

# Black Students in Canada's Higher Education System: A Systematic Literature Review

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*Abstract: Whereas studies show that minorities in Canada experience education differently given their various intersectional identities, there is no systematic literature review that synthesized the existing empirical literature on the experiences of Black students in Canada's higher education system. Contingent on this premise, we acknowledge that people who identify as Blacks are not homogenous and examined twenty peer-reviewed studies on their educational experiences in Canada, published between the 1960s and 2024. Articles for this study were retrieved from specific academic databases (Omni, Science Direct, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Jstor). Our study identified four interrelated themes that discussed issues of general lived educational experiences, discrimination, unbalanced power relations and Black students' subjective wellbeing. The findings also revealed the various coping mechanisms employed by Black students in higher education when faced with challenges. Consequently, policy interventions should strive to simultaneously address individual and group-level educational challenges of Black students in Canada.*

**Keywords:** Black Students; Minority; Canada; Higher Education; International Students; Mental Health

## Introduction

Although Canada boasts of population diversity and takes pride in the inclusion of all groups of people into its mainstream policies, an aspect of the society that continues to witness contention is education (Akuffo-Addo et al., 2024; Noreiga & Justin, 2020; Codjoe, 2006). This situation is largely a result of how different racial groups access mainstream education (Shizha, 2016). In light of this, studies show that Black students in Canada's higher education experience various challenges (Akuffo-Addo et al., 2024; Gosine 2006). Codjoe (2006, p. 33) observed the stereotypical representation of Black students in Canada as "loud, lazy, muscular, criminal, athletic, dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed." Other scholars identified financial difficulties as a common concern among Black students (Burke Hanson, 2021; Gosine, 2008). And, for Black international students, the challenges expand to include linguistic barriers, though a larger number of Black international students hailed from former British colonies where English is the official language (Ankomah, 2022). Specifically, Ankomah (2022) found students' language concerns were mostly due to their accents. Perhaps these challenges contribute to the higher rate of disengagement in educational institutions reported among Black people (Brown & Sinay, 2008; Wilson-Forsbeg et al., 2020).

While the ongoing studies give some insights into the experiences of Black students in higher education, no systematic literature review has been done on the state of knowledge on this development. We acknowledge global calls for inclusive education for all groups of people and seek to synchronize research on Black students' higher education in Canada. The research questions guiding this study are— (1) *what are the emergent themes from the literature on Black students in higher education?* (2) *And how do the themes fit within the broader literature on Black students' higher education experiences?* To answer these questions, we employ a systematic literature review approach using specified criteria to ensure transparency and clarity (Moher et al., 2009). This study is important for various reasons including, first, findings from the articles reviewed for the study have policy implications that can be generalized to understanding the unique experiences of Black students in higher education. Second, the study is EDI-focused (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) and will contribute to Canada's strive for inclusivity and equity. Third, the study findings support Sustainable Development Goal #4 which underscores the need for inclusive, equitable and quality education for promoting lifelong opportunities.

Our definition of higher education in this study expands to include all post-secondary education. Also, our definition of Black students in this study includes both domestic and international Black students in higher education who identify as Black. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that people who identify as Blacks are heterogenous and based on the definition on the mainstream categorization of Black people to enable research that is relevant to policy directives.

In the subsequent sections, we draw from the literature to give an overview of the research topic. Following this section, we included the method deployed in conducting this systematic literature review. The methods section is followed by analyses of the emergent themes from the reviewed studies. The discussion and conclusion sections are then presented with some policy implications.

## An Overview of the Literature

Although Blacks have established roots in Canada for nearly four centuries (Milan & Tran, 2004), their presence in Canada is closely marked by periodic struggles for emancipation from various forms of marginality (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). In light of this, the literature addressing their involvements in higher education is scarce. The extensive research on Black students' enrollment and experiences within the Canadian educational system focuses on elementary and high schools (James & Turner, 2017; Hampton, 2010). Despite these investigations, studies on the experiences of Black students in Canadian post-secondary institutions have predominantly focused on issues of racism and equity, with limited examination of their specific intersectional experiences (Moore, 2021; Tilley & Taylor, 2013).

Before the 1960s, Canada's immigration policies were largely discriminatory, favouring European immigrants over others (Boyd & Vickers, 2007). However, these practices shifted afterward, prioritizing immigrants' language proficiency, education, and skills (Richmond, 1993). The point-based immigration system and other government programs facilitated the immigration of Blacks, including Blacks from the Caribbean who were well-educated and previously served as nannies, teachers or nurses (Statistics Canada, 2024; Richmond, 1993). In more recent years, there has been a significant influx of Black immigrants from Africa to Canada. Their numbers have risen substantially, from about 16,000 between 1980 and 1990 to about 185,000 between 2011 and 2021 (Wall & Shane, 2023). The earliest wave of Black immigrants to Canada came from East Africa (e.g., Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia) and West Africa (e.g., Ghana and Nigeria); and among the majority of recent Black immigrants to Canada, most of them are well-educated economic migrants. (Wall & Shane, 2023).

