaction	4.81 (1.13)	4.73 (1.15)	5.08 (1.48)	4.77 (1.58)
Academic Orientation				
Self-Regulated Learning	4.28 (1.19)	4.21 (1.03)	4.39 (1.23)	4.34 (1.30)
Academic Motivation	3.45 (0.99)	3.40 (0.91)	3.48 (0.81)	3.23 (1.03)
Curriculum Knowledge	4.06 (1.70)	4.76 (1.15)	3.96 (1.41)	4.44 (1.36)
Racial Attitudes				
Collective Action	3.12 (1.01)	2.71 (0.98)	2.86 (1.17)	2.64 (1.06)
Attitudes Toward Black People	6.62(0.60)	6.59 (0.59)	6.08 (0.74)	5.91 (0.99)
Racial Regard	3.27 (0.72)	3.29 (0.82)	3.95 (0.65)	3.93 (0.76)
Malleability of Prejudice	4.46 (1.09)	4.26 (1.16)	4.18 (1.03)	4.28 (0.94)

Note. Table depicts descriptive group means with standard deviations in brackets.

Psychological Well-Being

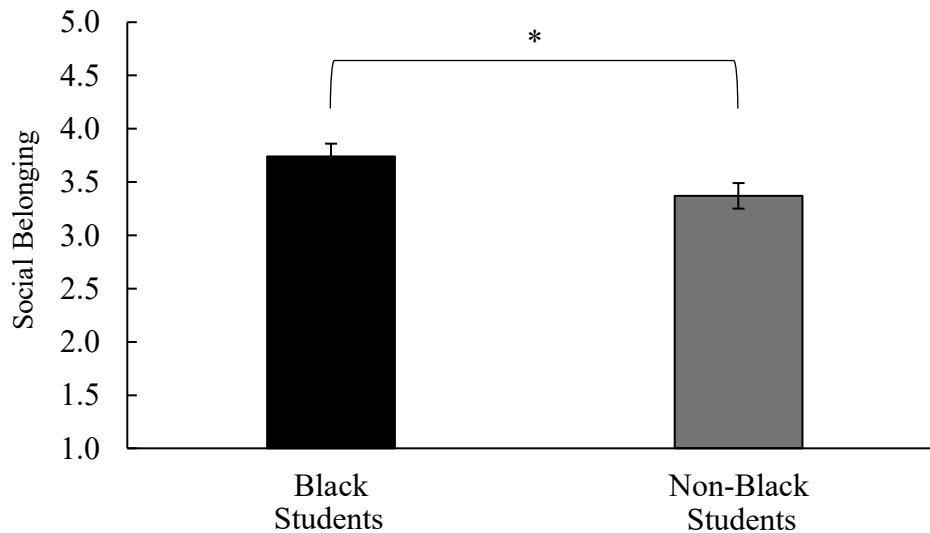
Social Belonging. A linear model was estimated using Time 2 social belonging as the outcome, with Time 1 scores as a covariate, and course type (anti-racism or comparison) as the primary predictor. Overall, course type did not predict Time 2 social belonging ($b = 0.09$, $t(85) = 0.65$, $p = .518$), with those in the comparison class descriptively ($M = 3.58$, $SE = 0.10$), but not significantly, lower in social belonging than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 3.66$, $SE = 0.08$).

Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race predicted social

belonging, $b = 0.37$, $t(49) = 2.36$, $p = .021$, such that Black students had statistically significantly higher social belonging ($M = 3.74$, $SE = 0.10$) than non-Black students ($M = 3.37$, $SE = 0.12$), as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Estimated Time 2 Social Belonging for Black and Non-Black Students in the Anti-Racism Class



Note. Figure depicts estimated marginal means controlling for matched Time 1 covariate. Error bars represent standard errors.

* $p < .05$.

Life Satisfaction. Course type did not predict Time 2 life satisfaction, $b = -0.19$, $t(85) = -0.99$, $p = .324$. Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race did not predict Time 2 life satisfaction ($b = 0.05$, $t(74) = 0.29$, $p = .770$).

Summary. Overall, I found no evidence of psychological well-being differing between course types at Time 2. However, within the anti-racism course, non-Black students expressed lower Time 2 social belonging than Black students.

Academic Orientation

Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning. Course type was not a statistically significant predictor of Time 2 self-efficacy ($b = 0.19, t(85) = 1.17, p = .268$), with those in the comparison classes ($M = 4.19, SE = 0.13$) expressing descriptively, but not significantly, lower self-efficacy than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 4.38, SE = 0.11$). Similarly, when conducting simple effects tests within the anti-racism class, race was not a predictor of Time 2 self-efficacy, $b = 0.07, t(49) = 0.33, p = .737$. However, non-Black students ($M = 4.22, SE = 0.16$) were descriptively lower in self-efficacy than Black students ($M = 4.30, SE = 0.14$) in this class.

