

Insights Into the Remembered Educational Experiences of Male Caribbean Immigrants to  
Canada: Literacy and Identity in the Canadian Classroom

Cynthia Medford-Williams, B.Ed.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate

Studies in Education

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Faculty of Education, Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

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## **Abstract**

Past research has addressed the issue of male underachievement in literacy as an issue of global concern. This qualitative study focused on one subgroup of males which the literature highlighted as most at risk of educational underachievement in the Canadian educational landscape: male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. The research questions that framed the study sought to gain insight into the educational experiences of this group of learners so that ways through which their literacy achievement as measured by academic performance and classroom engagement could be projected. New literacy studies view literacy as socioculturally bound in social, institutional, and cultural relationships (Gee 1996). Literacy can therefore be thought of as an extension of self that Lankshear and Knobel (2006) assert is always connected to social identities. Central to the research questions as a result of this perspective was the discovery of the ideologies of reading held by the participants and their connections to literacy practice. Supplementary questions delved into socially valued literacy practices and ways in which learners saw themselves as Black males reflected in the Canadian educational framework. In this qualitative study with an interview design, data were collected through individual semistructured interviews with the 4 participants and through a focus group session with all the participants. The findings depicted that identity, interests, and ideologies of reading all influenced the literacy practices and engagement of Caribbean males. The findings documented are valuable as they provide a fresh perspective surrounding the educational experiences of the male Caribbean learner and can present insights which can lead to enhanced academic engagement and improved student achievement for this group of learners.

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## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Anna. You always brought out the best in me! Thank you so much for never giving up on me and always encouraging me to give of my best in all my endeavours. You were always there when I needed you. You are forever etched in my mind and I am overwhelmingly grateful for having had you in my life.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Increasingly diverse student populations are changing the landscape of Canadian classrooms. Capps et al. (2005) highlight that within the past three decades there has been an upsurge in linguistic and cultural diversity in today's classroom, not experienced since the 1920s. This diversity, arising from massive population shifts, is a reality not only in the Canadian classroom but in many other Western countries. Such rapid alterations in student demographics have been accompanied by a cycle of continuing underachievement among a disproportionate number of students of racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This situation requires critical attention from the research community in order to improve instruction for these students (Ball, Skerrett, & Maritnez, 2011).

The changing dynamics of our classrooms, Lopez (2011) claims, lead to greater significance among calls for the use of more culturally relevant pedagogies in classrooms that centre on the lived experiences of our diverse students. It is imperative that today's education system be equipped with such approaches to teaching and learning as they are effective in attending to the needs of diverse student populations. Bean and Harper (2011) suggest that the increasingly diverse and heterogeneous nature of contemporary students means that the nature and educational needs of youth are not as easily generalized as they probably were in the past. It is therefore important that researchers focus on specific groups of learners so as to gain knowledge of what works best for particular subgroups of students. This study specifically seeks to provide insight into the educational experiences of one segment of Canada's increasingly diverse classroom context: Caribbean male immigrants. Caribbean immigrants are among the many faces

flooding the Canadian classroom. Gaining insights into the perspective of these learners and listening to their authentic voices is an important step in meeting their needs in the classroom.

Every student, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background, brings vast “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) to the learning context. Lalas and Valle (2007) describe funds of knowledge as the networks of interconnectivity between students’ identities, schools, families, neighbourhoods, communities, and overall lived experiences acquired throughout their lives. Every student’s story is therefore unique and shaped by this variety of experiences. For this reason Gutierrez (2001) contends that the heterogeneity of our students and the resources they bring to the learning situation must be considered in the instructional environment. Good instruction, Valdez and Callahan (2011) note, begins with knowing one’s students. The focus of this study provides an exploration of the perspectives of Caribbean males. This exploration provides fresh insights into the educational experiences of the male Caribbean learner. It is therefore significant as it brings the educational community one step closer to understanding how the needs of this small, yet significant segment of the diverse student population can be met. In addition, this study contributes to the limited body of research specific to this segment of the immigrant population in Canada, providing insights which can potentially lead to enhanced academic engagement and improved student achievement among Caribbean males.

Egbo (2009) claims that in a multicultural context questions such as what, why, and how to teach children in ways that reflect the rich tapestry of their diverse backgrounds is critical to fostering academic achievement and engagement. The

theoretical frameworks put forward by theorists such as Bandura (1986), Bruner (1986), and Piaget (1932) would support asking questions such as these as they expound that learners construct new ideas by building on existing knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs (Elliott & Woloshyn, 2013). Elliott and Woloshyn (2013) note, however, that teachers quite often focus on the similarities existing among their students rather than on the differences existing. As a result, teachers inadvertently ignore the unique range of cultural and social norms and values that diverse students bring to their classrooms. In today's pluralistic classroom, this situation should not exist because, as Genishi and Dyson (2009) posit, difference and diversity are rapidly becoming the new normal.

Every student brings culturally unique elements to the classroom. These elements should be appreciated because they are critical to academic engagement and achievement. Consequently such elements should be factored into any equation that attempts to discover meaningful ways to meet the needs of all learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. Ladson-Billings (1994) argues further that students will less likely fail in a school context where they feel positive about both their own culture as well as the culture of the majority. Ladson-Billings therefore encourages classrooms to embrace "culturally relevant pedagogy" using students' culture as a means of maintaining it, thereby transcending the negative effects of the dominant culture and ensuring outcomes which include academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Culturally relevant pedagogy is further seen as an effective way of centering the cultures, languages, and experiences that diverse students bring to the classroom to increase their engagement and academic achievement (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Villegas and Lucas (1991) notes that culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the understanding that

how people learn varies across cultures (Lopez, 2011). Therefore, teachers should be willing to gain knowledge of other cultures represented in their classrooms and translate that knowledge to instructional practice so that learning opportunities may be maximized. The educational community needs to learn as much as possible about the growing body of learners represented in today's classrooms, especially in the literacy classroom. In situations such as these, Lazar (2004) calls for culturally sensitive literacy teachers as one way to begin this process of meeting the diverse needs of all students.

This study advocates for a critical approach to literacy, one which Luke (1997) argues is characterized by a commitment to reshape literacy education in the interests of groups of learners who are marginalized based on gender, cultural background, and socioeconomics and therefore excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant cultures. Lopez (2011) notes that teachers who subscribe to the belief that schools are important in creating a socially just society must teach in culturally relevant ways that consider how every student experiences the curriculum. I subscribe to the belief that a critical literacy approach in the classroom is one way of engaging students in such culturally relevant teaching. Critical literacy develops the capacity to read, write, speak, view, listen, and represent, as Cooper and White (2008) claim, by linking the development of self-efficacy, an attitude of inquiry, and the desire to effect positive social change.

In past decades, the work of linguists and literacy theorists has led to the term literacy being reconsidered as *literacies* that are multiple, socially situated, cultural practices (Hymes, 1974; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). The New London Group (1996) describes these multiliteracies as “a shift in the concept of literacy and

literacy pedagogy from that of a page-bound practice restricted to an official/standard (i.e., monolingual and monocultural) language to a critical and dynamic understanding of literacy as a multiplicity of discourses” (p.188). These changing conceptions of literacy are pertinent in discussions surrounding diversity in the classroom as they are sensitive to diversity both at the text level and at the individual level (Danzak, 2011). Flynt and Brozo (2010) discuss further that the focus on these “new literacies” has recognized the diversity of texts and resounded the need for individuals to be engrossed with many multifaceted and diverse forms of texts and literacy learning beyond just the basic functional level.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has marked a significant shift in regard to literacy and what it means to be literate. Despite these changing conceptions, a noteworthy proportion of students still struggle in the area of literacy, specifically reading and writing printed texts, performing below the required standards identified as benchmarks for their age groups. Significant to this picture of educational underachievement today is the image of the male learner in particular. Various data sources highlight that boys as a group are underachieving and disengaged in comparison to girls, a phenomenon described often as the gender gap (San Vicente, 2011). Data collected in Canada through the Early Development Instrument in 2008 indicates that 21% of male students are considered vulnerable to academic underachievement, a percentage notably higher than their female classmates (Toronto District School Board, 2010). The Education Quality and Accountability Office assessment further indicates that in comparison to females a smaller percentage of males are performing at or above the provincial level at the primary and junior levels, while at the secondary level the number of students whose scores met

the expected standard was consistently higher for females than males (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2009).

San Vincente (2011) makes a crucial contribution to the discussions on male educational underachievement, asserting that these generalized data disaggregated by gender alone do not indicate which boys are failing, a question he believes is critical in providing a clearer picture of which boys are in need of additional academic support to succeed. This focus is important because some studies have further suggested that it is often boys from specific racial or ethnic groups that are most at risk of academic underachievement (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2000). Frank (2005) therefore suggests that a key antecedent to unraveling the issue of male academic achievement is race and ethnicity. There are concerns expressed by the educational community, however, surrounding the collection of racial information, and as such these kinds of demographics are not always collected. San Vincente (2011) explains that the Toronto District School Board stands out as the only school board in Canada which currently disaggregates data collected based on race. The data collected by this school board indicate that racialized students continue to be at the bottom of the hierarchy in relation to academic engagement and successful negotiation of school (San Vincente, 2011). The Toronto District School Board data highlight more specifically that students with a background that is Aboriginal, Black, Hispanic, Portuguese, or Middle Eastern have the lowest test scores, the lowest rate of credit accumulation, the highest dropout rates, the lowest rates of school attendance and the highest suspension rates, an achievement gap which notably has existed since the 1980s (Toronto District School Board, 2010).

In many instances, the picture painted of the achievement gap has featured young Black males in the foreground. Studies conducted in many Western countries, not only in Canada, place the young Black male in the spotlight largely because of the results of large-scale standardized tests. Such assessment results highlight further that amongst the male student population, Black males, particularly those with ties to the Caribbean, are one of the subgroups of males most at risk for academic failure in school (Department of Education and Skills, 2003; Fleischman, Hopstock, Pelczar, & Shelley, 2010; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; O'Reiley & Yan, 2009; Parekh, 1988).

Researchers such as Alloway (2007) maintain that despite the work of new literacy scholars and changing conceptions of literacy, the label of the “underachieving male” is typically derived from standardized tests on traditional literacy practices. Literacy competence is therefore often measured according to the practice of literacy as it is done and evaluated in schools. This however is representative of only one small set of literacy practices—always print-based, including answers that are either right or wrong, and often written by homogeneous groups of educators who have little awareness of other cultures and practices. As such, standardized measures of assessing literacy have often been critiqued as not culturally/linguistically relevant to diverse students because, as Alloway argues, boys may underachieve in these school-based literacies but not in other forms of socially valued and more desirable literate practices.

As an educator my personal epistemological stance leads me to believe firmly that literacy learning must be relevant to the self: to what is personally valued and considered desirable. There must be common ground between the literacy curriculum and the lived reality of the student. Learning is dynamic, and therefore at each stage of the

learning process the literacy teacher must be open and sensitive to what the learner brings to the learning context. L alas and Valle (2007) assert that in providing space in the classroom for what the learner brings to the learning context, school leaders can make valuable contributions to unpacking and approaching the challenge of diversity issues in the classroom and pave the road for more socially just classrooms where each learner feels valued as an individual. One way to begin this process is through knowledge, especially understandings of the many cultures (values, beliefs, ways of life, and habits) that pervade the classrooms of this globalized era. Educators must be open to students' stories and be mindful of how they can make the classroom more pertinent to the individual child by weaving learners' stories and experiences into different aspects of classroom life.

The beliefs which, as an educator, the researcher adheres to regarding teaching and learning are at the heart of the birthplace of this study—a study which seeks to explore the academic achievement of Caribbean male immigrants to Canada by telling their stories of integration into the Canadian education system. The research specifically sought ways to investigate possible links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of this group of learners. Information pertaining to these literacy practices was gained through an examination of the educational experiences of this subgroup of male immigrants to Canada.

As a racialized minority and person of Caribbean heritage, the picture of the Caribbean male as “at risk” was a bothersome one that captured my interests as a researcher, becoming the foci of my research initiative. The investigation of this issue is a potential means of adding to the limited body of knowledge specific to this subgroup of

males in regard to their academic achievement in the context of literacy. In addition to my rich Caribbean heritage, I also have significant experience working in the field of education as a teacher with specific expertise and training in the area of literacy; these experiences have sensitized me to the plight of many Caribbean males in education today. Personal reflections on this journey have allowed me to realize that all these elements of my life are in fact serving as a driving force behind this research initiative.

Students from the Caribbean add to the many faces of diversity which encompass the Canadian educational landscape today. Their identity as Caribbean nationals makes them unique, and this uniqueness must not be to their disadvantage but must become incorporated into the classroom so as to bridge the gap between themselves as individuals and what is done and taught in the classroom. According to Erickson (2001) culture, “is in us and all around us, just as is the air we breathe. It is personal, familial, communal, institutional, societal, and global in its scope and distribution” (p. 35). As Canadians and members of various racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups, culture is central to our identity formation, both as a group and as individuals. We all are cultural beings, and this cultural background influences our perception of the world, making up a significant part of who we are (Egbo, 2009). An understanding of culture is thus critical to unraveling the phenomenon of cultural diversity as it exists in society today, as it presents many implications for the success of racialized and minoritized groups within the educational system.

### **Background of the Problem**

Research into Black underachievement is not a new phenomenon and can be traced back to the 1960s in the form of major studies done by the Inner London

Education Authority (Little, 1978). The traditional approaches to studying young Black males in regard to literacy scholarship relied heavily on deficit theories to explain why some Black males did not engage with literacy in school (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2005; Young, 2007). Nehaul (1996) and Ogbu (1978), in their descriptions of this deficit model, note that it was felt that Black children were disabled by a culture that was inferior, lower intelligence, and behavioural problems which made them more devious, ill-tempered, unruly, fidgety, and destructive than other students.

In the 1970s and 1980s, racism and the racism orientations of many teachers helped further the narrow focus of theories on class and language (Nehaul, 1996). Paul (2004) notes that in today's popular culture the focus in terms of rationalizing why the problem of Black underachievement still exists has once again shifted from the school and racist teachers and points back to the child, pinning children's adherence to what he cites as an "anti-school, anti-education" counter-culture as the breeding ground for underachievement amongst Black youth today (p. 130). Paul expounds that the research on Black underachievement, although well documented, is problematic in that the explanations posited for the issue are reductive and fail to adequately explain the reasons for the underperformance of Black children. Paul claims further that the wealth of research on Black underachievement is not matched by research into Black achievement. The focus of research of the past is the backdrop against which much of the misunderstanding surrounding Black achievement was construed. This study seeks to add a new dimension to the limited body of research into Black achievement. Through the provision of a fresh perspective on the phenomenon, deeper insights into the issue can be garnered. These insights can change the way achievement amongst Black males is

conceived in the future, creating a new discourse that focuses on a strength-based/achievement model.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Underachievement as described by Bentley (1998) is often represented by low scores on international standardized assessments and further by its social consequences inclusive of criminal behaviour, social exclusion, and unsuccessful relationships and marriages. Data from international comparisons demonstrates that a relationship exists between the achievement of a nation's citizenry and its economic stance (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005). The social benefits of achievement include reductions in crime rate, improved health, increases in acts of charity, and enhanced participation in civic life (Wolfe & Zuvekas, 1997).

