



Achievement as White Settler Property: How the Discourse of Achievement Gaps Reproduces Settler Colonial Constructions of Race

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Abstract: Racialized narratives of academic ability, perpetuated by ahistorical interpretations of student performance data, have led to educational policies focusing on short-term solutions, instead of the ongoing legacies of racism and settler colonialism. The aim of this paper is to show how the racially defined achievement gap operates within the structure of settler colonialism. Informed by theories of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012, Veracini, 2010) and critical race theory (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), I closely examine some Toronto District School Board documents that address the so-called achievement and opportunity gaps. Using critical discourse analysis, this paper shows how the notion of achievement is racialized to protect white settler property rights, and how the discourse of achievement gaps functions as a settler technology to concurrently include and exclude individuals from the settler project. Understanding the settler colonial constructions of race brings to the foreground the relations between Indigenous erasure, anti-Blackness, and othering of racialized communities within the contemporary multicultural nation (Haque, 2012; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

Keywords: achievement gap; critical race theory; settler colonialism; critical discourse analysis; Ontario

El logro como propiedad de los colonos blancos: Cómo el discurso de las brechas de logros reproduce las construcciones coloniales de raza de los colonos

Resumen: Las narrativas racializadas de la capacidad académica, perpetuadas por interpretaciones ahistóricas de los datos de rendimiento de los estudiantes, han llevado a políticas educativas que se centran en soluciones a corto plazo, en lugar de los legados en curso del racismo y el colonialismo de colonos. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo opera la brecha de logros racialmente definida dentro de la estructura del colonialismo de colonos. Informado por las teorías del colonialismo de colonos (Tuck & Yang, 2012, Veracini, 2010) y la teoría crítica de la raza (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), examino de cerca algunos documentos de la Junta Escolar del Distrito de Toronto que abordan el llamado brechas de logros y oportunidades. Usando un análisis crítico del discurso, este artículo muestra cómo la noción de logro se racializa para proteger los derechos de propiedad de los colonos blancos, y cómo el discurso de las brechas de logros funciona como una tecnología de los colonos para incluir y excluir simultáneamente a los individuos del proyecto del colono. Comprender las construcciones coloniales de raza de los colonos pone en primer plano las relaciones entre el borrado indígena, la antinegritud y la otredad de las comunidades racializadas dentro de la nación multicultural contemporánea (Haque, 2012; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

Palabras clave: brecha de rendimiento; teoría crítica de la raza; colonialismo de colonos; análisis crítico del discurso; Ontario

A conquista como propriedade dos colonos brancos: Como o discurso das lacunas de conquistas reproduz as construções coloniais de raça dos colonos

Resumo: Narrativas racializadas de habilidade acadêmica, perpetuadas por interpretações a-históricas de dados de desempenho dos alunos, levaram a políticas educacionais focadas em soluções de curto prazo, em vez dos legados contínuos de racismo e colonialismo de colonos. O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar como a lacuna de realização racialmente definida opera dentro da estrutura do colonialismo colonizador. Informado pelas teorias do colonialismo dos colonos (Tuck & Yang, 2012, Veracini, 2010) e da teoria racial crítica (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), examino de perto alguns documentos do Conselho Escolar do Distrito de Toronto que abordam os chamados lacunas de realizações e oportunidades. Usando a análise crítica do discurso, este artigo mostra como a noção de conquista é racializada para proteger os direitos de propriedade dos colonos brancos, e como o discurso das lacunas de conquista funciona como uma tecnologia dos colonos para simultaneamente incluir e excluir indivíduos do projeto de colonos. Compreender as construções coloniais de raça dos colonos traz à tona as relações entre apagamento indígena, antinegritude e alteridade de comunidades racializadas dentro da nação multicultural contemporânea (Haque, 2012; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

Palavras-chave: lacuna de realização; teoria crítica da raça; colonialismo colonizador; análise crítica do discurso; Ontário

Achievement as White Settler Property: How the Discourse of Achievement Gaps Reproduces Settler Colonial Constructions of Race

In settler colonial nation-states, such as the United States and Canada, the development of publicly funded education cannot be separated from the ideologies that have contributed to racial hierarchies within these societies. Failing to recognize this leads to solutions that do not really

address how inequalities are reproduced within public school systems. While the Ontario education system has been praised internationally for its ability to achieve a strong balance between high-quality and high-equity education (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017), the racial disparities in academic achievement have been documented extensively over the past decades.

In an analysis of Canada's largest and most diverse public education system, Parekh, Flessa, and Smaller (2016) describe some of the ongoing initiatives by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to ensure equitable outcomes for all students. Their findings show that despite efforts to achieve greater equity, racialized and historically marginalized communities continue to be disproportionately affected when it comes to their educational opportunities. Furthermore, enriched programs (e.g., specialized arts, gifted, French immersion) disproportionately advantage students that are white and have greater access to social and economic resources, while racialized and poor students were overrepresented in special education and programs focused on trades/skills (Parekh, 2013; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017).

More than 30 years ago, the racial disparities in academic achievement had already been identified at the level of the TDSB and the province. For almost half a century, the former Toronto Board had been collecting student demographic data through the "Every Secondary Student Survey." A key focus of the reports was the relationship between immigration, language, race, class, and academic pathways (Parekh et al., 2016). In the early 1990s, the Board's published reports showed that a disproportionate number of Black, Portuguese, and Indigenous students were leaving school without graduating. Furthermore, in 1993, the provincial government established the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning. Two years later, the Commission released its report, entitled "For the Love of Learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 1995). The report summarized the issues with racialized communities in terms of the "risk" of students failing and leaving school without graduating, the high number of students in special education, and the tracking of students into non-university streams. Interestingly, the Commission's report also acknowledged that these issues were ongoing and had never been addressed through institutional changes.

