

**A critical analysis of the Assessment and Action Record (AAR) documentation:
Examining the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care in Ontario**

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Ontario Assessment and Action Record (AAR), used in child welfare to understand how this documentation supports (and fails to support) Black youth-in-care and their academic needs. We applied a critical review and analysis of three distinct but interconnected sources of data: 1) the AAR-C2-2016; 2) literature on the education of Black youth-in-care in Ontario; 3) policy and agency documents concerning how this group is faring. In our analysis of the AAR and its education dimension, findings suggest the AAR has been a race-neutral tool, which has implications in terms of how we conceptualize structural barriers faced by Black children and youth-in-care. We identified gaps and potential practice dilemmas for child welfare workers when using AAR documentation procedures. Using Critical Race Theory and the United Nations human rights framework, we argue that the AAR can be a tool to identify, monitor, and challenge oppression for Black children and youth-in-care who experience a continual negotiation of racialization alongside being a foster child. The AAR recordings can be harmful if they are simply a collection of information on the key areas of a child's life. Prioritizing the academic needs of Black children in care is critical to social work and aligns with the commitments of One Vision, One Voice, Ontario's Anti-Racism Strategic Plan as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly in relation to the right to education.

Keywords: Black youth-in-care, Education, Ontario, Looking-after-children, Assessment and Action Record

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Introduction

In Ontario, there is a significant overrepresentation of Black children and youth within child welfare institutions (Contenta et al., 2014; B. King et al., 2017; Turner, 2016a). Research shows that Black children are entering child welfare systems at a rate five times higher than that of the average Canadian population (Polanyi et al., 2014) and placed in White homes and communities outside of more diverse urban areas (Turner, 2016a). Literature consistently reports poorer outcomes for Black youth-in-care in the areas of education (Goodman & Johnson, 2017; Turner, 2016a). This article explores how responsive the Assessment and Action Record (AAR) documentation is to the educational needs of Ontario’s Black youth-in-care.

In 2009, the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS, 2009) reported that a mere 20% of youth-in-care (ethnoracial background unspecified) expected their highest educational achievement to be high school, while only 19% anticipated graduating from post-secondary. In 2012, Ontario youth-in-care graduation rates were at 44% compared to provincial rates of 82% (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). While much of the existing research has examined the prevalence of racial disproportionality and/or outcomes among youth-in-care (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2018), we argue that an overlooked aspect is the assessment tools themselves and how they are operationalized in practice by child welfare workers to assess, monitor, and evaluate outcomes of youth-in-care.

Informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), anti-Black racism (ABR), and United Nations (UN) definitions of human rights as guiding theoretical frameworks, we critically reviewed three distinct but interconnected sources of data: 1) the most recent version of the AAR, referenced as the AAR-C2-2016 (ages 10 and up), its user manual, and literature related to Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) and the AAR; 2) scholarly literature on the wellbeing of Ontario Black youth-in-care and educational achievement; and 3) policy and agency documents concerning how Black youth-in-care fare with respect to education. The objective of our critical review is to better

understand the limitations and possibilities of the AAR-C2-2016 in meeting the educational needs of Black youth-in-care. Although such standardized tools are used by child welfare agencies to serve a broad spectrum of young people in care, our study findings suggest that these universalized (i.e., race-neutral) approaches are limited in meeting the educational needs of Black youth-in-care. This is problematic given the racial disparities that have been identified in the extant literature (OHRC, 2018; Turner, 2016a). We conclude that information collected in the AAR can be better used to achieve and improve outcomes for Black youth-in-care.

Overview: History and Purpose of the OnLAC AAR

The Looking After Children (LAC) initiative began in England and Wales in the late 1980s and early 1990s to improve the quality of the ‘corporate’ or substitute parenting provided by child welfare organizations to young people in out-of-home care, and to monitor the young people’s progress on an annual basis (Flynn et al., 2004). The LAC model was brought to Canada in the mid-1990s and piloted by different provincial jurisdictions to gather information on children-in-care (Lemay & Ghazal, 2007). In 2006, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty mandated the OnLAC, using the AAR. Currently, the AAR is used by Ontario Children Aid’s Societies (CAS) and other child welfare institutions around the globe as a metric to measure seven dimensions of health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development, self-care skills and transitions. In 2016, an eighth domain, developmental assets, was added to the AAR. The standardized multi-item measures in the developmental assets domain are often one of the best predictors of AAR outcomes, such as education.