Smith (2010) notes that the emergence of international comparative tests allows nations to critically examine and compare the achievement of their students, leading to the reassessment of education systems in light of perceived failing as presented through such examinations. The increased reliance on these measures as a major marker of school success, Smith asserts however, has been a factor in relation to why certain segments of the school population are labeled as underachieving. Provincial and national assessments in Canada as well as international assessment results establish a distinct pattern of significant gender differences in reading performance favouring females (Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010). One example of this global issue is depicted through the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) of which Canada is a member. Knighton et al. (2010) establish that the results of the 2009 Programme for

International Student Assessment show that Canadian females outperformed Canadian males in reading literacy by 34 points, a gap similar to the average gap of 33 points amidst the entire group of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. These statistics are significant as 65 countries and economies participated in PISA 2009, inclusive of all 33 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries with between 5,000 and 10,000 students aged 15 from at least 150 schools typically tested in each country (Knighton et al., 2010). PISA is conducted every 3 years, and in the previous cycle of 2006 Watson, Kehler, and Martino (2010) note similar statistics which showed that girls outperformed boys in the area of reading in each Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development country.

Assessment results such as those conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment show that the underachievement of boys is a very real problem today. It has been at the heart of the cry that the popular press in countries such as the United States has put forth that there exists a “boy crisis” in education today (Husain & Millimet, 2009). Husain and Millimet (2009) suggest that the evidence proffered as supporting the notion of such a crisis centres around average test scores in reading and writing, as well as other measures such as prevalence of learning disabilities, grade repetition, and college enrollment statistics. Some purport that innate biological determinants are at the heart of the male crisis, noting that boys’ brains develop differently to girls, amidst other biological aptitudes and genetic predispositions resulting in late maturity and poorer verbal reasoning skills (Okopny, 2008). Okopny (2008) states further that other researchers see the root of the crisis as being grounded in the feminization of the education system via the preferential treatment of girls and the

feminization of education materials. On the contrary, however, Kimmel (2006) explains that boys' struggles may be attributed to socialized ideas of masculinity as opposed to the feminized classroom. Okopny (2008) further adds that it is less socially acceptable for a boy to do well in "female" subjects like English, thus making a point of explaining their lack of enthusiasm for these subjects. In fact, Okopny (2008) purports that blaming "feminized" materials or classrooms distracts from inequities in standardized test scores, preordained career paths, and socially constructed gender roles.

Researchers such as Husain and Millimet (2009) and Okopny (2008) question the validity of the "boy crisis," viewing this crisis as more myth than fact. Matthews (2006) states that we need to shift the paradigm from thinking of girls and boys as in an academic competition and develop more holistic ways of looking at girls' and boys' successes, moving beyond gender categorization. Okopny notes that it is irresponsible for boy crisis proponents to categorize all boys as a monolithic group as opposed to recognizing the fluidity of gender and sex. Okopny notes further that boy crisis proponents tend to cover up the real issue that low income boys of colour are struggling when compared with their nonminority middle class peers. Variances in boys' experiences, such as race or class for instance, do not come into the picture for those who look at the boy crisis as a plight for all boys (Kimmel, 2006).

Many researchers claim that academic underachievement is central to only specific groups of males. Strand (2010), for instance, cites empirical evidence which highlights that in the United Kingdom the performance of Black Caribbean, Black African, Black other, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi groups is below that of their peers. Strand further highlights a study following 530,000 students in England over a 4 year

period (2000–2004) which specifically revealed that Black Caribbean boys made significantly less progress over the time span studied compared with their White British peers. African Caribbean children are highlighted in numerous studies as one of the lowest achieving minority groups in the United Kingdom and are one of the highest ethnic groups of children excluded from school (Department of Education and Skills, 2003; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Parekh, 1988).

Similarly in the United States, Strickland and Alvermann (2004) note that despite efforts by educators during the past several decades, achievement gaps between certain groups of students continue to persist. Strickland and Alvermann cite studies done by the National Assessment of Education Progress which show that gaps between students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds continue to be an area of major concern. Fleischman et al. (2010) cite assessment results from PISA showing that on the combined reading literacy scale, White (non-Hispanic) and Asian (non-Hispanic) students had higher average scores (525 and 541 respectively) than the overall OECD and U.S. average scores, while Black (non-Hispanic) and Hispanic students had lower average scores (441 and 466 respectively) than the overall OECD and U.S. average scores. The picture is no different in Canada, as research coordinated by O'Reilly and Yan (2009) based on assessment done by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) highlights. The 2008 EQAO assessment revealed that in reading and writing there was a distinct discrepancy between the performances of students of different racial backgrounds (O'Reilly & Yan, 2009). The three groups cited as experiencing the most challenges in the EQAO assessment were Black, Latin American, and Middle Eastern students. Of the Black students, 43% of the students at grade 3 achieved a level 3 or 4

(the required standard for their age and grade) whilst 47% of Black students at the grade 6 level achieved this benchmark. Among Black students the EQAO report specifies that those from the Caribbean scored 6 to 14 percentage points lower than their Black peers of different cultural heritage (O'Reilly & Yan, 2009).

Statistics such as those highlighted above indicate that the issue of academic achievement as it exists amongst Caribbean males today still constitutes a major problem in educational circles. It is therefore worthy of attention by the research community. Although there is a growing body of research in this field, there are still questions which need to be answered in regard to this issue. Targeting the Caribbean male will provide insight into why this particular subgroup of males is continuously labeled as underachievers. In addition, it will add to the limited research available specific to the Caribbean male as it relates to their achievement in the area of literacy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative inquiry focuses specifically on describing possible links which may exist between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities among students of Caribbean heritage within the Canadian educational framework. The underlying purpose of this study, however, was to shed light on the phenomenon of achievement amongst the Black Caribbean male student. It seeks to give voice to this group of marginalized students by allowing the participants to share of their lived experiences as immigrants in Canada. These insights into such experiences provide fresh perspective on the phenomenon under study as data are sourced directly from participants who belong to this segment of the population. The results of this study help to counter existing (and often negative) perceptions of the Caribbean male student as an

underachiever. The study is timely given present-day circumstances in modern society where ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity is ever increasing and thus impacting education.

This study seeks to add to the research available on the topic of Black achievement in literacy by exploring links between literacy engagement and sociocultural identity for a specific subgroup of Black males. Kirkland (2011) explains that there are relatively few publications that show how an instructional approach that links literacy and life might work and even fewer publications that examine when and why such linkages might work with specific youth, particularly young Black men. It is hoped that this study can begin to address this shortage via its focus on ways in which Caribbean learners can be engaged in the literacy classroom by establishing links to their identity as persons of Caribbean heritage and their ideologies of reading. Further, this study is potentially one avenue through which we can learn about Caribbean students of colour in the classroom and help begin to eliminate the achievement gap as it exists through the power of knowledge.

### **Research Questions**

This research will seek to answer three questions pertaining to the experiences of the Caribbean male in literacy in the Canadian context:

1. What ideologies of reading do Caribbean males possess, and how do these ideologies connect to their literacy practices?
2. How do Caribbean males see themselves (interests, needs, and identities) as Black learners reflected in the Canadian educational system?

3. What literacy practices are socially valued and considered more desirable by the Caribbean male?

### **Rationale**

Froese-Germain (2006) purports that the debate on boys' underachievement needs to be broadened to give careful consideration to which boys are not doing well as opposed to assuming that all boys are having difficulty. Research literature often highlights that the Caribbean male is one of the racial and ethnic groups most at risk for academic failure. The proposed study focuses on the Caribbean male in an effort to counteract such existing notions of the Caribbean male as an underachiever. The current research is of significant personal interest given my own Caribbean cultural heritage and also because of my work as a teacher over the past 16 years with males within the Caribbean educational system. These experiences have heightened my interest as a researcher in this field through firsthand witness of issues surrounding academic achievement in the Caribbean itself. These issues contribute to high dropout rates amongst adolescent boys and other ill effects which ultimately pose threats not only to the individual themselves but to society by extension.

Research suggests a differential of academic achievement between Caribbean males and their peers of the dominant class. The profusion of research found on the theme of academic achievement among males focuses in the main on males as a homogenous group. The research focus found to be closest to the idea of issues surrounding the Caribbean male pertains to the achievement of Black males in general. This study is of significant value to the world of research and practice as it investigates the phenomenon from the perspective of the Caribbean male immigrant and therefore

offers a context-specific perspective on the phenomenon. It is essential that studies such as these be undertaken to contribute to research gaps in the field and to address the needs of Caribbean males in the classroom.

It is also important that any research that seeks to delve into this issue be of a nature that allows the participants to feel free to voice their experiences and opinions in an open, unrestricted, and honest environment. This research endeavored to do this through the use of a qualitative study with an interview design. Qualitative methods allow for the incorporation of underrepresented groups' perspectives and voices in research (Freeman, 1993; Tierney, 1993). The voices of such marginalized, underrepresented groups Kaplan (1999) asserts have been absent from educational debate about their experiences and achievement. The situated nature of qualitative designs further allows for the researcher to be located within the real world context of the participants and thus enabled to make their world more visible in the research context (Mertens, 2010). In choosing to implement a qualitative design, these positive benefits were at the heart of my decision.

In an attempt to answer the research questions highlighted above, data will be collected via two forms of qualitative interviewing: individual interviews and focus group discussions. These two methods of data collection incorporate the use of semistructured, open-ended questions. These methods of data collection are important as they allow for the discussion to be directed by the participants' experiences, allowing more flexibility in the interview and discussion process. It also allows for their voice to be heard as opposed to the researcher's. It was important to me that their voices be heard so as to ensure that the data collected were truly representative of the authentic thoughts,

feelings, and emotions of the participants. Lalas and Valle (2007) note that the voices of students must be listened to so that social awareness can be increased to give schools the chance to focus their policy, curriculum, and instruction to meet the needs of students and improve the schooling experience. Through the recollection of their schooling experiences the participants provide the opportunity for others to learn more about this segment of the school population and use this knowledge to create the changes needed to increase the academic achievement of other youth such as themselves. The inclusion of all voices is indeed an important aspect of change in education (Cooper & White, 2008).

This research is of inherent value to several levels of beneficiaries. First, for the researcher and wider educational community the research findings provide a timely and context-specific insight into the role of Caribbean identity as an influence on literacy practice. Second, the research highlights how Caribbean learners see themselves reflected in the Canadian educational community. This allows Caribbean youth and the wider Caribbean community to benefit from the findings, as the research provides an avenue through which the needs and perspectives of Caribbean students could not only be voiced but more greatly understood and catered to in the learning context. Thirdly, for the research community it is anticipated that the conduct of this research will not just add to the existing body of research but will also provide a compass to future research in the field of academic achievement amongst Caribbean males.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed within a critical ideological perspective. Morrow and Brown (1994) note that critical theory was first developed by the Frankfurt school in the 1920s. Siegel and Fernandez (2002) explain that the critical theory perspective seeks to connect

institutions, daily life, and the forces which shape larger society. Critical theory forms a salient backdrop against which this study can be framed. Critical theory perspectives align well with the intent of this research initiative that seeks to understand the relationship existing between the identity of Black Caribbean males and literacy achievement. The critique of positivism and the embracing of life and societal issues as connected with education are underpinnings which connect well with my own philosophy surrounding teaching and learning as I see education as dynamic. The classroom should not be seen as separate from life outside of it and the everyday lives of students. Children do not leave their daily lives hanging outside in the lockers when they enter the classroom. They enter the classroom with cultural and social resources which allow them to offer unique perspectives on varying aspects of daily life. These resources must be utilized in the classroom as building blocks upon which new learning opportunities are constructed. One of the greatest proponents of critical theory, Freire (1970) expounds that teachers who engage in critical views of education do not view their students as empty vessels needing to be filled; instead they create experiences that offer students the opportunity to actively construct knowledge.

Critical theorists recognize and value the interrelations that exist between education, society, and the individual. The more teachers embrace these interrelations, the greater the chances will be for the universal success of students in our classrooms. It is my hope that in embracing a critical theory framework the reader will become more sensitive to the overlap which exists between students' lives and instruction in the classroom. Being aware of this overlap can foster bridge-building between students'

identity as Caribbean nationals and literacy practices in the classroom and contribute to improved academic engagement and performance.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited in its scope as I have narrowed my demographic and geographic pool to examine the educational experiences of only male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. As such, there are implications which should be considered in future investigations. The size of the study group used was small and specific to only one subgroup of male immigrants to Canada. The sample size is too small to allow for generalizations and transfer of the study results across the broad spectrum of the Caribbean male population. Likewise the sample being specific to Caribbean male immigrants has implications on the generalizability and transferability of results across the entire group of male learners classed as underachievers.

The study examined the participants' discursive identities as narrated through their own lenses; this was a limitation in that I did not get the opportunity to actually observe the participants firsthand within the learning context. Observation of the participants in their learning environments would have added to the scope of the study as what we say or recall as individuals may bear differences to the actual event or circumstance as it occurred.

Further, the study was delimited by the time of the investigation. The limited time permitted only a cross-sectional investigation as opposed to a longitudinal investigation of the research issue. A longitudinal study would have allowed for building more extensive relationships with the participants and a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. Participants were interviewed once individually and once

subsequently as a group. Multiple interviews over a lengthened time frame, each building on the data collected earlier, would have allowed for greater probing into the issue at hand.

To fully understand this research issue, more extensive qualitative studies that focus on the central phenomenon need to be conducted so as to facilitate theorizing across the spectrum of Caribbean males and other groups of males viewed as underachievers. Despite these limitations, I am confident that the data collected are sufficiently substantial to provide great insight into the issue being investigated and a strong foundation upon which future research can be built.

### **Outline of the Document**

This report is organized into five chapters. In this chapter, Chapter One, I began by providing an introduction to the document. Insights into the problem being investigated along with its background were explored. In addition, the purpose of the study and rationale behind its conceptualization were discussed, all guided by the three research questions highlighted. The theoretical framework underpinning the study was also visited so as to provide a backdrop against which others could begin to conceptualize this work in comparison with other work adhering to the same framework.

Chapter Two provides a thorough review of extant literature pertaining to the issue at hand. The literature shows how this study has been built on existing knowledge in the field of education. It specifically explores the issue of Black males and academic achievement, literacy, and culture making connections to culturally relevant pedagogy. New conceptions of literacy studies are explored, home and school literacies, cultural

capital, and schooling experiences and classroom pedagogy are examined, and the implications in today's classroom.

