“I didn’t want to be anything special. I just wanted to teach school”: A Case Study of Black Female Educators in Colchester, Ontario, 1960

Funke Aladejebi
York University

Funke Aladejebi, Department of History, York University aladeje@yorku.ca

Abstract: The story of School Section #11 (S.S. #11) stood as a sharp reminder of racial injustice and the black experience in Canada. Located in Essex County, Ontario, the separate school maintained a predominately black student attendance until 1965, when parents and school board members negotiated its eventual closure. As the location of the last racially segregated school in Ontario, Canada, S.S. #11 remained one of the many institutional forms of racial segregation in Canada. This paper endeavors to prove that national policies surrounding multiculturalism and human rights did not eradicate local practices of racial prejudice and discrimination. More importantly, I will argue two main points, first, that African Canadian action in Colchester stood as a microcosm of black activism throughout Canada. The second part of this paper will focus on S.S. #11’s black teachers who advocated equal education while holding paradoxical positions of compliance and resistance within the Colchester community. In advancing a case study on Colchester Township, this paper proposes to examine fragmented province-wide educational standards and problematic race relations in Colchester as indicative of lived experiences in various Canadian communities. Ultimately, this research will speak about subtle nuances in the Canadian educational system that tended to remove blacks as Canadian citizens and active historical agents.

For African Canadians in the post-WWII era, Canada remained a paradoxical nation, incorporating concepts of inclusion and exclusion into its state policy. The desire of mainstream Canadian policy makers to create national programs often conflicted with the growing need for local autonomy and control. By the 1940s, it seemed that Ontario was truly moving towards egalitarianism with the passage of laws such as the Racial Discrimination Act (1944) which prohibited the publication or broadcast of anything discriminatory based on race or creed. Four years later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed and Canada moved towards connecting international movements with its domestic policy. By the 1950s, several provinces had passed laws against discrimination in employment, accommodation, and public facilities. As part of the provincial Human Rights codes, Ontario passed the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1951 and later the Fair Accommodation Practices Act in 1954. While national
programs broadly encouraged human rights and equality, they did so without establishing effective ways to implement these practices on a local level. Conversely, across the border in the United States, African Americans fought for desegregation and equality on the global stage. As the Civil Rights Movement grew, it also came under the scrutiny of public opinion, some of which came from Canada. Events in the U.S. highlighted racial consciousness in Canada and encouraged African Canadians to continue active resistance within their local communities.

It is amidst this international and local backdrop that teachers and parents of the last racially segregated school, School Section #11 in Colchester, Ontario negotiated its eventual closure and transition into an integrated public school system. Employing national discourses surrounding Human Rights, African Canadians criticized homegrown human rights violations and contested notions of segregation within the nation. Struggling to form a collective consciousness, African Canadians developed their critique of racial injustice on a much smaller and more fragmented scale than their American counterparts. This was the result of varying rural and urban populations across the provinces, as well as varying degrees of discrimination and prejudice based on local racial climates.

Despite regional differences, the story of School Section #11 (S.S. #11) stood as a sharp reminder of racial injustice and the black experience in Canada. Located in Essex County, Ontario, the separate school maintained a predominately black student demographic until 1965, when parents and school board members negotiated its eventual closure. As the location of the last racially segregated school in Ontario, Canada, S.S. #11 remained one of the many institutional forms of racial segregation in Canada. In this paper, I argue two things. First, that African Canadian action in Colchester stood as a small but powerful representation of black activism throughout Canada. The push from community members towards integration laid bare the fragmented nature of province-wide educational standards in Ontario and exposed the problematic character of race relations in the Canadian landscape. The second focus of this discussion will highlight the work of S.S. #11’s black female teachers. These intriguing women worked to claim black rights to equal education. Yet they held paradoxical positions of compliance and resistance to racial injustice in the Colchester community. It is their complex ways of dealing with the mainstream school board that help us understand the diversity of black experiences in Canada. Further, the story of S.S. #11 revealed inconsistencies between a national policy that encouraged equality and local practices that advocated racial segregation.