Furthermore, with the surge in international student numbers in Canada and the internationalization of Canadian universities, it is important to highlight that Black students at various educational levels encounter challenges in their academic pursuits. Brown and Sinay (2008) and Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2020) found that Black students in Canada have the highest rate of disengagement in educational institutions compared to other racial groups. Some critics argued that a predominantly white-centred academic environment contributes to these challenges due to reasons such as the Eurocentric curricula, insufficient minority faculty and the presence of overt racism. Also, other scholars attributed Black students' higher education challenges to roadblocks in effectively implementing equity and diversity policies and practices in Canada (Henry et al., 2017; Henry & Tator, 2009).

Moreover, studies consistently show that gender plays a significant role in shaping the educational outcomes of Black students in post-secondary education. According to Strayhorn, (2017), the academic performance of Black males is influenced by various factors, including a strong support network comprising of peers, teachers, staff, access to on-campus resources (e.g., counselling and tutoring services) and a supportive university's community. Similarly, James & Parekh (2021) pointed to Black female students' lack of essential support to excel academically. The authors argued that such a situation can lead teachers to misinterpret students' disengagement with learning as disinterested. According to Gouthro (2004), Black students' experiences with higher education as a result of age, gender, and location among other factors underscore how different characteristics and positionalities affect Black students higher education experiences in Canada.

Considering recent government projections for the increase of highly skilled job vacancies (James & Parekh, 2021), creating about 75% of job vacancies, filling such positions will require some form of postsecondary certification (James & Parekh, 2021). Given that this projection will likely require persons with some form of higher education, it is important to implement strategies that address Black students' experiences in higher education (Universities, 2021). It is imperative to ensure that minority groups, including Blacks, have access to equitable opportunities to pursue higher education. This will enable them to acquire the requisite skills and qualifications necessary to enter the labour market in the coming decades. Likewise, individuals can be role models/leaders to their communities, increasing upward social mobility and breaking down popular stereotypes.

## Methods

This study sought to identify and synthesize existing scholarship on Black students' higher education in Canada. The motivation for this study stems from the non-existence of a systematic literature review that examines and synthesizes knowledge on Black student experiences.

### Inclusion Criteria

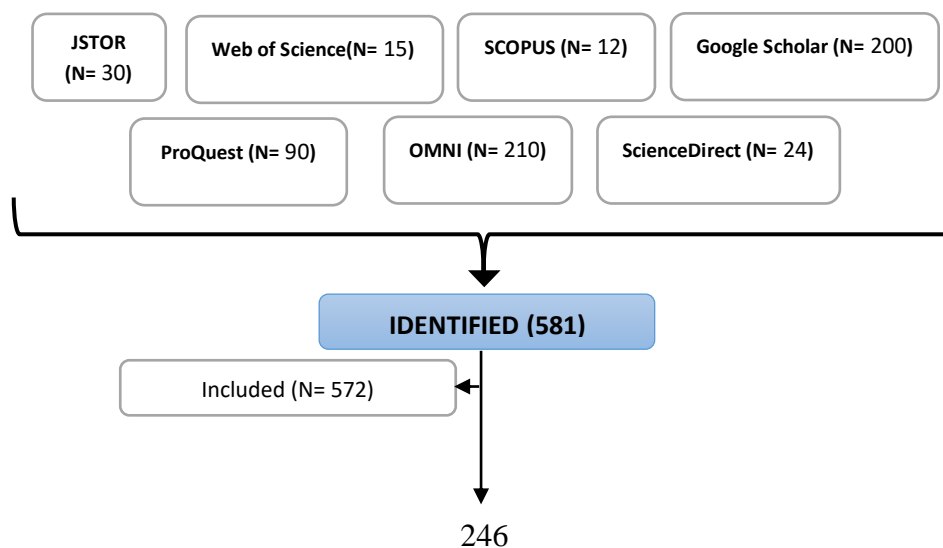
Standardized criteria were used in the selection of articles for this review; selected studies were restricted to only the jurisdiction of Canada. Here, Black students were defined as people of full or partial African descent. The study also focused exclusively on Black students in post-secondary institutions (universities and colleges in Canada). Selected articles for the final analysis should report primary data. Primary data, in this context, includes studies that use survey data or data collected by the researchers. Hence, grey literature, including dissertations, books, reports, memoranda, new articles, debriefs, conference papers and abstracts were excluded. All articles used for the study were peer-reviewed and published between the 1960s and 2024. The choice of study timeline was based on the high influx of Blacks to Canada in the 1960s (Wall & Shane, 2023; Mensah, 2002). Thus, since there is no systematic literature review on the topic, it was imperative to start from the 1960s to date. Also, the 2024 timeline was chosen to help examine the status quo of Black students' higher education in Canada. Furthermore, all selected articles were written in the English language because of the authors' limited proficiency in other languages.