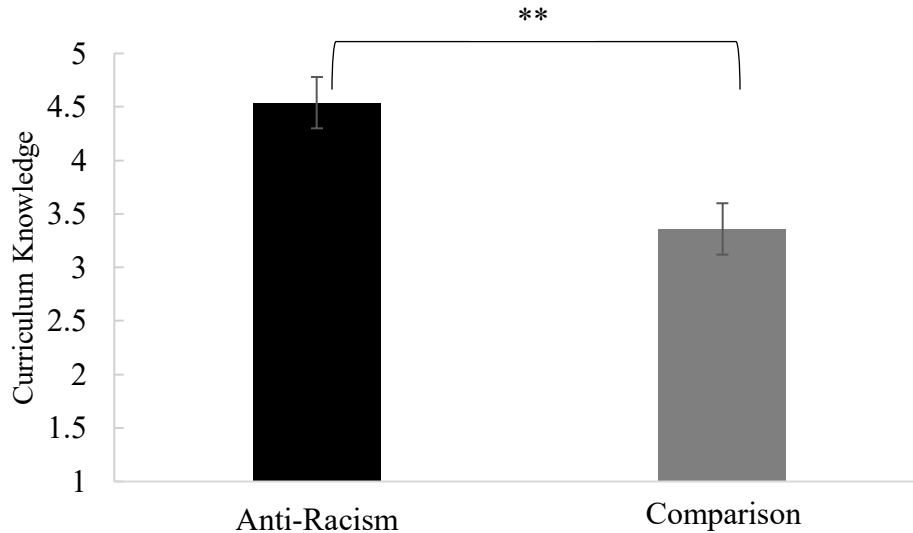
Academic Motivation. Course type did not predict Time 2 academic motivation ($b = -0.07, t(85) = 0.38, p = .704$), with those in the comparison class ($M = 3.23, SE = 0.15$) having descriptively, but not significantly, lower academic motivation than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 3.30, SE = 0.12$). Prior to conducting the secondary analyses, it was found that Time 1 academic motivation was not a predictor of Time 2 academic motivation within the anti-racism class ($b = 0.21, t(50) = 1.58, p = .120$), suggesting that academic motivation may have been less stable over time, at least within the anti-racism class. Nonetheless, for consistency with prior models it was included as a covariate. Race was not a predictor of Time 2 academic motivation ($b = 0.21, t(49) = 0.85, p = .401$) in the anti-racism class. However, non-Black students ($M = 3.20, SE = 0.19$) were descriptively lower in academic motivation than Black students ($M = 3.42, SE = 0.16$).

Curriculum-Based Knowledge. Given the clustering of Time 2 curriculum-based knowledge within teachers ($ICC = .18$), a random intercept for teacher was included in the following models (with all fixed effects identical to those in previous models). Course type predicted Time 2 curriculum knowledge ($b = 1.18, t(47) = 3.50, p = .001$). As expected, those in

the comparison class had lower curriculum-based knowledge ($M = 3.36$, $SE = 0.24$) than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 4.54$, $SE = 0.25$), as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Estimated Time 2 Curriculum Knowledge Between Classes



Note. Figure depicts estimated marginal means. ** $p < .01$.

Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race did not predict Time 2 curriculum knowledge, ($b = 0.36$, $t(22) = 0.74$, $p = .467$). Non-Black students ($M = 4.41$, $SE = 0.42$) had descriptively, but not significantly, lower curriculum knowledge than Black students ($M = 4.77$, $SE = 0.34$).

Summary. Across academic orientation variables, there was again little evidence of differences between course types or between Black and non-Black students in the anti-racism class for self-efficacy and academic motivation. However, there was a difference between course types when evaluating Time 2 curriculum knowledge, suggesting that students learned and remembered key concepts from the anti-racism course. Despite the lack of statistically significant effects, within the anti-racism class, Black students were descriptively higher than non-Black students across academic orientation variables.

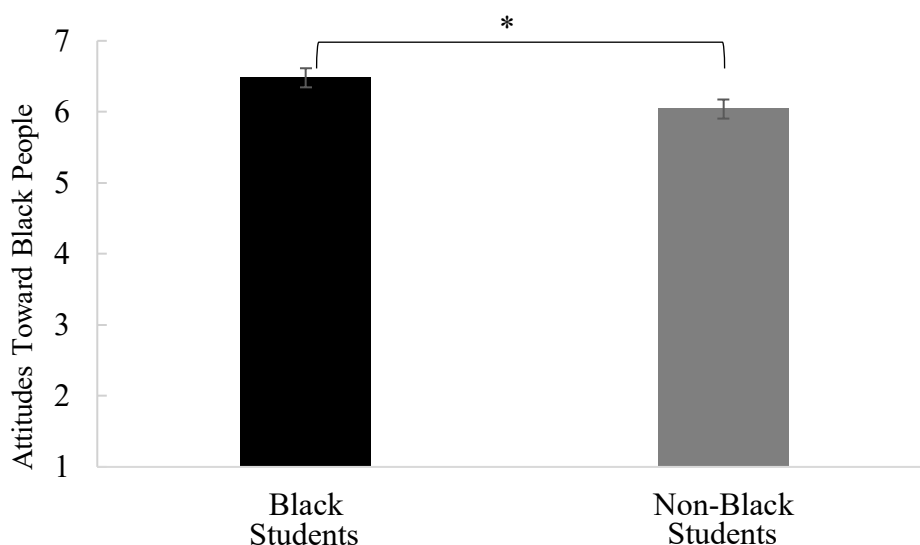
Racial Attitudes

Attitudes Toward Black People. There were notable ceiling effects present in explicit reports of positive attitudes toward Black people. In addition to the grand mean at both Time 1 and Time 2 being above 6 on a 7-point scale, 39% of all participants reported an average of 7 on a 7-point scale at Time 1 ($M_{T1} = 6.27$, $SD_{T1} = 0.86$) and 44% reported an average of 7 at Time 2 ($M_{T2} = 6.27$, $SD_{T2} = 0.93$). No data transformations were applied as absolute values for skewness and were below 3 and 10, respectively (see Kline, 1998).