As stated in the AAR-C2-2016 user’s manual by Miller et al. (2017), the main purposes of the AAR are twofold: To provide information needed for planning the young person’s services for the coming year and revising the plan of care; and to assess the young person’s progress over the last year in its eight dimensions. The AAR acts as a conversational interview to include the young person (for ages 10 and up), the caregiver, and the worker in the assessment process. The young person

thus has their voice heard in the planning and monitoring of services and developmental outcomes. AAR documents, available both in English and French, assess the following age groups: 0-11 months, 12-23 months, 24-35 months, 3-5 years, 6-9 years, 10-12 years, 13-15 years, 16-17 years, and 18+ years.

Throughout this paper, we focus on the education dimension. The complexities faced by Black youth-in-care demands critical examination of how the assessment of children’s needs support (or do not support) this subpopulation being cared for by CAS in Ontario. This area has attracted relatively little scholarly attention. The uniqueness of this article is that it centres race in the discussions of the child welfare AAR documentation for youth-in-care. Well thought-out supports for Black youth-in-care (and their families) are needed to ensure their full and equal participation in Canadian society (Turner, 2016a, 2016b; Turner et al., 2020). Although Ontario is the focus of the study reported on in this article, the insights gleaned from this article are relevant for comparable national and international jurisdictions that use AAR documentation.

Background

To set the context, in 2014, the United Nations (UN) initiated the International Decade of People of African Descent (2015-2024) with the theme, People of African descent: recognition, justice, and development. The premised ideals of recognition, justice, and development are important because they call for the full enjoyment of human rights—including economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights—for people of African descent, and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society (UN, 2014). On January 30, 2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced official federal recognition and commitment to the International Decade of People of African Descent (Government of Canada, 2019). Prior to this official recognition, Canada also committed to the Convention of the Rights of Children in 1990 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 1989). The Convention has 54 separate articles pertaining to the rights of children, but we emphasize Articles 28 and 29 that explicitly refer to education.

As a signatory, Canada is required to submit reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the measures taken to uphold its obligations under the Convention. Based on the 2012 report submitted by Canada, the Committee outlined a series of main areas of concern and recommendations in relation to Black youth-in-care and/or education (OHCHR, 2012). For example, the Committee stressed the urgency of measures to address the significant overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black children in the criminal justice system and out-of-home care (often outside of their communities); and providing appropriate assistance to support disadvantaged families with child-rearing, as well as educational opportunities for pregnant girls and teenage mothers (OHCHR, 2012). Canada’s response to these concluding observations was submitted in a report to the Committee in 2020 (OHCHR, 2020). Notably, the Canadian government acknowledged the unique challenges that African-Canadians face and has committed to learning more about ABR experiences through research and data collection (Office of the Prime Minister, 2018), processes that have also permeated to the provincial and local levels.

At the provincial level, former Premier Kathleen Wynne released Ontario’s 3-year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan in 2017 (Government of Ontario, 2017a). Consequently, Ontario mandated race-based data collection to be implemented in the justice, education, and child welfare sectors to identify and monitor racial inequities (Government of Ontario, 2018). Under this strategy, Ontario’s ABR strategy was released with the aim of reducing: the overrepresentation of Black youth within the child welfare system; the achievement gaps between Black students and all other students within the publicly-funded education system; and the disproportionate numbers of Black males involved in justice systems (Government of Ontario, 2017b; Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020). Additionally, the province has made the following investments (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020, pp. 10–12): 1) Children’s Aid Society of Toronto (CAST) received \$300,000 to deliver sessions dedicated to increase awareness of ABR biases and training to their staff; 2) \$650,000 to support One Vision, One Voice (OVOV), “a community-led project that supports the delivery of culturally relevant programs and services and

addresses disparities in experiences and outcomes faced by African-Canadian and Black children, youth and families in the child welfare system”; and 3) Launching the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, a four-year commitment of \$47 million to support Black children, youth, and families (Government of Ontario, 2017b). All these initiatives indicate the intention to address some of the lingering problems regarding the racial tensions in the province of Ontario and beyond.