### Article Search

The articles for this systematic literature review were retrieved from online databases and citations. Searches were performed across the following electronic academic databases: Web of Science (15), ScienceDirect (24), JSTOR (30), Scopus (12), Google Scholar (200), ProQuest (90), and Omni (210). Electronic databases and search engines were used because of their widespread use as resource repositories in academic discourse and research (Oklikah et al., 2024; McKitterick et al., 2021). Using search phrases, such as post-secondary, higher education, university(ies), college(s), immigrants, Africa, Blacks, Caribbean and Canada, combined with boolean operators (AND, OR and NOT), our initial search produced 581 articles. The initial articles retrieved were reduced to 572 after we removed duplicates. We performed a title and abstract screening in *Covidence* on the 572 articles which left us with 20 articles for full text reading (see Figure 1).

### Data Extraction and Analysis

The full-text reading list was extracted from *Covidence* onto a spreadsheet. The full-text reading was divided among the authors who identified emergent themes that were further examined and agreed upon. This procedure facilitated the reviewers' understanding of the methodological advantages and constraints of the selected articles that were analyzed for this study (McKitterick et al., 2021).



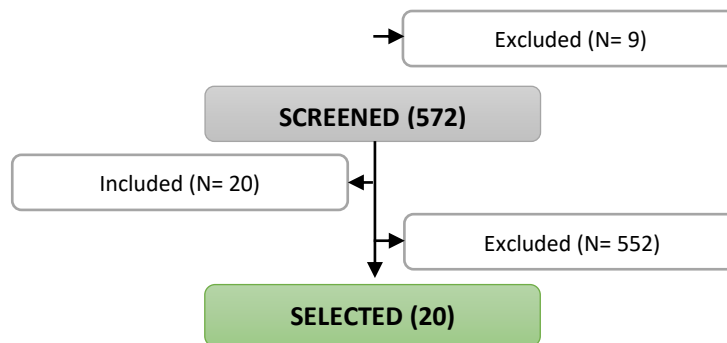


Figure 1: Summary of methodology  
*Source: Authors' construct (2024)*

## Results

### Study Context

This study systematically synthesizes the literature on Black students' experiences in higher education in Canada, with a specific focus on themes such as discrimination, coping strategies, power dynamics, and wellbeing. Twenty papers were included in the study, consisting of 16 qualitative studies and four quantitative studies, all of which were conducted in Canada. The participants in the articles examined were either second-generation-born Black Canadians or Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa. The geographic scope of the articles reviewed encompassed three studies conducted in Alberta, seven in Ontario, one from New Brunswick, three in Quebec, and five studies that recruited people from across the whole of Canada and one study that recruited from western Canada

All twenty studies investigated the overall lived experiences and wellbeing of Black students, emphasizing the distinct obstacles they encountered in managing their cultural identity with their academic endeavours (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2021; Gosine 2008; Gosine 2007; Codjoe 2006, 2001; Smith & Lalonde, 2003; Richmond 1993). These studies emphasize the necessity for stronger mental health support services that are sensitive to the distinct requirements of Black students, as their encounters with discrimination and marginalization have a substantial effect on their general wellbeing.

Likewise, twelve articles examined focused on discrimination and coping mechanisms (Ankomah 2022; Mathieu et al 2022; Magnan et al 2021; Wilson-Forsberg et al 2018). Black students often experience explicit and implicit forms of racism from their classmates, teachers, educational system or institutional environment. Instances of discrimination resulted in emotions of seclusion and separation which have a detrimental effect on their emotional wellbeing and academic achievements. Given these difficulties, embracing Black cultural identity equipped individuals with effective strategies for dealing with issues or cultivating positive attitudes of dignity and self-consciousness, enabling learners to navigate mainly Eurocentric postsecondary education environments.

Six studies examine power relations interlaced with other issues within Canada's educational system, specifically investigating the impact of institutional hurdles and educators' low expectations of Black students' academic progress (Magnan et al 2023; James 2003). These studies demonstrate the tenacity and perseverance of Black students, who work hard to achieve success despite these challenges. The underrepresentation of Black teachers and the dominance of a pro-white curriculum at many institutions hindered the attainment of a more inclusive and supportive educational setting.

