

A Black-focused School: Black Canadian Youth and the Mainstream Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

When asked about the proposal for a black-focused school, black youth from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) voiced their agreement with elements of the proposal, but resisted the idea of implementing the proposal by creating a separate school. Although media representations and Dei (1996, 2006) provide insight into what Torontonians' reactions are to the proposed black-focused school there has been no such information documented on what black youth in the GTA think about the project. This is the first known study that attempts to fill that gap by providing a representation of black youths' voices obtained via focus groups. The study examines what black youth know and think about the proposal, and why they largely disagree with the black-focused school proposal. While the findings of this study indicate that the participants saw many positive elements of the proposal, they did not support the implementation of a black-focused school as they saw the creation of a separate space for the school as a negative thing. The youth had trouble conceptualizing 'black-focused schooling' as an alternative approach to mainstream education, which had an impact on whether they choose to, or could, respond to questions that precisely related to the black-focused school project. The study concludes that the youth could not visualize what the school would look like and how it would operate because they draw on liberal racist discourses (e.g. colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity) when thinking about their educational experiences; however, there was a clear contradiction in the way the youths' voices reflected an awareness of the role of race in education experiences. It was evident when they talked about fear of stigmatization, but when using liberal discourses the youth discounted the role of race, and seemed not to be aware of its role in educational experiences. These findings pose important implications for educators, would-be educators, administrators, the TDSB and proponents of the black-focused school.

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CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXTUALIZING THE DEBATE ABOUT BLACK-FOCUSED SCHOOLS

To separate black students in a fashion that harkens back to segregation would be grossly unfair and ill-prepare them for grown-up life in a multicultural country (Windsor Star, 2005).

Some argue that black-focused schools represent a revision to the days of segregation. But there is meaningful difference between forced segregation and separation by choice. Segregationists in the first half of the 20th century sought to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in society. By contrast, black-focused schools aim to address an educational crisis and help minority youth succeed (George Dei, 2005).

In 2005, Lloyd McKell, a high ranking Toronto District School Board official, said he supported the idea of creating black-focused schools in the Toronto school district, which fueled the media storm initiated by George Dei's call for a black-focused school proposal (Brennan & Brown, 2005). As the opening quotations illustrate, some parties argued that the proposal was a progressive strategy to promote the academic achievement of 'failing' black¹ youth in Toronto, while others saw it as a regressive step back to the days of segregation. After the media coverage of this controversy captured my attention, I noticed that most accounts failed to emphasize that the debate over a black-focused school in the region was an old one: educators had grappled with this strategy to improve the academic achievement of black students for over 20 years (Kalinowski & Brown, 2005).

Research from as early as the 1970s has documented black students' struggles in Canadian education systems (Brathwaite & James, 1996; Foster, 1996; James, 1990, 2001; Moitt, 1996; Waldron-Patterson, 2006). The black-focused school proposal emerged out of the Toronto black community's frustration with the current education systems' inability to meet the needs of their

¹ While some critical race scholars capitalize the 'B' on black, I have opted for the lowercase spelling to avoid homogenizing and essentializing this community.

students. While the claim of a black-focused school remains controversial in the black community, it is based on the idea that providing an educational context that fosters a cultural connection between home and school makes the totality of black-lived experience relevant to all parts of the curriculum, which then improves the social, physical, spiritual, and academic development of students and promotes students' academic engagement and achievement.

The media coverage, and the proposal itself, also ignored the question of how young people would receive a black-focused school in their neighbourhood. I wondered: What do young people think of black-focused schools? To what extent do they support or resist the idea? Why? While I am most sympathetic to the argument that black students would benefit from an alternative educational environment, I have framed this thesis as a study of what black youth living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) know and think about the possible implementation of a black-focused school pilot project in Toronto as a strategy to lessen the drop-out rate and improve the academic achievement of black students. To address this question I conducted six focus groups with black youth from different areas in the GTA. I then proceeded to analyze the narratives that emerged from the focus groups to explore my second research question that focused on exploring why the youth supported or resisted the black-focused school proposal.

As I was conducting these focus groups, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) opened public forums to discuss the school proposal in the GTA community. Shortly after the focus groups were completed on January 29th, 2008, the TDSB announced that they would take steps to implement the proposal. At this time the debate still raged in the community; however, the TDSB voted in favour of the proposal due to concerns about the low achievement and disengagement of black students and a segment of the community's request for an Africentric Alternative School.

Few documents examine community responses to this proposal, and those that exist were written by George Dei (1996; 2006), one of the main proponents of black-focused schools. In his early writing, Dei (1996) stresses that people's perceptions of this new educational strategy are largely based on, "how we each structure our pedagogical and communicative ideas about educational alternatives" (p. 296). In other words, our values, beliefs, and assumptions about, and personal experience with education will influence our opinion of the project. Dei also identified and addressed some of the questions circling in the Toronto community about the proposal:

Do African-Canadian youth need a school that is owned and controlled by their community in order to feel more engaged with their schooling and less likely to drop out? How can it be ensured that the existence of African-centered school would not distract from the legitimate pressures to force mainstream schools to change their Eurocentric focus? Do all African-Canadian students share a sense of a common ancestral heritage? If they do not, how can it be ensured that teaching about African heritage and cultures does not merely feed on Black students' already deep sense of alienation? How do we ensure that an African-centered school is not stigmatized by society? (p. 297)

He argues that, while these are significant concerns, they do not diminish the need for a black-focused school, because the request for such a school "is an outward manifestation of the larger problems facing the Canadian public school system" (p. 297). Instead of clouding our opinion of the school with these concerns, we should look at the overall issue underlying the call for such a school, says Dei. He explains that:

The idea for such a school questions the fundamental objectives of public schools: what they are supposed to teach and how, who graduates from the system and with what accreditation, and whose interests are reflected in both the official and the "hidden curriculum"? (p. 297)

In asking these questions, Dei is encouraging us to think critically about mainstream schooling. He is arguing that our education system has an elusive nature, one that is inherently racist. Dei is adamant that this institutionalized racism will become evident if people take the time to consider

why everyday school activities are structured in certain ways and why certain students are not succeeding at the same levels as others.

In his more recent writing, Dei (2006) addresses another question posed by critics: "How do we know that the school will work?" He argues that, "We can only know if we try" (p. 31). In this piece he focuses less on the opinions of critics, and more on how such a school might be structured. In both essays Dei maintains that such a school is the right response to the current school systems inability to educate effectively black students because the idea for such a school, "is primarily based on its potential to address issues of Black and other minority youth disengagement and 'push out' from the Canadian school system, the same fundamental principles may help to transform conventional schooling in Euro-Canadian/American contexts, as well" (p. 28).

While Dei's work nicely details the debate over black-focused schools and argues for them, he does not address what black Torontonians youth know and think about this particular initiative. To my knowledge, no other studies do either. This research project gives youth the opportunity to voice their own opinions and concerns about the proposed pilot project and education systems in the GTA. My research participants were able to share resources to deal with challenges they faced and positive outcomes they experienced with regards to Toronto education systems, as well as to have their voices heard and their opinions and values respected. Youth are seldom involved in the decision-making processes that attempt to create new strategies to help improve their educational experiences. Local administrators, community members, and parents usually take primary control. Youth are left voiceless and barely informed about decisions made for them about their educational lives. Consequently, youth are not always aware of new education initiatives until these programs are established. They are often oblivious and sometimes remain uninformed about what is being discussed in their schools' board meetings and among the school

authorities. Although most school boards selectively post meeting agendas and decisions on their websites, information on school board trustees' discussions and concerns are seldom disclosed through the media. This study underscores the importance of valuing youths' narratives about educational initiatives and of engaging youth in critical thinking about educational strategies.

In this thesis, I argue that black youth generally disagree that black-focused schools should be implemented in the GTA, at the same time as they agree that the practices that would be used in these alternative schools would improve the academic achievement of black students (e.g., an Africentric curriculum, black history classes, black teachers). While the participants' limited knowledge about the proposal may have constrained their ability to relate to the proposed school, I argue that my participants could not visualize what the school would look like and how it would operate, primarily because they draw on liberal discourses of 'colour-blindness', 'blaming the victim', and 'equal opportunity' (Henry & Tator, 2006), which are inherently racist, when thinking about their educational experiences. As I will show, this way of thinking largely explains why they did not view the proposal as a plausible alternative for mainstream Eurocentric institutions.

To support these arguments I discuss in detail the black-focus school proposal and the related literature on the academic experiences of black youth in Canadian education systems. I provide this context for my study in Chapter Two, where I review the historical context of the proposal, community responses to the proposal, the literature on black youths' academic experiences, and past initiatives to promote academic success among black youth. Chapter Three focuses on the methodology employed in the project, and discusses how the multidisciplinary nature of this thesis has implications for its methodology and data analysis. In Chapter Four, I provide a summative overview of my participants' opinions on and concerns about the proposal, which is organized by answers directly related to aspects of the black-focused school proposal. In Chapter

Five, I analyze the narratives documented in Chapter Four as well as responses to additional interview guide questions, and demonstrate how the liberal racist discourses previously outlined are reflected in my participants' thinking about their educational experiences. In Chapter Six, I conclude with the implications of my insights, and identify directions for future research. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I discuss how developing this research within a multidisciplinary department has shaped the conventions used in the thesis and I focus on the theoretical perspectives that frame my research. Before I begin to outline the context of my study, I present a caveat explaining the multidisciplinary nature of my thesis.

Multidisciplinary departments offer students a range of diverse opportunities that provide excellent research skills; however, they also present students with important challenges. One of the most significant of these challenges is to decide whether or not their theses will follow the conventions of a single discipline. I have chosen to write a multidisciplinary thesis that neither follows the conventions of one discipline, nor assumes that every reader shares the same disciplinary assumptions. Therefore, there are times when I explain concepts and assumptions in more explicit terms than I would use if I were writing for a single disciplinary audience. For example, sociology scholars understand that the term 'liberal discourses' implies that such discourses are inherently racist (see Henry & Tator, 2002, 2006). However, if I use the term 'liberal discourses' within this thesis without explicitly stating this assumption then not all readers will understand that I am referring to discourses that are inherently racist.

A second challenge arises when a student chooses to write a multidisciplinary thesis, which has implications for its organization, theoretical framework, and methodological approach. In terms of organization, my thesis blends the conventions of psychology and sociology. This blending also extends into my theoretical framework, as in some disciplines theoretical grounding is emphasized more than others, and in my approach to multidisciplinaryity I have

elected not to ground my thesis in theory per se but have decided to draw upon theory to inform my theoretical lens. This means that instead of explicitly following the tenets of one specific theory, I draw upon elements of multiple theories to interpret my findings. Choosing to proceed this way has implications for my methodological approach. For example, there are multiple ways to conduct qualitative research, and my approach is reflective of my multidisciplinary training. In my approach to qualitative research, I have chosen to use focus groups as a vehicle that elicits individual opinions that are influenced by group dynamics. In addition, I have chosen not only to present my research participants' narratives in a summative format organized by the focus group interview guide questions, but also not interpreted through my theoretical lens in order to stress the importance of my participants' voices. In some disciplines this would be seen as breaking conventions within qualitative research, and this is true to a certain extent; however, in this thesis it is not only a breaking of convention, but also a reflection of the blending of different disciplines. Thus, it is important for the reader to keep in mind that this thesis blends multiple disciplines.

Configuring a Theoretical Lens

The blending of multiple disciplines is important in configuring my theoretical lens as I have chosen not to immerse myself in critical race theory (CRT), but instead to draw on specific aspects of the theory while also utilizing Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony. CRT is useful in providing a theoretical framework to address issues of racism, racial subordination, racial discrimination, institutional racism, and it relies on the assumption that racism is deeply embedded in one's lived experiences. This assumption is derived from Gramsci's notion of hegemony, yet CRT does not explicitly address the process of hegemony, and thus it is essential to drawn on Gramsci's work to understand how hegemony operates and can be identified within a given society (see 'Arranging the plot'). While both CRT and the concept of hegemony can

also be used to explore issues around how class, gender, and sexuality structure everyday experiences (Henry & Tator, 2006; Jones, 2006), I only focus on issues associated with race. In the next section I explain how critical race theory (CRT) and Gramsci's notion of hegemony influenced my theoretical lens. First, I 'set the stage' by providing a brief overview of CRT and its contribution to my theoretical lens. Second, I 'arrange the plot' by engaging in a discussion of the process of hegemony. Last, I 'introduce the actors' by describing how the liberal racist discourses identified by CRT theorists are hegemonic mechanisms and contextualize those discourses in educational experiences.

'Setting the stage': brief overview of critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is grounded in the claim that the law is ineffective at addressing instances of racism in society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). What is common throughout the literature describing CRT is that this theory is based on a critique of liberalism, seeks to understand hegemony, and believes that the law is a product of racism (Aylward, 1999; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Milner, 2007; Parker, 2003). The primary goals of CRT are to outline the history of a group's racialization in a society, to identify and deconstruct white hegemonic control of social and structural arrangements, to document racial discrimination, and to analyze experiences of racism through narrative/storytelling.

Critical race theorists seek to understand how, "a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of colour have been created and maintained in America" (Crenshaw, 1995, p. xiii) by, "deconstruct[ing] *white* hegemonic control of social and structural arrangements" (Parker, 2003, p. 185). They argue that a critique of liberalism is needed to break down racist liberal mechanisms, and that liberalism is an ineffective mechanism for challenging racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theorists also assume that racism is hegemonic, "so

enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people of this culture” (Delgado, 1995, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995, 11). While there are many other important aspects of CRT, I have incorporated these two primary elements into my theoretical lens: the assumption that racism is hegemonic, and the need to identify white hegemonic control of social and structural arrangements through an examination of liberal discourses.

‘Arranging the plot’: the process of hegemony

As I mention above, CRT does not explicitly address the process of hegemony, even as it relies on Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony. Gramsci describes hegemony as the power that a dominant group creates and maintains in a society in order to dominate over other groups² (Jones, 2006; Lull, 2003). Gramsci argues that the process of establishing and maintaining hegemony involves political, economic, and ideological means. Historically, hegemonic groups maintained dominance in a society most often through political and economic means (Jones, 2006). However, as more societies become democratic liberal regimes, hegemonic groups create and maintain their power by persuading subordinated groups to consent to their proposed or existing position of power:

‘Dominant’ groups within democratic societies generally govern with a good degree of consent from the people they rule, and the maintenance of the consent is dependent upon incessant repositioning of the relationship between the rulers and ruled. In order to maintain its authority, a ruling power must be sufficiently flexible to respond to new circumstances and to the changing wishes of those it rules (Jones, 2006, p. 3).

In other words, hegemony is an ongoing process of producing and sustaining power that is not purely based on domination, subordination, and resistance. Instead, it is largely based on the consent of subordinated groups. The controls and mechanisms used to influence consent are employed through a multi-layered web of power made up of political, economic, and ideological

² This dominant group is often called the hegemonic group, and the power that this group creates and maintains is often termed ‘hegemony’ or ‘hegemonic control’.

means (Jones, 2006). Therefore, hegemonic power is not only maintained by 'controlling economic forces' (e.g., employment policies that grant access to jobs), that disallow non-hegemonic groups' hierarchical mobility (e.g., career advancement), and political regimes that control with force, hegemonic power is also sustained by ideological means (e.g., liberal principles and values) (Lull, 2003).

Gramsci explains that in democratic liberal regimes hegemonic groups exercise ideological controls and mechanisms through social institutions such as schools, parliament, the family, and universities and media and educational structures (Jones, 2006). Gramsci calls these institutions and structures 'civil society', and explains that ideology, the third element in hegemony's multi-layered web of power, is enacted through civil society. In this study, I suggest that my participants have been exposed to ideological controls via social institutions and structures. However, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly which have been the most influential because the process of hegemony is ongoing³.

According to Henry and Tator (2002; 2006), ideology refers to the set of beliefs, values, perceptions, and assumptions held by a group of people. It is the conceptual framework people use to understand their world. The ideological controls and mechanisms the hegemonic group uses to maintain its power are called hegemonic ideologies. These scholars explain that as institutions and structures in a society are subject to political and economic forces, they are structured by hegemonic ideologies. Thus, they state that individuals are exposed to hegemonic

³ The web of power that the youth find themselves in, in this study, has a historical context that includes historical movements of the Civil Rights Movement and the Brown versus Board of Education case. These events have both clashed with the intentions of the hegemonic group. Yet the hegemonic group has been able to reposition the power between it and its subordinates, at the same time maintaining cultural (re)production. While these events are partial to the process of hegemony that the youth find themselves in, I will not bring these elements into my discussion and analysis.

control on a daily basis, and these mechanisms structure people's lives. However, hegemonic ideology cannot become manifest in the lives of non-hegemonic groups without their consent.

So how do subordinated groups consent to ideological controls and mechanisms, and why? How do these ideologies become part of their ideological framework? Consent relies on the ability of the hegemonic group to "reach into the minds and lives of its subordinates, exercising its power as what appears to be a free expression of their own interests and desires" (Jones, 2006, p. 4). In other words, the ideologies promoted by the hegemonic group must appear reasonable and fair to the subordinate groups, and grant them the freedom and rights to act in any way they desire, socially, economically, or politically. That being said, Gramsci identifies three reasons why individuals consent to the ideological operation of hegemony: civil society disseminates hegemonic ideologies, subordinate groups believe that they hold some level of autonomy, and ideology overlaps significantly with 'common sense' (Jones, 2006).

Gramsci explains in his discussion of ideological consent that every member of society consents and conforms to hegemonic ideological control in one form or another, and consent can occur consciously and unconsciously, because hegemonic ideologies are (re)produced through our societal institutions and structures and individuals may internalize those ideologies and not be aware of how that affects their beliefs and actions. By disseminating values and meanings that reflect the interests of the hegemonic group in social institutions, this group can ensure that their culture is being reproduced in the society in which they hold power. As social institutions are based on hegemonic interests, the members of these institutions abide by hegemonic ideologies every day.

Another reason why people consent to ideological control is because hegemony takes on economic, material, and legal-political forms:

A ruling power that ensures that its subordinates have enough to eat, are in paid employment and have adequate access to healthcare, childcare and holidays has gone a

long way towards winning their hearts and minds. Equally, parliamentary democracies appear to grant subordinate people a good degree of legal-political autonomy through granting them various rights and through allowing them to vote, to regularly change their government and to stand for election themselves (Jones, 2006, p. 48).

This function influences subordinate groups to believe that they hold some level of autonomy.

Lastly, 'common sense' is key in the successful operation of hegemonic ideological controls. As Williams (1976) explains, "Hegemony requires that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions. Its effectiveness depends on subordinated peoples accepting the dominant ideology as, normal reality or common sense...in active forms of experience and consciousness" (as cited in Lull, 2003, p. 63). Jones (2006) explains that Gramsci conceptualizes common sense as, "a way of thinking about the world that is grounded in material realities...literally thought that is common – common to a social group, or common to society as a whole" (p. 54). With this perspective, hegemonic ideologies act as 'common sense' because they are believed by most of society. The hegemonic group disseminates values and meanings that take on economic, material, and legal-political forms through civil society, and make these ideologies 'common sense' to all. Thus, Gramsci believes that we are all conformists in one way or another and the process of hegemonic ideologies becoming 'common sense' explains how and why subordinate groups consent to hegemonic ideologies.

'Introducing the actors': liberal discourses

Most often the racist ideology implicit in liberal discourses is elusive to members of mainstream society (Henry & Tator, 2002, 2006). Critical race theorists argue that racism is considered a normal occurrence in society because they believe that racism is ingrained in social institutions due to the way that people know and recognize life experiences. (Aylward, 1999; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Henry & Tator, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Milner, 2007; Parker, 2003). Racism has become as Bell (1992) argues, "a permanent fixture of [Canadian] life" (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 11). It is

now, “an endemic part of everyday life, deeply ingrained through historical conscious and ideological choices about race, which in turn have directly shaped the ways people think” (Parker, 2003, p. 185).

Henry and Tator (2002) explain that, “The ways in which society gives voice to racism are often subtle and even invisible to mainstream society because these [liberal] discourses are often contextualized within the framework of liberal principles and values” (p. 244). In other words, the collective belief systems operating in Canadian institutions incorporate structural racism and liberal principles and values. Henry and Tator (2006) argue that a liberal discourse is, “an ideology in which two conflicting sets of values are made congruent to each other” (p. 22). For example, the commitment for equality for all and negative feelings about subordinated racialized groups coexist (Henry & Tator, 2006). Throughout this thesis, when I use the term liberal racist discourses I will be highlighting these arguments.

There are several types of liberal racist discourses that have been identified by Henry and Tator (2002, 2006). I have incorporated three of them into my theoretical lens: ‘colour-blindness’, ‘blaming the victim’, and ‘equal opportunity’. Each of these discourses operates as a hegemonic mechanism.

Colour-blindness is the view that racial categories do not matter, and should not be taken into account when examining everyday social relations (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). The contention that skin colour is irrelevant to a teacher’s educational practice is an example of a colour-blind discourse (Henry & Tator, 2002). Such discourses find expression in administrative decisions not to collect race-based statistics because they supposedly have no bearing on academic achievement. They also are exercised in teaching practices when educators fail to consider, or resist considering the role racial differences can play in the classroom. Teachers commonly claim, “I treat all my students equally” and, “I only see children not skin colour when

I look at my students". James (1994) explains that colour-blindness is, "The refusal to recognize that race is part of the "baggage" that people of colour carry with them, and the refusal to recognize racism as part of everyday values, policies, programs, and practices" (as cited in Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 25). Ladson-Billings (1998) supports this view and argues that the colour-blind perspective is seen to work negatively for students in relation to current instructional strategies. Instead of considering other factors, the colour-blind perspective sees the inability to excel in the classroom setting as an individual phenomenon. When students do not succeed after teachers employ the common teaching skills that 'should' work for all students these students are identified as having academic weaknesses without considering the role that the instructional strategies may have played in the students' lack of achievement.

Like colour-blindness, the discourse of 'equal opportunity' masks racism because it is contextualized in liberal principles. The idea of 'equal opportunity' is based on the premise that, "We all begin from the same starting point and that everyone competes on a level playing field. Society merely provides the conditions within which individuals differentially endowed can make their mark" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 25). This premise supposes that an individual's accomplishments determine the extent that an individual will succeed in any given societal sphere (such as education) because everyone has the same rights and freedoms (Henry & Tator, 2006). A noteworthy example of how this discourse is inherently racist, but invisible to mainstream society as racist, is the belief that all students have 'equal opportunity' in Canadian education systems. This is a common assumption, but it is false; all students do not start on a level playing field. The curricula in Canadian education systems are based primarily on white middle class culture (Millory, 1999). Therefore, students from other social and cultural backgrounds do not come with all the 'prerequisites': white middle class values, norms, beliefs, and perceptions. This discourse ignores the privilege and power held by hegemonic groups, as

well as the presence of systemic racism and discrimination in societal institutions and structures. It is much harder for subordinated groups to act economically, socially, and politically when they face unequal treatment and discrimination. Ultimately, the discourse of equal opportunity masks racism because it is assumed that everyone has an equal opportunity; however, the reality is that racist ideology operates in our social institutions. This discourse is a common example of how liberal discourses and racial ideologies coexist and conflict together.

‘Blaming the victim’ follows from the previous two discourses because when people assume that racial equality (the view of colour-blindness) and equal opportunity exist, they must explain why one individual is not achieving at the same rate as another. Underachieving individuals or groups are often labeled ‘deviant’ or ‘culturally deficient’. They

may be lacking intellectual prowess or be more prone to aggressive behaviour or other forms of deviant behaviour. In this form of dominant discourse, it is assumed that certain communities (such as African Canadian) lack the motivation, education, or skill to participate fully in the workplace, educational system, and other areas of Canadian society (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 25-26).

Lacks of motivation or laziness are common explanations of black youths’ lower academic achievements. Thus, schools emphasize a lack of motivation as an explanation for poor grades as opposed to cultural disengagement. This discourse also can be expressed in the following ways: “Don’t waste time on the black youth, they don’t want to be here and they’ll drop out anyway”, or “Aboriginal students are lazy and they don’t want to succeed”. The discourses that focus on groups are easily identified as racist, while those that focus on individuals are more difficult to identify because the liberal value of individualism often masks the racism operating in social institutions.