This background information contextualizes the increasing attention to issues affecting persons of African descent and ABR at the international, national, provincial, and local levels. The UN human rights framework draws attention to the equal enjoyment of human rights for all, including people of African descent. While at the very least these international instruments addressing human rights and children’s rights aim to establish the basic conditions for children’s survival (Kikulwe & Swift, 2017), we recognize that human rights discourse is embedded in hegemonic Western thinking and its ideals of universality are problematic, including assumptions that all humans are to enjoy social, economic, and cultural rights (King, 2017). These assumptions ignore persistent systematic obstacles that treat Afro-descendant communities as inferior (Mollett, 2017), resulting in ABR. Given these critiques, we draw from theoretical perspectives of ABR and CRT to inform and guide our critical review and analysis.

Theoretical Perspective

According to Constance-Huggins (2012), CRT “is rooted in the perspective that racism is enduring and tightly woven into the fabric of society” (p. 7) since systems have worked together to create racial inequity through multiple policies and practices that exclude people of colour (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2000). CRT makes subtle forms of racism visible and advocates for change (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000). In applying CRT to the context of child welfare staff working with Black youth and their families in Canada, OVOV noted that systemic racism is embedded within organizational policies and practices and the culture of the Ontario child welfare system (Turner, 2016a). During an interview on

G98.7 FM, Toronto’s only Black-owned radio station, David Rivard, Chief Executive Officer of CAST, echoed concerns about a long legacy of oppression and systemic racism within child welfare in Canada (Monsebraaten & Contenta, 2017).

Systematic racism manifests itself in the overrepresentation of Black children and youth in Canada’s child welfare system. This research finding is also confirmed by the reports of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Children (OHCHR, 2012, 2020). Racism is also noted in the way Black families experience disparities through deficient services (e.g., lengthy stay in care when compared with their White counterparts) once they are involved with child welfare systems (Clarke et al., 2018; Contenta et al., 2015). The overrepresentation of Black families in child welfare and the disparities in their experience reflect a complex web of economic and societal factors including poverty, income inequality, geographic location, lack of access to resources, and discrimination (Kokaliari et al., 2019) and oversurveillance of racialized communities (Baldwin, 2018), all of which extend far beyond what occurs within child welfare.

Ontario has explored strategies to respond to racism. As a result, an important modification of the AAR-C2-2016 was made in response to the government’s mandated collection of race-based data in child welfare and other service sectors; all AARs completed from 2020 on include race-based data. This initiative is significant because of its focus on areas where Black youth and their families continue to experience disadvantages. However, it is not an achievement to celebrate yet, as there is a potential risk of obscuring practices of historical inequalities and continuities of injustice through a focus on the current situation only. In her seminal book *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, Maynard (2017) eloquently traced the country’s ongoing legacies of ABR inherent within institutional policies and practices deeply entrenched from slavery up to the present day and beyond that serve to surveil, criminalize, and punish Black lives in Canada.

Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) emphasized the need for a critical examination of the motivation behind the laws, policies, and practices enacted to eradicate racial

discrimination or provide remedies and redress for racial discrimination. This motivation is also central to the work of Derrick Bell, a legal scholar and proponent of CRT who described interest convergence, the idea that López (2003) defined as institutions advancing racialized persons interests only when it promotes the self-interests of Whites. In her antiracism work, Ahmed, (2006) contended that it is not uncommon for the racial equality materials, documents, and policies used by institutions to acknowledge the existence of racism while masking the very inequalities embedded within the system. Some initiative purportedly directed at racial equality represent a way for institutions to perform equality and maintain an image of justice without making substantive changes to the underlying sources of injustice. Ahmed (2006) concluded that work in the field of diversity, inclusion, and equality is often about changing perceptions about White dominance, rather than changing the status quo.