Different measurements of academic performance—standardized scores, graduation rates, credit accumulation, assignment to special education, suspension and expulsion rates, and post-secondary pathways—have been used to compare the academic achievement of Indigenous, Black, and racialized students with those of white students (Banks, 2012; Lucas & Beresford, 2010). However, many education scholars have pointed out that what these measures of achievement really reflect are gaps in opportunities between different communities (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013). Despite this critique, ahistorical interpretations of student performance data and government and Board-led initiatives have led to short-term solutions that do not address the legacies of racism and settler colonialism. Instead, educational reforms that are narrowly focused on the achievement gap have resulted in policies addressing the issue through high-stakes accountability measures (Hernández, 2016; Horsford, 2017; Leonardo, 2007; Noguera, 2017; E. Taylor, 2006). Rarely do these reforms address the opportunity or resource gap, or factors related to socioeconomic conditions that produce poverty and lead to significant differences in educational outcomes (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013). Furthermore, whether understood as a gap in outcomes or in the conditions that enable those outcomes, policy documents addressing the so-called achievement gap rarely acknowledge the fact that inequalities are inherent to schooling systems, for example, by examining how achievement itself is conceptualized as a racialized attribute (Henry & Tator, 2010; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

In this paper, I explain how the "problem" of the achievement gap came to be framed as a racial problem affecting specific groups of students in the TDSB. In 2010, the TDSB established the Achievement Gap Task Force in response to "alarming" disparities in the achievement levels of

different groups. The task force reviewed TDSB data and determined, as if it was a surprise, that an achievement gap existed for particular “racialized groups.” A released draft document goes on to name: “Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, Middle Eastern background” students as the focus of the document (McKell, 2010, p. 3). Importantly, the 2010 draft report presents the different groups as largely homogenous by lumping together students from diverse backgrounds in terms of language, race, immigration, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Without applying an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 2011a), aggregating the data in this manner overemphasizes the differences between groups, while de-emphasizing differences within groups. This approach obscures the complex and dynamic arrangement of power relationships that intersect to yield different experiences for members of various groups.

Drawing on theorizations of settler colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012, Veracini, 2010) and critical race theory (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), I argue that the language of achievement or opportunity gaps in educational policies operates within the logic and structure of settler colonialism to reinscribe racial differences among groups. In the following section, I draw on historical analyses to show how racial differences in academic achievement are endemic to public schooling in North America, and not a recent phenomenon as it is often portrayed in official documents. Next, I examine a school board’s official documents and policies using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to illustrate the way that racialized meanings are embedded in and reproduced through discursive representations. In this way, I show how the language of achievement, or even opportunity gaps, perpetuates racial hierarchies as part of the settler colonial project. I conclude by discussing how these educational policies foreclosed the possibilities of structural change despite using more progressive language by ignoring the schooling practices that reproduce inequality.

Canadian Settler Colonialism & School Inequality

Across North America, the historical origins of mass public schooling can be traced to the imperial and colonial project of producing a “civilized state” (Knight, 2016; Willinsky, 1998). The production of a “gap” in educational outcomes was the result of racialized processes of inclusion and exclusion into settler institutions. In Upper Canada (present-day Southern Ontario), exclusionary social practices were embedded into the state-run education system (Di Mascio, 2019; Henry & Tator, 2010; Houston & Prentice, 1988; McLaren, 2004). For example, Hunter Knight (2016) examines some of Egerton Ryerson’s documents from 1846 to 1868 to show how these laid the foundation for creating segregated school systems for racialized students and students with disabilities, as well as the residential school system for Indigenous students. Hunter shows how Ryerson articulated and reproduced normative and non-normative categories of people in imagining his “common” schools. This foundational belief in the categorization of students as normative and non-normative has marked the history of public education in Canada (Knight, 2016), both in terms of which students were imagined as capable of achieving and which ones were not.

This idea that some people achieve while others do not was foundational to the Ontario schooling system. One goal of settler colonialism is to eliminate Indigenous peoples’ claims to land, and closing this “gap” required the disappearance of Indigenous peoples through genocide. Therefore, state-run education of Indigenous children aimed at destroying the transfer of Indigenous identity, politics, and culture between generations (Arvin et al., 2013). Racialized students, on the other hand, were often denied admission to the state’s schools. When it came to the education of Black communities in Upper Canada, Black students were already being denied access to state schools before the Separate School Act of 1849. Following the Act, the courts refused Black children admission to “common” schools, while schools organized by Black communities were heavily underfunded (Harper, 1997). It was not until 1964 that the statute allowing racially segregated schools was repealed in Ontario (Backhouse, 1994).

While educational policies no longer enforce formal segregation, these policies have reinscribed differences between groups and preserved mechanisms of exclusion “alongside practices of partial and conditional inclusion” (Bourassa, 2019, p. 4). In the case of Indigenous, Black, and racialized students, funding inequality, Eurocentric curricula and pedagogy, and institutional practices and structures continue to (re)produce disparities in educational outcomes (Henry & Tator, 2010; James & Turner, 2017). For instance, school funding can vary significantly according to the schools’ average family income and geographic location (Winsa, 2015). There is also significant funding differences between Indigenous students attending schools on reserves and non-Indigenous students attending provincial schools (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013; Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2016). Therefore, Canadian multicultural policies and discourses have not significantly altered the colonial practices and power dynamics already in place, including those that produce the gap in educational outcomes inherent to the school system (Walcott, 2014).

