

**EDUCATING FROM DIFFERENCE: BLACK CULTURAL ART  
EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES WITH CULTURALLY  
RESPONSIVE TEACHING**

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**Abstract:**

The 2009 Ontario Ministry of Education's Equity Action plan called for school boards to implement culturally relevant teaching in their strategic plans. As senior administration and educators work towards inclusive classrooms, a perspective that remains absent is that of the arts educator and their relationship to culturally responsive pedagogy. This qualitative study uses Critical Race Theory to examine the work and experiences—including the successes and challenges—of Cultural Art Educators using African diasporic artforms. The narratives from semi-structured interviews with eight Black Canadian artists, uncover that while successes occur, cultural art educators navigate the politics of institutional unpreparedness, Anti-Black racism, delegitimization of their cultural artistry and cultural appropriation. Institutional recommendations are made to understand the artists' role, improve the working relationship and recognize Black art content supporting a Canadian education mandate. This is a valuable contribution to the topic of cultural relevance that counters the historical exclusion of race-based data of artists involved in education.

### **Acknowledgement:**

*I thank my immediate family and friends for supporting my artistic and education journey from T'karonto, my birthplace and home, to the Caribbean and African continent. I take a moment to honour my ancestors, my father, who is resting peacefully and all the pioneering Black artists across the African diaspora. I thank my fellow creatives, elders, mentors and colleagues that guide my steps.*

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## Introduction

Within its ongoing efforts to create an inclusive education, the 2009 Ontario Ministry of Education's Equity Action Plan<sup>1</sup> called for the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy. To achieve educational equity, the plan mandates all school boards to strengthen curriculum and assessments that are "culturally reflective of and responsive to the students they teach, so that all students see themselves, and their own and their classmates' lived experience, reflected in what and how they are learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). As of 2016, Ontario public school boards<sup>2</sup> began to add equity, diversity and inclusion into their strategic plans, naming culturally responsive pedagogy as the method to be used. Across the Greater Toronto school regions, senior administrators navigate through resistance for schools and educators to buy-in and reimagine their school and classroom practices to respond to the social and cultural realities of the diverse students they serve. However, there is one perspective that is systematically erased from this educational discourse: that of the arts educator. In addition, the idea of an inclusive classroom fails to understand that African, Caribbean and Black content and history are excluded and undocumented in Canadian curricula.

Given this erasure, an educational inquiry about the Black artist's relationship to culturally relevant pedagogy has yet to be considered. Hence, a critical research

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<sup>1</sup> Culturally relevant pedagogy is discussed in the Ontario Ministry of Education's Equity Action Plan ([http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/education\\_equity\\_plan\\_en.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/education_equity_plan_en.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> Durham District, Halton Region, Toronto District School boards include equity, well-being and culturally responsive pedagogy in their strategic board mandates.

question arose of how Black artists perceive the strengths and challenges of their culturally relevant teaching engagements in schools. I argue that as Black Canadian art educators contribute successful impacts with culturally responsive teaching in classrooms, their misunderstood presence is subject to a political negotiation with institutional unpreparedness, anti-Black racism, cultural appropriation and the task of legitimizing their cultural artistry to school administration.

This qualitative study uses Critical Race Theory to examine Black artists' work and experiences and explores how their purpose of teaching, social significance, and cultural art practices represent a "different way of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes and skills" (Gay, 2013, p. 51). This primary research aims to be a contribution to the lack of Canadian scholarly literature that centers the perspectives of African, Caribbean and Black cultural art educators who support inclusive education with African diasporic art practices. Analysing the lived experiences, narratives and dynamics between the Black artists and the educational institution, reveals their perspectives of the strengths and challenges of culturally responsive teaching. Recommendations are proposed to bridge a critical gap and improve a working relationship with Black artists who teach students with multiethnic frames of reference.

## Positionality

I am a part of a transnational diaspora that originated from African peoples taken from their lands and enslaved on colonized indigenous lands across the Americas. As a

Black Canadian-born female of Guyanese immigrants, I interrogate my relationship in juxtaposition to the term 'settler' raised by Amadahy and Lawrence (2009) and do not define Black peoples as equivalent to a European colonizer because they had no choice. I acknowledge the land and its caretakers on Turtle Island and situate the cultural work I engage in from the African diaspora and ancestors. The cultural engagements are not done at the erasure of Indigenous solidarity. My Black experience is by way of being a first-generation Canadian reconnecting back to my roots through the art of dance. I retain a South American heritage consisting of a multi-ethnic ancestry of African, Caribbean-influenced, East Indian and Amerindian Native cultures. I did not see my identity, history or culture reflected in my in-school learning and out-of-school living until I chose dance training among Caribbean professional artists and to study Black Diasporic histories in postsecondary courses.

Swaminathan & Mulvihill (2017) remind us that qualitative researchers discover a topic by examining their own autobiography and experiences. My memory work, a process I learned from Annette Kuhn (2002), occurred when examining my third and fourth grade report cards as artefacts. In a graduate course assignment, I recalled my experience as a Black child learning a Eurocentric curriculum in Toronto public schools and experiencing little respect of my intellect by white educators. I recalled Eurocentric artists such as Raffi or Sharon, Lois and Bram invited to my elementary school in the 1980s. I never saw or experienced arts engagement from my cultural background in my entire public education in Toronto. Indirectly, reflecting on the oral recount I shared with other graduate students in a qualitative research methods course, I recognized the enactment of productive nostalgia and memories as noted by Helgren (2015).

However, my memories are a result of the trauma of being disadvantaged by not seeing myself and any trace of the African diaspora represented in the curriculum.

A critical reflexivity allows for the gaze of the researcher to be turned upon oneself and ask what the researcher knows and how the researcher knows it (Swaminathian & Mulvihill, 2017). As Hatch (2002) tells us, the capacity to be reflexive, to keep track of one's influence on a setting, one's individual bias, and to monitor one's emotional responses, is to get close to the human action to understand what is going on. This critical reflexivity is a starting point of unpacking my involvement in arts, culture and education that is culturally relevant. There is an emotional impetus and a professional concern that drives this research topic. Throughout my performing arts career, I am hired by community and education institutions to perform and teach cultural arts in Ontario. I experience situations where I am not debriefed; I feel a disconnect in the reason why I am hired, or I question whether my arts engagement is merely an ad hoc act of cultural tourism.

Subsequently, I write about critical contemporary conversations in dance media that intersects with culturally relevant education. In April 2018, social media outrage emerged against an Eastview Secondary School student-choreographed routine for the SPARK dance competition in Barrie, Ontario because of its racial insensitivity, cultural misrepresentation and appropriation of Black content. The *Dance Current*<sup>3</sup> magazine invited me to write a September 2018 editorial that examined the incident and how the white students were ill-informed and used stereotypical tropes to tell an offensive dance narrative on the 'evolution of Black dance'. In this instance, the school and board did not

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<sup>3</sup> From "Who tells and cries our freedom?" in Writers & Readers column for The Dance Current, Canada's Dance Magazine by Collette Murray (<https://www.thedancecurrent.com/column/who-tells-and-cries-our-freedom>)

consider hiring professional cultural art practitioners of African, Caribbean or Black origin for engagement and cultural relevancy. This erasure is a glaring oversight in this age of cultural ethics, equity and inclusion and signals whether educational institutions value professional artists beyond an ad-hoc opportunity.

As an arts entrepreneur, community arts programmer, mentor and dance educator, my 17-year experience studying and teaching techniques of various African and Caribbean dance styles originating from African indigenous knowledge, invites inquiry of how to reimagine the quality of cultural arts education on the lands I reside. I gained social and cultural capital in my journey of cultural arts education by training and performance. By studying with master teachers of African and Caribbean origin, locally and abroad, I evolved as an individual creating and implementing changes through arts practice. My vision continues a path of leadership and advocacy, offering cultural arts-based learning experiences and programming for Black Canadians and diverse audiences.

From experience, I relate to the Black artists who are not privy to the reason why they are hired in relation to a current curriculum exercise. I am self-reflexive of my privilege and disadvantages, and I consider how as a multi-ethnic Black woman, I can improve delivery of workshops or cultural lessons that support culturally relevant pedagogy while not being complicit in the erasure of Indigenous knowledge on the lands where I teach. With this conscientiousness, I integrate my educational background of race, ethnicity, indigeneity and culture with my arts practice to explore artistic contributions of a culturally relevant nature. I contextualize my personal experience to a

macro level to a reimagining of culturally relevant artists utilizing cultural arts for ethnically diverse student populations.