Methods

This article critically analyzes the AAR against relevant academic and select practice/policy (grey) literature to the identify capacities and gaps of the tool and its responsiveness when supporting Black youth-in-care. In particular, we argue that universalized assessment tools that are seemingly race-neutral reflect inherent biases in the ways that information is collected about racialized individuals. Our goal in this paper is to discuss the limitations and possibilities of the AAR in serving the needs of Black youth-in-care informed by the intersections of CRT, ABR, and UN definitions of human rights.

The approach that we used in our critical review was to analyze three distinct but interconnected sources of data that we describe in three phases. First, we analyzed the AAR-C2-2016 (for children 10 years and up) and its user manual, as well as scholarly literature related to the OnLAC and AAR. Secondly, we searched for literature on the wellbeing of Ontario's Black youth-in-care in the areas of education. The third phase examined policy and agency documents concerning how these youth are faring academically.

Our search strategy and analytical approach was guided by the following question: How is OnLAC and AAR documentation supporting (and failing to support) Black youth-in-care in Ontario, Canada in the areas of education? The key terms used either alone or in combination for phase one were: "(Ontario) Looking After Children"/ (On)LAC, "Assessment and Action Record"/ AAR. Phase two included: Black/ African/ Caribbean", "child/youth-in-care" / "foster care"/ "child welfare"/ "child protection", and education/ school/ academ*." Our search included peer-reviewed literature and policy or agency documents published since 1990, as these coincided with the timeframe when the LAC was adopted in Canada and also when the nation-state became a signatory to the UNCRC. Initially, we limited our search to Ontario but when it yielded limited results, we expanded our search to the broader Canadian context. We excluded sources published before 1990 outside of Canada, as well as dissertations/theses, and books/book chapters.

For the first two phases, we searched the following major research databases: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ProQuest), Social Services Abstracts (ProQuest), Social Work Abstracts (OVID), and APA PsycInfo (OVID). For phase three, we included grey literature that recognizes policy or agency-level knowledge in the daily practices of workers and community-based organizations that serve Black youth and their families. We also sought recommendations from key informants that work in partnership with CAS to provide insights on relevant sources that are used at the ground-level to inform the end user's knowledge. This approach helped to better understand the localized context and identify gaps in evidence produced in academic journals and those being used in agency practices, particularly at the frontlines with service users.

Limitations

A major limitation is that we may have missed important information due to the parameters of our search strategy methods. As this study is based on a critical review of the AAR tool and secondary literature, our primary purpose while reviewing these sources was to critique it through a CRT lens rather than conduct a

comprehensive search. Another limitation is that the voices and experiences of Black youth-in-care and their families, workers, and caregivers are not included. This is an area that warrants further research. We would like to note that the authors of this study are currently conducting research in this area to help fill this gap, and encourage others to do so as well.

Findings

In this section, we present critical issues that emerged from our review and analysis of the AAR tool itself as well as scholarly literature (as outlined in our three phases). We describe content from the AAR, such as the types of questions asked and information garnered related to education. This information is juxtaposed against relevant literature to identify the capacities and gaps of the AAR and its utilization when supporting Black youth-in-care.

AAR and Education: Tool Requirements

With respect to the AAR dimension of education, the quantity of questions and information is quite extensive as it requires the worker, caregiver and youth to engage in discussions about multiple factors including the type of school attended by the child; grade level; changes in schools; learning-related difficulties (e.g. ADHD, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder); Individual Education Plan (IEP); tutoring outside of school; reading and math performances; and savings for higher education. Additionally, key components are included in the new developmental assets section of the AAR, which can be used to predict outcomes for youth in areas such as education. This added domain can be used to evaluate the youth's attitudes towards school and learning in general.

There are compelling reasons for examining dimensions of education because academic achievement is a foundation for success in other areas (Kovarikova, 2017). Moreover, factors such as lack of schooling and being in care are predictors of poor outcomes for children including poverty, homelessness, and criminal activity (Roos et al., 2014; Youth Without Shelter, n.d.). In a study

focused on Indigenous peoples in Canada, Alberton and colleagues (2020) found that educational achievement reduced the risk of homelessness. While the sample population of that study is focused on Indigenous peoples, the findings have relevance to other marginalized populations including Black youth-in-care.