Beginning with a letter sent on September 14, 1964, parents appealed to school board trustees for a change in the township’s schooling operations. Separate schooling had become entrenched in the community through the Separate School Act of 1850 which
permitted any group of five families or more to ask local public school trustees to establish separate schools for either Protestant, Roman Catholic or Coloured people. The act was supposed to promote individual choice in supporting schools, but in fact was used to force many black students into separate institutions.\(^1\) The 1964 letter would set in motion a major campaign to enforce integration in the Colchester community. Written by S.S. #11 parents, the letter was met with both negative and positive reactions from the residents of Colchester. Demonstrating their growing frustrations with the educational situation, the letter was a clear attempt to gain information and encourage action towards integration. The letter read, in part, “We, the undersigned residents of Colchester South, fix our signatures to this document out of deep concern for the future of our children attending this school under the miserable, segregated and intolerable situation found at S.S. #11.”\(^2\) In the hopes of drawing attention to separate school conditions, parents wanted to obtain information on arrangements pertaining to a newly proposed central school system. Parents had heard that a new integrated public school, Harrow Public School, was set to open in 1965 and amidst broken promises and ignored appeals, they feared that their children would once again be restricted from attending this newly developed school. It is during this period that the province also made plans for rural school consolidations across Ontario. Small rural schools were being closed across the province and replaced with schools large enough to offer diverse academic and vocational facilities.\(^3\) Black community members felt that they would be excluded from this consolidation process and remain in the current segregated and substandard schooling system. As such, they took a more active and direct stance on advocating for the inclusion of their children into the public school system.

Black community members were concerned that integration would never be fully accomplished since white students refused to attend S.S. #11. For many, integration encouraged equal education opportunities and acknowledged blacks as included members of society. They believed that without integration, blacks remained outside of mainstream society and were unable to obtain their rights as full Canadian citizens. Of major concern to the black community in Colchester was the fact that many white students were transported out of the area and discouraged from attending S.S. #11. According to a letter written by George F. McCurdy, Jr., president of the South Essex Citizenship Advancement Association (S.E.C.A.A.), the general consensus among the white community was that S.S. #11 was good enough for black children but not white children.\(^4\) While white ratepayers resided in the S.S. #11 area, only one white student had attended S.S. #11 in the previous thirty years. In fact, some white students would pass S.S. #11 to attend S.S. #4 which was a few kilometers further than the separate school.\(^5\) The fact that white students were transported out of the area compounded feelings of isolation and racial rejection among black ratepayers.
and dispelled the myth of Canada as a safe haven from the racial inequality.

The absence of white pupils in the school created a culture of separation that spoke of the problems of Ontario’s rural education system. Compounding these problems was the fact that S.S. #11 was unable to meet provincial standards surrounding adequate learning facilities, funding, and certified teaching personnel. S.S. #11 struggled with plumbing and toilet facilities, heating, teaching equipment, and learning space, all of which was highlighted with the news headline, “Rat Scampers Through Rubble in Yard Beside Dreary Buildings.” Despite provincial standards and regulations, the conditions at S.S. #11 displayed clear evidence that black students were being schooled in a substandard institution. Inferior schooling conditions meant that provincially sanctioned health requirements were not maintained. Parents adamantly complained about the toilet facilities in the school. In the brief issued to the school board, S.S. #11 parents stated that the Health Inspector condemned the school’s toilet system. Yet, upon regular school inspections by department representatives, nothing was done to repair the toilets. At the time, each school building had two chemical toilets that were supposed to be flushed out daily with water. However, it was clear that this was not done regularly. Parents reported that, “it has been observed that excreta is allowed to pile up in the two toilets provided, drawing swarms of flies within the area where the children are expected to learn and play.”