As we can see, liberal principles and values coexist to help conceal systemic inequality and they act as hegemonic mechanisms. These liberal principles and values as expressed in liberal racist discourses exist in multiple societal spheres and I have focused on their expression in my

participants' narratives about their educational experiences. The understanding of these discourses relies on an understanding of the process of hegemony and the tenets of CRT. Taken together, they configure my theoretical lens and shape my understanding of the black-focused school issue. They are the tools that I use to interpret my research participants' narratives.

'Connecting the dots': conclusion

This theoretical lens frames how I interpret my focus group participants' reactions to the proposed black-focused school. I use elements of CRT and the concept of hegemony to argue that black youth in the GTA disagree with the proposal as a progressive educational strategy because they draw on liberal discourses when thinking about their educational experiences. It is essential to document my participants' voices independent of my theoretical lens because this values their voices within the thesis and is in keeping with the study's main objective to value my research participants' opinions and concerns about the proposal and provide them with an outlet to express their perspectives. Chapter four provides a summative report of those perspectives without the theoretical interpretation that I apply to their reactions in Chapter five. For those who view the proposal as a progressive strategy, this section will recognize areas of the proposal that are going to be a problem when encouraging youth to attend the school, as well as identify what Torontonians have to say on the project.

Previous literature has shown that the way people view the proposed project will be based largely on how they think about educational alternatives (Dei, 1996, 2006). According to media representation on the proposal, the implementation of a black-focused school is attractive to some members of the Toronto community, while others remain unconvinced of its potential to invoke change in the way youth are educated. Nevertheless, the TDSB has decided to implement a black-focused school in the GTA in 2009 because it supports the interests of the black

community. The context for this decision and its associated literature will be discussed in the next chapter.

Media are the only source, with the exception of Dei (1996, 2006), that have provided information on what people's reactions are to the proposed project. These sources offer valuable insight on the opinions of many individuals, but youth voices have not been documented and represented. The idea for this proposed project has been in the works for over 15 years as a way to promote black students' academic achievement and engagement. It is time we ask the youth what they think and this study will do just that.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The idea of implementing a black-focused, Africentric alternate school in Toronto is not a new initiative (Brennan & Brown, 2005; Brown, 2005b; Dei, 2005; Kalinowski & Brown, 2005; Moitt, 1996; Monteiro, 2005). It was proposed to the TDSB between 1992-1995 by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning and the African-Canadian Community working group as a strategy to improve the high drop-out rates of black youth (Brennan & Brown, 2005; Dei, 2005; Kalinowski & Brown, 2005).

The proposals for an alternative school arose out of the deep frustrations the black community in Toronto had with the Toronto education systems. Black Canadian families place a lot of value on education; therefore, they are frustrated that black youth have long struggled to excel in Toronto education systems (Brown, 2005; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Moitt, 1996; Waldron-Patterson, 2006). Since the 1990's research has revealed that, among other reasons¹, systemic racism and discrimination is at the root of black students' academic achievement problems (Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, 1997; Dei et al., 1997; Foster, 1996; James, 1990, 2001a, 2002). Yet there is no simple cause and effect reason for student disengagement; it is a complicated process that develops over time due to many different factors (Dei et al., 1997).

¹ The Eurocentric curricula institutional processes, and the hidden curriculum; lack of support in school systems/funding; colour-coded streaming and labeling by educational personnel; low teacher expectations resulting in unequal opportunities; cultural disconnect between home and school; lack of parental involvement in students' education; internalized inferior status and low self-esteem; absence of black teachers, history, and culture; peer pressure and struggles with identity development; and low socio-economic status and/or migration stress.

Over the years attempts have been made to help these youth succeed, yet few have been adequately successful. The most recent proposal for an Africentric Alternative school has received much attention from members of the GTA community. Media representations of the proposal have been largely negative; they do not reflect a complete understanding of the overall issues and circumstances. More clarification is needed for members of the Toronto community to gain an accurate understanding of the proposed school and its purpose.

In this chapter, I provide the context for my study by discussing the black-focused school proposal and the related literature on the academic experiences of black youth in Toronto education systems. First, I review the historical context of the proposal and what this school may look like to provide a detailed account of the proposal and how it has evolved. Second, I look at the literature on black youths' academic experiences to explain why black students' are struggling with academic achievement. Third, I examine past initiatives to promote academic success among black youth to illustrate why some of the members of the black community are advocating for an Alternative Africentric school. Last, I will share some community responses to the proposal in order to provide some insight into how the GTA community has responded to this new form of alternative schooling.

'Not a new Idea': Africentric Alternative schooling

The idea of black-focused schooling in the GTA is not a 21st century idea; black-focused schools actually existed in the GTA in 1935 and 1968 (Moitt, 1996). In fact, the push for the black-focused school that will open there in September 2009 started in the 1990's (Brennan & Brown, 2005; Brown, 2005b; Dei, 2005; Kalinowski & Brown, 2005; Monteiro, 2005).

The proposal for an Africentric Alternative school emerged in 1992 after Bob Rae's NDP government established a new secretariat on the TDSB, and the Ministry of Education's new

measures to push race relations and equity training for teachers and board officials were announced. A black-focused school proposal made sense at this time considering the TDSB's statistics that traced the under-achievement of young black students in the GTA from the 1970s. These statistics echoed the 1992 statistics released by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, which preceded the recommendation to implement the new school (Osorio, 2007). Based on the period 1987 to 1991, the race-based statistics produced by the TDSB showed that 36% of black secondary students were 'at-risk' based on their English and math courses, and 42% of black grade nine students dropped out by 1992 ("Radical Solutions for black students: Focused schools the answer", 2007). The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, in conjunction with the African-Canadian Community working group that was responsible for the idea, proposed that, "one predominantly black junior high school be created in each of the six Metropolitan Toronto municipalities, and a five-year pilot scheme to establish what were termed black-focused schools" ("The case for black schools", 2005, ¶12). The schools would have a predominantly black and racial minority teaching staff and be open to all students regardless of social, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. In response to the proposal the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning called for school boards, academic authorities, faculties of education, and representatives of the black community to collaborate in establishing what defined a black-focused school. This definition would provide the foundation of a proposal for a pilot school, explains a Toronto Star article.

However, the recommendations and evidence of underachievement were not enough to persuade the TDSB to explore the proposal further due to strenuous opposition from white educators and politicians, as well as members of the black community ("Say no to black schools", 2005). For example, Wilson Head, a prominent black community leader at the time, is cited in

two sources as claiming that the school was equivalent to segregation (“Radical Solutions for black students: Focused schools the answer”, 2007; “Say no to black schools”, 2005). This reaction is common, yet it signifies a lack of awareness about the proposal, as well as a simplistic understanding of the overall issue. Dei (2005) explains:

Some argue that black-focused schools represent a revision to the days of segregation. But there is meaningful difference between forced segregation and separation by choice. Segregationists in the first half of the 20th century sought to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in society. By contrast, black-focused schools aim to address an educational crisis and help minority youth succeed (§20-22)

Despite its advocates, the proposed project was ‘placed on the back burner’ in 1995.

Almost a decade later on February 2nd, 2005, the idea was proposed again at a Toronto forum on black education by George Dei, a sociologist at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE). There were various reasons why the Alternative Africentric school proposal was suggested at that time². For instance, Toronto was experiencing increased gun violence, and many victims were African Canadians: 90% of them were black males (“Radical Solutions for black students: Focused schools the answer”, 2007). A number of anti-violence campaigns were initiated, and students, parents, and other members of the community voiced complaints directed at the TDSB’s curriculum. Low teacher expectations, streaming, unfair disciplinary practices, and a Eurocentric curriculum were regarded as plausible explanations for why black students were dropping out of school and getting involved in ‘street life’ (“Radical Solutions for black students: Focused schools the answer”, 2007). These anti-violence campaigns, which led up to a black education forum helped the GTA community ‘connect the dots’ between the gun violence on the

² Zero tolerance policy; Safe Schools Act; gun violence; Atkinson reports; race-based statistics

streets and the failure of these students at school (Osorio, 2007). As a result, media outlets started to develop more of an interest in the proposed pilot project.

Discussions about ‘black-focused’ schooling had been underway in the TDSB for some time, while media interest had been piqued. According to McKell (2005), discussions around the boardroom on this issue had been ongoing since the 2003/2004 school year, following a report on the Task Force on Safe and Compassionate Schools and reports presented by the Atkinson Foundation (Brown, 2005a; Robinson, 2007). Three related initiatives had begun at this time: the collection of race-based statistics, an Africentric Summer Institute (ASI), and an African-based Inclusive Curriculum. McKell states that these initiatives, “had flow[ed] out of a decision of the [TDSB] Board in June 2004 to establish a committee to ‘explore the idea of an innovative pilot school program in an urban inner-city area for students who are at-risk in general, and specifically students of African heritage’” (McKell, 2005, p. 5).

The first initiative, the collection of race-based statistics, focused on concerns about the collection of student data on race, ethnicity, language, and income levels. At the heart of this issue were questions about how much information the TDSB had on the academic achievement and performance of students of African heritage. The TDSB had stopped collecting race-based statistics in 1997. This decision occurred during the amalgamation of the GTA, and it went against the Ontario Royal Commission’s recommendation that province wide testing should be cross-referenced with students’ race, gender, cultural background, and family income (“The classroom: Don’t separate students”, 2005). During this same period the Mike Harris conservatives cut the TDSB secretariat hired by the NDP government³ (Osorio, 2007). As a result,

³ “When the new school board was amalgamated in 1998 by former premier Mike Harris, it boasted 44 community outreach workers, but budget cuts soon reduced that to 22, then wiped

concerns were raised at the board meeting that losing the secretariat and race-based statistics meant unclear data about the issue. Thus, evidence suggesting that black students were dropping out in greater numbers was revisited by the TDSB.

The TDSB was collecting student success indicators that were sorted by place of birth, and these indicators showed the number of credits teenagers had earned by the end of grade ten (If students do not have 16 credits or more by this time they are considered 'at risk' to graduate late or not at all) ("The classroom: Don't separate students", 2005). From 1987 to 1991 the student success indicators reflected the same story, yet many people questioned the validity of the numbers as evidence. Robinson (2007) states that, "other than numbers pointing out how many students aren't graduating from a specific geographical region, there aren't any race-based statistics to show there is a large number of black youth dropping out of school" (§22). Common criticisms reflected a colour-blind perspective, and stated that these numbers were no reason to assume that race or ethnicity was at the root of the problem (Kalinowski & Brown, 2005; "The best environment", 2005; "The classroom: Don't separate students", 2005). Others argued that economic factors or inadequate school systems in the Caribbean might have put young black children at an educational disadvantage. Some were even against reinstating the collection of race-based statistics. They claimed that this data might, "reinforce negative stereotypes, ignore or address low student performance or simply blame individual educators" ("The case for black schools", 2005, §2). These debates reflected competing visions of education in Ontario ("The case for black schools", 2005).

them out all together" (Brown, 2005a). Mike Harris' era did *a lot* of damage to Ontario education.

Ultimately, Lloyd McKell, the TDSB executive officer of student and community equity, stated that he was in favour of collecting race-based statistics that would track academic performance, disciplinary action (suspensions and expulsions), attendance, the number of black teachers on staff, and other scholastic indicators (Black-only school is not the answer, 2005; Brown, 2005a; Brown, 2005c). The TDSB then appointed a blue-ribbon task force to examine ways of gathering race-based statistics in a sensitive and appropriate manner; they asked for the report to be done in the fall of 2005 (Brown, 2005a).

In December 2005 the TDSB decided to pilot-test a student census in June 2006, so the collection of race-based statistics could be implemented in the fall and winter of the 2006-2007 school year (TDSB, 2005-2006). The purpose of the census was to gain information on students regarding their race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion (Brown, 2006b) "to assist the Board in developing policies and strategies to close the achievement gap between groups of students, as well as to establish a baseline of data to measure improvements in the educational outcomes for all students" (TDSB Research Report, 2007, p. 1). As of now, the results of the 2006-2007 census have been only descriptive, yet the TDSB (2007) says that they are in the process of exploring correlations and causal relationships among the variables.

The second initiative focused on piloting an ASI in the summer of 2005. This summer program occurred at Shoreham Public School, located at the centre of the Jane/Steeles, black Creek Pioneer Village and York University communities in Toronto⁴. The TDSB (2006) stated that it, "was designed to provide an enabling learning environment for African-Canadian students

⁴ TDSB (2006) states that, "In this diverse community, students represent 23 different languages and the cultures of 37 different countries. The participating students were primarily students of Shoreham Public School; however, there were also some students from other area schools. Seventy-three (73) students participated in the six-week institute, which began July, 2005" (p. 4).

in Grades 1-5 who were performing at Levels 2 or below in literacy and/or numeracy” (p. 4). This meant that the context in which students learned literacy, numeracy, and social studies skills reflected the activities that are part of African tradition.

The evaluation of the project was tracked using student report card data, and this data indicated that student achievement had increased during the six-week summer period (TDSB, 2006). Students most at-risk, those performing at Level one and below, improved in their reading, writing, and math skill levels; however, paired sample t-tests did not produce statistically significant values when comparing Term one to Term three. On the other hand, statistically significant values were produced when comparing the performance levels of higher achieving students from Term one to Term three. Yet this showed that the skills of these students decreased. The TDSB (2006) states that, “these findings parallel those obtained for all four of the other 2004-05 [Early Identification Programs] EIPs (i.e., Summer Academic Program, Summer [English as a Second Language] ESL Program, Summer Literacy Camp, and Tutoring Program)” (p. 2). However, teachers’, students’, and parents’ perceptions of the program were extremely positive (TDSB, 2006).

The following results are based on the ASI Research Report released by the TDSB (2006). Ninety-four percent of the students who attended the program said that they *liked* the program. After attending the program 94% stated that they *wanted* to learn more, 87% said that they *liked school more now*, and 94% declared that they were *proud* of the material they learned during the program. Also, 70% of students stated that they *enjoyed* reading, writing, and math much more *now* than they had initially. As a result, 94% of parents whose children attended the program decided that they *would* enroll their children in the program again in the following year. Even more encouraging was that 100% of the teachers who taught in the program reported that their

students had learned more reading and writing skills, and 75% of the teachers reported that their students had improved in basic areas. On the whole, 50% of the teachers rated the program 'very successful', and the remaining 50% rated the program 'moderately successful'. Following this pilot project, adjustments and recommendations were made when implementing the third initiative.

The third initiative was to begin the African-based Inclusive Curriculum Project. This involved creating a committee to develop curriculum similar to the model developed for the ASI. Alternatively, this curriculum would be for grades six and seven students (McKell, 2005). This Africentric curriculum was launched in the fall of 2006 and continued to the end of the school year at Brookview Middle School, near the Jane and Finch intersection in Toronto (Brown, 2006a). There was a short item in the *Toronto Star* about this Africentric curriculum taught at Brookview Middle School; a math unit relying on the context of racial profiling, "designed to boost pride and test scores among black students" (Brown, 2006a, ¶2). Little information is given specifically about the curriculum except that "a data-management unit that would use statistics about police and racial profiling – possibly from information used in the *Toronto Star's* series" (¶7) would be used. Andrew Allen, an education professor at the University of Windsor, explained that, "The idea is not to get students all worked up about racial profiling, but to allow them to use data about who gets stopped by police to come up with their own conclusions and develop a critical view of the world" (as cited in Brown, 2006a, ¶9). This illustrates some insight as to how the lived experience of black Canadians is being incorporated into the curriculum. Similar to the ASI project, a research component was included in the design of this project to explore how well the students performed, how effectively the teachers used the curriculum, and to

determine what did and did not work well. However, these results have yet to be released to the public.

Following these initiatives, the black community in the GTA requested a 'real' Africentric Alternative School on June 27, 2007 (TDSB, 2008). In response, the TDSB asked their staff to present a report on the feasibility of an Africentric Alternative School. The TDSB initiated the usual consultative process under the terms of the Board's Alternative Schools Policy and Procedures, which involves consulting with community and staff stakeholders (TDSB, 2008). Public meetings were held on November 8th and 12th, 2007 where two main questions were asked of the community: Do you support a pilot Africentric Alternative School in the TDSB? What should the TDSB consider in establishing such a school?

Most of the opinions voiced at these forums supported George Dei's and Lloyd McKell's views that action should be taken to support educational success for black students. Educators, teachers, parents, current high school students, undergraduates and masters level students were involved in the forum as spokespersons. They made statements and expressed positions that desired, yearned for, and welcomed this type of educational alternative for black students. People commented on the need to enhance black students' self-worth and confidence, their understanding of school-to-home differences, academic support, and safety. They identified with the current educational 'crisis' of black students. One high school teacher, David Watkins from Weston Collegiate, shared how in his 'society course' he introduced each class by asking 'What is it to be black?' (personal communication, Watkins, November 12, 2007). The reactions to this question included a variety of distortions and unclear notions of the meaning of black. His course was designed around mainstream curriculum expectations, but framed on a clear understanding of black heritage and positive black self-worth. Dialogue and group discussions preceded his class

assignments and reports. By the end of the course year he saw a positive improvement, growth, and academic development in his students. Many of these students who were previously indifferent and discouraged learners became buoyed and proud motivated students ready to launch ahead into the next year's studies with individual purpose. His comments, partnered with his first hand experience, supported the implementation of the black-focused school curriculum. He was adamantly in favour of this TDSB pilot project.

Following these meetings two black community education forums were held on December 1st and 12th, 2007. They allowed community members to register speaking time in response to the question: What is your proposal for black student success in school? A little over a month later on Tuesday January 29, 2008, the TDSB announced, based on an 11 to 9 vote, that they would approve the creation of Ontario's first Africentric Alternative school. The four recommendations approved of by the TDSB were stated by a TDSB meeting notice (2008):

- 1) That a Program Area Review Team (PART) be established in February 2008 to recommend the program and operational model for an Africentric Alternative School opening in September 2009, including grade levels, selection of site, and staffing and support services required, and that the PART report to the Board with its recommendations by May 2008;
- 2) That a three-year pilot program be established in three existing schools beginning in September 2008, to implement a model for integrating the histories, cultures, experiences and contributions of people of African descent and other racialized groups into the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and social environment of the schools;
- 3) That a Staff Development, Research, and Innovation Centre be established beginning in September 2008, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and community agencies, in order to develop, use and assess the effectiveness of best practices for improving school achievement for marginalized and vulnerable students who are not achieving success in school; and
- 4) That the Director report to the Board in April 2008 on an action plan for addressing student underachievement for marginalized and vulnerable students, based on proposals received from community stakeholders and on current system

plans. (p. 1) (See Appendix A for the complete Meeting notice produced by the TDSB)

What will this school look like?

The TDSB (2008) defines the Africentric Alternative School planned to open September 2009 as, “a school open to all students, which uses the sources of knowledge and experiences of peoples of African descent as an integral feature of the teaching and learning environment” (p. 2). The actual program and operational model for the school will not be fully defined until May 2008. The two paragraphs below describe how the project’s two most prominent supporters, George Dei and Lloyd McKell, define a black-focused school.

George Dei describes a black-focused school as having a number of unique characteristics that redefine the curriculum, teaching methods, and student management process. Its curriculum challenges the conventional educational environment by organizing itself around a holistic model of communal principles and non-hierarchical structures (“The case for black schools”, 2005). The school makes the totality of black-lived experience relevant to all parts of the curriculum in order to foster the social, physical, spiritual, and academic development of students (“The case for black schools”, 2005). The curriculum breaks down the separation between the school and the wider community by incorporating the family/home and the workplace in order to offer creative ways of thinking about knowledge, and then engages students to use this knowledge to make positive social changes (Dei, 2005). The school will teach discipline by developing the learners’ sense of self-worth, moral fiber, and purpose in society, and will not resort to suspensions, expulsions, or law enforcement (Dei, 2005).

Lloyd McKell agrees with Dei’s description and further clarifies that a black-focused school would function in the following ways. The school would be open not only for black students, but also for students of all racial backgrounds (“The case for black schools”, 2005). The school would

not recommend that all black students attend the school solely because it is a black-focused school, but rather it would recommend that students who are not functioning and achieving well in the mainstream curriculum consider attending. Therefore, a parent should not send their child to the school only because of his or her skin colour ("The case for black schools", 2005). This concept is similar to all-girl schools where the curriculum is focused on the needs of certain groups of students ("The case for black schools", 2005). Dei and McKell show how such a school might be implemented, and emphasize that the idea is not dissimilar from other focused-based curriculum already implemented in the GTA. The main objective and strategy is to meet students' needs in an equitable manner.

The proposed curriculum presentation methods are probably geared to critical thinking/reasoning/decision-making processes (based on exposure to history, personal experience, and especially culture) rather than on a traditional method where the teacher says: "Here's the material. Just learn it, do not ask questions, and show me that you understand". In the proposed black-focused curriculum black youth will likely be encouraged to question and support their learning, because they will have a closer 'ownership' in the curriculum. They will be able to identify with what they are being taught more personally, and not feel like 'fish out of water' in a school of 'European Canadian achieving fishes'.

‘Over forty years?’ The struggle of black youth in Canadian education⁵

Despite the value black Canadian families place on education, research since the 1970s has shown that black youth struggle to excel in Canadian education as they do not choose the courses or accumulate the credits needed to pursue postsecondary studies (Brown, 2005; Dei et al., 1997; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Moitt, 1996; Waldron-Patterson, 2006). The irony is that black Canadian youth and their parents’ value education highly. Cecil Foster (1996) explains that in the 1960s the dream for most people living in the colonial Caribbean was to obtain an education by immigrating. Immigration was seen, “as a chance to become all those things little boys and girls dream of when adults ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”” (p. 36). Immigration was desirable because education opportunities were not fully available in the Caribbean. Parents saw an avenue of opportunity in coming to Canada: gaining education credentials in Canada’s school systems. Despite this goal, black Canadian youth struggle in Canadian education systems.

These struggles have been well documented in scholarly literature. Beginning in the 1960’s, Canada saw a large number of blacks immigrating to Canada from the Caribbean (Foster, 1996; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Moitt, 1996). In the 1970’s,⁶ Canadian school boards and other

⁵ This literature review only focuses on the experiences of black youth in Toronto. Minimally, do I incorporate literature that focuses on the same social phenomenon but within other geographical locations in Canada, for the reason that, James and Brathwaite (1996) state that “there is ample evidence to indicate that the experiences of African Canadians in other provinces in Canada such as Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec parallel those in Ontario” (p. 14). Lastly, although a great body of literature does exist focusing on the academic achievement of black American youth in the United States, I agree with Carl James and feel that the context in the United States is not applicable or comparable to Canada’s (personal communication, March 18, 2008). One of the reasons being that Canada still denies the actual existence of racism in its societal institutions, whereas the United States of America actually admits that its institutions are characterized by racism (Aylward, 1999).

⁶ However, in terms of total accuracy, Karen Brathwaite and Carl James, (1996) explain that black students’ participation in the Canadian education system has been a problem since their recorded presence in Canada in the seventeenth century. From this time on, black students have

independent researchers⁷ began to recognize that African Canadian students, particularly those with Caribbean Heritage, were having difficulties at school (James & Brathwaite, 1996). However, they continued to value of education highly. James and Brathwaite (1996) state that, “Generally, studies of Black youth in the metropolitan Toronto area, show that during the seventies and eighties, most believed that education was important to their success in this society and that racism and discrimination were merely ‘obstacles’ that they would be able to overcome through their high level of education” (p. 21). Yet the difficulties observed in the 1970’s became a more widespread social phenomenon. In the 1980’s organizations and school boards became more aware of and concerned about these difficulties, as research continued to demonstrate low academic achievements among black Canadian youth (Moitt, 1996).

To illustrate, TDSB statistics showed that during the 1970’s and 1980’s a large percentage of black students were placed in courses that did not prepare them for university (Brown, 2005). Instead black students were often categorized as students with special education needs, or placed in behaviour classes rather than gifted programs. During these decades James and Brathwaite (1996) state that research⁸ “showed that Black students were second to Aboriginals in being most highly represented in basic level programmes of study” (p. 16). For example, using a group of grade eight students, “Larter et al. (1982)...found that Black and Caribbean students were the only groups who rated education as the most important to them; however, these were the two groups

argued that the education system has been used in their marginalization, as well as limited their full participation in Canadian society.

