Final Report Submitted to the Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing University of Toronto

Facilitated Dialogues on Confronting anti-Black racism

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Introduction & Context

DCG was approached by the Bloomberg Faculty of Nursing at the University of Toronto to facilitate a series of discussions that could serve as a platform for students to discuss issues related to students' experiences of anti-Black racism in the faculty. The request was also precipitated by a classroom incident in which a faculty member used a racial slur that negatively affected undergraduate students who were present in the classroom.

In response to the request by Dr. Linda Johnson, DCG structured the conversations with several key goals in mind:
- Identify how anti-Black racism is manifested in the faculty
- Explore student opinions regarding how to address anti-Black racism
- Identify the main challenges and opportunities related to addressing anti-Black racism
- Provide recommendations based on student feedback

DCG scheduled four sessions: two with undergraduates and two with graduate students. Each two-hour session explored three main questions:
- What are the manifestations of anti-Black racism in the faculty?
- What are the challenges to addressing anti-Black racism?
- What are main areas to be addressed to combat anti-Black racism?

Students were very engaged and provided helpful information. The following sections provide a brief synopsis of their responses.

Manifestations of anti-Black racism

Students were asked to identify ways in which anti-Black racism was manifested within the nursing faculty. They highlighted the use of the "N" word in a class discussion, the limited nature of assignment options, and the limited opportunities for including multiple identity perspectives and experiences into classroom discussions. They also discussed the ways in which curriculum content focused almost exclusively on whiteness and the many sites in which whiteness is evinced as the norm: faculty, leadership team, students, and course content.

The participants also highlighted the lack of inclusion of Blacks within course content which they proposed can have negative effects on the lives of Black students and the patients they are being trained to serve. They felt this kind of omission could place their patients' lives at risk, given that they may misdiagnose a condition or may not provide appropriate treatments or interventions. Specifically, students expressed concerns about the limited knowledge that instructors had about issues in relation to Black bodies and commented that there seemed to be limited interest in including this information into the curriculum or classroom discussions, despite the possible consequences. Concerns were also raised about the limited minority representation among staff members, including the fact that there were more White staff members than all other persons of colour (POC) combined. Some students reported feeling isolated and lacking a sense of relatability with the rest of faculty due to the lack of similar looking bodies in positions of leadership. Students commented that nurses need to be aware of the ways in which anti-

Black racism can affect their mental health, work ethic, and attention to detail. Students also highlighted the need for more Black students in the program as a necessary component for creating a school environment that is inclusive and supportive of Black students in addressing anti-Black racism issues. Some commented that the lack of Black students also contributed to the lack of Black voices/representation in class content. Further, the students believed that the faculty also needed to be aware of the multiple ways in which they as students are also negatively impacted by the exclusion of their voices, perspectives and the continuation of anti-Black racism.

Use of the term POC

The participants indicated that the continued use of the broad term POC, does not allow the option to discuss specific issues that may affect populations differently. Students noted the lack of reference or attention to the needs or concerns of specific groups could result in the internalization of negative attitudes about the self, which could consequently limit how students are connected and involved at school, which could ultimately have long term financial repercussions for themselves and their families. For example, some students commented that certain experiences, particularly those related to race, might affect the choice to complete the program or to pursue an advanced career in nursing.

Identifying anti-Black racism within the faculty

When asked to identify some ways that anti-Black racism was evidenced in the faculty, students in all groups referred to the incident in which the instructor used the "N" word in the classroom. Undergraduates referred to their experience of witnessing the event and the various elements related to that situation, including the reaction of the teacher, the reaction of students, and the response of the Dean. Graduate students commented that although this incident did not happen in a graduate-level class, rumors about it circulated through the entire faculty, and so the incident also affected graduate students. Graduate students also expressed frustration that this kind of incident had been happening for a long time and that there have been no real efforts to make changes within the faculty. Some undergraduates also expressed frustration, noting that there was no clearly defined process for students to report this kind of problem or to deal directly with racism. Students also commented on a letter that was sent out to the student body that they believed increased the level of confusion about the incident, did not address the situation and actually increased the sense of frustration experienced by students. They described the handling of the situation as superficial and ineffective.

Students identified additional indications of anti-Black racism within the faculty, including the use of derogatory language (the "N" word), lack of or limited representation of Blacks in the curriculum and among staff members, and the lack of Black students within the program. When referring to the lack of Black voices and representation within course content, some students referred to 'ignorance' as one root cause of anti-Black racism, specifically the generalization of issues, and the pattern of dismissing important topics or discussing it in very superficial ways.

Challenges related to addressing anti-Black racism

When asked about the main challenges to addressing anti-Black racism, students referred to the systems currently in place, specifically the fact that the faculty lead was White, as were most of the other staff members. Others also commented that when an issue was brought up, staff members were resistant to listening or failed to engage with the identified issues. Some commented that when faculty have been approached by students to discuss the need for curriculum change, some staff members did not address the students concerns and failed to make changes. Students used the example of skin disorders which, when discussed or when images are included in the texts, they were always shown on White bodies. This could ultimately jeopardize the diagnosis and treatment options presented for people with darker skinned complexions, which they believed was a clear violation of the ethical and medical guidelines of the field of nursing. They also identified the lack of diversity among faculty members, limited placement options, and limited anti-Black racism training or understanding amongst faculty members as significant challenges to addressing the issues. The participants believed that there was limited personal investment on the part of the faculty members to address the issues because they could not relate to them in any real and concrete ways.