## Literature Review:

The inclusion of artists within schools is not a new phenomenon. What sparked curiosity is whether there was scholarly literature examining the work that Black artists create in classrooms. After an environmental scan, articles referencing teaching artists and cultural relevancy were predominately from the perspective of white and non-Black authors using theoretical frameworks developed by Black scholars. In addition, culturally responsive pedagogy tends to be most interrogated at a postsecondary arts education level, as in Lai (2012) whose college programming efforts concluded that in the face of globalization, culturally responsive art teachers must recognize that a student's home culture and artistic expression is influenced by global forces.

Most research scholarship on culturally responsive teaching is predominantly targeted towards teachers, curriculum development and policy makers. Pedagogical paradigms and techniques may be effective but not culturally situated for marginalized, underachieving groups (Gay, 2018). This is a brief literature review about culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching with studies that incorporate the status of teaching artists in classrooms. In addition, it was important to look at current intersections of culturally responsive teaching and arts to assess what culturally responsive arts discussions are taken place.

## Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy— a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995)— can be used as a method of practice and instruction to make learning more relevant and effective using cultural knowledge, experiences, cultural frames of reference and the performance style of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2013). Ladson-Billings (1995) attempted to describe a pedagogy she conceptualized as culturally relevant and fluid. Ladson-Billings initially defined culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition for collective empowerment using three criteria: fostering academic excellence, maintaining cultural competency, and developing a broad critical consciousness among the learners to examine their daily environments. She argued for this pedagogy to be central to the academic success of African American students and others who are not benefiting from public education.

Panhar and Sensory (2011) support Culturally Relevant Pedagogy by stating that among Canadian research is the need to integrate students' cultural backgrounds into schooling (Dei, 1992, 1997; Henry, 1994; Solomon, 1992). Scholars (Dei, James, James-Wilson and Zine, 2000) identify that differential treatment influences high dropout rates, which counters the idea of fitting a student into the standards of a dominant group in society. When considering student failure, Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) initial assessment between schooling and culture identified discontinuity with non-white students and their experiences with school, as well.

Ontario classrooms consist of diverse student groups with Indigenous, Black and racialized students, including migrants and many multicultural communities. Yet the students live “in a society that advocates race neutrality, the prevailing myths of

meritocracy and color-blindness have allowed for the continuing exclusion of people of colour from full equality in various aspects of Canadian society” (James, et al., 2010, p. 25). Moving forward with different strategies, Ontario schools have utilized what Geneva Gay (2018) describes as education using a middle-class, Eurocentric framework that shapes school practices and have an attitude of “cultural blindness”. The effectiveness of this approach can be seen in a case study in Schroeter and James (2015), where French African-born students with refugee experiences were streamed into a separate Francophone-Canadian program from the remaining school population. This research noted how the student identities as migrant, racialized and ethnic Others operated to inform teachers’ perceptions and reactions to them. They were associated with hip-hop subculture which also operated in how they were perceived to negotiate their relationships with peers and their participation in school. Schroeter and James’ indicate that discrimination complicates student integration and the diversity in refugee experiences needs to be considered if students’ schooling is to be relevant and responsive to their needs, interests and aspirations. As such, this research is calling for an alternate way to center and empower the students.

Systemically embedded within the education system are inequities. Lawson (2018) alerted us to how educators leading teacher preparation programs are reprimanded by white administrators for challenging color-blind perspectives of beginning teachers in favour of the tenets of culturally responsive teaching. Some beginning teachers resist the alternative mode of teaching and enact their privilege to choose when they determine that a student’s identity matters. When any teacher claims not to notice student differences, including culture, Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies that

the educator disregards one of the most salient features of a student's identity. Therefore, the limitations of educators in centering the child's features disadvantages the children served. When a Black artist arrives to engage in culturally responsive teaching, they share a commonality with students of colour that there is no option to ignore race and differences, which, according to Lawson (2018), makes a difference in students' everyday lives and the access they obtain.

Ladson-Billings (1995) provided a great introduction to the pedagogy, demonstrating that there is no instant formula to define a single strategy. Additionally, there are no guarantees that culturally relevant teaching will garner academic success, but the goal is to provide learners with relatable experiences that connects them and their perceived differences to the learning that takes place. What can be determined is that culturally relevant pedagogy is a process of connection, functioning as a key entry point for students to choose academic engagement and success due to the diverse techniques integrated by successful educators using culture.

### **Culturally Relevant Teaching: an epistemology**

Due to epistemological racism discussed in Scheurich and Young (1997), scholars of colour created their own epistemological frameworks that emerged from their own race/culture's social history, rather than a framework from the social history of the dominant race. This study honours the race-based epistemology of *Culturally Relevant Teaching* by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), an African- American educator supporting the needs of cultural art educators. As she failed to see herself and the children she served reflected in the educational frameworks proposed, Ladson-Billings

attempted to conceptualize a fluid pedagogy to synchronize education into culture that makes it relevant and appropriate to theorize what culturally relevant teaching is. The initial definition sees culturally relevant teaching as a pedagogy of opposition for collective empowerment using three criteria: fostering academic excellence, maintaining cultural competency and the development of a broad critical consciousness among the learners to examine their daily environments.

The educational framework of Geneva Gay's (2010) *Culturally Responsive Teaching* is influenced by the race-based epistemology of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) to which the research participants subscribe. Gay's framework gives hope and guides educators who try to improve the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social-class groups. The cultural responsiveness of the cultural art educator's teaching is "most effective when ecological factors such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds and ethnic identities of teachers and students, are included in its implementation" (Gay, 2018, p. 28). Because culturally responsive teaching is rooted in an American context, it was important to include global examples. Now that some Canadian schools are recommending use of this framework for student engagement, this is a step towards acknowledging the inclusion of artists in Ontario educational reform.

### **Community-based artists working in classroom spaces**

Some educators tackle linguistic and cultural diversity of their student populations by inviting professional, teaching artists. The community-based artist is responsible for connecting participants with the artform and to evoke meaning-making and collective

artistic modes of expression. This action was discussed in Miles (2016), using a culturally responsive Hip-Hop program in four Brooklyn city schools which grappled with national instances of racial profiling and police violence towards Black and Brown peoples, such as Tamir Rice. Overworked teachers and students positively acknowledged the role of teaching artists with feedback that they are “presenting very important information in a different modality that the kids gravitate to easier” (Miles, 2016, p. 124). The intention of the culturally relevant experience prepared other Black and Brown children, who were the same age as Tamir Rice, for the ELA standardized exam and social studies. Artists encouraged engagement with academic content and brought a relevant political reference and links to using Hip-Hop as a critical pedagogy to build confidence for students to express themselves.

Hoffman (2012) wrote about a culturally responsive curriculum created for a middle school arts-based geography and world cultures project that was reflective of school demographics. Experiential activities legitimized that utilizing community voices and teaching artists provided cultural and historical understandings beyond the superficial food, music and dance references. Culturally competent artists build trust with students and open them to sociocultural inquiry. Immersion with different musical heritages impacted the ways students and teachers “constructed meaning of themselves as individuals and redefined the world around them” (Hoffman, 2012, p. 65). A personal connection to cultures outside one’s personal experience bridged the gap between self and other and fostered cultural competency skills.

The contemporary role of community-based artists invited into classrooms was explored in Campbell (2017) and referenced Taylor (2003) who believes effective

teaching artists are effective educators capable of inspiring enthusiasm and commitment for focused subject matter. Campbell reminds the reader that the relevant expertise of teaching artists remains significantly undervalued. More so, Campbell (2017) advocates that teaching artists must be community-minded, share innate passion with participants while they are grounded in collaborative and culturally responsive art-making approaches. Within this American context, input from Black Canadian artists can add valued perspectives from members of the African diaspora.