⁷ James and Brathwaite cite these researchers as: Schreiber, 1970; Stewart, 1975; Roth, 1973; Fram et al, 1997; Ramcharan, 1975; Anderson and Grant, 1975; Beeve 1976.

⁸ James and Brathwaite cite these researchers as: Wright, 1971; Deosaran, 1976; Wright and Tsuji, 1984; Cheng, Tsuji, Yau and Ziegler, 1987; Cheng, Yau, and Ziegler, 1993.

with the largest percentage (35% Blacks and 19% Caribbean) in special education classes” (as cited in James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 17).

This struggle continued in the 1990s. Dei et al. (1997) state that,

in a 1991 high-school survey by one board of education in Toronto, it was revealed that Black/African-Canadian youth were not achieving as well as other students in terms of credit accumulation. It was shown that 36 percent of Black students were ‘at risk’ of dropping out because of failure to accumulate sufficient credits to graduate within six years. This compared with 26 percent for Whites and 18 percent for Asians (see Yau, Cheng, and Ziegler 1993; Cheng 1995). This survey also confirmed that ‘45% of Black high-school students were enrolled in the Basic and General Levels, as compared to 28% of the entire student body placed in those two lower streams’ (Cheng 1995, 2; see also Cheng, Yau, and Ziegler 1993, 15; Brown et al. 1992, 13). In the most revealing statistics, the board of education’s study of high-school students who enrolled in 1987 showed that by 1991, 42 percent of Black students (compared to 33 percent of the overall student population) dropped out of school (see Brown 1993, 5). (p. 10-11)

In addition, the Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE), a community group composed mainly of African Canadian parents and activists, as well as the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning revealed the alarming drop-out rate of black students in the GTA (Dei et al, 1997).

Three decades preceding the seventies and four since Canada saw an increase in blacks immigrating to Canada, the TDSB released consistent statistics in the school year of 2001/2002 “which showed that 54 percent of students born in the English-speaking Caribbean had 14 credits or fewer at the end of Grade 10 (Students should have 16 credits at this point in their academic careers)” (Kalinowski & Brown, 2005, ¶27). The TDSB notes that having 14 credits or less at the end of Grade ten is a sign that students are at risk of not completing high school, because many students with this credit attainment profile typically drop out of school. The same data showed that 45% of students born in West Africa, Central or South America, and 39% of east African students were at risk of not graduating on time compared to 27% of Canadian-born students (The

classroom: Don't separate students, 2005). Similarly, and also consistent with previous decades, Waldron-Patterson (2006) found that Caribbean families view education and credentials as extremely important in 2004. Waldron-Patterson examined data collected from Caribbean Canadian parents who have educated their children in Alberta's school systems to better understand the educational philosophy of people from the Caribbean.

After three decades, these facts suggest that black Canadian students are still enrolling in courses that do not help them succeed academically, which indicates minimal improvement in their academic achievement. One might question: Why are these youth struggling with their education if their communities still put a great deal of significance on education? The following section focuses on this question.

Possible Reasons for Student Disengagement

As stated above, research began on the low academic achievement of black Canadian youth in the 1970's⁹. The findings demonstrated that these students were slow learners; had psychological problems, learning disabilities, adjustment, or pathological¹⁰ problems; were hyperactive; or had attention deficit syndrome (James & Brathwaite, 1996). Researchers argued that the problem was rooted in resettlement processes, and during 1970's and 1980's the majority of school authorities agreed that black Canadian youth were not excelling in school for those reasons. However, the same research showed that black children who were born in Canada were *also* struggling in the same ways. James and Brathwaite (1996) contend that "these explanations could not account for the similar school experiences of Canadian-born black youth, who were not doing well in school"

⁹ However, the previous section also notes that black Canadians have been struggling in Canada's education systems since the seventeenth century.

¹⁰ "(See Christensen, Thornley-Brown and Robinson, 1980)". (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 15)

(p. 16). School boards as well as independent researchers showed that black students were having trouble achieving not only because of adjustment issues but because they were experiencing discrimination based on race and cultural differences in education systems (James & Brathwaite, 1996). Therefore, in the 1990's the former explanation was discredited by many researchers, parents, and academics, while the latter gained more attention: systemic racism and discrimination was at the root of black students' academic achievement problems.

Low academic achievement has been associated with student disengagement. Much literature suggests possible reasons for student disengagement in the GTA (Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, 1997; Dei et al., 1997; Foster, 1996; James, 1990, 2001a, 2002), but generalizing them is problematic because there is no simple cause and effect relationship between any of these explanations and the low academic achievement levels of black Canadian youth; student disengagement is a complicated process that develops over time due to a variety of different factors specific to the individual (Dei et al., 1997). In no order of significance these probable reasons¹¹ include:

- 1) systemic racism and discrimination;
- 2) the Eurocentric curricula, institutional processes, and the hidden curriculum;
- 3) lack of support in school systems/funding;
- 4) colour-coded streaming and labeling by educational personnel;
- 5) low teacher expectations resulting in unequal opportunities;
- 6) cultural disconnect between home and school;
- 7) lack of parental involvement in students' education;
- 8) internalized inferior status and low self esteem;
- 9) absence of black teachers, history, and culture;
- 10) peer pressure and struggles with identity development; and
- 11) low socio-economic status and/or migration stress (Dei et al., 1997).

¹¹ Some of these probable reasons are different forms of each other, or are related to each other. In other words, these concepts and reasons overlap, or are a result of each other. For example, Eurocentric curricula are forms of systemic racism and discrimination.

The proceeding section will discuss the following probable reasons for student disengagement in Canada's education systems in an integrative manner: the Eurocentric curricula, institutional processes, the hidden curriculum, the cultural disconnect between home and school, colour-coded streaming, labeling by educational personnel, and low teacher expectations resulting in unequal opportunities.

Scholars argue that the problem with the education process in Canadian schools is that it puts minority groups at a disadvantage due to systemic racism and discrimination. The structure of these schools discriminates against marginalized groups by teaching from only a Eurocentric perspective. Karolyn Tyson (2003) identifies two main goals of education, "to teach basic academic skills and knowledge [and to transfer] ... to students certain cultural values, attitudes and orientations" (p. 328). Reflecting on these goals, it is evident why Apple (1986), Giroux (1983), and McCarthy (1990), "have drawn attention to how schools function to reproduce dominant ideologies of society" (as cited in Dei, 1997, p. 204) maintaining that the curriculum is used as a tool to preserve hegemonic ideologies in different educational contexts. When education systems systemically reproduce dominant middle class ideologies minority groups experience discrimination because their cultural values, attitudes, and orientations are not part of what is being reproduced.

Zinga and Davis (2007) argue that Canada's education systems are allowing the curriculum to continue to reproduce a white Eurocentric perspective. This agrees with earlier work by Tyson (2003) who noted that students are expected to conform to the, "mainstream white middle class, in order to access the rewards of society" (p. 327). By 'conforming' these students have to demonstrate that they comply with the mainstream norms and expectations held in Canadian schools. This is a vital problem because Canada's population has continued to become more

diverse. According to the 2001 Canadian Census, more than 94% of visible minorities live in Canada's metropolitan areas (as cited in Department of Canadian Heritage, 2005) with 36.8% of visible minorities living in Toronto. In many respects, Canadian educational systems were initially founded on curriculum designed to assimilate 'minority' groups identified as visible minorities. Several researchers confirm that this design is still apparent today; however, it is referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' (Dei et al., 1997; Henry & Tator, 2006; James, 2001; Tyson, 2003). The 'hidden curriculum' is a set of values and principles that are not explicitly expressed to students by their teachers (James, 2001). This core curriculum prepares students to conform and comply with authority and teaching them to regard social inequalities as natural, thus ensuring cultural reproduction.

The hidden curriculum is also problematic because students experience different cultural realities at school and at home, which increase a student's possibility of failing (Tyson, 2003). Students tend to feel disconnected from the classroom because the values and knowledge taught at home do not mirror the dominant white middle class perspective that structures the way they are expected to learn at school. Tyson's (2003) findings are consistent with Dei et al.'s (1997) who argue that in Canada students disengage from school because they "are unable to make relevant connections between their education and their everyday lives...when students do not see themselves or their interests represented, they develop a fatalistic attitude about themselves, their education and their future" (p. 69). Even those students who do find a way to conform to the cultural standards at school end up marginalized in some way. For example, James' (2002) study of two black youth indicates that, "Blacks with high educational aspirations have to negotiate their identities in educational settings in which their Black peers think that such aspirations and successes represent conformity to White cultural values" (p. 176). Thus, these youth have to

isolate themselves from black peers in order to succeed in their education. This is an example of how structural forms of racism have had negative implications on the identities of young black youth.

Black youth are also influenced by their interactions with educators. A common question arising from the literature on this subject is: "Why do teachers participate in practices and policies that may undermine minority students' academic achievement?" (Tyson, 2003, p. 326) Researchers have come up with two answers (Dei et al., 1997; Tyson, 2003). First, Tyson claims that teachers become the agents of their institutions. The institutions they are agents in are "part of the dominant culture and whose interest it is to reproduce the system" as agents that act to "structure learning, evaluation, discipline, and the overall classroom environment" (p. 339) based on mainstream ideologies. This is a further example of how racism and discrimination are deeply ingrained in Canada's education systems.

Second, teachers feel that they treat all students equally (Dei et al., 1997), but Tyson (2003) and Dei et al. (1997) propose that teachers feel this way because they are hiding their own discomfort with the issue. This reflects a colour-blind perspective. When teachers ignore explanations involving racial categories that point out different academic success levels among different groups of students they are operating from a colour-blind perspective. Relatedly, some teachers also do not see themselves as political agents and view racism as society's problem, not the schools' problem. However, one study suggests that teachers who have experienced racism and discrimination in their own lives are able to construct their role as a teacher in ways that can improve the educational experiences of blacks (James, 2002).

However, Dei et al. (1997), James (2001), and Tyson (2003) indicate that most teachers do not perform in the classroom in racially equitable ways. Dei et al. (1997) found that student

comments indicate that teachers are not doing enough to encourage black students. While, James (2001) suggests that racial stereotypes have been passed on and down to teachers over the years and as a result, “Low teacher expectations continue to contribute to the streaming of minority and immigrant students into low-level educational programs, resulting in alienation and high dropout rates” (p. 182). This is consistent with Dei et al. (1997) who indicate that this lack of encouragement from teachers, “confirmed long histories of school experiences which served to undermine [minority groups] self-esteem and self-confidence” (p. 67). Thus, teachers are involved in the ‘school practice of streaming’.

Streaming is defined as the situation, “when low expectations are juxtaposed with positive evaluations given to other racial groups” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 69-70). For example, when black students are encouraged to enroll in courses that do not prepare them for university or are labeled as having learning disabilities they are being streamed. This practice harms a student’s personal and cultural self-esteem. Guidance counselors also contributed to the streaming of black youth through low expectations, which made students less likely to confide in their guidance counselors and teachers for fear of being evaluated under certain stereotypes (James, 2002). In some instances, students revealed that these personnel even encouraged them to drop out of school (Dei et al., 1997).

Most researchers argue that teachers need to become activists in school systems who can overthrow the curriculum and pedagogy practices that disadvantage blacks and other minority groups. James (2002) contends that “It will be up to the teacher to ensure that their curriculum and pedagogy do not re-inscribe the dominant liberal ideology that does not address the inequitable educational contexts that today’s students are expected to tolerate and survive” (p. 200). Similarly, Dei (1997) concludes by saying that, “Educators have to lead the way by opening

up spaces for alternative non-hegemonic viewpoints to flourish in the schools” (p.205). It is evident that one of the main reasons why black youth are prone to dropping out of school is because they lack encouragement from teachers. However, the structure and institutional processes in Canada’s Eurocentric education systems are also key. So, what has been implemented in Canadian education systems to help these youth? The following section will examine this question.

What has been done? Attempts made to improve the educational experiences of black youth

In an attempt to serve the ever-growing black population in Canada, the ‘Canadian Multicultural Policy’ was implemented in Ontario in 1971. This policy instructed schools to, “initiat(e) educational programs that addressed issues related to race, national and ethnic origin, color and religion” (James, 2001, p. 175). However, there was a problem with the framework guiding this policy for the African Canadian student population because it, “failed to recognize the dominance of Anglo-Celtic Canadians as an ethno-racial group and the construction of the English and French as real Canadians” (James, 2001, p. 177). In other words, the policies that were put in place to deal with the hidden curriculum were not doing the job, and were continuing to construct dominant and subordinate relationships between social groups (James, 2001). As a result, organizations comprised of African Canadian parents and community members worked to develop their own initiatives.

Some of the groups and programs that were established by the African Canadian community included the Black Education Project (BEP), the Harriett Tubman Youth Centre (HTYC), United Improvement Negro Association (UNIA) (Moitt, 1996), the Black Liaison Committee (BLC) at the Toronto Board of Education, African Canadian Heritage Programmes (ACHP), Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE), Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC), the

Transitional Year Programme at the University of Toronto, and others (James & Brathwaite, 1996). Some of these organizations were formed independently, while others linked up with larger institutions (James & Brathwaite, 1996). These groups sought to create policies that would change the educational experience of black students. A number of the issues these groups fought against include the streaming of black students and the multicultural policies that had been created and implemented by the federal government (James & Brathwaite, 1996). They also fought to integrate teaching about African heritage into the curriculum (Moitt, 1996). As a result, these groups have had some influence over programs introduced under the TDSB.

The TDSB first introduced Black Canadian Heritage programs in 1979 following a memorandum released in 1977 from the Ontario Ministry of Education (Moitt, 1996). These programs were structured to meet the needs of minority groups in Canada's education systems, and they valued parental participation in demanding that local administration provide heritage programs for their students. However, these programs were not part of the regular school week. The Toronto Board of Education structured this program by providing the following: "The teaching of Heritage Languages as part of the offerings of the Continuing Education Department for 2 ½ hours per week after regular school hours, on non-school days, or, where numbers warranted, by an extension of the regular school days" (as cited in Moitt, 1996, p. 181). Consequently, if students wanted to gain knowledge in these areas they would have to do this on their own time, either after school or on weekends.

Two other attempts to integrate African heritage knowledge into education systems were initiated in 1983 and then again in 1988 (Moitt, 1996). Both in the form of textbooks, the first, '*Black Studies*', emphasized the importance of black history and culture, and it was created by numerous teachers and community members (Moitt, 1996). The second, '*Etudes Afro-*

Canadiennes', was "a major modification of '*Black studies*' designed for use in the French school system" (p. 185). To Moitt's knowledge, neither of these two textbooks was used or is being used in education systems. Although the textbooks are described as 'admirable and well conceived' the likelihood that teachers would spend the extra time in the library to find these resources is unlikely (Moitt, 1996). Thus, these initiatives did not have a lasting impact on the curriculum being taught in the school boards in the GTA.

Following these events, in 1988 Canada's Prime Minister admitted that the previous 1971 policy had failed to address the issues. As a result, a new act was created: the 1988 Multicultural Act. Alternative programs like multicultural days and field trips that exposed children to different cultures were implemented into the curriculum. The support for both sides of the debate about the programs' effectiveness is fairly equal with educators and academics claiming they are a positive step in transforming the 'multicultural education' that is presently part of our curriculum. However, there are still critics. For example, some people argue that such, "programs and field trips to cultural communities encourage a tourist outlook...enforcing the idea that these cultural expressions are elsewhere outside of Canada" (James, 2001, p. 181). Programs continue to espouse the idea that cultures that are not part of the dominant white middle-class groups are remote.

Since the 1988 Multicultural Act, educators, researchers, and students have proposed different kinds of education in attempts to help black youth and other minorities achieve academically. Two of these proposals have been anti-racism education (see Dei, 1996) and inclusive education (see Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000). Although there are many different approaches and structures to these proposals they all strive to break down dominant hegemonic ideologies and promote a curriculum that allows for counter-hegemonic views. Yet to my

knowledge neither of these approaches is being used in Toronto schools. However, over the last couple of years Toronto school boards have allowed teachers to design and offer African history courses, yet these courses are not consistently available across all Toronto schools. On the other hand, several Alternative schools under the authority of the TDSB have been created in an attempt to improve the educational experiences of students of other profiles, yet their programming does not address the black student profile specifically.

These TDSB Alternative schools have been created to, “offer students and parents something different from mainstream schooling” (Toronto District School Board, 2008). Currently, the TDSB cites 16 different alternative elementary schools, and 23 secondary alternative schools existing in the GTA. The TDSB describes each school as having, “a distinct identity and approach to curriculum delivery. They usually feature a small student population, a commitment to innovative and experimental programs, and volunteer commitment from parents and other community members”. To my knowledge, Alternative schools focused on Aboriginal, gay and lesbian, and several other ‘at-risk’ students already exist. At each of these schools, students take courses that give them credits toward their school diplomas. These existing schools are different from mainstream schools only in that they are structured differently in practice and teach using an alternative curriculum. Therefore, the Africentric Alternative school that has been proposed is not radically different from these existing Alternative schools and will function in the same ways. Yet many members in the Toronto community do not see it this way.

‘Cries of segregation’: community response/opinion on the project

As I stated previously, the most common reaction to the proposal is that it constitutes a form of racial segregation. Yet this reaction represents a lack of understanding about the proposal as a concept, as well as a surface-level understanding of the overall issue. Many people cannot see the

difference between segregation by force and segregation by choice. Without knowledge of this proposal they may be unable to accept that this pilot project is similar to already established all-girl schools, Catholic schools, Aboriginal schools, boy-only literacy classes in junior grades, and schools for gay and lesbian students. Many people believe that implementing this sort of institution would be regressive and support racism. For example, when analyzing media accounts¹² I found seven articles that quoted people who believed that this pilot project would take a huge step backwards to the days of segregation (Bedford, 2005; “Best environment”, 2005, Browning, 2003, “Case for black schools”, 2005, Monteiro, 2005, Murray, 2005 & “Say no to black schools”, 2005). For example, William Bedford, a citizen of the Toronto area, wrote in the *Toronto Star*: “Any special school for any particular race or ethnic group would be seen, quite properly as racism” (Bedford, 2005, ¶ 1).

Another common reaction from the community was that allowing black students to have a school will ‘separate them from the real world’. It is possible that those people who agreed that “to separate black students in a fashion that harkens back to segregation would be grossly unfair and ill-prepare them for grown-up life in a multicultural country” (“The classroom: Don’t separate students”, 2005, ¶ 11), do not necessarily understand the concept of multiculturalism. While it can be argued that ‘multiculturalism’ as a concept is subject to many different interpretations, if one subscribes to the ideology behind the Multicultural Act then the proposal should be welcomed as a way of valuing diversity. This said, I found the comment made by Lincoln Alexander, the former lieutenant-governor who received an award for promoting racial

¹² This paper explored public support and resistance to the proposal of creating a black-focused school in Toronto, as a strategy for providing equity for black Canadian youth. It drew on media accounts – i.e. newspaper articles and radio talk shows – on this proposal, public support and resistance to education ‘segregation’ was examined from the perspectives of government, educators, and people in the general community.

harmony, somewhat disturbing. Alexander stated that this proposal would be a step back to segregation and then commented that, “If you don’t have a black boss in the police department, does that mean you can’t be a policeman? If you don’t have a black person as head of the law society, does that mean that you can’t get a law degree? These university professors ought to get out of their classrooms and see what’s going on” (as cited in “Best environment”, 2005, ¶ 11). Perhaps Mr. Alexander does not understand the proactive objective of this black-focused school proposal: *To provide equity and support in a curriculum designed to promote greater understanding of and increased success for black students and to better prepare these future citizens for adulthood.* However, it also is possible that his comment may have been taken out of context by this particular media representation.

The third reaction I observed from the general public about the black-focused school proposal is contextualized by two discourses: ‘equal opportunity’ and ‘individual responsibility’. The two strongest voices advocating ‘individual responsibility’ were John Oakley, who hosts a radio talk show on 640-AM, and Michael Coren, from the radio Michael Coren Show on CFRB-AM 1010. Regarding the current situation black students are experiencing in Toronto schools both hosts argued in defense of the state: the state does not hold any responsibility or fault. Instead, they centered responsibility on the parents, and more precisely on the students. Many callers to the shows also voiced this opinion. One black man who called in said that, “Parents who are failing are calling the state to bring up their children...It all comes down to moral values, and black people do not have many...parents are blaming the state for their failing on the home front” (Syrett, 2005). John agreed with him and suggested that these parents are, “trying to rush in the ‘Nanny’ state” (Syrett, 2005).

The idea of 'equal opportunity', meaning that every student has equal opportunity in education mobility also was voiced by the general public. Muller and Schiller (2000) agree that, "as an ideal, the concept of equality of educational opportunity – that any bright and motivated student can succeed – is well ingrained in our national psyche and serves as a measure of success" (p.196). Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) support this argument by stating, "A life course perspective on human development holds that through their actions, individuals are producers of their own development" (p. 95). The state has emphasized that every student no matter what their family background and economic status has equal opportunity, and that in school systems students are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of their achievement – meritocracy.

The last reaction I observed from the community supports the literature that discusses the hidden curriculum and how teachers play a big part in that process (see two sections above). Murray (2005) shares the first piece of advice her teacher friend received while practice teaching in one of Toronto's inner-city schools: "Not to waste too much time on the Jamaican kids because they'd never amount to anything and most would likely end up in jail anyways...as for Somali students, she was told, it was likely 'inbreeding' that accounted for their total lack of intelligence" (Murray, 2005, ¶ 2-3). Murray goes on to say that her friend

had hoped that these views were only of this particular teacher, however she came to realize that there was a pervasive climate within the school that had branded these children as losers. She grew tired of seeing the long line of black boys in the hallway outside one particular classroom where the teacher kicked them out for infractions such as showing up without a pencil (¶ 4)

In Murray's friend's opinion nothing is expected of these children so they are unlikely to succeed (Murray, 2005). Her friend believes that if these students are treated as dumb and lazy this is how they will act (Murray, 2005).

In Brown (2005a) and Shanoff (2005), Bairu Sium, a black teacher who has been involved in public education for more than 40 years, also agrees that black students are underestimated and respond to this by performing according to those lower expectations. He informed the *Toronto Star* that black students are not often asked questions in class and that they are streamed away from academic paths as early as kindergarten. He said that black children are seldom identified for early gifted programs. Instead, they are identified for special education or behavioural classes (Brown, 2005a). Bairu believes that public schools whether it is intentional or not stream students by colour, and steer black students in particular away from more ambitious scholarly paths (Shanoff, 2005).

Lastly, another teacher's personal experience was discussed in the newspaper article. Mark Seupersaud, a black history teacher from a public high school in Kitchener, Ontario argued that the current school curriculum ignores the history of black people (Monteiro, 2005). Seupersaud said that he used to teach black history until the former Conservative government dropped it from the curriculum (Monteiro, 2005). This fact is disturbing that in our so-called multicultural curriculum the state is excluding the history of our citizens. Seupersaud further makes a strong point with which I agree. He argues that, "What we have now is segregation...our system is Eurocentric" (Monteiro, 2005).

In conclusion, this chapter has illustrated that black-focused schooling is not a recent idea. Instead, it has had currency in Toronto since the 20th century. The distinction between black-focused and mainstream schooling is that it will provide black students with a deeper connection between home and school realities. It is quite disturbing that these students have been struggling for several decades, their value of education remains high. A summative explanation for this struggle is that the Toronto education systems are structured by systemic racism and

discrimination. Attempts have been made to improve this problem, but none have been completely successful.

Although many Alternative schools have been created in Toronto for other 'at-risk' groups, those who were not succeeding in the mainstream system, many members of the community cannot see this proposed Africentric Alternative school in the same light. Therefore, the general disagreement among members of the GTA towards the implementation of Africentric Alternative school should inspire some interest, as so many other Alternative schools are running in the GTA. It is understandable that the black communities in the GTA is adamant about such a move when over forty years of low academic achievement levels have not inspired effective strategies for improvement. But what do black youth living in the GTA think about the idea? Should their views not be considered in this decision? The next chapter will outline how I address these questions. I outline the methodology I employ when talking to my research participants about this issue, and explain how I approach my data analysis and theoretical interpretation of my participants' responses.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

As outlined in Chapter One, the multidisciplinary of this thesis has methodological implications. Specifically, this thesis does not follow the conventions of one discipline, because it is a product of a multidisciplinary department and written for a multidisciplinary audience. Its organizational structure, as reflected by its chapters and what is included in each chapter, are drawn from both psychology and sociology and blend conventions from both disciplines. In addition, my approach to qualitative research does not strictly follow the conventions of qualitative research within sociological contexts, but tends to be similar to qualitative work done within psychology. In particular, it includes quantitative elements and some separation between the reporting of findings and the interpretation of those findings. This breaking with sociological qualitative conventions is intentional, and is reflected in the organization of the chapters reporting the data analysis. Chapter Four provides a summative report on my participants' responses that is organized by the interview guide questions, but not interpreted through my theoretical lens, while Chapter Five provides the theoretical lens analysis. This is in direct opposition to conventions within sociology, as analysis would be embedded in the reporting of my focus group participants' narratives.