Chapter Three gives insight into the research traditions within which this research is framed. It highlights the intricacies of the data collection phase and the considerations taken in ensuring the protection of the participants and the data collected. An overview of the research methodology inclusive of the research design, research site, participants, data collection methods and means of recording the data, and data processing and analysis as done through thematic analysis. The limitations of the study and the establishment of credibility and ethical considerations are also explored in this chapter.

Chapter Four presents and analyzes key research findings, while Chapter Five delves into the final summary of the research process and presents further discussion of the results as presented in Chapter Four. The implications of findings for practice, theory, and further research surrounding the issue at hand are explored here. Finally words of conclusion are made to end the document.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study hopes to shed light on the issue of achievement amongst male Caribbean students through its focus on the role of identity in the literacy achievement of Caribbean males. It seeks to establish links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of male students of Caribbean heritage within the Canadian educational framework. The research initiative through this focus intends to “disrupt the discourse on male Caribbean students” and challenge existing notions of “deficiency” based largely on hierarchal models of assessment that are perhaps culturally inapt.

Hood (2005) expresses the view that the academic achievement of boys has persistently been a worrisome issue for educators. This view is supported by Froese-Germain (2006) who argues that every release of major test results in Canada and by extension the Western world is accompanied by anxiety over the failure of boys in terms of academic achievement in comparison to girls. The National Assessment of Education Progress (2009) establishes further that female students consistently score higher than boys in both reading and writing. This is a trend which Watson et al. (2010) concur is likewise supported by the results of assessment done by the Programme for International Student Assessment, which shows girls as outperforming boys in each Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development country. Universal evidence, Rowe (2000) therefore expounds, indicates that on average boys’ achievement is significantly lower than girls’ in all areas of the cognitive curriculum assessed throughout elementary school and high school. As a result it is suggested by Sadowski (2010) that the universal nature of the issue of male underachievement is thus at the heart of the reason why these gender gaps have garnered the attention of journalists, education policy makers, and scholars in

the field of education today across the world. This interest continues to linger because, as Whitmire (2010) argues, boys' literacy deficits put them at a disadvantage not just in the area of English Language Arts but across the curriculum.

The widening achievement gap between boys and girls has been at the backdrop of worldwide education agendas to raise standards to counteract the ill effects it poses. Despite a broad range of research focusing on the problem and possible interventions to raise the achievement level of boys, the achievement gap persists. The emphasis has been on improving conditions for all males in schools through a focus on addressing factors such as the biology of the male (more specifically how boys' brains develop in comparison to girls brains and its effects on their engagement in the classroom), provision of a more male-focused curriculum, and increasing the number of male mentors in the classroom. This has been challenged by Martino (2008) and Froese-Germain (2006) who argue that male underachievement should not be looked at so generally as a crisis needing to be addressed for all males but should be examined more as an issue that is central to only a fraction of the male population.

A similar view expressed by Gurian (2002) is that many boys are successful at school. This idea is supported by Martino (2008) who suggests that in addition to asking questions such as why boys fail in literacy achievement, one must entertain the question of which boys are failing. Froese-Germain (2006) further concurs with this focus by suggesting that educators need to carefully consider which boys are not doing well as opposed to assuming that all boys are encountering difficulties. This idea has been extended by Frank (2005) who argues that boys are being treated as if they are all the

same. Frank proposes that issues surrounding boys' underachievement are complex, and as such the analysis thus far surrounding the phenomenon is far too simplistic.

The views outlined above which question the means through which the achievement gap is viewed and understood are central to the focus of this study. This study sought to add new dimensions to present research scope surrounding male achievement. The issues of ethnic, cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity are brought to the foreground of discussions surrounding male achievement gaps. The exploration looks at achievement gaps as not merely a male issue but more a sociocultural one. A more complex analysis of the factors which influence the achievement of Caribbean male immigrants to Canada is offered by the connections between achievement and identity established in this research initiative. The exploration of literature which follows explores the connection between pedagogy and schooling practices and its implications for the experiences of diverse youth. The interplay between literacy achievement and cultural identity is established, and insight is offered into how divides which exist between the home, community, and school culture create a potential for achievement gaps among diverse students in the classroom.

### **Black Males and Academic Achievement**

The national and international assessment results of students from the Caribbean, Central America, South America, and Eastern Africa cause them to be labeled among the group of boys most at risk of academic underachievement (O'Reilly & Yan, 2009; Strand, 2010; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). Further and more specifically, children of African Caribbean origin based on the results of large scale standardized tests worldwide are portrayed as one of the lowest achieving minority ethnic groups (Department of

Education and Skills, 2003; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Parekh, 1988). Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, and Walters (2010) cite empirical research specific to Canada which indicates that immigrant and visible minority youth tend to have a more difficult time academically at school. In further exploring student level data provided by the External Review Committee of the Toronto District School Board, Anisef et al. found a consistent pattern which revealed that in terms of sociodemographics and school-related characteristics, Caribbean immigrants were seen as being in the most disadvantaged positions academically in comparison to their peers at school. The results of data analysis conducted by Anisef et al. demonstrated that Caribbean immigrants were least likely to be in the academic track (39%); exhibited the highest drop-out rates (40%); and were most likely to be labeled at risk (33%) by educators.

In the past, researchers have made many attempts to try to understand issues surrounding the academic performance of Black males as a whole, especially in the area of literacy. Traditional approaches to the study of Black males in literacy scholarship tended to rely heavily on deficit theories to explain why some Black males do not read at school (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2005; Young, 2007). This has been challenged by Barakett and Cleghorn (2008) who argue that while it is a fact that not all people are able to achieve well in school, no scientific evidence exists to prove that some persons are more intelligent than others based on their social class, race, ethnicity, or gender. James (2003) takes the stance, however, that in many Western societies, many subordinate groups are believed to be intellectually, physically, and culturally inferior. Many authors such as James are therefore still of the view that deficit theories are being utilized to explain why Caribbean students are not excelling at school and why they are

overrepresented as academic failures. Demie (2001) emphasizes however that “ethnic heritage does not presuppose underachievement” (p. 1). According to Ogbu (1991) and Slavin (1991) there is no biological or genetic reason why some groups should be overrepresented among those who either succeed or fail in school. Although genetics can impact the academic performance of human beings, bodies of current knowledge clearly show that factors which affect academic performance are better explained by cultural difference and by structural inequalities that disadvantage students from poor and minority backgrounds (Egbo, 2009). Likewise, Demie draws attention to a number of factors that may be responsible for the underachievement of ethnic minority groups, including levels of English language acquisition, poverty, and social class. These factors among others are predominantly presented in the research literature as critical to gaining insight into the plight of the underachieving males of the ethnic groups highlighted as most at risk of underachievement.

Socioeconomic status is often examined as one of the chief factors attributing to the failure of males of ethnic minority. Mead (2006) highlights that when racial and economic gaps are combined with gender achievement gaps in literacy, the result is often alarmingly low achievement for poor Black and Hispanic boys. A similar view is held by Strand (2010) who proposes that any examination of ethnic gaps in educational achievement must take into account the substantial overlap between ethnicity and poverty, noting that socioeconomic disadvantage may present a direct influence on children’s development and their subsequent achievement at school.

Among the many factors discussed as underlying achievement amongst Caribbean males, Haynes, Tikly, and Caballero (2006) put forward the perspective that

the underachievement of Caribbean pupils needs to be understood not only in terms of socioeconomic disadvantage but rather in the way that this factor works with gendered perceptions and expectations of teachers along with peer pressure to create challenging circumstances for children. This stance is built upon by Gillborn (1988) who refers to a level of complexity in the Caribbean students' adaptation to school. Gillborn suggests that in comparison with their peers of White and Asian ethnic origins, Caribbean students typically experience greater amounts of criticism and conflicts in their relationship with their teachers. Crozier (2005) agrees with this notion based on the results of a study of 25 parents of a total of 55 Black Caribbean children and White/Black Caribbean children in the United Kingdom. The parents in this study were interviewed both as a group and individually, and data collected revealed a pattern of cumulative negative experiences in school contributing to academic underachievement and academic disengagement. The parents reported that teachers viewed Black students negatively and exerted a disproportionate amount of control and criticism on Black students, potentially "breaking their spirits as learners" (p. 589). Crozier emphasized that what the participants have argued is that

the downward spiral of underachievement does not start with the child himself/herself but that it is a pathological view of the Black or in this case African-Caribbean child, that is so embedded within the school institution that it conspires against his/her success. (p. 596)

An alternative view to consider when investigating achievement levels amongst Caribbean males is the heavy reliance on accumulated data, namely standardized testing, as a measure of student achievement. Researchers such as Steele (1997) and Steele and

Aronson (1995) concur with this view as they believe that while many of the structural issues discussed earlier in this section may affect student achievement, they also view issues relating to standardized tests such as stereotyped tests and culturally biased questions that require specific upper middle class, White cultural knowledge as having an effect on the test scores of minority students. One view expressed by Houchen (2012) is that two elements of historical literacy theory that continue to marginalize students today are the interpretation of achievement levels through the discrete categories of cognition presented in standardized tests and the hierarchical rankings that are produced as a result. Although progressive educators may be inclined to discount evidence obtained by means of standardized tests, their use persists because they offer administrators and legislators seemingly clear-cut answers (Kritt, 2004). Therefore Shepard and Smith (1988) assert that despite a broad base of critique surrounding their use, standardized tests are common within education. Several researchers even hold firmly to the ideal that reducing test score gaps will increase student achievement and put an end to public criticisms of the use of standardized tests (Gose & Selingo, 2001).

The use of standardized tests as a measure of achievement has been challenged further by Bagnato and Neisworth (1994). Bagnato and Neisworth draw attention to the notion that despite the usefulness of standardized tests as a common measure and means of comparison, the tests provide little insight into the specifics surrounding what the individual child can actually do. Standardized tests therefore fail to uncover and address the specific factors, literacies, and reading strengths and weaknesses that each individual student possesses (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009).

Alternatively, Irvine (2009) explains that educators have looked to theories from psychologists such as Erikson, Kohlberg, Sternber, and Gardner for guidance in how teaching and learning occurs in the classroom and possible explanations for why underachievement is still a reality for so many students. Despite a broad base of research that is central to this issue and interventions that promise to raise the achievement levels of all students, the achievement gap between students of different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds still persists (Ceci & Konstantopoulos, 2009). Like Bourdieu (1989), I question if the ways in which we understand and respond to diversity within the classroom is responsible for the unequal achievement levels between diverse groups. Bourdieu takes the stance that “to change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced” (p. 23). We live in a society that is increasingly diverse: ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically. These new times and contexts Luke (2004) suggests require a teacher capable of incorporating the local and the global into the classroom encounter so as to facilitate students’ engagement with broad expanses of knowledge across contexts which are characteristic of this moment in time.

### **Literacy and Culture: New Conceptions of Literacy**

Literacy according to Lankshear and Knobel (2006) is centre stage in education policy, curriculum development, and educational practice worldwide. In a review of the work of literacy scholars, Newman (2006) describes definitions and approaches to literacy as existing on a continuum. On this continuum, Newman sees literacy focusing on discrete skills on one end versus holistic skills on the other, formal instruction versus informal learning, classroom contexts versus home and community contexts. Definitions

of literacy, Vasudevan and Wissman (2011) expound however, must be informed by sociocultural lenses which explore literacy as “social, multiple and imbued with the political, cultural and historical meanings of particular contexts” (p. 97). These contexts must be navigated by the lives of the students themselves: their lived realities and the cultural repertoires which make them who they are and govern their daily lives.

Gee (1996), a sociocultural literacy theorist, proposes that literacy is bounded in social practices and can be truly understood only when situated within social, cultural, and historical contexts as it is connected to social, institutional, and cultural aspects of life. It is suggested by Gallego (2000) that critical, personal, and community literacies all impact an individual’s understanding of texts and the world. This understanding of literacy as social, Luke (2004) proposes, must be advanced in the teaching and learning contexts as it is a viable response to the ever-increasing diversity of contemporary classrooms.

Globalization has resulted in new cultural, technological, and economic conditions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). These changes occurring over the past 20 years have given birth to what Morrell (2008) refers to as a revolution of the sociocultural framework of New Literacy Studies which seek to expand the prevailing conceptions of literacy that forms the basis of much classroom instruction. The concept of New Literacy Studies as proposed by researchers such as Gee (1991) and Street (1996) represent new traditions surrounding the nature of literacy, one which focuses on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice as opposed to focusing on the acquisition of skills as in dominant approaches. Street (1984) describes New Literacy Studies as a theory that takes

nothing for granted as it relates to literacy and social practice, thereby problematizing what counts as literacy at any given time and space.

Contemporary researchers view literacy as consisting of many literacies in many forms within varying social contexts and under varying conditions, inclusive of new technologies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2005; Strickland & Townsend, 2011). Thus, the nature of literacy continuously evolves and the fluid definition challenges the traditional notions of reading and writing to include what the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) describes as literacies that comprise three elements—the text, the activity, and the reader who is influenced by a wider sociocultural context. This sociocultural context influences how the learner interprets and transmits information within the classroom, home, and community to create personal meaning.

Kress (1997) and Wohlwend (2009) stress that literacy research depicts children's interaction with texts no matter the form as semiotic, multimodal, and social. This is because children draw on their everyday discourse to navigate their ways into academic discussions (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). This view is extended by Heath (1994) who suggests that literacy is deeply rooted in culture. Gallagher (2007) expounds therefore that to study literacy is to study culture. Purcell-Gates, Melzi, Najafi, and Orellana (2011) describe culture as patterned ways of organizing daily life, embedded in the practices of communities and dynamic as they shift over time to respond to changing conditions. Kumar and Maehr (2010) explain that a student's cultural group is of great significance as it impacts their thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviours, helping them to locate themselves in relation to other cultural groups within a pluralistic society. In pluralistic societies such as Canada, the academic and social culture of the school must

be modified so as to assist teachers in meeting the challenges of cultural diversity, ensuring that all students are able to adapt well to school (Kumar & Maehr, 2010).

McLean (2011) asserts that each social context has distinct and embedded cultural resources (social networks, psychological and cultural models) that are represented within its literacy practices, that is through texts, discourses, values, and ideologies. Kirkland (2011) explains that it would be helpful for educators to think of literacy as an extension of the self. If language arts classrooms adopt this philosophy, the learning experiences of the Caribbean student can potentially be transformed, as cultural resources would be appreciated and acknowledged within the classroom environment. Kirkland explains that for Black male students, the practice of reading is rarely about reading alone but rather it is about who they are, what they believe, and how they want others to view them. Critical to the examination of literacy achievement amongst Caribbean male students is the consideration of the links between students' identities, ideologies of reading, and actual literacy practices within the classroom.

Kirkland (2011) takes the stance that reading for Black males is an ideological act and that the teaching of reading for Black males should be in accordance with their ideologies of reading. Ball and Freedman (2004) view ideology as relating to an individual's present interests and past experiences. Kirkland summarizes the term ideology similarly as the system of beliefs that shape an individual's interests, expectations, and actions. It is important that all learners are empowered in the learning environment and that school literacies connect with youth's everyday literacy practices. Literacy that is incorporated into classrooms as a situated social practice establishes links to everyday life (Street, 1984). New literacies include all activities both in and out of

school as Gee (1999, 2008, 2011) argues, it showcases the relationship between people's literacy practices, their actions, behaviours, beliefs, values, and discourses. New Literacy Studies therefore take into account the diverse nature of today's classroom and purport that the classroom should be a place that recognizes and appreciates diversity.

