Canary Songs: A Study of the Relationship of

Black Youth to Winnipeg Schools

by

Michelle Joanne Jean-Paul

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Michelle Joanne Jean-Paul

Masters of Education

Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology Department
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Abstract

This thesis examines the narratives of Black youth and their parents about their experiences in Winnipeg schools. The study looks at aspects of academic achievement and school engagement. The study explores similar research based in Eastern Canada and the United States. Youth and parents were interviewed individually as a way of cross referencing the lived experiences of the young people involved in the study. In the paper, it is argued that Black youth in Winnipeg may feel disconnected to school and schooling because they cannot attach to the curriculum, they cannot attach to their teachers, and/or they cannot attach to their peer groups. The author explores the factors that influence the engagement and achievement of Black youth. The paper concludes by pointing out the implications of these stories on the structure of schooling and the practice of educators.

Acknowledgments

As I sat down to put pen to paper in my first earnest attempt at completing this monster of a project, the words of Audre Lorde, as cited in one of the many texts I consulted along this journey, came to my mind.

"When I dare to be powerful – to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid".

With the support of my family, friends, and my thesis committee (Dr. John Wiens, Dr. Laara Fitznor and Dr. Gary Babiuk), I have done my best to put my fears – of being judged, of having the stories I am telling contested, of not doing the participants of this study justice, of not coming across as academic or intelligent enough – aside in service of my desire to bring forth the voices of my community. And I hope that my attempt to tell their stories will dare others to be powerful.

Michelle Jean-Paul

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Chapter 1
Introduction

"We are defined by the stories we tell ourselves."

–Anthony Robbins (Oprah's Next Chapter: Aired 02/19/2012)

1.1   Rationale

I loved school as a child, so much so that I decided to commit my life to it by becoming an educator. My father taught at the school that I attended for kindergarten to grade nine. Our stay in that building overlapped for only my first year but his presence was instrumental in how I viewed school and teachers. My earliest memory of school is of sitting in the staffroom on the lap of one of the teachers, being fed treats while I waited for my mother to pick me up. I strongly believe that these initial experiences provided me with a strong sense of cultural capital that led to my ongoing success in school. I was an honour roll student and involved in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities. I was liked by my classmates, and respected by both the teachers and administration of my schools. I received several scholarships upon my graduation from high school and promptly began my degree in education at university the subsequent fall.

In part, it was my positive relationship with school that led to my decision to become a teacher. Quite frankly, I have always felt that it was a calling. School was a place in which I felt empowered and in control of my destiny. I possessed what it took to excel in that setting. But in spite of all of my successes within the school system, there was always an unnamed tension that existed. I had always been aware of race and discrimination. After all, as the child of a white German speaking Mennonite mother and Black francophone Haitian father, I was different than all of the kids I grew up with and had faced racism in many ways, both overt and subtle. But

there were specific incidents that took place that helped me to name it and recognize the impact that the colour of my skin had on my development as a person and in how I perceived myself as a student. Three of these critical incidents are explored later in this chapter.

While this study focuses on the lens provided by my experience as a Black youth and a Black educator in Winnipeg Schools, I would be remised if I did not acknowledge the role that my Mennonite heritage has played in my own identity development and in shaping my perspectives of the world. I was raised in the Mennonite Brethern church and my mother's family played a seminal role in my upbringing. I cannot help but think that the strong family support and unconditional love contributed to my success in school and informed my sense of justice. I believe that the peaceful yet resilient resistance to oppression demonstrated over history by the Mennonite people is a characteristic that was implanted in me, and informed my sense of right and wrong.

As a child, regardless of the number of ways that I was the same as my peers, there was a glaring difference that most ignored or pretended not to notice. I attended the same school with the same group of peers from kindergarten to grade 9. There was very little transiency, which led to a pretty cohesive group. This is probably why this first incident had such a great impact on me. It was a typical day in grade five where recess was dominated by wars between the boys and the girls of our class. I cannot recall the exact details but do remember that I, along with two other girls, beat a boy in our class into line when the recess bell rang. He was quite upset by this and was calling us names. But he chose a special name for me. That was the first time in my life that I can remember being called "nigger." I was so embarrassed and ashamed that upon returning to class, I hid my head in my desk and began to cry. My teacher intervened and referred us to the office. I remember feeling extremely supported by the vice-principal that day but it changed the way I interacted with my peers and it was a bit of a racial awakening for me. I

had always known that I was different, and had been bullied along the way for my afro and other aspects of my ethnic identity, but the impact of that singular incident on my identity and my relationships with my peers is difficult to explain concisely. I believe that the fact that I had had a school girl crush on this boy impacted my self-esteem and how I began to relate, particularly to my male peers.   And that impact is still present to this day.

It was shortly after that incident that, quite by accident, I came upon the first Black author I had ever read in school. An English reader had a poem by Langston Hughes, Mother to Son, which I devoured with much fervor. Something about a work written by someone who looked like me helped legitimate me while also making me keenly aware of my absence in the rest of the curriculum.

Fast forward to high school where I, again, experienced the social deficit of being one of a handful of Black students in a school of 1200. After bussing across the city to attend my K to 9 school, I transferred to a high school within walking distance from my home. It didn't take long for me to develop a number of social circles based on my many interests. It was in my grade 11 year that I was approached by one of the other two Black students in my grade. She knew that we had mutual friends and shared with me that, while at a party, a group including some of these friends had been making racist jokes about Black people. Some of these jokes had been directed to her. Incensed, I marched up to one of the boys who had been part of the joke telling, repeating one of the 'racist' punchlines to him. His face fell which was, in my mind, a clear admission of guilt. I quickly walked away before my strength turned into sadness as I did not want anyone to see me cry. Word of this group's poor attempt at racialized humour quickly spread throughout the school, as did rumours that two Black males from our school were planning on rallying their friends to fight them. The school's administration caught wind of things and the conflict was de-

escalated rather quickly. But for a brief moment, despite belonging to very different social circles, the Black students of my high school had an unspoken pact with one another. This incident led me to understand how deeply rooted racism can be and that we all hold, often unconsciously, racist ideals. Never had I imagined that my generation would be capable of such hatred, but as the one boy later explained to me, this was just what he had grown up with in his home and he did not actually share in that belief. But, by being in that environment, some of those racist attitudes had been internalized to a certain extent.

It wasn't until I was reflecting on this experience for the purposes of this paper that I realized that based on his address, one of these boys was likely one of the boys who had followed me down the street while bike riding, calling me "nigger" when I was much younger.

It was in my late teens, shortly after graduating high school, that a boy who I had admired for quite some time and had considered one of my closest friends in school, told me that he was surprised that he found me attractive because he did not usually like Black girls with their wide noses and big foreheads. For years, I had walked the hallways with people and tried to act as though I was the same as them, all the while fearing that they knew that I was not. And finally someone had named that difference. This last event forced me to finally acknowledge why I pushed myself toward excellence as a student. I could not control the racist reactions to my physical appearance but I could compensate by being exemplary in every other possible way.

Despite having four sisters, these issues of identity and development were very rarely discussed deeply in our home. I was left wondering if my experiences were unique to me or if they were characteristic of other Black youth in Winnipeg schools. I wondered if other Black youth felt the pressure to exceed expectations to make up for what they felt was a deficit based on their race and did they sometimes crumble under that pressure too? Did other Black youth

recognize the absence of their images in the books that they studied or in the faces of the adults surrounding them (Tatum, 1997, James in James and Shadd, 2001; Stewart, 2009)?

From the moment I decided to become a teacher, I knew that it was in part to present a different face to my students. A face that I personally had never seen at the front of the class. A face like my own. And it was very early in my teaching career that I began to see the potential impact that having a teacher of colour could have on students from minority backgrounds.

After years of analyzing my own relationship with school, I had decided to pursue a Masters' in Education. The very moment that the topic of this thesis came to me is clear as day. I was volunteering as a tutor in a housing cooperative. I was working with a group of Black elementary school students who were all, according to their report cards, struggling learners. They identified themselves as being weak students with behavioural problems. Now I will be the first to admit that working one on one or in a small group once a week can yield very different results than working with the same group of 30 students on a daily basis. But what I saw in these students, over time, was a group of children who came from families with legacies of academic failure, dispositions that they had already adopted as their own stories as early as grade two. The fact that, at age seven, a child had already decided that they were not intelligent was heartbreaking to me, particularly because, in this intimate setting, I was able to easily identify the strengths of each of them.

At this same point in time, I was teaching in an elementary school and was in the office visiting with the secretary one day. She was well aware of my involvement in the Black community and my interest in issues of equity and diversity in education, and was a close personal friend. She quietly leaned over her desk and said to me, gesturing to the group of boys who were sitting waiting for the principal, "Why is it that your people are always in the office"?

I pressed her on what she had initially meant as a joke and she went on to explain that these boys, who were all Black, were in the office on a daily basis but for some reason had never been sent to the office when they were in my classroom. She innocently asked me, "Why do you think that is"?

Both of these experiences made me ponder the initial question raised by my school secretary in a very real way. Why were the Black students in my school overrepresented in the office? As the students from my school and the students I was tutoring were from lower socioeconomic brackets, I began to wonder if their experiences in school were the result of poverty or were they at all informed by race.

My reason for choosing my thesis topic is in part because of my own experiences as a youth and as an educator in Winnipeg schools. Conversations that have taken place for years within Winnipeg's Black community also inform this decision. But if I am to be completely honest, the real reason is much more selfish than that. By exploring the factors that contributed to my experiences, I am able to critically analyze a system that often appears to be designed to fail children who look like me. I am deconstructing my reality and the realities of other Black youth within the school system in the hopes of creating change. I realize that my surroundings caused me to become guarded so I am writing myself real and making myself vulnerable. I am letting down the curtain that hides my vulnerability and only shows the world the confident, competent, successful version of me. The world of academia provided me with a shelter to hide my difference within. Now I will use it to help me grow.

We each have our own story to tell, stories that begin long before our births and influence our every thought and action. Some of our stories are buried so deeply within us that we are not even aware of their legacies, while others confront us directly on a daily basis. Children arrive at

school with their stories in tow, as do their teachers and their parents. These intertwining stories can lead to the success of some and the failure of others. It is only in giving voice to these stories, in creating a space for them to be shared, that we can learn from them.

The stories told here in this paper are all unique but there is a common thread woven through each of them. Each tells a tale of socialization. Each storyteller speaks of how the colonial legacy of systemic racism in schools has impacted their interaction with school and, consequently, elements of their sense of self. Some of these were told on a very conscious level while others were so deeply internalized that the narrator was left unable to identify the impression left.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

Black youth (as defined on page 14), in general, may feel disconnected to school and schooling because:

1. They cannot attach to the curriculum;

2. They cannot attach to their teachers; and,

3. They cannot attach to their peer groups.

They may have difficulty attaching to these things because they are not represented in them. The issue is cyclical and difficult to address. Parents of Black youth may also lack a connection with the school. A possible consequence of this is that they may not advocate for their children to the same extent as parents with a more positive connection to the school system. The result is a cycle of disengagement that is perpetuated from one generation to the next. As Black youth disengage from schooling, subcultural groups develop in an attempt to create a

sense of belonging. The characteristics of these groups often stand apart from the majority

(Tatum, 1997, p. 181).

Schools often ignore issues of race on two levels. Overtly, they choose not to

acknowledge race. As Dunn (in James and Shadd, 2001) explains it, "I realized that they thought

that if they held on to the belief that we were the same then there would be no need for any

discussions on race and culture" (p. 270). Covertly, they pass on values that do not recognize the

social identities of minority groups (Taylor, 1992). The hidden curriculum of schools, the

resources, and the lack of cultural representation amongst teaching staff are all examples of this.

This is reflective of Canadian culture. We choose to view ourselves as a tolerant and colour-

blind society as presented in former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson's (2011) "Room for

All of Us." Perhaps this is just a way to excuse ourselves from the discomfort that comes with

challenging systems of privilege and oppression.

I would like to suggest that the absence of a familiar historical legacy in Black Canada

has the same consequences as the presence of one of subordination and marginalization in the

United States of this same group. Changing trends in the immigration patterns (Statistics

Canada) in Winnipeg indicate that the Black population in Manitoba is growing. As of the 2006

census, Blacks were the third largest Visible Minority group, with an increase of approximately

3000 people since the previous census was completed. Ethiopia and Sudan have found their way

into the top ten source countries for immigration to Manitoba several times over the last eight

years. Furthermore, this does not account for individuals who chose not to self identify.

While my personal experiences as an educator and member of the Black community have

led me to believe that the experiences of Black youth in Winnipeg would more or less echo those

of Black youth in areas with larger Black populations (Dei, 1993, 2008), I decided to leave my

research open by looking at the overall experiences of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. I did

not include school success or school failure as criteria for selection of youth participants. I

allowed the experiences and perspectives of the participants of this study to define any trends.

Unfortunately, regardless of the personal relationship that the youth participants had with school,

their cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, family structures, their status as new

immigrant or third generation Canadian, the general perception of the experience of Black youth

in Winnipeg schools fits into the larger landscape of disengagement and disappointment.

1.3   QUESTIONS

This leads to the question of whether the academic achievement and school engagement

seen amongst Black youth in Winnipeg schools is proportional to that of other cultural groups?

What factors influence engagement and achievement according to said youth?

1.4   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Dei (1993) provided an important Canadian perspective in his research on the Black

community and the public school. His anti-racist discursive framework acknowledged the role

of educational institutions in the re-creation of societal inequalities. He also discussed, with

urgency, the need for a more inclusive system of schooling that is responsive to minority

concerns. It is Dei's perspective that will provide a conceptual framework for my research. His

research provides a foundation for much of the work done in the area of Black youth engagement

and achievement in Canada. In fact, Dei advocated for the creation of all Black, or Afrocentric,

schools as a way to address the gap in achievement between Toronto's Black and other youth.

The lens of an anti-racist discursive framework as presented by Dei in "Narrative

Discourses of Black/African-Canadian Parents and the Canadian Public School System" will be

employed. This particular lens has been chosen as it challenges the often unquestioned notions

of white privilege and the role of white privilege in our society and institutions. Furthermore, it

helps to confront the inadequacies of the educational system in meeting the needs of minority

youth.

"The anti-racist approach questions White power and privilege and the accompanying

rationality for dominance in the discourse of public schooling. It problematizes the

marginalization of certain voices in society and the de-legitimization of the knowledge

and experience of subordinate groups in the educational system. The antiracist approach

also questions pathological explanations of the Black/African-Canadian "family" or

"home environment" as a source of the "problems" that Black youths face in schools. It

is argued that such explanations only serve to divert attention away from a critical

analysis of the institutional structures within which the delivery of education takes place

in the schools. An anti-racist theoretical framework to understanding the processes of

public schooling in Canada acknowledges the role of the educational system in producing

and reproducing racial, gender, and class-based inequalities in society. It also

acknowledges the pedagogic need to confront the challenge of diversity and difference in

Canadian society and the urgency for an educational system that is more inclusive and is

capable of responding to minority concerns about public schooling"(Dei, 1993, p.49).

There is a need to confront white privilege, which is the notion that members belonging

to the majority often have opportunities over those who belong to marginalized groups (defined

further on page 14). Within Winnipeg's Black community, there has been much discussion of

how the school system continues to fail their youth. School leaving, difficulty graduating, lack

of engagement in school & community are all factors that have been identified. But scholars,

such as Dei (1993, 2008) and Moore Jr. (2009), would argue that the school system is not failing,

that it in fact is enormously successful as it is doing precisely what it was designed to do. The system is moving those who represent power and dominance to the top and streaming students from marginalized groups out.

I am employing this framework as it focuses on the institution, its structure, who it represents and who it reflects. I am placing less of an emphasis on the role of Black families and the Black community as they subject to the "asymmetrical power relations" present in the education system and other institutions that perpetuate white privilege (Dei, 1996, p. 42). However, this does not ignore their role in self-determining, an aspect that will be explored in a later chapter (Freire, 1985).

1.5   Why narrative?

The decision to use a methodology of qualitative research and with aspects of a narrative case study arose in an attempt to more authentically express the voices of the participants. Storytelling is a way of creating and recreating identities. The narrative format is also more accessible to a variety of readers. If part of the intent is to make recommendations based on the stories, recommendations for classroom teachers and school leaders to follow through on, the language must be plain and direct. And the people whose stories are represented here must find the interpretations accessible as well.

Tonya Stremau in her work "The Personal Narrative in Dissertation Writing: A Matter of Academic Honesty" suggested that the use of narrative in graduate level thesis "should not only be acceptable but desirable" (Stremau in Nash, 2004, p. 1). She suggested that it better allowed the writer the opportunity to critically establish and question their perspective/interpretations. She went on to say "I am not a disinterested observer; why should I pretend to be? It is a matter of academic honesty" (Stremau in Nash, 2004, p. 1).

Nash (2004) supported the use of personal voice as well stating that "[g]ood teaching, good helping, and leadership are, in one sense, all about storytelling story-evoking" (p.1). He supported the notion that the voice of the "other must be included to challenge and question the dominant, white, male, Western research ethos in the university" (Nash, 2004, p. 2).

The voices being represented in this study include my own. My position is greater than that of the interested observer identified by Stremau. It is also that of members of the very group I am exploring. Anthony Stewart (2009) discusses his use of the first person in his own academic research:

"At the root of this book, and the main reason I have chosen to write from a personal observation rather than a scholarly, "disinterested" one, is that I have been treated very well by this profession and by institutions generally. I have the very good fortune to have a job that pays me well to read, write, think, and express my thoughts to others. These are privileges that are systematically withheld from people with ethnocultural origins similar to my own until comparatively recently. Now, some of us are "allowed" to do this job, but many more are discouraged from pursuing such a career. With what I've just said, think about this: If the university looks to *me* the way I am describing it, then one can only imagine how hostile, unwelcoming, and exclusive it must look to a young person of colour who has not had my good fortune and has not been treated by institutions as I have been." (p.49)

I too have been treated well by my profession, having earned a permanent contract before I had completed my education degree and moving into a vice-principalship at the age of 27. My success within the field was noticed by my community. Several years into my teaching career, there were conversations taking place in the Black community about the hiring practices of a

particular school division. The general sentiment was that teachers of colour were not being

given opportunities within that district for employment or advancement. The community was

looking for a way to confirm and challenge this when I received a call from a parent whose

children attended school in that division. She told me that there was an opening in her children's

school and pleaded with me to apply for it in an attempt to test that division. As I explained to

her that the position was for a part time Early Years Educator, a position requiring only a

certificate, and that I was already under a full time permanent contract and overqualified for the

position in terms of my formal education, she pleaded with me. This experience was a reminder

of the fact that it was not only in the generations before me that Visible Minorities struggled for a

place within the workplace. My success as a Black woman in the education system was still seen

within my community as an exception, not the rule.