In the same report dated November 9th, 1964, parents explained that toilets were not flushed out until November 3rd, 1964, approximately two-and-a-half months after the school had opened for the year. Parents claimed, “the smell was so strong and noxious that some of the children became ill before the principal decided, belatedly, to move the children to an adjacent home where classes were continued in a fashion beyond our comprehension.”

Upon observing unsanitary toileting conditions at the school, it was clear that schooling conditions were inadequate and insufficient for the proper learning of any child. Furthermore, school board trustees did not intervene to ensure that proper health requirements were enforced. There is a strong likelihood that segregation discouraged board intervention, because blacks, seen as separate and unimportant, occupied spaces outside of mainstream concern. In this sense, enforcing proper health requirements in black separate schools was secondary to the maintenance of white common schools in the 1960s. Board trustees argued that some funding was allotted to the repair of the school; however, S.S. #11 parents made it clear that the school was in need of much more improvement.

The substandard conditions of S.S. #11 clearly indicated that the children and community of African Canadians in Colchester remained outside of mainstream educational initiatives. Unable to obtain the same education and adequate learning conditions that were given freely to whites, especially as Ontario reformed education in the 1950s and 1960s, some
black students in this area came to accept the realities of their substandard conditions. Compliance with this injustice was common since it was all the students and generations of black children had been exposed to. In an interview discussing S.S. #11, a black resident of the community revealed that forms of racial prejudice and isolation only encouraged feelings of subservience among many black students. Some felt that they could not move beyond their secondary status in society. In discussing the aspirations of blacks in the Colchester community, Rachel Stephenson (pseudonym) recognized how some blacks came to accept subservience. Stephenson explains, “There was ingrained prejudice, not racism. There was systemic thinking on both sides. While a lot of blacks in Harrow didn’t get past grade eight, they weren’t encouraged to continue either.”

Stephenson alludes to differences in prejudice and racism by indicating that in Colchester, judgments were made about blacks based on their race. Thus, prejudice was distinguished from racism in the sense that not all members of the black race possessed inferior characteristics, but a majority of them were judged on this basis. Stephenson’s distinction between racism and prejudice is indicative of how some African Canadians in the area were able to merge into mainstream society, become educated, and obtain employment, while others were kept isolated and bound by varying levels of racial prejudice. While Stephenson is able to make the distinction between prejudice and racism, in practical manifestations, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. These varying degrees of racial prejudice existed not only in Colchester Township, but were also present throughout the Canadian provinces. As a result of this variation, the treatment of blacks in Canada cannot be interpreted as a uniform experience.

Nonetheless, the busing of white children out of the school district, the disregard for maintaining mandated school requirements, and perceptions of subservience among blacks, only encouraged mistrust between black community members and white board trustees. For S.S. #11 parents, conditions in the school were a clear indication of the slow progress towards integration. Trying to repair the damaged relationship and open dialogue between board trustees and parents were S.S. #11’s female teachers.

Trying to bridge the gap between school board trustees and school parents were S.S. #11 teachers, Mrs. Beulah Cuzzens and Mrs. Hilda Dungy. Many parents and members of the Colchester community felt that these teachers were the redeeming factor of the segregated school. Their long history and perseverance through the turbulent times of the 1960s exemplified the importance of these African Canadian women to the Colchester community. These women stood out as community leaders within Colchester and worked to support communication between S.S. #11 parents and the local school board. At the time, teachers like Hilda Dungy and Beulah Cuzzens acted as activists committed to the project of “racial
uplift” and their community relationships moved beyond the bounds of segregated circumstances.