Diversity is a major issue in contemporary classrooms, as Naqin, Mckeough, Thorne, and Pfitshcer (2012) explain that in Europe the population that speaks a language other than the dominant language of the country has increased by approximately 20%. Similarly in North America, the population that does not speak the dominant language has increased by 20% in the USA (Census 2000 Brief, 2003) and 11% in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007). Further, 22% of children less than 6 years old are born to immigrant families in North America, and Canadian youth represent approximately 17% of the immigrant population (Statistics Canada, 2001). This increase in racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity is significant. Perhaps, given that nearly 87% of all teachers are White females and one out of every three students enrolled in elementary or secondary school is of a racial or ethnic minority, a "cultural divide" exists within schools (Sleeter, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

This cultural divide Griner (2012) claims can lead to a lack of connection between schools and the community students reside in. A lack of connection between schools and community can potentially overwhelm the educational community, leading to what is described by Anton (1999) as devastating learning experiences for students of diverse backgrounds. Griner explains further that many racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students struggle to make the same connections to learning in comparison to their peers of the dominant culture group, impeding positive learning

outcomes for such students. This disconnect between the cultures of racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and the educational institution helps highlight a fundamental issue impacting achievement gaps in education today (Griner, 2012).

Although the diverse nature of contemporary classrooms may present challenges, it also represents a unique potential for exposure to knowledge and literacies that are well suited for the demands of this new era (Enright, 2011). It is the responsibility of schools however, as argued by Luke (2004), to keep abreast with the changing face of the classroom by embracing the social fields of teaching. Contemporary teachers must recognize that literacies are always connected to social identities and to being particular kinds of people (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Gee (1999) takes a similar stance, suggesting that literacy is always embedded in discourses which he distinguishes by a capital D and a common d. Discourse with a capital D refers to our ways of being in the world which integrates identities, and discourse with a common d refers to the language bits or language uses of Discourses (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

### **Home–School Literacies**

Wohlwend (2009) discusses that within the past decade New Literacy Studies documents a wide array of multimodal ways of reading and writing with dynamic technologies. This is supported by Elliott and Woloshyn (2013) who explain further that the meaning of the term text has thus shifted to include not only the printed word but also digital texts that are visual, multimodal, and dynamic. These changing conceptions regarding texts have revolutionized traditions surrounding the idea of literacy and what it means to be literate in today's society. Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland, and Reid (2002)

suggest however that there exist disconnects between the broad range of multimodal texts used in the home and those of school literacy texts. Lapp, Moss and Rowsell (2012) concur that schools continue to privilege traditional texts, beliefs, and forms of reading and writing despite the evolution of theories of literacies in the wider world.

It has been argued by Purcell-Gates (1989, 2000) that whatever children learn about print before starting formal education is shaped by literacy traditions within their communities as well as the demands of their everyday lives. Children then take this knowledge with them as they begin formal instruction in educational settings (Purcell-Gates et al., 2011). Moll et al. (1992) also emphasize that those who work in the field of education must be culturally responsive, actively learning about the family and community literacy practices of children enrolled in their classrooms. In reference to children of colour, Gay (2010) acknowledges that such children come to school already having mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing. Gay further suggests that if teachers were to use this knowledge as a scaffold, building on the students' capabilities, academic success could result.

In their review of research surrounding bridging gaps between students' in-school literacy practices and out-of-school literacies, Hull and Schultz (2001) asked the question, "How might out of school identities, social practices and the literacies that they recruit be leveraged in the classroom?" (p. 603). Incorporating students' varied social and community literacy practices into school literacies is a challenge for many educators. Therefore there is often a mismatch existing between in-school and out-of-school literacies highlighted by Vasudevan and Wissman (2011) who argue that

many students have school histories that reflect low test scores, placements in remedial classes and labels such as ‘reluctant readers’, ‘below grade level’, and ‘at risk’; however ethnographic research provides contrasting images of these very same young people successfully navigating a range of sign systems, including print, outside of school. (p. 99)

Today’s youth, irrespective of race or gender, Alvermann and Marshall (2008) and Mahiri (2004) discuss are active readers and writers. Kirkland (2011) argues therefore that it is not youth that are failing to engage texts but that many of the texts used in schools are failing to engage youth. The range of texts youth engage with outside of school are multiple and varied. These texts Elliott and Woloshyn (2013) explain often incorporate information and communication technologies such as MSN, Twitter, Facebook, email, and blogs. These various kinds of texts students interact with on a daily basis are cultural in nature and aid in the development of their identities, beliefs, values, and worldviews (Luke, 2000).

Learning is an active and socially mediated experience (Egbo, 2009). This idea is in line with the views of Vygotsky (1978) who stressed that the construction of our knowledge should be linked to our interactions with the world around us. He stated further that in order for knowledge to be meaningful it must be relevant to the experiences and meaning making systems of the learner. Thus it is incumbent on schools to identify and nurture various levels and kinds of talent among children based on the resources they bring to the learning context. Connections must be established between home, community, and school literacy practices as Hinchey (2010) explains that

children's particular cultural background has more to do with how they fare in schools than does their ability

### **Cultural Capital and Schooling Experiences**

The theory of cultural reproduction proposed by Bourdieu (1977) emphasizes how schools can use culture as a means of reproducing certain social inequalities existing in society (Egbo, 2009). Sullivan (2001) describes cultural capital as familiarity with the dominant culture of a society. Relatedly, Pahl (2002) uses the term *habitus* to refer to an individual's worldview: their dispositions, aspirations, values, and home/community rituals. Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital has been operationalized by many subsequent researchers (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). The most dominant interpretation of the term cultural capital is connected to the thinking of DiMaggio, who defines the term as "elite status cultures" (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Cultural capital is summarized similarly by Lamont and Lareau (1988) who view it as that which enables certain individuals with knowledge of high status cultural signals inclusive of attitudes, preferences, knowledge, behaviours, goods, and credentials.

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction assists educators in reflecting and asking questions pertaining to who holds the reins of power in society and how they use that power to maintain the status quo. Cultural capital and *habitus* demonstrate ways in which particular outcomes are produced for students when societal structures and opportunities work together with individuals' aspirations and choice. The theory of cultural reproduction Hill (2010) describes as a useful one in providing insights into the cultural divide existing between homes, schools, and community. Hill takes the stance that schools regularly view the *habitus* and cultural capital of the dominant group as

coming naturally to all students and so inadvertently treat all children as if they had equal access to the same worldview. Walpole et al. (2005) argue that when the culture of the dominant group is given more significance, schools inadvertently reward students from dominant cultural backgrounds and leave those students with nondominant cultural backgrounds at risk for lower school success.

According to Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996), children who possess what the society they live in regards as cultural capital may be advantaged. Kalmijn and Kraaykamp suggest that such children may be more readily able to master academic material, develop greater taste for learning material that is abstract and intellectual, and may even be favoured by their teachers over classmates with less cultural capital. These factors work against children who are not representative of the dominant group in society and so possess less of what their society views as cultural capital. Bourdieu (1977) takes the stance therefore that the whole structure of the educational system favours children who are members of a society's dominant group, possessing the cultural capital necessary for survival in schools. This epistemological foundation is central to notions of what constitutes as cultural capital in our society and the way its interpretation is enacted in the school context. The culture that is valued in schools depends on who controls power and resources in the society at large; in Canada this group would be middle class society of European ancestry (Egbo, 2009). Egbo emphasizes that in such situations specific forms of knowledge are privileged while others are devalued. Cultural capital according to Barakett and Cleghorn (2008) can therefore perpetuate educational and social inequalities through its constant valuing of only the dominant culture. This creates many educational effects which all adversely affect members of groups other than the dominant one.

Barakett and Cleghorn (2008) stress that the language and texts of schools are reflective of the interests, values, and tastes of dominant power groups. This acts as a means of disadvantaging minority groups existing within the school population. A disadvantaged minority population in turn leads to frustration, disempowerment, and alienation, all considered to be strong precursors to academic underachievement (Egbo, 2009). A similar view is held by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Nieto (1992), who argue that this focus on the dominant group in academic instruction is traditional in nature and can ultimately alienate and exclude members of culturally marginalized groups. This is supported by Fine (1991) who suggests that schools that disrespect and alienate students push against students who are members of historically marginalized groups and thus conspire against their success academically.

Hinchey (2010) expresses that critical theory is a means of questioning power and the hierarchal structures existing within education today. Hinchey states that within the critical theory framework questions surrounding power such as: “Who has it? How did they get it? How do they keep it? What are they doing with it? How do their actions affect the less powerful? How might things be otherwise?” are encouraged (p. 17). These critical questions all connect to the issue of the devaluation of the cultural capital of some minority groups in the classroom due to the power relations which exist there. Critical theory offers a means of challenging these power structures in authentic ways in the classroom. Siegel and Fernandez (2002) agree that although there are many variations of critical theory and the term critical, one fundamental principle most critical theorists hold to is the conceptualization of literacy as a social and political act as opposed to a set of neutral, psychological skills. Critical approaches Siegel and Fernandez suggest look

beyond the “taken for granted” and try gain insight into how ideological systems inform instructional practices and social relations in the literacy classroom and school by extension. Critical approaches when embraced in classrooms allow students to challenge and question assumptions surrounding how knowledge is constructed and used to privilege some groups while marginalizing others (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008).

### **Pedagogy and Schooling Practices: Implications of Culturally Relevant Teaching**

Houchen (2012) stresses the need for adhering to best practices in teaching and learning in educational environments today. According to Franzak (2006) and Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) however, effective pedagogy entails more than simply utilizing a given skill or technique: It fosters student engagement, is based on student ability, and strives to connect to students’ sociocultural identity. Despite the view that effective pedagogy, as the later point highlights, is embodied in relevance to the sociocultural identity of students, Ware (2006) notes that culture is not often looked upon as a function of school success. Pajeres (2007) emphasizes the need therefore for closer attention to be paid to cultural issues in all classrooms today as “our students’ learning, cognition and achievement are always situated in a network of sociocultural practices” (p. 37). Ware holds the view that if attention is not paid to these cultural issues, it ultimately creates a mismatch between school culture and the culture of students, creating the potential for misunderstanding of action and misinterpretation of communication between teachers and students. This creates what Irvine (1990) describes as a lack of cultural synchronization which increases the possibility of failure for students who lack the cultural capital necessary to be a success at school. The theory of the cultural context of

teaching and learning is embedded in such viewpoints. Ware suggests that this cultural framework views the inclusion of students' culture in the schooling experience as a necessary element in improving students' academic success.

It has been proposed by Griner (2012) that culturally responsive practices in classrooms are an effective means of addressing the achievement gap and the representation of certain groups of students as low achievers. Culturally responsive pedagogy is described by Gay (2010) as teaching "to and through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities and their prior accomplishments" (p. 26). This is supported by Irvine (2009) who views culturally responsive teaching as the acceptance and incorporation of the cultural traits and behaviours that students bring into the classroom. This stance is important as "students of colour come to school already having mastered many cultural skills and ways of knowing, to the extent that if teaching builds on these capabilities academic success will result" (Gay, 2010 p. 213).

It has been proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995) that culturally relevant pedagogy is three dimensional in nature in that it holds high academic expectations for all students, it refocuses curriculum to build upon students' funds of knowledge, and fosters critical consciousness among students regarding power relations. Sleeter (2012) argues however that the application of these dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom is often limited by educators' simplistic understandings of the term. Sleeter proposes therefore that culturally responsive pedagogy loses its' significance when educators view it as merely cultural celebration or simply learning "about" culture as opposed to learning to teach the cultural processes and knowledge of each student. One view, as supported by Nykiel-Herbert (2010), is that a major reason why minority and

immigrant students are viewed as underachieving in schools is because their home culture, while in some instances “celebrated” in the classroom, is not, effectively used as a resource.

While culturally relevant pedagogy is well known and applied in educational contexts, Young (2000) states that it is often not fully understood as a means of advocating academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Young draws attention to the argument that even though culturally relevant pedagogy is considered effective pedagogy and widely recognized, the need exists for work to be done with teachers to foster greater understanding surrounding how the theory could be adequately put into practice. A similar stance is taken by researchers such as Cochran-Smith (2004) who describes the difficulties educators face in putting the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy into actual practice in the classroom. Fiedler et al. (2008) explain that this situation may exist because educators lack clear examples and tools for best practices which would aid them in successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. There therefore follows a gap between policy, theory, and practice (Griner, 2012), resulting in what Tabak (2006) describes as major differences between what researchers and policy makers say works and what is actually implemented in classrooms.

Education authorities constantly make efforts for the increased standardization of educational practice. This situation Sleeter (2012) and Griner (2012) propose make it even more difficult for teachers to work with culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, as there results less time to research and develop a curriculum that students can relate to. Crocco and Costigan (2007) accept this view as they cite reports of a study

of approximately 200 teachers in New York City where teachers expressed frustration with a system which forced them to adhere to the curriculum and organize teaching in prescribed ways, resulting in less time to forge meaningful relationships with students.

Meeting the needs of all students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms requires a commitment to social justice in education through the implementation of practical strategies that are meaningful in addressing the unequal structures and belief systems which affect the achievement gap (Griner, 2012). Kozol (2008) refers to unequal distribution of resources, underachievement of diverse students, and the disproportionate representation of such students as being among the many injustices that impact our system of education. These injustices fuel as Griner (2012) draws attention to, a divide between home and school culture. Irvine (2009) sees culture and ethnicity as influencing students' ways of constructing knowledge as well as teachers' pedagogy, and while noting that it would be unfair to imply that teachers and students are simply productions of their cultural experiences, it would be equally unfair to assume that instruction and learning are not influenced by cultural variables. Schools and teachers that adopt culturally relevant teaching can be agents of change in their schools if they bridge the divide between home and school cultures and so ensure more equitable schooling experiences for racially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically diverse students (Kraft, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Noguera (2008) suggests that many young Black men are disconnected from the content and instruction of schools; these young men cannot identify with many school texts because they are linear and sequential in nature and unresponsive to their identities, culture, and ideologies of reading. There are several teaching styles which can be in

classrooms to impact the academic success of children of colour. Cooks and Ball (2009) note several such useful strategies which, if used in the classroom, would aid in building on the literacy resources and literacy ideologies such students bring to the learning context. The strategies suggested by Cooks and Ball include: establishing connections between home and school literacies, being conscious of including literacy community practice in classroom encounters; engaging students in work as critical ethnographers of their personal and home literacy practices; and utilizing critical language pedagogy within the classroom setting. All these strategies incorporate the unique cultural identities, ideologies, and funds of knowledge of learners into classroom practice.