1.6   DEFINITION OF TERMS

The old adage of sticks and stones is a false one. How often do words hurt us? Within

the context of this research, "Black" will be used as an umbrella statement to incorporate

members of the Afro-Canadian community whose origins may be Caribbean or African. I have

chosen to use this term as I feel as though it is the most inclusive in that it removes the negative

stigma from the term "Black" and does not position participants as conditional or hyphenated

Canadians. The status of a hyphenated Canadian further marginalizes by creating conditional

citizenship which ignores and refutes the multicultural banner that Canada so proudly waves

(Walcott, 2008; James and Shadd, 2001). I consulted various leaders of the Black community in

Winnipeg and prominent Black Canadian scholars who have researched and written about this

process of naming. The consensus was in agreement with my use of "Black" as an umbrella

statement used to refer to Blacks of Canadian, African and Caribbean ancestry. I have chosen to capitalize it as one would capitalize any other ethnocultural group.

"The term Black has so many connotations in our society: descendant of African slaves, or a recent African immigrant, or refugee to Canada, or the colour of my skin and that of my friends and family members, regardless of the actual shade or hue" (Jennings in James and Shadd, 2001, p.147).

"Black youth", for the purpose of this study, refers to young people between the ages of 14 and 21 who self identify as Black.

"Academic achievement" refers to academic success as in graduation, high grades, honour roll. It is primarily focused on what the Canadian Education Association (CEA) defines as "academic or institutional engagement" (2009).

"School engagement" is defined as social, institutional and intellectual engagement by the CEA. It can be measured through relationships with peers, adults including teachers and administration. It can also be measured through involvement in organized school activities and one's level of attachment to the building. Attendance can be an indicator of this type of engagement. CEA (2009) defines the three categories this way. *Social* refers to sense of belonging, participation, and positive relationship; *institutional* engagement might include attendance, homework, and the value held for schooling outcomes; and, *intellectual* refers to effort, interest, motivation, and quality instruction.

"White privilege" refers to the notion that members belonging to the majority often have opportunities over those who belong to marginalized groups. These opportunities are sometimes subtly built into institutions created on the beliefs and understandings of the majority despite the fact that they are intended to serve the masses. The concept of race and privilege arise from the

need "to legitimize the ruthless exploitation and subjugation of non-Western people" (Dei, 199, p.40).

The terms "Visible Minority", "marginalized", "disenfranchised" will be used in reference to non-White ethnocultural groups.

1.7   Purpose of Study

This thesis is about the long and sad story of young people belonging to marginalized groups within the institution of school. Public education holds within it the potential to intervene and disrupt should we use it to call into question practices that continue to privilege the few. It can be an impetus for critical change. And while schools and education have come a long way, they are still often a place where students are sorted and stratified.   My intent is not to place blame but to confront and to identify the roles that all people can play towards positive change. My goal is to create the opportunity for a conversation to begin. My choice of framework was intentional and may lead to some discomfort or resentment but I believe this to be a necessary step in challenging the impediments that are embedded in the education system and in our attitudes. "If these dynamics are rarely if ever discussed out loud, because they make people uncomfortable, it is obvious how difficult it might be to get anything change" (Stewart, 2009, p.112).

Canadian schools are becoming increasingly diverse. As regional population trends continue to change, so do the faces reflected in our classrooms. The 1970s were highlighted by a wave of Black, Caribbean immigrants to Manitoba, many of which settled in Winnipeg (Sandiford, 2002). Changes in immigration policies dissipated this trend but in the new

millennium, a new wave of immigration began. Outside of Asian countries, the largest group of immigrants to Winnipeg as identified by Statistics Canada was African.

Chapter 2 will explore the work of others in the area of Black youth and schools. Chapter 3 will explore the methodology behind my research. Chapter 4 will explore my findings as uncovered through the personal stories of Black youth and their families. Chapter 5 will discuss the potential impact of this study on the practice of classroom teachers, aspects requiring further study and theory. Pre-service and in-service educators can use the information to improve their teaching strategies, their approach to education, and to challenge their beliefs about and approach to educating youth belonging to marginalized groups. The hope is to encourage educators to challenge the structure of systemic racism that is often entrenched within our school systems.

Black community organizations will have data to support or disprove their assumptions about the quality of education their youth are receiving. This information can be used to strengthen community efforts related to youth engagement. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study attempts to give a voice to Black youth.

Cornel West, philosopher and activist, often begins his lectures by telling his audience that he hopes to say something that unnerves, unsettles and unhouses them. I too hope to upset the way that you think as you make your way through this research study. I hope to cause you to pause and to reflect so that we might support Black youth in redefining the negative stories they tell of themselves in Winnipeg schools.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

"Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous … For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world."

–Thomas King (2003)

Most of the literature exploring the relationship between Black youth and schooling is concentrated to the United States and to Canada's larger urban centres (e.g. Toronto, Montreal) as well as provinces with longstanding, historical Black communities (e.g. Nova Scotia). Much of the research, Canadian-based or otherwise, focuses on the at-risk nature of Black youth within Canadian schools. While the research supports the statement that Black youth are less successful in school than their white counterparts, research of this nature seems to reinforce the image of Black youth as academic failures.

While the Black population of Winnipeg is nowhere near the size of larger metropolitan areas such as Toronto, similar trends are being identified within these groups. The situation became so dire in Toronto that the Toronto District School Board developed what they refer to as Afrocentric Schools. In Winnipeg, community initiatives such as the African, Black, Caribbean Community Initiative (ABCCI) identified the same concerns for Winnipeg's Black youth. The general sentiment was that there is a superficial treatment of diversity and issues of race within Winnipeg schools and that the system or structure that allows for this institutionalized racism remains largely unchallenged. Personal experiences as a tutor, educator and volunteer within the Black community have provided me with ample examples of this.

Much research has been done as to the success of student learners from Aboriginal communities in Winnipeg schools but there is an absence in research pertaining to the experiences of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. This is likely to do with the small population. But it is a population that has identified a need to address disparities. Researchers have attempted to come up with explanations for these gaps: lack of representation in the curriculum, miseducated educators, an absence of positive role models, expectations of failure politics of recognition, the system versus the community, and white privilege (Dei, 1993; Tatum, 1997; Moore, 2009).

I chose to organize the literature review based on the recurring themes that came out of the interviews I conducted. The themes are also repetitive in the literature which may be indicative of their validity. What I tried to do is access research for answers as to why these are the recurring themes.

2.1   Lack of Representation in the Curriculum

Researchers in this field suggest that lack of representation of marginalized groups within the formal and informal curriculum of schools plays a significant role in the disengagement of students from those groups in those schools. This is illustrated perfectly by Lisa Delpit in "The Skin That We Speak" where she discusses the disconnect that many African-American children have to schooling and academic success as a result of the internalization of the notion that they are "less than" which is perpetuated by a concentration on the negative. She gives the example of a young man who is asked to look into a mirror and tell his teacher what he sees. His response is, "I don't see nothin'" (Delpit, p.46). Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests the development

of programs to include real-life experiences of Black children as legitimate components of the official curriculum.

The missing faces of communities of colour are evident in school textbooks and other materials as well as in the individuals working in schools whether this be as school leaders, teachers, educational assistants or custodians. "As a researcher in African Canadian history, I am constantly reminded that the four-hundred-year presence of Blacks has been written out of history and obliterated from the Canadian psyche in general" (James and Shadd, 2001, p.11). But this absence extends further into what is a structure built on Eurocentric values.

"I then pointed out that since many studies have shown that students learn more effectively when the subject matter more closely replicates their own realities, maybe the task of the next generation of postcolonialists might be to take what they'd learned and teach in high schools with predominantly non-white student bodies. My thought was that such a pedagogical project (a missionary enterprise, if you like) might hasten the day when a group of academics talking about the work of non-white writes might actually include some non-whites" (Stewart, p.94).

I recall several experiences as a student where I was able to create space for my own identity. One such experience was a grade 12 anthology project for an English class. I explored Black authors, including Langston Hughes who I had discovered in elementary school. I also recall being introduced to bell hooks by a professor who recognized that I was looking for ways to express my voice as a young, Black woman. These experiences impacted the development of my racial identity in positive ways and influenced my educational philosophies. These teachers also gave me a space to critically question the absence of people who looked like me in the curriculum that we covered.

The lack of representation in the curriculum presents itself in the tools that educators employ to both instruct and to determine intelligence or ability. Curricula and assessments have historically been designed by members of the dominant group leading to an immediate bias. For example, the WISC-R (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised) is the most commonly used IQ test in Canadian schools. Yet it is based on a sample of 2,200 children of which only 330 were non-white (Contenta, p. 83).   "This is because this image of Canada as a 'white country' is so very pervasive. It is as prevalent in information disseminated about this county around the world as it is in our schools here in Canada" (James and Shadd, 2001, p.12).

My take on the literature is that education is a system designed on Eurocentric values. Subconsciously, in its design, we maintain its history and legacy of oppression. When students are not reflected in the formal and informal curriculum of the school, their absence does not go unnoticed. Instead, it reinforces their position as secondary citizens thus perpetuating the cycle of disengagement often seen within communities of colour.   Furthermore, simply including the images of students belonging to marginalized groups is a superficial response to a deeply systemic issue. If members of marginalized groups are not part of the design of curricula, their voices are not authentically communicated through them. By designing materials, such as the WISC-R, without a truly representative sampling, we measure a very narrow definition of intelligence.   The faces, voices and histories of all communities must be visible in every layer of schooling. In order to challenge this, educators must first develop a consciousness of this issue of privilege or lack thereof.

2.2   Miseducated Educators

Schools often take one of two approaches to dealing with culture in the classroom. The first is what is often referred to as the "Folklarama" treatment. This is in reference to an annual festival that takes place in Winnipeg where cultures from around the world share their traditional food, dance and music. The second is the colour blind approach where the focus is on similarities as opposed to difference or raced ignored altogether. "I realized that they thought that if they held on to the belief that we were the same then there would be no need for any discussions on race and culture" (Dunn, p.270).

These approaches are employed, rather than confronting issues of race head on, for a variety of reasons. Issues of race or ethnic identity can become very political and perhaps educators do not feel as though it is their place to discuss such controversial topics in their classrooms. The rationale is perhaps that educators feel ill equipped to appropriately address these conflicts and a result, choose to ignore them. Or perhaps the sentiment is that teachers rather focus on similarity to create a sense of the community rather than focus on difference.

Trueba (1993) in Kottler (1997) developed a model to explain why some minority children function more comfortably in schools while others become behaviour problems. Four responses to cultural conflict are presented in this model: nativistic, transitional, assimilationist, multicultural. Nativistic refers to "the extreme position of one's own culture, language, and customs must be preserved at all costs, even if it means outright rejection of everything associated with the dominant culture" (Kottler, p. 100). This would be characterized by oppositional behaviour. Transitional is "passive or disengaged" in nature (Kottler, p.100). An assimilationist response is where a "student refuses to acknowledge his or her cultural roots and instead jumps into the dominant culture as if it was always his or her own" (Kottler, p.101). The result of this response is often easy acceptance of the student by both teachers and students

belonging to the majority, a stark contrast to the reaction of students the reaction given to students embracing the nativistic response. The fourth and final response to cultural conflict presented by Kottler is the multicultural response which is identified as being the most ideal in that it allows the student to balance both the home and school culture. "Such a student is very motivated to learn as much as he or she can about mainstream customs and language but also retains pride in his or her own culture" (Kottler, p.101). The role of the educator is then to identify which response the child is employing and support them in integrating home and school cultures.

The superficial treatment of race and culture through celebration provides educators with the opportunity to acknowledge their students' diversity whilst avoiding the inequity that comes along with it. This leaves the privilege extended to some and denied to others to go unchallenged. Gorski (2008) focused on issues of class in his article "The Myth of the Culture of Poverty" but his critique of "educators with unquestionably good intentions who too often fall to the temptation of the quick fix, the easily digestible framework that never requires us to consider how we comply" (p.35).

The result of ignoring race is far from positive. Teachers who do not have an understanding or are unable to acknowledge the importance of culture and the role it plays in a person's every experience are doing a disservice to their students. The fear of being "politically incorrect" leads to educators avoiding issues of race. The consequence of this is the often unintentional reinforcement of the second class position of marginalized people. If we refuse to acknowledge the existence of race, we then don't create space to develop an understanding of how racism impacts our society in the past and present (Dei, 1996).

Vivian Paley (1979) describes an incident where the mother of a Black child shared her frustrations with the fact that her child's teachers continuously refused to acknowledge, and therefore celebrate, the unique qualities of the Black identity. Schools need to be places in which all children can develop a sense of belonging. This is only accomplished when they are recognized as unique individuals.

Contenta (1993) also explores the notion of racial myopia in his work. He asserts that by simply ignoring cultural difference under the guise of so called "colour blindness", teachers do not need to challenge their own ideologies and practices. "Racial myopia comes in handy for teachers who have spent their careers turning the classroom into a dull routine that excites like the hum of a refrigerator. To admit the existence of cultural differences would be a threat to their curriculum and teaching methods" (Contenta, p.85).

George Dei (1993, 1996, 2008) and Carl James (2001) assert that Black youth are reacting to their alienation by mainstream curriculum and need school environments that offer "a more positive cultural identity" while focusing less on the effect of the historical legacy stressed by their American counterparts Ogbu and Fordham (in Brennan and Brown, 2005, p.215). Both of these studies look through the lens of an anti-racist discourse and focus on moving by challenging the past legacy of racism.

A third aspect of the miseducated educator is not what the teacher teaches but how they may act on an unconscious level. In the words of Pedro Noguera (2008), "Unless educators consciously try to undermine and work against these kinds of stereotypes, they often act on them unconsciously" (p.11). There is a need for educators to develop a critical consciousness in regards to issues of white privilege and the inequities their students of colour may face as a result of functioning within a system built on Eurocentric values. An understanding that we all hold

racist ideas as a result of our environment cannot be something that we fear. Rather, we must work to identify, confront and correct them. How to develop this will be explored further in chapter five.

There is a need to acknowledge and challenge the privilege that we as educators hold. Teaching is a political act in that through critical self-reflection, we can become agents of change (Egbo, 2009). It is my opinion that this responsibility extends to all educators. As a Visible Minority, it has been my experience that teachers and parents look to me when issues of racism arise. I recall being approached by a teacher while still a teacher candidate and asked to deal with an issue involving a student whose family had recently emigrated from Africa. Even then, I wondered why I was identified as the designated expert on all things race related.

My take on the literature is that while some changes to teacher training programs in Manitoban universities, that is the addition of mandatory diversity credits, aim to better prepare teacher candidates, however this doesn't respond to the lack of sensitivity and or awareness of in-service teachers. The "Action Plan for Ethnocultural Equity 2006-2008"was developed by the Province of Manitoba but whether or not this information is being disseminated and implemented is questionable. There is an acknowledgement in this very document that the multicultural education policy of the 1990s and other such initiatives were not being adequately shared (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006). The provincial government is in the process of replacing the Multicultural Education Policy document with one that generally addresses issues of diversity and inclusion. Race is no longer at the forefront and issues of poverty, sexuality and ability are taking its place. Questioning the way in which one's privilege has influenced their practice is a humbling and laborious experience. It is unsettling and many teachers choose to avoid it for this very reason. To have to confront racial superiority when one

sees themselves as anything but racist is a big pill to swallow! The argument could be made that the approach that a teacher takes to addressing culture in the classroom has a direct impact on the response of Black and other minority students in the room. It is important that educators recognize the impact of their pedagogy on the identity development of their students and the relationships that young people develop to schooling. When the dominant voice is privileged over others, by ignoring the other voices or patronizing them, the system remains unchallenged.

When adults in power do not address issues of race within the school system, when they choose "to remain silent in public, they – without realizing it – were really demonstrating their privilege and, hence, emphasizing my lack of it" (Stewart, p.88). We have a choice to view teaching as a neutral activity or to understand our role as agents of social change (Egbo, 2009).

2.3   Absence of Positive Role Models

The absence of positive cultural role models, or any role models for that matter, in the curriculum, school buildings, and greater community are a barrier to the success of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. It prohibits them from seeing themselves reflected in faces around them which can lead to detachment.

In "Reclaiming At Risk Youth", Brendtro et al. (1992) discuss the notion of belonging as one of the four factors in what they call "The Circle of Courage". Their thesis is that youth who feel alienated will seek out power through alternate measures such as inappropriate behaviour in school. They suggest that positive, healthy relationships with adults in the school setting can help youth achieve a feeling of belonging. The alternative can be a distorted sense of belonging

achieved through things such as gangs or promiscuous behaviour or an absent sense of belonging characterized through guarded and distrustful temperaments.

Dr. Gordon Neufeld builds on this notion of belonging in his work on attachment. He suggests that attachment occurs most easily with those who look like us. Without opportunities to attach to adults in the school system, as a result of a work force that largely represents the dominant White society, Black youth attach instead to peers. The consequence is the development of a subcultural group that often defines itself in opposition to majority in an effort to define itself. Dr. Neufeld goes on to state that the primary factor that differentiates between teens and at-risk teens is positive relationships with adults, often times a teacher. In his words, "We need to be collected before we can be directed" (Neufeld, 2008).

In my first year of high school, I took an advanced placement math course. There was another Black student in the class and somehow we ended up sitting next to each other. We both struggled to find our place in that course. He seemed to struggle with how being in the course fit with his public image that filled the stereotypical hip hop related notions of Black. I struggled with feeling, for the first time in my academic career, that I was falling short as a student and might be reinforcing the notion that Black students were not high achievers.

My take on the literature is that without positive cultural models, Black youth either disengage from school or from their cultural identities. "Acting white" becomes the viable option when the only version of "acting Black" that youth see is the negative stereotype of thug or gangster. Providing regular examples of positive Black role models benefits all students in that it deconstructs stereotypes associated with Black culture. However, when miseducated educators present Black role models as the exception rather than a reality, for example, pointing

out a Black author as an enigma, it reinforces the notion of Black students as less than able as their white counterparts (Stewart, 2009).

2.4   Expectations of Failure

Ogbu and Fordham in Noguera (2008, p. 9) explore the school as a place that often forces marginalized youth to assimilate to White culture and its values. Academic success as a result is equated to "acting White" or "selling out". Black youth can choose one of four responses to the pressure they feel to achieve in school.

1) They become the stereotype associated with being Black.

2) They become the "sell out" and assimilate into the dominant culture.

3) They develop multiple identities in attempt to successfully navigate between their diverse settings.

4) They challenge the assumptions and redefine Black identity for themselves.

None of these choices prove easy. Racialized identity forces another layer of identity development at an already challenging time in a child's development (Noguera 2008, Tatum 1997). Young people are working to define their racial identities in addition to the other layers of their personalities.