Course type was not a predictor of Time 2 positive attitudes toward Black people ($b = 0.18$, $t(85) = 1.28$, $p = .205$), with those in the comparison class ($M = 6.01$, $SE = 0.11$) descriptively, but non-significantly, lower in positive attitudes toward Black people than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 6.19$, $SE = 0.09$). Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race predicted positive attitudes toward Black people ($b = 0.43$, $t(49) = 2.23$, $p = .029$). Non-Black students ($M = 6.05$, $SE = 0.14$) were lower in positive attitudes toward Black people than Black students ($M = 6.49$, $SE = 0.12$), see Figure 3.

Figure 3

Estimated Time 2 Attitudes Toward Black People for Black and Non-Black Students in the Anti-Racism Class



Note. Figure depicts estimated marginal means. * $p < .05$.

Racial Regard. Course type was not a predictor of Time 2 racial regard ($b = -0.11$, $t(62) = -0.68$, $p = .499$); those in the comparison class ($M = 3.64$, $SE = 0.12$) were descriptively, but non-significantly, higher in racial regard than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 3.53$, $SE = 0.10$). Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race did not significantly predict Time 2 racial regard ($b = -0.01$, $t(35) = -0.03$, $p = .979$), with non-Black ($M = 3.44$, $SE = 0.24$) and Black students ($M = 3.44$, $SE = 0.13$) having similar racial regard.

Malleability of Prejudice. Course type was not a significant predictor of Time 2 malleability of prejudice ($b = 0.16$, $t(47) = 0.94$, $p = .351$), where those in the comparison class ($M = 3.80$, $SE = 0.12$) were descriptively, but non-significantly, lower than the anti-racism class ($M = 3.96$, $SE = 0.12$) in perceptions that others can change prejudiced beliefs. Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race did not significantly predict Time 2 malleability of prejudice ($b = 0.09$, $t(22) = 0.35$, $p = .732$). Interestingly, non-Black

students ($M = 3.90$, $SE = 0.23$) were descriptively, but not significantly, lower than Black students ($M = 4.00$, $SE = 0.17$) in perceptions that others can change prejudiced beliefs.

Willingness to Engage in Collective Action. Course type was not a significant predictor of Time 2 willingness to engage in collective action ($b = 0.08$, $t(85) = 0.54$, $p = .593$), where those in the comparison class ($M = 2.45$, $SE = 0.11$) were descriptively, but non-significantly, lower in willingness to engage in collective action than those in the anti-racism class ($M = 2.52$, $SE = 0.09$). Further, when conducting secondary analyses within the anti-racism class, race did not significantly predict Time 2 willingness to engage in collective action ($b = -0.07$, $t(49) = -0.42$, $p = .676$), where non-Black students ($M = 2.72$, $SE = 0.13$) were descriptively, but non-significantly, higher in willingness to engage in collective action than Black students ($M = 2.65$, $SE = 0.11$).

Summary. Within racial attitude variables, the main finding to emerge was that, for students in the anti-racism class, Black (vs. non-Black) students were higher in Time 2 positive attitudes toward Black people. Although these results should be interpreted with low sample size in mind, this provides some initial evidence of the potentially identity affirming quality of the anti-racism course for Black students versus non-Black students.

Research Question 2: Analytic Approach

To examine my second research question, I made use of all of the data from Black students at Time 1, regardless of class enrollment ($n = 56$). As can be seen in Table 4, social belonging was positively correlated with racial regard and life satisfaction (see Table 5 for additional correlations). In addition, a positive, but non-significant correlation emerged between life satisfaction and racial regard.

As a post-hoc exploratory analysis, I examined whether Black students' social belonging would mediate the relationship between their racial regard and life satisfaction, as has been found for Black adults (Yap et al., 2011). As noted earlier, Black students' racial regard did not significantly predict life satisfaction, $b = 0.39$, $t(54) = 1.91$, $p = .061$. I constructed a and b paths for the hypothesized mediational model. Results revealed that Black students' racial regard significantly predicted their social belonging, $a = 0.34$, $t(54) = 2.67$, $p = .009$, and social belonging significantly predicted their life satisfaction, $b = 0.64$, $t(54) = 3.33$, $p = .001$.