### **Culturally responsive arts operating in 21<sup>st</sup> century education**

American-dominated research discusses the need for culturally responsive arts in education, where art scholars do their part to educate other art educators and pre-service teachers on this issue. For example, the term 'culturally responsive education' in musical education dialogue is a relatively recent phenomenon (Bond, 2017). Lai (2012) created a culturally responsive art project where her college students applied micro-ethnographic interviews with local artists to analyse art and culture through a critical, local-global consciousness. In analysing the project's effectiveness, Lai advises that 21<sup>st</sup> century art teachers need to guide students to address notions of, and tensions among localism, cultural origin, sources of production and globalism of art. McCarthy-Brown (2009) called for dance educators to reflect on perpetuating a dance hierarchy that does not instil a value system for different genres of dance. Her research states that dance educators acknowledge that "dance culture" is not synonymous with cultural relevancy. While racialized students accept the exclusive, traditional approach of Westernized dance training, the full potential of these dancers is never fulfilled

because they had to choose the privileged dance curriculum that devalued the dances of their cultures. The need for culturally responsive dance education raised practical suggestions about constructing classroom culture that incorporates explicit cultural expectations, consideration of the impact of stereotypes and calls for inclusion of the communications styles and cultures of students.

Culturally responsive art educators were encouraged to introduce sociocultural consciousness and context to students using the “What is Your Tar Baby?” visual art exhibition of Charly Palmer (Jackson, 2012). The painting series connected the story of a cunning charlatan, Brer Rabbit, to interactions with a tar baby doll and images of public figures. We learn from this study that the orality which passed down the story of Brer Rabbit stems from griots of West African culture. Students were exposed to a creative way to engage in politics, race, metaphors and multiple narratives. Jackson (2012) argues that student affirmation, given by cultural content and context, opens opportunities for engaged learning and discussions. Ironically, there is the inclusion of African American artist’s biography, which substantiates the current practice of mobilising Black artists and their work only as an external reference for student learning.

Arts institutions, artists, audiences and theatre educators were called on by Schroeder-Arce (2014) to explore culturally responsive artistry with minority communities. As mainstream American companies often did not include Latinx stories on their stages, the research study responds to monolingual audiences on non-accessibility and voices representative of the racial and cultural demographics of their communities. This demonstrates how a theatre scholar adapts a theoretical framework to develop culturally responsive artistry and then applies it to implement culturally

responsive theatre education for young people. With experience of teaching pre-service teachers of school theatre programs, Schroeder-Arce identified the power of regional theatre companies where external artists are relied upon as a model for the theatre programs to choose from. All examples show how scholars are thinking, unpacking and designing culturally responsive arts to challenge Eurocentric practices.

## Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emerged between the 1970s to 1990s as an intellectual movement shaped by scholars of colour, deconstructs and transforms the law, which is an institution that constructs and perpetuates racial domination and subordination (Essed, 2011). Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Alan Freeman formed CRT's origins. Critical Race Theory is rooted in a few basic tenets noted in Delgado and Stefancic (2017), where racism is normalized and difficult to address as it is not acknowledged. The second feature is how racism advances the material interests of white elites and working-class populations that psychically have less incentive to eradicate it. The third tenet holds that race is a social construction with racism and other structural categories that interact and intersect with power. The radical critique against the acceptance of white supremacy in legal paradigms and contemporary law is instrumental in mainstreaming intersectionality and multiple identifications as theoretical frameworks.

Using CRT as a theoretical framework aligns with the epistemology and methodology of this study to affirm what artists experience as they navigate an institution of power. A tenet of CRT is that narratives and stories are important to

understanding individuals' experiences and how those experiences represent a counter-story of the way the society works (Ladson-Billings, 1999). In the context of education, CRT identifies voices striving to exist in conditions where groups struggle for human status. Zeus (2013) positions Critical Race Theory as its extension within a discourse of colour-blindness that frames the daily operation of race in the inner workings of schools and society. As a counter to colour-blindness, CRT centers the narratives of Black cultural art educators' marginalized perspectives for educational equity and racial justice. Finally, CRT understands that multiple oppressions inform an intersectional approach in the ways race, culture, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality shape both individual and group experiences as well as the identities of the research participants.

## Methodology

This study began with a participant search based on external criteria calling for cultural artists who self-identify as African, Caribbean and Black, with at least five years of teaching in K-12 schools across the Greater Toronto Region, who have a commitment and philosophy that supports dissemination of history, culture and social context through the arts. The internal criteria called for a participant sample of professional artists representative of the African diaspora who were Canadian-born and/or born in and immigrated from Africa, the Caribbean and Europe to Canada. Between August and October 2018, eight semi-structured interviews of up to two hours duration were recorded, with consent, and transcribed into rich narratives from twenty-three questions about culturally relevant teaching experiences in schools. Interviews

included lived experiences from African Heritage Month in 2017 and 2018, a peak period when artists of African & Caribbean descent were predominately hired by schools.

## **The participants**

. I interviewed eight Black Canadian artists who represent an intergenerational span across the arts sector. These professional Canadian artists hold various ethnicities within the social construct of Blackness, and they engage with their distinct African and Caribbean sociocultural realities. Linguistically, the artists are English and French-speaking and a few are multi-lingual in some African languages. All participating artists, at minimum, are trained and specialized in an artform that spans at least fifteen to thirty-five years of practice. As there are interdisciplinary arts across the African diaspora, this study is not limited to one artistic genre. This study highlights the heterogeneity of cultural arts that originate from the African and Caribbean regions and is offered in schools across the Greater Toronto region. Each artist noted that this was the first time they were ever asked to share their teaching experiences and how important this study is in terms of documenting the presence of Black art educators in Ontario schools.

The respondents hold multiple roles within the arts sector which include years of entrepreneurship, arts leadership, teaching and professional performance. The artists divulged their collective repertoire which includes drumming, percussion, and traditional griot storytelling that incorporates traditional West African cultures. In addition, the identified artforms include spoken word, music, visual arts and mixed media with African cultural concepts. Some artists are skilled musicians in Sub-Saharan African

indigenous instruments where polyrhythmic, ancestral music was derived from and transposed unto djembe and dundun drums representative of Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Mali. The techniques of the interviewed dance educators range from Afro-Contemporary to tackling how Caribbean peoples arrive across time and space. Modern, Jazz, traditional Yoruba and Santeria forms of Orisha dances in Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago are also part of their presentations. Movement vernacular includes traditional Caribbean Folk from Jamaica (Kumina, Pocomania, Dinkimini), and Eastern Caribbean belt (Grenadian Jab Jab). As members of diasporic communities, the artists share embodied cultural memory and nuances in their contemporary expressions.

## Research Ethics

This inquiry relies on the lived experiences and perspectives of Canadian cultural art educators as knowledge sharers, who represent different ethnic groups with artforms originating from African or Caribbean regions. Qualitative interviews were subject to informed consent and research ethics protocols. Participants' narratives were deemed anonymous so that the research did not pose risks to any existing and current relationships with educational institutions. In conducting this study, half of the participants advocated for their actual names to be documented to eliminate the perpetual practice of their erasure in research. While it is true that Black Canadian artists and their practices fail to be documented in academic research, some expressed the concern of silencing their identities in this research. As such, a tension emerged as I

considered minimal risk to protect the identities of the artists against potential scrutiny or retaliation for disclosing a negative experience and confidential information from a past or current relationship with schools and boards. But as a researcher, I take responsibility to uphold and tell their stories and maintain anonymity. I chose to use pseudonyms of African-descended names to be culturally representative of the identities and voices of the Black creatives. As I share the respondents' anecdotes, the names of institutions, administrators or school educators are confidentially excluded, as per research ethics protocols.

## Overview of Artists in Education

In the 1980s, the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) funded *Mariposa in the Schools*<sup>4</sup>, a predominately Anglo and Francophone group of multidisciplinary artists and musicians offering single-class and teacher workshops, concerts and tours in Toronto schools. This program's aim was to enhance curriculum using folk traditions and common roots of various cultures. Such an initiative did not consider the demographics of students or their cultural backgrounds at that time and focused on the dominant culture. Over time, the OAC program was revised to a granting program titled, Artists in Education, which is currently the Artists in Communities and Schools grant. I inquired with Ontario Arts Council's research department for historical data on the number of Black artists or organizations they funded for educational engagements and found no race-based data existed outside of my own OAC-funded projects.

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<sup>4</sup> Mariposa in the Schools Performers' Catalogue from 1985-86 was an artefact I accessed of a funded multidisciplinary hub of artists that schools hired for workshops, tours and concerts. The program was funded by Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Musician's Association through the Music Performance Trust Fund.