This breaking with convention and blending of psychology and sociology also is reflected in my choosing to conduct focus groups as my method of data collection. In my research I conceptualize focus groups as vehicles that elicit individual opinions that are influenced by the group dynamics. As you may recall from Chapter One, the main objective of this research is to give as many black youth as possible the chance to voice their opinions and concerns about the

black-focused school proposal and their educational experiences. Thus, focus groups are the ideal data collection technique to address the main objective of this research.

Little is known about how black youth have responded to this proposal, which is why it was important to hear from black youth and to respect their opinions and values. Adults routinely make decisions about what is in young people's best interests, while often discounting youth voice by arguing that the youth do not know or appreciate what is 'good' for them. As youth are seldom involved in decision-making processes it is essential that my research participants' voices be recognized independent of the theoretical interpretation.

My decision to provide a summative reporting of my focus group participants' voices in Chapter Four is drawn also from CRT's focus on the 'valuing of narratives'. CR theorists use narrative/storytelling as a method for gathering data, because it allows them to document racial discrimination and analyse racism. They also value narrative/storytelling because it, "provides members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self preservation" (Delgado, 1989 as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 55). CRT's focus on the valuing of narratives fits well with my use of focus groups, as focus group sessions can potentially act as vehicles for youth to share their views and have their opinions valued. Therefore, my main objective and theoretical lens have impacted my decision to devote one full chapter to documenting my participants' voices, as my way of valuing my participants' narratives (Chapter Four). By allowing my research participants' voices to stand on their own in this chapter, free from my theoretical interpretations, I have documented the voices of my research participants so that they could be heard, respected, and valued.

In this chapter, I outline my research methodology. First, I provide an overview of the project's research methodology and procedures. Second, I explain the rationale behind why I choose to collect data from black youth. Third, I describe the focus group compositions by

illustrating the similarities and differences between group members. Prior to discussing how this study's design has had an impact on how my data was handled, I outline some unexpected matters and modifications that arose during data collection.

Description of Research Methodology

During the fall of 2007, I conducted six focus groups with black youth in different regions across the GTA (see Table 1). I located participants by approaching community organizations: a community youth agency¹, a LGBTQ support program for youth, a Canadian activist group, and a non-profit social service agency. As the black-focused school issue emerged out of the black community and was designed to address issues around the academic achievement of black students, I sought to talk with only black youth. Ethical approval was sought from the TDSB to conduct focus groups, but denied. Although disappointing, this was not intended to be my primary source of participants. I preferred community-based recruitment because it avoided the influence of the school environment in that it allowed for students from diverse schools to participate and eliminated the possibility of pre-screening by the TDSB. Also, this strategy permitted focus groups to be made up of only black youth, as it might have been difficult to separate black students from other students in a school setting. Community-based setting may also have allowed my focus group participants to talk more freely about their opinions on the new proposed school and on their current school situation than if the groups were conducted in a school environment. Fortunately, the community-based recruitment was successful and the TDSB was not needed as a source of additional participants.

¹ This particular community youth agency had two locations, each in different regions in the GTA. One focus group was conducted at the location in the TDSB's York South Weston Ward, and two focus groups were conducted at the location in the TDSB's Etobicoke Centre Ward.

Table 1

Description of focus group sessions: participants' demographic characteristics

Session order	Location	Age	Race	Gender	Place of birth	Mother's Place of Birth	Father's Place of Birth	Mother's Occupation ₁	Father's Occupation
#1 Youth Agency ₂ (n = 12 ₃)	This youth drop-in agency is located in a housing complex in the TDSB's Etobicoke Centre Ward. ₄	15 = 1 16 = 1 17 = 1 20 = 1 21 = 2 22 = 2 23 = 1 25 = 1 26 = 1	All blacks ₅	M = 7 F = 4	Canada = 8 Afghanistan = 1 Saudi Arabia = 1 Sweden = 1	Bangladesh = 1 Canada = 1 Jamaica = 5 Nigeria = 1 Saudi Arabia = 1 Somalia = 1 Trinidad = 1	America = 1 Ghana = 1 Jamaica = 4 Locman-Sudan = 1 Nigeria = 1 Saudi Arabia = 1 Somalia = 1 Trinidad = 1	Cook = 1 Doctor = 1 Hairdresser = 1 Mother = 1 Nurse = 2 Police officer = 1 Probation staff = 1 Don't know = 2 Left blank = 1	Factory worker = 1 Taxi driver = 1 Don't know = 4 Left Blank = 1 Humorous = 3 Not working = 1

₁ In ending each focus group session, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire, in which they identified their parents' occupation. They were not asked their social economic status.

₂ Two focus groups were conducted at this same site at different times, and with different youth. The first and fourth focus groups were conducted at this site.

₃ One participant from this focus group did not hand in a demographic questionnaire; therefore no demographic information was determined for this participant.

₄ See Figure 3 for map of TDSB Wards. Map retrieved April 16 2008 from: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/boardroom/trustees/>

₅ Participants were not consistently asked to self-identify in terms of race or culture, although some members of some groups answered or volunteered this information. Yet, the recruiting flyer did specify sessions with black youth (see Figure 2). It was therefore up to the researcher to determine race as visible cues would presumably be the same basis for differential treatment within the schools.

Session order	Location	Age	Race	Gender	Place of birth	Mother's Place of Birth	Father's Place of Birth	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation
#2 Youth Agency (n = 11)	This youth drop-in agency is located in a building in a commercial area in the TDSB's York South Ward.	15 = 1	All black	M = 10 F = 1	Canada = 8	Unknown = 1	Unknown = 1	Factory worker = 1	Janitor = 1
		16 = 1			Jamaica = 2	Grenada = 1	Canada = 1	worker = 1	Retail = 1
		17 = 4			St. Vincent = 1	Jamaica = 8	Grenada = 1	Janitor/	Factory
		18 = 3				St. Vincent = 1	Jamaica = 7	Receptionist = 1	manager = 1
		19 = 1					St. Vincent = 1	Housewife = 1	Mechanic = 1
		26 = 1						Nurse = 2	Reception = 1
								Don't know = 2	Don't know = 1
								Left blank = 3	Left blank = 2
								N/A = 1	N/A = 2
									Deceased = 1
#3 LGBTQ support program (n = 12)	This youth centre is located in a health Centre in the TDSB's Toronto Danforth Ward.	17 = 1	All blacks	M = 2 F = 8	Canada = 5	Canada = 1	Grenada = 1	Plant inspector = 1	Banker = 1
		20 = 1			Grenada = 1	England = 1	Jamaica = 5	Lab	Carrier = 1
		22 = 1			Jamaica = 1	Grenada = 1	Togo = 1	technologist = 1	Client Admin
		23 = 3			Togo = 1	Jamaica = 4	Trinidad = 2	Nurse = 4	istrator = 1
		26 = 1			Trinidad = 1	Togo = 1	Zimbabwe = 1	Retail = 1	Electrician = 1
		28 = 1			Zimbabwe = 1	Trinidad = 1		Security = 1	Printer = 1
		29 = 1				Zimbabwe = 1		Spanish	Retailer = 1
		30 = 1						Professor = 1	Security = 1
									Technician = 1
								Can't work = 1	Retired = 1
									Don't know = 1

This youth centre is run by the same organization that runs the youth centre where two other focus groups were conducted.

Two participants from this focus group did not hand in a demographic questionnaire; therefore no demographic information was determined for these participants.

One of the participants who did not hand in a questionnaire was not black, however this individual had to leave early and did not have an opportunity to complete a questionnaire.

Session order	Location	Age	Race	Gender	Place of birth	Mother's Place of Birth	Father's Place of Birth	Mother's Occupation	Father's Occupation
#4 Youth Agency (n = 12)	This youth drop-in agency is located in a housing complex in the TDSB's Etobicoke Centre Ward.	15 = 2 18 = 2 19 = 1 21 = 1 22 = 1 23 = 4 24 = 1	All black	M = 8 F = 4	Canada = 5 Ethiopia = 1 Jamaica = 1 Kismaya = 1 Morroco = 1 Somalia = 3	Canada = 1 Egypt = 1 Ethiopia = 1 Jamaica = 4 Kenya = 1 Somalia = 2 Switzerland = 1 Tanzania = 1	Unknown = 1 Canada = 1 Ethiopia = 1 Jamaica = 5 Kenya = 1 Somalia = 3	Attendant = 1 Hairdresser = 1 Health care = 1 Librarian = 1 Maintenance = 1 Mother = 2 Left blank = 2 N/A = 2 Nothing = 1	Drummer = 1 M.S.M. = 1 Mechanic = 2 Miner = 1 Travel agent = 1 Don't know = 1 Left blank = 3 N/A = 1 Nothing = 1
#5 Canadian Activist group (n = 4)	This Canadian activist group is located in a commercial area in the TDSB's St. Paul Ward.	17 = 1 19 = 1 24 = 2	All black	M = 2 F = 2	Canada = 2 Ghana = 1 St. Lucia = 1	Ghana = 1 Jamaica = 2 St. Lucia = 1	Ghana = 1 Jamaica = 2 St. Lucia = 1	Cleaning = 1 General labour = 1 Hotel manager = 1 Social worker = 1	General labour = 1 Professor = 1 Activist = 1 Don't know = 1
#6 Not-profit social service agency (n = 6)	This youth and newcomer support centre is located in a commercial plaza in the TDSB's Scarborough Centre Ward.	15 = 1 16 = 1 17 = 3 18 = 1	All black	M = 4 F = 2	Canada = 3 Guyana = 2 Jamaica = 1	Unknown = 1 Guyana = 2 Jamaica = 3	Unknown = 1 Guyana = 2 Jamaica = 3	Entrepreneur = 1 Nurse = 1 Receptionist = 1 Left blank = 3	Government Worker = 1 Entrepreneur = 1 Don't know = 1 Left blank = 3

The decision to use focus groups for this research was also informed by the importance of making the youth comfortable within the research. As a white female outsider, I was aware that my own location and positionality (both as exhibited by me and as inferred by the youth) would influence what I heard and understood as well as what the youth said and were prepared to say. As I stated previously, I saw focus groups as providing the youth with a vehicle to elicit individual opinions that would also be influenced by group dynamics. I had concerns that not all of the youth had heard about the black-focus school proposal and so a focus group would allow for everyone to be involved in the discussion after being informed of the proposal by their peers. I also recognized the importance of providing the youth with a setting that recognized potential power differentials (e.g. privileged white researcher and black youth) and so did not see individual interviews as an appropriate method whereas a focus group offered more support for the youth. Given that I was aware of my own positionality and location as well as the possible impacts this could have on the youth, I hired a black male student who was connected with various communities in the GTA to be part of the research team. The student attended all of the focus groups and provided technical support (e.g. setting up the video camera and monitoring its performance) while I focused on connecting with the youth and facilitating the sessions.

Fifty-seven individuals participated in the focus group sessions and the groups ranged in size from four to 12 participants. Before beginning each session informed written consent was obtained from each participant. The principal investigator reviewed the consent form orally to ensure that the participants understood their rights. The group discussions were video-taped and transcribed. An open-ended focus group interview guide was used to facilitate discussion.

The interview guide consisted of questions that centered on the young peoples' knowledge and opinions about the black-focused school proposal, their experiences at school, and

experiences in their culture (see Appendix B). A brief description² of the black-focused school project also was included in the interview guide to ensure that each participant was given an accurate picture of the proposed pilot project. I did not present the proposal as being either positive or negative, because my main objective was to elicit my participants' opinions about the proposal. The interview guide was designed to elicit their opinions, and while it did not actively prevent participants from critically engaging in the issues it was not designed to prompt them to think critically about their current experiences at school, or see this project as a progressive or regressive strategy to improving the underachievement of black youth in education systems.

As a result, *all* the focus groups were driven by my research participants; they followed their own discussions and were not structured by the questions. The discussions were determined by the questions they asked about the project and the issues they felt they needed to shared regarding their school experiences. Thus, my role in the sessions could be defined as the one who asked only interview guide questions and answered questions my participants had about the project, but did not direct my research participants' discussion of those questions and answers. Furthermore not all of the interview guide questions were asked in all of the groups and they were not always asked in the same order, because the focus groups were driven by my

² This information was taken from sources citing George Dei and Lloyd McKell. These two individuals are prominent advocates of the pilot project. George Dei is a sociologist at The Ontario Institute of Sociology and Education (OISE), while Lloyd McKell is the TDSB's executor officer of student and community equity. These sources were published in 2005: See Dei, G. (2005, February 19). Black-focused schools are about inclusion, not segregation. *Guelph Daily Mercury*. Retrieved September 28, 2005, from <http://elibrary.bigchalk.com/libweb/canada/>, and McKell, L. (2005, April 27). *National Anti-Racism Council of Canada Issues*. Retrieved February 7, 2008, from: <http://action.web.ca/home/narcc/issues>.

participants. A breakdown of all the questions asked and the order in which they were asked in each group is provided in Appendix C.

At the end of each session, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire so their characteristics could be established (see Appendix D). The demographics of participants can be seen in Table 1. Once the questionnaires were collected, the participants received three items: a \$10 honorarium, a feedback letter explaining the project, and a short list of counseling services if the participants needed support after the discussion. After this, the participants in the groups divided and my research assistant and I left the site.

Six video-taped focus group sessions were transcribed into text. The transcripts were then imported into a qualitative data software program, NVivo 8, where question-based and thematic coding analyses were conducted. In addition, 54³ demographic questionnaires were entered into a statistical software program, SPSS, where analyses of variable frequencies and descriptives could be run (this data is presented in Table 1).

Focus group compositions

The nature of each community organization and the participants recruited from each organization are diverse. Each community organization is located in a different geographical district in the GTA according to the TDSB ward map, and each has special purposes that attract diverse types of youth (see Table 1 and Appendix E). Focus Groups One, Two, and Four were conducted at a youth-driven agency at two different geographical locations that provide 'at-risk' ethno-cultural youth with a place to learn about critical thinking skills. In contrast, Focus Group Three was conducted at an organization that provides a space for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgendered (LGBTQ) youth to receive support in finding housing and

³ Three of the 57 participants did not fill out a demographic questionnaire.

employment opportunities, as well as a safe place to express feelings of alienation. The remaining organizations specifically focus on issues relating to the black community. Focus Group Five was recruited from a Canadian activist group that deals with issues concerning the black community, and Focus Group Six was conducted at a not-for-profit organization that provides social services for youth, newcomers, and Caribbean and black communities. My focus group participants in these sessions reflected the type of organization of which they were a part, therefore my participants are 'receiving social service' youth, 'activist' youth, 'at-risk' youth, and LGBTQ youth.

The nature of each organization and the participants recruited were diverse, even though the composition of each focus group was similar (see Table 1). In five out of six sessions, the number of males was higher than the number of females⁴. Also, the majority of participants in each group were born in Canada, while the others were born in countries in Africa or in the Caribbean islands.⁵ Furthermore, the majority of the participants' mothers and fathers in each group were born in Jamaica, while remaining parents were born in other Caribbean islands or countries in Africa.⁶ Notably, half of my research participants reported specific occupations for their parents while the other half either left the answer blank or responded with 'n/a', 'don't know', 'not working', 'can't work', or they answered in a humorous manner. The participants were not asked their socio-economic status, although it appears from their responses to the parent occupation questions that the majority of them come from low socio-economic

⁴ This may have been due to the nature of the organizations, or perhaps who chose to participate and attend on the day of the session.

⁵ With the exception of Focus Group One, as additional participants were born in Europe and the Middle East, and Focus Group Two, as all the participants were born in the Caribbean.

⁶ With the exception of eight parents who were born in: Canada (n=3), Europe (n=2), India (1), and the Middle East (n=2).

backgrounds. Several narratives also support this premise, as some youth talk about wanting to succeed in school so they can give their children more than their parents could give them. Alternatively, focus groups varied significantly in terms of participants' ages. One group ranged in age from 20-30 with the exception of one 17-year-old. Another varied in age from 15-19 except for the 26-year-old community group leader who decided to participate. Focus Group Six ranged in age from 15-18 years old, while the remaining three groups varied in age between 15-26 years old. This unexpected age range of participants will be discussed in the next section.

Unexpected Matters and Modifications

To recruit participants, a poster was given to participating community organizations. This poster indicated that I wished to speak with youth presiding in or entering into grades 10-12 (see Appendix F). I preferred that participants had a minimum of one year's experience in high school so that they would have had some educational experience in that context. However, I talked to a range of participants who were not between solely the ages of 15-19⁷ (see Table 1).

The majority of organizations I worked with provided me with youth who were older than my requested age range. As a result, the data collected was gathered from 'youth' who were between the ages of 15-30⁸. I could have taken stricter measures to ensure that my participants' ages were within the 15-19 age range *and not older* by asking for my research participants' ages at the time, or asking the organization leader to confirm ages and turn people away; however, I did not do so for the following reasons:

- 1) I was intrigued at the number of people who were interested in participating;

⁷ With one exception, the non-profit social service agency focus group session only consisted of youth between the ages of 15-19 years old.

⁸ In this thesis, the term youth refers to individuals whose ages range between 15 and 30 years old. Although there could be some debate on whether these individuals could be termed youth, or young adults, I have chosen to group and label them 'youth'.

- 2) It did not seem appropriate to turn people away who had taken the effort to show up especially when doing so could embarrass them in front of a group; and
- 3) It was difficult to tell age differences without making assumptions.

Therefore, throughout this study 'youth' refers to participants between the ages of 15-30.

In addition to changing the age range of my participants I excluded three of my participants from the analysis and they were not reported in any of the descriptions of data, because they had extensive knowledge about the black-focused school proposal, the history of what has been done to help educate black youth, and the educational experiences black youth encounter in school systems. They were obviously experts on the topic, and were not within the age range of 15-30. These three participants attended the same focus group session and did not influence the answers of the other participants the session. I have ascertained that their participation did not appear to unduly influence my focus group participants' opinions by carefully examining the transcripts. Through this examination it became clear that my participants did not agree with the expert participants' comments as youth in this session made comments that were similar to those made by other youth in other focus group sessions. However, it is possible that these youth agreed with them in principle, but were annoyed with their 'expertise' so they decided to take on an opposite perspective. This was because my research participants in this session made comments that were similar to those made by other youth in other focus group sessions.

Data Analysis

Multidisciplinarity has also impacted my data analysis in that I do not analyze each focus group as only a single group narrative. For example, at times I report individual narratives while at others I provide a summative accounting by focus group. In Chapter Four, I chose to focus my results on the direct responses to the interview guide questions when summarizing my results, while most qualitative researchers code their data for themes. By handling data in this

‘question-based’ manner, it allowed me to document the voices of my participants. Furthermore, because my research question was to find out ‘What black youth living in the GTA think about the possible implementation of a black-focused school pilot project in Toronto as a potential strategy to lessen the drop-out rate and improve the academic achievement of black high school students?’, I decided to report only directly on the findings that in my view corresponded to my research question. In Chapter Five, I analyze individual narratives and how the interplay of youths’ voices influences the responses given. However, I draw on data corresponding to other questions during my theoretical interpretation only where other responses are relevant to my research question.

As I stated above in my description of the research methodology, each transcript was coded using the qualitative software program NVivo 8 (see Appendix G). The interview guide questions served as ‘parent tree nodes’ (see Table 2) and answers/responses to these questions served as ‘child tree nodes’ under each ‘parent node’⁹. Five additional parent nodes were created inductively due to reoccurring answers that related to questions being asked under the ‘Knowledge about the black-focused school’ and ‘Experiences at school’ sections in the interview guide (see Table 2).

In Chapter Four, the results from this study are presented in the form of direct quotes from the participants. When selecting quotes I considered not only the richness and representativeness of the responses but issues of diversity of views, perspectives and voice. To protect confidentiality, all personal indicators were changed. Wherever possible I indicated age,

⁹ ‘Parent tree nodes’ and ‘child tree nodes’ are terms used within the NVivo 8 software to describe topics, issues, codes, or themes. The parent tree node acts as the broad topic, and the child tree nodes act as different issues under the broad topic.

Table 2

A summary of the 'parent tree nodes' created within the NVIVO dataset

Interview Guide Question Sections	Parent Tree Nodes
Ice Breaking	School Likes School Dislikes School is fine the way it is What would you change about your school?
Knowledge about the proposed black-focused School	Asked for positives about the black-focused school Asked for negatives about the black-focused school Have you heard of the black-focused school proposed? Initial thoughts on the proposal Knowledge on the proposal – What have you heard? What do you think belongs in this school and curriculum? When did they hear about it? Where did they hear about it? Would this new school eliminate drop-outs? Would you attend this school? Would your parents want you to attend? Would you send your children there?
Culture and School	How do you learn about you culture? How does your school reflect your culture? How would you describe your culture? What is important about your culture?
Experiences at School	Alternative programs mentioned in relation to mainstream education Attitudes towards the schooling experience Differences between schools Do you plan on getting your grade twelve? Experiences at school right now What makes you stay in school? Why do students get suspended or drop-out?

gender, and focus group session. The parent and child tree nodes that are reported on are outlined in Table 3.

In addition, results are presented in tables corresponding to specific questions and answers as well as participant or focus group session. This approach is reflective of my multidisciplinary training as I have blended qualitative and quantitative methodology techniques to present my research participants' responses in a summative format. As I mentioned earlier, I wanted to provide an outlet for my focus group participants' views to be documented, so that all their opinions and concerns on the project could be displayed. Therefore, by displaying a summative account of the responses to every question relating to my research question I feel I have accurately portrayed my participants' voices. The findings in the tables are based on responses per focus group except if interview guide questions were more individually based, 'Have you heard of the black-focused school proposal?'

Following Chapter Four, which displays the summative report of my research participants' responses, is Chapter Five, which engages in a discussion of my participants' responses as interpreted through my theoretical lens. In this chapter, I did use inductive thematic coding for the theoretical interpretation of my data. Among my focus group participants' responses displayed in Chapter Four and the additional responses to other interview guide questions were narratives that illustrated liberal racist discourses; however, these liberal racist discourses were not identified within the summative report of my participants' narratives. In Chapter Five, these narratives are coded inductively into three 'free nodes'¹⁰: colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity. This organizational structure breaks with the conventions of qualitative

¹⁰ 'Free nodes' refer to themes that do not have any 'child tree nodes'. In other words, these themes were not questions on my interview guide.

Table 3

A summary of the 'parent and child tree nodes' under the interview guide section - knowledge about the proposed black-focused school – and the corresponding answers given by my participants

Parent Nodes	Child Nodes
Asked for positives about the black-focused school	Curriculum will be different It could work if... It is a good idea. It will try to change racist attitudes. Learning in a comfortable environment Learning about black history Less police all the time More black teachers Nothing
Asked for negatives about the black-focused school	Arrogance Bad Idea No suspensions or expulsions Possibility of heightened homophobia Possibility of violence There is a better way – inclusive
Have you heard of the black-focused school proposed?	No Yes
Initial thoughts on the proposal	Discipline methods Does not think the title black-focused is appropriate It is a set-up. It is segregation. Misconception about the idea in relation to time Non-blacks may feel out of place. Sounds like a 'special school'. Why not just make an inclusive school?
Knowledge on the proposal – What have you heard?	Anybody can go there. Incorporating black history Incorporating the black-lived experience Nothing specific That it is only for black students That it was proposed to the TDSB – It is under discussion

Parent Nodes	Child Nodes
What do you think belongs in this school and curriculum?	n/a
What parts of the proposal needed clarification?	Anybody can go there. Classes Different forms of discipline Inclusive schooling has been attempted. Location and how many Philosophy of the School This is not a new idea. Vision of the school environment What school board is it going to be under? Who is behind the idea? Who will the teachers be?
When did they hear about it?	n/a
Where did they hear about it?	Conference News Word of mouth
Would this new school eliminate drop-outs?	n/a
Would you attend this school?	Do not know Fears Maybe No Post – Views the idea different now Pre Yes Yes but with stipulations
Would your parents want you to attend?	No Yes
Would you send your children there?	Maybe at a different time No Yes

Note: n/a indicates that not enough common answers were given to make code

research within sociology, as Chapter Five focuses on the theoretical interpretation of my research participants' narratives, while Chapter Four provided a space for my focus group participants' voices to be documented at face value.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘VALUING THE NARRATIVES’: RESULTS

It is essential that my participants’ opinions and concerns on the proposal for a black-focused school be heard as they were communicated. Clearly it is not possible to include the transcripts for each focus group session in this thesis. Therefore, this chapter provides a summative account of my research participants’ responses to every interview guide question relating to the black-focused school proposal in order to document my focus group participants’ narratives as they were shared with me. The summative reporting of these narratives is documented in narrative and tabular formats. I am aware that this documentation is not completely free of my interpretation. Interpretation was involved when I made decisions about what to include in the summative reports; however, when compiling this summative accounting of my participants’ voices I did not apply my theoretical lens.