The cultural heritage and experiences of persons of Caribbean heritage are very unique, and if educators are not willing to bridge gaps between the culture and identity of Caribbean students and those of mainstream students, many Caribbean students will continue to be at risk of being labeled as underachievers. The Caribbean cultural experience is different from that of other regions because, as Gopaul-McNicol (1993) and McKenzie (1986) explain, Caribbean nationals come from a polyethnic culture that contains influences from African, Spanish, British, French, Dutch, Asian, and Native Amerindian cultures. In addition to this ethnic diversity, there is also racial diversity in the region because while a significant proportion of the population is of African descent, there are also sizable White, Chinese, East Indian and Native populations present in the region (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993). The SUNY-State Education department (1997) explains further that linguistic diversity is also an element of cultural diversity within the region, as there are multiple languages spoken throughout the islands inclusive of English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Creole ( a blend of West African phonology and French or

English words). Despite such extensive elements of cultural diversity within the Caribbean community, individuals with cultural ties to the Caribbean share a common set of cultural values (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). These cultural characteristics found as central to the Caribbean population according to Gopaul-McNicol (1993) include collectivism, the importance of spirituality, focus on self-amelioration, and a strong sense of ethnic pride.

McLean (2011) notes that individuals' identities, that is, their sense of who they are in the world, are always being coconstructed in connection with their historical, social, and cultural contexts. Identity therefore plays a major role in the way one engages with a variety of texts and the literacy practices which one uses and understands (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), establishing school–family–community partnerships and understandings are critical in diverse classrooms as this leads to increased educational outcomes for students, empowerment for parents, social capital for families, and future success for students. Mitchell and Bryan (2007) concur with this view as they explain that such partnerships are an effective avenue through which barriers to learning can be addressed and resilience can be promoted amongst immigrant students.

### **Summary**

It has been proposed by Santrock (2002) that educational achievement is important to every student, as students who do not fully develop their academic skills develop educational deficiencies that significantly decrease their economic and social well-being over their lifespan. Given this correlation, improving the academic achievement of Caribbean male immigrants to Canada is extremely important. Within the

research presented, Caribbean males are among the groups presented as underachieving. Research is suggesting that the focus should not be solely on male underachievement but should begin to delve into understanding the groups that are underachieving and factors which cause this to be so. The experiences of the Caribbean male are unique, and many factors such as socioeconomic status, poor teacher perceptions, and expectations along with peer pressure are listed as factors which contribute to this trend of underachievement amongst Caribbean males.

It has been argued by Street (2012) however that we need to analyze and contest what counts as literacy and examine what literacy events and practices mean to users in different cultural and social contexts. Through this study I hope to examine Street's statement further by investigating the links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of students of Caribbean heritage. Through this examination I hope to uncover Caribbean students' ideologies of reading and the role this plays in their engagement with literacy in the classroom. As stated by Ball et al. (2011), the rapid changes in student demographics and the continuing underachievement of disproportionate numbers of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds have increased the urgency for critical attention to be given to this issue by the research community and efforts made to improve instruction for these students. In this regard Ball et al. propose that there is a need to hear more from students themselves about their experiences so as to generate greater understandings of the interplay between curriculum and instructional practices and the ensuing impact on how instructors achieve goals as well as how students achieve personal, academic, and social goals.

The main aim of this paper is hence to locate Caribbean students at the heart of the data collection because very few research papers observed have them and their experiences at the foreground of such. Thomas (2007) holds the view that despite growing education agenda to raise standards of achievement for all students, those young persons most at risk of failing are seldom offered the opportunity to join the debate and so let their voices be heard. Young people have a lot to offer researchers in relation to insights into their experiences. This is supported by Fielding (2004) who emphasizes that the messages students relay are powerful and are a force that needs to be released and harnessed as they have the potential for transforming practices in the classroom. By sharing their experiences through this qualitative research, Caribbean males have a chance to be included in the debate surrounding their academic achievement experiences and offer valuable insight into the issue under study.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

This qualitative study with an interview design involves an investigation into the educational experiences of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. It specifically seeks to provide insight into these experiences so as to explore the possible links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of male students of Caribbean origin. To situate the context of this study, this chapter begins by giving the reader an insight into the phenomena of Caribbean culture and identity. This study is written from an insider perspective, the researcher having lived the Caribbean immigrant experience herself. Reflections on these experiences are therefore incorporated into this chapter as a means of adding to the scope of the research based on a personal perspective.

This chapter also provides a comprehensive overview of the study's research methodology. A description is provided of the research design, research participants, data collection and recording methods, and data processing and analyzing techniques. Finally the, limitations of the study as well as efforts made to establish research trustworthiness are presented along with the ethical considerations inherent within the study.

#### **Study Context: Caribbean Cultural Identity**

Caribbean immigrants have migrated from the Caribbean region, which is defined by Chaney (1994) as the 50 inhabited islands between Trinidad and Western Cuba stretching in an arc that is 2,000 miles long. In addition, Chaney explains that because of their historical identification with the region, the mainland territories of Guyana, Surinam, French Guiana, and Belize are also often considered as part of the Caribbean region. The Caribbean region shares a unique culture which includes many commonalities. The diversity of the region must be recognized however as each island/

territory has its own individual history, national and cultural identities. The use of the term Caribbean as representative of the heritage of all the participants was by no means an attempt to homogenize the various groups and experiences of the region or an attempt at disregarding the national, social, racial, ethnic and linguistic identities of different groups within the region. The term Caribbean is however used as the overarching term in this study as the participants as well as the researcher are from different islands within the region and so it was decided that the term Caribbean was the most fitting descriptor of the heritage of the entire group of participants as a whole. Differences amongst the islands being recognized there are elements of culture that bind the region together as a group and are an identifying marker for its people throughout the world.

According to David (2004), culture is the social glue binding a society together, creating for its members a sense of identity. The identity of Caribbean people is deeply rooted in the history of the region as it is the shared experiences of the past which provide the nucleus of the present identity of Caribbean nationals. Being aware of the history of this vast array of islands and land masses is thus critical to understanding the culture of its people, as the culture of the Caribbean is indeed a rich blend, with each island having a unique cultural heritage influenced by European colonialists, African slaves, and Native Indian tribes. As stated by Gopaul-McNicol (1993) and McKenzie (1986), Caribbean nationals possess a cultural heritage that is polyethnic containing influences from African, Spanish, French, Dutch, English, and Native Indian cultures. The culture of the Caribbean is therefore a blend of the colonial mainstays and other ethnic groups who have inhabited the region throughout its rich history.

The earliest inhabitants of the Caribbean were members of either of two indigenous people groups known as the Caribs and the Arawaks (also known as Tainos). There are very few members of these indigenous tribes surviving today. The Spaniards led by a Christopher Columbus expedition were the first Europeans to colonize the region in 1492. They were followed soon after by other Europeans, namely the French, English, Dutch, and Portuguese. These groups fought amongst themselves for possession of the islands for several hundred years, with control of various lands shifting hands several times. The English endured through these battles, and a rich English heritage can be observed throughout the region, especially in the smaller islands. French and Dutch colonies were also formed in a few of the larger territories. Every one of the islands that make up the region was at some point in its individual history a colony of a European empire, and some even retain this status today. Most of the islands have however achieved independence from Europe and largely govern themselves.

The Europeans turned to the slave trade to fill the need for labourers upon realizing the economic potential of the region, especially as it related to agriculture. This brought the first wave of African slaves to the region and accounts for the majority of the population of the Caribbean being of African descent. After slavery was abolished, the need for labour in the Caribbean was predominantly filled by indentured labourers who came in the main from Asia, namely India, Syria, Lebanon, and China. Although many of these labourers returned to their homelands after their contracts were up, many chose to settle in the region, giving rise to a the number of persons of East Indian descent being almost as numerous as those of African ancestry in some islands.

This intermingling of settlers has led to significant diversity in the region because, as Gopaul-McNicol (1993) explains, while a large proportion of the population is of African descent there are also sizable White, Chinese, East Indian and Native Indian populations present significantly shaping the demographics of the region. SUNY-State Education Department (1997) states therefore that there are a variety of languages spoken throughout the region inclusive of English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Creole (a form of oral communication blending African phonology and French or English words).

Caribbean cultural heritage as influenced by the history of the region is reflected in many forms inclusive of music, culinary arts, religious traditions, and other social elements. In regards to music, it is rich in tradition and reflects the multicultural influences that have shaped the region. The generic styles of reggae, calypso, soca, and many similar styles are popular throughout the region and are largely influenced by African traditions. Music is and has always been a central part of Caribbean culture and is used often as a means of expression. Calypso is a genre of music with its roots in West African traditions originally used by slaves as a means of entertainment. Calypso is topical and usually marked by political and social commentary. Soca is a genre of music originating in the Caribbean; it is a blend of calypso and Indian rhythms. Reggae is another genre of music originating in Jamaica made popular throughout the world by artists such as Bob Marley. It has its roots in a cry for freedom from various forms of oppression. In terms of culinary arts, original Caribbean cuisine is largely influenced by African and East Indian traditions and utilizes a variety of spices, peppers, and herbs heavily in meal preparation. Each island has its own unique signature dish influenced by its history.

The main cultural festival on most of the islands is carnival. Carnival is characterized by local music and dances significant to the region marked by the swaying of the hips and shuffling of the feet. Carnival has its roots in religious tradition, which is also a significant aspect of Caribbean culture. Religious traditions are largely influenced by European connections, with a large percentage of the Caribbean population being Catholic. African influences are also seen in regards to religion as particular islands still retain African religious beliefs such as Voodoo and even Shango, which has managed to merge African as well as European Catholic rituals into its religious practices.

In terms of cultural values, Caribbean immigrants share some commonalities such as collectivism, the importance of spirituality, a focus on self-amelioration, and a strong sense of ethnic pride (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993). Collectivism is an important cultural feature evidenced in the presence of extended families often inclusive of unrelated individuals who are treated as family members and the maintenance of a strong sense of family cohesion (Brent & Callwood, 1993). Spirituality is also a critical part of Caribbean cultural value systems as most individuals frequently attend church and even those who may not attend church regularly refer to a belief or faith in God.

McKenzie (1986) additionally refers to self-help or amelioration of personal problems as a common feature intrinsic to Caribbean values. Gopaul-McNicol (1993) explains further that Caribbean individuals believe that individuals should help themselves to address personal difficulties or achieve personal goals, only with help from the extended family as needed. Further, persons from the Caribbean, according to Brent and Callwood (1993), have a deep sense of ethnic pride depicted in their strong allegiance to their countries of origin. This is demonstrated at Caribbean festivals where

individuals proudly showcase national flags, food, local music, and dancing. In Canada, this sense of ethnic pride is evident in the Caribbean Carnival in Toronto, where a strong sense of nationalism is evident in the waving of national flags, the wearing of national colours, and in general the support of the festival on all points by Caribbean nationals.

All of these elements of Caribbean culture are important as they shape the identity of Caribbean immigrants and influence their interactions and experiences in Canadian classrooms. The core meaning of identity according to Khan (2001) is the idea of sameness with oneself and sameness with others through shared characteristics. The ideal of a Caribbean identity relates to the shared features of the region as a whole which bind the region together as a group. We all are cultural beings, and our cultural backgrounds according to Egbo (2009) influence our perceptions of the world, constituting an essential part of who we are. The rich tapestry of the Caribbean culture is one that has been intricately woven through a history which is as rich as it is unique. It is a truly diasporic society (where many came from different lands whether by choice or force) that has become a new home to many who have formed a new society with intermingled cultures and traditions.

In the Caribbean certain aspects of traditional customs, David (2004) asserts, are being pushed into the past. This in many ways can be attributed to the process of globalization as the Caribbean is part of a global village and as such the effects of are manifested in the way of life of its people. Dunn (1995) describes globalization as a process that refers to political, economic, and social interconnectedness between spaces and people which transcend geographical boundaries. This influence is creeping into the region through exposure to the pop culture of North America and Europe via the vehicle

of technology and the open communication which exists between the societies of the world today. The culture of the region is evolving but remains central to its people and their identity as a group, exerting significant influence on their interactions with the world around them.

### **Reflexivity: Personal Reflections on the Educational System**

The Caribbean system of education has a strong colonial legacy which arose largely out of the British model of education. Gaining insight into this legacy and its lingering effects in the Caribbean even today is vital in understanding the underlying tenets of the education system within the region. My experience as a teacher within the Caribbean for the past 15 years, and a student within the region for most of my life allows me to note that the system of education still mirrors the British model in many ways. Colonial ideals are still highly esteemed and reinforced in many ways through the curriculum and teacher expectations; ideals such as respect for authority, discipline, self-control, and teacher-led instruction are commonplace. Standard English is still the required form of communication in the classroom, while the use of Creole (the first language in most homes) in formal oral and written communication at school is not encouraged on many islands. Students still attend school daily in school uniforms, following the past British system. These uniforms are generally shirts worn neatly inside of trousers or skirts with the addition of a necktie for most boys and girls at the secondary level.

The focus within the Caribbean classroom is still largely centered on the teacher at the front of the room and acting as the expert of knowledge. The classroom is often set up in traditional colonial style, with the teacher's desk at the head of the classroom and

the teacher as the focal point at the front of the classroom. The general schooling experience is unique in that in most instances the principal and teachers are often revered as authority figures; questioning the decisions of a teacher or principal could be viewed as rude or defiant and could result in serious consequences. Teachers and students generally have good relationships interacting and communicating with each other, but there is a fine line which students know should not be crossed. It is considered acceptable to ask questions during class, to clarify misunderstanding through questioning, but challenging the teacher's decisions and actions in major ways can be viewed as being disrespectful of authority. Respect for authority figures, such as the principal and teachers, and obedience to rules and regulations are therefore mandated. Waters (1999) emphasizes that in the Caribbean schools quite often the teacher acts as "in locus parentis," and principals and teachers are often viewed as authority figures trained to make the best decision for a child's academic progress.

Silence during the completion of assignments is the norm and, although discussion is welcomed during teaching sessions, it is done in a structured fashion with the teacher still maintaining control. Sharing of work and ideas during class time is often viewed as copying and students, if judged culpable, would experience loss of privileges for this act.

In terms of the curriculum, a lot has changed in recent years through efforts at the level of the Organisation for Eastern Caribbean States regional curriculum reform (Watts, 2011). This change Watts (2011) argues was influenced by demands for new thinking worldwide surrounding curriculum in the second half of the 20th century. These demands spurred efforts at harmonization of curriculum across the region. This reform

effort has helped to make the curriculum more culturally relevant and has provided space for teachers to adopt a more culturally relevant pedagogy. For example, in addition to a common curriculum across the Organisation for Eastern Caribbean States, texts published in the Caribbean, more reflective of local heritage, have been introduced into classrooms, and regional exams have replaced the traditional British-based exit exams once mandated at the end of secondary and tertiary schooling. Such changes have been at the heart of literacy reform in the Caribbean in regard to the way literacy is taught and conceptualized by teachers.