Identified Gaps

While AAR educational measures target key learning areas for youth, gaps remain in our understanding of the academic success of Black youth, particularly those with child welfare involvement. By having standardized checkbox measures with little designated space for comments or elaboration of responses generated during the conversational interview, we argue that these metrics can be considered narrowly defined in the sense that they fail to adequately assess the lived experiences of Black youth-in-care. The link between information recorded through the utilization of the AAR cannot be viewed as separate or disconnected from the structural struggles that Black youth-in-care face. In its current use, AAR documentation will not contribute to dismantling systemic racism if these metrics do not examine the disadvantages encountered by Black youth as a result of their racialized identities and family backgrounds.

Within the Canadian context, scholars like James (2015) have emphasized that the needs of Black students must be prioritized within school settings as a matter of course, not just when problems arise. Multiple intersecting academic barriers impact Black students who face particular challenges, including low high school graduations and high suspension and expulsion rates, as well as being tracked into applied and special education programs (James & Turner, 2017). Black students experience a sense of un-belonging in schools because of differential treatment from educators, disinterest in Black students by teachers, favouritism towards non-Black students, and negative assumptions of Black students' academic abilities (James & Turner, 2017). Educational needs to be a priority in child welfare work as entrusted state carers work with Black youth on a daily basis. A report by the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2019) noted that Black youth-in-care need more transitional supports to help them move

from elementary school to middle school to high school and to post-secondary.

In Ontario public school systems, it is not uncommon for Black youth to have IEPs (Turner et al., 2020). According to Ontario's Ministry of Education, IEPs are used to identify a student's specific learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate accommodations, program modifications, and/or alternative programs as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies (Ministry of Education, 2004). However, some scholars in Canada have critiqued IEPs for being limited academic tools that are sometimes used to identify marginalized children (Brackenreed, 2004), some of whom may not even have any form of learning challenges. The modifications in an IEP imply that curricular expectations for students are downgraded (Ministry of Education, 2004). Salient examples include reduced assignments and using the same student's assignment for multiple classes (Mitchell, 2010). At best, these IEP programs may keep at risk students from falling further behind their peers, but even this intervention is limited. While there is relatively limited Canadian research, pioneering work conducted by Slavin and Madden (1989) in the US indicated that for many years, special education pullout/alternative programs have received criticism on the grounds that they provide instruction that is poorly integrated with students' regular classroom instruction, disrupt students' regular instruction, and label students.

Practice Dilemmas for Child Welfare Workers

Kufeldt and colleagues (2000, 2006) emphasized the need to focus on the educational goals of children in care by all professionals involved. Kufeldt et al. (2000) stated, "[t]here are indications in the literature that educational needs are not only low priority but may be affected by low expectations of children in care" (pp. 31–32). Research by Anucha et al. (2017) has recommended that stopping the silencing and willful blindness toward Black students' realities within the educational system is a key step towards racial equality. Of relevance to child welfare workers, these authors also noted the need to expand Black youth's notions of what is possible in their education and careers to tackle the structural violence of

low expectations for what Black youth's capabilities (Anucha et al., 2017). A professional culture in social work that simply requires documentation and record-keeping can limit workers from prioritizing and advancing youth's potential and what is possible for youth-in-care in particular.

In practice, the inability to apply the AAR information with the understanding of the broader context of race and racism can perpetuate the image of a poor Black student. In their work with the Ontario provincial advocate office, Kovarikova (2017) noted that personal characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, and abilities can undermine one's academic and career trajectories. In their discussions on African-American learners, Slavin and Madden (1989) maintained that students are frequently assessed and regrouped based on these characteristics. Altogether, these school practices have negative impacts on Black students including school dropout and pushout (James & Turner, 2017), which are further exacerbated for students that fall within intersecting marginalized identities, as is the case for Black students in care. Academic precarity can lead some students to poor outcomes including homelessness, early pregnancies, mental health issues, and substance abuse problems (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). As a result, Black students are held accountable for failings individually, even as the origin of their challenges are systemic. Clandfield (2014) concluded that these educational barriers repeat cycles of class, racial, and gender disadvantage, as well as discrimination.