Unfortunately, education policies addressing issues of equity and diversity sometimes circumvent structural change and reinscribe the logics of white settler colonialism (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2015). For instance, Rezai-Rashti, Segeren, and Martino (2017) argue that the 2009 equity policy, “Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools” (revised 2013), appears to be a progressive and inclusive initiative; however, the narrow framing of equity based on student achievement data resulted in the inclusion of boys as a designated disadvantaged group alongside other historically marginalized groups (e.g. students with disabilities, immigrant students) in the official equity policy. By referring to the category of boys as a homogenous group, the policy obscures the racial and socioeconomic inequalities faced by specific groups of boys. Furthermore, the policy promotes a color-evasiveness approach by focusing on “recent immigrants” rather than explicitly tackling issues of racism and racial inequality. By ignoring these structural factors, the policy sidesteps the redistributive mechanisms that would contribute to structural change and leaves intact the legacies and logics of white settler colonialism (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017).

Educational Policy as White Settler Property

Educational policies are often mobilized as a strategy for solving problems like achievement gaps. However, in many cases, such policies produce or reproduce the problem that they are trying to fix. A critical approach to policy analysis explores the ways that policy is not simply a mechanism for achieving incremental degrees of equity. Instead, policies can also structure racial inequality by extending the interests of those in power (Bacchi, 2000; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Ball, 2005; Levinson et al., 2009). Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s as an intellectual movement seeking justice, liberation, and economic empowerment (Crenshaw, 2011b; Tate, 1997). CRT acknowledges the prevalence of racism in policy discourses and challenges the deficit-based beliefs about racialized communities (Yosso, 2017). This approach to policy also challenges the white racial experience as the standard for progress and success. Thus, a CRT perspective interrogates the production of knowledge through policy by focusing on racism and exposing the racialized discourses that normalize institutional practices while marginalizing others (Dixson & Rousseau, 2017; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015; Parker, 2003). In education, CRT has been used to challenge the assumed rationality, neutrality, and objectivity embedded in policies by showing how policy initiatives intended to serve historically marginalized communities instead benefited middle- and upper-class white interests (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noguera, 2017).

Cheryl Harris’s (1993) article, “Whiteness as Property,” has become a classic of CRT because her analysis shows how stratified property rights have organized social relationships and upheld whiteness even as notions about property changed (Patel, 2015). Harris’s (1993) analysis

traces how the emergence of “whiteness as property” was tied historically to the legal enshrinement of Black slaves as property and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Furthermore, her analysis shows how the United States’ legal system played a key role in instituting racial hierarchies that privilege whiteness as the norm (Harris, 1993). Education scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Prendergast (2002) built on Harris’ argument to illustrate the way education has functioned as white property by restricting access only to those students, families, and communities that were considered white. Thus, education became the property of whiteness. As such, CRT provides an important analytical tool for understanding how measurements of achievement do not simply reveal racialized differences among groups, but produce those differences in the process.

While CRT focuses on racism, it has not appropriately addressed Indigenous peoples’ experiences of colonization. Framing the issues of Indigenous peoples solely in terms of their status as a racialized group ignores questions of Indigenous political autonomy and sovereignty (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015). Building on CRT, Bryan Brayboy (2005) emphasizes both the political and racialized nature of Indigenous subjectivity in the United States. Through what he termed tribal critical race theory, Brayboy argues that settlers used their legal system and institutions to dispossess and maintain control over Indigenous peoples and lands. Settlers legitimized and justified their acts of violence and dispossession through the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the belief that Indigenous lands were empty and that settlers were “destined” by God to take the land. The economic structure of settler colonialism also depended upon the expansion of chattel slavery and indentured labor. Thus, dispossessed peoples come to be on Indigenous land as the result of other colonial projects including enslavement, indentured labor, military recruitment, and displacement/migration (Kauanui, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

The aim of settler colonialism is to eventually supersede its Indigenous and exogenous alterities, and at the same time to conceal the violence inherent to the colonial relation (Veracini, 2010). Leonardo Veracini (2010) argues that a settler colonial project establishes a system of relations between the (European) settler colonizer, the Indigenous communities, and subaltern exogenous Others. Settlers are defined by their sovereign entitlement and are always represented as virtuous. For exogenous Others, a process of selective inclusion shaped by white supremacy permits some individuals to be recognized as “probationary settlers,” on condition that they embrace a white settler colonial ethos (Veracini, 2010). Indigenous presence undermines the legitimacy of the settler entity, therefore Indigenous and exogenous subjectivities hold separate positions within the population economy. The relationships between these categories are flexible and dynamic to allow the (European) settler colonizers to maintain control of the settler colonial population economy. According to Veracini, settler normativity is established through the settler’s ambiguous location between Indigenous and exogenous Others, as they can be constituted as Indigenous and exogenous simultaneously.