Table 1.1: Summary of articles reviewed

<i>No.</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Findings</i>
1.	Codjoe (2006).	(1) Black students stressed the need for incorporating culturally diverse curriculum. (2) Parents and guardians played vital roles in assisting students develop strong sense of self and cultural identity. (3) Students demonstrated deep knowledge of issues related Black community while being conscious of their African-Canadian identity. (4) Canadian-born Black students undergo several identity transitions before forming a strong sense of blackness, whereas Black students born outside of Canada have a well-established Black identity upon arrival and do not fully identify with Canada due to their immigrant status.
2.	Gosine (2007).	(1) Most participants cited a combination of ethnically motivated, collectivist reasons and individualistic causes as their motivation for pursuing higher education. (2) Black students viewed higher education accomplishments as a means to challenge existing misconceptions that portray Black Canadians as intellectually inferior. (3) Black students' experiences in higher education differed based on their level of Black consciousness, gender, and academic discipline. (4) While some Black students found the educational environment less hostile, others were dissatisfied with issues such as huge class sizes, lack of attention from instructors, and the stress of competitive programs. (5) Black students emphasized the need for more visible minority faculty and a more inclusive curriculum. (6) Hard work, determination, and a positive mindset were identified as the primary coping strategies adopted by Black students.
3.	Codjoe (2001).	(1) Racial discrimination, racial stereotypes, the absence of Black perspectives, low teacher expectations, and a hostile environment were challenges faced by Black students in higher education. (2) Black students encountered racism in both subtle and overt forms, affecting them at school and in other places. (3) Teachers often steered Black students into roles that match perceived innate talents, leading to decreased self-assurance in their abilities. (4) Viewing Black students primarily as athletes reinforced the stereotype of them being academic underachievers. (5) Black students in Canada's higher education were concerned about curriculum, which was often Eurocentric and racially bias. (6) Social isolation and loneliness were the most challenging aspects of the educational environment for Black learners.
4.	Gosine (2008).	(1) Black students navigated their identities between Black ethnicity and mainstream Canadian culture. (2) Study participants felt a lesser sense of belonging but are connected to their familial ethnocultural background. (3) Most Black students embraced their Black identity as a source of empowerment and inspiration. (4) Black students from middle-class backgrounds exhibited unique connections to their Black identity. (5) Black female student discussed how being Black and female influenced their experiences, identities and possibilities. (6) Black students viewed their higher education achievements as a means to challenge existing prejudices that portray Blacks as intellectually inferior.
5.	Wilson-Forsberg et al. (2018).	(1) Professors and counsellors in Canadian higher education labeled Black male students as troublemakers and underachievers. (2) Black students adopted various forms of self-expression, which can be seen as a reaction to racism. (3) Some Black students faced academic discouragement from educators, staff, and counsellors who often advised them against enrolling in certain courses. (4) Black student noted that they had to meet higher standards to prove their capabilities, earn respect and excel academically.
6.	Ankomah (2022).	(1) Non-racialized students often underestimated the English proficiency of Black international students in Canada, leading to a lack of recognition for their efforts. (2) Racial microaggression and racism in educational settings present serious challenges for Black teaching assistants. (3) Black international teaching assistants encountered difficulties in establishing positive connections with students due to their different socialization and backgrounds. (4) Racism impeded Black students and teaching assistants from fully participating in the educational process.
7.	Magnan et al. (2021)	(1) Some Black students faced discrimination and microaggressions in Canada's higher education due to their skin colour. (2) Some Black students noted that the use of racist or discriminatory language by instructors and lecturers can unsettle them, even if they feel valued. (3) Black students in Québec experienced stereotyping and marginalization based on their appearance.
8.	Smith & Lalonde (2003).	(1) Black students who experienced general psychological discomfort exhibited lower racial identity scores compared to those who did not face psychological hardship. (2) No significant correlation was found between GPA and the mental health of Black students. (3) There was a substantial relationship between GPA and academic orientation of Black students in higher education.