Discussion

Throughout this paper, we have problematized the AAR assessment tools that are being used to monitor Black youth within the child welfare system, drawing attention to some of its inherent flaws. We argue that despite its intentions to assess, monitor, and improve outcomes for youth-in-care, standardized tools such as the AAR reflect a seemingly race-neutral approach towards youth-in-care that is actually a disservice to Black and other racialized subpopulations and their unique needs.

This argument is supported by existing literature (Knight & Caveney, 1998; Mohamud et al., 2021) that suggests

that standardized measures operationalized as checklists and seemingly neutral documents used to assess and monitor service delivery and outcomes of youth-in-care are limited in achieving their intended purposes, particularly for those from marginalized or racialized backgrounds. The utilization of such neutral documents are not fair where stark imbalances exist (Knight & Caveney, 1998). The imbalances are entrenched where structural inequities of ABR exist and manifest, including down to the daily practices of frontline workers with their clients. In their analysis of larger structural and historical contexts that shapes the opportunities and constraints for Black families living in Ontario, Mohamud et al. (2021) situated child welfare in a nexus of anti-Black policy and structures to argue that the cumulative burden of navigating and contending with larger systemic forces leave Black families vulnerable to a relatively low threshold for reporting to local child welfare agencies maltreatment concerns and risk of harm. Importantly, the authors argued that seemingly race-neutral eligibility criteria embedded within Ontario child welfare results in disproportionate reporting of Black families (Mohamud et al., 2021).

The AAR seems to reflect implicit biases that have a myopic take on how Black youth-in-care are assessed and monitored based on mainstream or dominant White standards and norms. Additionally, workers may lack the capacities and resources required for proper implementation of the AAR tool as it was originally intended due to institutional barriers such as time constraints, large caseloads, and competing priorities. This is further exacerbated by implicit and explicit biases in the daily practices of CAS workers and agencies who may not have adequate knowledge and training to support Black youth-in-care (Cénat et al., 2020). For example, workers may lack an acknowledgement and exploration of intersectionality and other crucial issues concerning youth-in-care, which creates blind spots that can cause harm. These issues include gender, race, class, and disability, along with the under-resourcing of family support, foster care and residential care (Clarke, 2011; Clarke et al., 2018). Misunderstandings regarding the cultural or racial practices of Black families living in Canada stemming from implicit biases can consequently lead to encounters with child protection/welfare

systems, particularly if the workers do not share a similar social identity with their clients (Bergen & Abji, 2020; Clarke, 2011; Mohamud et al., 2021; Rambally, 1995).

Implications for Policy and Practice

We offer recommendations to improve the utilization of the AAR terms of practice, policy, research, and education to better support the needs of Black children and youth-in-care so that they can achieve better outcomes with respect to education to enable them to participate more fully in society. To our knowledge, there are no studies that explicitly consider the unique outcomes of Black children and youth-in-care based on OnLAC AAR data. This is likely in part due to the fact that collecting information on race was mandated only in 2020; therefore, literature may not yet be published or available. Nevertheless, this gap is important to address through research, especially given that literature on the wellbeing of Black youth-in-care in Ontario suggests that outcomes in the areas of education are problematic.

The AAR affords workers with an instrument to focus on the education of youth-in-care by tracking school changes and learning difficulties, as well as reading and math performance. Although CRT may not offer a practical application of how child welfare workers may use AARs, its importance lies in the conceptual understanding it offers that standardized documentation in child welfare creates blind spots for recognizing and acting on the challenges faced by Black youth-in-care, and reject that Black families are differently situated with regard to racial relations in Canada. This insight is incredibly important because so often, discussions focus on the overt actions that relate to systemic racism. While necessary, covert or subtle forms of inequities that can occur to place Black youth at a disadvantage deserve to be illuminated. The collection of data through existing mandatory AAR should be at the centre of the child welfare debate to understand the multilayered social forces (i.e., race, age, living in foster care) that structurally limit Black youth and others in the areas of education. This can surface in the ways that Black youth are labelled (such as through IEPs) and its compounded effects of this on their academic journeys.