Table 3

Zero-Order Correlation Matrix for Research Question 2 (Black students only)

Variable	1.	2.	3.
1. Social Belonging	-		
2. Racial Regard	.34**	-	
3. Life Satisfaction	.41**	.25†	-

Note. † $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 4*Correlation Matrix among all variables for Black Students at Time 1*

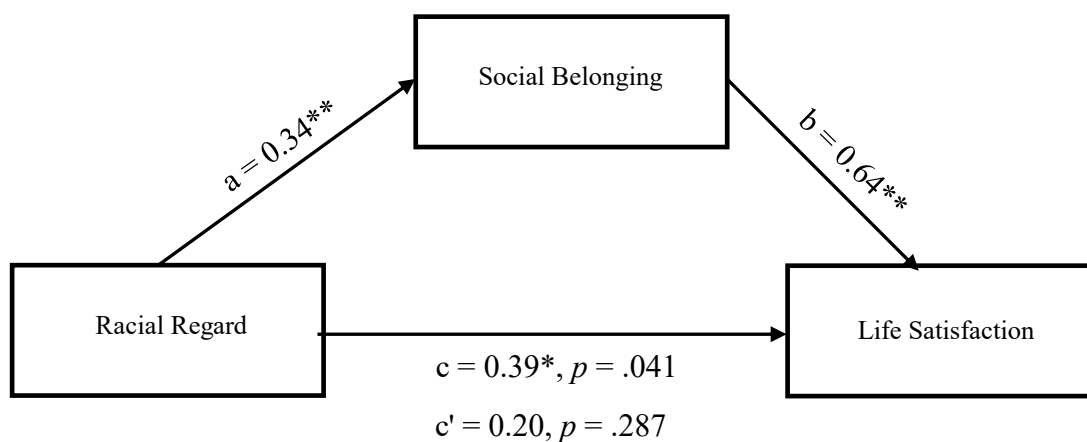
Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Social Belonging	-							
2. Life Satisfaction	.41** [.17, .61]	-						
3. Self-Regulated Learning	.24† [-.03, .47]	.27* [.01, .50]	-					
4. Academic Motivation	-.07 [-.33, .20]	.08 [-.18, .34]	.48** [.25, .66]	-				
5. Curriculum Knowledge	-.08 [-.41, .27]	-.14 [-.46, .20]	.39* [.06, .65]	.20 [-.15, .50]	-			
6. Attitudes Toward Black People	.05 [-.22, .31]	-.15 [-.40, .12]	.36** [.11, .57]	.40** [.15, .60]	.18 [-.16, .49]	-		
7. Racial Regard	.28* [.02, .51]	.26† [-.00, .49]	.20 [-.06, .44]	.37** [.11, .57]	-.11 [-.43, .24]	.13 [-.14, .38]	-	
8. Malleability of Prejudice	-.53** [-.74, -.24]	-.38* [-.64, -.05]	-.09 [-.41, .26]	.01 [-.33, .35]	.14 [-.21, .46]	.16 [-.19, .47]	-.33† [-.60, .01]	-
9. Collective Action	-.19 [-.43, .08]	-.38** [-.59, -.13]	.05 [-.21, .31]	.06 [-.20, .32]	.22 [-.13, .52]	.42** [.17, .61]	.05 [-.21, .31]	.24 [-.10, .54]

Note. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Given these results, I conducted a mediation analysis using bootstrapping with 5,000 simulations (see Figure 4 for model diagram). Results revealed a statistically non-significant direct effect of racial regard on life satisfaction, $c' = 0.20$, 95% $CI [-0.14, 0.64]$, $p = .287$. However, there was a significant total effect, $c = 0.39$, 95% $CI [0.01, 0.83]$, $p = .046$. Further, the indirect effect of racial regard on life satisfaction through social belonging was statistically significant, $ab = 0.20$, 95% $CI [0.01, 0.45]$, $p = .039$, suggesting that social belonging had a mediating effect on the relationship between racial regard and life satisfaction for Black students. These results are consistent with the possibility that positive racial regard may enhance life satisfaction through perceived social belonging. However, these results should be interpreted with the relatively small sample size in mind.

Figure 4

Mediation Between Racial Regard and Life Satisfaction Through Social Belonging



General Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to examine whether enrolment in a high school course designed to deconstruct anti-Black racism and affirm positive Black identity would lead to better psychological well-being, academic-based perception, and racial attitudes among Black

and non-Black adolescents. The results of this study did not provide strong evidence that participation in this course had an impact on the majority of measures administered, at least with this relatively small sample. However, there were three interesting and noteworthy findings that emerged for social belonging, attitudes toward Black people, and curriculum-based knowledge.

The first main finding was that there was a statistically significant difference at the end of the course in self-reported social belonging between Black and non-Black students within the anti-racism course, when controlling for social belonging at the start of the course. Specifically, Black students in the anti-racism class were higher in social belonging than their non-Black classmates by the end of the course. One possible explanation for this finding is that Black students in the class resonated more strongly with the course content or classroom environment, potentially addressing gaps in inclusion often reported in traditional academic settings. These results align with prior research indicating that culturally responsive pedagogy and identity-affirming environments can enhance social belonging, particularly for Black students (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Interestingly, the higher belonging scores among Black students contrasts with patterns typically observed in educational settings, where students from underrepresented backgrounds often report lower belonging (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015).