To begin this chapter I discuss the impact that the focus group dynamics had on the responses of my participants, and the general findings as indicated by the summative reporting of my research participants’ narratives. Following this I provide the detailed narrative and tabular formatting of my focus group participants’ voices. I start with a description of how my participants responded when I asked them if they had heard of the black-focused school proposal, and the general findings of the other interview guide questions relative to the black-focused school issue will follow. I end with a description of how my research participants responded when I asked them what sorts of things they would put into the black-focused school curriculum and whether or not they thought that the implementation of this school would help eliminate drop-outs.

The dynamics of each focus group influenced the responses of the participants. The opinions and perspectives of my focus group participants were affected by how well the entire focus group worked together to explain the philosophy of the proposed school. My research participants shared knowledge with each other creating a different dynamic level of knowledge in each youth-driven group, even though I facilitated the conversation and encouraged the information-sharing. Contradictions and agreements within the group led to much 'echoing', 'complimenting', and 'building' (Hilfinger Messias, Jennings, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2008) on each other's voices. For example, one youth would introduce a subject that resonated with someone else, and that might lead to that person 'echoing' the first youth's concerns, or 'complimenting' them by adding additional information, or it might have been used by another youth as a segue into another area, thus 'building' the conversation.

The dynamics of each focus group produced an array of responses; however, the opinions given were relatively similar across all of the groups. As a result, the general findings in this study address several patterns. First, when I asked participants if they had heard about the black-focused school proposal I found that certain groups had heard about it, while others had not. What had been heard about the proposal was limited, and the initial reactions towards the idea were somewhat negative at the beginning of the group discussions. Second, my participants had a difficult time conceptualizing the proposed structure and curriculum of the Alternative school. This difficulty influenced my research participants' ability to answer other questions posed about the project: Would you attend? Would your parents want you to attend? What sorts of things belong in this school curriculum? Would it eliminate drop-outs? Finally, there was a contradiction in my focus group participants' responses about the proposal. Overall, my participants disagreed with the implementation of the proposal. However, more positive than

negative aspects were identified when the participants were asked to share some positive and negative aspects about the Alternative school by almost all the focus groups. Nevertheless, as I show, the identification of more positive than negative aspects does not imply that my research participants felt comfortable with the implementation of the black-focused school and its ability to lower the drop-out rate of black Canadian students.

Have you heard of the black-focused school proposal?

Table 4 presents the frequencies of participants in each focus group who indicated 'Yes' or 'No'¹ when asked if they had heard about the black-focused school proposal prior to their focus group session. Among the groups, every participant in the not-for-profit social service agency

Table 4

Frequencies of youth in each focus group who had heard or not heard of the proposal

Focus group organization listed in descending order of when the session was conducted	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total (%)
#1 Youth Agency	3 (25)	9 (75)	12 (100)
#2 Youth Agency	3 (27.2)	8 (72.7)	11 (100)
#3 LGBTQ	2 (16.6)	10 (83.4)	12 (100)
#4 Youth Agency	4 (33.3)	8 (66.6)	12 (100)
#5 Canadian Activist group	4 (100)	0 (0)	4 (100)
#6 Not-profit social service agency	6 (100)	0 (0)	6 (100)
	22 (38.6)	35 (61.4)	57 (100)

and the Canadian Activist group had heard about the proposal prior to the session. In the remaining four sessions, the majority of participants had not heard about the project prior to the session. We can see from Table 4 and the corresponding descriptions of each focus group in Chapter Three that my research participants from both of the organizations that focus

¹ These phrases are parent nodes, and they are outlined in Chapter Three, Table 2.

specifically on issues concerning black Canadians had heard of the project. On the other hand, the majority of youth who were part of organizations that focused on other broader social issues had not heard about the proposal. Overall, the data show that the majority of participants had not heard of the proposal prior to their session (61.4%).

When and where did you hear about it?

Only one third of the participants who had heard about the proposal heard about it one year or less prior to their particular session. For example, three participants indicated that they had heard about the proposal approximately one or two years ago, whereas only five participants stated that they had heard about it in the last month. The majority of the participants who did answer the question (7) indicated that they heard about the initiative through the following sources: 'News', 'CP24', 'CityTV', or 'word of mouth'. Yet one black male aged 15-19² heard about the initiative at a York University conference:

Harry: One time I was at a conference. I think it was York I was at. They briefly talked about it. They overviewed the point but I really didn't focus on it.

I: Which conference was it at?

Harry: It is a thing that happens every February, black history month conference; yeah that's where I heard it. (Focus Group 6, Lines 588-595)

The majority of the participants who had heard of the proposal, with the exception of Harry, were informed through peers, family, or media representation, and had not heard of the proposal until recently, within the last month prior to their session. Furthermore, my focus group participants indicated that all of the information had come from the media directly or indirectly as filtered through peers or family members. Therefore, the knowledge my participants had gained about the proposal was restricted because the sources that informed my research participants about the proposal were limited.

² Personal identifiers were not collected during the course of the research. Therefore, participants' ages are identified only by age ranges 15-19, 20-25, or 26-30.

Knowledge on the proposal – what have you heard?

Before I gave my participants a brief description of the proposal (see Appendix B), they were asked what they had heard regarding the proposal. All discussion responses are listed in Table 5 corresponding to the focus groups in which they were identified. The most recurring answer was, ‘that they’re thinking about doing it’. No additional comments were made with these responses, except for one female aged 20-25:

Coretta: I heard that it was proposed to the Toronto District School Board to actually do a black-focused school in Toronto, and that they were actually starting to work on a curriculum, but like nothing has happened since then. That was implemented like two years ago. (Focus Group 4, Lines 250-252)

The second most reoccurring response was that this school was only for black students. However, this response was often countered by the comment, ‘anybody could go there’. To illustrate, three youth aged 15-19 discuss their knowledge on the issue:

Penny: ...anyone can go there. It is not only for black students.

Pete: Oh, I didn’t hear that. I heard it was only for black students (Harry agrees)

Penny: No, it is not just for black students. They are just putting the black aspect into things... (Focus Group 6, Lines 484-491)

The response that ‘anybody can go there’ was the third most reoccurring response. The last two responses are given by one female aged 15-19, ‘they are putting in the black history... [and] the African aspect into every subject’. The rest of the participants who answered this question reported that, yes, they had heard of the proposal but they had heard ‘nothing specific’ about the project. We can see from Table 5 that the majority of the insights came from youth aged 15-19 in the non-profit social service agency group session. Most of the other youth who had heard of the proposal did not hear anything specific about the project. Therefore, knowledge around the project, whether or not it was true or false, was limited among these youth.

Table 5

A summary of what focus groups discussed on the proposal before the proposed description was given

Focus Group Session	What have they heard about the proposal?					
	Anybody can go there	Incorporating black history	Incorporating the black -lived experience	Nothing specific	That it is only for black students	That it was proposed and it is under discussion
Focus Group #1	X	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #2	---	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #3	---	---	---	---	X	---
Focus Group #4	---	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #5	---	---	---	X	---	---
Focus Group #6	X	X	X	---	X	---

Note: X indicates that the corresponding focus group had a discussion on the listed knowledge about the proposal.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion on the listed knowledge about the proposal.

Initial thoughts on the proposal

Following the brief description of the proposal (see Appendix A), my research participants were asked what they thought about the proposed project. All responses are displayed in Table 6 corresponding to the focus groups in which they were identified. Every focus group primarily questioned why the TDSB just could not make an inclusive curriculum for its mainstream existing schools (over 15 participants overall among all the groups). In other words, the majority of my focus group participants reacted by disagreeing with the idea. This is evident in the responses listed in Table 6. Throughout all the focus groups participants engaged in information-sharing discussions with each other about the black-focused school proposal that included expressing complimentary and contradictory opinions. The conversation below prompted by the comment, 'it is racial segregation', illustrates how these opinions led to much 'echoing', 'complimenting', and 'building' (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2008) throughout the discussion.

Belinda: Why do they need to have their own school?

Amy: Because they don't want to put it in regular school

Belinda: Ok, exactly, so then how does that look? That looks like anybody who wants to learn about being more black has to go to their own separate, segregated school. That's not cool. What's cool about that?

Ray: They're not fair. They're not being fair.

Tara: Yeah. They should put that into the curriculum.

Will: You tell them girl! (claps and bangs on the wall)

Miranda: Why is that not cool?

Rudy: But it's an issue that really (inaudible)---

Belinda: No but---

Amy: ...And they don't want to change the curriculum, therefore---

Rudy: They don't want to change the curriculum so somebody is trying to make it more accessible for all the people

Amy: Exactly...to everybody. So, it's like if you don't want to go, you don't have to. I don't see the problem in it.

Belinda: No, okay, but you guys don't see. Ok, after the whole Martin Luther King and all that jazz and segregation and all that stuff, right? And all that stuff went away. You guys don't feel like it's taking a step backwards. Instead of making more protest, not more protest, but more progress. No, you know what I

Table 6

A summary of the initial thoughts that each focus group discussed after the proposal description was given

Focus Group Session	Initial thoughts given on the proposal							
	Discipline methods	Does not think the title black-focused is appropriate	It is a set-up	It is segregation	Misconception about the idea in relation to time	Non-blacks may feel out of place	Sounds like a 'special school'	Why not just make an inclusive school?
Focus Group #1	---	---	---	X	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #2	X	X	X	X	---	---	X	X
Focus Group #3	X	X	X	X	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #4	X	---	X	---	X	---	---	X
Focus Group #5	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #6	---	X	---	X	X	X	---	X

Note: X indicates that the corresponding focus group had a discussion on the initial thought listed on the proposal.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion on the listed knowledge about the proposal.

mean? Like instead of making more steps to try to make it be a part of regular curriculum in all schools...

Amy: They don't want it to happen.

Belinda: But that's what I'm saying then. Okay, so then why's that fair to us? Why should they say, 'We don't want black student going on in school. So why don't you take all your black kids and shove them in a school over there?'

Amy: It's not ONLY for BLACK PEOPLE!

Belinda: Didn't you hear what she said? (referring to the interviewer) It's more Africentric than a Eurocentric---

I: Curriculum.

Amy: I don't get it.

Will: What she's (referring to Belinda) saying is you should put that in a regular curriculum rather than having a separate school.

Amy: But that's exactly what they don't want---

Rudy: But the school board don't want it---

Will: Why, why?

Amy: Toronto School Board does not want it. That's why they're proposing that they have this school and---

Ray: Because they're racist.

Tara: That's racism, yeah.

Miranda: They're racist to the camera (looks at the camera) They're racist! (Focus Group 1, Lines 450-527)

This conversation is indicative of the kind of richness, diversity of perspectives, and voice that characterized the discussions throughout all of the focus group sessions. Approximately nine participants across all focus groups indicated that the school was a form of 'racial segregation' when initially asked what they thought about the school. However, we can see from this conversation that there are many different ideas that disagree and possibly support the proposal.

In addition to asking, 'why can't the TDSB make the school curriculum inclusive?' and viewing the school as a form of, 'racial segregation', a total of ten participants made comments that questioned the integrity of the proposal. Two of these responses approached the integrity of the proposal in different ways. The first perspective within the common response displayed in Table 6, 'it's a set-up', is reflected in the conversation below from a group of 15-19 year olds:

Cyrille: Yo, maybe what they're trying to do yo is put all black people in a White area so if something goes down they can find them easier.

Thomas: It's true.

Mario: That's basically it.

Marcko: Yeah you go to that school. We have everybody on database. They know where everybody is.

Cyrille: 'Oh you want Billy? Okay, I'll get you Billy.' (Focus Group 2, Lines 1165-1174)

Other narratives reflecting this perspective included: 'seems like another conspiracy' 'it's like a reservation' 'sounds like a jail'. Another view of this common response is reflected in this quote made by a female aged 20-25:

Coretta: It sounds like a set-up for a downfall; like they want this to happen so that when it doesn't succeed they're like "Oh oh, you see, like we let all the black people have their school and like, now it failed." (Focus Group 4, Lines 394-396)

Finally, the other response that reflected this same perspective was 'it's a set-up for disaster'. The discussions that reflected these responses were full of richness, and my participants "echoed, complemented and built on each other's ideas" (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2008, p. 163), as were the discussions to the response, 'it is racial segregation'. However, what distinguished the 'it's a set-up' discussion from the 'it is racial segregation' discussion is that my research participants were in agreement that the proposal was a set-up, but disagreed about whether it was racial segregation.

Another interesting element of their discussion was about the title of proposed school. Although there were no direct questions about the title of the school, it was identified by my focus group participants in two of the focus groups as an issue of concern. My participants thought that the title 'black-focused' was inappropriate, for it did not compliment or give the right 'picture' of what the school was really about. For example, a female aged 15-19 commented:

Penny: I think people will feel uncomfortable with that title. (Focus Group 6, Lines 531-532)

And a group of 15-19 years olds comment:

Fred: First of all, who chose that name?

Thomas: Yeah.

[...]

Cyrille: Black-focused!?!]

Fred: They need to change that name because it's going to confuse a lot of people.

[...]

Marcko: I was confused. (Focus Group 2, Lines 295-306)

In addition to this concern was the fear that the proposal sounded like a 'special' school:

Jane: But then again I don't want to be taught like I'm dunce, like I don't feel to be in a different school and to be taught like we're dunce, and we're not stupid. I think everyone, everyone, no matter what race, class like you are, like you should have an opportunity to be taught like school or whatever. I don't know (inaudible) it's not just black people.

Fred: Yeah, the way it sounds, it sounds like a special school. (Focus Group 2, Lines 421-426)

These two perspectives about the title of the school and school's purpose reflect some of my research participants' concerns about the project, as do two other responses initially discussed by these youth. One major concern had to do with which methods of disciplines would be used, and another was that non-blacks may feel out of place at the new school. A total of 11 youth reacted to the description of alternative disciplinary methods proposed in the new school (see Appendix B). The overarching finding here was that they could not conceptualize other forms of discipline as alternatives to suspensions, expulsions, or involving law enforcement. The other perspective brought up by only one individual, a male aged 15-19, was that non-black students would probably feel out of place at such a school. We can see from the data that these youth do have insightful concerns regarding this proposed project.

What parts of the proposal needed clarification

The main objective of this project was to provide sessions where black youth could 'voice their opinions and *learn* about the project' (see Appendix F). Thus, a significant amount of time within each focus group discussion centered on my participants gaining accurate knowledge

about the project from me, and the other participants. My research participants sought knowledge about the proposal on the aspects that are displayed in Table 7. Displayed in this table are the questions, issues of concern, or comments that my focus group participants brought up corresponding to focus groups in which they were discussed.

As I state earlier, most of my participants were unable to conceptualize what the school would 'look like' and understand the philosophy driving the ideas for the school in comparison to their mainstream schools. Their inability to visualize the concept of the proposal occurred before and after the description and explanation sections of the focus group discussions. For example, most youth were unable to visualize or understand the following components: the incorporation of black-lived experience into the new curriculum; how this school would prepare and allow them to pursue a post-secondary education; why it would be called 'Africentric' if they were just going to let everybody go to the same school; a holistic versus the hierarchical structure present in current school systems, where administration and teachers hold all the authority; alternative discipline methods to expulsion and suspension; and why students who do well in mainstream school now would decide to go to this new school. My research participants voiced concerns about not being able to learn anything but African history at this new school and nothing about other cultures. Concerns such as this led to youth voicing further concerns about how going to such a school would prepare them for post secondary education. The view that this school would be only for black students also was a perspective that was hard to breakdown in my focus group participants' minds. Alternative methods to disciplinary methods such as suspensions or expulsions also were difficult to grasp especially in a school that would represent a holistic structure versus a hierarchical one. Lastly, my participants were concerned

Table 7
A summary of what each focus group asked for clarification on regarding the proposal

Focus Group Session	Statements, topics, and questions that needed clarification										
	Anybody can go there	Classes	Different forms of discipline	Inclusive schooling has been attempted	Location and how many	Philosophy of the school	This is not a new idea	Vision of the school environment (holistic)	What school board is it going to be under?	Who is behind the idea?	Who will the teachers be?
Focus Group #1	X	X	---	X	X	X	---	X	X	---	--
Focus Group #2	---	X	X	---	---	X	---	---	---	X	--
Focus Group #3	X	---	X	X	X	X	---	---	---	---	--
Focus Group #4	X	---	X	---	X	X	---	---	X	---	--
Focus Group #5	X	---	X	X	---	X	X	X	X	---	--
Focus Group #6	X	X	X	X	---	X	X	---	X	---	X

Note: X indicates that the corresponding focus group had a discussion to clarify the particular issue listed.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion to clarify the particular issue listed.

about what type of youth would be attending this kind of school. To illustrate this and some of the other concerns above, I have documented a conversation between youth who vary in age:

Huey: ...Are there going to be kids that you can do homework with? Because I'm guessing all these people are going to be kicked out of the schools, right?
 I: No, no---
 Huey: Like special behavioural kids, right?
 Coretta: NOOOO! It's a REGULAR SCHOOL! It's not a school---
 Huey: Okay, but why would some kid pick some school over some---
 Coretta: Because you feel like---
 Grace: Because it's black-focused---
 Coretta: Yeah, it's black-focused---
 I: The curriculum is different---
 Grace: You feel like you're not learning enough about culture. You're not studying enough about your culture--- (inaudible)
 Coretta: Exactly like you said you don't want to learn about Wilfred Laurier [referring to an early conversation about 'heroes' presented in Canadian history]
 Huey: I know but like just a regular kid wants to go to like [names a school]
 Grace: You can, go ahead. It's not saying that you have to go to this school because it's black. (Focus group 4, Lines 660-684)

From this data we see how one youth is unable to conceptualize the new school. In all of the other groups other youth faced the same problem. Most often the inability for my research participants to foresee alternatives often led them back to the question: 'Why don't they just integrate these things into the mainstream schools instead of making a whole new school?'

Asked for positives and negatives about the black-focused school

After explaining and clarifying the proposal my focus group participants were asked if they thought the project was a good or bad idea. This question resulted in positive and negative views about the proposed school. A summary of which responses were given in each focus group when asked these two questions is displayed in Tables 8 and 9. From the tables we can see that all of the focus groups except one voiced more positive than negative attributes about the proposal, so overall the positive comments exceeded the negative comments. However, this should not indicate that most youth were advocating for the project's implementation. There

were several aspects of the proposal that sounded appealing to my participants: having a different curriculum, being able to learn more about black heritage in a comfortable environment, having more black teachers and less police, and that it might change racist attitudes – but many youth questioned the safety of the school space itself. For example, one male aged 15-19 shares his concerns about what could go wrong at this new school:

Pete: For me, tension. Because in the public schools right now you have the majority of the black people fighting other black people, and like yo... right now I am in a school where I see someone brush another person in the hallway and you are always ready to kill someone.

[...]

Pete: We are fighting ourselves. We have a big group---You have a big group of black Bloods over there. You have a big group of black Crips over there. You have other black-skinned Somalis and Arabs over here and they are already to fight each other. You know what I mean? If you bring everybody into a school like that, all together, there is bound to be fights.

I: So you're saying it is dangerous to bring different types of black people into the same school?

Pete: It depends on the neighbourhood thing, too. Because already in my neighbourhood, we have a problem in that neighbourhood right? (talking directly to Harry) (Harry confirms that yes they have a problem)---If we walk by that person (inaudible)--- If you bring a majority of people like from my neighbourhood and all of the crime neighbourhoods and no one likes each other, you are bound to have problems.

Harry: Yeah it is true what he is saying. (He names a bunch of places and groups of different people)--- There's going to be tension, there is going to be conflict, and if this black-focused school starts, we are all going to be targets. You're always going to see police there.

Eve: Everyday, everyday. (Focus Group 6, Lines 728-770)

This conversation is representative of all the responses given by my research participants in the focus groups who thought that the proposal was a bad idea because of safety issues. These youth voiced views that the schools would be 'scary', and that 'the possibility of bad things happening was endless'. Pete illustrates these views well in this narrative:

Pete: ...In [names a school] they have maximum police officers in the dances, okay? As soon as you walk into the dances, there are already ten police and two at the door. Even in the daytime you have police cars; police walking around with guns and everything, uniform patrolling, and if you have a black (school)--- They

Table 8

A summary of which responses were given in each focus group when asked if there were positives about the black-focused school

Focus Group Session	Responses given when asked if the proposal is a good idea								
	Curriculum will be different	It could work if...	It is a good idea	It will try to change racist attitudes	Learning in a comfortable environment	Learning about black history	Less police all the time	More black teachers	Nothing
Focus Group #1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Focus Group #2	X	X	---	---	---	X	---	X	---
Focus Group #3	X	X	X	---	X	X	---	---	---
Focus Group #4	---	---	X	---	---	X	X	---	X
Focus Group #5	---	---	---	X	---	---	---	---	---
Focus Group #6	X	---	---	---	X	X	---	---	---

Note: X indicates the corresponding focus group that had a discussion about the particular 'positive' listed.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion about the particular 'positive' listed.

Table 9

A summary of which responses were given in each focus group when asked if there were negatives about the black-focused school

Focus Group Session	Responses given when asked if the proposal is a bad idea					
	Arrogance	It is a bad idea	No suspensions or expulsions	Possibility of homophobia	Possibly of violence	There is a better way – inclusive
Focus Group #1	---	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #2	---	---	---	---	X	---
Focus Group #3	---	X	---	X	X	---
Focus Group #4	---	---	X	---	X	---
Focus Group #5	X	---	---	---	---	---
Focus Group #6	---	---	---	---	X	X

Note: X indicates the corresponding focus group that had a discussion about the particular 'negative' listed.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion about the particular 'negative' listed

already know what the deal is--- They already know the gangs and what goes on in the school, all the tension, if you are going to bring all the people from all the neighbourhoods that already don't like each other, especially out here (referring to the area he lives in) you bringing them all into the same school the police are going to already know what is going on, they are going to be patrolling, circling the school, as soon as a fight happens the police are going to rush, that school is going to be on TV--- 'Black-focused school gone wrong', that's going to be the headline, I already see it! And once that happens everyone's going to be like "I told you it's a bad idea' (everyone in the focus group agrees). (Focus Group 6, Lines 777-790)

These conversations illustrate some strong fears and apprehensions my focus group participants have about what already they experience in their day-to-day lives. Violence, lack of safety, and the influence media has over images portrayed about black students are evident in these narratives. However, this should not infer that all of my participants thought it was a bad idea. For example, eight out of 13 people in Focus Group Four stated that they thought it was a good idea, and six out of 12 people in Focus Group Three thought it was a good idea. Here are some comments made in these sessions:

I: ...Are there any positives that you guys can think of?