Noguera (2008) responds to the first of these in "The Trouble with Black Boys". He suggests that Black youth are likely to be punished in schools and that failure becomes a normalized behaviour. This leads to the development of an oppositional relationship with

school, hostility against often a strategy used to cope with feelings of lowered expectations (Noguera, p.41). Oppositional behaviour arises when Black students hold themselves back for fear of being ostracized (Ogbu/Fordham in Noguera, 2008, p.31). One could assume that the fear of failure might also cause Black youth to avoid challenging the stereotypes. The longer a child is entrenched in failure, the harder it will be for them to overcome their failures and be consistently successful (Scott, 2008). The stereotypical Black identity is often defined by the hip hop music culture. "The urban youth culture…practised by Black youth in Canada, inner city and suburbs alike, is often defined by its music … Through our style of dress, our vocabulary, our goals, and our own artistic expressions, we tend to identify with some of the most commercially successful artists of these types of music" (K. James in James and Shadd, 2001, p.18).

A teenage boy, who I will call Malik, is someone who epitomizes the first response. He has struggled academically throughout his entire scholastic career. He has internalized the notion that he is a failure so deeply that he will no longer engage in school at all. In his opinion, the classroom is just a place where he is constantly reminded of the fact that he is not intelligent or capable, so he creates conflicts to avoid doing work. He rather be seen as lazy or rude than stupid.

In "Rituals of Failure: What Schools Really Teach", Sandro Contenta discussed the hidden curriculum of Canadian schools and how that curriculum continues to stream youth. He identified the organization of schools by age and the reinforcement of failure for students who simply take more time to learn. He claimed that schools neglected to take into account factors that would influence the rate of learning of the individual (for example, home environment, appropriateness of work assigned quality of teaching) and goes on to say that the failure is not

that of the student but that of the schools as students have little influence over these factors. He went on to say that the school often decides which students will fail very early in their educational journeys and that this repeated failure is destructive as few young people have the ability to find success within the system in spite of it. Restructuring schools was provided as a way of disrupting these rituals of failure. I wonder how that might change the perception a student like Malik has of himself.

Option two speaks to the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture, what was discussed earlier as Trueba's assimilationist response to cultural conflict. The term "white washed" is descriptive of the effort by Black youth to adopt stereotypically White personas in an attempt to integrate successfully into the school environment. Patrick Solomon (1992 in Davies) claimed that Black youth tend to regard academics as a 'white activity' and were "increasingly drawn towards sports" (p.214). The pressure of wanting to integrate while maintaining a sense of cultural identity leads to the third option. Perhaps this is how the other Black student in my high school math class viewed me.

Option three refers to what Pedro Noguera (2008) called a "split personality" and Lisa Delpit (2002) called "code switching". This is when students develop the skills to successfully navigate between the Black culture of the home and the dominant, White culture of the school. Henry T. Trueba (in Delpit, 2002) calls this the multicultural response. A young man who I will call Tay embodies this in my mind. When with his Black peers, he displays a bravado or confidence in line with the stereotypical image of a Black male. But when apart from them, he is very concerned about his academic performance and university entrance.

The fourth option can be terribly isolating. Young people struggle to define themselves (Noguera, 2008). Some students challenge these expectations and actively resist succumbing to

stereotypes. The challenge, according to Noguera "is to find ways to support their resistance to negative stereotypes and school sorting practices and to make choosing failure a less likely option for them" (p.33). This requires educated educators. A group of former students met this challenge in my mind. These four young Black women refused to live up to a stereotype but celebrated their Black identity and culture on their own terms. They all pursued post-secondary educations in a variety of fields and never felt as though this compromised their belonging to their peer group. I believe that this process of redefinition may have been facilitated by the fact that they had each other's support and weren't the only ones struggling to create a new notion of Black identity for themselves.

"Historically, the conventional construction of black youth has been left largely to law enforcement agencies, social work and educational institutions, and popular culture. These entities disseminate the received categories in society that depict black youth either as a social problem or as a mentally and emotionally debilitated social group. They employ images of black youth as violent, dangerous, sexually permissive, disease-infested, surly, disruptive, unemployed and unemployable; as suffering from self-doubt and low self-esteem; and as lacking control, initiative, motivation, and self-respect — ultimately, they represent black youth as a group that is ''beyond love'' and outside the boundaries of respectability" (Duncan, p.5-6).

My take on the literature is that the expectations of failure correlate directly to the absence of positive Black role models. Black youth must be able to see examples within their communities of people who are intelligent, thoughtful, successful, contributing, engaged role models. Black identity must be defined independent of the dominant identity in order to honour the unique experience that comes along with being a Visible Minority. While race is a social construct, it greatly impacts how you interact with your environment particularly when your race

is not that of the dominant group. This secondary layer to the development of a Black youth's identity is one not necessary for his White counterparts. This is a privilege that teachers belonging to the dominant group may not recognize. "[…But] for a young white man, such vigilance need not be quite so reflective" (Stewart, 2009, p.107).

2.5   Politics of Recognition

Tatum (1997) discusses the significance of racial identity development on student behavior in "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" She provides a psychological analysis of the issues related to identity development and offers a starting point for discussions about race. Tatum suggests that dealing with an oppressive system becomes physically and psychologically exhausting for minority youth. Issues of engagement and behavior are described as a form of resistance against an educational institution based on the values of the dominant group.

> "[T]he institution's appearance has much to do with whether or not is seems welcoming to new people, even as it makes official pronouncements of openness. Also, as a person of colour, my experience has been influenced heavily by my own appearance and others' reactions (sometimes positive, sometimes negative) to my appearance, to how I look to *them*. I routinely ask my students whether it is preferable to be idealized or objectified, telling them eventually that neither is desirable since both impulses turn one into something more or less than the individual. The "positive" stereotype is really no better than the negative one, if only because accepting the one means by necessity having to accept the other" (Stewart, p.41).

Taylor (1992) explores the notions that politics of universalism leads to "difference blindness" which "negates identity by forcing people into a homogenous mold that is untrue to them" (p. 42). The mold of a hegemonic culture whose own values override and alienate the social identities of marginalized groups. Our identities are shaped by the recognition or "misrecognition" of others.

Stewart's (2008) work in regards to the role of race within institutions of higher learning and his personal search for recognition as a Black male could be transposed onto the kindergarten to grade 12 school system. His discussion of what he calls the "mixed messages" of the institution apply to both settings. For instance, in the school system where mission statements, employment equity boxes on application forms for jobs, and multicultural festivities send a message of acceptance and celebration of difference, meanwhile, the reality of the school system is one in which the faces of Black youth continue to fail to be reflected back at them in the curriculum or by the people presenting it or as Stewart sums it up, "You're just like us, except, of course, in all the ways you're not like us" (p.98).

My take on the literature is that Black youth need to be given the space to create their own identities within the school system. This recognition cannot be superficial. The notions of "racial myopia" or "colour blindness" speak directly to the politics of recognition in that the presence of those attitudes leads to the misrecognition of Black youth (Taylor, 1992; Contenta, 1993; Egbo, 2009).

2.6   Systems versus Community Forces

Literature in the area of achievement gaps between youth of colour and White youth has a tendency to explore the system, comprised of the media and institutions representing the dominant culture, versus the minority community, whose beliefs and behaviours are brought into institutions such as the school.

In "Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement", Ogbu (2003) of Berkley, argues that issues of student disengagement should be examined on both an institutional and a community level. While he does discuss the role that the institution plays in minority student underachievement, he also places the onus on the community concentrating on their need to implicate themselves in the social and academic lives of their youth in order to overcome the barriers they will face. Ogbu's work examines one particular school in an upper middle class neighbourhood in the United States where community members recognized a gap in achievement between Black and White youth despite their paralleled socioeconomic statuses. While he acknowledged school and society based factors that may contribute to the disparity, such as, internalized beliefs, leveling, and race relations, he chose to focus on the community factors stating a lack of research in the area as his rationale.

While Ogbu does not exonerate the school of its responsibility in addressing the difference in achievement, he chose to focus on community factors in this particular study. This is not to say that he blames minorities, rather he seeks to empower them by exposing the historical context from which they are coming and the role of race on parenting practices related to schooling. In addition to the influence held by parents, peers and the larger Black community also have a significant role in impacting the response of Black youth to schooling.

This perspective is echoed in Dei's work in that its focus extends beyond the community. Both researchers acknowledge the impact of White privilege and expose the impact of a legacy

of oppression on parents and the consequence this has on parenting and thus, on schooling. Ogbu's work and Dei's work both advocate for the inclusion of communities of colour in the discourse that influences the politics and practices of institutions such as schools (Dei, 1993, 1996, 2008; Ogbu, 2003).

Anthony Stewart (2009) explores the role of the institution itself in inciting positive change with regards to the overall experiences of Black youth within the education system in his work "You Must Be a Basketball Player". He speaks of how although he is successful within the institutions (university in specific), he questions how the institutions must look to a young person of colour who has not had the same success or found the same sense of belonging. I too have been forced to acknowledge how I have been privileged over other Black youth in my experiences as a student in Winnipeg schools. I was reminded of this when a young, Black student who was struggling with his courses said to me, "You don't understand. You've probably always been good in school." I am reminded of the social capital I possess as a result of seeing behind the curtain, if you will, and developing an understanding of the inner workings of the school system as the result of being the child of a teacher and spending my early and middle years in the school my father once taught in. The conclusions he draws can be extended to other institutions such as the public school system. Stewart felt that policies were insufficient to incite change and that the rationale for change must be owned by the members functioning within an institution. Further to this, if institutions reflect a certain image, they attract/repel people based on whether or not they see themselves reflected within those institutions. This reinforces the need for not only informed educators but for Black educators to present an alternative model of what a teacher/principal/university professor looks like. "A truly diverse nation must enable all Canadians to see themselves represented within the levels of society that

make decisions regarding the nation's wellbeing … people habitually equate "the diverse" with "the disadvantaged" " (Stewart, 2009, p. 33), a concept that needs to be challenged.

My take on the literature is that a change to the school system is only achievable when there are both internal and external pressures acting upon it. Marginalized communities often reinforce the exclusion of their youth from school and feel a sense of powerlessness to change their fate. Positive stereotypes are embraced by youth and often encouraged by their own communities in an attempt to find a space to belong within the institutions. This internalized oppression much be addressed with the Black community in order to put external pressure onto the school system.

2.7 White Privilege

Davies and Guppy explore the limitations of school socialization in part four of their book. They suggest that the structure of schools through the practice of streaming creates "disincentives for successful students (Downes 1996 in Davies, p.208). The reaction to this is the creation of subcultural groups with inverted values. Tanner (in Davies, 2001, p. 209) suggests that pop culture is often used as a "vehicle for disengaging from academic studies" whereas Cohen, Miller and Stimchcombe in Davies (2006) suggest that the school system often breeds frustration or boredom as the academic content of the school is unrelated to the social status of lower class students. The Canadian Education Association uses Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi concept of "flow" to describe student engagement (www.cea-ace.ca). "Flow" is defined as the space in which a student is truly engaged as their skill level is in tune with the challenge they are being faced with. Disproportion between skill and challenge can lead to

frustration, anxiety, apathy, boredom amongst other things. While Davies and Guppy were exploring these aspects in terms of social class, and not race, one could argue that they would apply in both contexts. The increasing popularity of the hip hop culture has, in essence, created a social class of its very own. An "opulent working class", if you will (West, 2011).

Critical race theory ascertains that the process of racialization by which people are viewed as difference and therefore experience themselves as different (Lewis, 2005). Schools are "race producing" institutions that actively reinforce racial identities and inequalities. School practices, policies and ideologies ignore the salience of race and disadvantages of minority children. The superficial address of the historical legacies of racism contributes to the subtle racializing of students. Teachers belonging to the White, dominant group are often unaware or unwilling to challenge their own racial identities or the dominant understanding of race. In addition, they often misinterpret the behaviour of students belonging to marginalized groups as oppositional misbehaviour. Downey and Pribesh (2004) suggest that this is truest amongst First Nations and Black students. They also found that black students are consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than their non-Black peers. However this same pattern did not persist when students were evaluated by Black teachers. In a 2003 report by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, it was revealed that many people believe that zero tolerance behaviour policies are "culturally insensitive and [single] out black males for punishment" (Davies, p.212). African Americans and First Nations people are described as "involuntary minorities" in Davies' work in that they have been acted upon through acts of colonization resulting in their minority status (p.212).

While the dominant groups sees schools as "neutral and effective institutions that offer opportunities and pose few barriers", voluntary minorities see school as places offering

opportunities sought which is often the reason for immigration (Davies, p.212). Involuntary minorities see these institutions as oppressive (something the legacy of residential schools in the Aboriginal community exemplifies (RCAP, 1996) and may view public education as an institution which serves to neutralize their culture (Ogbu & Fordham in Davies p.213). However, many Black Canadians are "voluntary minorities" despite often having a heritage of involuntary migration forced by the transatlantic slave trade of the 1800s. Manitoba's Black population is arguably formed of "voluntary minorities" many of whom emigrated from the Caribbean in the 1960s (Sandiford, 2002) and more recently, immigrants and refugees from various African countries (based on 2006 census information). According to Davies and Guppy, American based research has conflicting conclusions in terms of the relationship of African-American students and the school.

In regards to the rationale explaining the adoption of American hip hop culture by Black Canadian youth, one could argue that they are identifying more with Black hip hop culture of the United States as they are not being exposed to Black culture in other contexts (Walcott, 2008). Hip hop seems to serve as a unifying force between Black youth of African, Caribbean and Afro-Canadian heritage. Is this their response to the divisiveness of their parents' generations? This often oppositional subculture being claimed and formed by Black Canadians is often manifested within the school system as underachievement. Davies concluded that "[low] achievers tend to react by expressing a mild indifference and apathy towards their studies" (p.220). He went on to say that a historical legacy of assimilation that has been imposed upon Black youth in schools can result in the reluctance to integrate into the school which is representative of the dominant culture (p.212).

It is suggested by Davies (2006) that "[g]endered and racial identities appear to be reinforced in extracurricular activities such as school sports rather than in the core curriculum" (p.221). According to Davies (2006), sociologists have interpreted student subcultures as "the reaction of low achievers to blocked opportunities, as youthful versions of working class cultures, or as expressions of gendered and racial identities" (p.221).

The relationship of minority youth and schools is influenced by the wider context of race relations (Davies, 2006, p. 212). The long historical legacies (Walcott, 2008) and geographical context (Lieberson, 1961; Ogbu, 1992; Fordham and Ogbu in Davies, 2006) also influence the performance of ethno-racial groups. "And so in this dichotomy of race, 'Those who are not White are presumed to be recent arrivals and often told to go 'back where they came from'" (Rosenblum and Travis 2000:16 in Codjoe, p.278).

Paul Willis (1970) in Davies minimizes the role of race and claims that the subculture of school rebellion is largely class based and is rooted in the notion that the culture of school and its related activities do not hold relevance for the future in store for lower/working class youth. The irrelevance leads to disengagement as it is not viewed as purposeful activity. Sir Ken Robinson's work on change paradigms echoed this (http://vimeo.com/17439081). Here he argued that the current school system in the Western world is still designed based on the needs of the industrial revolution which is no longer relevant to this day and age. This dated system privileges members of the dominant society while streaming Black youth and other youth belonging to other marginalized groups. Disengagement leads to higher instances of diagnoses of conditions such as ADHD (Robinson, no date), a label that is given to Black male youth in disproportionate numbers (Noguera, 2008). Rather than restructure the system, Black youth are further pushed out of it.

McIntosh (2009), Moore (2009) and hooks (in Stewart, 1990) all challenge the reluctance of dominant society to address the privilege that come with being White. They argue that our discomfort with confronting issues of privilege only results in sustaining the privilege of the few and the disenfranchisement of most.

> "Words like *other* and *difference* are taking the place of commonly known words deemed uncool or too simplistic, words like *oppression*, *exploitation*, and *domination*. *Black* and *white* in some circles are becoming no-no's, perpetuating what some folks see as stale and meaningless binary oppositions. Separated from a political and historical context, *ethnicity* is being reconstituted as the new frontier, accessible to all, no passes or permits necessary, where attention can now be focused on the production of a privileged, commodifiable discourse in which race becomes synonymous with culture" (1990: 52-2. original emphasis) (bell hooks in Stewart, 2009, p.89).

My take on the literature is that schools do not create spaces in which to appropriately challenge white privilege. How educators might begin to hold these conversations within staffrooms, classrooms and the community will be explored in chapter five. Stewart identifies a pressure felt within institutions of higher learning to ignore these concerns which could be transposed to the school system. He says that there is often "pressure that non-white academics feel to hide their concerns about identity in less threatening language as to not force colleagues to recognize power of their own privilege and the discomfort associated with this recognition (Stewart, p.89). Until the system itself is ready to challenge the oppressiveness that exists within its very structures, it will continue to privilege the few and marginalize Black and other disenfranchised youth.

The questions that follow arose from the themes unearthed in this study and were supported by the literature:

- Does the absence of Black culture, in all of its complexity and diversity, within the formal and informal curriculum impact the engagement and achievement of Black youth?

- Does the approach that teachers take to addressing issues of race have an impact on the performance of Black youth in school? What if race is ignored altogether?

- Does the absence of Black role models in school and the greater community influence the identity development of Black youth?

- Do Black youth feel as though there is an expectation, positive or negative, around if and what they achieve in school?

- What role/responsibility does the school have in guaranteeing the success of Black youth? The community?

- Are the challenges that Black youth face in schools that are unique from their White counterparts?

2.8 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to engage is the uncomfortable process of naming and challenging the aspects of the school system that disengages and fails Black youth in Winnipeg schools. "Without the substantial and professional influence of people for whom race is a daily lived experience, the academic humanities begin to look even more elitist, distanced, and irrelevant than they already do for many people" (Stewart, p.121). The hope is to use my influence to perhaps make the institution just a little more accessible and less oppressive to Black

youth. While I recognize that other factors beyond race, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, can impact one's experiences and the lens through which one views life, the focus of this study is on the impact of race and identity as a Black youth.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I will describe the methodological procedures that were followed in my study of the academic achievement and school engagement of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. This is my story about someone else's story. It is a dialogue between three voices. Through the stories of the parents, the youth and my own stories, I was able to come up with the themes which were supported by the literature. The methodology I chose was a qualitative framework with aspects of narrative inquiry in an effort to most authentically represent the voices of the participants. As discussed on page 15, this mixed methodology best honours the stories being shared by the participants in this study while critically challenging their absence from the academic rhetoric.

3.1 Background

In this chapter, I will describe the methodological procedures that were followed in my study of the academic achievement and school engagement of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. This is my story about someone else's story. The methodology I chose was a qualitative framework with aspects of narrative inquiry in an effort to most authentically represent the voices of the participants.