Recent scholarship has argued that anti-racism teaching alone is insufficient to confront the deeply rooted anti-Blackness in North American society (Parks et al., 2021). Instead, it is necessary to foster a pro-Black classroom through co-construction and intentionality (i.e., education that centres students' interests and needs). While it remains the intention of the TDSB to teach anti-racism curriculum to all students throughout their academic journey, descriptively, Black students in the comparison class were not seeing the social belonging, attitudinal, and curricular benefits that Black students in the anti-racism class may have. It is possible that the

TDSB was successful in their goals to teach anti-racist pedagogy *and* foster a pro-Black environment (Toronto District School Board, 2021). However, further research is needed to determine which, if any, specific aspects of the course may contribute to positive effects for Black students, and whether similar observations would be found across different institutions or student populations. In addition, given the small magnitude of these effects, the small sample sizes, and the lack of differences when directly comparing classes, these findings may be confined to the population studied – that is, Black and non-Black students in Toronto.

The second main finding was that students enrolled in the anti-racism course (vs. comparison course) reported a greater ability to explain concepts like Black agency and activism in Canada to a friend or family member by the end of the semester. This was an expected finding given that this material was covered in the course. However, beyond serving as a form of verification, this finding suggests that students in this course have a newfound and/or better ability to explain anti-racist concepts, reinforcing deeper learning and engagement with the material. Their belief in their ability to articulate course concepts provides evidence for comprehension and retention of anti-racist material, a critical component of anti-racist cognitions and behaviour for non-Black individuals (Devine et al., 2012). By the end of the year, students in the anti-racism class were prepared with knowledge of media literacy, pre-colonial African culture, identity, and activism. At the most basic level, students enrolled in the course learned relevant anti-racist material, even if changes on other measures were not observed.

A third main finding was that within the anti-racism class, Black students' attitudes toward Black people were more positive at the end of the course compared to non-Black students. This finding aligns with intervention work in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which has found that teaching Black history through a lens of both struggle and

achievement increases racial pride among Black students and empathy among their non-Black peers (Hughes et al., 2016). Although some researchers suggest attitudinal interventions are most effective around ages 10-15, some theory points to emerging adulthood as a time where aspects of racial identity (i.e., public/private regard, centrality, ideology) are formed (Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). This suggests that identity affirming anti-racist education should begin early and continue into late adolescence and early adulthood, when students are developmentally primed to critically examine identity, social structures, and systemic inequality. Non-Black students descriptively, but not statistically significantly in this small sample, decreased in positive attitudes toward Black people, while Black students descriptively increased. The divergence in Black and non-Black students' positive attitudes toward Black people suggests that sustained engagement with course content highlighting the positive historical and contemporary contributions of Black individuals may have reinforced racial pride and countered internalized stereotypes among Black students. Conversely, the descriptive decline in positive attitudes among non-Black students may point to the need for more structured reflection or support in processing challenging racial content to avoid defensiveness and/or disengagement from material.

In terms of my second research question, I found promising preliminary evidence that racial regard is positively associated with life satisfaction among Black students, in part through increased feelings of social belonging. Some researchers have identified positive racial regard as a protective factor against depressive symptoms (Caldwell et al., 2002) and linked ethnic/racial affirmations to greater use of positive coping strategies (Zaff et al., 2002). Although I did not find direct support for racial regard as a protective factor, results point to the possibility that Black adolescents who hold positive beliefs about the perception of their racial group may be

less likely to feel stigmatized in the school environment, possibly allowing them to experience a greater sense of social belonging, factors that contribute meaningfully to overall life satisfaction (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Sellers et al., 2003). Together, these findings underscore the critical role of positive racial regard in shaping Black students' well-being and highlight the need for school environments that actively affirm racial identity and foster belonging. Supporting these dimensions may be essential to the holistic development and life satisfaction of Black students.

Limitations and Future Directions

A major limitation to the present research is the lack of random assignment. The course was offered as an interdisciplinary grade 12 elective, in which students may choose to enrol in a maximum of two for course credit. This may negate the educational value of such courses and deter students from enrolment. This course is one of several interdisciplinary electives that students can select from, but they are capped at only pursuing two of these types of courses during their secondary career. This might have made some students less willing to enrol in this course. Anecdotally, this would align with the decrease in schools offering the course that I saw across three years of recruitment. Given the lack of random assignment, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions about the impact that this course might have on students who are required to take this as part of their core curriculum. Despite the correlational nature of this study, these findings have the potential to inform future experiments that aim to tailor the intervention to target aspects of identity related to positive well-being (e.g., targeting positive racial identity development).

Importantly, there were no statistically significant effects found for numerous variables where I expected differences between classes (e.g., willingness to engage in collective action, racial regard, malleability of prejudice). Research suggests that learning anti-racist ideology in

general can have inoculating effects later in life (Dasgupta, 2011; Tse et al., 2011). However, it is possible that the intervention is too late in students' development to have the intended effects, particularly for non-Black students. Manning (2012) suggests that ages 10 to 15 are the optimal developmental period for attitudinal intervention, whereas our participants were on average 17 years old. The current research study took place in a diverse and populous city, which encourages youth to form diverse friendship networks that likely inform opinions about similarities and differences among their peers. Participants' exposure to diverse cultures throughout their education may have positively influenced their racial attitudes prior to enrolment in the anti-racism class. This is supported by the ceiling effects observed in explicit reports of attitudes toward Black people at Time 1 across all classes. The presence of ceiling effects at Time 1 suggests that explicit attitude measure included may not have been sensitive enough to detect further improvement resulting from the class. This underscores a common challenge in anti-racism education research, where participants with initially high levels of motivation to self-regulate prejudice may show limited measurable change on explicit scales (Devine et al., 2012; Monteith et al., 2001). However, other research has found that exposure alone does not predict positive racial attitudes (Choi, 2024). In the educational context, youth often need culturally appropriate responses and guidance from educators to conceptualize their surroundings and engage in cooperative learning (Manning, 2012). Taken together, course content may be better suited for earlier implementation during critical periods of development.