Marcko: The curriculum

Cyrille: Of course the curriculum; we'll learn about our culture instead of what they want us to learn. We'll learn the *truth* (Focus Group 2, Lines 1238-1244)

Debra: Now that I've heard like what you mean about an integrated *curriculum* and *students*, I think that this will be the perfect blueprint to start as like a text general, (to) see how it works out (and) then build every school like that. Right? Why not start like this and see how it goes? (Focus Group 3, Lines 623-626)

Beth: ...I think that they should have it (referring to the school), because black people or whoever feels that they need it, they're been fighting for it for 20 years, I think that it should have been built, at least 15 years ago! At least! Right?...They should have, yeah they should have a few and they should have it in Mississauga, Peel, because there are a handful of black people in Peel in every school; It's spread out, right? So they should have it in Peel; they should have it in, you know, Toronto district, but like, you know, in other areas, it doesn't have to be in Jane and Finch; it could be where there is a predominately white area and have black people come and go there if they want to; If they don't want to be the five black people at the white school. I think it should be an option. I think they should be a choice, and I don't think,...I think that they can really benefit from building it now as opposed to maybe building it maybe 20 years ago when, where it could have just been, you know, a school where you *don't* want to go to if you're gay, or a school where you *don't* want to go to if whatever, you know. And I think they should have uniforms there too. I think they can do a lot to benefit black people at that school (Focus Group 3, Lines 837-865)

Mary: Okay, so like more of like, speaking with the elders, and very like, you know, just wisdom, right. I think that would definitely have been something that I would have been interested in, right. (inaudible) would have definitely been something that would have empowered me growing up, and I think that for kids who choose to go the other way and not really trust like the Eurocentric way of

learning, not just the history, this history is history, but just the way they learn; I think that would be such a positive way. And I don't know, I'm just saying like, for me, I was thinking if I've been under, if I have been learning that way it really would have really opened like my mind into many different perspectives. There's two ways that I can really understand (inaudible) that's how I've learnt like since I was a child and so I'm learning (inaudible). I feel that sometimes that the ways schools are set up right now, you learn one thing at school and you come home and your family is not like that (Gabrielle nods with a big smile) (Focus Group 3, Line 925-937)

Grace: I think it's a really good idea. I think it's a good chance for the youth of Toronto to get to know about their backgrounds if they're not, especially if they're here, like they've been here for a long time and they don't know too much about where they come from; do you know what I mean? It'll be a good chance to learn that (Focus Group 4, Lines 461-464)

Finally there were comments that represented youth views that were 'on the fence'. For example:

Ahmed: It has its ups and downs. It brings us black people together but then further apart at the same time. (Focus Group 2, Line 314)

Fred: Change, it's good.

Jane: Change is sometimes good, but like you don't know that until it comes to effect.

Fred: When it comes to learning, things change all the time.

Robert: I think they should go back to elementary school and slowly change the processing; switch things around. Right? Like it takes time to change things right? Well like, they can't change things fast because everyone's just going to get messed up and it's going to be like hell; It's going to be havoc, right? (Focus Group 2, Lines 579-587)

Pete: It is a good way to learn about African heritage, you know? In a comfortable environment because you know, you don't want, okay the majority of teachers at school are white and older people too, right? So those are the people that have been threw, well at the schools that I have been to. Those are the people that have been through the 60s and things like that so they grew up in the times when a lot of segregation was about, so I don't want to hear about their opinion, you know? As from a person from a race that was against another race, I don't want to hear it from that person's opinion; I want to hear it from the opinion of people that were there or that can relate to it. (Focus Group 6, Lines 607-616)

Marcko: ...More black teachers, I'm down for that.

Ahmed: Seeing black people up there helps motivate us to learn more.

Robert: And they can unify, you know, our culture too, because like, a lot of us, you know, a lot of society now, you know, they're trying to, you know, get back and find each other, right? But I think, you know, if we learn about our past and

everything and try to make a change for the future, you know, it can unify us later in life.

Thomas: True, true.

I: Does everyone agree with him, hands? [Some people put their hands up] (Focus Group 2, Lines 1246-1257)

Would you attend? Would your parents want you to attend? Would you send your children to this school?

Due to the fact that most of youth were not able to conceptualize what this new school would look like, the question, 'Would you attend this school?' often was not answered by my research participants. None of my focus group participants in Focus Group One or Two answered this question, and a very small number of participants answered the question in Focus Group Three (yes = 5) and Four (yes = 1; no = 1; yes but with stipulations = 1). However, in the remaining two focus groups all my participants participating did answer the question. The participants in session Five all said that they did not know if they would attend the school, and in session Six one participant answered 'no', one answered 'maybe', and the other four did not know if they would attend the school. Initially, only the questions posed in regards to this aspect of the issue were 'Would you attend?' and 'Would your parents want you to attend?' However, because of the age range modification, 'Would you send your children to this school?' became a more appropriate question in some sessions. Yet the overall responses to these questions were rather weak. No straight answers were given to the former, and only a couple of youth indicated that maybe they would send their children to this new school but only several years following its initial implementation.

What sorts of things belong in this school curriculum, and would it eliminate drop-outs?

Similar to the above three questions, my research participants did not always respond to these two questions: What sorts of things belong in this school curriculum, and would it eliminate drop-outs? Their responses to these questions were limited as my focus group participants

tended to deflect both questions to a discussion focused on what they would change about current schools to improve the academic achievement of black youth. This illustrates the difficulty my participants experienced in conceptualizing the black-focused school and is exemplified by the response below from a 25-year-old female:

I: So do you think this school will help people stay in school?

Coretta: "Either this school or like just taking a lot of the aspects of the things that they're trying to bring through this school to the regular schools we have now, because like it doesn't have to be all black or black-focused school. If it's not going to be specific for black people I mean like, why not just introduce more cultural programs or cultural classes in regular schools now? Why not have more people from diverse, more teachers from diverse backgrounds teaching in the schools now that people from other backgrounds can relate to and say "ok, well, oh this is a really smart Asian guy, like I look up to him. If he can do it I can do it" like you know what I mean? Like things to relate to I guess. (Focus Group 4, Line 650-658)

Despite my research participants' disagreement with the proposed implementation of the school, they were able to identify 'what sorts of things belong in this school curriculum' and these responses are outlined in Table 10 corresponding to focus groups in which they were identified. We can see from the table that each group responded to the question in diverse ways. The most common responses among the focus groups were: inclusive curriculums, more black history, learn more about business and life teaching skills, and self motivation. For example, one male engaged one group in a discussion on 'self motivation', while another made a suggestion for more business and life skill teaching classes:

I – Okay, let's just say you had the chance to create the curriculum for this new pilot project, and you had to send your children and your friends' children to this school, what would you make of it? What would you put in to the curriculum to allow these students to succeed and graduate---?

Dennis: Self motivation, yo. Self motivation, that's what they need at the end of the day.

Tara: Learn about business.

Dennis: Yeah, self-motivation, you can only push yourself yo.

Tara: Yeah, entrepreneur.

[...]

Table 10

A summary of which focus groups proposed certain elements that they think belong in the new school

Focus Group Session	Elements youth think belong in this new school										
	Learn about different cultures weekly (Inclusive curriculum)	More black history	Good food in the cafeteria	Learn more about business (Teach life skills)	Bus tickets for students	Self motivation	Learn Other languages	Mandatory mentorship programs	Sex education	Good teachers	Call parents when there are disruptive acts
Focus Group #1	X	X	---	X	---	X	---	---	X	---	---
Focus Group #2	X	---	---	---	---	---	X	---	---	X	---
Focus Group #3	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	X
Focus Group #4	---	X	X	X	X	X	---	X	---	---	---
Focus Group #5	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Focus Group #6	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Note: X indicates the corresponding focus group that had a discussion regarding the listed element they proposed for this new school.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion on the listed element they proposed for this new school.

Dennis: Alright, I think it's self-motivation because at the end of the day people don't care about you. It's all about you at the end of the day. Like in middle school they always say, nobody's going to bother you in high school. They're not going to tell you to do your homework. Self-motivation, you gotta do what you gotta do to succeed. It doesn't matter where you come from; yo it's common sense too. It's what you want to do. You know, and maybe the people that are succeeding in Canada are maybe only Caucasians people but you know there's some black people too that did that, too.

Rudy: That's true.

Dennis: You know? But maybe it's more Caucasian because this is where they came first and this is what they can do, and they can do anything, you know? At the end of the day it's self motivation though.

[...]

Rudy: So what I would actually recommend for my own child would have to be like they said, self motivation, like for real. Because a lot of these kids have no self-esteem, a lot of these kids, so they have no self-esteem. They have these issues where, you know, the teachers don't have enough time to deal with them, so they feel like they're not as good as some of the other kids that are excelling in class. So just that extra oomph, just that little extra push for them would actually help them out. I mean just letting them know that they're just as important as everybody else; that they got just as much to say as everybody else. Well, there's always, they're always going to try and emphasis school kids excelling in school. I'm not going to lie. I excelled in school, I was very gosh, darn it, good at school, thank you. I was always on the honor role, and I'm not complaining about being recognized for my achievements cause I worked very hard for that. What I'm saying is, sometimes I wish that the teachers really did give you that pat on the back to say "Job well done!" when you didn't do as good as somebody else. (Focus Group 1, Lines 1638-1874)

Motivation was a common topic surrounding the issue concerning what youth needed to succeed in school, next to having an inclusive curriculum and learning more about black history. Yet there was one individual who disagreed with the idea of an inclusive curriculum:

Samuel: All this stuff can never happen. Like there's no point of even talking about it. In Canada, Canada is based on structure: we teach you this for you to get here, and then you get here, and you get here. You put all these things in it, it's chaos. You know what I mean? The world can't work on chaos, like. Everything will be crazy, like yeah Jenn wants to tell her story, Sherri wants to tell her story, Neil wants to tell his story. There's not enough time to learn about that. So they give you the essentials on what you need. It may not be what you want, but this is what you need in order to get here, to get here, and then to get here.

[...]

Samuel: I am not saying that it's right. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that is right. But this is what you need like---

Ray: That's what you get.

Samuel: Like this is the way it has to be. It can be no other way. Just like the Bible is like written from this person's story, you're getting this person's perspective.

Ray: It is not the real story.

Samuel: Yeah, who knows what really happened? We don't know, we're just being told like, you know what I mean, and we've got to believe that. But hold on, listen---

[...]

Samuel: Religion, for an example like, all you need is something, like, we all believe in different things: there's Muslims, Christians, Jews, as long as they have something to look forward to... it's structure, you know what I mean. If you threw in what really happened this time, and what really happened that time, and what might have happened that time I'd be chaos. Because then they're going to see that all the people we looked up too robbed and stole from people, they raped people and stuff like that; you know what I mean? Like it'd be crazy. So in order for Canada to structure it out they teach you this, they teach you their story, because that's all that they know, from the beginning, and that's it. They don't put nothing else in there or else it would be crazy?

[...]

Samuel: I'm just saying like, okay. No, wait okay for Americans, for Americans, Abraham Lincoln and all of that, right? There's other sides to that, like I hear Mason's story that Ab Lincoln is a Mason and he worships the devil and this and that.

[...]

Samuel: They hog and kill homosexuals and stuff like that, but nobody, you can't tell people that, because you need to see this. You need to see the light, before, like you know what I mean? They can't show them all this stuff like oh; then they're going to think, why don't I do that too? To keep people good, you got to show them a good perspective, you know what I mean, so? You can't do all this stuff. Like it won't work. It'll just be chaotic.

Ray: Straight up

Samuel: Because then who's story is more important?

Ray: Thank you. Look at Martin Luther King. His words didn't mean nothing to nobody...KKK and all that stuff.

[...]

Samuel: To make sure that they know you have to take it upon yourself to teach if you really want them to know. Most people have internet access and stuff like, your parents they have to ensure, you show them; you know what I mean? That's the only way they will ever know. (Focus Group 1, Lines 1761-1854)

In this chapter, we can see from my focus group participants' narratives that they had strong opinions and concerns about their educational experiences. Most of my participants did not

think that the black-focused school proposal was a good idea, even though they agreed with several of the proposed elements for the school. Also, they had difficulty conceptualizing 'black-focused schooling' as an alternative approach to mainstream schooling. This had an impact on whether or not they choose to, or could, answer some of the interview guide questions that specifically related to the black-focused school issue. Also, through the narratives we can see the potential impact that the focus group dynamics had on my research participants' responses, and how the contradictions of responses led to my focus group participants 'echoing', 'complimenting', and 'building' (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2008) on each others' opinions. When one individual introduced an issue that resonated with other youth, the first youth's concerns were repeated, elaborated, or provided a bridge into conversation about another related issue. I am aware that displaying my findings in this way is not completely void of all interpretation; however, by choosing to organize the findings in this 'question-based manner I was able to value my participants' voices independent of my theoretical lens.

This chapter has drawn on CRT's focus on the valuing of narratives, as data was organized according to the questions I asked and the responses that were given by my research participants. This organizational structure allowed me to fulfill the main objective of my study: to value my focus group participants' opinions and concerns about the proposal and provide them with an outlet to express their perspectives. In the next chapter I apply my theoretical lens to interpret my participants' narratives in an attempt to answer the following question: Why do the youth disagree with the black-focused school proposal?

CHAPTER FIVE

THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

The summative reporting of my participants' narratives made it clear that my research participants do not support the idea of a black-focused school (see Chapter Four). What is less clear is why my focus group participants do not support the proposal. In this chapter, I interpret the narratives through my theoretical lens, in order to examine why youth do not support the proposal.

My theoretical lens draws on elements of CRT and Gramsci's concept of hegemony, yet I do not immerse myself in either of these theories. As my study's objective was to provide an outlet for my participants' voices, I do not undermine or discount the importance of my research participants' responses during my analysis. In this thesis, I present their narratives in a summative format in response to questions about the proposal (Chapter Four), and then identify hidden assumptions and implicit meanings within my participants' narratives as viewed through my theoretical lens. I do not put this interpretation forward as a truth, but as a potential explanation that needs to be engaged by my research participants, as well as those who are involved in the black-focused school proposal.

My interpretation of my focus group participants' narratives draws on the following elements of CRT and Gramsci: the assumption that racism is hegemonic (CRT), the valuing of narratives (CRT), the objective to identify white hegemonic control of social and structural arrangements through an examination of liberal discourses (CRT), and the process of hegemony. I use these elements to structure my interpretation, and according to this interpretation I argue that my participants could not visualize what the school would look like and how it would operate primarily because they draw on liberal racist discourses of 'colour-blindness', 'blaming the

victim', and 'equal opportunity' (Henry & Tator, 2006), which are inherently racist, when thinking about their educational experiences. This chapter will demonstrate this argument. First, I give examples of where the liberal racist discourses (colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity) are evident in my research participants' narratives, and discuss how these discourses impact their ability to relate to, visualize, and agree with the black-focused school proposal. Second, I discuss an additional theme that emerged during the coding of these inductive themes: fear of further stigmatization. I suggest a contradiction between this theme and the others in the way that my focus group participants identify race as a factor in educational contexts, and then conclude by pointing out an underlying fear my participants had about attending the black-focused school.

Liberal Racist Discourses

As explained in Chapter Three, narratives that illustrated three liberal racist discourses were coded inductively into three themes: colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity. Table 11 displays an illustration of which themes were discussed, corresponding to the focus group in which they were identified. With the exception of session One and Four, each session illustrated *all* three of the liberal racist discourses during their discussions.

Table 11 indicates that the liberal racist discourse 'colour-blindness'¹ was illustrated in narratives from five different focus groups. Implicit examples of this discourse arose during discussions on the following²: 'School likes', 'School dislikes', 'Initial thoughts on the proposal', 'Asked for negatives on the proposal', 'What would you change about your school?', and 'What parts of the proposal needed clarification?'. One example of the liberal racist

¹ See Chapter One, page 14

² These phrases are parent nodes outlined in Chapter Three, Table 2

discourse colour-blindness is demonstrated in a narrative from a female aged 25-30 when discussions centered on the black-focused school proposal:

Chelsea: My thing is why do people think that it has to be of a certain colour to relate. Sometimes it's experience—yes colour does help and culture does help—like it's experience. You know, not because I am black and I have been through the same thing that a person has that I can relate to them, because my train of thought or the way I think or the way that I view the situation might be completely different from how someone else's view to their situation. But again back to what they were saying, I completely agree with you and that is exactly what I was going to say. And I don't think you should segregate in order to teach or to fix a problem. It's like going back to the olden days, why segregate? We fight so hard to be, you know, integrated and to fit in to society. (Focus Group 3, Lines 489-497)

It appears that Chelsea thinks about her educational experiences through a colour-blindness perspective, because she does not see how race plays apart in the everyday experiences of people. Earlier in the discussion, Chelsea also talks about how she liked everything about her schooling experience:

Chelsea: I went to a Catholic school and I was one of twenty black people. And I took a lot away from that school. A LOT. I had no bad experiences. I didn't experience any kind of prejudice, any kind of stereotypes, any kind of generalizations. It was just school. I was there to learn, the teacher was there to teach, and fortunately I had teachers who all cared and who were all from different background. From Portuguese and Italian, and one African American teacher, African Canadian teacher, and I learned from all of them. (Focus Group 3, Lines 122-128)

While other students in this focus group session agreed with the black-focused school proposal Chelsea disagreed: "I don't think you should segregate in order to teach or to fix a problem. It's like going back to the olden days, why segregate?" We can see from her responses that she is using the discourse of colour-blindness as she thinks about her educational experiences. She

Table 11

A summary of which theoretical themes were identified in each focus group

Focus Group Session	Theoretical Nodes			
	Fear of Further stigmatization	'Colour-Blindness'	'Equal Opportunity'	'Blaming the Victim'
Focus Group #1	---	X	X	---
Focus Group #2	X	X	X	X
Focus Group #3	X	X	X	X
Focus Group #4	X	---	X	---
Focus Group #5	X	X	X	X
Focus Group #6	X	X	X	X

Note: X indicates the corresponding focus group that had a discussion on the specified theoretical node.

Note: --- (dash) indicates that the corresponding focus group did not have a discussion on the specified theoretical node.

decides that a black-focused school is unnecessary in order to help black youth succeed academically. This colour-blind perspective was actually common among students who indicated that they do well in school.

Also, when the focus group sessions switched to discussions about the black-focused school my participants would draw on this perspective to disagree with the idea of the black-focused proposal. The narrative below provides another example of this when Bob age 15-19 talks about how he does not have a problem achieving well at school. Yet this narrative is particularly interesting because later on in the discussion another participant (Audrey, age 20-25) directly challenges his colour-blindness perspective. First, Bob indicates that he likes most things about his school:

Bob: I don't know, I like learning in school, I like that I can see my friends, and all the different groups I can join like I'm the editor of my school newspaper, I'm on the African student alliance, and I'm one of the heads of the equity committee at my school, so yeah I like school (mumbling a little)... and teachers really like me... (Focus Group 5, Lines 126-130)

Later on in the discussion, Audrey challenges Bob's perspective:

Audrey: I have a question for you (directing at Bob)--- You said "Oh I like my teachers and my teachers like me, and I'm doing all these things"--- Which everything you're doing is GOOD, but, I think your teachers like you because of everything you're doing in the school, so that puts you in a different category. How do your teachers treat the students who are not on your level? Cause we all analyze, right? (Bob agrees) How do you think--- Although you said they're causing the problems themselves, cause it's a two-way thing, right? (Bob agrees) Teachers treat you a certain way and you react to it in a certain way, so how do you view your teachers, honestly--- Compare yourself to those students, how do you think the teachers treat you compared to them?

Bob: Well I think that, like I know most of my teachers personally and that's how I get to that level I guess, but ummm (2 second pause) I guess they don't treat them as--- They treat them as normal students. I wouldn't--- I would say that I might get a little special treatment, but I wouldn't say a lot. I don't know, some of the, some of the--- Not the teachers, but one of the principals is very biased, and very ummm--- She talks down to the students a lot. I don't really see a difference between white and black students, cause I remember in the hallway like one time

she said to this white student--- “Oh, you’re going to be a criminal anyways”. And I was like “What? That’s crazy!” (during with answer he fidgeted constantly with a juice box in front of him)

Audrey: Is that one of those students who likes to consider himself a black student, still?

Bob: No, there’s a few white.... (makes a sound) (Audrey laughs)--- But then, I don’t know she just talks down to the students a lot and is like really bad (Focus Group 5, Lines 449-478)

Audrey is implying that Bob is functioning from a colour-blindness perspective, because he does not acknowledge that race plays a part in the way teachers treat their students, “I don’t really see a difference between white and black students”. While Bob is more sympathetic to the struggles that black youth experience at school than Chelsea appeared to be he still indicates that a black-focused school will not eliminate the problem:

Bob: Okay (cuts another youth off). We’ve identified the problem, but black-focused schools wouldn’t be the solution. Why don’t we just focus on trying to improve our existing public system as opposed to creating a whole other system...? (Focus Group 5, Lines 407-410)

Despite other narratives indicating that education administrators committed racist acts, these youth and other youth claim that all students are treated equally. This perspective mirrors colour-blind statements educators make such as, “I treat all my students equally” and, “I only see children not skin colour when I look at my students”. These examples illustrate how some of my research participants’ disagreement about the black-focused school proposal is attributable to colour-blind perspectives.

The second liberal racist discourse identified in my focus group participants’ responses was ‘blaming the victim’³. Several instances of this perspective were identified, yet we can see from Table 11 that examples were present in only four out of six of the focus groups. These

³ See Chapter One, page 16

narratives were captured during discussions of the following: 'What would you change about your school?', 'Why do people drop out of school?', 'How would you describe your culture?', and 'Asked for positives and negatives about the proposal'. Aside from indicating in their narratives that they believed the education system (administration and institutional processes and structures) could not provide all students with what they needed to succeed academically, a significant amount of youth voiced opinions about academic achievement that reflect individualistic views. A male aged 15-19 voices one example of this:

Pete: People always say like you guys were talking about before that black people can't get jobs, but are you really trying? Have you been going to school, going to all your classes; have you been even trying to get an education? NO! I know a bunch of people who just skip off school every day and they say like "Okay, I am going to chill on the block, or I am going to go sell a half ball (referring to drugs) --- Who is that? It's all us black brethrens. And then when they want to go they are like "Hook me up for a job, hook me up for a job", and when I go hook them up for a job, they blow the interview with no resume, no common sense and make me look stupid, cause I'm telling them to hire an idiot--- (Focus Group 6, Line 891-901)

However, when responses that did reflect the blaming the victim perspective were given by a participant some youth often challenged these perspectives. Some of these examples are displayed below:

Jane: I don't know, black people just like to slack, like if y'all just step up.

Robert: I could say that for almost every ethnicity.

Ahmed – I have books in my backpack right now.

Fred – I would never say one single race likes to slack more than the other.

Thiery – It's true.

Marcko – We don't slack, we try, they just make it hard for us. (Focus Group 2, Line 589-600)

Harry: And like I was saying early, black people need to be focused, we give ourselves that title (Penny and Eve start to say something) Wait, can I say something? I am not saying they are right or anything, but honestly if you guys go to a dance to enjoy yourself--- Take for example the dance the other day where that guy got shot (commotion) --- And money was put into it, and what I realize with this organization when we are trying to run a program we have to write

letters to whoever we are getting funding from to get the money to run the program and we have to write the letters to these people and say that "We want to have a dance, these kids are so good and we want them to show their talent and embrace this so they can do this..." and then we run the program and somebody gets shot. How does that look on us? How does that look on black people all over? And then next time a program wants to happen---

Pete: Exactly---

Harry: Black people need to start being responsible, you know, we are being picked on---

Pete: We are not being picked on. Black people don't like black people and I say that

Mark: That's not true

Pete: Look at this! Look at this! Even in the school, look in our neighbourhood dog, all the people fighting---

Eve: You can't label all black people as the same thing. That's like saying all black people are stupid and they are ignorant (Penny agrees). That's all you are saying, that's all you are saying, you are labeling us as one category. There are black people out there that are smart, they just don't have the chance to put it into work because they are black, because whatever two or three black people did two years, yesterday or today is being portrayed on them, its being put on them, that person should be able to make a living just like everybody else--- (Focus Group 6, Line 792-826)

It is evident that Jane, Henry, and Pete ages 15-19 voiced some opinions that were racist and are connected to the liberal racist discourse blaming the victim. Jane states that, "black people just like to slack", and Henry says that "black people need to be focused", while Pete questions the actual effort black people are putting into their education. Comments like these, which refer to lack of motivation and laziness, are popular indications of the blaming the victim perspective. In each of these examples these participants are blaming the individual for their own academic shortcomings. Not surprisingly, none of these individuals thought that creating a black-focused school was necessary in order for black youth to succeed academically, and their narratives demonstrate that they are using the discourse blaming the victim to think about educational experiences.