3.2 Context

As a researcher, I was interested in the perspectives of Black youth and their parents in regard to their level of school engagement and academic performance. This study was intended to provide a central Canadian perspective on an issue that has already been explored in other parts of the country (primarily, Toronto, Montreal and province of Nova Scotia) and in the United States. My interest in this topic developed from conversations within the Black community and the distinct differences I observed between my experiences and the experiences of many Black students I worked with.

3.3 Sample

This study centered around seventeen different stories. Eight youth and eight parents participated in one on one interviews interviewed: and my own. Their backgrounds represented the diversity of Black culture in Canada. All of the youth had to identify as Black in order to participate in this study. Some were born and raised entirely in Canada while others arrived as immigrants or refugees from the West Indies or Africa. The socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants varied greatly with some living in more affluent, suburban neighbourhoods and others residing in government supported housing. Some of the young people had positive recollections of their schooling experiences while others were challenged to find a sense of belonging in school. Some of these young people were still in the process of navigating through the school system and others had been out of it for a while and were able to look back on their experiences.

The parents who shared their stories were equally diverse. Their one similarity was that they identified themselves as being the parents of Black children who had attended Winnipeg

schools. Some of these parents did not fully share the cultural identity of their children. Perhaps they were of a different race or had been raised "back home" which resulted in a perspective different from the Canadian born and bred perspective of their children. Some were raising their children in single parent households while others shared parenting responsibilities with a spouse. Some held multiple university degrees; some struggled to complete their high school education.

And the seventeenth story is, of course, my own. My experiences as a Black youth growing up in Winnipeg schools and now as an educator in the same system I was a student in have influenced the lens through which I see these stories through.

In order to obtain participants, I circulated a handout to African, Black and Caribbean community organizations, various associations with focuses on education, and personal networks. Interested individuals were asked to contact me directly. (See Appendix 1 for amended letter requesting participants and appendix 2 for the handout.)

While I did not actively recruit youth from the Winnipeg School Division, my employer at the time of my data collection, I did notify the school division of my research. Participants were recruited through community contacts, not through schools. When I decided to pursue this topic of research, I had assumed that it would be easy to find participants as I had been present for so many discussions on this topic within the Black community. But people were quite reluctant to speak with me. I believe that this may have been because I was no longer just representing the community but had moved into the formal forum of academia.

3.4 Why the Study of Black Youth in Winnipeg Schools

There are a number of factors that may contribute to the level of engagement and achievement of all youth in school. This study specifically focuses on the experiences of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. My experience as an educator juxtaposed against my participation in the Black community provided me with a depth of understanding on this topic.

The choice to focus on adolescent participants was made as they would have had a longer relationship with the school system and would be able to better express their experiences in a critical fashion.

3.5 Participant Variables of Interest

To investigate whether the research conducted in the area of Black youth engagement and academic achievement holds true for Winnipeg, this study consisted of individual interviews with Black youth and with the parents of Black youth. The youth participant group consisted of seven Black youth between grades 9 and recent graduates (ages 14-18). Effort was made to have an equal number of males and females, representation from each grade level, and from each of the three identity groups, African, Black, and Caribbean. The youth were current high school students, recent graduates, or school leavers. I did not interview my own students. Youth participants self-identified as "Black". In allowing participants to self-identify, I also recruited participants of mixed ancestry but feel as though their self-identification as Black is sufficient grounds to include them in the study. (See Table 1 below)

The parent participant group consisted of eight parents. No age or ancestry specification was necessary. Attempts were made to have the parents of the youth participants participate in the

parent interviews. Parents did not have to self-identify as Black but had to identify themselves

as the parent of at least one Black youth who was attending or had recently attended a Winnipeg

school. (See Table 2 below)

While the relatively small sample size is somewhat limiting, it does not discount the validity

of the generalizations made based on the findings of this study.

Table 1 –Youth Participants

Youth	Approximate age	Background	
Talia	Recent graduate, female.	Canadian born & raised, father Afro Caribbean and mother Indo Caribbean.	Mother also participated in study.
Claire	Recent graduate, female.	Canadian born, lived in Caribbean for several years as a child.	Mother also participated in study.
Jeremiah	Current high school student, male.	Canadian born and educated, African ancestry.	-
Mesfin	Current high school student, male.	African born, arrived in Canada as a refugee within two years of the interview.	-
Yamenka	Current high school student, female.	African born, arrived in Canada as a refugee within two years of the interview.	-

Jenna	Recent graduate, female.	Canadian born, mother of Caribbean ancestry/birth and father of European Canadian ancestry.	Father also participated in study (H).
Brittany	Current high school student, female.	Canadian born, educated in United States and Canada, Caribbean ancestry.	Mother also participated in study (Natalie).
X	Recent graduate, male.	-	Withdrew from study.

Table 2 – Parent Participants

Parent Pseudonym	Background	Child participated in survey
Suchita	Indo Caribbean born. Immigrated to Canada as young adult.	Mother of Talia.
Vakasa	African born and educated. Immigrated to Canada as an adult.	Mother of Jeremiah.
Matthew	African born and educated. Refugee to Canada.	NA
Charlotte	Caribbean born and educated. Immigrated to Canada.	Mother to Claire.
Natalie	Caribbean born, raised and educated in Canada.	Mother to Brittany.

Howard	Canadian born and educated, European ancestry.	Father to Jenna.
Aileen	Caribbean born and educated. Two Canadian born children in Winnipeg schools.	NA
Alberta	Caribbean born and educated. Two Canadian born children in Winnipeg schools.	NA

3.6 Research Instruments and Data Collection

This research study employed the qualitative research method. This method was most appropriate as its primary goal is to encourage participants to share their knowledge, beliefs and insights about the school setting. Patton describes the role of the researcher as one where s/he asks "questions about people's experiences, inquiry into the meanings people make of their experiences" (2002, p.33). It descriptively "observe, describe and interpret settings as they are" through the use of expressive language (Hoepfl, 1997).

Qualitative researchers have a special responsibility to their subjects and their readers. Since there are no statistical tests for significance in qualitative studies, the researcher bears the burden of discovering and interpreting the importance of what is observed, and of establishing a plausible connection between what is observed and the conclusions drawn in the research report (Hoepfl, 1997).

The link between my research questions and Dei's theoretical construct makes the qualitative method a logical choice of methodology in that it seeks to create a space for the voices of marginalized people by challenging White power and privilege within the educational system. Marshall and Rossman (2011) identified some of the characteristics of qualitative interviews as: face to face conversations with the participants, immediate opportunity for follow up and clarification, and useful in obtaining nonverbal data in addition to the verbal communication. Employment of the qualitative method allowed me to engage in conversations with participants and to allow their voices to be clearly heard throughout the study. It also allowed the participants to share their perspectives in a natural setting (Hatch, 2002).

> Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal
> structured interviews. The research explores a few general topics to help uncover the
> participant's meaning perspective, but otherwise respects how the participant frames and
> structures the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative
> research – the participant's perspective on the social phenomenon of interest should
> unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it (Marshall and Rossman,
> 2011).

Representing these voices through the use of narrative, as discussed in chapter one, further reinforces the appropriateness of the qualitative method. If the method of data collection intentionally seeks to expose the complexity of the human experience through the eyes and experiences of the participant, the most logical way to represent their perspectives is through the narrative representation of their stories. Bogdan and Bilken (2003) define qualitative data analysis as "working with the data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and decided

what you will tell others (p.145). The use of personal narrative throughout the research helps

expose the bias that I bring as the researcher to my analysis of the data.

3.7 Procedures

Interviews lasted no more than 90 minutes and concerned the questions included in

appendices 3 and 4. Interviews were held at a time and location that was mutually agreed on and

took place between December 2008 and August 2009. Participants were also provided with the

option to provide additional written feedback based on the questions subsequent to the interview.

This was intended to provide participants with the opportunity to share information they may not

have felt comfortable sharing with the interviewer in conversation. Throughout the interviews, I

kept notes of my personal impressions.

There have been no risks or benefits to the participant identified in this study other than

the participants' role in providing data for analysis. Interviews were tape recorded to facilitate

transcription. No compensation was given for participation in this study. It was purely

voluntary and participants had the option to opt out at any point in the study by simply making a

written request to me. I asked for a written request so that I would have a written record of the

request. No requests were made to opt out.

3.8 Ethics

All participants were asked to review and sign a letter of consent. This letter clarified their

ability to withdraw from the study at any point in time and allowed them to request a copy of the

final research study. This information was reviewed orally with the participants prior to their

interviews. The students interviewed were not students with whom I had a teacher-student

relationship. One component of this study involves interviewing young people who may be

under the age of 18. In this case, parental consent will be obtained in addition to the consent of

the youth. This research did not involve the deception of any participants. All should benefit as

this study created a forum for the voices of marginalized youth and also provided an opportunity

to develop viable solutions in response to Black youth disengagement. Participants did not

receive compensation for their participation.

Pseudonyms were assigned and any identifying information altered in order to protect the

identity of all participants. All data was kept under lock at the researcher's home and will be

destroyed one year after the completion of this project.

Informed consent was obtained in writing from every participant, whether students or

parents. For participants under the age of 18, parental consent was obtained <u>in addition</u> to the

participant consent. The letters of consent are attached as Appendices 4 and 5.

When all interviews were completed, transcribed, and analyzed, all participants had the

opportunity to receive a written summary and interpretation of the results. Tape recordings of

the interviews were transcribed only by me. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and these

were used in all written or oral analyses, interpretations, and summaries of the study.

3.9 Data Analysis

Once completed, interviews were transcribed then analyzed. Common/repeated themes within and between the interviews were identified for further analysis and research.

The ideas presented in the next chapter emerged from my interpretation of the data provided through the individual interviews. The themes were developed based on their recurrence in more than one interview and represent the perspective of the participants. All indented material and material within quotation marks are direct quotes from the participant interviews. They were chosen based on their ability to represent the shared or greater theme in most cases. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

3.10 Summary

In chapter 3, I have attempted to provide an explanation as to the methodology of this study. The intent of this study is to determine whether there is a perceived difference in the academic achievement and school engagement of Black youth compared to other youth and if so, to identify what this difference is as defined by Black youth and their parents Further, this study will attempt to identify what they attribute this division to, and to provide a forum in which to explore what can be done in response to perceived differences in achievement and/or engagement all the while respectfully sharing the voice and the stories of the participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduced in chapter one, Dei's framework of anti-racist discursive challenges the notion of white privilege in educational institutions and the greater society. In this chapter, this framework is applied to the six primary themes that arose from the research. These themes are: naming, representation, optimism and hopefulness, identity, roles and responsibilities of the both the majority and minority, and finally, athletics. The stories of the students and parents interviewed as a part of this research project will give voice to their personal experiences and the literature will demonstrate the broader nature of the tales they tell.

4.1   Naming

"She has internalized the lesson that acknowledging race in Canada is tantamount to exposing your own racism. Under that strict set of rules, the safest strategy is to insist that you simply don't notice race."

-Anthony Stewart (2009, p. 64)

It is my view that one's definition of what it means to be Black can often speak volumes to the internalization of positive or negative stereotypes. Understanding one's perception can inform the understanding of one's relationship to schooling and the school system. How a youth

defines themselves as a Black person can be influenced by their cultural community, peer group, the media and by their parents. In order to confront the legacy of racism, one must first acknowledge its existence. But what happens when an individual is uncomfortable with this process of naming? How might it influence their identity development and in turn, their success in the school environment? (Tatum, 1997; Egbo, 2009)

Jenna is a young woman of both European and Caribbean ancestry. She was relatively successful in school and identified herself as a "*girly girl*," choosing dance and music over athletics. Throughout much of our conversation, Jenna spoke of the experiences of Black youth as the experiences of the other. She did not relate her experience to what she felt was the typical story of Black youth in schools in spite of feeling great pride for her Caribbean heritage. I was able to connect with Jenna's upbringing as it was similar to my own. Perhaps the reason for disconnect could be explained by exploring the narrative of her White father.

Howard readily welcomed me into his home to share his story for the purpose of this research. He looked relaxed as we sat next to the pool in his backyard on a hot summer's day. Yet from the outset, Howard seemed uncomfortable using the word "Black" and seemed to hesitate before employing it in relation to his daughter or his wife's identities. When asked to define what it meant to be Black, his response spoke to his attempts at creating a "colour blind" environment.

"Well, I'm not Black obviously. Uhm, obviously there is a visual distinction and certain there is tremendous variety amongst people who are visible minority and, uhm, it's odd

because I, my wife is … is black and I have, I don't see her as a colour. I never have. And when we were dating in high school it was interesting cause, you know, people would comment to me after meeting my wife, "Oh, you're wife's Black." And it's like, okay, (laughs), it's just a weird thing because I, I've never defined people or see them as a race, uhm, however other people do. And so they perceive that. I guess there's certainly cultural differences when people come here from other areas but I think most Canadian kids who are visible minorities to being Black generally are viewed, you know, as Canadian kids. You could say it's probably different than it is in the United States."

Howard went on to describe the experiences of other Black youth he was aware of in contrast to his own children.

> *"There were distinctions, yup. There were differences, yup. A lot of those kids would be getting into trouble very frequently. Dealing with failures, dealing with detentions, dealing with, uh, violence or conflict, suspensions, those types of issues. Those were never issues for our children. Never, in any way, shape or form. And that kind of a conflict environment would probably been much more my wife and her siblings experience growing up here."*

The use of the word "Black" becomes contentious in a colour blind society. And while it does not adequately describe the breadth of diversity within this particular community, it helps to unite the common history of colonization, discrimination and racism. Race, despite being

societal construct, has a very real role in our society. As a result, despite its artificial nature, the process of naming is an important one.

The participants' responses to the question "What does it mean to be Black?" differed greatly. In order to participate in this study, youth participants had to be willing to identify as Black and parent participants had to be willing to identify their children as Black. However, the practical use and personal comfort with this label seemed to vary based on their individual involvement and exposure to Black culture, in its many forms.

In stark contrast to youth Jenna and her father's near aversion to the word, youth Claire and her mother spoke of the pride, sense of community and history connected to being Black. Juxtaposed against Jenna's definition of Black as, *"There's a lot that comes with it I guess. Obviously skin colour, hair texture, that kind of thing"*, sits Claire's definition. She saw being Black as "*being a part of a community*". "*I was born into it and it's something I'll always be. It's a part of me…it's that group that always be a part of from the day that I'm born to the day that I'll die*". She goes on to say, "*It's more than the skin colour. We have such a history and we've been through so much as a people. You know, it's about knowing your history and continuing to live and strive for excellence as a community*".

Both of these young ladies were approximately the same age but perhaps the difference in upbringing led to their relationship. In stark contrast to Jenna's experiences in predominately white school and social settings, Claire grew up immersed in the Black community and spent some time living in Jamaica and attending elementary school there. By high school, Claire's peer group consisted primarily of other Black youth while Jenna was one of a handful in a large predominantly white school. One must question not only the impact that the difference in their

experiences had with their interpretation of what it is to be Black but also their relationship with schooling.

Jenna felt that race was not at all a factor in school success. "*You just do your best and you try hard*". Ironic in that Jenna's father had revealed that the notion of trying hard and doing your best had been racialized in their family. When asked to speak on the relationship of Black youth and schools from the perspective of his family, Howard responded that "*that's so much of a Black issue as it is a cultural issue*". He seemed to be very deliberate in his speech, carefully choosing his words, as he continued.

> "*Uh… academics were really quite a high priority for us growing up. They may have been less of a priority for my wife's family. Uhm [seems to be very deliberate in his speech, carefully choosing his words] they were, they didn't particularly excel academically, uhm, although it was really important for my wife that our kids did. And for me speaking. She didn't perhaps embrace that cultural idea. A lot of her extended family haven't done particularly well academically or … pursued academics as … but our children have excelled academically. And I would say that's the result of both of our, the way we think. It certainly isn't just me anyways. She was very active in their upbringing with reading and school so…*"

> "*I would say…our kids weren't very involved in the Black community. That again probably came more from my wife's direction. She had grown up culturally, a lot of her social peers in high school were white but her cultural experience was very Black,*

Caribbean. So she was very involved in that community and didn't like a lot of the things

that that community reflected. Perhaps I'm guarding my words here a little bit. But she

didn't want her children as well to necessarily grow up with a strong participation in that

community. She had concerns".

Claire gave a more political response when asked about the relationship between Black youth and school success, one that recognized the legacy of oppression facing them in schools.

"*Black people come from this background where we're always put down. To excel, you*

know, one of the ways that we can excel is not just to work on our skills but learn stuff

like, uhm, diving into education, by being the strongest student we possibly can. Cause

especially when you're Black, you sometimes get the feeling that a lot of eyes are on you.

More pressure's on you."

Yet in spite of this response, Claire characterized her experience in Winnipeg high schools as having been tumultuous. Her struggle to successfully graduate was directly tied to the lack of space she felt was created for Black students in the high school she attended for the majority of her senior years education.

After years of loving school, one specific incident changed Claire's feeling towards schools and educators in a very profound way. She told the story of a confrontation with one of her school's principals that led to what she and her mother felt was an extreme reaction to expel

her from the school in what was to be her graduating year.

> "*And it was also [at] "Sunnydale's" high point and everybody sort of felt like they were,*
>
> *uhm, cleaning up the school of Black students or just the students they felt were*
>
> *misbehaving … it felt like she [the school administrator] was always trying to intimidate*
>
> *us and none of us would really break. And I just felt like she caught a hold of me and*
>
> *wanted to make an example out of me*".

Claire essentially absolved the vice principal of culpability in the matter saying, "*it's not really necessarily personal. I was just in that place, at that time*". But when asked what she learned from this experience, the message she and her peer group heard from the school was loud and clear, "*Black youth don't belong in [this] school. They are just in the way*".

Mesfin, unlike Claire and Jenna, was not born in Canada. He was born and raised between three different African countries before coming to Canada on his own as a refugee. He had a positive connection to the word "Black". It was a label that he was happy to wear. "*Actually, I'm proud of what I am … some people they might not like calling someone Black, they might think it's colour discrimination but personally, me, I'm Black and I'm proud of what I am*".

Alberta associated being Black with challenges and perseverance. "*You think you always have to be better at everything because you're not going to be given opportunities easily.*

You have to work at everything you get". While the process of naming or labeling is, as Anthony Stewart describes, "*insufficient, a generalization standing in for what is impossible to express exactly…but we settle on such expressions for the sake of expediency, to get us where we need to go*"*,* it could be argued that the process of naming one's self or one's Self is an empowering process (p.21).

Employing Dei's framework to these stories I suggest that we, as educators, must confront the internalized notions we hold about "Blackness". Only once we challenge the stereotypes, positive and negative, associated with the Black cultural identity can we begin unpacking them. If we, as educators choose to ignore the distinct identity of our students, we risk further alienating them from the school system and from themselves. When young people are struggling to define and accept who they are, walking into an environment that their reflection is absent from does not serve to support them. Ignoring and/or avoiding the absence of this reflection does not alleviate the issue, rather in compounds it. We need to be open to acknowledging the fact that race or issues or racism, perceived or real, can contribute to the negative experience of Black youth in schools.