Settler states use social policies to manage their populations and reinscribe colonial relations (Coulthard, 2014; Strakosch, 2015). Policies recreate the image of the settler as sovereign and at the same time they attempt to eliminate Indigenous political difference through assimilation and racialization strategies. Settler colonial policies transform the nation-to-nation relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples into one of guardian–ward (Calderon, 2014; Macoun & Strakosch, 2013). When policies use the language of improvement and settler goodwill, they draw from narratives that the settler state is universal, inclusive, and benevolent. This language reveals the ongoing colonial logic of assimilation and genocide. Through the language of “improving,” “uplifting,” and “progress,” Indigenous and exogenous Others are positioned as only temporally excluded, thus legitimizing the claim of settler institutions to represent all sectors of the population

(Veracini, 2010). This logic of inclusion and exclusion produces and reproduces the “gap” between the settler and the Indigenous or exogenous (racialized) other.

Examining education policies using CRT alongside theories of settler colonialism provide the conceptual tools to explore how processes of racialization and colonialism have worked simultaneously to secure white dominance through notions of time, property, and self. Understanding settler colonial constructions of race brings to the foreground the relations between Indigenous erasure, anti-Blackness, and othering of racialized communities within the settler colonial nation-state (Haque, 2012; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). It also draws attention to the way in which different groups have historically been racialized differently in accordance with the shifting needs of the settler state.

Methodology: Analyzing Policy Discourse

Policies represent a key site for contesting the completion of the settler colonial project (Strakosch, 2015). To understand the mechanisms through which the discourse of achievement gaps reproduces the racial ordering of settler colonialism, I use a critical policy analysis (CPA) methodology drawing on CDA as an analytic strategy (Lester et al., 2017). The purpose is to bring to the foreground the colonial structures and discourses that shape educational policy. CPA is a methodology that examines how policy problems are defined given the unequal distribution of knowledge, power, and resources (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 2005; Diem et al., 2014). Informed by theorizations of settler colonialism and CRT, this study provides a view of policies as sites for contesting the assertions of settler political authority and challenging whiteness as the standard for progress and success. Schooling, as a settler institution, forms part of larger colonial discursive practices. The culture, norms, and values associated with racialized whiteness—including, in this case, the very idea of achievement—come to be viewed as normal and natural in the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres of society. Educational policies and everyday classroom practices normalize dominant constructions of what it means to be an “ideal student” and define the standard for all students (Bacchi, 2000; Gee, 2011b).

Lisa Comeau (2005) illustrates how the formation of settler identity as normative and exalted at the onset of Canadian public schooling was contingent on the degeneracy of others. This sense of superiority fueled a moral responsibility to “narrow the gap” by assimilating others, while those who were considered inadmissible into the settler body politic were excluded and segregated altogether. Although approaches to education have changed, particularly with the introduction of multicultural policies and discourses, Comeau outlines how white middle- and upper-class settler identities continue to be positioned as normative, while constructing others as “dysfunctional” and “at-risk.”

CDA is particularly well suited for drawing attention to the ways in which circulating discourses shape the way issues are constructed in policy and the policy responses that become available (Bacchi, 2000). Discourses are interwoven in social, cultural, institutional, political, and economic relationships. They influence how individuals produce, reproduce, sustain, and/or transform social practices. Unequal access to “mainstream” discourses also leads to the unequal distribution of social, political, and economic benefits. These tend to be represented along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, and other forms of social differentiation that produce marginalization. Thus, power becomes concentrated with certain groups at the expense of others, and discourses normalize these unequal social relations. However, power also represents the productive set of relations from which subjectivity, agency, knowledge, and action emerge. In this sense, discourses both enable and constrain solutions to educational and social problems (Gee, 2011b; MacLure, 2003). CDA provides an analytical tool to understand how racialized meanings are

embedded and (re)produced through discursive representations. CDA shows how power relations shape the way texts construct representations of social identities, relationships, and society, and exposes the ways in which power manifests in discourses, the formation of knowledge, and the marginalization of particular subjects (Gee, 2011b; MacLure, 2003; S. Taylor, 2004). I chose this approach because it highlights the links among language, ideology, and discourses that play an important role in (re)producing racism and white supremacy in settler colonial societies (Henry & Tator, 2007; Leonardo, 2003).

Data Sources

This study looked at public documents from the TDSB as data, because these represent official, ongoing records related to the public education system in the city. The documents include: the “Achievement Task Force Draft Report,” “Opportunity Gap Action Plan (OGAP),” and the “Draft Opportunity Gap Report,” a companion piece to the OGAP document. I chose these documents because I was interested in understanding how these texts, in seeking to address the “problem” of the achievement gap, also constructed educational disparities as racialized.

In 2010, the draft Achievement Gap Task Force Report was produced by TDSB staff, including “superintendents of education, principals, vice principals, and central staff” (McKell, 2010, p. 3). However, the Board’s Equity Policy Advisory Committee released a public critique of the report noting the absence of parents, student leaders, community, members and organizations (McCaskell, n.d.). Incorporating some of the feedback, the finalized OGAP document was presented to the TDSB’s Programs and School Services Committee for approval in 2011. This document is divided into different sections: the rationale for the action plan, context, next steps, and finally the call to action with a year-by-year plan. The third document, the Draft Opportunity Gap Report, is mainly a reiteration of the TDSB’s 1999 Equity Policy but includes how the OGAP addresses each of the policy’s commitments (curriculum, equitable opportunities, parent, and community partnerships etc.).