A conceptual limitation to this work was the analytical choice to categorize participants in binary racial groups (i.e., Black and non-Black). While participants from this study were categorized in this way for analytical purposes, Black identity is not monolithic. For example, Boatswain and Lalonde (2000) asked 101 Black university students in Toronto to list their top

three preferred ethnic/racial labels. They found that while 63% of participants chose “Black” as one of their top three labels, with “Canadian,” (27%) “West Indian,” (27%) “Black Canadian,” (19%) and “African Canadian” (18%) closely followed as the top identity labels. For this reason, it is possible that participants included in analyses as “Black” may not identify strongly with the label. While the current study was unable to use preferred identity labels for a more nuanced analysis, this work took a holistic approach to understanding the included sample. For that reason, this work may not be generalizable outside of TDSB schools. Future work should seek to obtain a sample size large enough to account for the various racial and ethnic identities within Ontario schools.

It is also important to note that the lack of findings for my first research question may be attributable, in part, to limitations in sample size and measurement. Due to a lower than anticipated number of participating classes, I was unable to examine certain questions with the necessary statistical power. This likely reduced the ability to detect small or moderate effects. In addition, several survey measures were shortened to ensure feasibility within the available timeline. Although necessary, this decision may have impacted the reliability of the scales used. This was observable in the relatively low Cronbach’s alpha generated for the racial regard measure ($\alpha = .55$). It is also possible that the measures lacked the sensitivity or reliability to capture meaningful change over the duration of the four-month course. This could, in part, be related to the measures included in this study all containing fewer than 4 items.

Given these findings, future iterations of the course could consider a flexible curriculum that maintains core anti-racist concepts and evaluations but can be driven by student interest. This could occur through discussions prior to each unit where educators ask students what they are most interested in learning about and centering these interests throughout. It may be in the

best interest of researchers to investigate the underlying processes that link constructs like racial regard to developmental outcomes for Black students, in order to precisely target them. As Neblett and colleagues (2012) argue, a predominant focus on identification of protective factors, without unpacking how or why they exert their influence, risks limiting the efficacy of future programs and interventions. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for designing interventions that are evidence-based and developmentally responsive. Further exploration may provide clearer guidance for educators working to promote equity and well-being in school settings.

Curriculum developers may also seek to de-racialize the course by implementing aspects of anti-racism and pro-Black/pro-diversity education into mandatory courses. It is possible that the title of the course alone (Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism) may trigger defensiveness in non-Black students. Pendry and colleagues (2007) noted that participants, and particularly White participants, in workplace diversity training sessions often respond with feelings of threat, anger, and/or defensiveness. Although this high school elective was designed to accommodate all students, regardless of race, results show less than optimal outcomes for non-Black students. Non-Black students in the anti-racism class were significantly lower in social belonging and attitudes toward Black people than Black students in the class; a decrease that was also observed for non-Black students in the comparison class. Non-Black students were also descriptively, but non-significantly, lower than Black students in life satisfaction, self-regulated learning, academic motivation, and malleability of prejudice, with the opposite being true for students in the comparison class. It is possible that non-Black students enrolled in the anti-racism class were significantly lower in social belonging as a “side effect” of the intended impact of the course. The course is designed to encourage students to challenge and reflect on racism in Canada and

how they may have contributed to it. Although it cannot be determined if non-Black students' social belonging recovered following completion of the course and the study, it is possible that the decline represents a necessary, but temporary, step in developing allyship and racial literacy for non-Black students as they enter adulthood.

School boards may further support Black and other marginalized students by integrating identity affirming education to mandatory curriculum. In the 2023 TDSB census, the board reported that 70% of students enrolled were students of colour (Toronto District School Board, 2023), suggesting the need for culturally responsive teaching, inclusive curricula, and equitable representation in faculty and leadership. In accordance with this, previous work has linked having a positive racial identity to positive academic and psychological outcomes, particularly for Black students (Chavous et al., 2003). Taken together, a shift from culturally responsive electives (i.e., Deconstructing Anti-Black Racism) to culturally responsive teaching has the potential to affirm students from all backgrounds (Gay, 2018).

Conclusion

Despite the pervasive nature of anti-Black racism in education, the present research provides some, though limited, evidence that a course discussing Black identity and contributions through a positive and affirming lens may predict higher social belonging and positive attitudes toward Black people for Black (vs. non-Black) students in the course. Results of this research have the possibility to provide novel insight into (a) the potential for a school-based course to have an impact on Black and non-Black students' psychological well-being, academic attitudes, and racial attitudes, and (b) predictors of social belonging among Black adolescents. These findings highlight that incorporating equity and identity representation in the

curriculum is essential for a well-rounded education and shaping how stigmatized students perceive themselves and others.