4.2 Representation

"You can't be what you can't see". –Marian Wright Edelman (Founder & President of the Children's Defense Fund, http://www.missrepresentation.org/about-us/)

It is important for students to see positive examples of themselves reflected in both the larger community and the school context. This helps to broaden their definition of Blackness and alleviate the pressure of being "the only" or the representative of Black culture to mainstream society. This pressure can often lead to students "acting white" in an effort to "elevate" the perceptions of others related to their race or to adopt the definitions associated with the subcultural group of Black hip hop culture. Positive examples broaden the definition of what it means to be Black and provides students with an opportunity to associate it with qualities beyond musicality, sexuality and athleticism (Solomon in Davies, 2006; Walcott, 2008; West, 2011).

Yamenka was a female high school student, originally from Central Africa. She spent two years in a refugee camp in another African country before moving to Winnipeg one year prior to our conversation. English was not her first language and led to what was initially a very short, clipped conversation. I soon switched into French with led to a change in disposition and a very animated narrative.

Yamenka dismissed race as nothing more than a colour yet stories of racism dominated our conversation. Everything seemed to be a case of "*les Blancs contre les Noirs*" (the Whites versus the Blacks). She said that her purpose in attending school was to learn and that she did not concern herself with how others might perceive her. Her goals were to master the English language, earn her high school diploma, graduate from university and get a good job. But she recognized that not everyone managed to make it through the bullying and teasing brought on by racism unscathed. She told stories of members of her community feeling uncomfortable in Winnipeg schools, stories of children saying "*Je ne veux pas aller à cette école parce que les Blancs se moquent de moi*". (I don't want to go to that school because the White kids make fun

of me.) This is a narrative that hit close to home for Yamenka as it is the story of her younger

brother. She told me of how he attended an elementary school with a limited number of

immigrants and Visible Minorities. One day, her mother was contacted by the school as they

were concerned that her brother was not working in class and was becoming a behavioural issue.

It wasn't until he was confronted for this bad behaviour by his mother that he finally revealed

that he had been embarrassed by his White peers on a number of occasions after trying to

contribute to class discussions. He chose to withdraw to cope with the ridicule, an action that

was misinterpreted as opposition.

Having completed most of her schooling in African countries in predominantly Black

schools, Yamenka acknowledged that "*les impolis*" or rude people exist in every school

community regardless of how diverse or representative a teaching staff. However, she felt as

though teachers needed to be given the tools to address and confront racism. In her experience,

adult interventions led to positive changes in the attitudes of young people. Ultimately, when it

came to confronting issues of race in schools and the challenges that Black youth may encounter,

"*C'est l'école qui a la responsabilité*" or the school has the ultimate responsibility.

I began my initial conversation with Yamenka in English which she said she understood

and spoke efficiently. Approximately ten minutes into the interview, I had already asked all of

the questions from my protocol but the last one. I asked Yamenka what she would change about

schools and began to list things such as smoking, disrespect towards adults, and racism. As she

struggled with finding a word in English, I came to the realization that Yamenka was thinking in

French. Sure enough, the moment that I responded to her in French, the tone of the interview

changed and dialogue began in earnest. In addition to what I learned from her story, this

language barrier raised an important question for consideration. Speaking the same language,

whether it is literal or figurative, goes a long way in creating a space in which young people feel accepted. How many students are not producing in schools simply because they are unable to communicate effectively with their teachers in the language of schooling? How does the lack of cultural capital impact their overall academic success and school engagement? This is a point reinforced by my own experience in that I have frequently had the parents of Black students call me specifically because they feel that I have influence over their child that other non-Black teachers do not.

Youth Claire hesitantly proposed the idea that perhaps finding some way of creating a critical mass of Black and other minority youth in schools might remedy this situation. She felt that "creating a quota of Black students and Black teachers" might create more opportunities for students of colour to see themselves represented in schools. Her experience in Caribbean schools, where she saw her history reflected in the formal curriculum, was in stark contrast to the void she found in Winnipeg schools. Claire considered the idea of Blackcentric schools (Dei, 1996).

> "*If everybody looks like you and sort of acts like you, you know, there, I mean, even though the school itself would create a kind of separation, once you're in the school you wouldn't feel that separation. You wouldn't feel singled out, you wouldn't feel like people were looking at you, you know. It's almost as though it would feel more normal I think if there was that kind of situation*".

An absence of diversity can lead to students feeling further alienated when encountering overt incidents of racism (Noguera, 2008; Egbo, 2009). While youth Jeremiah painted a pleasant picture of his experience in school which suggested almost a raceless environment, further probing revealed more layers to his story. He reluctantly identified some encounters with racism

in junior high but did not wish to discuss them in detail. What he did say was that he felt as though people had matured since then and that his current school had a much larger Black population, suggesting that this was in some ways a deterrent to further incidents involving race.

So the student who, earlier in our conversation, did not feel a need for a reflective curriculum or workforce described himself as feeling more comfortable in a school with a slightly more significant Black population. At the same time, he also struggled with the notions of Black identity that he was confronted with in society. He was very concerned about how others perceived him, something not unusual amongst adolescents, and put effort into going against the stereotype. He felt the responsibility to "*not do things that people would expect a Black person to do, like, [wearing] baggy clothes and ... doing bad in school ... do the opposite of that to prove them wrong ... to show that not only Black people are like that*".

My impression of Brittany was that she was an incredibly timid teenage girl when we met one winter afternoon. Her voice was barely audible and her responses very short. I found it very difficult to encourage her to elaborate on her responses and was somewhat surprised when she volunteered an encounter she had with racism not too long before our conversation. Perhaps my questions brought up the feeling of anxiety she felt with the incident and caused her to unpack the incident with me a little.

A girl she thought she was friends with began teasing her one day, saying that she liked a boy in their grade just because he was one of the only other Black students. This same girl later called her a "nigger". She wished she would have used any other name. Brittany didn't feel very much adult support in this situation. She wondered if a Black teacher would have reacted differently.

What conclusions might a young person draw from being one of the only members of their racial group in a school? First might be the notion that they do not belong in schools. Second is perhaps that they bear the burden of representing their entire race the other members of their school community. As a child, and even now as an adult, I felt that I was often called upon to be the expert on all things Black.

The first conclusion causes one to imagine the experience of the lone Black youth within a classroom or school. As Anthony Stewart suggests, the weight of representing one's race can become paralytic.

"Carrying that kind of weight may be enough to discourage regular attendance in a class on a daily basis, possibly further reinforcing negative stereotypes already silently or not-so-silently held by fellow students or the professor. Overcoming that sense of discouragement is hardly impossible…the added pressure to represent everyone else who happens to look like you, because they are not there to speak for themselves…"(Stewart, 2009, p.71).

The second conclusion creates the conditions for apathy or racial myopic behaviours. If integration was more common place, perhaps there would be less hesitancy to confront issues of race in authentic ways rather than ignoring them for fear of creating polarized environments or singling out individuals.

Many of the youth interviewed identified substitute teachers as the only non-White teachers they had in their time in Winnipeg schools. What subconscious message does this send? There is often little respect for substitute teachers from both students and staff. They are viewed as subpar teachers who could not find full time employment. They are thrown into less than

ideal situations where they are expected to engage a classroom full of students who are unfamiliar to them with content that is foreign to them with little to no context. And that can be the best case scenario. Often times, classroom teachers are ill prepared for receiving substitute teachers and they are left trying to maintain a captive audience on the fly. If these are the situations that our students are seeing Black and other minority teachers in, what is the likelihood that they will perceive these individuals as competent, confident professionals? This serves to reinforce the notion of under achievement within community of colours and the idea that perhaps there is not a relevant space for Black youth within the school system (Tatum, 1997; Noguera, 2008; Dei, 2008; Contento, 1993).

Anthony Stewart borrows from the work of bell hooks in his discussion of representation, or lack thereof. "Her term "only" makes clear how vulnerable the member of a minority group can feel when that person is the "only" member of a particular group present. The term is useful because of how it crystallizes the effects of the desire for implicit approval." (Stewart, p.95) He goes on to discuss how a symptom of "only-ness" becomes a rejection of activities that appear to be "White" as the lack of representation within educational institutions can lead to a resistance of formal education (Stewart, p.117).

In chapter seven of "Race Matters", Cornel West (1994) explored the physicality and sexuality of Black Americans. He linked this to the legacy of colonialism and slavery where the only power Blacks often had was their physical strength. This strength often led to them being feared by their masters. He suggested that the ultra macho persona of the Black male athlete was a form of resistance against White society. Both the stories of the participants and the literature support the need for the presence of positive Black role models in the lives of Black youth. These role models serve to challenge the stereotypes and liberate young people from a narrowly

defined version of Blackness. It shifts the tone of the historical relationship of Black youth to educational institutions from one of dischord to one of possibility.

4.3   Optimism and Hopefulness: The Obama Effect

"Our kids can't all aspire to be the next LeBron (James, a basketball star) or (rapper) Lil Wayne. I want them aspiring to be scientists and engineers, doctors and teachers, not just ballers and rappers … I want them aspiring to be president of the United States." –

President Barak Obama (2009)

An absence of positive Black role models in the Canadian media is felt strongly by the Black community. The election of the first Black president in the United States of America created space for a movement away from expectations of failure to a spirit of optimism and hopefulness in Black communities around the world, including Winnipeg.

Charlotte was born and raised in the Caribbean before moving to Canada as a teenager. She completed her high school education here. Her daughter, Claire, was also a participant in this study. Charlotte's experience had some parallels to that of her daughter. She too was pushed into athletics as one of a few Black students in her high school. *"I didn't get that kind of push to go into math or science"*. She was so bold as to say that little had changed in that area since her own high school experience. *"I think the school goes out of their way to attract Black youth [to sports]"*. Charlotte felt that it was vital that schools include the positive history of Blacks in their curriculums, not just the study of slavery, in order to celebrate the achievements

of Blacks and to give Black youth a sense of pride. U.S. President Barak Obama was one

contemporary figure she felt could be explored in the classroom. When asked if she felt his

presidency would have an impact on the Black community, she responded, "*I think he has, and I*

think he will".

> "*One person, maybe an Obama, might be able to make changes*" (Parent Aileen).

On a superficial level, the positive wave brought on by Obama's initial inauguration

influenced Blacks around the world, Winnipeg notwithstanding. And while this optimism and

hopefulness is to be celebrated, looking at this issue with Dei's lens of anti-racist discourse

causes one to ask, was there no other positive Black role model outside of sports and

entertainment present in mainstream media? Youth Claire shared a laugh when I mentioned that

people often say that I look like Michelle Obama. The only resemblance in my mind is perhaps

our height and our style of dress.

Parent Howard felt that there were an increasing number of role models for Black youth

that transcended athletics and entertainment.

> "[*S*]*ocial entertainment media portrays a certain stereotype for Black youth, for*
>
> *Hispanic youth, for Indo-Tropical youth, for, not very much so much for Asian youth. I*
>
> *think that stereotype is this, this rap idea with the music, drugs, sex […] I think it's a*
>
> *huge problem. I think there were for years a huge lack of really good role models in the*
>
> *Black community that, uhm, young people looked up to and wanted to be like. I think*
>
> *that's changed drastically with our new president in the United States, people like Tiger*

Woods who have so much talent, you know, and so much integrity. Uhm, Colin Powell, you know, I think of people like that, have the highest integrity, the highest achievements".

When asked if she felt schools made the effort to provide Black and other minority youth with role models, Jenna replied,

"*In my experience, I think that they try to but maybe they can't relate as much. Cause it's kind of, it's different, right? Cause you can say, there's so and so, this Caucasian person or this so and so. But the majority of people are Caucasian so it's really hard to find somebody who's not, who can be a good role model to them. But I guess now we can use Barack Obama for the Black youth [.]*"

The way Obama was cited as a positive role model in many of the interviews in this study makes the case for the lack of Black history in Winnipeg schools. Was there no one before Obama? Are there no great Blacks in Canadian history? One would think, based on the way he is lauded, that he is the first and only. The intent here is not to minimize the enormity of what it means that the United States elected a Black president, but our legacy of greatness did not begin with Barack Obama. There are many who paved the way and who are lifting him on their shoulders. But we are apathetic and ignorant to that rich legacy. Many of our own young people, not to mention youth from other cultural groups, are not aware of the long journey in Canada of Blacks and that is something that needs to be corrected.

On the basis of history and demographics, it is far less probable that Canada will see a Black political leader in the near future but perhaps we might see an Aboriginal Prime Minister within my lifetime? My hope is that with the occasion of a Black American president, it will become less of an obstacle for society to see members of underprivileged groups in positions of power and privilege. Let his be the lesson learned from the story of Obama and the inspiration he seems to bring. What are the short and long term effects of his presidency? Will failures reinforce perception of inadequacy of the entire ethnocultural group?

"… [I]t's easy to start thinking (or to imbibe the perception subconsciously) that black people, for instance, just don't do these things. We get so little practice seeing people of colour …" (Stewart, p.75).

Obama's call for a renewed sense of personal responsibility among African-Americans, urging Black families to set the bar higher for their children is one that resonated with many of the participants in this study. I would suggest that this is connected to the need to be represented.

I contend that the success of Blacks and other members of marginalized groups cannot be seen as exceptions but rather as achievable realities in order to inspire youth of colour. We, as educators, much challenge the way in which we present the voices and images of marginalized people within our schools. Do we focus on the fact that Shakespeare was a White author when we study his works with our students or just the idea that he was a great author? The latter is most common in Winnipeg schools yet when we present our students with authors from disenfranchised groups; we often subconsciously support the notion that for a member of one of these groups to be an accomplished author is an anomaly.

When addressing the predilection to presenting these cases as exceptions to the rule, Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. challenges us to consider the historical rational behind the imbalance. He asks, "How many Obamas are at the bottom of the ocean?" (Moore, 2009).

4.4   Identity

"So why do some Black youth constantly deny their Canadian identity even when they are born in Canada? There are so many reasons for this, and perhaps the biggest of them all is how we perceive the image of a Canadian. A contributor to this is image is the school curriculum." - Kai James (2001, p.17)

Canada's apolitical stance in regards to race, and our tendency as Canadians to focus on our historical treatment of Blacks in juxtaposition to the United States of America, reflects a sense of apathy. We view our Canadian identity as one of tolerance and politeness. We have built our international identity on these characteristics. Challenging the question of identity forces us to be a little less polite and to acknowledge the impact of racism in our country's legacy and our personal position in terms of the privilege we may hold. Furthermore, the absence of a Black identity in Canada leads to the adoption of an American based, hip hop centred identity that is often a far cry from the reality of Winnipeg's Black youth and the communities that they live in.

Talia was 18 years old when we spoke and in the process of complete an additional year of high school in an effort to reach graduation. Her mother is of West Indian ancestry and very much engaged in anti-racist education. Her father is Black and lives in the Caribbean. Her

mother, Suchita, asked if could stay in the room prior to the interview and Talia agreed to this.

Mom sat quietly in the far corner of the room throughout the interview, taking in what her

daughter was saying. Talia very rarely looked up to make eye contact with her mother.

Talia described her high school years in less than favourable terms. "*I guess I sort of felt*

left out, I don't know why. I just didn't feel like I belonged or anything". Rather than being seen

as a stereotypical Black youth, she chose to avoid certain activities despite her interest in them.

In her experience, Black youth were perceived as inattentive, class clowns, and "*sort of loud*".

Talia's struggle to define herself against this stereotype extended beyond just avoiding certain

activities. She isolated herself from other Black youth because she "*didn't want to be seen as*

like them".

It wasn't that she was ashamed of her cultural identity. It was that she noticed that those

students were treated differently by other students and by the school staff. She recounted the

story of sitting in class next to a Black boy. Students in that class were allowed to play their

music on the computers in the room. When this Black boy put his hip hop music on, the teacher

told him that it was inappropriate despite the fact that two White girls were listening to the same

genre of music. This led to her belief that the teacher's reaction was, consciously or

unconsciously, due to race.

Other than an Aboriginal custodian, Talia does not recall having any other

marginalized groups represented on the staff at her high school. She did recall one Black

substitute teacher who "*acted like an Uncle*". She believed that had there been more teachers

like him on staff, she would have felt a stronger sense of belonging. "*I think it would have been*

better for my actual earning … having somebody higher up would probably make you more

comfortable, help you focus … there would be closeness even if you're not close at all".

In Talia's opinion, race should not even exist. She found "Black" impossible to define

because of the many complexities that come with one's racial identity. But at the same time, she

presented the notion of being "whitewashed", that is, when members of minority groups act in

line with the stereotypes associated with being White. Throughout the conversation, she,

perhaps inadvertently, defined Black or the stereotypes associated with Black identity. For

example, athleticism. She recognized the diversity and cultural differences belonging to the

Black experience but said that "*from the outside, they just see Black*".

Issues of identity can be closely linked to the lack of representation or misrepresentation

of Blacks in the larger community. For instance, the response of Talia's teacher to the Black

student and his rap music cemented in her and the negative perception that her teacher had of

that Black boy and in turn, Black people. Talia's impression of the situation was that by virtue of

their white identity, the girls listening to the same music went unchallenged in class. How

welcoming an environment did that classroom become for Talia, a young woman who was

clearly looking for a way to define herself?

Howard's perspective on this is as follows:

"[*T*]*here's a real division in that community … One part of that community is very, very,*

uhm, academically inclined. Very supportive of education, very supportive of their

children's successes and their, uh, they have to do well. And, uh…there's another part of

that society that's far less academically inclined. It's, I won't say stereotypical cause I

don't think that's fair because it varies so distinctly in the Black community. I'll speak just from the Caribbean community. That's my experience. Ah, which is, you know, generally not as likely to work very hard to move forward. Less likely to hold good jobs, be involved in a lot of unstable relationships, those types of experiences. Less socially perhaps stable relationships".

Youth Claire's definition of Black, one that focused on pride and a shared cultural heritage, was in contradiction with the descriptors she gave to describe her peer group in high school. The stereotype involved loud music, dancing, loitering in the halls, noisy, baggy clothes and "*ghetto girl[s]*".

Claire discussed the pressure to "act white" in our conversation. She felt as though there were expectations of failure from the moment students who looked like her walked through the classroom door. She felt that in order for teachers to think that you might have the potential to be successfully, as a Black youth, you had to make the effort not to associate with the other Black students, not participate in the same kinds of activities as the other Black students and socialize with more academically inclined groups, "*I guess which tends to be all those lovely white children*" she says sarcastically.