Data Analysis

I approached these texts using Paul Gee’s (2011a) tools for analyzing discourse. His approach attends closely to the structure of language and how the structure informs meaning-making (Gee, 2011a, 2011b). I was interested in examining how these documents framed racialized and Indigenous students in relation to the achievement gap. This analysis was guided by the following questions: How is the achievement gap represented as a “problem” within these documents? What are some of the underlying assumptions about academic achievement and who is constructed as capable of achieving? What was taken for granted? How are settler ideologies embedded in these constructions? This analysis also required asking questions such as: Who or what was placed in the subject position of a sentence and what was said about them? What information was left out, backgrounded, or made salient in the process? As such, I looked at how the text described racialized and Indigenous students, how they were positioned within the text, and how the vocabulary and grammar framed the relationships between these students and the settler institution.

Findings

Throughout the documents, the discourse of achievement or opportunity gaps works as a technology of settler colonialism to include and exclude individuals into and from the white settler collective. First, the texts frame the Board, a settler institution, as a kind and “benevolent shepherd” drawing from a pastoral logic rooted in white settler supremacy. Second, and by contrast, the texts portray Indigenous, Black, and racialized students through a deficit lens. Furthermore, the texts

frame achievement as the property of white settlers, and therefore, only achievable to Indigenous, Black, and racialized students through assimilation. By focusing on the shortcomings of Black, racialized, and Indigenous students, the solutions to the problem shift the focus away from the schooling practices that marginalize them, as well as the redistributive mechanisms necessary to address the ongoing issues.

The Board as a Benevolent Settler Institution

The texts establish the normativity and sovereign entitlement of the white settler institution through different strategies. In all documents, the Board, an abstract entity, is represented as an agent with the capacity to carry out actions such as providing, approving, making decisions, serving, recognizing, valuing, and believing. The policy text embedded within the Draft Opportunity Gap Report (TDSB, 2011a), particularly, uses the first-person plural “we” to refer to the Board and includes (successful) schools, students (general), and Board staff as part of the school system. The Achievement Gap Task Force draft report (McKell, 2010) describes closing the achievement gap and meeting the needs of a “diverse urban community” as “not an easy task” (p. 5), “a major and challenging mission” (p. 14) that “will require extraordinary measures” (p. 5). Furthermore, in framing the “challenge,” the draft Achievement Gap report states that “many TDSB students of our diverse communities face many significant challenges in their lives outside of school. This impacts their learning” (p. 5). The text places the challenges that Indigenous, Black, and racialized students face outside of the school system, and implicitly absolves the Board of responsibility for addressing them.

At the same time, these documents construe schools as benevolent institutions capable of uplifting marginalized students. According to the final OGAP document, “a call to action is our collective and moral responsibility” (TDSB, 2011b, p. 96). This moral responsibility positions the Board as responsible for students’ well-being:

But our schools do have a moral responsibility to ensure the very best environments for learning for all students. That entails an enormous commitment to do everything possible to help the most vulnerable, the least engaged, and the least successful. (McKell, 2010, p. 14)

The Board as a benevolent agent reflects the pastoral ethic of an institution founded on Judeo-Christian values (Foucault, 1982). This pastoral logic functions to disempower groups, while those who design the policies are construed as “holding power” (Bacchi, 2000, p. 54). The discourse of moral responsibility in the texts represents an extension of the settler’s sense of moral superiority and has been used to justify assimilatory practices. This discourse also serves to establish the sovereign entitlement of the settler institution (Brayboy, 2005; Calderon, 2014; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Furthermore, the Board imagines schools as capable of benefiting all students, while also positioning “marginalized students” as incapable of advancing their own interests without the assistance of the schools:

For marginalized students, the school provides the best opportunities for developing healthy social relationships with peers and for participating in cultural and recreational activities. It is also the only place available to them where they can develop their leadership skills, their capacity to think critically about their lives and to express their opinions about school and their lives outside of school. (McKell, 2010, p. 11)

As in much of the text, the school is positioned as the agent, and the marginalized students are positioned as passive recipients of the school’s good will. Implicitly, the text also frames the families

and communities of marginalized students as incapable of providing them with the opportunities to develop “healthy social relationships,” and particular skills (e.g., critical thinking). This exaltation of the settler institution also functions to conceal colonial violence (Thobani, 2007). To make such claims, the text must ignore the schooling practices that marginalize students, and the effect of the practices on these students’ academic achievement. By positioning the Board, the we, as both the granters and the arbiters of what constitutes achievement as well as how to achieve, and racialized students, the they, as in need of achievement, the documents implicitly define achievement as the property of white settler institutions and, by extension, white students, whom Indigenous, Black, and racialized students must emulate in order to achieve.

Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Students—“Them”

The TDSB texts use the third person plural, they, to describe Indigenous, Black, and racialized students—placing them as outsiders to the collective that makes up the Board. These students are also represented as lacking agency; they do not appear as the subject of clauses, and the few instances when they do, the verb in the sentence is not an action verb. Particularly in the draft Achievement Gap report, these students are described through a deficit lens (e.g., lower tech skills, lowest test scores, least likely to enjoy school). The only positive attribute refers to the “high rates of academic success” of East Asian students, who are not the focus of the documents, but allow the Board to “save face,” because, after all, some racialized students do achieve. Through this mechanism, the text legitimizes the Board’s claim to serve all sectors of the population (Veracini, 2010). Yet, the text still uses a deficit lens to refer to East Asian students due to the negative effects of racism on their “social and emotional outcomes” (McKell, 2010, p. 9), which reinforces the idea that all racialized students require some form of improvement.