Pahar & Sensory (2011) remind us of research identifying school systems with exclusionary educational practices in support of Eurocentric ideologies. This research increasingly demands that educators adjust their teaching to meet the needs of their diverse student populations. Black professional artists educate from difference by teaching non-Eurocentric arts in schools for cultural relevancy— specifically, artistic knowledge originating from African and Caribbean nations. Within Ontario schools each year, the research subjects present a workshop or a lesson to fulfil a themed activity and performance, predominately in February. Past practices of artist inclusion would involve the school operating as “an inherent power dynamic as the program does not gauge interest of students” (Gerdes & VanDenend Sorge, 2015, p. 74). Realistically, hiring such cultural practitioners in this manner continue to represent an ad hoc practice in support of arts engagement in Canadian classrooms, without any clear alignment and awareness of current discourses and pedagogies for cultural relevancy during the rest of the year.

## Cultural Arts

During interviews, the Black artists contextualized their art as a form of cultural arts. As such, there is a need to define what type of arts the respondents engage in. For this purpose, I define cultural arts as a holistic interweaving of the historical, contemporary and futuristic ideas of a set of creative aesthetics that affirm cultural and political identity, intergenerational social values and ethnic particularities in expressive artforms. In geographic regions across Africa, and the Caribbean, the arts include

performative functions of oral (words, speech, text, song), visual (imagery, dress or artefacts), innovative music, rhythms and instruments (auditory) and movement (physical practices). In addition, the communicative style of cultural arts includes cultural codes, linguistic patterns, with polyrhythmic and polycentric values that are generational across time and space.

One of the research participants, Kofi, is a musician who asserts that each person's role artistically symbolizes a relationship to a larger concept: "With polyrhythm, I have to help the students understand what each part means, just like a community." With concepts such as call and response, students interact and function as a community, while intersecting cultural arts relationships in a nuanced presentation. For example, song, drumming and dance in a simultaneous fashion. Such relationships show the multidimensional nature of arts across the African diaspora and the next section speaks to current art interventions in schools.

## **Cultural arts interventions within Ontario school engagement**

In 2016, during the Wynne administration, national arts councils received an unprecedented re-investment from the Government of Canada<sup>5</sup> to support the infrastructure of arts and culture. In addition, there was interest for inclusion and focus on artistic projects representative of, and for, priority groups and marginalized communities in Canadian schools. As provincial grant funding programs were

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<sup>5</sup> Media announcement on March 22, 2016 from the Canada Council for the Arts: <http://canadacouncil.ca/press/2016/03/renewing-investment-in-the-arts>

developed or merged to prioritize Black and Indigenous artists, the applications within the past three years began to request self-identifying data for equity-seeking groups<sup>6</sup>. It is yet to be determined how arts councils will report and use the findings.

In the past decade, there is evidence of cultural education reform using the arts to instigate other ways of knowing from IBPOC groups. Dion and Salamanca (2014) shared a culturally responsive project inviting Indigenous artists into the Toronto District School Board to support urban Indigenous students address their invisibility as Indigenous peoples in Canada and its cities. The culminating public art exhibition for education stakeholders centred on their challenging schooling experiences using visual arts and storytelling as a means of cultural survival and resistance (survivance<sup>7</sup>).

*Rhymes to Re-Education*<sup>8</sup> is a curriculum developed collaboratively by Toronto District School educators, youth and predominately professional, ethnoracial artists as a transformative tool of how hip-hop serves as a critical pedagogy to engage learners aged seven and up. We see a resurgence of the arts within institutions such as Toronto District School Board's *Dare2Create*<sup>9</sup>, acknowledging artists as assets in creating well-rounded education for students and as part of instructional delivery included to inspire student voice through their creative projects. While the aforementioned TDSB initiatives have included Black artist collaborators, limited research exists in Canada that documents the voices of cultural artists engaged in inclusive education.

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<sup>6</sup> Race, LGBTQSA+, disability, geographic location, and Francophone are identified priority categories on Ontario Arts Council applications as of 2018.

<sup>7</sup> A concept of presence coined by Gerald Vizenor (1994), who explains that Indigenous survival plus resistance equals survivance.

<sup>8</sup> A 2014 curriculum resource guide developed by Toronto artists and educators of color, which is available from A Different Booklist's publishing company (<http://www.rhymestoreeducation.com/>).

<sup>9</sup>A Toronto District School Board initiative to encourage artist residencies to work with secondary grades to develop innovate projects from youth perspectives (<http://tdsb.on.ca/High-School/Get-Involved/Dare2Create>).

## Hiring Cultural Art Educators

First, it is extremely positive that some educational institutions identify the need for the cultural artist as an educator and requests to book their services for the classroom. One research participant, Dayo, is a drummer who shared that Ontario French immersion and French Catholic school boards hire cultural artists because there is a large student demographic with heritages from West African countries, which were former French colonies. Second, the mere presence of the cultural art educator of African and Caribbean descent occupying classroom space demonstrates that school boards hold some awareness that cultural representation is key.

As a cultural art educator, myself, I examined the entry points of hiring artists and in the past few years, I even underwent some processes to understand the climate and secure contracts and bookings. About two-thirds of the participants taught junior kindergarten to Grade 8 and one-third worked in the secondary school level. Two artists taught at performing arts high schools, where the student demographic includes a very marginal population of one or two Black students in the entire school. Respondents revealed how some of them are independently hired by a teacher championing the need for Black content and paying the artist directly with their own funds. In later years, hiring becomes structured with teachers and principals, a booking agent, an external organization or arts council partnership, and a residency opportunity or referrals.

Most cultural art educators, like Dayo, relayed how they rely on word of mouth referrals and pursue relationships built through independent hiring, directly from a teacher, parent council or a principal. With independent hiring, the cultural art

educators informed me that as they negotiate varying costs, a main concern of theirs was to set a consistent standard across the educational system with the hope of not underselling the value of their cultural work.

### **Impact for student well-being and academic achievement**

When asked about successful practices in their culturally relevant teaching experiences, all research participants emphasized the importance for students to learn about different cultures and their own culture to support their growth, identity formation and development. When the lack of culturally relevant material becomes an inaccessible barrier, this can be harmful to student well-being. Students in homogeneous settings with the least exposure to other cultures are likely to be disadvantaged because they will not gain an understanding of people different to them (McCarthy-Brown, 2009). When students see themselves within course materials, it offers an entry point to identify with the content in a relatable way and legitimizes that they exist. As a dance professor, McCarthy-Brown noted that Eurocentric aesthetic judgements she developed in her 25-year student and teaching experiences became a generative cycle from which she needed to decolonize. Continuously, many of her students of colour contemplate whether to reflect their identity, culture, confidence, prowess and joy through dance because they face rejection in their dance training and oftentimes, throughout the educational system. The structural power of dance curriculum creates an oppressive environment for a portion of the student population to conform and deny aspects of their own creative identities.

The effects of incorporating movement expressiveness and polyrhythmic performance into African American student's learning environments was considered in Allen & Boykin (1992). This study acknowledged cultural styles of learning, such as a West African cultural ethos of interweaving of music, movement and percussive dance. The authors claim that offering cultural content materials in high movement, story and polyrhythm garnered a greater manifestation for student interests, emerging competencies and participatory behaviour as a proactive medium for higher cognitive reasoning. With concerns of student achievement gaps, this does not mean that inclusive classrooms must offer high functioning activities but supports the argument that incorporating culturally relevant materials from the African diaspora produces a positive impact on cognitive skills.

In Bennett's (2001) work, there was a breakdown of Boykin's nine interrelated dimensions of West African and African American stylistic behaviour. This analysis details the high movement expressiveness among African American children and how it can be incorporated into classroom pedagogy. Some of the dimensions include communalism, spirituality, a harmony between human and nature, receptiveness to high levels of sense stimulation and an emphasis on emotions and feelings. In African-indigenous art forms, those dimensions interweave with rhythm, percussion, music, dance and visual arts. Boykin and Cunningham (2001) wrote about expressive individualism with a distinct personality for spontaneity in behaviour, orality in oral/aural modes of communication and gaining a social time perspective in which time is understood as social space rather than a material one. Lastly, African-indigenous cultures hold rituals, customs and traditions that are separate from a general dance

code of conduct in a classroom. In West African dance, McCarthy-Brown (2009) noted the custom of honouring one's teachers as a demonstration of honouring themselves. Indeed, there are benefits of inviting these dimensions to transform the classroom, invigorate their learning and motivate students towards skills that impact their well-being. These examples support the Critical Race Theory tenet in Howard and Navarro (2016) to challenge the dominant narrative by valuing experiential knowledge from indigenous communities around the world. The next section invites us to see the artists' perspectives when delivering their educational activity.