Claire identified two distinct levels of identity: the stereotype and shared heritage. Her understanding of how society, as represented through the institution of schooling, misunderstood Black identity created a great deal of tension for her. It led to her feeling that schools or at least her school in particular, pressured young people to conform to a white ideal in order to function

within them successfully. Non-conformist attitudes, in her experience, led to disengagement and perhaps even a certain level of persecution.

I identified with Claire's description. As a Black youth of mixed heritage, I felt as though I was in some ways excluded from Black culture as I did not fit the stereotype. Not only was I an active student, I was also very engaged in my Mennonite culture which contrasted drastically to the stereotypical image of a Black youth.

Research noted that there is an absence of a Black identity in Canada. Despite touting itself as a multicultural nation, Talia and Claire found that schools promoted a very singular definition of who belonged. Kai James (in James and Shadd, 2001) discussed this in his work. He proposed that Black youth create an identity based on the culture of hip hop music as a type of "mistaken identity" (p.18). "Through our style of dress, our vocabulary, our goals, and our own artistic expressions, we tend to identify with some of the most commercially successful artists …" (K. James in James and Shadd, 2001, p.18).

Cornel West (2012) interpreted the gangster image as a type of "civic terrorism" as Black youth resist the pressure to conform to what is seen as a White identity. This seemed to suggest that the absence of a Black Canadian identity both historical and contemporary, forced Black youth to identify with more stereotyped impressions of "Blackness".

This connected back to the two levels identified by youth Claire in our conversation. The stereotype based on hip hop culture was one of the identities she recognized and identified with. The other was based on a shared cultural heritage. Carl James explored this alternate identity in his work as well. He suggested that Black youth with immigrant backgrounds, even when they

have only ever lived in Canada, may also choose to embrace their Caribbean identity. One might argue that this imitation is out of necessity as Black youth battle to define themselves within the Canadian context where Black identity is often defined by the hip hop culture of the United States (Walcott, 2008). "They are part of a culture that those born in Canada can only imitate" (K. James in James and Shadd, 2001, p.18).

Parent Natalie felt the failure or refusal to acknowledge race was very much a part of the Canadian identity. Canadian cultural theorist David Sealy (2000: 98) stated, "The implication of this construction of Canadian identity for hegemonic constructions of Black identity is revealing: it's impossible to be both Black and Canadian at the same time, since Canada is imagined either as a place without Black people, or where the few Blacks there are well-behaved, even apolitical" (Shadd in James and Shadd, 2001, p.295).

Some of the Black youth in this study identified themselves as being successful in the school system. Despite having identified themselves as Black and chosen to participate in this study on the experiences of Black youth within the school system, they seemed to distance themselves from the topic, speaking of Black youth as an "other". This speaks to the way they have been socialized to believe that the stereotypical definition of Black is one to be rejected. Jenna identified herself as Jamaican yet when asked questions about the experiences of Black youth, used "they" instead of "we" or "some of us". Colour blind rhetoric was used as a way of avoiding the discomfort associated with confronting racism. In the case of Jenna, this rhetoric has been passed down from her parents.

Jenna's father, Howard, who was white, claimed that the race of his Black wife was not

something that he ever noticed. His discussion would reveal that he had certainly noticed but

perhaps just chose not to surface the issue. On the surface, "colour blindness" has a positive

connotation. When dissected with more critically, this apolitical position is actually quite

charged. It excuses apathetic attitudes towards issues of race and racism. Despite the fact that

the notion of race is a social construct, it is still a notion that plays a seminal role in human

interactions and cannot be ignored (McIntosh, 2009). There is a need to confront issues of race

and name them to provide validity to the experiences of Black youth in Winnipeg schools. An

important role in the development of one's personal identity is played by perception and

perspective. The very implicit nature of racism in Canada is one masked by "politeness" or

"colour blindness". In spite of this false politeness, Jenna was still able to draw some

conclusions as to her mother's perspective on traditionally Black activities. And those

impressions have been integrated into her way of thinking. She says:

> *"Uhm, I actually wanted to take hip hop but my mom was completely against it. She*
>
> *thought that when it first came out that it was street dancing. And that's all she ever saw*
>
> *it as. She said that she would pay for me to take ballet, salsa, any sort of dance class like*
>
> *that, but she would not let me take hip hop … Uhm, I guess at the time I didn't really see*
>
> *it but now I kind of see where she was coming from. Cause when it did first come out, hip*
>
> *hop was all, like, the rap and, you know, the kind of negative influence on the youth and*
>
> *stuff. And ballet's more classical, it's good training, good posture. I think it kind of*

came along with the connotation of good manners as well. And she wanted a well

behaved child, not someone rude. Hip hopper. [Giggles]"

Failure to acknowledge racism does not make it go away. Ignoring the systems of oppression that are built into the institution of education only serves to perpetuate a society where some are privileged and others will remain disadvantaged. "Other Canadians have so readily bought into this myth of Canada as a multicultural nirvana that, despite everything, so the myth goes, this is a pretty darn great country we live in. There are incidents of prejudice to be sure, but down and dirty racism, embedded in the fabric of the society and its institutions? Not here" (Shadd in James and Shadd, 2001, p.295). I asked a former student who had graduated from high school to come and share her experiences as a Black youth to some teachers participating in a workshop. When we met initially to discuss the workshop, she was not sure what she would have to contribute as she thought that her experiences in school had been positive. But when she came back a week later to present, her perspective had changed drastically. By stopping and thinking about it, she had realized that while she had not faced overt racism in school, she was able to recognize times when she felt like she didn't belong because she never saw her face reflected in the curriculum or at the front of the classroom. It was not until she was challenged to think about it that she realized the privileges she had been denied as a result of her cultural background. This was a profound learning experience for both of us and reiterated the importance of openly discussing issues of race and racism in the classroom. Only by challenging one's thinking and the way that privilege is afforded to some

and denied to others, can we create a Canadian identity that is truly inclusive (Egbo, 2009). This

type of open dialogue goes against the Canadian political sensibility of politeness.

4.5   Roles and Responsibilities of the Majority and the Minority

**"The easiest way to control people is to lower their expectations."**

–Ralph Nader in Heather jane Robertson (2012)

It is difficult to pinpoint the cause when studying the tautological nature of

disengagement. Who takes responsibility when Black youth do not feel a sense of belonging in

schools and consequently disengage and fail? Both the members of the dominant culture and the

minority play a role, however, it is important to take into consideration the fact that the minority

has been acted upon by the majority and they themselves are products of a Eurocentric system of

education and democracy that does not always create space for their voices.

Teachers who are ineffectively educated through an anti-racist lens can potentially

alienate students from minority backgrounds. This may result in student failure and

disengagement. A lack of discussion of race and culture in faculties of education may also, in

addition to inadequately preparing teacher candidates, create an uninviting atmosphere for

minorities within those faculties. Visible Minority students who disengage from school may

pass on their negative perception of school to their children in the future. Potentially strong

teachers may choose to go into other fields when they find that schools and faculties of education

are not representative or welcoming to people of colour. The end result is a lack of diversity and

awareness on issues of race and culture that sets students of colour up for failure (Contenta, 1993; Kottler, 1997; James, 2001; Dei, 1993, 1996, 2008).

Figure 1:
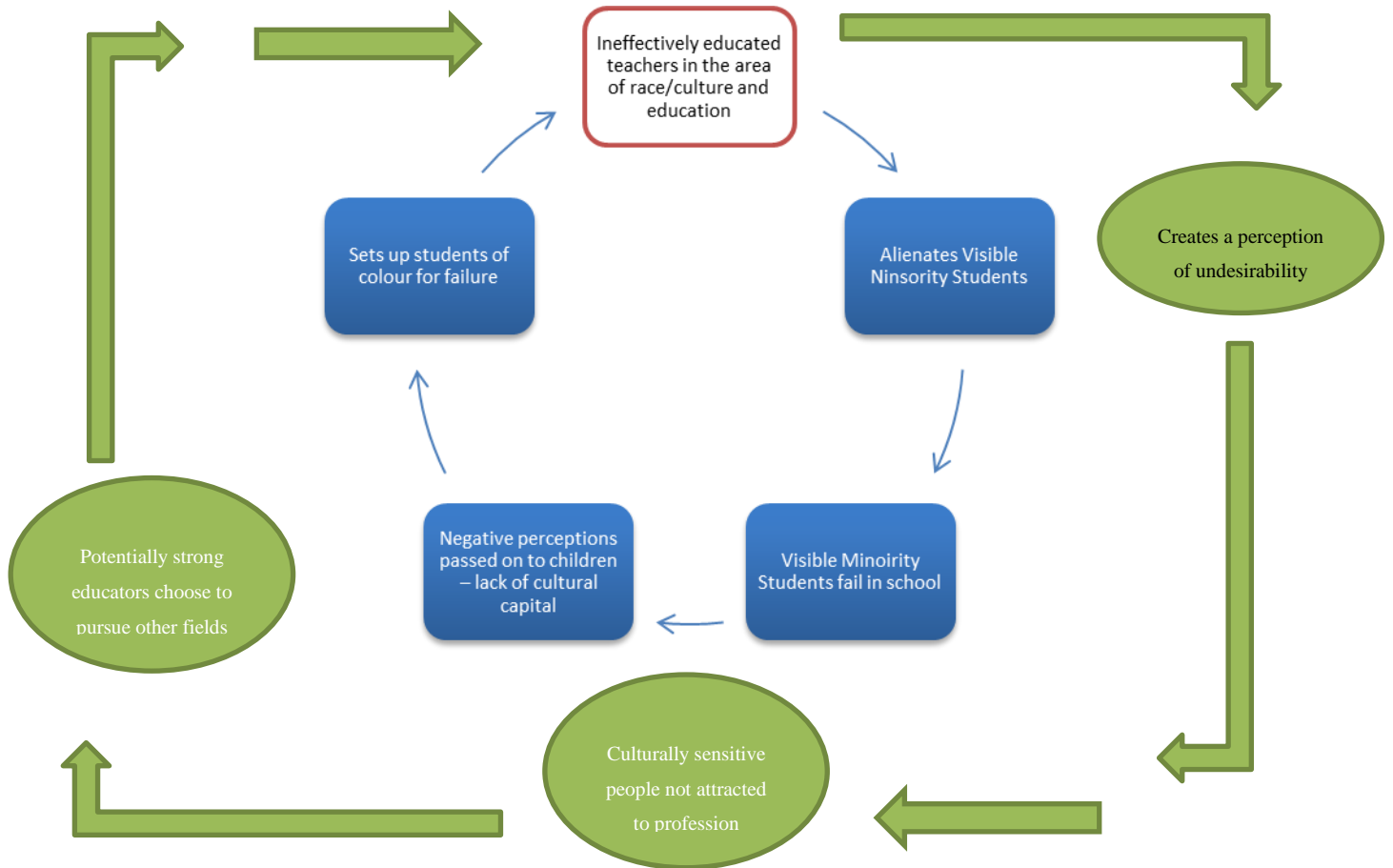
The Role/Responsibility of the Majority

"What happens in our nation's schools is truly a matter of self-preservation, for whether we can use education to transform lives and expand opportunities will ultimately determine what kind of society we live in." (Noguera, 2008, p. xxviii)

As institutions built on Eurocentric ideals, schools may have a tendency to continue to privilege those belonging to the dominant culture as a result of their very structure. They are systems based on the needs of a post industrial world (Robinson). This system must be challenged by those who function successfully within it. This means allowing one's self to become uncomfortable. Kwame Anthony Appiah explored this important role in his work. "African American identity (…) is centrally shaped by American society and institutions: it cannot be seen as constructed solely within African American communities, any more than whiteness is made only by whites"(Appiah, p.107).

The majority consists of the Department of Education, Teacher Education programs offered through universities, the professional organization (Manitoba Teacher's Society), school divisions, including Human Resource departments, senior management and school leaders, as well as, possibly, staff and students. The school is the system of structure of the majority while the teacher is the individual functioning within it.

i. The Role of the School

"We can, whenever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far." (Ron Edmonds, http://www.effectiveschools.com/freestuff.asp)

Natalie, mother of two adolescent children, held two graduate level degrees and self-described herself as Caribbean born "*Canadian bred*". She also spent some time living in the United States and her children attended school there so she felt she had a familiarity with schooling in a variety of geographical contexts.

Her daughter remembered her early school years in the United States fondly. Natalie felt as though the school helped develop a sense of pride, ownership, belonging in her daughter by focusing on the individual child. She did note that this was in a private school setting.

After moving to Winnipeg, her family faced many issues with her children not feeling comfortable in their school community. Her daughter has continued to have academic and social challenges. Her son, who is academically gifted, has been labeled as disruptive to class, his inquisitiveness mistaken for rudeness. In elementary school, his teacher was skeptical when she wanted him participate in a late French Immersion program. She felt that race may have been an issue

Natalie felt that parents could not expect schools to do everything but did feel as though they were often afraid to address issues of race. To do this would "*go against the grain of Canadian culture*". And so racism, in its more discrete forms, continues to go unchallenged.

The roles and responsibilities of school are simple in her teenage daughter's eyes. If she could change one thing about the school system, she would create a place where people were "*allowed to have any type of culture*". Her choice of words is haunting it that it suggests that she feels as though there is pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture. In a perfect school, they would celebrate history, culture and the colour of people's skin. The responsibility to students is

to "*teach them to be proud of who you are*", a guiding principle behind the development of Blackcentric schools (Dei, 1996).

Aileen felt that the role of the school was to *"[build] a structure around your life that makes you successful"*. She felt as though the presence of Black teachers in schools would provide students with positive role models, someone potentially beyond the stereotype, someone "to associate with the perception of Blackness". She gave the following recommendations to schools as strategies to create a more welcoming environment in schools for Black youth: "*curriculum, HUMAN resources, recruitment and retention practices, professional development focused on cultural awareness*".

Public education has the potential to act as an intervention to shift paradigms of oppression and dissembed the legacy of colonialism should it choose to (Walcott, 2012). The school is an institution that, much like the university, projects "quite specific models of authority and expertise to their students … the ones who absorb and imitate the models tend to do much better than those who reject them (Stewart, 2009, p.44). As a result, the institution has a responsibility to question how it recreates systems of privilege. For instance many Black youth live in segregated settings until they reach school age. Here, they become a minority. Black identity becomes defined as per social constructs and can be in conflict with the identity created within the community. The importance of dealing with issues of race and racism in schools lie in this fact (Noguera, 2008).

Schools tend to ignore issues of race 1) overtly by not acknowledging and 2) covertly by passing on values that do not recognize the social identities of minority groups. This is accomplished through the hidden curriculums, the formal curriculum, resources, and teachers (Taylor, 1992; Egbo, 2009). Decisions to encourage students into particular activities, such as

when Claire was encouraged to play basketball based solely on the fact that she "looked" athletic, must be critically questioned. Even when the system does address the history of students from marginalized groups, it is either a superficial celebration of culture or an exploration of the ugly. As expressed by parent Charlotte, there needs to be more exploration of the positive history and achievements of Blacks, beyond athletics.

Institutional leaders must not necessarily have all of the answers but must be willing to assist in harnessing the necessary resources to respond to the needs of their school communities (Walcott, 2012). Deb Helsing (2011) suggests four arenas of systems change: competencies, conditions, culture, and context. A more culturally diverse workforce would quickly impact those arenas in a positive way in that including the voices of people from less privileged backgrounds would shift the culture of a building. The absence of representation within the profession serves as a barrier to creating space for students of colour.

But change requires planning and consciousness. Noguera (p.36) suggests the following characteristics of effective schools as supported in current research: clear purpose, standards, expectations, committed to educating all, safe and orderly environment, strong partnerships with parents, and, problem solving attitude. In order to better meet the needs of Black youth in Winnipeg schools, schools must first recognize that the problem lies not in our students but in our response to them (Greene, 2008).

ii. The Role of the Teacher

"Those of us who teacher must first make our students recognize their potential brilliance. When we know the real history of Africa…then we can teach our children that if they do not feel they are brilliant, then it is only because they do not know whence they came."

-Lisa Delpit (2002)

It is my opinion that at times, there appears to be a level of fear on the part of teachers when it comes to addressing issues of ethnicity in the classroom (Delpit, 2002; Noguera, 2008). This may be the result of a lack of knowledge or perhaps a lack of right on the part of teachers belonging to the dominant group to speak of the issues of the other.

When it comes to the role of race in the classroom, Aileen is a mother who felt "*there's a question but no answer*" meaning that the lack of discourse around issues of race in the classroom often left her guessing whether or not the race of her children was a factor in their success and engagement. She felt that there was "*a lot of myth*" surrounding teachers' understanding of Black culture and identity. She found that the cognitive assessments completed on her son became his scholastic identity. The result of these assessments was that "*[they] put limits on [him] and lowered expectations*". Aileen said that it was only because of an individual teacher who took a personal interest in her son and took the time to get to know him beyond his folder of assessments that he developed a passion for science.

Youth Claire explored the need for teachers to engage their students in learning. She remembered an early years teacher who "*would make me feel like I could do anything. She would support me … When a teacher goes out of their way to create that kind of relationship with their student that does a lot for them*".

Her mother echoed that sentiment. She spoke of the time a community leader and educator identified Claire argumentativeness as a strength and encouraged her to take a law class in high school. Charlotte said that there was a noticeable difference in Claire while she was enrolled in that class. "*She was awake. She was alive*".

The role of the teacher is not always destructive. They can be influential agents in the development of identity amongst youth by helping them identify and build on their strengths. "*There were teachers along the way who found that in her and those are the teachers that she'll write about or that she looked up to*" says Charlotte.

Teachers often engage in conversations of social justice with students in contexts that are at arm's length, such as the mistreatment of marginalized people living in developing countries. Adopting a stance of colour blindness within the classroom creates a false sense of homogeneity that lends itself to a false sense of comfort. It is far easier to point out instances of injustice in other domains but the apprehension is strong when asked to question it in the very realm in which one exists.

Teachers must work to present their profession as one that is rewarding and welcoming. If people within the profession project an image of dissatisfaction and hostility, there is little to encourage members of marginalized groups to pursue careers within the profession. "More of them might pursue graduate studies in English, history, or philosophy, or another academic discipline, ending up in front of university classrooms and integrating the profession, in only the received informed, active, and non-patronizing encouragement from the profession itself." (Stewart, p.121) This is the role of an educator at any level institution. My success in school and the successes that my teachers afforded me led to my pursuing a greater role within academic institutions namely as a school administrator, graduate student, and seasonal university

instructor. This was in spite of being surrounded by educators who tried desperately to dissuade me from the profession in part as a result of the limitations that the institutions had placed on them because of their marginalized identity.

The classroom teacher can be both an ally and advocate for her students. The role of the teacher is not always to teach culture but to create opportunities for learning about culture and awareness. There is a place for White teachers to teach about the other when they seek to authentically share the voice of the other. Demonstrating a commitment to learning about the difference and similarities, creating a respectful space for learning to occur (Lévinas, 1998). Those in power can only allow others to be empowered when they create a space for the voice of others, not step aside which reinforces oppositional relationship (Swisher, p.192) Educators must recognize their positionality when teaching about the issues of the other and how this might influence their perspective.