I believe that some islands have come a long way in embracing new ideas which see literacy as social and, as such, bearing connections to everyday lives and social encounters. In many schools however, based on personal observations, the focus still lies heavily on the different elements of language arts: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, reading, literal comprehension, and writing. An integrated model of literacy instruction, though heavily promoted and sought after by many Ministries of Education in the region and associated teaching training institutions, is not always what is reflected in the classroom itself. For instance, the use of Creole (the mode of oral communication used at home which utilizes “broken” forms of the language) was frowned upon at school, and I thus remember grammar being a heavy focus in the curriculum. Students would spend many literacy classes conjugating verbs and choosing the correct verb to use in abstract sentences as practice exercises. Writing of letters and stories was commonplace, but oftentimes these were based on a topic selected by the teacher or a list of choices to choose from also selected by the teacher. The reading materials present in the classroom were heavily gender based and favoured the interest of girls (i.e., namely fictional or

fairy tales). A variety of genres that appealed to the interests of boys were often unavailable. These ways of practicing literacy made it difficult for many students to relate to literacy instruction, and this stymied progress in regard to literacy achievement in many classrooms.

My experiences in Canada as a volunteer in the classroom and my observations of my own immigrant children's work in the Canadian classroom have allowed me to see that the Canadian model of literacy instruction and schooling experience in general is very much different from what I have experienced in the Caribbean. The whole structure of the schooling system is not as rigid and discipline focused as in the Caribbean. In terms of the general classroom ethos, I see the role of the Canadian teacher more as a facilitator of learning rather than the sole font of knowledge in the classroom (Grasha, 1996). The focus in the literacy lesson is not on breaking up instruction into the component areas of language arts but more on integration of the elements in an activity-based setting that encourages cooperative learning, questioning, and discussion. I see students interacting with a variety of reading genres in informal ways, discovering and making meaning on their own through activities such as reader's theatre, oral presentations, and literature circles for instance. The Canadian structure, based on personal observations, seems to embrace a focus on "new literacies" which, as Flynt and Brozo (2010) describe, recognize the diversity of texts and the need for individuals to interact with many diverse forms of texts and literacy learning beyond the functional level.

Potentially this disconnect between the Canadian literacy context and the Caribbean child's experience can be a challenge to the immigrant student who is used to

allowing the teacher to take the lead and now coming into a system whose focus is more so one of self-discovery. Caribbean students come from a system where silence is valued in the classroom and sharing of work and ideas is frowned upon to one where this is encouraged through various team projects and cooperative learning assignments throughout the day. This I see as something that has to be adjusted to. Even as an adult learner at the graduate level, I felt challenged in conforming to the structure of the Canadian context in which I felt forced to speak up and share my opinion when in fact I would have been more comfortable sitting in class listening and absorbing all that the professor had to say. I even struggled when given free choice in terms of assignment models. I remember saying to myself (never to the professor because even as an adult I would have thought that to be disrespectful of authority) that I would have preferred being told exactly what was required and given set boundaries. In addition, in many instances I was the only person of Caribbean heritage in the classroom, so I became conscious of the way I spoke and the things I said and did because I was at times somewhat intimidated being different from everyone else. Many things that my classmates would discuss were new to me, and as such I couldn't participate in their discussions but listened attentively so as to learn as much as I could. This could have been a hindrance to my learning and growth in the Canadian classroom had I not been focused on the specific goal of success despite the obstacles. I am certain that many other immigrant students would have experienced such a transitioning as a difficult process affecting their engagement in the classroom and their achievement.

According to Bourdieu (1977), every learner brings rich cultural capital into the classroom: subtletics of language, unique knowledge bases, and links to resources. What

is counted as cultural capital in the Caribbean is not necessarily considered capital in Canada however. Caribbean students have a rich cultural heritage which allows them to have a deep sense of national pride, they are taught value in the idea of discipline in the home, community, and classroom, respect for authority and elders is held in high esteem, there is belief in the value of education and further an appreciation for a wide variety of genres of music, rich oral traditions passed on through generations inclusive of traditional stories and games, subtletics of language seen in the ability to speak Creole, drama, rhythm. All these and many more such ideals are considered cultural capital in the Caribbean.

As a person of Caribbean heritage living in Canada I have experienced the transition from the Caribbean lifestyle to the Canadian lifestyle. As such, although we are all unique individuals with differing experiences, I share a number of commonalities with the participants that allow me as the researcher to add to the discussions surrounding immigrants' experiences in the Canadian classroom.

### **Personal Reflections on the Immigrant Journey**

Canada is one of many countries that attract Caribbean immigrants each year. These immigrants are in search of a better life for themselves and relatives who remain in the Caribbean. Many begin their immigrant journey as a family, while some individuals travel alone with the hope of reuniting their families at a later time. Each immigrant's experience in relocating to a new country is somewhat unique. McLean (2010) suggests that migration is more than a geographical concept; it represents the social repositioning and cultural negotiation that takes place across home spaces. Although a Canadian by birth, my journey in returning to Canada this past year has made me consider myself to

be an immigrant in many ways. The length of time I have spent in the Caribbean (almost my entire life) makes me consider the Caribbean my home. In relocating my family, I have experienced the reality of issues relating to immigration, especially with regards to my children and their experiences while adjusting to the Canadian school environment.

It has been suggested by Anisef et al. (2010) that immigrants are willing to bear the costs of moving to a new and unfamiliar country in pursuit of economic opportunities, a better standard of living, and what is especially important to most, a brighter future for their children. Anisef et al.'s assertion is in line with my personal experience, as my children's future was foremost in my decision to immigrate to Canada. Barakett and Cleghorn (2008) explain that in Canadian and generally across North American society there is a widely held belief in the equality of educational opportunity, inclusive of equal access to schooling, equal treatment within school, and the potential for equal results. Many immigrants, as I did, subscribe to this belief. In addition, their children often enter the school system with the hopes of realizing their personal dreams and/or their parents' dream. However, unexpected circumstances may dampen or even prevent immigrants from realizing their dreams, unless they are persistent towards their goals. Egbo (2009), who writes from a Canadian perspective, argues that schools routinely exclude minority groups (which include Caribbean immigrants) through structural, pedagogical, and curricular processes. Egbo expounds further that despite the discourse, equality of opportunity for all is not often the reality in the Canadian classroom. A similar view is held by Barakett and Cleghorn, who concur that if equal educational opportunity truly existed, differential distribution of educational results

would not be an issue in our schools and achievement would therefore be distributed evenly between social classes, racial and ethnic groups, and between the sexes.

### **My Daughters' Experiences**

As stated by McLean (2010), with migration comes the difficult task of adjusting to complex and sometimes different ways of knowing and being. McLean suggests that each social context has inherent cultural resources (e.g., social networks, psychological and cultural models) represented in its literacy practices, texts, discourses, values, and ideologies. After immigrating to Canada, my then 9-year-old daughters were faced with this task of adjusting to the different aspects of knowing and being as highlighted by McLean especially as it related to the cultural resources required for classroom literacy practices. Two girls who once placed in the top percentile of their class in the Caribbean, who read above their grade 4 reading level, and who accomplished excellence in everything academic were found to be deficient in the school environment in regard to literacy skills.

Their Canadian report card for the first winter term offered them a D in oral communication. Children who could communicate proficiently in Standard English in the Caribbean were given a D in oral communication. And yet they can speak and relay any message with accuracy and clarity, communicate their intentions with ease, ask questions, summarize books, give their opinions, retell stories and television shows, describe what they observe around them, and give accounts of daily encounters. As a mother, I was asked by their home room teacher if my children (who speak Standard English fluently) have a language barrier and if English is their first language, when they speak no other language.

These girls are students who are reserved, soft spoken, and often quiet in the classroom. While a quiet, shy demeanor is by no means common to all Caribbean children, this was an element of their personality which was often counted as valuable in the Caribbean classroom as children are often taught to think before they speak. Additionally, silence and discipline in the Caribbean classroom are often appreciated. However, in Canada this element of their personality and culture was used as one of the markers of linguistic competence. This outlook disadvantaged them in the Canadian school environment, as many of their classroom assignments in literacy required them to have to showcase their comprehension skills orally. In the Canadian system variations in teaching reading and views of comprehension made it necessary for these girls to make adjustments in order to succeed. There were two very different systems of teaching and learning at play as the girls were no longer required to display comprehension just in literal ways, usually through the use of pencil and paper. The Canadian context centered on showcasing comprehension beyond just the literal level, in many instances through oral presentations, group projects, and collaborative learning assignments. These changes in the literacy classroom required adjustments to facilitate these new ways of knowing and being (McLean, 2011) and were a struggle for the girls in the first year.

I recall similarly an incident in which one of my daughters came home very distraught. She retold an incident in which she felt she was told that she was not competent in literacy. She had done a multiple intelligence survey meant to determine, based on her own reflexivity, with which intelligence she was the strongest. Being a student who loves to read, write, and express herself with words, she scored her highest in the area of linguistics. When she raised her hand for the teacher to record her strength

on the board along with all her classmates who felt they were also proficient in this area, she was told she could not be included in this group. She was further told to pick another intelligence as her strong point. Her retelling of the incident highlighted that the teacher did not agree with her assessment of herself. She then questioned herself and her abilities in this area. She came home wondering what she had done wrong and tried to rationalize why her teacher would not include her with her classmates. She was upset about the whole situation but, much like the typical Caribbean student chose to keep her feeling to herself for fear of upsetting or disrespecting the teacher and simply did as she was told, picking her second highest score as her strongest area. Her recent success on a provincial literacy assessment, however, places her as reading at the grade 6 level even though she was just entering grade 5. This demonstrates her proficiency in the area of literacy as her assessment of herself showed or might possibly show that she had learned the “Canadian way” of reading and was beginning to grasp the way reading was taught.

Canada is a diverse and multiracial society whose economic future depends on meeting the needs of its ever-growing population of immigrants, a significant percentage of whom are from the Caribbean. It has been argued by Duffy (2003) that Canadian schools are failing new immigrant minority students and run the risk of creating an underclass if newcomers are not better served in the education system.

### **Research Methodology and Design**

A qualitative research methodology was employed during this study to gain insight into the nature of the school experiences of male students of Caribbean heritage within the Canadian educational context. It specifically sought to describe possible relationships between the participants’ identity as Caribbean nationals and their literacy

practices. I advance that a qualitative research methodology has the potential to provide the data needed to give such insights because, as Miller (1998) states, qualitative research offers opportunities to develop analytical perspectives that speak directly to the circumstances and processes of the everyday life of participants. Hence the adopted methodology fits the focus of this research.

As a researcher and an educator it is my personal stance that life and learning should be in many ways integrated in the classroom. I advocate that classrooms can engage young learners and contribute to enhanced levels of academic success through a classroom pedagogy that is culturally relevant to the lived realities of students. As a teacher in the Caribbean over the past 15 years, I witnessed that children's success, especially as it related to literacy, was enhanced when literacy tasks and activities were made more relevant to the everyday experiences, values, and beliefs of the students in my classroom. In embarking on this research it was my intent, based on these experiences in the Caribbean, to give insight into how literacy and identity could be linked for the male Caribbean learner within the Canadian education context. I wanted to achieve these aims as outlined by allowing the participants to share their stories related to personal experiences as immigrant students in the literacy classroom in Canada. These stories were collected through two forms of interviewing. There was a one-on-one interview with each individual participant and a focus group discussion which included all the participants. Given the methods of data collection this research initiative is therefore a qualitative study with an interview design.. My own experiences as a person of Caribbean heritage and an educator allowed me to have certain elements in common with the participants. This allowed for open interviews and discussions as many potential

barriers to communication during the interview process were eliminated. The participants were also able to relate with me as an “insider” being a member of the Caribbean community to which they all belonged. This added some measure of comfort to the interview sessions allowing for more candid responses.

The central phenomenon under study is the issue of academic achievement amongst Caribbean male immigrants, specifically in the area of literacy. Given the broad nature of this phenomenon, the many possible variables involved, and the continuous cycle of Caribbean males being represented as academic underachievers in scholarly research and international reports on student achievement, it is necessary that this phenomenon be carefully operationalized to establish shared understanding. The research could have focused on various dimensions of the debate surrounding academic achievement. It was however broken down to look specifically at the educational experiences of the participants in an attempt to establish links between their remembered literacy practices and discursive identities. This aspect of the debate surrounding academic achievement is sociocultural in nature and can be meaningfully understood only through an exploration that is in-depth and seeks to make sense of the phenomenon based on the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of the group of affected individuals themselves. This further explains the choice of a qualitative methodology for this research initiative, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explain that qualitative research is a means of studying things in their natural setting so as to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

### **Selection of Participants**

This study adopted a purposeful sampling technique to select participants (Creswell, 2012). This study was limited to the experiences of specific individuals of the same ethnic heritage: males born in Canada to Caribbean parents or males immigrating to Canada from the Caribbean. It was also limited to those males of the subgroup identified with experience as students within the Canadian educational context at the secondary or postsecondary level.

The study specifically explored the experiences of males as opposed to both males and females because I believe based on personal observations and research into the phenomenon that there are gender issues at play as it relates to achievement amongst Caribbean nationals. Gender roles and expectations at school and at home are different. In the Caribbean home, females are generally pushed towards academic success in a more serious manner than males are. Females are encouraged to read and study whereas in many instances males are allowed to pursue other interests which usually involve active activities such as sports and other forms of outdoor recreation. Reading material in the school and even at home tend to be gender biased focused on the interests of females thereby decreasing the motivation for males boys to desire to read. This brief exploration of gender issues is related to my personal experience in one of the islands of the Caribbean but the experience could be different in other islands. It is however based on these differences observed and the results of research which specifically showcases the Caribbean male as underachieving that my focus was on males as opposed to both males and females.

The participants were all either first or second generation male immigrants to Canada from the Caribbean, with significant experience as students within the Canadian educational context. Two of the participants were born in Canada to Caribbean parents and two immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean. The participants all had experience at the secondary and/or postsecondary classroom level in Canada and ranged in age from 18 to 21. These characteristics of the sample created a unique balance among participants and allowed for variation within the sample.

Access to the participants was gained through a colleague at Brock University whose role as a child and youth worker with Caribbean youth allowed him to act as a gatekeeper (Creswell, 2012), facilitating a connection between me and the participants. The letters of invitation were emailed to this colleague, who distributed them to approximately eight potential participants who met the stipulated criteria. Participants who agreed to participate following receipt of the letter of invitation informed the liaison, who then informed me, and contact arrangements were then made between the participants and me. The small sample size allowed the researcher to provide a detailed picture of each individual. It was important to keep the sample size small because, as Creswell (2012) suggests, the researcher's ability to provide an in-depth picture of the issue at hand diminishes with the addition of each new individual. This desire to keep the data manageable coupled with the limitation of time and associated logistical issues of increasing sample size was the rationale behind keeping the sample size small.