The Achievement Gap report defines a racialized group as “a group of people who may experience social inequities on the basis of their perceived common racial background, color and/or ethnicity, and who may be subjected to differential treatment in the society and its institutions” (McKell, 2010, p. 3). The text uses the passive “may be subjected” without explicitly stating by whom. This move toward innocence creates ambivalence as to who or what is responsible for causing the differential treatment. Moreover, the use of the auxiliary verb “may” positions the experiences of racialized communities as questionable, and up for debate by implying that there are certain conditions when these groups do not experience “social inequalities” and/or “differential treatment” as a result of racism.

For the most part, the texts use “racialized” to describe students who do not identify as white. The texts state that “racialized students represent 70% of the TDSB student population” (McKell, 2010, p. 3), while TDSB data at the time showed that 30% of students identified as white (Yau et al., 2013; Yau & O’Reilly, 2007). The inclusion of Portuguese-speaking students in these policy documents, however, illustrates how racialization as a process operates as a mechanism for managing alterities in a settler colonial context. Portuguese-speaking students, in some contexts, may be classified as “European,” “Southern European,” or “white” (Presley & Brown, 2011), yet were included in the documents as racialized. In the texts, the flexible use of the category of “racialized” is a manifestation of assimilationist practices. Racialization is a strategy to manage different sectors of the population within a settler colonial context. This strategy construes all exogenous Others as having equal opportunity to be admitted into the settler sector of the population, and absolves the Board from acknowledging that the problem is inherent to the education system (Veracini, 2010).

Indigenous & African/Black Students

The Achievement Gap report brings attention to the underachievement of Indigenous and Black/African students in particular:

The lowest achieving demographic groups of students in our schools are students of Aboriginal and African background. Students from these groups arguably experience the effects of racism to a greater degree than any other group. (McKell, 2010, p. 9)

Aboriginal and Black students have the highest rates of school failure in the TDSB in terms of EQAO [Education Quality and Accountability Office] scores, credit accumulation at Grades 9 and 10, and the highest dropout rates. (McKell, 2010, p. 13)

Here, the text positions Indigenous and African/Black students as objects, as supposed to subjects with agency. When these students are positioned as subjects, as is the case in the second excerpt, they are not construed as agents carrying out an action; instead, they are described as possessing some negative attribute. The use of “dropout” signals a passive process of student disengagement. Similarly, the language of “at-risk” often refers to demographic factors that students have no control over, such as race, family income, gender, and immigration status. These terms have been criticized for obscuring the social structures in schools and society that contribute to student disengagement, and instead attributes it to students’ personal shortcomings (Dei et al., 1997; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010).

As these examples show, the terms African, Black, and Caribbean are used interchangeably across the documents. In the draft Achievement Gap report, the text begins by referring to Black (African) students, and then switches between the terms African and Black. The Draft Opportunity Gap Report (TDSB, 2011a), and the final OGAP document (TDSB, 2011b) primarily use the term Black, but on one occasion the text references Caribbean students. Thus, students who have connections to either the Caribbean or the African continent (even remotely) are incorporated into one category. This includes students whose families immigrated recently to Canada, but also includes students whose families have been in the country since the onset of settler colonialism. The swapping of terms in the text without much context reflects the difficulty of trying to reduce a diverse set of experiences to single categories. At the same time, this careless substitution shows the Board’s lack of understanding of the differences in student experiences. In this way, the text reflects the authors’ tensions between coming to terms with the reality of racism, while at the same time, not fully abandoning a racial ideology of color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Although the texts, at times, recognize the inequalities that exist in the school system and in society, they do not challenge the structures (e.g., programs, curriculum, practices) that already exist. In the draft Achievement Gap report, societal and systemic racism are used interchangeably. Systemic racism is framed as responsible for erecting the barriers for racialized groups, while at the same time existing outside of the practices of individuals, groups, and institutions such as schooling. For example, the text states that “for racialized groups, the negative effect of systemic racism continues to erect barriers to the full realization of their potential for success” (McKell, 2010, p. 9). This sentence is quite complex and is composed of several embedded clauses. Although the subject/topic of this sentence is “the negative effect of systemic racism,” the sentence has a marked theme as the subject/topic is preceded by “for racialized groups.” By making “for racialized groups” the theme, the text sets the context through which to interpret the meaning of the sentence.

Furthermore, nominalization turns a dynamic process into something abstract. For example, in condensing the clause “racialized groups realize” into “realization,” “racialized groups” as the subject of the clause becomes the indirect object in the sentence (i.e., systemic racism continues to erect barriers for racialized groups), which actually reduces the perceived agency of racialized peoples. The use of the verb “to continue” expresses a permanence of the effects of systemic racism—it has been something that existed before, it is something that exists in the present, and has the potential to remain into the future. Moreover, the subject/topic of the sentence contains the clause “systemic racism affects something/someone negatively.” The use of the adjective “negative” sets up a dichotomy between the positive and negative effects of systemic racism. The document implicitly assigns achievement as a property of whiteness by framing Black, racialized, and Indigenous students as unable to achieve (e.g., lower graduation rates and scores on standardized tests), while leaving those who do achieve (i.e., white students) unnamed. In this way, the texts obscure how systemic racism contributes to positive outcomes for some students at the expense of others. By leaving unnamed the beneficiaries of white supremacy, the texts reproduce the racial hierarchies of settler colonialism and absolve the settler institution of responsibility for the oppression and marginalization of these students.