Just as the school leader is restricted by policy, the classroom teacher is also limited by the institution. But there are is space for flexibility within the classroom. Sonia Nieto (2010) purported that certain characteristics could help a teacher uncomplicate the notions of culture and race within a classroom. These "Qualities of Caring" included: a sense of mission, solidarity with and empathy for students, courage to question the mainstream, critically affirming students' identities, creating a sense of belonging, expecting the best from students, teaching students to be critical, and, understanding and using your power.

 "I have attempted to modify curricula in social studies and other courses I teach by

filling in the gaps in the regular curriculum, which means incorporating the contributions

of non-Europeans to Canadian society…It means highlighting the blatant implementation

of white supremacist racial hierarchies during the empire-building period, and explaining

how even the education system itself enabled institutional racism to be part of nation-building in Canada. Although the conservative elements in our society resist these kinds of curriculum changes, educators are always in possession of a certain degree of autonomy once the classroom door is closed." (Orlowski, p.265)
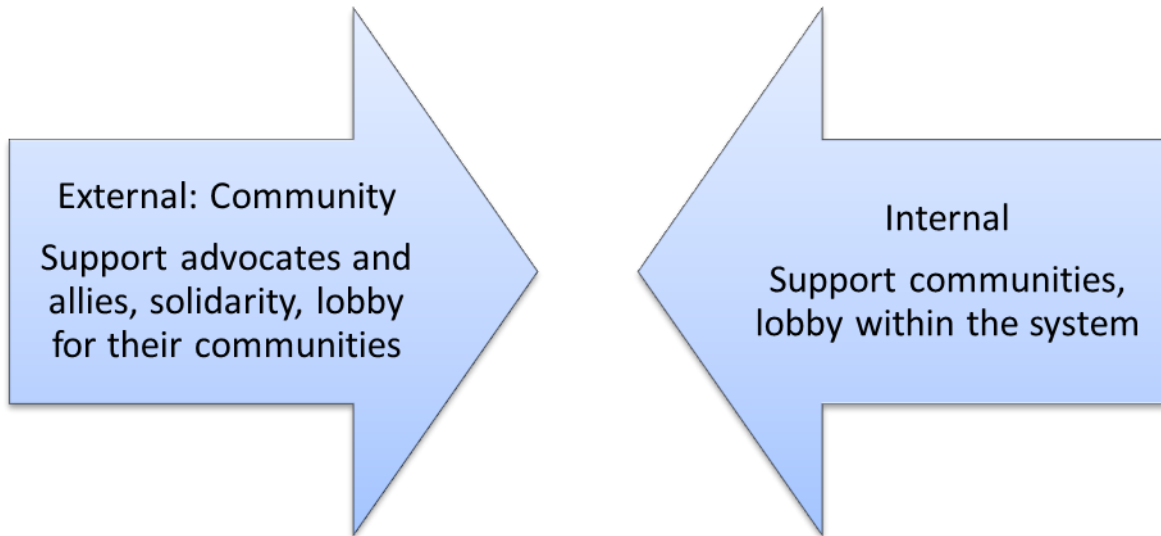
I suggest that teachers can look to the greater to community to help authentically bring alternate perspectives to the classroom as a way of create space for discussions about race and privilege. But at the same time, they must challenge themselves to make issues of racism important to all people, not just the business of those whose privilege is challenged as a result of their cultural identity.

The Roles and Responsibility of the Minority

In order to create change within an institution, there must be pressure from within and from without. The role of the minority is to develop an ability to understand the signals of the institution in order to effectively function within it and navigate around it. Stewart (2009, p.115) and others refer to this as "institutional literacy".

Figure 2:

External: Community
Support advocates and allies, solidarity, lobby for their communities

Internal
Support communities, lobby within the system

System change occurs when there is a framework for collaboration and cooperation that serves to intertwine both the internal and external forces that are acting upon an institution. Advocates and allies within the system must work simultaneously with community agents acting on it in order create the conditions for change. In order to effectively play this role, members of the Black community must develop the cultural capital necessary to function within and against the school system. This can only be accomplished through engaging with the system. Passive resistance, in the forms of absenting one's voice from decision making, rarely effects change. Active resistance may take the form of engaging in conversations with the school through forums that already exist such as parent council and parent teacher conferencing. Volunteering in her children's schools is the route that Alberta took when she recognized that their schools were not meeting their interests as best as she felt they could.

i. Role/Responsibility of the Community

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any".

(Alice Walker, http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/9-strategies-to-end-corporate-rule/quote-page-alice-walker, Retrieved March 2012.)

While Dei's framework concentrates on role of institution, one cannot ignore the role of the minority in challenging the assumptions and advocating for their own rights. Paolo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1985) spoke of the need for people from marginalized groups to advocate for themselves. The literature suggests that pervasive stereotypes exist within the Black community; internalized racism is often the cause of this. While not all of these stereotypes are negative, they can be limiting to individuals trying to develop their personal identities (Walcott, 2008).

Parent Aileen recommended that the community advocate for more accessible sports to be played and promoted in schools, such as soccer. She felt that making school activities accessible was an important factor of student engagement.

Natalie, mother to Brittany, had her own theories behind the reluctance of the Black community to become more politically involved in changing the school system to better meet the needs of their youth. She felt that Canadian culture was a passive one and that members of the Black community "*don't want to rock the boat, be viewed as troublemakers*". It was also her opinion that, while race was often used as an excuse or "*trump card*" by members of the community, due to the relatively small number of Blacks in Winnipeg it was an ethnocultural group with relatively no power. Individuals wanting to challenge the system were often viewed as "*one mad black man*". This reinforces the need to normalize these discussions to address systemic forms of racism being perpetuated in our institutions (Stewart, 2009).

Another factor presented by Natalie was the difficulty faced by individuals of multiethnic ancestry or of immigrant families who felt that it was hard to take a stance on issues of race as it forced them to choose a side.

Youth Claire believed that parents and the community needed to play an active role in improving the status of Black youth in schools. Advocating for Blackcentric schools, programs or courses were ways that she felt that they could contribute to the struggle of Black youth.

Cultural communities have a large and powerful role to play in the success of their youth in schools. It is often the community that reinforces stereotypes and racial separations (Noguera, 2008, p.13). There is a need to affirm the identities of young people and to teach them of their history and culture (Noguera, 2008, p.37). This will help ready Black youth for the discrimination that they will surely face in life by giving them a foundation to stand on. These "micro-aggressions" help prepare Black boys for the discrimination by hardening them (Noguera, 2008, p.xiv). These challenging experiences lead to the development of "built up scar tissue" that can make Black youth grow into resistors of oppression or can lead to their destruction (Noguera, 2011).

The Black community needs to help its youth develop a sense of agency or control over their fates in school and society. Levinson, Foley and Holland in Noguera (2008) state "student identity formation within school is a kind of social practice and cultural production which both responds to, and simultaneously constitutes, movements, structures, and discourses beyond school" (p.28).

Anthony Stewart (2009) spoke of the need for a united effort to change the face of our institutions. He felt that the faces representing our institutions reinforced who belonged in them.

Part of the role of the minority is to create space for themselves, not to lie in wait of the institution to make them feel welcomed. The Black community must work to support its members who are working with the school system on all levels. In isolation, it can become impossible to effect change. The impression that the general public often has of employment equity can lead to isolation of Black educators within the system.

It is also important for members of the Black community to question their own privilege. For instance, I recognize that as a result of being socialized within the dominant culture, I hold values that differ from the values that my father may have brought with him to Canada from Haiti. This process of socialization impacts one's ability to function within the dominant culture but it can also cause members of the minority to misunderstand or misrepresent the needs of their cultural group. If the people representing a system were socialized in such a manner than it is more likely that they have internalized the beliefs and assumptions of the majority and may even be unconscious of the prejudices they hold towards members of their own marginalized group (Stewart, 2009).

ii. The Role and Responsibilities of the Parent

"Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time".
(Hebrew Proverb, http://authenticteaching.wordpress.com/2010/04/02/educational-quotes/, Retrieved October 2012.)

The cycle of failure amongst Black youth in schools often begins with their parents. As they may also lack a connection with school/schooling, they do not always advocate

appropriately for their children often initiating a cycle of disengagement to be perpetuated from one generation to the next.

Aileen was a divorced mother of two. She was born and raised in the Caribbean but her children, whose father is Canadian born and of Black and White ancestry, are Canadian born. Both of her parents were teachers "*back home*" and she felt that the example they gave of good teacher lends to what she saw the role of the teacher as being. She felt teachers were meant to be positive role models and should not place limitations onto students. Growing up in a predominantly Black community, Aileen never felt as though she was inferior because of her race while going through school. In her own words, "*I wasn't a good student [but you] give a bit extra*". Her children had some issues with bullying and exclusion as a result of their race while growing up in Winnipeg schools. At age six, her daughter was already being excluded from play by her peers for her difference in appearance.

While Aileen's children were younger she saw a news story that caused her to get more involved in the scholastic lives of her children. It explored the story where a woman volunteered her time to local schools in an effort to gain a sense of teachers' feelings towards people of colour. The study found that Black youth dropped out because they felt that less was expected of them because of the colour of their skin and so they gave less. She right away connected this to the experience one of her children was having at that very moment in swimming lessons.

This was Aileen's call to action. This led to her becoming more involved in her children's school which raised some important questions in her mind. One of the tough questions she found herself asking was, "*Do I see faces of colour*"? It struck her as odd not to see greater cultural diversity in the faces of the staff at their schools.

Charlotte agreed that the role of the parent is to be an active participant in their child's scholastic life. She found that parents sometimes bred complacency in their children by giving them too many rewards. Often, in the case of immigrant parents, this had to do with wanting to give their children a better life. "*They know what they're coming from and they're trying to save their children from that*". With her own daughter, she realized the need to find a "*middle ground*" between allowing independence and being aware of what was happening at school. "*By not paying attention then that meant that you don't care*".

Members of marginalized groups often have a long history of differential treatment. This may at times appear to be based on race (Noguera, 2008, p.29). One possible effect of this cycle is the formation of subcultural groups that develop/adopt forms of behaviour, etc. that often stand apart from the majority (Tatum, 1997, p.181).

Support from home can help students confront the challenges presented to them when navigating a school system that typically does not reflect them (Noguera, 2008, p.12). Parents should look to their cultural communities for support. When it comes to contentious issues, parents may look towards community members who function successfully within the school system to help them navigate through the barriers. Aileen felt that the role of the parent was to "*pay more attention*" as to what was happening with their children in school. She spoke of the greater sense of community felt "*back home*" and recognized the role of relatives in creating an important network of support to young people.

iii. The Role and Responsibilities of the Student

"Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious." –George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four

While adolescence is often characterized by identity development and teenagers feel as though they are being acted upon, Black youth have an opportunity to become agents of their own destinies. They too have a role to play in creating a space for themselves in school. I remember how empowered I felt when the incident with the racist jokes occurred in high school and the response of administration was to allow me to organize a school-wide anti-racism rally.

Mesfin arrived in Canada as a refugee after leaving his country and his family. He lived in refugee camps in two different countries before arriving in Winnipeg. At the time of our conversation, he was attending high school during the day and working in the evenings, sending money to support his family back home. He lived on his own. He took his role as a student quite seriously. "*If I succeed in school, I know I'm going to succeed in life*".

Mesfin found that many Black youth from immigrant and refugee communities were lured by gangs which set them on a dangerous path. "*They don't really know by the time they are joining ... coming back to right ways are difficult*". He felt these youth were young, naïve and being taken advantage of.

In his perspective, Black youth in Canada were largely disengaged. "*They are not into work and they are not into school*". He felt as though Canada offered so many opportunities but Black youth lacked discipline. "*Most of the people you see here succeed but not the Black society*". He attributed his personal success to strong parenting as a child and to his own personal drive and determination to provide the family members that were unable to join him in Canada with a better life. "*I try to make my life burn bright*".

For him, the definition of a good student was to have goals and direction. In Mesfin's case, it also involves sacrifice. As a result of working in addition to attending classes, he is unable to participate in after school activities. *"I really try to participate as much as I can"*.

Noguera (2008) and Tatum (1997) identified the important role played by the peer group in the shaping of identity, particularly at the senior years (i.e. high school) level. If the community and the family help to instill a strong sense of positive cultural identity within Black youth, this will assist them in nurturing healthy peer relationships on the basis of that positive sense of self.

4.6 Athletics

Sports often provide youth with an opportunity to be successful at something. The expectation of failure that seems to permeate the academic existence of Black youth often does not exist in the athletic realm. In fact, the opposite is often true. There is an expectation of excellence.

Jeremiah was a teenage boy enrolled in a private high school when we met. He described himself as being extremely active up until a serious sports injury. He was still sporting the evidence of this injury as we sat in his living room to speak. Jeremiah didn't have a lot to say on what it meant to be black other than it was a physical difference that caused people to be treated differently in the past. Jeremiah was a first generation Canadian. His family, including his siblings, were all born in an African country. *"Which I'm not happy about. I always wanted to*

be born in Africa". The reason for which he felt that, he was not entirely certain of.

Jeremiah identified as being a good student who was finding success in a variety of activities in school. He spoke of his involvement in language clubs and volunteering. When prompted more on his volunteering, he divulged that while he could not play he was still a part of every volleyball and basketball practice and game that year. It was not until a conversation with his mother that a deeper story began to reveal itself between the lines.

My conversation with Jeremiah's mother, Vakasa, took place immediately after my conversation with him. We sat and shared a cup of tea as I asked her about her son's experience in school. In far contrast to his interpretation, she spoke about his academic struggles and of how he felt pressure to attend practices and games to teams that he could not even participate in because of his injury. Her expectation was that the coaches would suggest he use the time to place concentrate on his studies. Rosaling Mickelson in Noguera defined this as an "attitude-achievement paradox", that is, one says they value education but the academic outcomes do not coincide with the personal rhetoric (2008, p.34).

Aileen was a Caribbean born mother of two. Her son pursued athletics and languages in school through the French Immersion program. Her daughter pursued dance. She noted that her son's involvement in athletics was valued by his peers and earned his status amongst them. "*You have to be something to be recognized*" was her commentary on the subject. Sadly, she didn't feel as though schools met the needs of Black youth outside of stereotypical domains such as sport. "*Students of colour are not supported or encouraged, they're ignored*". She felt that schools viewed their role to be the socialization of young people into the dominant culture but for herself, the role of the school was to "*educate, expose, [and develop a] critical mind*".

Charlotte felt that Black identity by Winnipeg youth was influenced by American media. She felt that athletics were part of that stereotype. She felt that while back home in the Caribbean, sports was a way to help youth feel successful, in Canada it seems like an easy path to recognition or status. *It's a lot about money, the way you dress, how much power you have when have that money. And you get that because you've been in sports*". She went on to say that the quest for power or recognition through athletics is something that pulls Black youth, particularly males, from school. *"They spend that time trying to build that image"*.

Cornel West (2011) discussed the myth of the Black athlete, giving the example of the white quarterback being praised for his intelligence while the black quarterback is celebrated only for his natural athletic ability. Why is the Black athlete not celebrated for being a critically reflective individual? The under intellectualization of the Black athlete speaks to the internalized racism that exists within Western society. Even within Black communities, athleticism is often celebrated and promoted as a positive stereotype. But at the same time, it perpetuates a lack of hope, what West (2012) refers to as "nihilism", or an expectation of academic failure.

Eddie Moore Jr. (2009) was less polite about this. "This is a system designed to destroy kids of colour, not to bring them to the top". He viewed institutions and athletics as white supremacy in its covert, systemic form. The relationship that the Black community, particularly black males, had with athleticism is residue from what Moore named the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in that despite the fact that leaders, princes, and scholars from Africa were enslaved, the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade becomes an impression that the value of the Black male lies in his physicality and not beyond.

When asked about how she was engaged in school, youth Claire mentioned sports and a brief attempt at music. She said that while she loved music, she only joined the choir because the teacher was someone that she knew from the community. She wanted to play soccer, a sport she had grown up with in the Caribbean, but as a result of her height felt pressure to play basketball.

"*You know, I think what I felt like was "Oh, there's a tall Black girl. Are you going to try out for the basketball team?" and I'm like, I guess so … And when I changed schools at the end of my high school career, it's pretty much the same thing. "Tall Black girl, you can try out for basketball"… They just categorize me as a Black girl, not as who I am*".

Jenna spoke about the playful teasing she endured from her White friends as she struggled to be accepted as a ballerina and not a baller.

"*Uhm, I think a lot of people would make jokes about, like, that I'm not very sporty. I mean I do dance, I was a ballerina, but I don't, I don't really play basketball. You know, when people would say you should play basketball. And both my sisters ran track, and my dad was really, kind of upset that I didn't cause he thought that I had the ability to. But I just hate running. So, but other than that, I don't think that there was anything too serious regarding that. Just mostly the jesting*".

Mesfin provided a slightly different perspective on the role of athletics. In his opinion, his desire to participate was based on his own interest and he did not feel a push to participate.

He felt that school sports were one way to develop skills to assist him in finding success later on in life. He felt the teamwork aspect would benefit him in a professional context. But while he did not allow sports to interfere with his academics, prioritizing homework and a job as his after school activities; he did spend every lunch hour engaged in sport and often felt pressure from his peers to try out for school teams. While he was flattered by their recognition of his skill, or perhaps was it their presumption of his skill, his need to work to support himself and his family far outweighed the need for recognition.

Rejection of the aspects of the stereotypical Black identity, for example athletics, was often viewed as a rejection of their Black identity by the peers of many of the students interviewed. They were seen as "white washed". In regards to the impact had on Black youth by repeatedly hearing the statement "*you* must be a basketball player" or "you *must* be a basketball player", Anthony Stewart raised an important question, "I cannot help wondering what else they might see themselves doing if they were told something else about themselves, even half as frequently" (2009, p.22). I see this in many of my own male students who cannot identify their worth or strength or goals beyond athletics.

Ignorance to the racist practices within our institutions allows us to perpetuate them. As discussed by Stewart (2009) in his discussion of Glen Loury's work, our attitudes towards others often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, if a coach believes that all Black youth excel in athletics, they might be more likely to recruit, interact with and develop the skills of Black youth. Brittany and Claire both experienced this as tall, Black girls. Subsequently, they are reinforcing the idea that Blacks are good at sports as they have surrounded themselves only

with examples of Black youth that support the belief. Critically questioning this paradigm might lead one to question the over representation of Black youth in sports such as basketball. Rather than associating athleticism to race in a positive stereotype, one might come to consider the socioeconomic reasons for which Black youth are over represented in some sports while greatly underrepresented in others. For example, little equipment is needed in sports such as basketball, soccer or track as compared to a White dominated sport such as hockey. Cement can be easily found in communities everywhere, regardless of the socioeconomic setting, but swimming pools, golf courses and tennis courts are less accessible. Representation helps to feed stereotypes but there is often a historical rationale for the initiation of these stereotypes. A question of privilege: if you will. Encouragement and/or discouragement to participate in particular activities by one's own community further perpetuates the over representation of Black youth in certain school activities (for example, athletics and music) and the underrepresentation of this same group in other activities (for example, advanced placement courses).