9. Adeyanju & Olatunji (2021). (1) Black international students from Nigeria are attracted to Canada because of its high unemployment rate and less restricted student labour market opportunities. (2) Black international students persevered through higher education challenges with the hope of graduating and obtaining post-graduation work visas.
10. Mathieu et al. (2022). (1) Sixty-nine percent of study respondents reported feeling involved or integrated within their medical school community. (2) Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported encountering discrimination, primarily from patients, colleagues, and hospital personnel; most Black students shared these experiences with friends but did not formally report them. (3) Sixty-two percent of participants agreed with comments about resilience when discussing their responses to racial discrimination. (4) Sixty-five percent of respondents reported poor wellbeing during medical school, showing signs of burnout and expressing negative views regarding the diversity of their medical school staff or curricula.
11. Magnan et al. (2023). (1) Black immigrant students faced significant parents pressure to excel in their carrier decisions, often linked to their family's aspirations for higher social status. (2) Career choices among Black students often prioritizes securing financially lucrative and esteemed positions, while also seeking personal fulfillment in their chosen profession. (3) Students in alternative health programs often consider different career paths as a fallback strategy that could potentially lead to a medical career. Most students opted for alternative programs after not gaining admission to medical school.
12. James (2003). (1) Coaches and instructors played a crucial role in preparing Black students for college athletic scholarships by facilitating school transfers and providing exposure opportunities that cater for students' athletic interests. (2) Student-athletes often transferred to different schools if they perceive their coaches as unsupportive. Students rejected stereotypes of Black youths as tall, physically strong, and less educated. (3) Parents of Black students endorsed their academic goals and viewed athletic scholarships as means to achieve academic success. (4) Parents supported student-athletes in selecting schools that align with their sports interests and requirements. (5) Black student-athletes' perceptions of their achievements in sports are influenced by their understanding of Black identity.
13. Richmond (1993). (1) Educational attainment among Black immigrants in Canada from the Caribbean began to decline 1971. (2) Across all age groups, Caribbean women showed less inclination towards pursuing higher education in arts, humanities, or social sciences. (3) Among individuals aged 20-24, 17% of Caribbean-born males in Caribbean households held a university education, compared to 33% of non-Caribbean-born males in Caribbean households. (4) The age of immigration to Canada significantly affected Blacks educational attainment.
14. Prah (2016). (1) The participant's educational journey was fundamentally influenced by institutional structures that organized students along race, ethnicity, gender and class. (2) Participant's educational experiences included poverty, lack of parental involvement, lack of community, cultural displacement, isolation, loneliness, lack of representation, hidden curriculum, racial harassment and violence, alienation, lack of belonging, stereotyping, streaming, low teacher expectation, and lack of mentorship and academic guidance. (3) The participant drew on inner strength and a sense of self-worth, as a coping strategy to challenges; also, the participant relied on racial pride and ethnic identity.
15. Codjoe (2006). (1) Participants highlighted the role of a supportive higher education environment in reinforcing knowledge and pride in Black cultural identity. (2) Participants demonstrated in-depth knowledge of Black affairs, reflecting a self-awareness that extends beyond their Canadians identity to embrace their identities as African Canadians. (3) Black students actively sought information from their parents, friends and their personal efforts, reading widely about the Black experience.
16. Akuffo-Addo et al. (2024). (1) The results presented interrelated themes that characterized Black students' experiences to and through medical school, and reiterating perceptions of the surgical culture (2) Black medical students identified lack of mentorship and representation, as well as experiences with racism as the main barriers to pursuing training. Some also cited systemic racism, lack of representation and insufficient safe spaces as deterrents to program completion.
17. Noreiga & Justin (2020). (1) Black international students saw higher education in Canada as a pathway to obtaining globally recognized qualifications that can enhance career prospects. (2) Participants stressed the sacrifice of relocating from their home country, leaving behind friends, family, and cultural ties to pursue higher education in Canada. (3) Participants developed a strong consciousness of their Black identity in Canada's higher education.
18. Luhanga et al. (2023). (2) Study participants reported numerous experiences of racism within their learning environment. Beyond facing unwarranted language discrimination, the lack of diversity exacerbated their experiences in higher education. (2) Participants felt voiceless, unable to effectively address their concerns or discuss their challenges with faculty due to inadequate advocacy support systems. (3) The complexity of being Black students (i.e., experiences of racism, being a minority, and having immigrant status)— further marginalized and disadvantaged many participants. (4) Most students described strained relations with faculty members in

- the nursing program, leading to heightened anxiety. (5) Some participants employed avoidance tactics to navigate the intricate dynamics of racism in nursing school.
19. Leduc et al. (2021). (1) Black students applying to medical school in Quebec are disproportionately rejected at the first step compared to non-Black students.
20. James (1997). (1) Black students expressed discontent with being label as "access students," but remained committed to pursuing teaching career, viewing themselves as pivotal in becoming role models and advocates for educational reform. (2) Participants noted that encouragement from their peers in the program helped in managing their circumstances in the program.

### General Lived Experiences

From the review, a study noted that Blacks often exhibited a strong propensity to pursue higher education and have a higher likelihood of succeeding in postsecondary education (Richmond, 1993). However, Black students in Canada's education system encountered various challenges (Mathieu et al., 2022; Magnan et al., 2021; Codjoe, 2001). For instance, Gosine (2008) reported that financial difficulties are pressing concerns for most Black students. However, the situation is musky when interlaced with other socio-economic pressures and familial responsibilities. For example, Black single mothers face daunting obstacles when enrolled for further education. The financial burden of tuition fees and academic demands mixed with the responsibility of juggling professional responsibilities alongside childcare exacerbated their challenges and affected their higher education experiences (Gosine, 2008). Consequently, some Black single mothers quit mid-way or forgo their aspirations of pursuing higher education to improve their skills, thereby underscoring the complex intersection of financial constraints, familial responsibilities and educational aspirations (Gosine, 2008).