## **Perspectives on Successful Culturally Responsive Teaching Purpose of their Cultural Arts Engagement**

Culturally responsive teaching, offered by the eight Black cultural art educators, opens critical artistic inquiry using the socio-historical, cultural, and political relationships associated with a diasporic artform. Students enter a co-creation process with critical dialogue about local and global references, gain exposure to intercultural learning and develop competency skills while executing an artistic output. The artists include culturally relevant materials in arts engagements to unlock student minds to other curricula, innovatively. A few are intentional in supporting the cultural literacy of other generations of African, Caribbean and Black students to understand, see themselves and value knowledge from many ethnic groups across the African diaspora.

Cultural art educators holding performing arts expertise bring integrative and experiential learning opportunities as discussed in Kindelan (2010). The cultural arts activities offered by the interviewees are collaborative and support cognitive, operational

and value-focused skills. For example, dance and orality can be used to interpret and translate themes, subject matters and stories in a creative process that fosters reflection, empathy and collective action. In addition, artists offer cultural arts as non-verbal communication styles and social patterns within embodied movement and musical languages that are reflective of the social life, interactions and cultural purposes of various ethnic groups. Each engagement can provide experiential learning in cooperation, accountability, self-reflexivity, critical thinking and leadership skills.

When unpacking their purpose, the interviewees engage in their work to counter the superficial ways cultural arts are presented and debunk the Eurocentric hegemony that categorize and separate creative expressions. Imani, a dance educator and studio owner, outlines her purpose of teaching:

“To bring these artforms into less diverse (and diverse) environments where they are not known, practiced, understood and often appropriated. It is important that these students obtain the knowledge before they go out into the world, whether they continue as artists or not.”

As the only Black student in a performing arts high school (Grade 7 to 12) and then within an undergraduate dance studies program, Imani’s educational experience predominately showed her that arts from African, Caribbean and Black cultures were never valued. This example of unconscious messaging that a dancer of colour must reject dances from a student’s culture to succeed within the dominant dance hierarchy was discussed in McCarthy-Brown (2009). Here is an artist impacted by dominant dance curriculum that systemically excludes her cultural frames of reference, but she had to make a conscious effort to find and learn Black dance vernacular, outside her Eurocentric school and dance training.

Ife, a visual creator, also grew up in predominately white spaces with no Black content at all in her Ontario schooling. Ife tells us: “I work with children of African descent because I am feeding their soul with their own culture, which they do not get and that they are robbed of.” Ife holds thirty years of combining her artistry in interdisciplinary approaches with themes of Black-Canadian, African and Caribbean artforms, mythologies and plant medicine. Ife’s intentionality dwells in the joy, jubilation and genius of African culture and offers culture to children and youth to uplift people of African descent to engage in practices rooted in a valid culture.

The cultural art educators commonly stated they spark curiosity and expose North American audiences to the cultural heritage and positive contributions of their Black colleagues and ancestors. Subsequently, cultural arts highlight African and Caribbean indigeneity and artistic codifications among different cultures. Adisa, a dance choreographer, states that cultural arts engagement is:

To bring forth a vast history of an incredible practice of the arts that is collaborative in its very nature. Additionally, one that brings forward stories of persons of African descent over time and connects with arts practice that also evolves over time. Cultural teaching is an opportunity to provide student audiences a chance to look at the impact of an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary experience that is engaging and grabs at the visceral, emotional and intellectual level.

There was a collective sentiment among the Black artists’ responses that cultural arts engagement incites the next wave of young artistic minds and helps to uncover talents among children.

## Creating Culturally Responsive Art

Culturally responsive arts from the African diaspora support the practice of passing down arts as a legacy and maintaining creative practices from ancestors, cultures and communities. This cultural arts principle creates accessible spaces for generational and diverse cultural knowledge, and it actualizes the right to self-determine in contemporary and futuristic ways. With Ontario's education mandate to meet equity strategies across its school boards, cultural art educators offer opportunities to bring existing and innovative ways that present Black people positively and allow all students to navigate curriculum. If a specific theme involves friendship, unity and bullying, Kofi customized the experiential learning to convey moral lessons, as evident in African communities. Using storytelling, chants and some dance movement along with a discussion, Kofi attested that student voices were fully engaged because in "most traditional African cultures, oral storytelling has always been that basic and accessible type of informal education to get people thinking about what they are facing, watching and hearing."

Dance educator, Nabila, offers how culturally responsive dance connects to other genres:

It is an opportunity to present Black people through movement, positively, differently and diversely. For example, the way hip hop has shifted is a concern, as it has become more sexualized. I make references between Hip Hop dance and how it is rooted in African and Caribbean dance vocabulary. Come meet Hip Hop's grandparents.

Ife's impetus to develop and offer culturally responsive teaching is about anti-Black racism messaging and lived experience. Ife strongly conveys why:

It is due to righteous rage of what I have been robbed of in my own childhood and education. I felt adamant about providing what I did not have for young people. I was educating others about our own culture as an enrichment for them but as I get older, the radical voice comes to the fore again. With courage and clarity, I have a soul mission to serve women and children of African descent thorough art, performance and ritual practices around the African diaspora.

There is an emancipatory and reciprocal need for culturally responsive art that not only services the students but also affirms artists' identity, and ignites their soul, intellect and creative practices. In turn, we need to explore the successes when Black artists assess the classroom, consider who is in the space and tailor the art to center the identities in that environment.

### **Successful Practices and Impact**

Respondents of this research included some best practices. First, they position their cultural work in relationship to the land and the Indigenous caretakers. In addition, the Black artists socially locate their cultural work in relation to the descendants of the enslaved African peoples who were occupied and brought to other lands through the Middle Passage of the Transatlantic slave trade. While there are recent land acknowledgements instituted on a national level, it is the responsibility of the artist to position themselves and their cultural work done on Turtle Island. Second, community agreements are collectively established with the cultural art educator and students on how to relate, exchange, and resolve matters with a consequence impacting all participants. The classroom is converted into a community in order to decolonise and creatively evoke respectful, classroom spaces. If someone challenged or disrupted the

engagement, the entire group, including the art educator, will face the consequence. This act demonstrates collective responsibility to maintain respect, to honour the role of all parties and how individual actions impact the community. I've shared a successful practice where collaborative meetings include the teacher, arts organization and herself; or with a group of teachers who brainstorm and share objectives. All are examples of culturally responsive classroom management styles to set expectations and ethical standards from the artists' cultural frame of reference, background and social location.

When asked, all cultural art educators understood what culturally responsive teaching meant and articulated the pedagogy in their own way. Most artists reflected on their definition of culturally responsive teaching and noted how they bear the sole responsibility to be cognizant of their individual instructional style brought into the classroom, adjust it and center the identities of the underrepresented cultural voices and the learning expectations for all. For example, Adisa's narrative went from introspective questions to an influential learning opportunity he identified:

When we look at the word 'cultural' and 'responsive', what are we talking about? What are the skillsets that the artist brings into the classroom to benefit the learners? What are the learners' interactions and expectations and how might I, as a Black Caribbean instruct differently? I am referencing how my instruction looks different in relation to a North American teaching practice. As someone coming from a different structure and discipline from the Caribbean, I am culturally responsive to the beneficial ways I have grown up, but I must be responsive to the learners who grow up in classrooms in Canada. It is a negotiation, I find, in my responsiveness to that. Culture must take a backseat to what a meaningful experience is for the learners.

Adisa recalled a prior teaching engagement when arriving to a performing arts school's drama class exploring culturally specific movements related to drama. He entered expecting all his student learners to execute the same movement. He had to

seamlessly alter his structure after surveying that he had Black Muslim girls in skirts. Cognizant of cultural nuances, customs and religious beliefs, he quickly revised his warmup vocabulary (stretch and floor work) to suit the students' identities and bodies and transform the classroom space to a culturally responsive one. This taught Adisa the value of not assuming how the learners will respond to a different vocabulary, but how he responds to them and their needs within a moment, a practice he continues today. This counters a colorblind approach which misses critically important information about students' needs, "such as how membership in a racial group shapes experience, access to social and cultural capital, and perspectives" (Gandara, 2008, p. 44). This successful practice informed future teaching decisions to bring a wider worldview and equitable inclusion of student's identities and perspectives.