In their search for recognition, many Black youth, particularly males, pursue athletics. They are often highly lauded for their athletic prowess and, as in the case of Jeremiah, forgiven of their academic deficits as a result. This may in turn lead to further disengagement from academic study as these youth begin to focus on increasing their level of acceptance by continuing to excel in sport. The attention of coaches and permission granted by teachers when disengaging as a result of athletic pursuit can lead to the creation of a false sense of ego. The false sense of belonging achieved through athletic success further disadvantages Black youth as they are pushed through academic institutions with little regard given to their intellectual development. "On the other hand, there is the self-consciousness that expresses itself as self-

absorption, where you over-estimate your real and symbolic importance to others" (Stewart, 2009, p.95).

Chapter 5

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the perceptions within the Black community, as represented by the participants, are that Black youth do not engage and achieve as well in Winnipeg schools as youth from the dominant group. This study shares the actual voices of Black youth and the parents of Black youth. In chapter one, I discussed the purpose of this study and reasons I was motivated to pursue this topic of study, both personal and professional. In chapter two, I explored research from both the United States and Eastern Canada that discussed the relationship of Black youth to schools. Chapter three provided an explanation of the methodology used to frame this report project while chapter four discussed the findings raised through the narratives recorded in relation to the literature. This final chapter will examine the limitations, implications and recommendations uncovered through the research.

5.1   Limitations

No story is complete and is seen or heard through the lens of the audience. This research is not intending to use the words of the few to draw conclusions for the many but the stories of the participants cannot be ignored. Within their stories holds the possibility for the next generation. Perception is reality and if the perception of the seventeen people who participated in this study is that Black youth are not achieving to the same level of other youth in Winnipeg schools, there is value in those opinions and experiences.

The role of direct cultural heritage was not explored in this study. As a result, comparisons between the diverse sub groups of the Black identity were not explored. There could potentially be a difference in perception between the African, Afro-Canadian and Caribbean sub groups. There could also potentially be a difference between the experiences of members of refugee versus immigrant groups.

This study does not look at the impact that socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation or any other factor has on school achievement and engagement. Some of the experiences of the participants could also have been influenced by these other factors.

5.2   Implications

"Justice becomes what love looks like in public". –Cornell West (2011)

Guinier and Torres in Noguera (xxv) suggest that the experiences of racially marginalized people are like a "miner`s canary". Their stories alert us to the threat we all face. The problems discussed in this study are not just those of the Black community but are of importance to all people regardless of cultural background.

There are several areas uncovered through this study that would benefit from further research. The first of which would be to develop an understanding of the role of the peer group in influencing identity development. Much of the research suggests that this is a factor but focused work on peer influence on the identity of cultural identity amongst Black youth may help inform one of the key factors that informs the relationship of Black youth to schooling.

A second area for further research would be the role of athletics in defining the Black male identity in adolescents. Athletics seemed to be a recurrent theme in many of the conversations held for the purpose of this study. How schools and the Black community reinforce the stereotype of the Black athlete and the privilege this affords and denies young, Black males is a possible area to delve deeper into.

A number of the participants spoke of experiences within the context of the school environment that caused them as the question, "Was that a race thing?" They were often left without an answer for fear of looking as though they are "playing the race card". Claire's removal from school, Talia's example of the students playing music in class, Brittany's issue with her basketball coach, Jeremiah sitting in practices despite being injured for the season instead of being encouraged to focus on failing academics; these are just some of the experiences shared in the conversations with participants where they were left with uncertainty, sometimes years later, as to whether or not their race was a factor in how people within the school system responded to them. The impact of this specific question or pressure on student engagement and achievement could be more closely examined.

Finally, as the literature attests, we know that schools do replicate systems of oppression. We are often socialized to react to race unconsciously. These practices are so deeply engrained that we ourselves do not recognize when we are acting racist. An example of this might be an experience I have personally dealt with and also witnessed, a Black student having their natural hair petted and being told that it feels "weird". Further research needs to be done to create a practical framework for teachers on how to disrupt this cycle. The first step to this is sensitivity and openness on behalf of educators. The second is to consider one's own privilege and how this perspective may lead to the perpetuation of a cycle of oppression.

The implications of this study extend from areas of further research into practical applications to my professional life. This study was the catalyst to my founding a non-profit organization that works to promote diversity within the education system through raising awareness around issues of race, and by providing free professional development opportunities that are open to all educators but target Visible minorities and internationally educated teachers. It has had an impact on my practice as well. In my role as a high school vice-principal, it has changed the frequency and depth with which I discuss how culture and race might be impacting student engagement when meeting with teachers. It has also led to my creating opportunities for internationally educated teachers and teachers from minority groups as teacher candidates and substitute teachers within my building.

5.3   Recommendations

"[D]ialogue involves creating a container that can hold human energy, so that it can be transformative rather than destructive … [the] journey requires willingness to accept many moments of profound disorientation". - (Senge et al., p. 34 &35, 2005)

Can a system that was originally designed to sort and reward the most "able" be reformed in such a way as to help everyone work to fulfill their personal potential? Help each student find their strengths? In order to achieve the changes necessary to make Black youth feel more engaged and increase their achievement in schools, there are specific roles that parents, educators, school leaders, and faculties of education might play. The first role that all of these groups must take upon themselves is to enter into dialogue with one another.

Parents who struggled with school must overcome their reservations and become advocates for their children. They are valued citizens and have a right to see their faces represented in the curriculum and in the classroom. Vocalizing their concerns about the lack of representation is a necessary external pressure on the institution. Parents should also encourage their children to pursue careers in education even if they are struggling students. The work force will only become diverse if members of the Black community enter into it.

As educators, we must first acknowledge the ways in which we are perpetuating a system that largely excludes and streams Visible Minority youth. This requires critical reflection of how our practice might be adjusted to become more inclusive. It also requires us to question how we are privileged and how these privileges might influence our perspectives. I recognize that despite feeling isolated as a student because no one else looked like me, I was still an engaged and academically successful student. This privileged me over the student who struggled academically. It is not enough to bring in a guest speaker or put a poster of a smiling Black face on the classroom wall. The critical evaluation must continue when choosing classroom material that is culturally representative. Are these materials further reinforcing stereotypes or do they break them? Including the community in the classroom is a way of helping students identify role models within communities of colour. Once we are better situated within our own privilege, we should work to create spaces in our classrooms where issues of identity and diversity can be openly and constructively discussed. Another recommendation to educators is to raise our expectations of students coming from marginalized backgrounds. Questioning our privilege will likely lead to uncovering some stereotypes or tendencies that can lead to lowering our expectations of children from these groups. Participation in professional development sessions that focus on anti-racist education, social justice and equity issues in education can provide a

scaffold under which teachers can begin to unpack their own beliefs and the potential adverse impact some their ideas may have on Black youth (Egbo, 2009).

McDermott and Varenne (1995) found that miscommunication between students from marginalized groups who are taught by teachers belonging to the dominant group can at times lead to these children struggling in school in spite of the fact that most are capable. They suggested that a focus on difference often views culture as a deficit. At the same time, Pedro Noguera (2008) intimated that Black youth are more influenced by positive support and encouragement from teachers than other students. Ensuring that students don't self segregate, encouraging students to pursue activities outside of stereotypes, incorporating culture into the curriculum, building relationships and helping students recognize their potential are concrete actions that teachers can take to provide Black youth with said support (Noguera, 2008; Tatum, 1997).

Those of us who are school leaders must be unafraid to have the tough conversations with our school staffs. Statistical information and research can be provided as third points to try and make these conversations feel less accusatory. Social justice as practice or pedagogy must be a focus of professional development. Engaging parents and children in dialogue on how schools can work to create a more welcoming environment is a first step. While we are limited by the policies of their school districts and by the ministry of Education, school leaders have varying levels of autonomy. I believe that the limitations of the credit system at the secondary level is the perfect example of a structure built into the education system that privileges certain types of intelligence through mandatory credits (e.g. English, Mathematics) while courses that lend themselves to other ways of being and knowing are classified as options (e.g. Art, Music). Creating multi-age classrooms is one way to function within a structure that reinforces failure

based on pace of individual learning. Career exploration and internship is another avenue that may better engage and retain students. Refusing to compete with other schools to recruit students but rather recognizing the strength that various programs have and that those differences might support particular students in achieving academic success is simply a shift in mindset that school leaders can employ to make the school system more hospitable to all learners.

Faculties of education must work to recruit and retain students from Visible Minority groups. While courses on diversity are required in Manitoba, the faculty staff must reflect this diversity so that the rhetoric is supported by action. Professors of all education courses must engage students in discussions about creating equitable and effective classrooms.

5.4   Conclusion

"Indifference is the one trait that makes the very angels weep". –Cornell West (2011)

As I sat working in my advisor's office one summer day, a recently retired science professor stopped by to say hello. We engaged in a brief conversation in which he asked me what my thesis topic was. When I told him, he responded with, "True fact. In over 20 years of teaching Physics at this university I have had only one Black student." He stressed this point by raising one finger in the air. "Just one! That is truly regrettable. We need to change that."

Why is this study of importance? I know that it has already significantly touched the lives of at least two of its participants.

Youth Claire, who felt like schools were inhospitable to Black youth who did not whitewash themselves, thanked me at the end of the interview, saying I had given her much to

think about. Sometime later, she began working for a local non-profit organization, supporting Black youth in their exploration of careers in an effort to try to engage them in school and encourage them to pursue post secondary educations.

Parent Suchita, who sat in on her daughter's interview, was fairly emotional at the conclusion of that conversation. Several days later, she called me to let me know that she was moved to put her degree in education to use and went back into the classroom in an effort to present a face of colour to students of all backgrounds.

I wonder if the stories of the other participants have been impacted by intertwining with mine. Over time, has youth Jeremiah's perception of schools as a raceless environment come into conflict with what his subconscious seemed to already know?

My practice has been impacted by the results of this study. I created a grassroots network with the intention of supporting diversity in education. This organization provides free professional development to educators on a variety of topics but also works to support Visible Minority and immigrant teachers by helping them create professional networks. I have been more intentional about raising questions of privilege with my colleagues, particularly in one on one conversations with teachers about students and in forums including other school leaders. I have also engaged students in conversations about privilege and identity in an attempt to create a space in which they can explore these concepts and how they might be impacting their engagement and achievement in school.

This study unearthed many enduring questions for future exploration. In addition to the possible research topics listed earlier in this chapter, some of these questions are:

- How do you identify race without stereotyping? Is this possible?

- Will there ever be a point in time where colour of skin is no longer a key identifier when describing someone or does this myopic perspective rob people of an essential component of their identities? Is it possible to shift the perception to difference from deficit?

- When multiple factors that lead to oppression are present (race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.), do some carry a greater influence on the experience on an individual in an institution such as that of schools?

I was raised in an environment that led me to understand at a relatively young age that the colour of my skin would impede me in life. Despite my professional successes, every gain has been met with skepticism as people have questioned, sometimes to my face, whether I earned my place or was given it for the sake of employment equity. I have chosen not to remain indifferent but to confront the injustice that I and others like me have faced. I do so because I am responsible for helping others find the opportunities that were made available to me through the battles fought by my father and other Black educators of his generation.

If this research project has served to do nothing more than allow the fifteen people who participated to feel as though their voices were given a moment to exist within the realm of academia, I hope that this feeling will empower them enough to support another in telling their story of failure and success within Winnipeg schools.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:   Letter Requesting Participants

December 8, 2008

Dear community member,

My name is Michelle Jean-Paul and I am currently working towards a Master's in Education at the University of Manitoba. In order to complete this degree, I am planning to write a thesis exploring the relationship between African, Black, and Caribbean youth and the school system. The three questions guiding my research are:

1. Are there perceptions of a difference in the school engagement and academic achievement of Black youth compared to White youth in Winnipeg schools?

2. If such a difference is perceived, what factors contribute it? And

3. What can be done to overcome these differences?

I am hoping to conduct interviews and/or focus groups with young people of African, Black and Caribbean ancestry and their parents youth for their perspectives on this topic. But I cannot do this without your help. I am asking that you pass this information on to members of your community and encourage interested individuals to contact me directly. I am seeking equal representation from the African, Black, and Caribbean communities and wish to speak with young people age 14 and older. These young people can be currently attending high school, recent graduates or school leavers. Parents wishing to participate do not need to be of Black ancestry.

I have attached a handout that I hope you will circulate to members of your community. Interested individuals are asked to contact me directly. For more information on this project, please contact me at mjeanpaul@yahoo.com or 471-1985.

Respectfully,

Michelle Jean-Paul

Appendix 2:   Handout Soliciting Participants

academic achievement and

school engagement of

Black youth

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba looking for youth of African, Black and/or Caribbean ancestry and parents to participate in research looking at the relationship of Black youth with the school system. Participants can participate in individual interviews and/or peer-based focus groups.

All participants will be given the opportunity to provide written relfections following the interview/focus group.

For more information or to participate,

Please contact Michelle Jean-Paul

By email or phone:

mjeanpaul@yahoo.com   or   471-1985

Appendix 3:   Questionnaire for Interviews with Youth

One-on-one interviews will use the following script and questions as closely as possible. It is expected that there will be departures from the wording and sequencing of certain questions, and/or that time constraints may prevent certain questions from being asked at all. It is possible that I offer working definitions of "academic achievement" and "school engagement" for the participants. Note that the questions parallel those of the parent interview quite closely.

Investigator (Jean-Paul): This is a study about the academic success and engagement of Black youth in the school system. This interview will be tape recorded and transcribed. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. I will keep your identity and comments completely confidential throughout the project, including whenever results are published or shared in any form. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign a pseudonym to each participant in any written or oral summary, analysis, or interpretation of the results of the study. If you wish to receive a summary of the results of the study, you must provide a mailing address at the bottom of your consent form where it is indicated. The summary will not be available until the study has been completed.

I also ask that you keep confidential your own comments that you make during the interview session. That is, please do not tell others exactly what you said in order to respect your own privacy. Are there any questions about what I have said?

After answering any questions, the investigator will proceed with the following comments.

Investigator: I'd like you to say as much as possible in response to these questions. Please give examples or other details to show what you mean.

Investigator poses each of the following questions:

Students

1. What does it mean to you to be Black? What does it mean to be a good student? What is the relationship between being a good student and being Black?

Perceptions/Feelings of School

2. What are your feelings about school?

3. What kind of school activities are you involved in? What about those activities caused you to get involved? If you are not involved in any, are there any that interest you? Why are you not involved?

4. Do you think that succeeding in school will help you succeed later in life? Why or why not?

Issues related to Schooling

5a. Do you think that there is a gap between the academic achievement of Black youth compared to other youth? If yes, explain.

5b. Do you think that there is a gap between the school involvement or engagement of Black youth compared to other youth? If yes, explain.

6. What do you think your teachers think about your ability? Do you have or have you had any Black/minority teachers? Does or did this affect your behaviour or performance in school?

7. How welcoming are schools to Black students? How, if at all, is school different for

   Black youth?

8. How important of a role do parents of Black youth play in their schooling? Please

   explain.

9. What can the school do to make things better for Black youth?   How can community

   help? What can you do?

10. If you could make one change to the school system, what would it be?   And why?

11. Those are all of my questions. Is there anything you would like to add or anything you

    think I forgot to ask?

Investigator: Thank you for taking the time to share with me. I remind you that to please keep

confidential your own comments that you made during the focus group session, as well as

comments made by others in the group. Should there be additional things that you wish to share

but feel you did not have the opportunity to do so, you will be able to provide me with written

feedback.

Appendix 4:   Questionnaire for One-on-one Interview with Parents

One on one interviews will use the following script and questions as closely as possible. It is expected that there will be departures from the wording and sequencing of certain questions, and/or that time constraints may prevent certain questions from being asked at all. It is possible that I offer working definitions of "academic achievement" and "school engagement" for the participants. Note that the questions parallel those of the youth interview quite closely.

Investigator (Jean-Paul): This is a study about the academic success and engagement of Black youth in the school system. This interview will be tape recorded and transcribed. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. I will keep your identity and comments completely confidential throughout the project, including whenever results are published or shared in any form. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign a pseudonym in any written or oral summary, analysis, or interpretation of the results of the study. If you wish to receive a summary of the results of the study, please provide a mailing address in the appropriate space on the consent form. The summary will not be available until the study has been completed.

I also ask that you keep confidential your own comments that you make during the interview. That is, please do not tell others exactly what you said in order to your own privacy. Are there any questions about what I have said?

After answering any questions, the investigator will proceed with the following comments.

Investigator: I'd like you to say as much as possible in response to these questions. Please give examples or other details to show what you mean.

Investigator poses each of the following questions:

<u>Students</u>

1. What does it mean to you to be Black? What does it mean to be a good student? What is the relationship between being a good student and being Black?

2. Do Black children enjoy school? Do Black children succeed in school academically? Are Black youth active in school activities?

<u>Feelings/Perceptions of School</u>

3. In your opinion, what is the role of schools? What kinds of activities/opportunities do schools offer Black youth?

4. Do you think that succeeding in school will help children succeed later in life? Why or why not?

<u>Issues related to Schooling</u>

5a. Do you believe that there is a gap in the academic achievement of Black youth compared to other youth? If so, what factors contribute to this difference? How much of a role do you think race plays in your child's academic achievement?

5b. Do you believe that there is a gap in the engagement of Black youth compared to other youth? If so, what factors contribute to this difference? How much of a role do you think race plays in your child's engagement?

6. Do you think that your child's school is meeting their needs? Why or why not?

7. What do you think teachers' perceptions are of Black youth? Has your child ever had a Black/minority teacher? Did this affect their behaviour or performance in school?

Issues related to Schooling

8. What role, if any, should parents play in the schooling of Black youth? How do you think parental involvement and relationship with the school affects a child's engagement and achievement in school? Give personal examples to illustrate your ideas.

9. What can the school do to provide a better environment for Black youth? What can the Black community do? What can parents do?

10. Those are all of my questions. Is there anything you would like to add or anything you think I forgot to ask?

Investigator: Thank you for taking the time to share with me. I remind you that to please keep confidential your own comments that you made during the focus group session, as well as comments made by others in the group. Should there be additional things that you wish to share but feel you did not have the opportunity to do so, you will be able to provide me with written feedback.