Effects of anti-Black racism

In their first session, undergraduate students identified the specific effects of anti-Black racism. They referred to the 'mental weight' of racism: having to deal with multiple elements of racism including the erasure of identity, challenge negative stereotypes (referred to as stereotype threat), trying to find themselves represented in the school in regard to faculty and peers, and trying to avoid internalizing negative messages.   They commented that managing the effects of racism required a great deal of energy, which had negative effects on their wellbeing and their ability to adequately manage school and placement-related expectations. These comments suggest they were experiencing internalization, isolation and that their mental wellbeing was also being compromised. Students were very clear that individuals should not have to relive trauma for someone else to understand that oppression hurts. They believed that trauma should instead be explained through curriculum and mandatory training, and that it is not the responsibility of those who have been living with oppression to relive their trauma in an attempt to educate others.

Where should we start?

Undergraduate students were asked to prioritize the options for addressing anti-Black racism. First, they identified the need for school staff to be more transparent regarding curriculum development, hiring practices, and other procedures. Second, they identified the need for designated safe spaces where they could discuss issues affecting them. Third, they identified the need for people to be held accountable: some noted that even when problems were brought up, nobody was punished or forced to answer for certain undesirable outcomes. Fourth, they specified the need for more guidelines to combat anti-Black racism, as well as incentives for making changes. Finally, they felt that mandatory anti-Black racism training for new and existing faculty members would help mitigate the challenges faced by students.

Similar trends emerged when graduate students were asked to identify their top priorities: they specified the need to recruit more Black staff, update school curriculum, improve accountability when issues are brought up, create safe spaces for Black students, and review punishment procedures, which they believed disproportionately affect Black students at higher rates.

The importance of prioritising the need to address anti-Black racism

Students were also asked what the environment would look like once the suggested changes were implemented. Some commented that seeing more diverse representation among faculty staff members would help foster inclusivity and would also increase confidence that issues would be addressed when brought up. Others noted that in a perfect world, there would be opportunities to engage in open discussions about personal experiences, to talk about and address shared concerns. Some noted that the inclusion of guest speakers from a wide variety of backgrounds would increase cultural awareness and racial diversity and reduce ignorance and lack of awareness among non-POC and foster more open discussions about the experiences of Black students and communities. Students generally wanted more transparency in terms of the process for developing policies to address issues. Graduate and undergraduate students highlighted the need to implement anti-oppression training for staff members indicating that this training would help to reduce racism and oppression within the school environment.

Some also commented that more diverse mentorship and partnership programs would significantly benefit their educational and career development and would be a clear representation of change. Students also noted that webinars and other meeting forums could help them feel more comfortable about addressing and dealing with issues related to racism. Graduate students commented that the curriculum should be redesigned to include a more diverse array of images and thereby normalize the experiences of racialized populations. Graduate students also commented that staff members should attempt to find more placement options that matched the needs and goals of Black students. They referenced the need for mentorship by Black nurses as connected to the consistent theme of increasing diversity among staff members. Overall, students felt that things will improve when Black, Indigenous, persons of colour and LGBTQ+ students can actually say that they feel safe at school. This notion of safety was one that underscored all of the conversations in relation to students specifically, but particularly in relation to the responsibility of the field to ensure the safety of patients.

Recommendations

Overall, the discussions provided rich data and helped clarify next steps. First, it is important to note that this brief report should not be interpreted as an attack on the faculty and its staff. Most students agreed that one main problem with addressing anti-Black racism is not knowing where to start. They also referred to the many competing opinions within the school environment, which contribute to the problem: one student referred to the need to 'connect the silos.' This section discusses future directions and presents clear recommendations for implementation.

Most students brought up the need for more Black leadership and voices, commenting they would prefer race-based discussions to be led by people from diverse backgrounds, rather than

White staff members alone. Therefore, recruitment is one first step. The faculty needs more diversity in terms of faculty members, administration, and students.

Policy is another important step to addressing anti-Black racism. Students referred to the need for a sustainability plan, student evaluations (e.g., student feedback questionnaires), and policies specifying rules for handling clear wrongdoing; some suggested implementing data systems to track challenges and successes. They also commented that faculty should be involved in addressing instances of anti-Black racism – but made a point that external consultants should oversee outcomes as a way of increasing accountability. They stressed that ultimately, the Dean is responsible for ensuring the faculty is a welcoming environment and that problems are addressed appropriately. Most agreed that anti-Black racism training should be mandatory for new and current staff members.

With regard to curriculum, the general consensus was that more representation is needed. Some students suggested hiring a curriculum analyst to develop and embed implement the aforementioned topic areas as central aspects of the curriculum rather than as add-on pieces. Specific ideas for improvements included: more diverse examples in class about non-White healthcare systems; more examples of issues and symptoms faced by non-White patients (e.g., mental health); history of oppression; inclusion of more Black narratives; more lectures and webinars about racism (anti-Black/Indigenous); more regular land acknowledgments (traditional territory); and more attention to the history behind race and health care.

Communication was identified as an important way to address anti-Black racism. They want established channels of communication so that students know where to seek help, voice concerns, express personal challenges - including personal experiences of racism, and be transparent and honest about gaps in curriculum. They also noted the importance of fostering dialogue with faculty members and needing faculty members to develop the knowledge and skills to name and address the problems related to anti-Black racism. They also highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for students and faculty members to be honest about gaps in their personal knowledge and experiences. With regard to timelines, most students wanted some changes effected immediately, specifically indicating that changes to the curriculum should be in place by the Fall of 2021. They however indicated that all changes should be fully implemented and running within two years and be re-evaluated at varying junctures.

These steps should foster a safer environment and provide opportunities for allyship and mentorship. Some students referred to the need for more support and caring, especially in the context of COVID-19, and commented that perhaps more accommodations could be made. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure all Black, Indigenous, and persons of colour within the faculty feel safe and included. Students noted that they can also play a role in addressing racism by holding faculty more accountable, continuing to provide suggestions, and being aware that racism affects all students and faculty, not just those who are racialized.