The respondent narratives indicate how they operate with integrity and are ethically responsible in educating with history, political, social and cultural context that informs the artform. To be culturally responsible and culturally representative, the artists teach artforms from lived experience or through cultural practices studied with Master Teachers from the countries of origin. Each artist noted their positionality as knowledge sharers to cite sources in their own diaspora and not to present themselves as experts. When faced with an assumption on the styles taught, a dance interviewee, who brings foundation, rhythmic structure and techniques from many cultural-specific dances, would refer educators to their colleagues trained by African Master teachers, for example. Cultural art educators voiced the emphasized need for quality programming which distinguishes them from individuals who claim to know and teach

arts and culture, yet have not been to any workshops with Masters, traveled to the African continent for research, or been to the regions where the artforms are practiced.

Kofi uses humor in his work and honours student questions relayed to him by their classroom teachers, after his visit. This openness encouraged a further extension of the work after the students' assessments and a relationship to the cultural material. When Ebele, a writer and spoken word artist, held a Course Director or lecturer role, his successful practice was to speak of and show local and contemporary artists in the Black Canadian arts sector who showcase practices that they studied and that exist longer than Ballet. In those settings, Ebele assessed how all the minority postsecondary students of colour felt affirmed by the culturally responsive content he brought into the classroom. This is a culturally competent act that moves beyond dominant discourse and "becomes an emancipatory process that frees students from the notion that a particular kind of cultural capital is worth having; difference does not equal deficit" (Bond, 2017, p. 153).

Subsequent successful practices indicate that cultural relevance is key, so it is pertinent to interweave students' own cultural references into the lesson —using resources such as movement, music, books, imagery, nationality, materials and artefacts. Citing sources, people and different cultures are important. By adapting this practice of cultural learning relevant to student's social lives, the cultural arts support them in understanding that lessons do extend outside the school environment.

The artists' perspectives summarize that elementary students are impacted by the interactive lessons, but the secondary students seem to prefer collaborating with the artist to bring relatability between the arts and their own realities. Such positive

reactions are echoed by all research participants' when asked about student impact. All respondents beamed with pride as they reflected on the student and educator testimonials they receive. As the respondents continue to center their work on Black students' engagement, they appreciate when other racialized and non-racialized students make connections and see familiarity with the activity in their own family or out-of-school experiences. The impact was measured by the artists' observations and the students' emotional responses.

As a drummer, Dayo noted that the meaning making of his cultural arts work and student dialogues expressed heightened curiosity to learn more about the continent of Africa, as well as the diversity of African diasporic artforms and cultures. Post-instructional feedback that the respondents conveyed include Black students who felt affirmed and wanted more. Principals and primary teachers told our research participants how the Black students felt it was the best educational assembly, observed how they reacted to the Afro-indigenous instruments played, and non-Black students showed interest in being further educated. Cultural art educators encouraged student dialogue to extend to their family and elders' homes, because in African and Caribbean communities elders are revered as repositories of knowledge.

When educating diverse populations, a successful practice is not only reaching the minority students but also dominant and other racialized groups. As a dance instructor, Imani spoke of cross-collaborative training among African and Caribbean-born students who were guided to use resources to gain history of their own regional and diasporic differences but teach their own dance movements to each other. When non-racialized students are receptive to embodying a cultural practice, accept

corrections of alignment and embrace cultural nuances and vernacular, this is transformative learning that Nabila, in her teaching experience, finds helpful. Imani, in addition, supported the narrative that non-racialized students shift from being a rigid dancer versed only in Ballet or Modern vernacular to a dancer capable of polycentric and polyrhythmic techniques from indigenous African and Caribbean dance.

The artists identified how their teaching is successful when educators build a relationship with the cultural artist, ask questions, and are critically cognizant to bring authentic knowledge in and avoid sourcing pretenders in their classrooms.

Accomplishments occurred with some Black students motivated to apply to a future performing arts school or influenced to apply to a postsecondary arts program. In performance arts schools and postsecondary settings, very few Black students receive access to cultural arts work from African, Caribbean and Black communities. According to Nabila, success is based on the Black student confidently continuing their learning with the cultural art educator within community settings or at a professional arts level, external to the educational institution.

Zula, who is an OCT-certified artist, noticed how classroom educators' viewpoints are broadened to other ways of teaching and introducing programming that highlight the strengths their diverse students have. Zula assessed that if the educators are receptive, they pull back and watch with marvel to see a different side of their students they never saw before. When students experience cultural art educators, who are respected elders:

Even students who were from the Caribbean, who were initially resistive, appreciated a different way of thinking. At the end, they said it was most meaningful program with a Caribbean-based structure. How important it was to see a teacher from Jamaica who upheld some of the structure, discipline and practices of 'home'. Also, how important it was not to underserve the students. - Adisa

Considering different education systems from the Global South, the artists show educators that it is important not to underserve or underestimate African and Caribbean students in the classroom.

Some respondents break normative rules of art and blend experiences with multidisciplinary artforms. Imani notes that she listens to the children and allows their voices to move in the direction of her arts engagement, which is a form of community arts practice that is collaborative in nature. As a cultural art educator and professional artist, myself, I go beyond to create culturally responsive arts that is equity-focused and sparks intellectual analysis and relatability in students. This serves as a catalyst which aims to deepen intercultural perspectives that open a student's eyes to macro-level issues on matters that are culturally relevant to them.

## **Perspectives on the Challenges in Culturally Responsive Teaching Institutional Unpreparedness**

As teaching artists, many challenges are faced such as “difficult communication with overworked classroom teachers, inattentive principals, unclean classrooms” (Gerdes & VanDenend Sorge, 2015, p. 75). Some respondents are adamantly assertive with educators when the space provided is unsafe and hazardous. It is disappointing, especially after clear conversations about respectful space and what it means. All respondents agreed that when logistics are not arranged, and miscommunications

occur it can make the experience negative. For example, musician, Kofi, recalled hearing from a teacher that:

It's just drumming. You don't need to have any specific space. You can just push the desks and chairs to the side, in the cafeteria or staff room.

Other artists' perspectives shed light on several other logistical challenges:

Sometimes you may not get what your ask for. Time is wasted to find chairs for a drumming circle, or the floor is not swept, or the room is freezing. Sometimes I arrive and it's 'Oh, you don't get the gym. You get the library'. Really? I have to teach dance on a carpet in a library? Sometimes things happen and they don't recognize that there are needs. - lfe

When I inquired about the cultural art educator's experience in preparing for their teaching engagement, an astounding majority noted that school educators or senior administration (e.g., principals) are not proactive and provided no information prior to their classroom engagement. It was alarming that within Kofi's thirty-years of cultural arts teaching, none of the educators had in-depth discussions to support his preparation. Kofi clarified that he failed in being debriefed prior to teaching and he further said, "To say that there was someone who told me, 'here are the objectives and the goals we want to achieve', it was very seldom that it happened". All artists confirmed that rudimentary information is shared about the school location and grades to work with, but most conversations are framed around technical requirements and space configuration.

I learned that cultural art educators must proactively lead the logistical conversation because school boards do not know what is required. Some of the cultural art educators are previous professional touring artists, so adequate sound and physical space where arts are presented or engaged in are important. Indifferent behaviour

towards the resources an artist requires is perceived as a lack of respect. The onus is on the cultural art educator to ask questions, organize and prepare. For example, when Adisa communicated in a phone call for his space animation needs, he noticed there was no debriefing of program expectations and he claims there “can be a misunderstanding on the part of the educator failing to communicate to the students effectively, about the process.” When a cultural art educator is independently booked there is a disconnect in the planning process with the school as noted when assessing the feedback from the respondents, even though a booking may be performance-based. An important finding among all narratives is that the onus is on the Black cultural art educator to probe, to provide a clear sense of their own technical needs and to determine if their experiential learning supplements the classroom curriculum.

## Legitimizing Culturally Responsive Artistry

Educational institutions may not be aware that they have educators and administrators who hold unconscious bias, assumptions, negative perceptions and attitudes about the arts that originate from the African and Caribbean diaspora. For parts of Ontario that are just becoming diversified, unpreparedness by educators can be evident:

As my Caribbean class was going on, you could tell that [the classroom teacher] guessed her way through her prep-talk. I was in the middle of my movement class and the teacher asks me, in front of her students, “So how do you deal with negative comments about the bodily movements?” So now I am taken aback by this approach and the kids hear negative judgment associated in moving this way. Is that what came to the classroom’s teacher’s mind? It said more about her, how she was feeling, as a teacher, in that moment. It reminds me of how uncomfortable a lot of teachers can be when they bring you in to teach movements and how they can feel threatened.