Also, while Akuffo-Addo, et al. (2024) and Leduc et al. (2021) found that Black learners in medical school lack mentorship and representation and that the intersections of these challenges with gender exponentially increase barriers to higher education, Codjoe (2006) found that amidst the educational challenges of Blacks in higher education in Canada, students achieved academic success against all odds due to supportive environment that reinforces knowledge and pride in Black cultural identity. Such achievements are contingent on students' depth of knowledge about Black and African affairs, which indicates an awareness of themselves, not just as Canadians but as Blacks (Codjoe, 2006). Additionally, some Black students in post-secondary institutions in Canada encountered challenges in maintaining robust social connections (Luhanga et al., 2023). They cultivated specific friendships to help mitigate challenges while others resorted to avoidance strategies (Luhanga et al., 2023; James, 1997). Other Black students have the agency to alter their social circles and form friendships with individuals who prioritize academic work, which significantly influences their academic trajectory while others inadvertently engaged in negative influences, thereby impeding their academic progress (Codjoe, 2006).

Regarding Black international students, their perception of higher education as a pathway to pursuing permanent residency affected their educational experiences in Canada (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2022; Ankomah, 2022; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Adeyanju and Olatunji (2022), observed that Black international students leveraged post-secondary education irrespective of the challenges they face to achieve multiple objectives concurrently. On the other hand, Ankomah (2022) examined the challenge of Black international students facing linguistic barriers and concluded that while participants hailed from former British colonies where English is the official language, most students encountered numerous communication challenges given their accents (Ankomah, 2022). This issue raised concerns about Black international students' perceived competence in effectively performing as course teaching assistants (Ankomah, 2022).

### Discrimination in Educational Spaces

Discrimination was a major concern for most Black students in higher education, as identified by most of the studies (Magnan et al., 2021; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). In higher education, Black students faced various forms of discrimination (Akuffo-Addo et al., 2024; Luhanga et al., 2023). For example, graduate students serving as teaching assistants encountered discrimination, primarily stemming from accent variations and stereotypical concerns regarding their competence in teaching undergraduate students (Ankomah, 2022). The exclusion is further entrenched given that some undergraduate students' preferred white teaching assistants due to the presumption of their superior competence (Ankomah, 2022). However, it is essential to note that despite these challenges, Black teaching assistants are well-

equipped to effectively manage the courses assigned to them by their respective departments (Ankomah, 2022). Many of these individuals enrolled or took teaching courses to boost their proficiency and foster professional growth (Ankomah, 2022).

Moreover, Black students, particularly those enrolled in programs with fewer quantitative elements, have voiced strong complaints about experiencing racism during their academic pursuits (Gosine, 2007). Some Black students noted that the Eurocentric focus of courses in schools partly contributed to exposing students to racist inclinations (Gosine, 2007; Codjoe, 2001). Conversely, students enrolled in programs that emphasize quantitative skills reported different concerns. They predominantly mentioned challenges such as large class sizes and receiving less attention from professors (Gosine, 2007).

A noteworthy finding was the importance placed by many Black students on having racially diverse staff within higher education institutions in Canada. This argument stemmed from the perception that Black instructors may better understand Black students' experiences and effectively guide them toward achieving academic goals (Magnan et al., 2021; Gosine, 2007). Furthermore, some Black students observed instances of institutional racism on campus and attributed feelings of isolation and discomfort to faculty and staff's lack of familiarity with racial vocabulary and their use of euphemisms in (in)directly addressing Black students (Magnan et al., 2021). For instance, a student from Haiti recounted being jokily informed that not everyone can pursue a profession as a drug dealer (Magnan et al., 2021). Also, jokes targeting Black individuals with dreadlocks contributed to stereotypical perceptions. A prevalent struggle among Black students was the challenge of fostering a sense of belonging at the university without role models that reflect their racial identity (Magnan et al., 2021). Notably, in a study, about 60% of Black students encountered prejudice during their training, particularly in the health training institutions; and nearly 75% of all reported situations left students dissatisfied (Mathieu et al., 2022). This finding reflected the institutional marginalities that manifest in higher education, especially medical school (Akuffo-Addo et al., 2024; Leduc et al., 2021).