The fight for racial uplift did not come easily for these African Canadian women. It was a long and arduous road for equality and independence. At a celebration for her 82nd birthday, Mrs. Beulah Cuzzens discussed her life in Colchester as an African Canadian teacher. After graduating from high school in Chatham, Mrs. Cuzzens began her teacher’s training at a normal school in London. It was at this normal school, which served as a teachers college during the time, that Cuzzens met her future teaching partner, Hilda Dungy. Upon graduation, Cuzzens went to Essex County because as a “black girl [she] could only work at four schools.” Three of these schools were located in Kent County and the other one in Essex County. Discussing her early experiences in obtaining education, Cuzzens described an encounter with an unnamed doctor in Western Canada. Revealing racial indifference in Ontario, Cuzzens described her contact with this man: “My colour was different from his, my cultural background was different; I was brought up in a different environment. He cared not for my morals or my creed. I had to be like him, or I didn’t count.”

As a young teacher, Cuzzens soon discovered that teaching in African Canadian separate schools was particularly challenging. Cuzzens received her first teaching assignment at a separate school in Harwich Township, Kent County. She later obtained a position at S.S. #11 in Colchester in 1932, where she remained until its integration into the Harrow Public School in 1965. Cuzzens was the Principal of the S.S. #11 for fifteen years and was highly regarded by most parents in the community. Teaching at one of the only black schools in the area, Dungy and Cuzzens balanced teaching loads in order to educate the growing number of African Canadian students in the area. Upon coming to S.S. #11, Cuzzens and Dungy had to teach eight grades and seldom had time for lunch. According to Cuzzens, they taught spelling, arithmetic and reading everyday, and taught grammar and composition, writing and art, history and geography on alternate days. Cuzzens recalled that she rarely had more than ten minutes allotted to teaching an individual lesson.

As discussed earlier, S.S. #11 also faced challenges that plagued many one-room schoolhouses at the time such as attendance fluctuations, outdated teaching materials, and poorly heated and sustained school buildings. As such, Dungy and Cuzzens were not only...
challenged by teaching curriculum to various school aged children but also had to deal with the challenges of maintaining adequate educational facilities.

Despite these extreme hardships, Cuzzens was determined to aid her race by delivering quality education. For Cuzzens, teaching was a natural and necessary component in her life. In an interview with the Windsor Star, Cuzzens stated, “I didn’t want to be anything special. I just wanted to teach school.”13 According to Cuzzens, the education of African Canadian students came out of a commitment to her race. Greta Spencer (pseudonym), a long-standing resident in the Colchester community, recalled that, “Beulah Cuzzens didn’t have to teach in Colchester, she lived in Windsor but came to S.S. #11, showing her dedication to the children of the community.”14 In many instances, Cuzzens’ position as an educator created a sense of social responsibility based on her race and gender. She took difficult steps to ensure that students in her classroom could escape overt forms of racism and discrimination in the community. Similar to many female educators, Cuzzens incorporated her work as a teacher into a broader project of racial and economic justice as well as community uplift.15 It was this dedication that encouraged Cuzzens to take on other community activist projects in the area.

Despite gender and racial barriers, Cuzzens became an important figure in the Colchester community. By the 1950s, she was asked to join the Harrow Business and Professional Women’s Club, an integrated women’s group, and served as secretary, vice-president and president. In Windsor, she was an active member in the city’s community work, which included the Pivot and Hour-A-Day Studies Clubs in Windsor, Ontario.16 These clubs organized social and cultural events in the community, created scholarships for school students, and raised funds for local community members. Her work in Colchester also helped her to challenge the undercurrent of racism prevalent in the area. Cuzzens recollects her early experiences in the area. She explains, “Black people were not liked very well in Harrow in 1932. We could not eat in the restaurants. When the theater was built, we were not allowed admission. I visited the library and was well received, but it was not common practice.” The fact that Cuzzens was well received in the library may be an indication of her well respected position within the community. Her account also acknowledges the racial prejudice that many blacks underwent in the area. Despite these experiences, Cuzzens’ foremost focus was on the township’s positive future.