- Imani

Disappointingly, Kofi noted how his lessons and themes are valued by educators' choices:

Organizationally, if there is someone at an institutional booking agency that approaches a school prior to the visiting artist, a set of questions and requirements are given to the teachers to prepare themselves for the artist and students, and there are follow-up assessments. I try to adopt the same approach with a teacher, when I teach solo, but I am met with '*Oh, we are done with this. It is just too busy. We have to move on.*' So, the teachers do not put time in using the new activity I gave as part of their student's growth. Many times, the teachers see the work as entertainment or just a different activity to do and it is up to me to decide that I want them to learn something that ties to their academic learning, as well.

These omissions speak of the entitlement in teacher's discernment to judge and insert personal bias, which is a non-commitment to a social justice agenda to connect cultural arts with student learning. According to Critical Race Theory, these are examples of subordination where teacher attitudes foster educational inequity. Adisa noted,

There really was not much support for that. I was, and am currently, working with teachers who felt that when I arrived in the space, they would do nothing. They mark papers or go out to do something else, but they would not support me working with the class.

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) note a CRT tenet that experiential knowledge ought to be valued. The subordination by the educator devalues and dismisses Black artists' expertise and does not factor how students fully benefit from artist's stories or experiential knowledge offered in the classroom. The educator feels entitled to disengage.

Despite instances of disengagement, the cultural art educators continue to bring culturally relevant teaching as a decolonizing practice. As Nabila noted,

For the children who are not of African descent, I want them to gain respect for African cultures and peoples. I want them to recognize the information and experiences that have been excluded from their education.

Two of the cultural art educators are practicing musicians and noted that they face misunderstandings about African culture which seem to be associated with primitiveness and that rhythms are perceived to be of sacrifice. Dayo continually encounters generations of children and youth, who still have stereotypical, indoctrinated views about the negative clichés of Africa today. This point is articulated further, in terms of Afro-indigeneity:

It is critical to distinguish that these are not haphazard rhythms and dances being performed. Too many people take African dance and drum for granted. - Kofi

Nabila shares that, “The kind of dances I like, or work I am involved in, isn’t trendy or popular and there are general stereotypes and assumptions about what I do.” Therefore, these narratives inform us that when it comes to educational spaces, the artist has a short period of time to counter the attitudes, negative perceptions or stereotypes, as they simultaneously suppress their reactions and deliver their cultural arts content.

There are underestimations of what cultural art educators bring to the classroom. For instance, when a performing arts high school brings a dance educator who presents contemporary perspectives on cultural vernacular that existed for generations, it challenges the teachers’ and students’ viewpoints by helping them find connections to what they are familiar with:

They have preconceived notions that I am teaching traditional African or Caribbean dance. I teach contemporary African-Caribbean. They don't think the traditional forms are a technique- Nabila

This cultural art educator sources her training in Dunham technique influenced by African and Caribbean movements and its relationship to classical Ballet and Modern dance, which surprises the predominately white student audiences that she is well-versed in the Eurocentric vernacular. This example tells us that if a school does not expose its learners to cultural methodologies, it will not allow all parties to raise questions and challenge students to think globally, critically and be conscientious with the cultural arts they are digesting and sharing. Overall, the narratives support that cultural art educators are, in a sense, activists advocating for inclusion of Black diasporic art, identities, cultures and social experience for social justice purposes. They are demonstrating their own relevance all year, across curricula.

## **Anti-Black Racism**

Anti-Black racism is a particular racism and violence directed towards, and experienced by, Black people in Canada stemming from the colonial period. Specific institutional laws and practices have been responsible for segregation in education, employment, the criminal justice system and in the broader society (James, et al., 2010, p. 26). All participants had instances of Anti-black racism where the behavior and power imbalance were directed by a school administrator or educator towards the Black artist and their Black content. Some artists perceived that some schools hold assumptions that children of African, Caribbean and Black decent automatically know their cultural history and practices. As well, some artists perceived a delegitimization of the idea that

cultural arts are actual techniques and arts practices. Given this lack of historical inclusion in curriculum, some cultural art educators face microaggressions from school administration or other full-time teachers during their decades working in schools.

## Microaggressions within Educational Institutions

When asked about their relationships with institutions, the cultural art educators responded with examples of subtle racism and differential treatment:

I have been underemployed because of the specialization in my practice, as an arts educator because its only relegated to February. Can we have African-based programming in March? Then, there are microaggressions where teachers think they mean well but say racist comments either by objectifying or exoticizing. - Ife

The everyday racism with educators who operated in dismissive ways towards the artist's presence, the artform and the cultural content are a form of anti-Black racism that "identifies a system of prejudice and unfair or unequal treatment on the basis of skin color" (James, et al., 2010, p. 64). When entering a school space, the Black artist is judged differently in an interlocking experience with race and gender:

Yeah. Body politics. As a Black man, as a teacher, walking into white schools where [educators] may not know of your experiences and what knowledge you bring in, so automatically you are questioned rather than supported. I have had to push back against teachers and administrators. Especially when signing in, where you are looked beyond and not acknowledged. When you identify that you are there to present and deliver a program, there is a shift in treatment and that should not be. - Adisa

Aside from hypervisibility, some cultural art educators revealed that they navigate pushback from educational institutions for having a Black-centred focus. Ife was

cognizant of her challenges, speaking of an incident where one educator undermined her work:

I had a two-year residency at a school. I worked alongside a teacher of LatinX heritage and I thought he was an ally. He was the one who ratted on me and tried to cause trouble for me because he didn't see the value of the project. We had it out. I did not change my project. Yet he had some epiphany and he later realized (after a while) and said 'OMG. It does. This expectation met this curriculum and that expectation met this [need].' Because it wasn't overtly obvious to him, at first.

This action of using one's power to devalue what one does not understand, not only impacts the reputation and future opportunities of the visiting artist, but also reflects an unwillingness to accept interdisciplinary pedagogies arising from the cultural work.

In addition, research participants shared anecdotes of teachers' attitudes with their cultural arts engagement. Kofi notes during the pre-social media years:

For the longest while, I would come in and in fact, teachers would walk out of the classroom to do something else or go to a corner and do something at their desk. That was a sad moment for me because the whole purpose was to work in collaboration.

Adisa notes the following:

Just for the sake of having no miscommunications or hidden expectations, I always encouraged that we have a conversation about where they are and what they find their needs are in a particular school. I always use the teachers as educators as well. So [educators] must be in the room, to see how I am delivering the programming. We have to have referred processes over time, so it was never a checkbox to say, "oh I have diverse programming" or "this Black dance artist" was hired to do the work. It could be used as a development process for them as well, in terms of how they could approach their own teaching by the common experience in the room.

Subsequently, the cultural work brought into the classroom is not categorized as a break away from the curriculum. The cultural art educator can create added-value

assignments, mark it, or it can be incorporated into the final assessment tools for student assessment. Subjugating and discriminating against the work and the artist counter the CRT tenet to value the artists' experiential knowledge, which Howard and Navarro (2016) remind us that there are different ways of knowing, thinking and communicating.

A few artists responded with examples of colourism/shadism, in which their light-skinned appearance can either be an advantage or disadvantage. A cultural art educator with mixed-raced identity privilege shared:

White people don't feel threatened by me. I have a distinct experience being invisible as a Black person, in the context of white space. So, then I may hear firsthand racist comments that they would not dare say to someone they recognized as Black. It's exhausting. It offends and some are unconscious about it, most of the time. – lfe

The true intentions and beliefs of school staff were uncovered, leaving the artist privy to racialization and racist thinking among school educators. The mixed-race identity of an artist is evidence of how they navigate liminal space:

The Caribbean identity is not only Black. Even when I walk into schools, kids question "Are you Black?" So beforehand, I have to ask teachers what the student demographic is so that I can style my hair accordingly so that I am relatable. I can barely get to my lesson because they are trying to legitimize and prove my identity to teach. - Imani

This narrative speaks to negotiating race, ethnicity and identity while teaching, which is an interlocking experience of navigating the social constructions and assumptions made about the artist without an understanding of the complexities of the artist's relationship to the heterogeneity of Blackness. Shadism within the culturally responsive teaching experience is a cumulative effect that not only takes the focus away from the engagement but leaves the artist with self-hypervigilance. The situation presents a

pressure to conform and accept racialization and stereotypes as norms within the school environment. During the presentation, emotional labour can be internalized by the artist. A political and power dynamic is at play when one must constantly answer qualifying questions about one's Blackness and racial background, to which white counterparts would not be subjected.