Linked to the discourse blaming the victim is the third discourse of ‘equal opportunity’⁴. As we can see from Table 11, narratives reflecting this liberal racist discourse were present in *all* of the focus group sessions. Examples of this perspective arose in one focus group or another during discussions relating to every section of the interview guide. First, this liberal racist discourse was demonstrated in the previous narratives that reflected the discourse blaming the victim. Some of these comments included black students need to stop ‘slacking’, be more ‘focused’, be more ‘responsible’, and to start ‘trying’ to succeed. What this type of perspective implies is that everyone has the same rights and freedoms, and individual accomplishments will determine the extent to which an individual will succeed in societal spheres. Yet what is often unseen by people who hold this perspective is that not all students have an equal opportunity in Canadian education systems, because these systems only are based on a white middle class culture. This was apparent when my participants were asked: ‘What would you change about your school?’ For example, one male aged 15-19 responded to the above question in this way:

Jerome: I don’t think they really have to change anything. I think it is fine the way it is because in the school system they don’t allow religion into our society. I guess because they put it into a neutral environment so no one feels offended like if someone is like from another race--- (Focus Group 6, Lines 446-449)

Despite preceding examples of systemic racism and discrimination in education systems’ curricula (see Chapter Four), this example and others demonstrate that my research participants spoke frequently of the curriculum being ‘fine’. This illustrates that my focus group participants’ disagreement to the black-focused school proposal is attributable to the liberal racist discourse equal opportunity, as well as CRT’s assumption that racism is so deeply ingrained in our society that people do not recognize it anymore.

⁴ See Chapter One, page 15

Additional demonstrations of this perspective were made during discussions on whether or not my participants thought the black-focused school was a good idea. One of these discussions centered on how Aboriginal people should have their own schools because they are losing their culture, whereas black people are not. Therefore, this new proposed black-focused school is not really necessary. For example, a group of youth aged 15-19 demonstrate this:

Robert: The only reason I don't find anything wrong with a Native school is cause they have every right to have their own school, like they were the first ones who found this country, right?

Cyrille: What are you talking about?

Robert: So they have pretty much every right to everything (inaudible)

I: And just because of that it's alright for Natives to have their own schools, and it's not called segregation, but if it's the black schools it's called segregation and it's wrong?

Jane: Cause like they were segregated from time...

Robert: No, I see your point, I see your point

Ahmed: No, that was a good point yo

I: I'm asking why is it ok to have Native schools and not black?

Marcko: I know what you're trying to...

Robert: But then again, like cause what I've heard on the news, right, is that the Natives are losing culture, right? They're more Western socialized than they are socialized from their history. So it's like the amount of culture they have is slowly declining on to a point where they're not going to know what their culture is, or anything about their history (Focus Group 2, Lines 953-974)

This discussion is particularly interesting because my research participants acknowledged that Aboriginal students needed their own school so they could learn about their culture, but did not see that additional Alternative schools were needed for other minority groups whose cultures were not reflected in mainstream schooling. In this case, my focus group participants imply that everyone has an equal opportunity in Canadian education systems accept Aboriginal students.

As we can see in the previous section, I used my theoretical lens to frame all of the liberal racist discourse examples that were evident in youths' narratives. The various elements that make up my theoretical lens were applied to the narratives in multiple ways. First, Gramsci's

process of hegemony⁵ may suggest why I have found liberal racist discourses in my participants' narratives. According to Henry and Tator (2002, 2006), these liberal racist discourses are hegemonic ideological controls or mechanisms that ensure that the dominant culture in a society is maintained. In this case, the colour-blindness perspective ensures the operation of the belief system that racial categories neither matter, nor should be taken into account when people consider what happens in everyday experiences when this is in fact false. While the blaming the victim and equal opportunity perspectives ensure that hegemonic mechanisms have no impact on individual achievement, even though research about the low academic achievement levels of black students indicates that this is hardly possible⁶. Although, it is impossible to pinpoint the (re)production centre of hegemonic power it is probable to suggest that these youth have consented to these ideological controls, and were exposed to them via social institutions and structures⁷.

Second, it is evident that the data has fulfilled CRT's assumption that racism is hegemonic. It is probable that my research participants could not visualize what the school would look like and how it would operate, because they view racism as hegemonic (normal and natural) as indicated by the liberal racist discourses in their narratives. Several of my focus group participants' narratives demonstrate that they regard racial inequalities as natural and normal. For example, even though some of them acknowledged systemic racism and discrimination in social institutions and structures they did not see this as an excuse; they still believed that an

⁵ See Chapter One, pages 9-13

⁶ See Chapter Two, pages 36-42

⁷ See Chapter One, page 10

individual could succeed if they tried harder, were more focused, or had more motivation⁸. One youth (Samuel) even explains rather explicitly that racism is normal and people just have to accept it (see Chapter Four, pages 91-92).

Lastly, through the interpretation of my data I have recognized white hegemonic control of social and structural arrangements by identifying liberal racist discourses in the way that youth think about their educational experiences. It is evident that most of my participants' belief systems are operating by liberal principles and values. They demonstrate opinions based on equal opportunity and racial equality; however, my research participants also hold negative feelings and attitudes about black youth in particular. Negative feelings about black students were already identified in some of the narratives provided in the blaming the victim discussion. Given that it is probable that my focus group participants operate from these two conflicting sets of values, this demonstrates that my participants use liberal racist discourses to think about their educational experiences (Henry & Tator, 2002, 2006) and because they think about educational experiences using these discourses they did not agree with the implementation of a black-focused school. They do not think it is a good idea because the ways that they think about educational experiences are coupled with liberal values and principles, as well as negative feelings about the black community.

There is an interesting contradiction between the perceived liberal racist discourses in my research participants' narratives and the 'fear of further stigmatization' theme that was identified in my focus group participants' narratives. We can see from Table 11 that five of the groups illustrated the theme 'fear of further stigmatization'. Fear of further stigmatization refers to instances when my participants were skeptical and concerned about what implications the

⁸ See Chapter One, page 13

implementation of this new Alternative school may have on them personally or on black people as a whole. These narratives occurred in the sessions during discussions on the following: 'Initial thoughts on the proposal', 'What parts of the proposal needed clarification', 'Asked for negatives about the school', and 'School dislikes: Violence', and examples of some of these narratives have already been displayed in Chapter Four (see pages 78, 79, 82, 83, and 85). The overall contradiction between this theme and the perceived liberal racist discourses is that my research participants' narratives reflect an awareness of the role of race in the stigmatization theme that is generally not present in the other themes.

For example, when liberal racist discourses are evident in my focus group participants' narratives they indicate that race does not have a role in their educational experiences, yet when they talk about 'fear of further stigmatization' it is quite evident that they understand that race is a factor in educational contexts. There are four examples of this contradiction. First, they feared that race would be a factor if the school failed. Their narratives indicate that they were afraid that if the school did fail then black people could be mocked after pushing so hard for the implementation of the school to improve the academic achievement of black youth (see Chapter Four, page 78). Second, when my participants talked about the school as a reservation/jail or as an easier way of tracking students for the police they were voicing concerns about how this school might be a tactic that could be used to further oppress the black community in the GTA (see Chapter Four, pages 77-78). Third, they feared that violence would break out at this new school daily, because of gang relations, and they did not want black people to be further stigmatized for these probable occurrences (see Chapter Four, pages 83 & 85). These narratives demonstrate a fear that race does play a role in oppression. My research participants claimed that race was not a factor in their everyday educational experiences; however, it is quite evident

that they are afraid that race would be a factor for the black-focused school insofar as it would have negative implications for black people, or be used in oppression tactics against them. Lastly, my focus group participants also feared that universities and colleges would most likely not accept them because they attended a 'black' school instead of a 'white' school. One example of this is voiced by Eve a female aged 15-19:

Eve: A lot of people will look at that on your transcript and say it's a black-focused school (emphasizing the title negatively) well its not black-focused, its Africentric--- they would rather except a person with a European-centric graduation.

I: Are you sure?

Eve: Yes! I believe that!

Pete: I believe so too, cause look at this, look at this---

Eve: Baby boomers as the head mistresses and head masters I would say that they would way prefer the Eurocentric then Africentric, that's my opinion.

Pete: They'll just look at them and say you don't know how to live with other people that go to this school because the people that go to this school are mostly black people (Harry and Eve agree).

Harry: Yeah! What jobs are we going to get?

Eve: Will we get Africentric jobs too? (Focus Group 6, Lines 1045-1065)

This example shows a particularly interesting contradiction because Eve, Pete, and Harry demonstrate that they believe systemic racism and discrimination exists in school systems. Yet when they talk about reasons why black students are not succeeding in the mainstream schools, as well as argue against the need for a black-focused school each of these individuals demonstrate a belief system that reflects the liberal principles and values that discount the role of race.

I do believe that the majority of the youth I talked to about the proposed 'black-focused' school did not think that implementing this school would be a good idea. Yet, I also believe that several of these same youth were also 'on the fence' in their thinking. By 'on the fence' I mean that they thought that the contours of the proposed school were positive, yet this, combined with their inability to conceptualize the idea of this school existing and what this would mean for

them caused them to fear and ‘project’ – worry about the ‘what ifs’. The possible ‘what if’s’ that my participants identified seemed to have negative repercussions on them, as well as on the black community in the GTA as a whole. Some of these concerns are very conceivable. The odds of the Alternative school failing due to stagnant student grades, increased violence, or even lack of stable funding⁹ are possible happenings. Moreover, if media representations are not sensitive to the image of the school if ‘deviant’ acts are committed, the littlest event could spark much negative attention. Yet these fears masked a greater underlying fear: The youth were afraid that if they did attend this new school they would be labeled ‘different’ from other mainstream students.

This finding is common among people; nobody wants to be considered ‘different’ from others. People want to fit into ‘society’ and be accepted by others. These youth feared the unknown. It is alarming that my research participants feared that this school would be a regressive step towards decreasing the systemic racism and discrimination coloured people already experience in Toronto, and more specifically in the institution of education. This is very concerning because the actual purpose behind the creation of this kind of school is to improve the school experience and outcomes of black youth, and its philosophy is sound and proven positive in other school environments (TDSB, 2006; Watkins, personal communication, November 12, 2007). The Africentric Summer Institute (ASI) pilot project is proof¹⁰. The students who attended this institute *liked* the program, *wanted* to learn more, *now liked school more*, and were *proud* of the material they learned at the institute. The ‘society courses’ taught

⁹ This was a concern voiced by one of the experts in session Five. The individual’s argument was that unless that new Alternative school receives adequate funding, it will fail at its purpose.

¹⁰ See Chapter One, pages 26-28.

at Weston Collegiate by David Watkins are also proof¹¹. Watkins observed that after students completed his course which centered on forming a clearer individual/personal understanding of black heritage and positive black self-worth, many who had been previously indifferent and discouraged learners were buoyed and proud motivated students, ready to launch ahead into the next years' studies with individual purpose. This project is a counter hegemonic strategy that people in the GTA have been fighting for, for over two decades, so that black youth can obtain education in an environment free of systemic racism and discrimination formed by dominant hegemonic ideologies. It is a positive step in the right direction towards equity.

In this chapter, I have applied my theoretical lens to interpret why my focus group participants disagree with the black-focused school proposal. I do not argue that I have found the 'truth' about why my participants do not agree with the black-focused school proposal; instead I offer a possible interpretation of their narratives by identifying hidden assumptions and implicit meanings using my theoretical lens. Through my theoretical lens I have argued that my research participants largely disagreed with the proposal because they draw on liberal racist discourses of colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity when thinking about their educational experiences. Also, I have pointed out a contradiction in the way that my focus group participants identify race as a factor in educational contexts, and suggest an underlying fear my participants also had about attending the black-focused school. In the next chapter I outline my key findings, discuss the implications of my insights, and identify directions for future research.

¹¹ See Chapter One, pages 29-30.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study began with two questions: What do black youth living in the GTA know and think about the possible implementation of a black-focused school pilot project in Toronto as a strategy to lessen the drop-out rate and improve the academic achievement of black students? Why do the youth support or resist the black-focused school proposal? The key findings of this inquiry are:

- The majority of the youth disagreed with the black-focused school idea, even though they agreed with several of the proposed elements of the school.
- The youth also had trouble conceptualizing 'black-focused schooling' as an alternative approach to mainstream education, which had an impact on whether they choose to, or could, respond to questions that precisely related to the black-focused school project.

These key findings suggest that there is a need to examine why the youth did not support the proposal. By applying a theoretical lens that draws on elements from CRT and Gramsci's process of hegemony this study sought to answer another question: Why do the youth disagree with the black-focused school proposal? The theoretical interpretation of this inquiry suggests that:

- The youth could not visualize what the school would look like and how it would operate primarily because they draw on liberal racist discourses of colour-blindness, blaming the victim, and equal opportunity (Henry & Tator, 2006), which are inherently racist, when thinking about their educational experiences.

- There is a contradiction in the way the youths' voices reflect an awareness of the role of race. They are aware that race is a factor when they talk about the possible negative implications of the school, yet their voices do not reflect an awareness of the role of race when they talk about why they disagree with the black-focused school proposal.
- The youth feared that they would be labeled 'different' from other mainstream students if they attended this Alternative school.

To ensure compliance with the study's main objective – to provide an outlet for the youth to have their voices heard, respected, and valued – when discussing these findings I do not argue that I have found the 'truth' about why the youth disagree with the black-focused school proposal, because it is not entirely clear if the youth have a false consciousness: no awareness that they are supporting discourses that are hegemonic mechanisms. In order to find out if the youth do have any awareness of hegemonic mechanisms it is necessary that further inquiry be conducted with the youth themselves. In this thesis, I emphasize the summative presentation of the youths' narrative in Chapter Four, and then suggest a possible explanation for the key findings induced from my initial research question, as well as encourage the TDSB and those involved in the black-focused school proposal to engage with the youth further in these issues. There are other possible interpretations of the youths' narratives, and I use the next section to discuss alternative interpretations.

Other Possible Interpretations

Perhaps one direct way of interpreting this data would be to argue that the youth were opposed to the pilot school's implementation and did not think it would be beneficial to the educational experience of black Canadian youth. Evidence does show that the youth identified

several possible downfalls to implementing the Alternative school, while other youth simply did not think the strategy was necessary. To illustrate, many youth believed the school environment would not be safe due to the current levels of violence happening among black youth. Also, one of the groups discussed the possibility of heightened homophobia due to the inability of people of colour to be accepting of this lifestyle. On the other hand, some youth viewed the action as a method of 'racial segregation' that represented a regressive step for the black community in the GTA as a whole. From this evidence we can see that the youth had many fears that this school might further stigmatize black people. Finally, some youth believed that the current curriculum did in fact satisfy the needs of all students, and thus this new school was unnecessary as a strategy to improve the academic standings of black Canadian youth.

Questionably however, even though on the surface the youth appeared to resist the idea they did think that the elements that were part of the proposal would help improve the drop-out rate of black Canadian youth. In support of this evidence, I suggest that if the youth had been presented with the concept that the pilot project would be created with the proposed strategy operating within their current physical school space it is possible that the youth would have been more in favour of the black-focused school proposal, because almost all of the youth viewed the elements that would be incorporated into the school as progressive to improving the academic achievement of black youth. For example, most of the youth saw positive aspects in how the proposed Africentric curriculum would work to help youth excel academically. They mentioned positive aspects such as the curriculum would be able to try to change racist attitudes, they would be able to learn more about black history, and that everything would be different overall creating a more comfortable learning environment for black Canadian youth.

Other important positives were that there would be more black teachers to learn from and less police at the school all the time.

Arguably, this data may be unable to actually make an accurate conclusion about what black Canadian youth think about the possible implementation of such an Alternative school, because the youth were not able to fully conceptualize how this strategy would look, or how it would work. For example in the Fifth session, one of the oldest experts who had had extensive knowledge regarding the black-focused school proposal suggested that it would most likely be impossible for youth to conceptualize the possibility of having this type of Alternative school because they were not present when smaller versions of previous black-focused models were running. One example of this was the school created by Marcus Garvey in 1935 (Moitt, 1996). Therefore, it could be argued that if the youth could conceptualize this idea accurately, as proposed by the elders of the community they quite possibly would argue that this strategy should be implemented, and that it would help black Canadian improve academically in school.

Concluding Comments

We can see that the youths' resistance to the project can be interpreted in different ways. Further inquiries resulting from this research include questions such as: Why do they resist the idea? Are there underlying reasons causing resistance and hesitation? Are they really resisting the idea? And would they have resisted the idea in different physical space circumstances? However, in some ways I do not think that asking 'why?' questions independent of the youth is the important future direction implicated from this study. Instead, I think it is more important that the TDSB and proponents of the black-focused school start engaging the youth in examining their discourses to see what the youth identify through a critical self-examination.

The youth need to deconstruct their own discourses by considering where the various elements in the discourses originate and what role they serve in the discourses.

It is important to note that while I have chosen to focus on race within this thesis, several other factors such as class, gender, sexual orientation, and mixed racial background may have influenced the youths' narratives. The narratives are informed by how the youth identify and locate themselves within society; however, the youths' understanding of their identity and location are likely to be in a state of flux due to their age and experience. While it is clear that I spoke with youth from a series of community agencies that offered the youth opportunities to identify and locate (i.e. activist youth, LGBTQ youth, at-risk youth), it is not clear that the youth accepted the identification or spoke from that location during the focus groups. It is important to be aware of these other factors and the possible shifting state of the youths' identity and location when considering the findings that I have presented. This is particularly important when examining the contradiction between the way the youths' voices reflected an awareness of the role of race in their expression of the fear of stigmatization but also reflected the use of liberal racist discourses to discount the role of race in their educational experiences. I have characterized this as the youth exhibiting periods of colour-blindness but it is also possible that they are borrowing the colour-blind discourse to resist the idea and protect themselves from the fear and vulnerability triggered by the black-focus school proposal. Future research should take these factors into consideration and provide youth with an opportunity to identify and locate themselves within the issues as well as to deconstruct their own narratives.

I want to acknowledge and show appreciation for the youth's participation in this project. The youth's responses have provided me with a greater understanding of their views, and opinions on the proposed Alternative school. I continue to believe that involving youth in

discussions about possible policy implementations and strategies for their well-being is a very important component of decision-making processes, and of social relations in education. I respect and value their positions, as well as admire their ability to be truthful about their perspectives. The findings I have gathered from their discussions are extremely valuable, and will make important contributions to education research.

As the TDSB's first black-focused school is expected to occur in September 2009, this study is important because it sheds light on reasons why black youth may not be eager to attend a black-focused school in Toronto. The TDSB has concluded that the implementation of a black-focused school in the GTA supports the interests of members of the black community, yet in the late summer of 2008 media talk started focusing on the difficulty of recruiting youth to begin attending the school in September 2009. By drawing on this study interested parties can consider probable reasons for this reaction, gain a deeper understanding of the proposed school and its purpose, and perhaps even view the proposal in a more sympathetic nature.

I hope readers realize the political importance of this school, as I have in being compelled to conduct research on this issue. If this alternative education strategy is fully supported it has the potential to transform Canadian education systems. It is an opportunity to show our society that something else can work. It will provide evidence that school can be structured in different ways that can meet the needs of young people.

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APPENDIX A: TDSB MEETING NOTICE FOR JANUARY 29, 2008

Special Meeting
January 29, 2008

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Report No. 01-08-1217
RTS No. 212

TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

IMPROVING SUCCESS FOR BLACK STUDENTS

TO Special Meeting

29 January 2008

RECOMMENDATION IT IS RECOMMENDED:

1. That a Program Area Review Team (PART) be established in February 2008 to recommend the program and operational model for an Africentric Alternative School opening in September 2009, including grade levels, selection of site, and staffing and support services required, and that the PART report to the Board with its recommendations by May 2008;
2. That a three-year pilot program be established in three existing schools beginning in September 2008, to implement a model for integrating the histories, cultures, experiences and contributions of people of African descent and other racialized groups into the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and social environment of the schools;
3. That a Staff Development, Research, and Innovation Centre be established beginning in September 2008, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and community agencies, in order to develop, use and assess the effectiveness of best practices for improving school achievement for marginalized and vulnerable students who are not achieving success in school; and
4. That the Director report to the Board in April 2008 on an action plan for addressing student underachievement for marginalized and vulnerable students, based on proposals received from community stakeholders and on current system plans.

RATIONALE

Background

On 27 June 2007, in response to a community request for an Africentric Alternative School, the Board decided that staff present a report on the feasibility of an Africentric Alternative School. Staff undertook the usual consultative process with community and staff stakeholders under the terms of the Board's Alternative Schools Policy and Procedures.

The request for an Africentric Alternative School arises from community concerns about low achievement and disengagement of Black students in schools. Staff also received extensive input at two system-wide community forums on 1 and 8 December 2007. At these forums about 100 speakers – parents, community members, youth groups, community organization representatives, teachers, principals, and interested individuals, presented their proposals for Black student success to a panel of trustees and senior staff. A summary of the key proposals are listed in Appendix A.

This report presents four recommendations and rationale.

Program Area Review Team Process for Africentric Alternative School

This recommendation responds to the specific community request for such a school. Staff conducted literature reviews to provide background information on Africentric schools. As in any other school, the success of an Africentric Alternative School depends on the expertise of the school leadership, high quality instruction, high expectations for students, a culture of caring, parental engagement and support, as well as an inclusive curriculum that positively reflects the identities, backgrounds and experiences of all the students in the school.

An Africentric Alternative School is not a school for Black students only. It is open to any student in the TDSB who chooses to attend. The TDSB defines an Africentric Alternative School as follows:

An Africentric Alternative School is a school open to all students, which uses the sources of knowledge and experiences of peoples of African descent as an integral feature of the teaching and learning environment.

A planning process for the Africentric Alternative School will begin immediately with the establishment of a PART in February 2008.

This process and timeline is recommended because of the need to ensure that the following key components of the program and operational delivery model are carefully considered with the input of the community:

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- The grade levels of the school (i.e. elementary, middle or secondary grades) and the number of classes per grade;
- A suitable and accessible school site;
- The school philosophy, pedagogy, and program focus require community input;
- An Africentric curriculum for the appropriate grade(s) once the grades have been determined;
- The nature of the staffing and support services required;
- The expectations for parent involvement and support; and
- Staff training on the model in order to ensure the required level of expertise.

Following a determination of the above components, a survey of parents will have to be conducted to determine intent to enroll. This survey will require information about the grade levels of the school, selected site, program description and other necessary details in order for an informed parental choice to be made.

It is understood that the opening of any alternative school in the TDSB is contingent upon a commitment to enroll formally expressed by a sufficient number of students required to operate a viable program, as recommended by the PART.

Community members have emphasized during the consultation forums that the Africentric Alternative School must be set up for success. Opening the school in September 2009, will provide greater scope for careful planning and execution of the key components so as not to place the viability and sustainability of the Africentric Alternative School at risk.

Pilot Programs in Three Schools

A key equity goal for the Board is to ensure that every school positively reflects the diversity of its community, in terms of school philosophy, instruction, student support and overall socio-cultural environment. Some racialized communities, in particular the Black community, have persistently expressed concerns that their child's school falls far short of that goal.

Data from the recent TDSB Student Census shows that a vast majority of students say that learning about their own racial and cultural background will make school more interesting and enjoyable for them and about half of all students say that this will help them to do better in school.

Other TDSB student data shows that students from the Caribbean, East and West Africa who are predominantly Black have the highest rates of school failure. About 40% of Black students do not graduate from high school.

The rigorous implementation of inclusive school practices within an inclusive school philosophy is essential to reversing this persistent pattern of school failure for Black students and other racialized groups. All schools will benefit by access to proven exemplary practices, resulting from schools which model these inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.

This report therefore recommends that a three-year pilot project in three schools (K - 6, middle, secondary) with a significant population of Black students would provide a mechanism for identifying high-impact best practices. Integrating an Africentric approach along with other approaches which centres the experience of other groups positively within the whole school environment will be the focus of these pilots. Additional resources will be needed to support this initiative.

Existing African-centred curriculum units developed with the TDSB and from external sources will be adapted and enhanced to support these pilots.

Staff and community expertise will support these pilots. There is potential interest among several schools to participate in this opportunity.