African-born Black students exhibited a distinct Black consciousness arising from their awareness of not belonging to Canada, prompting them to develop unique coping strategies. Conversely, Canadian-born Black students often felt disconnected from this consciousness and advocate for equal treatment without discrimination, as they perceive themselves as Canadian citizens (Gosine, 2008). It is worth noting that Canadian-born Black students often do not fully grasp their identity until they commence schooling, especially higher education. Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping the consciousness of racism, inadvertently exposing them to various forms of discrimination in the school curriculum (Codjoe, 2001). Black learners sometimes encountered discrimination and faced barriers that hindered their integration and advancement in society. Such discrimination manifested through overt racist remarks, subtle exclusion of other students, or through perpetuated institutional barriers (Gosine, 2007). In some instances, teachers steered Black students towards roles aligned with perceived stereotypical strengths, inadvertently undermining their confidence and abilities—thereby stereotypically assuming abilities about specific mental and physical capabilities of Black students (Codjoe, 2001; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018).

Similarly, the pervasive perception of Black students primarily as athletic reinforces stereotypes of Black students as academically underachieving (Codjoe, 2001). Some Black students in Canada encountered challenges integrating their Black identity and African history into a dominant narrative that often emphasizes inferiority and perceived danger (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Also, some Black students stressfully navigated the complex task of identifying as Black while simultaneously preserving other unique identities that may diverge from conventional notions of Blackness (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Other Black students grappled with multiple layers of identity, including their Black ethnicity, mainstream Canadian culture, as well as the intersection of lower or middle-class status (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018).

Struggles to establish a sense of belonging among Black students emanated from various factors, including their family's ethnocultural background (Gosine, 2008). However, some Black students often felt compelled to develop coping strategies to manage their challenges in higher educational institutions in Canada (Codjoe, 2006). For example, Black female students who encounter stereotypical behaviours, including sexualization, challenged their sense of identity and achievement to do better (Gosine, 2008). This approach means to challenge prevailing biases, especially ones that characterize Black students as intellectually inferior (Gosine, 2008). Likewise, Black male students perceived as troublemakers (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018), eventually realized such profiling was detrimental to their academic success (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018). Also, some Black students discouraged by mentors and advisors from pursuing academics on the grounds of being academically weak but more likely to excel in athletics (H. M.



Codjoe, 2001; James, 2003), eventually cultivate diverse networks as a means of assimilating into different social groups or broadening their knowledge (Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018).

### **A Continuum of Power Relations**

The influence of parents and teachers on Black students' higher education success was paramount (Codjoe, 2006). Studies show that sometimes parents dictated the educational pathways that Black students should pursue, often for valid reasons (Magnan et al., 2023; Codjoe, 2006), including an increase in social status to compensate for other deficiencies, as well as for financial capabilities (Magnan et al., 2023). However, such directives do not often align with the interests of Black students, resulting in various power conflicts. For instance, some participants mentioned that their parents wanted them to pursue a career in medicine; however, lacking Canadian educational knowledge or knowledge about the program, parents were unable to offer appropriate guidance (Magnan et al., 2023). To navigate these power struggles, Black students often pursue higher education to obtain credentials (often diplomas) that promptly lead to employment opportunities (Magnan et al., 2023). A decision that usually enabled them to reduce their reliance on parental control and pursue their passions or desires independently.

It is worth noting, that Black students who excelled in athletics often encounter challenges involving parents, coaches, or professors (James, 2003). These stakeholders influenced the choice of schools these students should attend. Importantly, parents generally do not impede Black youngsters aspiring to secure sports scholarships (James, 2003). However, financial constraints limited their ability to fully support their children's athletic pursuits. Thus, parents often aspired for their children to secure sports scholarships as a means to alleviate financial burdens (James, 2003), as was the case of participants who received scholarship offers from both Canadian and American universities (James, 2003). In such cases, parents continued to influence decisions by telling their children which option or higher education institution to accept (James, 2003).

### **Black Students' Wellbeing**

Black learners in higher education who maintain a positive attitude toward their racial identity and foster strong connections with other Black students tend to exhibit higher levels of self-confidence and subjective wellbeing (Codjoe, 2006). Additionally, students with higher levels of academic efficacy and lower levels of academic apathy typically experience reduced general psychological distress (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Furthermore, Black students in higher education with elevated self-esteem demonstrated higher academic efficiency, while those who display more apathy towards their academic pursuits tended to have diminished self-esteem (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). These findings underscore the importance of fostering positive racial identity and social connections, as well as promoting academic efficacy and self-esteem, in supporting the wellbeing and academic success of Black learners. A study revealed that Black students classified as "A" demonstrated higher levels of efficacy compared to students classified as "B" and "C". Conversely, students classified as "C" exhibited considerably higher levels of apathy compared to "A" students (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Moreover, students with reduced psychological distress tended to outperform those with higher psychological distress (Smith & Lalonde, 2003).