While the texts acknowledge racism and poverty, references to colonialism are completely absent from the documents. Explicit references to Indigenous students disappear following the definition of “racialized groups” in the introduction of the Achievement Gap report. Instead, “marginalized” or “racialized” are used throughout the text to refer to all the groups of students who are the focus of this intervention. The collapsing of Indigenous students into these other categories implies that the needs of Indigenous students are to be dealt with similarly to the needs of other racial, ethnic, or cultural groups, a move that undermines Indigenous political autonomy and sovereignty (Grande, 2015). Furthermore, in the absence of any discussion of how success/failure is racialized, the texts reflect how the settler institution absolves itself of the responsibility of addressing the underlying racialized assumptions behind the construction of achievement.

Framing the Achievement Gap

The texts position the Board as the one with the authority to determine what achievement is, and how it is measured, while at the same time positioning Indigenous, Black, and racialized students as having to meet these standards of achievement. By erasing the Indigenous Other, and degrading the racialized exogenous Other, the texts establish settler normativity and the settler institution’s capacity for managing the different sectors of the population (Veracini, 2010). In locating the problem only with Indigenous, Black, and racialized students, the text implicitly privileges a white settler identity as the standard against which these students are being measured. For example, on the front cover, the Achievement Gap report states that it “presents directions for consideration to close the school achievement gap for racialized groups in the TDSB relative to other groups” (McKell, 2010, p. 1). These “other groups” are not named, yet it is implicit that the members of those groups are white settlers. This omission is significant because the documents set up the white racial experience as the standard for success within the school system.

How is Achievement Defined?

The texts define and measure student achievement through narrow conceptions of learning stemming from a Eurocentric worldview (Dion et al., 2010), which again construes achievement as white settler property. The draft Achievement Gap report focuses primarily on graduation rates and is consistent with the provincial policy Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18), which measures success primarily in terms of graduation rates (OME, 2012). The opening sentence of the report begins by stating: “The mission of the TDSB is to enable all students to achieve high levels of

success” (McKell, 2010, p. 3). One of the goals expressed in the document is to reach the provincial target for graduation rates: “Reaching the provincial graduation target of 85% can only be achieved through significant progress in improving educational outcomes for racialized groups in our schools” (p. 3). The subject of this sentence, which is “reaching the provincial graduation target of 85%,” is a nominalization of the clause “someone/something reaches the provincial graduation target of 85%.” In the process of turning the clause into a noun phrase, the subject of that clause disappears. Implicit in the text is the notion that the Board as a collective entity will be carrying out the action. This positions the Board, and not the racialized students, as the one defining what achievement is, which establishes the Board as the arbiter that determines whether racialized students succeed or fail. Furthermore, the Board’s ability to reach the provincial target is contingent on the educational outcomes for racialized students. By locating the problem only with these students, the text implicitly privileges a white identity as the standard against which these students are being measured, thus construing achievement as the property of whiteness.

The final OGAP also defined and measured achievement in relation to graduation rates and standardized tests. However, there is a change in language regarding the Board’s mission. Instead of students achieving “high levels of success,” the Board’s obligation is to “create and sustain high levels of excellence for ‘all’ students” (TDSB, 2011b, p. 99). In this text, there are references to two meanings of the term excellence. The first meaning derives from an understanding of excellence in relation to a particular standard (Gillies, 2007). In this case, the standards include graduation rates and scores on provincial assessments. The second meaning can be derived from the way that achievement and opportunity gaps are defined. This is illustrated in the following sentence: “In this regard, a key priority of schools is to close the achievement and opportunity gaps: the gaps between where students are at any given time, and the highest levels that they can potentially achieve” (TDSB, 2011b, p. 99). Both definitions of student achievement in relation to excellence have their limitations.

Defining excellence in relation to a particular standard has the effect of setting standards that do not consider students’ well-being or future success. For example, despite changing the name to reflect the opportunity gaps that exist within the education system, the OGAP measures student achievement in relation to graduation rates. This definition of excellence has embedded contradictions. In practice, students can meet the requirements for graduation, but streaming practices in schools mean that not all students who graduate have the same opportunities. Indigenous, Black, and racialized students are disproportionately streamed into lower tracks, which creates a barrier for accessing post-secondary education, and can have an impact on their lifelong outcomes (Parekh, 2013; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017). Thus, achievement remains the property of whiteness and elusive to these students. Instead, for all students to achieve “high levels of excellence,” excellence in education is contingent on a structural shift involving other sectors of society including health care, housing, and wealth distribution. (Gillies, 2007). The second definition of excellence presented in the OGAP, where “students reach the highest levels that they can potentially achieve” (TDSB, 2011b, p. 99), also presents some challenges. This self-referencing form of universal excellence frames the gaps in terms of the capacities of individual students, and ignores a society structured hierarchically, thus, reinforcing the status quo (Gillies, 2007). Absent from the documents is the relationship that excellence has to failure: the production of excellence occurs and is dependent on the production of failure (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Excellence can be defined in relation to being better or superior to others, thus placing excellence at odds with values of equity. However, this contradiction is left unaddressed within the Ontario education system, where equity and excellence are assumed to “go hand in hand” (OME, 2008, p. 8). The omission of this understanding of excellence conceals the way that schooling is

structured to categorize individuals according to performance hierarchies in a way that resemble those in society (Gillies, 2007; Savage, 2011).