Upon integration in 1965, Cuzzens and Dungy were able to make the transition into the Ontario Public School System. Both women became instructors at Harrow Public School for several years and their efforts were well respected among both white and black members of the community. The community work that both Dungy and Cuzzens participated in represented a
type of unpaid female labour that was fundamental to the development of the Colchester community. Not only did these women view the importance of education as a process by which to enrich their community, but they also understood their role as one that was meant to establish a set of separate networks of support to combat racism and discrimination in their local district. As African Canadian women who dealt with mainstream notions of racial inequality, black female educators often extended notions of education and self-help beyond the classroom. This recognition of racial prejudice and discrimination made black women educators constantly aware that their position in the professional sphere was connected to the progress of blacks as a group.

Even though Mrs. Beulah Cuzzens and Mrs. Hilda Dungy were social activists, they nevertheless held precarious positions in the Colchester community and were both revered and ostracized for their stance in the S.S. #11 controversy. While these teachers encouraged educational progress within the segregated system, they exemplified the fact that the black community was not homogenous and could be divided on many issues. Cuzzens and Dungy chose to forge positive relationships with the newly elected school board, which put them at odds with many black parents. In the *Windsor Star* on November 10, 1964, Principal Beulah Cuzzens and Hilda Dungy were reported to have stated that allegations of discrimination towards whites had emerged from mistrust on the part of the black community. Mrs. Cuzzens hints at feelings that “self-appointed black leaders” like George F. McCurdy, Jr., president of the S.E.C.A.A., came from outside the community and caused divisions between the black and white residents. Siding with the school board trustees meant that Cuzzens and Dungy were disliked by many members of their own race. It is difficult to determine why Cuzzens and Dungy sided with the
school board. They may have believed that change was fast approaching and that all they needed to do was wait. They also may have felt that siding with the school board was the best way of encouraging change rather than direct agitation. There was also the possibility that siding with the school board would ease their transition into the integrated school system. In any case, their stance ostracized them from many in the very community they were trying to help.

Tensions between community members and the teachers only elevated tensions within the classroom. On January 7, 1965, still awaiting full integration, Mrs. Cuzzens and Mrs. Dungy met with school board officials and local parents to discuss problems of discipline at S.S. #11. In particular, Mrs. Cuzzens cited discipline problems with several students in her classroom. The teachers believed that these discipline problems stemmed from home environments. Believing that some black parents were unhappy with the stance that she and Dungy had taken months before to support the school board, Cuzzens explained that in the previous two months, she had received very poor cooperation from the children. Mr. Sellick, a member of the school board, reiterated this point by explaining, “Mrs. Cuzzens seems to have the feeling that the parents are not with her.” Mr. Woodbridge, an area trustee, also agreed with Cuzzens’ beliefs and questioned whether feelings of isolation stemmed from the controversy surrounding S.S. #11 earlier that year.