### **Discussion**

This study synthesized the emergent themes from the literature on Black students' higher education experiences in Canada, elaborating on how the emergent issues fit within the broader literature on minority education in Canada. To answer the research questions: (1) *what are the emergent themes from the literature on Black students in higher education?* (2) *And, how do the themes fit within the broader literature on Black student's higher education experiences,* the study found that Blacks in higher education experience different but related experiences, including discrimination and unbalanced power relation, all of which affect their sense of belonging and subjective wellbeing. Specifically, studies examining the lived experiences of Black students revealed that some face financial constraints, language barriers, and underrepresentation among other issues—and for Black international students, experiences could include cultural isolation and homesickness (Luhanga et al., 2023; Gosine, 2008). Perhaps these challenges reflect how the multiple situated realities of Black students in higher education extend beyond the classroom.

Lived experiences also include issues of (racial) discrimination. Discrimination could range from microaggressions to more overt forms of discrimination from colleagues and instructors (Akuffo-Addo et al., 2024;

Luhanga et al., 2023; Leduc et al., 2021). This finding coalesces with Morales (2021) and McGee's (2020) studies that identified significant instances of racial discrimination against Blacks in higher education. Also, a gendered dimension of Black students' experiences in higher education suggests that Black females are more discriminated against than their male counterparts (Burke Hanson, 2021). The various forms of discrimination experienced by Black students in higher education create hostile learning spaces that hinder academic excellence. Also, the results show that racism is overtly and covertly existent in Canada's higher education system (Luhanga et al., 2023; Leduc et al., 2021). The consciousness of racism in Canada's higher education brings to bear the regional differences, particularly the less inclusion of Black students in Quebec (Leduc et al., 2021). It further solidifies the notion that racism is deeply rooted in systems and structures (Burke, 2017), contributing to the chronic underachievement of Black students in higher education in Canada (Codjoe, 2001). Despite the Canadian government's numerous initiatives to advance equity and diversity on higher education campuses, such as redesigning curriculum and improving the work environment for minorities (Hussain, 2023; Henry, 2015). It is crucial to encourage research to gain a comprehensive understanding of contemporary, subtle racism, which results in the Black students experiencing discrimination, dissatisfaction, and alienation among other ethnic minority students in Canada (Bailey, 2016).

In other lights, Black students are conscious of mainstream perceptions as less qualified students (James, 1997), while also oscillating between achieving their personal ambitions and parents' ambitions (James, 2003). Thus, parents dictating the educational paths for Black students often leave Black students trapped in fulfilling the goal of their parents. This could be a result of cultural expectations for children to pursue certain specific careers. A decision that could also be a means to offset economic status and systemic racism. In other instances, economic pressures, identification and representation could force Black parents to push their children towards undesirable educational pathways.

Also, in as much as, very few studies focus on Black students' wellbeing in higher education, it is an area that is worth looking into. Some scholars have found the prevalence of higher depressive symptoms among Black students, especially women, which is highly attributed to racial discrimination (Cenat et al., 2021), and concludes that the prevalence of depression among Black in Canada is nearly six times higher than that of the general population (Cenat et al 2021). This findings underscore that mental health is pronounced among Black students in post-secondary institutions in Canada (Smith & Lalonde, 2003).

The findings reported in this study reiterate the urgent need to understand the realities of Blacks in higher education but also how the continuum of struggles reinforces the necessity for intermittent policy re-evaluation to ensure that no group of people are left behind in attaining higher education in Canada. That notwithstanding, this study has some limitations. First, the exclusion of grey literature from the study limits the amount of relevant evidence that could be gleaned from those studies to support a study of this nature. Second, the generalization of Blacks to all groups that identify as Black hindered a thorough contextualization of the lived experiences of various groups of Black people.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined studies on the experiences of Black students in higher education to synthesize knowledge on the current literature. This endeavour has provided the avenue to highlight the general experiences, challenges, and coping strategies adopted by Blacks in higher education in dealing with macro, meso and micro-level issues in Canada's higher education system. More importantly, while the finding articulates the lived experiences of Black students concerning their daily negotiations of student life, it should be understood that their experiences are not disconnected from the broader level systemic challenges that have reinforced practices that serve as barriers to Black students. Thus, despite the unsettling realities and racialized barriers, some Black students in higher education are determined to succeed at all costs. Furthermore, policy initiatives should strive to address the intersectionality of various positionalities of Black student in understanding their higher education experiences. Likewise, stakeholders should note that even in instances where a contextualized stance is adopted as the collective voice of Black students in higher education, it is possible to under-identify the implications of a particular context and the contestations of power relations therein. Also, the study identified a limited number of published articles which suggests limited study on Black students. More research is needed to understand the emerging issues and dynamics of Black students in higher education. Consequently, future research should focus on intersectionally examining how the different embodied identities of Blacks in higher education e.g., age, gender, resources, and family separation among other characteristics,

affect Black students' performance and participation in higher education. Research is also needed to better understand and address the mental health needs of Black students in higher education.

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