

A Review of *#BlackInSchool* by Habiba Cooper Diallo

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#BlackInSchool reflects the firsthand lived experiences of Habiba Cooper Diallo as she navigates high school years interwoven with systemic racism, micro-aggressions, and discrimination of her as a Black female student in a Canadian education system. Diallo sheds light on her experiences through a number of journal entries from Grade 11 to Grade 12, which courageously and eloquently illustrate her interactions with classmates, teachers, administrators, and support staff that condoned pervasive and embedded systemic racism in the education system. She further dismantles systemic racism and fearlessly resists its malignant growth by using her voice to address the constant struggles she had with her teachers, vice principal, and support staff. In her memoir, she shares practical solutions that educators can use to provide an anti-racist environment. Throughout her journal entries, Diallo asks crucial questions that provoke educators and students to reflect on their practices, language, and communication for ways they may perpetuate discrimination and unjust learning spaces, especially for Black students.

As a Black parent and a graduate student, I am deeply interested in the author's insightful experiences as she navigated an unsafe space purported to be a space to educate, guide, and inspire students for better futures. I keenly acknowledge Diallo's exceptional ability to unearth taken-for-granted behaviors, language, attitudes, and thoughts that perpetuate systemic racism and counterattacks along with her recommendations for an inclusive and just society. I appreciate Diallo's opening for each journal entry where she highlights the content with motivational quotes from profound anti-racist activists such as Maya Angelou, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, bell hooks, Malala Yousafzai, and others. Also, she includes photos of herself and friends in some of the entries.

In Part 1, Diallo highlights the endless struggles of Black students in high school as they go through policing, brutality, and eroded humanity which is constantly under attack in presentations and assemblies—in particular the attacks on the Kony 2012 campaign (see Invisible Children, 2012). Diallo is asking critical questions about how schools can be safe and healthy places when the police coerce Black students away from education. How can Black students focus on their assignments when their humanity is being degraded and humiliated at the same time, their existence and images only represented negatively as those experiencing warfare, famine, and diseases? Diallo continues questioning the teachers' and school staff's accountability in the misrepresentation of Black bodies in classrooms. Diallo shares her emotional and spiritual struggle through her encounters with White students' distorted statements about Africa. Nonetheless, she acknowledges the support system she has established with her Black peers and her immersion in Reggae and Wassoulou dance to recharge her spirit and reconnect with her culture. Diallo concludes the first part by identifying multicultural and diverse ideologies as non-existent, rather the existence of a system embedded with the entanglements of each student and staff's thoughts and racial prejudices.

In Part 2, Diallo shares her encounter with White students hypersexualizing her cultural dance during the school's multicultural show preparations. She also shares overt interactions with her biology teacher and the terminology the teacher used that perpetuated racism and discrimination. Examples of her biology teacher's notions include that "light people cannot survive in Africa" (p. 35), and the "sickle cell has primarily been isolated to the continent of Africa, and