### **Description of Participants**

Four male participants of Caribbean heritage with recent or present experience as students in the Canadian educational context participated in this study. The pseudonyms

Dillon, Sheldon, Omar and Nigel were used to identify the participants.

Dillon was 21 years of age at the time of the interviews. He was born in the Caribbean and had been exposed to life on more than one Caribbean island. He lived and went to school on the island of his birth until he was in grade 2. He then moved with his parents to another island in the Caribbean and had the opportunity of living there and going to school within that context from grade 3 to grade 8. Dillon moved to Canada at the start of grade 9 and has been a student in Canada for 5 years. At the time of the interview, Dillon was attending university in Ontario.

Dillon described his literacy activities outside of school as geared mostly towards his interests. He reported reading a lot of material on Black history, philosophy, and entertainment news relating to hip hop artists. In relation to television, he stated that he enjoyed watching sports and the news and only experiences movies when he goes to the cinema. Dillon expressed a love for writing poetry and music. The poetry he currently writes he connects to his interest in Black history as he writes a lot of spoken word. Dillon describes his past literacy classes with the exception of a few as “irrelevant” to real life. He states however that his recognition of the importance of literacy for his future allowed him to work hard to attain good grades in these classes. He explains that literacy which is relevant would include critical reading which related literacy to everyday life, a focus on writing, and learning to use proper grammar.

Sheldon was 18 years old at the time of the study and was a recent graduate from the secondary level. Sheldon, at the time he was interviewed, was employed but expressed a desire to return to school in the not-too-distant future to study to become a pilot. Sheldon was born in the Caribbean but at the time of the study had been in Canada for almost eight years, having started school in Canada when he was in grade 6.

Sheldon's mom, like many other immigrants, came to Canada in search of a better life. When he was just a baby, she left him behind to be cared for by other relatives in his native land. They later reunited when she sent for him to join her in Canada at the age of 11. Sheldon has lived in Canada for the past 7 years but still maintains strong connection with his Caribbean roots through being in close contact with friends and family in the Caribbean via the internet and telephone. Sheldon's reading interests are not varied as he expressed an interest in reading only the newspaper. He explained the rationale behind this interest as being the fact that he likes to know what's happening in the world.

Sheldon enjoyed listening to rap and reggae and reported an interest in viewing sports on television. He was introduced to the composition of poetry by a friend and engages in poetry writing in his spare time. Sheldon shared that he uses poetry as a means of expressing emotions surrounding personal events in his life. He described literacy as having been his best subject in school because he enjoyed writing stories and poetry.

Omar was 21 years of age at the time the study was conducted. He has lived in Canada his entire life and is Canadian by birth. Omar however possesses a rich Caribbean heritage, having been born to two parents who were born in the Caribbean. Omar has lived and attended school in Canada for all his life and at the time of the study had recently graduated from college and was employed. Omar stated that he did not like

his past literacy classes very much and described them as not being among his favourite classes. He explained that he struggled in literacy classes, especially in essay writing, as teachers required the writing to be structured in particular ways which were hard to follow and understand. The topics he explained also made essay writing a struggle as the teachers were the ones choosing the topics, which sometimes were not of interest to him. Reading he said was the same thing in that texts were chosen by the teacher and were not in accordance with his interests, and this made him sometimes disengaged in the learning environment. The only times he remembers being engaged in literacy classes were those times when something hands on was done, such as drama. Omar stated an interest in reading the newspaper and articles that pertained to cars and sports, as he found these areas connected with his interests.

Nigel was 18 years old when the study was conducted and was a high school student, in grade 12. Nigel was born in Canada to Caribbean parents. Nigel, a self-reported reluctant reader, was a frequent internet user, relying mainly on social media such as facebook and twitter as a means of communication. He described his interest in sports and cartoons as influencing the majority of the programs he watched on television. Nigel at the time of the interviews expressed a love of music and regularly listened to various genres inclusive of rap, rhythm and blues, and gospel. Nigel explained that during his grade 10 and 11 years at high school he got good grades in literacy class. Nigel enjoyed the class reading together and also enjoyed doing group and class projects. He explains that the only time he felt he was struggling in literacy class was when the classes were large in number. He felt a greater sense of connection to the teacher and understood classroom content more when his classes were smaller.

## **Data Collection and Recording**

Data were gathered through two means: (a) individual interviews with each participant and (b) a focus group discussion. Interviews are special forms of conversation which ask people to talk about their lives, providing a means of gathering data about the social world (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). Semistructured interviews were utilized, and participants were interviewed on a one-on-one basis. Additionally, focus groups were also conducted with all the participants collectively. Mertens (2010) substantiates the use of focus groups, asserting that it allows for the interaction of ideas among all participants which can be valuable in providing extended insight into the issue being examined.

### **Interviews**

Open-ended questions were used because, as Creswell (2012) identifies, open-ended questions give participants the opportunity to voice their experiences without being constrained by the perspectives of the researcher or past research findings. The open-ended questions asked in the interviews (Appendix A) focused on the individuals' experiences as students within the language arts classroom, their literacy practices at home, and the interplay between their home and school literacy practices. The open nature of the questions asked allowed the participants to provide more detailed personal responses, resulting in greater insight into the underlying factors which have impacted these students' achievement in the area of literacy. The questions used were all unique to this study. Given the nature of the study and its focus on the links between identity and literacy practices amongst Caribbean youth, questions were developed specific to this study. This allowed for more targeted investigation in an in-depth manner of the specific research issue.

The face-to-face interviews took place at a venue agreed upon by the participants. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes long and was audio recorded for later transcribing to facilitate subsequent analysis.

### **Focus Groups**

Subsequent to the conduct of individual participant interviews, a focus group interview was utilized to collect additional data as well as to verify and validate data previously conducted. The conduct of the focus group is consistent with similar qualitative studies. It was thought that bringing all the participants together following the individual interviews would be beneficial as it would allow for a more in-depth discussion surrounding the issue under examination and allow for the negotiation of overlap among ideas or differing opinions among issues: comparison of ideas. The focus group session was held at an agreed upon destination at a convenient time to all parties and was approximately 60 minutes long.

The emphasis of the questions guiding the focus group session (refer to Appendix B) was on extending participants' interaction with the issues that were discussed in the one-on-one interviews. Similarly to questions formulated for the individual interviews, those asked in the focus group sessions were unique to this study and were created by the researcher in an effort to make the data collected as specific as possible to the phenomenon under study. The focus was on the participants' ideologies of reading and possible connections between their lived experiences as students of Caribbean heritage and their experiences at school. The questions asked were semistructured; such a format Mertens (2010) suggests ensures the coverage of important issues while allowing for flexibility in responding to group-initiated discussion. The interviewees were similar to

each other, being within the same age range and sharing the same ethnic heritage. Such a sample population with similar characteristics Creswell (2012) describes as instrumental in improving the possibility of collecting the best information from the participants. The focus group interviews were audio recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

The process of the data collection began after the initial individual interviews were conducted. Following the completion of the individual interviews, data were prepared for analysis by transcribing them verbatim from spoken word recorded in audio files to typed text files. This process of transcribing the data allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of each participants' experience, as the transcripts had to be read several times while listening to the recorded interview to ensure the accuracy of the written transcript. The typed transcripts were then explored further several times line by line in an attempt to begin the process of developing codes. Creswell (2012) refers to coding as the process of segmenting and labeling texts to form descriptions and broad themes in the data. Creswell deems this segmenting and labeling process as a necessary element in making sense of the data collected. By assigning codes to segments of the data and examining the codes for overlaps and redundancies, major themes running through the data can be more easily identified (Creswell, 2012). Some of the codes that were highlighted included: importance of literacy, future success, and life in the real world.

The relatively small data record allowed the researcher to code the transcripts by hand. The approach utilized in assigning themes was the highlighting or selective approach outlined by Van Manen (1990). Using Van Manen's selective approach, the text was read several times and colour coding was used to highlight parts of the text

deemed relevant in answering the research questions. The participants' responses based on these colours were grouped into approximately 20–30 codes. As the data for each interview were further analyzed each of the codes were grouped and major themes were identified by locating the codes which ran through each of the interviews. Patterns emerging based on this analysis allowed for the codes to be ultimately reduced to themes. Once all the data were coded and the codes grouped into major themes, six more specific themes were focused on. These themes were used as the framework for discussing and representing the data collected. The themes were represented within a visual matrix format which Creswell (1998) views as the final stage of the data analysis spiral. This visual matrix allowed for comparisons to be made across the themes identified.

This procedure adopted in the data analysis for this study follows the process of inductive thematic analysis. According to Tesch (1990), through this procedure detailed data are broken down into general codes and themes. Creswell (2012) explains similarly that qualitative data analysis and interpretation is inductive in nature therefore moving from diverse detailed data to general codes and themes. Tesch states that although the initial analyses seek to subdivide the data, the ultimate goal of qualitative data analysis is to create a larger, more consolidated picture.

Following the identification of the themes, the researcher then began writing about each theme, providing a description of the ways they were interrelated.

### **Establishing Credibility**

Creswell (2012) explains that throughout the process of data collection and analysis it is imperative that findings are validated so as to ensure they are accurate. Cho and Trent (2006) discuss further that the concept of validity in qualitative research

implies that there must be some level of interaction between the researcher, the participants, and the collected data aimed at achieving high levels of accuracy and consensus throughout the research process by revisiting data collected and interpretations made. In this study this validation of the research was ensured through respondent validation, member checking, and triangulation of the data.

Respondent validation was secured by presenting a summary of the findings to the individuals interviewed via email. Creswell (2012) asserts that soliciting from participants their consensus in regard to emerging perspectives is an important element of respondent validation and should not be overlooked. In addition, member checks were conducted by asking participants to check verbatim quotes for accuracy. Approval was sought to use these quotes in the presentation of the written research report. Darbyshire, Macdougall, and Schiller (2005) explain that repetitive use of member checks at different phases of the study provides a means of increased validity. Member checks according to Mertens (2010) involve the researcher seeking verification with the participants about the construction that is developing based on data that are being collected and analyzed.

Mertens (2010) notes that triangulation involves checking collected information for consistency of evidence, as was done in this study through the use of multiple sources of data. Data were triangulated in this study through the collection of data from one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions, and a review of related literature. Collecting information from these multiple sources was useful in ensuring that there was consistency across the different sources, adding to the validity of the results. All of these measures undertaken throughout the process of data collection and analysis ensure a high level of research credibility with regard to the study's results.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I was engaged in conducting fieldwork which involved human participants. As such there were many moral and ethical implications to be considered throughout the research process. Given these implications, ethics clearance was first sought from the Social Science Research Ethics Board of Brock University. Ethics clearance was granted (Ethics file # 11-238).

Every possible effort was made to ensure that data were collected ethically, with sensitivity to the individuals being studied always maintained. It was made clear to participants at the onset that they were participating in a study. The purpose of the study and possible ways it would be presented after completion were shared with participants prior to beginning the study. There was no deception involved as all elements of the study and the requirements were explained to participants prior to completion.

I was careful of not prejudicing the research process by taking sides or bringing to bear my own personal opinions and experiences having lived the immigrant experience myself and as a parent of immigrant children. I was particularly careful of not interjecting my own opinions and experiences during the interview sessions, especially during the focus group session, which generated much discussion surrounding central ideas.

Participant confidentiality was maintained. Every effort was made to maintain participants' identity by the use of pseudonyms in place of actual names so as to reduce the risk of harming the participants in any way and to maintain their confidentiality.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the study's research methodology. It described in detail the means through which data were collected and

analyzed. The following chapter will explore in detail the findings of the study based on the analysis of data collected via the individual interviews and focus group discussion conducted. Each of the themes discovered in the data will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS**

This qualitative study with an interview design explored the educational experiences of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. It specifically sought to provide insight into these experiences so as to explore the possible links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of students of Caribbean heritage. The image of the Caribbean male student in Canada is one that is thwarted by pictures of underachievement and characterization of the “at-risk” Black male. Both local and international assessment results alike paint a disturbing picture of Caribbean males as one of the groups of learners most at risk for academic failure, especially in the area of literacy.

This chapter presents the findings emerging based on the investigation conducted and data collected. Detailed insights into the themes discovered through the data analysis will be explored as an attempt is made to formulate answers to the central research questions initially developed to guide the study.

### **Findings**

The findings presented are representative of themes identified based on the analysis of data from both the individual interviews and the focus group session conducted. Several themes emerged from the data analysis process. The themes that will be subsequently discussed are participants’ national and personal identities, relevance in relation to theatre, movement, music, and the digital world, the element of agency as reflected through choice and variation in the literacy classroom, interest and motivation, the view of literacy as vital, and finally the importance of literacy in determining success. The above mentioned-themes discovered through the data analysis and evidence to

support same will be presented in detail throughout the remainder of this chapter. The final section presents a discussion of the interrelations existing between the themes and a summary of the data collected.

### **National and Personal Identities**

National pride and the connection to identity bore relevance to the needs, lived experiences, and interests of the participants. These were significant to the achievement of the participants and related to the literacy practices they valued. For instance, when participants were asked what thoughts first came to their minds when they heard the words reading and literacy, the first three words that participants stated were poetry, creativity, and history. These elements of literacy are all socially constructed and hinge on the self and the situated and lived Caribbean contexts in which these individuals were connected.

All participants had a strong sense of identity as reflected in their choices with regard to literacy practices. Literacy practices were based not only on interests but also on participants' sociocultural identity. All participants had a strong sense of identity and Caribbean heritage. This connection was evident in the choices they made, especially in regard to reading materials and music. For example, one participant articulated a strong interest in Black history which he attributed to the way he was raised and the sense of national pride which was instilled in him from childhood within the Caribbean classroom. Dillon, in referring to the way he was brought up, stated,

Just the way I was brought up ... you learn about Norman Manley, Marcus Garvey, Nanny of the maroons. It gives you a sense of pride not just for the national heroes of my country but in Black people in general. That makes you

want to know more about other stuff, like other stuff that relates. In a sense my interest in philosophy came from my interest in Black history because I wanted to know more about what other people thought or other ideas that people had.

(Dillon, Transcript, p. 4)

This comment by Dillon shows that his interests as a reader were linked to his heritage and the ideals and history which he felt a close connection to as a person of Caribbean heritage. The way his reading practices were shaped by his cultural ties showed evidence of the role that culture can play in kindling literacy practices and even literacy interests.

All four men also expressed an interest in music that was associated with the Caribbean, such as reggae and soca. Furthermore, participants indicated an admiration for Caribbean musicians such as Bob Marley and Berres Hammond. Such expressed interests and admiration reveal cultural ties to the Caribbean, bonds that were still evident within the lived literacy practices of the participants.

Sheldon affirmed,

The songs/the music that I listen to; I listen to reggae, soca all of that. I think that's probably where my urge to be poetic came from listening to artists such as Bob Marley, Berres Hammond. (Sheldon, Transcript, p. 12)

Sheldon further related his efforts at poetry to his identity. In one instance for example Sheldon describes his poetry as an expression of self. He explains that he uses writing as a tool to release his emotions and feelings. He states, "I have been writing a few times getting out how I feel ... Most of it is emotion, if I'm sad, if I'm angry, if I'm happy" (Transcript, p. 9).