Centre for Staff Development, Research and Innovation

Initiatives proposed in this report will require the use of action research to gather data, track progress, use and test best practices, which have an impact on all students, in particular marginalized and vulnerable students. The support of external expert partners in this research will be an important resource for this initiative.

Phase I will begin in 2008 through a partnership with York University, Faculty of Education, through the concept of a Centre for Research, Staff Development and Innovation. Discussions have already taken place with York University regarding the research model to be used. Initiatives to improve achievement of Black students and other racialized groups will benefit from this research. Other post-secondary institutions have indicated an interest in similar partnerships to support marginalized and vulnerable students.

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Action Plan for Improving Black Student Achievement

Many proposals for improving the achievement of Black students have recently been made by community members, educators and experts.

Staff have not yet had an opportunity to consider the proposals received at the 1 and 8 December 2007 community forums. Other proposals and strategies arising from reports such as the School Community Safety Advisory Panel Report and from other staff and community discussions regarding Black student achievement will be considered in developing an action plan.

This report recommends that the Director report to the Board with an action plan based on these proposals, for short and long term response, with implementation beginning in 2008-09.

COST AND FUNDING SOURCE

\$350,000.00	Development Process for Africentric Alternative School -
\$450,000.00	Pilot Programs in Three Schools (\$150,000 per school) -
\$15,000.00	Centre for Staff Development, Research and Innovation -
<u>\$5,000.00</u>	Development of Action Plan
\$820,000.00	Total

IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

- PART process to begin as soon as possible;
- Lead principal to be hired for September 2008;
- Consultation with Superintendents of Education to identify interested pilot schools, and their readiness to participate;
- Development of Action Research model in consultation with York University;
- Formation of a Committee to begin review of community and staff proposals and to set priorities;
- Executive Planning and Priorities Committee will monitor, review, and report progress to the Board.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Black Community Education Forums (1 and 8 December 2007): Summary of Key Proposals

FROM

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McKell, Executive Officer, Student and Community Equity a
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ROUTING

Executive Planning and Priorities
Special Meeting

22 January 2008
29 January 2008

E03(AfricRptBrdFrmJan22)fm.4017
Last update: 23 January 2008

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January 29, 2008

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Appendix A

BLACK COMMUNITY EDUCATION FORUMS

**DECEMBER 1, 2007 – Northview Heights Secondary School
DECEMBER 8, 2007 – Winston Churchill Collegiate Institute**

What Are Your Proposals For Black Student Success In School?

KEY COMMUNITY PROPOSALS

INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

- Teach all students about how race, class and gender impact their lives, and provide curriculum resources and teacher training to support this teaching;
- Ensure that history of Canada taught in TDSB schools is inclusive of the histories of people of African descent and all other groups which make up this country including the perspectives of all groups impacted by events in Canadian history;
- Implement a mandatory curriculum unit on the history and experiences of people of African descent as well as Aboriginal peoples in the curriculum for all students at middle and secondary schools;
- Establish a diversity education program in each school using community resources so that all students can learn about each other and develop intercultural understanding;
- Invest substantially in literature, film, documents, and aids that depict legitimately the experiences of people with whom the diverse community of students can identify;
- Use African-centred references and content in visual and performing arts and sports at all levels of instruction including the teaching of rap, gospel, and jazz;
- Teach historic facts about wealth creation, entrepreneurship, science and academia of people of African descent in order to change current societal emphasis on Black role models in sports and entertainment;

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- Provide opportunities for all students to learn world history early enough so that they understand why people from different geographical regions have different experiences, characteristics and values;
- Integrate the teaching of African history, cultures and achievements through the school year, not just in African History Month;
- Establish a position of Central Principal for Black Studies similar to the existing position of Central Principal for Aboriginal Studies.

PROGRAM INITIATIVES

- Require each school to identify equity targets for the School Improvement Plan;
- Restructure Grade 9 courses to run in split classes, applied and academic together; teachers will deliver the academic curriculum and allow for a differentiated assessment;
- Make co-op opportunities more accessible to youth of schools in marginalized communities;
- Provide more job shadowing programs for youth in high need communities;
- Develop Eco Schools Program in inner city communities;
- Build partnership projects between schools in disadvantaged communities and cultural institutions such as the ROM, the Toronto Art Gallery and the Ontario Science Centre to bring greater learning involvement of the youth with these institutions;
- Undertake an aggressive program to teach inner city youth how to use new technologies to support learning;
- Use technology and Africentric software to aid in teaching a more culturally relevant curriculum;
- Provide permanent funding to support the stability, quality and expansion of the existing Black Heritage International Language Program;
- Extend learning opportunities to include summer programs for children and youth;

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- Organize specialty summer camps for marginalized students to include no traditional summer activities such as archery, horseback riding, wilderness survival and other activities that will expose students to a wider range of experiences;
- Provide employment opportunities for students in disadvantaged communities work for the TDSB in the summer.

STUDENT SUPPORT

- Transform the role of guidance counsellors to provide a focus on guidance to students struggling with challenges who need culturally sensitive support to make more informed choices in their academic and social lives;
- Restore and expand the community support workers, youth outreach workers, attendance counsellors, and social work positions which have been cut by the Harper government;
- Establish a Black male mentorship program in high need areas;
- Establish a TDSB job category of Youth Mentors;
- Provide in-school one-on-one tutoring for students struggling with their academic challenges;
- Schedule intervention style group meetings with the student at-risk with more than one teacher, parent/guardian;
- Replicate the "Promoting Excellence Program" which has a 98% success rate in the Jane/Finch area;
- Utilize 'Future Aces Program' which provides student leadership opportunities;
- Offer Pathways to Education (Regent Park model) in all inner city communities TDSB.

VALUES

- Create a board-wide initiative where every school would be required to adopt a charitable project around which they would use character-building values;

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- Implement an integrated approach to character development across all programs in the school;
- Teach children good manners; teach them the importance of a smile (*the promoter of rap music have taught children to wear a sullen and hostile look*);
- Encourage children not to copy the tough gangster look that America has sold to Black youth.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

- Ensure that each school set a goal of building a trusting relationship between all staff and students and work hard to create an environment in which all students feel safe
- Ensure that teachers get to know each student personally; know their names, know their goals, know the issues and stresses that they are experiencing in their personal lives and actively support them in dealing with their challenges;
- Build the school program in disadvantaged communities around improving students self esteem by focusing on what they do well, by expanding their view of what is achievable, and by instilling the confidence to strive for something positive;
- Provide support for those students whose learning styles that may be considered different, while making learning challenging and fun by developing their creativity and thinking skills;
- Create opportunities for groups of students in middle and secondary schools to come together to discuss issues; organize student workshops and discussion groups on topics and issues they are dealing with in their lives;
- Create many opportunities for Black students and other racialized groups to participate in leadership responsibilities in the school.

STUDENT DISCIPLINE

- Get students to commit to taking responsibility for their part in building respect for each other and for adults in the school;
- Establish a better balance between punishment and conflict resolution, peer mediation, prevention, human rights protection, and equity;

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- Use in-school suspensions where suspensions are warranted, and ensure that supports are provided for suspended students;
- Link students who are having behaviour challenges with a mentor/advisor prior to suspensions;
- Promote the use of school uniforms for all schools.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Train all elementary and middle school teachers in the use of African-based content in delivering literacy and numeracy programs;
- Provide intensive training for principals, teachers, guidance counsellors and support staff in equity issues including anti-racism and gender equity awareness and strategies, stereotyping, racial profiling, cross cultural differences, and understanding the immigrant and refugee experience;
- Provide pre-service education for all teachers in the college programs to learn about the realities of dealing with Black students and other racialized student groups;
- Develop an Africentric Leadership Institute for principals, teachers, and students so they understand the needs of the community, similar to the model in Nova Scotia;

PERSONNEL ISSUES

- Recruit teachers who have a passion to teach children and who can communicate high expectations for all students and who can build trust with students;
- Recruit teachers who understand how to use mainstream hip-hop culture as a context for motivating and teaching Black students;
- Include demonstrated evidence of inclusive instruction as part of a teacher performance appraisal programs;
- Principal transfer approvals should consider the candidate's record in equitable school practices and community engagement;

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- Principals with experience in working progressively with Black students and parent should be placed in schools with predominantly Black populations;
- Establish a teacher compensation policy which includes factors related to teacher effectiveness and student achievement data.

ADVOCACY AND ADVISORY STRUCTURES

- Establish a Black community committee of advisers to work with the TDSB on how to move forward on Black students achievement issues;
- Develop a council in African Canadian Educators to work specifically with the Ministry of Education to ensure the needs of Black students are being met;
- Establish a committee of Black educators, parents, students, members of the community and the clergy to work with the Board to organize, implement, and administer the Black focused schools;
- Organize a support group of community and professional organizations to act as youth advocates for students;
- Organize an annual Black Community Education Summit funded by the TDSB.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Create strong home-school connections with Black parents, providing opportunities for families to come together to support student learning;
- Ensure that principals and school council leaders have strategies for identifying and eliminating any barriers to the involvement of Black parents and other racialized groups in the school and in the school council;
- Organize events at school that are of interest to parents who are not actively involved in the life of the school;
- Have a Parent Night once per month for the parents to just talk with each other about schools and their children;
- Establish a formal network between schools, community centres and businesses and other interested groups in the local community to address youth issues and support youth;

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- Open the schools to more free or low cost community use for programs aimed at children and youth;
- Schools and community agencies should create parent support groups with expert resource people to help parents with coping strategies and proactive strategies;
- Adjust school meeting schedules to accommodate the convenience of parents;
- Organize a Take Your Parent/Caregiver To School Day for students in K-10;
- Make sure the main school office projects an inclusive and African-friendly environment.

BLACK FOCUSED SCHOOLS

- The Board should establish a Black focused school because it will lead to improved school achievement for students who attend, and it will provide a model for other schools to follow;
- The Board should not establish a Black focused school because it is divisive and it will create a focus away from improving school achievement of Black students in all schools.

OTHER

- Ensure that the TDSB website or other communication vehicles gives the community good information about what's going on and how the Board is addressing Black students' issues.
- The TDSB should work closely with the Ministry of Social Services, Ministry of Child and Youth Services, and the Ministry of Housing to address social issues of Black students which impact Black students in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

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Agenda Item 5.2

Written Notice of Motion (Trustee Matlow)

From: David Tomczak, Senior Manager, Board Services

In accordance with Board Bylaw 10.4, the following motion was submitted in time to be included on the agenda of this meeting for consideration.

10.4 A member of the Board may include a matter in the agenda for a regular Board meeting by submitting the matter in writing to the Director at least seven days in advance of the meeting.

Alternative Proposal

Whereas, the Toronto District School Board, along with other levels of government, community agencies and parents, has a responsibility to respond to the fact that there is a disproportionate number of black students in Toronto who are either failing to graduate, dropping out or experiencing incidents of racism; and

Whereas, it is imperative that the Board act in a substantive manner to do all it can to ensure optimum and equitable learning conditions that meet the needs of all students, notwithstanding their place of origin, in each of its schools; and

Whereas, Toronto's students, no matter the colour of their skin, want to go to school together, to learn about each other's cultures and identities, and to succeed in the world, fully cognizant of all its intricacies and differences; and

Whereas, the Board must positively and collectively take action to combat racism and tackle the challenges students face, in all of the Board's 557 public schools, in an approach that expands, not limits, choices for students; and

Whereas, one of the principal goals of schools should be to bring students together; not divide and potentially stigmatize them through artificially created divisions; and

Whereas, all students, no matter the colour of their skin or their ancestry, should have an opportunity to learn about their own family's culture and those of their fellow students.

Therefore, be it resolved that staff report directly to the Board in April 2008 with a recommended framework on how to move forward on a critical path that will ensure that the Board supports students toward the fulfillment of the following objectives that are to be achieved in all the Board's schools:

- (i) The equalization and expansion, where appropriate, of African and black studies and other world culture curriculum course offerings across all quadrants of the Board which ensures that students in all areas of the city can**

access and benefit from such subjects in order to achieve a greater understanding of the great contributions of African and other societies contributions to world and Canadian history;

- (ii) The delivery of all African and black studies course offerings in a non-colonial context and in a manner that encourages students, no matter the colour of their skin, to learn about these subjects together rather than divided.**

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Opening reminders:

Welcome everyone and introduce research team members. Remind participants about maintaining confidentiality and not using names during the session – i.e. their own or other people about whom they may be speaking. Talk about being respectful of each other and the importance of hearing what they have to say. Briefly explain the purpose of the research and remind individuals about their rights as participants. Discuss the videotaping and why it is important. Have the participants sign the appropriate confidentiality agreement forms.

Ice breaking questions:

What are your favourite things about school?

What things would you most like to change about school?

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions:

Have you heard about the black-focused school being proposed in Toronto?

What have you heard about it?

How did you hear about it?

I would like to share with you what I have heard about it (this will be read to all focus groups):

Over the last twenty years this idea of having a black-focused school has come out as a way to improve how well black students do in school. The school hasn't happened yet because the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has not approved the idea. The two main people behind the idea are George Dei who is a sociologist at the Ontario Institute of Sociology and Education, and Lloyd McKell, the TDSB's equity boss.

There have been mixed thoughts about this idea from the Toronto community and the media. Some people think this is a good idea. Some people think it's a bad idea.

The main goal of the black-focused school is to meet students' needs in an equal and equitable way. The school would have a new curriculum that is different from the mainstream curriculum, as it adds the black-lived experience to all parts of the curriculum. This would give more a connection between a student's cultural way at home and school. Discipline would also be different as the school would not use suspensions or expulsions, and would not use law enforcement as a disciplinary method.

The school would be 'black-focused', but would be open for all students. Dei and McKell think that this school could be helpful for any students whose needs are not being met in the mainstream schools.

Does any of this sound familiar to anyone? What sounds familiar?

What was your first thought when you heard about it?

What about this proposal do you think is a good idea? Why?

What about this proposal do you think is a bad idea? Why?

Would you attend this school? Why or why not?

Do you think your parents would want you to attend this school? Why or why not?

Okay so we are going to shift gears a bit and talk a little about your culture and school:

How would you describe your culture?

What sort of things do you find important about your culture?

How did you learn about your culture?

How have your parents had a role in teaching you about your culture?

How do Canada's school systems and the curriculum reflect all your culture?

How do you think that Canada's school systems and curriculum reflect all of the people who live in Canada?

Thinking about a black-focused school and how to bring culture into the curriculum, what sort of things do you think should be put into it?

Who do you think belongs in this school?

Now I would like to talk a little bit more about your experiences at school:

What do you like about attending your current school?

Do students in your current school drop out or skip a lot?

What do you think makes people drop out or skip?

What would make you stay in school?

Do you plan on getting your grade 12?

What do you plan to do once you're finished high school?

Do you think that students would still skip and drop out of school if they attended this new proposed school? Why or why not?

How would a school like this help you achieve your goals more than your current school does?

Wrap up

We're going to start to wrap things up now. I'd like each of you to reflect for a minute and think about what you'll take away from our discussion. Then I'm going to ask everyone to go around and share what they've thought.

Now does anyone have anything else they'd like to add?

Thank you for taking the time to sit down and talk about these issues. It is very important to us that we really hear what young people have to say.

Distribute the feedback form detailing the research project, and how the youth can contact me if they thought of something else they would like to share with me, or if there was something they wanted to share with me but didn't feel comfortable doing while in the group. Also suggest that if their parents ask them about the research, they can show them the feedback form.

Distribute the 10 dollar compensation to each student, and have each student sign and date a form stating I have distributed this compensation to them.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS SPECIFIC TO EACH SESSION

Questions asked from the Interview Guide

First Focus Group coded: November 15th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – ALL except #'s 4 and 5

Culture and school – Only 1 and 5

Experiences at school – Only 1 – 4

Second Focus Group coded: October 5th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – 1, 2, (5-7)

Third Focus Group coded: September 27th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – 1-3, 6-8

Culture and school – 1-6

Experiences at school – 7

Fourth Focus Group coded: September 26th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – 1-3, 6-9

Culture and school – 2, 5, 6

Fifth Focus Group coded: September 20th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – 1-3, 6-8

Culture and school – 1-3, 5-7

Experiences at school – 1-6

Sixth Focus Group coded: September 18th 2007

Ice breaking questions - ALL

Knowledge about the proposed black-focused school questions – 1-3, 6, 7

Culture and school – 1, 2, 5, 6,

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions:

What is your age? _____

What is your gender? _____

What country were you born in? _____

What country was your mother born in? _____

What country was your father born in? _____

What is your mother's occupation? _____

What is your father's occupation? _____

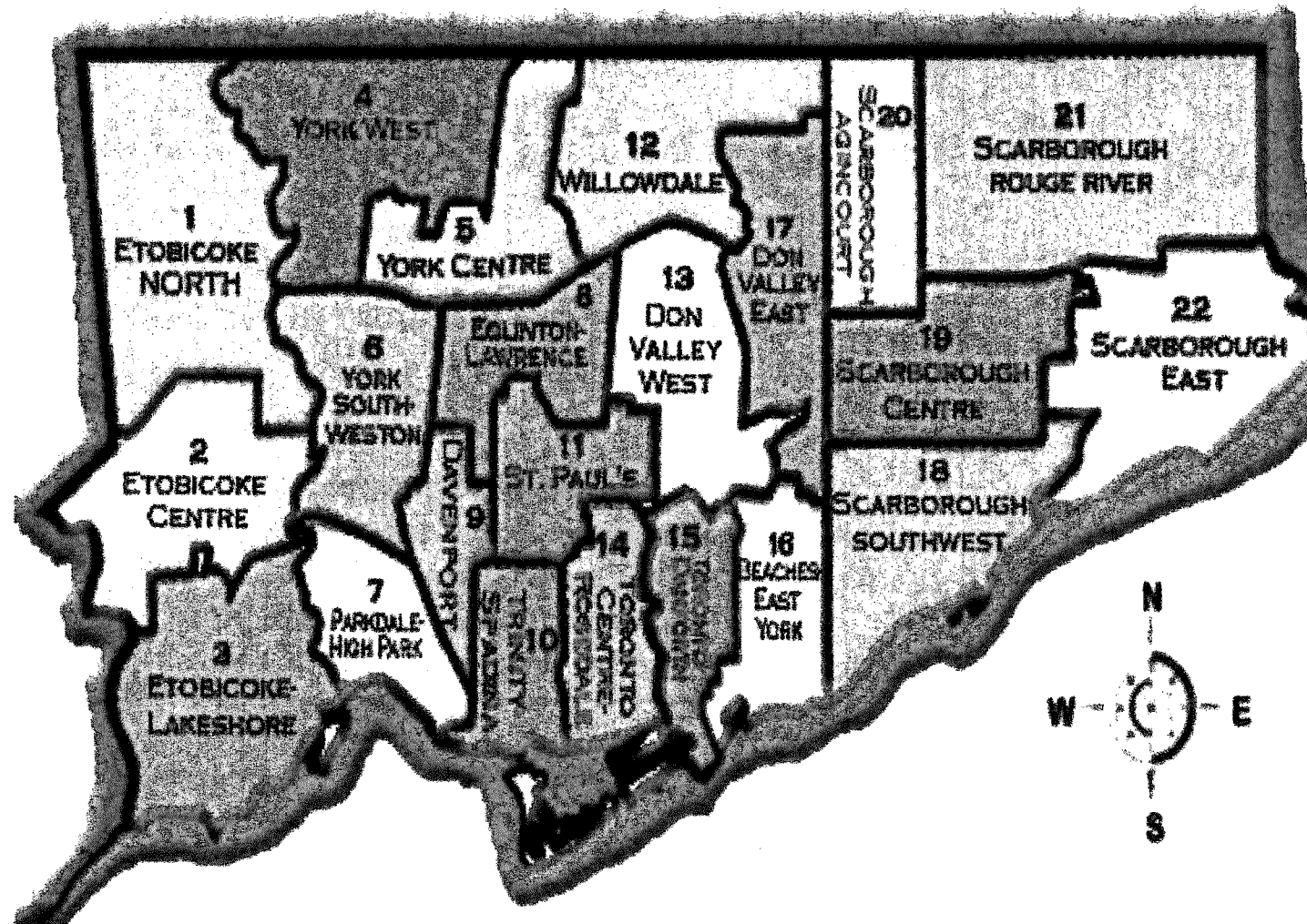
Who do you live with? (Check more than one box if needed)

- ☐ Mother
- ☐ Father
- ☐ Grandparent
- ☐ Aunt
- ☐ Uncle
- ☐ Other _____

Are you parents divorced?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

APPENDIX E: A GEOGRAPHICAL MAP OF THE WARDS OF THE TDSB



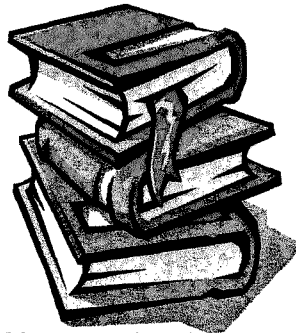
APPENDIX F: RECRUITMENT POSTER (FLYER)

BROCK UNIVERSITY

Youth Research



INVITING BLACK YOUTH FROM A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS;
ENTERING OR PRESIDING IN GRADES 10 TO 12, TO PARTICIPATE IN A 1-2 HR. FOCUS GROUP
ABOUT THEIR REACTIONS TO THE BLACK-FOCUSED SCHOOL PILOT PROJECT PROPOSED IN
TORONTO.



- Voice your opinions and learn about the project
- Have your voices heard, respected and valued
- \$10.00 compensation for each participant
- Focus groups will be video-taped
- Contact (insert centre contact person) to sign up for a session

This research is being conducted by Megan Davis B.A. (Hons.). Miss Davis is a master's student in the Department of Child and Youth Studies at

ALL SESSIONS (INSERT DATES)

(INSERT TIMES)

@

(INSERT LOCATION)

(INSERT ADDRESS)

Brock University. Miss Davis' faculty supervisor is Dawn Zinga, an associate professor at Brock University. Questions can be directed to either the researcher (ext. 5107) or her supervisor (ext. 5132) at 905-688-5550. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (07-008). Permission has also been granted by (insert organization name), where the research will take place.

APPENDIX G: MY CODEBOOK

1. I coded inductively within each parent tree node below:

- School 'Likes'
- School 'Dislikes'
- School is fine the way it is
- Have you heard of the black-focused school proposal?
- Initial thoughts on the proposal
- Knowledge on proposal – What have you heard?
- What parts of the proposal needed clarification?
- Where did they hear about it?
- When did they hear about it?
- Asked for positives about the black-focused school
- Asked for negatives about the black-focused school
- Would your parents want you to attend?
- Would you attend this school?
- How would you describe your culture?
- How does your school reflect your culture?
- Why do students get suspended or drop-out?
- What makes you stay in school?
- What would you change about your school?
- What do you think belongs in this school and curriculum?
- Would this new school eliminate drop-outs?
- Would you send your children there?
- How do you learn about your culture?
- What is important about your culture?
- Do you plan on getting your grade twelve?

Each of the nodes above are parents nodes and they have corresponding child nodes that sort the answers into categories.

2. I also coded issues relating to the interview guide questions that came up during discussion into Tree Nodes (see below):

- Alternative programs mentioned in relation to mainstream education
- Attitudes towards the schooling experiences (meritocracy; individualistic views)
- Differences between schools
- Experiences at school right now

Each of the nodes above are parents nodes and they have corresponding child nodes that sort the answers into categories.

3. I created annotations that comment on specific individuals and suspect why they might have responded in a certain way that is unique to the rest of the group.

4. I created the following 'see also links' for the following reasons:

- Probing questions – i.e. questions asked by the interviewer that were not planned

- Talks initially about diversity as if resisting the black-focused school idea – i.e. when asked about school ‘likes’ many of the students emphasize that they really enjoyed the diversity
- Links between questions/answers/themes – i.e. if the interviewer asked one question and the participant brought up a topic that answered another question on the interview guide thus implying that they were linked in some way I noted this
- Question construction – i.e. if a question is stated one way in the interview guide but synonyms for some words in the question are used interchangeably

5. I coded the following topics into Free Nodes based in possible connections to my theoretical framework, unique phrases that stuck out to me, etc.:

- Colour-blind insight
- Hegemony
- Racism is deeply embedded
- Stereotypical views
- Individualistic views
- Fear of further stigmatization

I then narrowed down these themes into four themes:

- Colour-blindness
- Blaming the victim
- Equal opportunity
- Fear of further stigmatization