While uncomfortable to disclose details where staff, who are non-Black and identify as a person of colour (POC), showed resistance towards his presence, an artist noted:

Sometimes you do experience racism from other POCs. I have had pushback from South Asians who are educators and administrators. Black bodies are handled differently when coming in to do particular programming and when they shut out Black bodies and experiences. - Adisa

Kofi reflected on a time when he required support with sound equipment for his Black History Month activity and the school librarian said, "I am boycotting this and not doing anything with the sound until there is a White History Month." All instances are striking examples of anti-Black racism left for the artist to manage, while teaching. The politics of racism have Black creatives' responsible to continue productivity despite the racist gaze they work under. Their advocacy to share their work comes with the taxing emotional labour to navigate offenses, which is not common to all creatives.

## **Cultural Appropriation**

A change that cultural art educators voiced is to see non-Black individuals or groups refraining from positioning and offering themselves as experts. Members from the culture wish to educate and represent their stories. Kofi passionately shares:

It is this idea of teachers who consider themselves as experts because they went to Africa or the Caribbean and witnessed an event as a tourist. They took a dance or drumming class or saw a Yoruba practice in Trinidad, and they come back to Canada to take the lead. Excuse me?

A major concern the respondents raise is that teachers should not engage in representing cultures that they do not belong to and allow qualified African and Caribbean artists doing cultural arts education that is integral to the learning outcomes and practices that help shape Black identity and Black achievement in the Canadian education system. Evident in the case study in Hastie, Martin and Buchanan (2006), on the praxis of two Anglo-teachers' attempts to teach a culturally responsive unit in physical education that they had no skill to execute. Part of the inappropriateness was their assumption that only watching one live performance and accessing a recorded videotape gives authority to teach Grade 6 African-American students how to 'step' dance. The teachers did not think to hire a cultural art educator skilled in the art of 'stepping' and did not know the impactful sociopolitical and cultural African origin to educate the students, either. The notion of teacher's adequacy, political uneasiness and tensions of whether it was legitimate to teach culturally specific art, demonstrated how ethical considerations stopped them from taking the lead. However, the article inappropriately claiming that 'stepping' had no structure or formal rules to it, is devaluing the complexity of and misrepresenting an African culture's dance vernacular in published research. Cultural stories are to be handled with respect and care. Lai (2012) echoes that in the age of globalization, arts educators are very concerned about cultural representation and suggest that teachers are to address conditions that create

major distortions and stereotypes. If cultural art educators cannot rely on the teacher to unpack misrepresentations, let the artist do so.

Competition is another concern, indirectly created by educational boards that hire and approve partnerships with non-Black companies and vendors who culturally appropriate and choose to capitalize and present Black arts content to diverse student populations. Cultural representation must be considered for who shares and is representing the culturally relevant material for priority groups. The research participants apprised me of how the hiring process does not always undergo a vetting of quality programming as the individual authorizing the hiring has no awareness about the artform or the community. The artists shared multiple narratives that schools hire inexperienced members rather than qualified, professional artists who are experienced in arts education. Kofi elaborates with this example:

Some white person who has access to students and who may not necessarily be a classroom teacher, goes to study in West African countries and goes into schools to teach Malinke culture, rhythms and instruments. The artist, who he studied under the tutelage of, is the repository of information and culture. Yet a white man presents himself as the expert to the schools. We, as practitioners must be at the forefront and it's a problem for me, that happens all the time.

On the other side of the spectrum, non-Black artists use their privilege to market school bookings for Black History Month and programming for Black students. This is a historical, and ongoing, ethical problem that forms an erasure of knowledgeable voices from the Black community. The powerful and entitled decision to tell and represent another culture's story is the act of appropriation and the school boards are to see their own complicit behaviour in the process. This practice is a form of symbolic violence against the African diasporic community, without consideration if the action incites harm

or is accepted by the community members. The school boards and educators need a deep dialogue about communities representing their own cultural stories and their role in accepting any artist that excludes Black art educators from presenting and centering Black content.

## Recommendations

### Understanding the Cultural Art Educator's role

Cultural art educators take ownership of their creative role as knowledge sharers with artistic practices that are non-Eurocentric. The artists do not serve as a threat but as an ally in teaching students and supplementing the learning taking place. As a visiting artist, Adisa articulated how artists can be an instigator of knowledge and instead conveys that he honours conversations of how race, culture, lineage and history are transferred from African and Caribbean spaces.

When the artists were asked about what the school administrators and teachers understood about their role, it spawned a deeper conversation and raised concerns of being underestimated and misunderstood. Among other challenges, the participants wish to be valued as professional artists who educate and serve as a bridge to student success. Some of the cultural art educators are also educators as well, with Ontario College of Teachers certification, or a bachelor and/or master's degree. Sometimes, the artists are categorized by the schools as external community members or reduced to an intermittent, contracted artist. A true definition is that they are professionally trained, studied and experienced performers with arts facilitation, teaching skills and leadership skills. The respondents would like educators to see how their role opens

collaboration, cultural representation, cultural competence and encourages a critical consciousness among students. Cultural art educators provide a space to interact and actively engage in orality, non-verbal communication, culturally nuanced expressions and shift perspectives at the end of the engagement. Moving from passive to active learning, students and educators are given the opportunity to think differently about African, Caribbean and Black cultures, experiences and people. The cultural art educators legitimize that cultural literacy as an asset.

### **Institutional Considerations**

This qualitative study calls for Canadian education to see value in the arts of cultural communities as a form of internationalizing curriculum. Cultural art educators hold a global perspective that the Canadian educational system should use to move beyond 'checking the box' because conversations around intentional programming and curriculum supports for Black students and diverse peers are needed. This research unpacked the perspectives of artists who support the need for educational institutions and educators to work on their relationships with a vetted and inclusive, qualified roster of cultural art educators. Cultural art educators should be considered as assets and some supportive and equitable practices to engage with them and their work should be developed. A further consideration calls for the creation of full-time positions for Black cultural art educators across school boards, especially in arts education departments and consultations on curriculum inclusion

The dismantling of anti-Black racism starts with the inclusion of diasporic work throughout the school year and using Black vernacular, African and Caribbean

concepts, stories and lived experiences will benefit underserved school areas. When the artist's teachings are made available, it legitimizes to the Black student populations that there are learning activities that represent their identities and culture. Further recommendations include required Anti-Black racism training in school boards and administration on the dynamics of cultural appropriation, cultural representation and what value culturally relevant arts have and mean to the African diasporic student population. Students and staff would benefit from ongoing training in anti-Black racism and shadism/colourism to respond appropriately to instances that occur. The research findings call for Canadian curriculum to refrain from defining cultural artforms as separate, as African and Caribbean art bring holistic practices where music, dance, visual arts and orality are integrated. If we can understand the implications of erasure when it comes to the Indigenous communities and the interweaving in Indigenous work on our Canadian lands, we can consider other student modes of learning. More professional development opportunities and possibly a training manual for a new generation of Black cultural art educators is key, especially for those interested in doing this work, despite the challenges. A final recommendation is to invest in raced-based data on cultural art educators in educational institutions and their impact across Ontario schools for the Ministry of Education to document their support of inclusive learning.

## Concluding Thoughts

When educating from difference, the respondents use creative engagements that are not privileged by Whiteness, given today's climate of cultural pluralism and the need for culturally responsive work in Ontario schools. The Black cultural art educator

understands that they work with educators, teachers, students and school administration to supplement curriculum. Although invited and hired, the treatment sends a prominent message of unbelonging, at times. Considering the 2009 Ontario Ministry's Equity and Inclusive Education strategy, the provincial priorities on closing achievement gaps and building confidence in publicly funded education<sup>10</sup> grossly ignore cultural art educators as a visible and valuable resource and add structural barriers. Educational boards that work with these independent teaching artists are "deprived of substantive research on the qualities and methodologies at the heart of excellent teaching artistry" (Campbell, 2017, p. 86). Although more challenges exist than successes, Canadian educational stakeholders may use this research study to better understand the Black creative's perspective. In conclusion, now that the Ontario Education Equity Action Plan mandates the use of culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching among its school boards, I look forward to this study advancing conversations on education policy for Ontario arts curriculum while African, Caribbean and Black professional artists are valued for their contributions to educational spaces.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/inclusiveguide.pdf>

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