the descendants of Africa” (p. 37). Diallo unsettles the stereotypes of racialized communities by planning her presentations in a way that acts as resistance and offers alternate narratives. In this entry, she shares her French presentation that addresses racial profiling by the police and gives specific details of the two young French boys of Malian and Algerian descent, Bouna and Zyed, who were electrocuted on a transformer while being chased by the police. Instead of helping these young boys, the police failed to warn them of the danger they were in or to rescue them but left the boys to their deaths. She further clarifies that the term “Francophonie” not only pertains to White people and those of European descent, but the majority of the Francophonie are in Africa. Diallo is conceptualizing the legacies of Dr. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and re-imagining how their legacies can challenge today’s racist, anti-Black realities that alienate Black students in high school. She further critiques the school events that disregard the existence of Black students and neglect to address important racism issues. Diallo gives an example of her school celebrating "Happy Day!" instead of commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Racism. From her perspective, she believes that the school administration is neglecting its duty to the students as it lacks involvement in such crucial events that she and other Black students are experiencing daily inside and outside of the classroom. One of her constant struggles was with teachers invasively and antagonistically questioning her elevator use. Diallo expresses her frustrations with her teachers inquiring about her agency using the school elevator and believes the incidents indicate racial micro-aggression. However, she proudly shares how each elevator incident made her a stronger person, more aware of herself, her rights and position, and society. Diallo sheds light on the unfortunate incident which happened to the Dalhousie's African Student Association's members at the Grad house, where they were treated with disrespect and intimidation, dehumanizing their culture and presence. However, the incident brought positive change to the Dalhousie community as students were mandated to participate in anti-racism training sessions as part of orientation week. Diallo questions the teachers' and administrators' responsibilities. She asks critical questions such as who is accountable to Black students? Who is responsible for her human rights, her dignity, and her security of person? Why are her basic human rights eroded by the very institution that is meant to build her confidence, educate her, and provide her with a quality education? Diallo bravely sheds light on the obscure history of obstetric fistula in North America by focusing on the story of Anarcha, an African American slave who developed an obstetric fistula. Due to this health problem, Anarcha was sold to a gynecologist, Dr. Marion Sims and forcibly performed over 30 fistula surgeries on Anarcha without anesthesia (which was available at the time). Anarcha was cured eventually. To this day, a large number of fistula patients are Black women in Africa, and Diallo is committed to raising awareness through the organization she founded, the Women’s Health Organization International (WHOI). Diallo concludes Part 2 with an email to the Minister, outlining her experiences as an International Baccalaureate (IB) student, indicating how her school lacks the necessary tools to engage multiculturalism and suggests three key strategies: (a) anti-racism training for staff and administrators, (b) development of critical tools and strategies to engage students of non-White backgrounds, and (c) review of the core curriculum by experts in epistemological racism.

In Part 3, Diallo opens her chapter by sharing her International Baccalaureate graduation experience, proudly wearing her Kente sash to symbolize her difference, Blackness, and Africanness. Even though she was emotional from missing her father, Diallo was surrounded by her family and friends and received the Higher-Level French Award. She further shares her preparations for prom with her friends, as well as graduation rehearsals. Amid her graduation experience, Diallo feels discontent because of the lack of diversity in her school that has been

impactful on her everyday learning experience. In this entry, Diallo reflects on her middle school where she began the IB program in seventh grade. She appreciates the small community that offered great opportunities to bond with teachers and receive individualized feedback. Now, in eighth grade, she shares the great joy of having a Black teacher, describing her as going above and beyond her call of duty. She continues sharing her learning experiences as refreshing and invigorating. However, high school changed everything. Diallo's perspective indicates that high school fosters a sense of disunion among students by labeling IB students as the academic elite, naturally creating division between IB students and non-IB students. Diallo graduates from Grade 12 feeling fatigued, relieved, and anticipating a new beginning—a relief from the elite. In this entry, Diallo explains wisely how Black youth channel their human ingenuity into innovative ventures to improve their economic standing. Further, Diallo critiques the pervasiveness of whitewashing and the racism that pervades media, advertising, education, and social culture and the critical paradigm shift needed by White people in respecting and viewing Black people through a positive lens. Diallo concludes the chapter by showing a photo of herself and her friend, Ntombi holding a rally in support of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old Black male from Ferguson, who was fatally shot by a White police officer on August 9, 2014.

In concluding her memoir, Diallo shares her bitter-sweet experiences in high school, highlighting the impediment of the education system to Black students' self-actualization and their full potential. At the same time, she shares the amazing opportunities and friendships formed over the years during high school. She urges Black students to use their voices, energy, and effort in taking a stand against systemic racism. Similarly, Diallo challenges White educators, administrators, curriculum consultants, and policymakers to design inclusive programs that are congruent with the experiences of Black people in Canada. Her last arguments point to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, reminding parents of Black students to safeguard the inclusion of these rights in the education system. Also, Diallo suggests filing a class action lawsuit to disclose any injustices to Black students on national and legal levels to fight against institutionalized racism.

Reference

Diallo, H. C. (2021). *#BlackInSchool*. University of Regina Press.

Invisible Children. (2012). *Kony 2012* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Y4MnpzG5Sqc>