The first recommendation is for agencies to contextualize the collection of race-based data through

the AAR, understanding that there are multiple intersecting barriers faced by Black youth and other marginalized groups that impact their academic success. Secondly, another important recommendation is to also consider the lack of documentation or information that is not being collected regarding Black and racialized youths' experiences within school and social settings. For example, within the AAR document, Black youth are not asked enough questions about their home lives, school lives, or anything in between and how that may be affecting their current situation. Documentation (or lack thereof) is crucial to the lives of vulnerable youth, as it has implications for their present and future.

OACAS (2009) noted a number of innovative practices being adopted by social work to support children in care along the dimension of education. Of relevance to education, OACAS noted there is need for increased use of Ontario Access Grants for Crown wards (wards of State), as well as for using volunteers to assist youth with college tours, applying for grants and bursaries to finance their university education (OACAS, 2009). While these are productive ideas for a subset of youth, many Black youth-in-care are not transitioning from high school to universities or colleges due to various institutional and structural barriers that need to be addressed, once identified in the AAR documentation.

Thirdly, social workers need to change the way they work with their clientele by viewing each youth as someone with the potential to do well academically no matter what their current educational standing is, and irrespective of the stereotypes used to judge them regarding their living situation. With regards to the education sector, in his blog entitled, *Systems Slavin* (2019) explained,

in educational innovation, we frequently talk as though individual variables are sufficient to improve student achievement... Any of these factors can be effective as part of a system of innovations, or useless or harmful without other aligned components... Separately, each of these factors is nowhere near as effective as all of them taken together in a coordinated system... The importance of systems explains why programs are so important. Programs invariably combine individual elements to attempt to improve student outcomes. (para. 3)

Multiple variables play a role and have an impact on a youth's academic achievement. Therefore, it is important to take the time to get to know the system in which the youth exists, along with the youth and their biological families personally, in order to develop a specialized and effective approach towards the youth's educational attainment. A thorough look at the multiplicity of systems impacting Black youth is needed. Including biological families in the completion of the AAR documentation also can be an additional resource to provide culturally responsive services, as (Hopps et al., 2002) described that Black families play a pivotal role in the nurturing, socialization, social functioning, competence, and successes of adolescents.

Conclusion

We applied CRT and a UN human rights framework to understand the responsiveness of the AAR to the academic needs of Black youth-in-care in Ontario. AAR documentation can be a place where social work identifies and challenges oppression for those who experience a continual negotiation of being Black and being in care. Within school contexts, racialized youth-in-care face a "double whammy stigma" (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 70). Black youth are forced to navigate an inequitable education system (James, 2015) and deal with family separation and potential loss of their identities (Mosher & Hewitt, 2018) while in care. As the number of Black youth-in-care increases in Ontario (Turner, 2016a), issues of race become of greater importance to issues of children's rights and their full and equal participation in the Canadian society. This approach is consistent with a model suggested by (Clarke et al., 2018) that centres ABR in Canadian institutions such as child welfare. The AAR recordings can be harmful if they are simply a collection of information on the key areas of a youth's life; however, they can be impactful if utilized by child welfare workers to deepen their understanding of what Pecora and Huston (2008) perceived of as the dilemma of ensuring placement stability, while at the same time helping youth achieve permanency in ways that meet their educational needs. Prioritizing the academic needs of Black youth-in-care departs from systemic ABR, and other oppressions that intersect and interlock to bring Black families to the

attention of child welfare authorities; ABR denies this population all kinds of services and programs that are fundamental to their social, cultural, and familial well-being and safety (Clarke et al., 2018). Conversations about educational challenges and opportunities can play a crucial role in countering the dominant narratives and negative perspectives meted out towards failing Black students bound up in the child welfare system.

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