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Appendix A: Full Survey

This will be a different packet with a different colour cover sheet

Grade 12 Survey Questionnaire – Time 1

Please complete this second

You must read and complete the consent form before starting this questionnaire

When you have completed the forms, please put them in the provided envelope and seal the envelope.

Important information. **This will be used to link your data across time and will be removed after all data collection is completed.**

1. What is your student number?

2. Please write the **initials of school name**, **your initials**, and your **day of birth**.
For example, a student at Runnymede Collegiate Institute (RCI), named Amina Chen (AC), born on July 5th (5) would write: RCIAC5

-
3. Please write the course number (or name) of this class (e.g., IDU 4U)

This survey contains questions about your activities and experiences during your time in secondary school. There are no right or wrong answers to any question. Please do your best to complete all of the information as honestly as possible. Individual responses will be averaged across respondents. Your identity and responses will be held in strict confidence, being seen only by the researcher.

Please place a check mark next to the highest academic degree you plan to earn in your lifetime.

- ☐ High School Diploma
- ☐ Job-related/Technical certificate
- ☐ Certificate/Diploma Program
- ☐ College degree
- ☐ University Bachelor's degree
- ☐ University Master's degree
- ☐ Law Degree (J.D.)
- ☐ Doctorate (Ph.D., Ed.D., M.D.)

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements.

(Academic Motivation Scale – Reduced from 8 items)

1. I am willing to work hard in a course to learn the material even if it won't lead to a higher grade.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

2. I frequently do more reading in a class than is required simply because it interests me.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Please circle the answer that best reflects your experiences at school. Your responses will be kept anonymous, and so no one, including your teachers or the researcher will be able to identify you based on your responses.

(Sense of social fit - Reduced from 15 items)

1. People at my school accept me.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

2. I feel like an outsider at my school.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

3. Other people understand more than I do about what is going on at my school.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

4. It is important that you pay attention to this study. For this question, please select 'Neutral'

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

5. I belong at my school.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

(Academic-Related Perceptions, Beliefs, and Strategies Subscale – Reduced from 6 questions)

6. My chances of succeeding later in life don't depend on doing well in school.

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Please rate your agreement with each of the following statements.
(Riverside Life Satisfaction Scale – Reduced from 10 questions)

1. I like how my life is going.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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2. I am satisfied with where I am in life right now.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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3. Please select slightly disagree

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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4. I feel optimistic about my future.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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Please answer the following questions using the seven-point rating scale.

(Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning Scale – Reduced from 11 questions)

1. How well can you study when there are other interesting things to do?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
well						

2. How well can you plan your schoolwork?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
well						

3. How well can you organize your schoolwork?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
well						

4. How well can you motivate yourself to do schoolwork?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
			well			

(Teacher perceptions)

5. To what extent does your teacher for this course understand you as a person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
			well			

6. To what extent do you understand your teacher as a person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all						Extremely
			well			

7. To what extent do you see your personal culture and values reflected in your education?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not well at all			well			Extremely

Please rate what you are like and how you normally behave.

(Adolescent Measure of Empathy and Sympathy - Reduced)

1. I can easily tell how others are feeling.

Never Almost never Sometimes Often Always

2. I can often understand how people are feeling before they tell me.

Never Almost never Sometimes Often Always

3. I feel sorry for someone who is treated unfairly.

Never Almost never Sometimes Often Always

4. When a friend is angry, I feel angry too.

Never Almost never Sometimes Often Always

Show how much you favour or oppose each idea below by selecting a number from 1 to 7 on the scale below. You can work quickly; your first feeling is generally best.

(Social Dominance Orientation - Reduced from 12 items)

1. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and others are at the bottom.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly oppose	Somewhat oppose	Slightly oppose	Neutral	Slightly favour	Somewhat favour	Strongly favour

2. Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly oppose	Somewhat oppose	Slightly oppose	Neutral	Slightly favour	Somewhat favour	Strongly favour

3. We shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly oppose	Somewhat oppose	Slightly oppose	Neutral	Slightly favour	Somewhat favour	Strongly favour

4. We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly oppose	Somewhat oppose	Slightly oppose	Neutral	Slightly favour	Somewhat favour	Strongly favour

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement and be as honest and accurate as you can throughout. There are no right or wrong answers. Just answer according to your own feelings, rather than how you think most people would answer. Your response will remain completely anonymous.

Please circle the answer that best reflects your thoughts.

(Bias awareness scale – Reduced from 4 questions)

1. When talking to Black people, I sometimes worry that I am unintentionally acting in a prejudiced way.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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2. I never worry that I may be acting in a subtly prejudiced way toward Black people.