In many ways, the position taken by Cuzzens and Dungy reveal the multiplicity of struggles experienced by black female educators. The standpoint of these teachers reflects the complex and contradictory ways in which black women interpreted and reinterpreted their roles within the black community and mainstream educational institutions. Cuzzens and Dungy were aware of the mainstream institutional notions of black education, but also understood their position as minority women. Patricia Hill Collins reflects on this difficult position when she discusses black women as outsiders within who have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant groups’ actions and ideologies. As such, Cuzzens and Dungy’s position on the S.S. #11 case can be understood as a means of sustaining and recreating black cultural survival. It is possible that had Cuzzens and Dungy chose not to support the school board, they may not have been included in the integration process and black children would have still faced challenges of isolation and separation within the integrated school system. They also would have had to survive and face the new school system without the possibility of Cuzzens and Dungy’s intervention. The presence of these women may have made the transition into a new school structure easier for the children. Given their multiple, fluid and complex identities, one can see the ways in which black female educators migrated through conceptions of race, class and gender in order to create their position as community leaders.
It is important not to discount the fact that Cuzzens and Dungy also made
decisions based on their professional
careers. For Hilda Dungy and Beulah
Cuzzens, teaching was an important part
of who they were. These teachers were
ordinary women making difficult
decisions in challenging times. Already
limited by the types of jobs available for
black women, Cuzzens and Dungy may
have also viewed the transition into the
public school system as a way to ensure
their careers and financial stability.
Annette Henry writes of the instability of
the job market for black female
educators: “Without a secure
infrastructure, Black schools were not as
financially stable as White schools; thus,
Black teachers were more transient,
often teaching in a number of schools
during a teaching career.”
Teaching at
the integrated school would have
allowed Cuzzens and Dungy to display
their professional training as well as
secure salaries that might give them
more status than they already had within
their community. Furthermore, it can
also be argued that having achieved
various professional and educational
successes, Dungy and Cuzzens were in
different class categories from many of
the children and parents in their
community. Therefore, it is possible that
they identified more closely with school
board trustees. In an interview, Rachel
Stephenson, whose niece attended S.S.
#11 and whose father was a member of
S.E.C.A.A., reported that there may have
been elements of classism creating
divisions between the teachers and
parents. Stephenson claimed that, “Some
blacks thought that she [Hilda Dungy]
betrayed the community for a position
with the board. But they didn’t feel that
way about Beulah Cuzzens.”
Given
their enhanced socioeconomic status as
trained professionals, Dungy and
Cuzzens’ decision to side with the school
board can also be interpreted as a
testament of their class difference and
distance from other members in their
community. Dungy and Cuzzens’ unique
positions as leaders within the
community often meant that the
responsibilities that held ideals of race as
primarily important relegated issues of
gender and class to secondary
importance. Unable to navigate through
these conceptions as separate from one
another, however, Cuzzens and Dungy
took the risk of isolating themselves
from their community in hopes of
obtaining equality through integration.

Soon after, the board and
S.E.C.A.A. came to an agreement based
on the November 1964 brief and
attached a series of resolutions that
would be enacted before the integrated
Harrow Public School was opened. In a
compromising set of resolutions, the
school board and S.E.C.A.A. recognized
that the black students had suffered from
the long-term segregation. The school
board agreed to begin integrating Grade
One students from S.S. #11 beginning
January 1965 and to work on improving
the physical conditions that existed in
the school. S.E.C.A.A. agreed to promote
family-teacher consultations and assist
with the cooperation of children on
school property. The newly combined
school board was scheduled to take
office on January 1, 1965 and begin the
administrative process of building a 12-
room public school for Colchester South
students. Eventually, Harrow Public School boasted one of the most modern school systems in the surrounding county areas, one that included black children. Had it not been for the persistence of African Canadian parents and the compromise of school board members, the move towards change may have occurred even later than 1965. In her family genealogy, Hilda Dungy explains, “It is gratifying to have lived to see the time when our young people are receiving excellent education and positions in accord with their abilities.”

The story of S.S. #11 demonstrates how African Canadians implanted themselves into the Canadian narrative. Employing the language of human rights and equality, African Canadians moved themselves from a position of isolation into one of social and political concern. The measures taken by the parents and teachers reflect an ongoing black legacy in Canada. As community builders, black women incorporated notions of racial uplift in order to set up schools, create day programs, and protest social inequalities. In many ways, African Canadians felt that education was a major factor in uplifting the race and moving towards self-sufficiency. Black women such as Beulah Cuzzens and Hilda Dungy took an active role in the education of young black children. Their actions and activism give us insight into the complexities of the black experience in North America. These educators worked against white notions of racial inferiority to prove that blacks were deserving of equality. With concerns ranging from family, employment, education, and politics, black women educators truly displayed that education extended beyond the classroom. For many black women, education was inextricably tied to racial betterment. The position of women like Dungy and Cuzzens also reveals the contradictory and complicated ways in which African Canadians viewed themselves and their local environments. Having to position themselves through complex ideals of race, class, gender and professionalization, these female teachers were both respected and, for a short time period, ostracized by the African Canadian community. Through aggressive advocacy and changing national policies, parents and teachers of S.S. #11 students were able to encourage the eventual closure of the last segregated school in Ontario in 1965.

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