The draft Achievement Gap report sets up the achievement gap as an individualized problem and frames racialized students as “disengaged” and not motivated by school, without stating why or how the process of disengagement happens or how the Board’s own policies and practices contribute to that process. The text individualizes the causes of the problem either by attributing it to an external force, such as racism or poverty, that affects these students’ individual “psyche, self-esteem, and societal functioning,” their “readiness to learn” (McKell, 2010, p. 9), or by stating that they have not made “positive choices” (p. 11). By framing the problem in terms of students’ individual shortcomings, the texts propose the following solution, “schools which use what the students know, experience, and feel as opportunities for building self-esteem, self-confidence will help students to understand how taking personal responsibility benefits them” (McKell, 2010, p. 11). Indigenous and exogenous Others have the potential to be individually admitted into the settler politic on the condition that they make “the right kind of choices,” and embrace a settler colonial ethos (Veracini, 2010). This framing reinforces the ambiguous location of Indigenous and exogenous Others within the settler population system. The texts imply that, through improvement on metrics set by the settler institution (e.g., graduation rates), Indigenous, Black, and racialized students can overcome the achievement gap and possibly gain inclusion to the white settler politic. These assumptions reinforce the Board’s authority to set the terms of engagement and how success is measured, at the same time as they reinforce notions of achievement as the property of white settlers, and promote the assimilation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized students. The achievement gap draft report also frames culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (CRRP) as an “approach to teaching [that] creates motivation to actively participate in their learning and to take pride in their accomplishments” (McKell, 2010, p. 8). The text overemphasizes CRRP’s focus on personal relationships with teachers, at the expense of system-wide changes, as a way to mold Black, racialized, and Indigenous students to resemble a particular kind of student, mainly white students, who “will be more receptive to guidance and words of advice” (McKell, 2010, p. 11). Thus, the texts absolve the Board of responsibility of the problem, while protecting its image as a benevolent entity committed to ensuring that every student “achieves.”

Conclusion

Given that the education system in Toronto was built on the principles of settler colonialism, educational policies are bound to reinforce existing racial hierarchies and power relations. This study illustrates the different mechanisms through which the discourse of achievement gaps reproduced the racial ordering of settler colonialism. Whereas the earlier documents use the language of the achievement gap, the finalized OGAP uses the language of opportunity gaps to frame the educational disparities of Black, Indigenous, and racialized students. Yet, despite shifts in language, these documents continued to reinforce deficit discourses when referring to these students. Rather than acknowledge that the problems are inherent to the school system, the documents framed the gaps in terms of the failure of these students, their families, and their communities, and implicitly positioned them as individually responsible for overcoming their oppression. Later, in a 2014 report released by the Task Force on Success of Students of Somali Descent, these students continued to be described using deficit language that places them “at higher risk” of “dropping out” (TDSB, 2014, p. 98). The 2014 report generated pushback from members of the Somali community over fears that singling out and labeling of Somali students would lead to further stigmatization (Poisson, 2014). These fears from families and community members were not unfounded. Guerrero, Shahnazarian, and Brown (2016) shared their experiences as facilitators of the

TDSB's "Engaging All Students" initiative, which was implemented over the 2012–2013 academic year and sought to increase student engagement and achievement. In their account, they illustrate the way that Board discourse framed students belonging to the "opportunity gap" groups as "broken," yet "fixable" by individual teachers. While this paper does not focus on whether or how the initiatives proposed in the OGAP were implemented, it provides evidence of how the documents had framed CRRP primarily in terms of the personal relationships between individual teachers and students. By minimizing the systemic changes that CRRP advocates for (e.g., funding structures, resource allocation), the documents overlooked the solutions needed to transform the unequal power relations between different educational stakeholders.

Despite citing the works of critical scholars such as Kugler and West-Burns (2010) in the finalized OGAP, this study highlights the way that education policies can reinscribe the logics of white settler colonialism and foreclose possibilities for systemic changes in programs, policies, and practices. The discourses embedded in the Board's documents still framed achievement through narrow, technical understandings without questioning the underlying assumptions that construe achievement as a racialized attribute and the property of white settlers. The finalized OGAP also cites the "Decolonizing Our Schools" report (2010), which advocates using broader criteria to measure student success and well-being beyond literacy and numeracy skills and credit accumulation. However, outcomes on standardized tests and graduation rates continue to be the primary measures of student achievement and success in the OGAP. These decisions were partly influenced by the educational policy context at the provincial level, which limits individual boards' abilities to implement programs and initiatives due to narrow conceptions of equity (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017; Shah, 2020). Yet, the racialized meanings embedded in the discourses of the achievement gap legitimized achievement as the property of white settler institutions, and by extension, white settler students.

Given that the permanence of the settler state is ensured through ideologies, discourses, and institutional practices (Calderon, 2014), educational policies represent a key site for contesting the completion of the settler colonial project. Future educational policy writing needs to acknowledge the political authority and sovereignty of the Indigenous nations of that territory. In the case of the TDSB, this includes the Mississaugas of the Credit who are part of the Anishinaabe Nation, the Wyandot Nation, and the Six Nations that comprise the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Both CRT and theorizations of settler colonialism provide useful analytical tools for uncovering the racialized meanings embedded in educational policies and challenging linear notions of progress, as those are implicit in the very idea of an achievement or even opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ray et al., 2017; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). Lastly, by overlooking the relationship that excellence and achievement have to failure, the TDSB documents obscure the school mechanisms that categorize individuals according to performance hierarchies that reproduce the racial ordering of settler colonialism. If schools and other educational institutions are to take up the challenge of addressing the historical educational disparities that affect Indigenous, Black, and racialized students, they must also be ready to dismantle the mechanisms inherent to schooling that leads to their marginalization. This involves recognizing the ways that settler colonial constructions of race are embedded into policy writing and implementation to reify the status quo as well as the social and political implications for teaching and learning.

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