(Reverse scored)

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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(Concern about discrimination scale – Reduced from 4 questions)

3. I'm not personally concerned about discrimination against Black people.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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4. It is important that you pay attention to this study please select 'Strongly Agree'

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------	-------------------	-------------------

5. People make more fuss about discrimination against Black people than is necessary.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-------------------------------	-------------------	-------------------	-------------------

Please indicated how often you would be willing to participate in the following activities and behaviours:

(Willingness to engage in collective action)

1. Protesting on the streets during Black Lives Matter protests.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

2. Attending forums, meetings, or discussion groups related to Black Lives Matter protests.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

3. Posting messages on social media about the Black Lives Matter protests.

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always

(Personal ability and motivation to make change - Novel)

Think more generally in your day-to-day life for the following questions:

4. How confident do you feel in your personal ability to make positive changes for the equity of Black people?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Extremely

5. How motivated are you to make positive changes in pursuit of equity for Black people?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Extremely

Please read the following statements and indicate how well you think you could explain each concept to a friend or family member based on information that you have learned at school. (Curriculum-Based Academic Engagement - Novel)

- ## 1. Black agency and activism in Canada

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all well Extremely well

- ## 2. Dominant or Deficit narratives and counter-narratives

(Racism and Life Experiences Scale – Reduced from __ items)

- Never Less than once a year Few times a year Once a month Once a week or more

1 2 3 4 5 6

Disagree Agree

Very strongly
disagree

Strongly
disagree

Strongly
agree

Very strongly
disagree

The statements printed below represent individual differences in viewpoint therefore there are no right or wrong answers. Please respond to the best of your ability and give your honest opinion. Your responses will remain completely anonymous, no one, not even your teachers or the researcher will be able to identify you based on your answers.

(Racial attitudes scale/Allophilia – Reduced from __ items)

1. In general, I have positive attitudes about people who are Black.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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2. I am comfortable when I hang out with Black people.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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3. I feel a sense of belonging with people who are Black.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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4. I am interested in hearing about the experiences of Black people.

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
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Please enter or circle the best answer to each of the following demographic questions:

1. **Age** (in years): _____

1b. **Month and Year you were born:** _____
Month/Year

1c. **Today's date:** _____
Month/Day/Year

2. **Gender:**

Female Male Non-Binary Prefer Not to answer

3. Is **English** your first language

Yes No (If no, please specify first language: _____)

4. Which of the following best describes your **racial/ethnic background**? Please check both a box and the circle that best describes you.

- ☐ Black
 - ☐ African (e.g., from Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria)
 - ☐ Caribbean Black (e.g., from Jamaica, the Bahamas)
 - ☐ Not listed (please specify) _____
- ☐ Asian
 - ☐ East Asian (e.g., from China, Japan)
 - ☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., from Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand)
 - ☐ South Asian (e.g., from India, Pakistan)
 - ☐ Not listed (please specify) _____
- ☐ Indigenous (e.g., First Nations, Métis, Inuk (Inuit))
- ☐ Middle Eastern
 - ☐ Not listed (please specify) _____
- ☐ Latin/South American
- ☐ White (non-Hispanic)
- ☐ Bi-Racial/Multiracial (please check all that apply above or print here):

- ☐ Not listed (please answer here): _____

5. How accurately can others guess your racial/ethnic background just by looking at you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Not at all

Extremely well

6. Please answer the following questions when thinking of racial/ethnic background. If you are multi-racial/multi-culture, think of the background or identity that you identify most strongly with.

(Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Teen – REDUCED from 9 items)

- a. I am proud to be a member of my racial/ethnic group.

Really Disagree Kind of Disagree Neutral Kind of Agree Really Agree

- b. Most people think that people from my race/ethnicity are as smart as people of other races/ethnicities.

Really Disagree Kind of Disagree Neutral Kind of Agree Really Agree

- c. People think that people from my racial/ethnic group are as good as people from other races/ ethnicities.

Really Disagree Kind of Disagree Neutral Kind of Agree Really Agree

(MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status – Youth Version)

7. Imagine that the ladder pictured below shows how **Canadian society is set up**.

At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off — those who have the most money, the highest amount of schooling, and the jobs that bring the most respect. At the bottom are people who are the worst off — those who have the least money, little or no education, no job, or jobs that no one wants or respects.

Now think about your family.

Please tell us where you think your family would be on this ladder. Mark the rung (with an X) that best represents where your family would be on this ladder.



8. Now imagine that the ladder is a way of **picturing your school**.

At the top of the ladder are the people in your school with the most respect, the highest grades, and the highest standing. At the bottom are the people whom no one respects, whom no one wants to hang around, and who have the worst grades.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder? Mark the rung that best represents where you would be on this ladder.



9. In what country was your birth mother born? _____

10. In what country was your birth father born? _____

11. Which of the following best describes you?

- ☐ I was **not** born in Canada; I was born in (name country): _____
- ☐ I **was** born in Canada and at least one birth parent was born **outside of** Canada
- ☐ I **was** born in Canada; my parents were **also** born in Canada
- ☐ Indigenous (My family is native to this land)
- ☐ Not listed (please print to explain): _____

12. Which of the following best describes your reasons for taking this course? Please check all that apply and circle your top reason.

- ☐ Interest in the course content
- ☐ It fit into my schedule
- ☐ I needed an elective
- ☐ I like this teacher
- ☐ My friends were taking this course
- ☐ I thought it would be easy
- ☐ I thought this would increase my GPA

13. What do you think you will learn from the course?

(Post-test: What was the most important thing that you learned from the course?)

14. Is there anything else that you would like for us to know?

Thank you for completing this survey.

Please place all of your sheets back in the envelope, seal it, and return it to your teacher.