Dillon similarly related his compositions to his identity connecting his poetry to his interest in Black history. In explaining more about what he writes in terms of poetry, he states, “yeah the poetry is spoken word and that comes from me reading so much Black history, I guess” (Transcript, p. 2). The way composition is used by both Dillon and Sheldon as a means of self-expression indicates that their identity is at play in terms of their literacy practices. The study focused on the Caribbean male attempting to establish connections between male identity and ideologies of reading. Clear connections were seen between the participants’ national and personal identities and their ideologies of reading but issues specific to gender were not clearly established in the data.

**Vocabulary.** In discussing the idea of identity in the literacy class, Sheldon shared an incident that occurred in his class during his period of transitioning from the Caribbean educational context to the Canadian. This incident gives evidence of one of the roadblocks to learning immigrant students can potentially face in the literacy classroom. Sheldon notes that he was always taught to ask questions when he was unsure of something that was said, and when he tried to be true to that in the literacy classroom as a transitioning student he was made to feel “out of place.” Sheldon stated,

My English teacher said to bring a duo-tang to class and I had no idea what a duo-tang was and so I put up my hand because my aunt, my mom and my dad always taught me to put up my hand if I didn’t know what the question is, so I asked him what is a duo-tang and his reaction wasn’t what I was expecting because I was just asking him a question, and he thought I was playing around and trying to be a class clown. He got upset and started yelling at me in the middle of the class and so I kind of got upset too so I just stooped down and sat down in my seat.

Basically what I am trying to get at is that some of the words I had never heard of when I was in grade 6 because I don't think we have duo-tangs or agendas where I am from. (Sheldon, Transcript, p. 10)

In referencing the situation described above in the focus group discussion Sheldon explained that the situation made him feel out of place.

He expected me to know what a duo-tang was because I didn't he probably felt like I was being a class clown. Cause he felt that, I thought that I should know. This made me feel like why should I even be questioning so I just sit back down ... then basically tattletaled and told my mom, thought that was the best thing to do at the moment. So that kind of made me feel out of place. He didn't really put me out of place. I kind of put myself out of place for asking the question what a duo-tang was". (Sheldon, Transcript, pp. 18–19)

This moment made him question himself. Sheldon's narrated story provides evidence of the multiple situations the participants described as disconnect between their identity as Caribbean learners and the practices they engaged in and what was expected of them in terms of both actions and knowledge in the Canadian literacy classroom. Sheldon as a young immigrant student did not possess the knowledge of certain words which may have been familiar to the other children in his class. This scenario concurs well with the ideas of Barakett and Cleghorn (2008), who note that the very language and texts of schools reflect the interests, values, and tastes of dominant power groups, of which Sheldon as a visible minority was not a member. Sheldon was a new immigrant and explained that where he emigrated from the term duo-tang was not part of his vocabulary. The teacher, one may infer based on his reaction, did not take these cultural

differences into consideration and so misinterpreted Sheldon's question. As Ware (2006) argues, if attention is not paid to cultural issues such as these it ultimately creates a mismatch between school culture and the culture of students, creating the potential for misunderstanding of action and misinterpretation of communication between teachers and students.

**Connections to classmates.** Dillon, in exploring the link between identity and classroom practices, notes the importance of feeling connected to his classmates as a crucial antecedent to literacy engagement. In his case, such a peer connection was not felt, and this lack of shared identity significantly hindered his motivation as well as his actual class participation. He explained,

There have been times when I have been in a class and I'm the only Black kid, it doesn't mess up my identity there but it reduces my participation because I am less motivated to give out my opinion and talk because there's not people I can relate to, it's less comfortable. In a sense I didn't get all I could out of the class because of who my classmates were. That's not their fault at all, that's my fault but it is what it is. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 18)

Dillon felt aware of his racial difference in the classroom and as a result chose to keep his ideas and opinions to himself. In my graduate student experience in Canada, even as an adult I recall similar feelings. I was conscious of my difference to my classmates, being the only Caribbean student in most of my classes. I was aware of my accent, my different ways of speaking, my different sets of experiences, and many times preferred to remain silent rather than share my opinions and ideas. This shows further how my own context

like that of Dillon, had an impact on my literacy practices and the identities I performed in the classroom.

Nigel explains that his experiences in the Canadian classroom were very different from his experiences at home. This bears weight in explaining how his identity impacted his actions in the classroom.

It's kind of way different. You are used to hearing your parents talking different ways and when you go into a Canadian classroom you might say something you say to your parents normally and they [the teachers] will correct you and you would say Oh I forgot I was saying that to you and you would have to correct it for the teacher to understand. (Nigel, Transcript, p. 21)

In speaking with his parents Nigel used Creole English, which is the language of the home in most Caribbean families. In Nigel's experience his out-of-school context is connected to his national identity, but he noted that he had to remember to keep this part of himself separate from the classroom context so as to avoid being misunderstood or avoid having himself "corrected" by his teachers. The participants narrated stories help to present a disconnect between home and school literacy practices, and the research findings hint that a serious issue for the Caribbean male in the Canadian educational context relates to the disconnect between cultural identity and literacy practices. Research by authors such as Egbo (2009) and Vygotsky (1978) show that situations where this disconnect exists can potentially hinder students' progress because they view learning as active and social in nature, bearing relevance to interactions with the world.

**Relevance: Theatre, Movement, Music, and the Digital World**

Relevance was one of those issues which were central to discussions held with participants. Relevance in the literacy classroom was explained by participants as being a classroom context that bore connections to real life and embraced the movement away from rote memorization and working with texts just at the literal or surface level. For example, Dillon stated,

In high school especially in my senior year I felt that in the English class, a lot of the topics we did were irrelevant... I think that an English course should teach the students how to write better, how to do critical reading. I don't feel like that course did that. Basically all you had to do was remember. So we'd read a book and then the test would give us questions about the book, what happened. I feel like all you had to do for that is just remember. If you had a good memory you would ace the course but that doesn't necessarily mean that you are good at English or you can read critically or have proper grammar or write a proper thesis statement. All you had to do was remember that's what I mean about irrelevant.  
(Dillon, Transcript, p. 2)

Dillon's statements above hint that he desired more from his literacy classes. He was interested in digging for deeper meaning, wanting to make greater connections between literacy and life in his classroom. Perhaps, Dillon's desires for more impactful literacy learning opportunities is evidence of Kirkland's (2011) assertion that reading for Black males is an ideological act and that the teaching of reading for these males should be in accordance with their ideologies of reading.

Participants in this study perceived the literacy classroom and school in general as being too separate from the real world. The men felt that school should not just be about regurgitating facts but should incorporate elements of the real world and tasks that happen within it so as to make the schooling experience more meaningful and authentic. The participants wanted the literacy classroom to reflect as, Ball and Freedman (2004) explain, their ideologies, which is their present interests and past experiences. For example, in stating how literacy classes could be made more relevant to his life as a Caribbean male, Omar suggested, “Connect it to real life. Everybody is living life; everybody knows what life is all about so connect it to it” (Transcript, p. 19). This issue of making school content relevant to the participants’ lives was a major discussion point throughout the data collection phase, and one participant refocused the discussion repeatedly through the interviews and focus group session.

Research today highlights many stereotypes surrounding boys and reading. The participants in this study aid in refuting this claim as they were all avid readers, reporting varied reading interests outside of school including the news, philosophy, Black history, urban and mystery novels, sports, cars, and Black entertainment. Participants were of the opinion, like that of Kirkland (2011), however that their interests, needs, and identities as male Caribbean learners in the Canadian classroom context were not met because the texts used in schools were failing to engage them. The participants saw little or no connections between what they practiced at home and at school. One participant had an interest in Black history, which he noted connected with his identity and the stories of national heroes he was brought up listening to in the Caribbean. He claimed that his interest in Black history was not met in the classroom, to use his words, “not even close.”

In further discussions during the focus group he accounted for this situation as probably tying in with the history of Canada. He explained, “Black people do play a role but not as prominent a role as the English or French. So I guess that has to do with it, but even still, not close.” (Transcript, p. 4).

During the same discussion in the individual interview surrounding the issue of possible ways to make the curriculum more relevant to their needs as Caribbean males, this same participant made a rather strong statement which showed the lesser significance he assigned himself as a member of the Caribbean community here in Canada. Dillon stated,

I would hope that there would be some content that as Caribbeans we can relate to but I don't see how they would factor it in, given their culture ... in their defense I don't see how it would be smoothly factored in. And then taking into consideration the kids who were born and grew up here, to factor it in for them too I don't see how it could be done. It would be nice to have content about that in classes where they gave examples from situations in the Caribbean and a Caribbean child sitting there would be like, oh I grew up there or I was born there or my parents lived there, maybe they could know something more about it. I could go home and talk to them. They would be more interested in the class but I am not sure how they would be able to do it. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 5)

The data collected were powerful in that this participant could not see clearly how content that reflected him as a Caribbean youth could be included within the curriculum or daily classroom encounters in a meaningful way. There was a strong feeling expressed that the culture of Canada was separate from his culture and a way of bridging that gap

between the two could not be realistically seen. Despite the disconnect felt between the two cultures, all participants were able to suggest meaningful ways through which the literacy classroom could be made more relevant to their needs, interests, and identity as male students of Caribbean heritage operating within the Canadian educational context. The examples they gave of relevant activities were activities they thought they could connect to or activities used with them in the past that they found to be meaningful and engaged them as learners. Dillon in these discussions gave a very practical suggestion as to how language arts classes could be made more relevant to young Black learners like himself. It was evident in his suggestion that he desired more content that was aligned with his interests in music, the focus point of his suggestion being hip hop.

In high school we always study Shakespeare and I say Shakespeare is brilliant and that's no problem at all but hip hop and rap is an art form; it's an art form that in the last 20 years has become more relevant than Shakespeare and it's not every aspect of hip hop that's drugs, money and girls. There's actually some relevant topics in there, why not use the educational forms of it. It's more relevant than Shakespeare. If you go out on the street and play a song they will recognize it before they recognize a piece from Shakespeare. It's more relevant so why not do that. That would make a lot of people more interested. I am sure some of the same points you could find in a Shakespeare monologue, you would find in a verse if the teacher was willing to put in the work. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 19)

Suggestions such as these give evidence of the links that participants felt should be made between classroom literacy practices and real-world activities and interests. He enjoyed listening to hip hop music, so his example connects both to his interest in music

and ultimately with his identity as a Black male (hip hop being a prominent genre of music in Black culture). Relevance in the classroom for this participant was not merely a means of connecting to real life but it was also a means of connecting to his interests and identity.

**Modes.** In recalled “favorite moments” in their literacy classes, the participants offered additional ways to connect curriculum to real-life contexts. For example, Sheldon recalled an instance where he was given the opportunity in one class to create a book which gave details of events surrounding a relationship he was involved in with a girl. The book he noted “basically went step by step through all the events we did” (Transcript, p. 10). The connection to real-life here made Sheldon more engaged in the learning situation and affected his success in this class positively as his book was used by the teacher as an “example to others of how a book should be done” (Transcript, p. 10).

Hull and Schultz (2001) in their review of research conducted on bridging the gap between students’ school literacy practices and their out-of-school literacies asked, “how might out of school identities, social practices and the literacies that they recruit be leveraged in the classroom?” (p. 603). Sheldon’s example is a definite example of one way a classroom teacher answered this question. Kress (1997) and Wohlwend (2009) note that literacy research depicts children’s interaction with texts no matter the form as semiotic, multimodal, and social as children draw on their everyday discourse to navigate their ways into academic discussions (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Sheldon’s experience in writing the book he describes allowed him to draw from his everyday discourse to make connections to his academic endeavours and this made him more engaged and successful in the literacy encounter. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that the

construction of our knowledge is linked to our interactions with the world around. He states further that in order for knowledge to be meaningful it must be relevant to the experiences and meaning system of the learner. Sheldon's teacher allowed Sheldon to construct meaningful knowledge on writing a book by allowing Sheldon to use his personal experiences to navigate his literacy assignment.

Theatre and movement is another important element of Caribbean heritage. Theatre and movement is seen and appreciated in many aspects of Caribbean life, incorporated into musical presentations, comedy, and a variety of theatrical productions. For example, annual calypso competitions during Carnival incorporate drama to help transmit the messages within the music. Folk music, which is a form of music passed on through generations, incorporates theatre and movement into their presentations. Schools in the Caribbean encourage this element of theatre at various times of the year through school competitions which use storytelling as a means of expression. In addition, storytelling is an everyday aspect of life; simple retellings of a situation incorporate drama and movement as persons often use their hands and actions to emphasize events they would have encountered.

Omar reaffirmed this affinity for theatre and movement in his recalled favourite literacy sessions that involved hands-on experiences, like drama. Omar explained that he felt more engaged because "it was more hands on, you were actually doing something rather than just reading and going over whatever you read. You were actually getting to do something" (Transcript, p. 7). Similarly, Nigel noted that he was able to relate more to classes that were hands on and involved movement, stating that although he enjoys

English, some of the classes bored him when they involved only sitting, reading, and writing.

I enjoy it but sometimes I just want to get it over with. Because sometimes I am in class and I don't like sitting around. I like doing something at the same time, not just sitting and writing ... well it's just for English class that's basically what you have to do, other classes its more movement, that's what I choose for my classes, it's more moving, hands on things. Now if it's a project that's a different story. I would enjoy doing a project because I am doing a lot of different things at the same time. (Nigel, Transcript, p. 22)

Dillon shared an example of a time in which the class was given the task of working in groups to interpret a set of poems. Dillon shared that although each group had the same poem, every single group had a different interpretation. Dillon noted that the exercise was meaningful and memorable because, as he stated, activities like this “help you to relate to life in general ... you get to see how people think differently and how people can have different ideas” (Transcript, p. 3). These examples given by participants demonstrated that their literacy experiences were made more meaningful when given the opportunity to immerse themselves and their perspectives into the situation on a deeper level. The findings suggest that for the participants, as Vygotsky (1978) asserts, giving of themselves and emerging themselves directly into the learning context made the experience more relevant and hence subsequently more meaningful as the experiences were never forgotten and stuck out for them as most memorable.

Dillon sums up the idea of relevance well through his thoughts surrounding the role schools should play in reaching students on the real-life level in the literacy

classroom. Although he sees school as vital in an individual's life, he believes that schools are failing in their mandate of preparing students for the real world. Dillon suggests that the format of high school should change to be more reflective of real-life contexts so as to reach all students on an individual level.

I think school in general, high school doesn't prepare you for the real world at all.

I feel that high school is too much based off of memory and studying and not enough on teaching you how to think properly, like solve problems in situations.

The majority of tests in high school is study for this and if you study and remember you will get a good grade. There's not enough of you get a situation and solve this problem because that's what happens in the real world. You have situations and you need to solve them, you need to learn the right way to solve situations and problems so I don't think high school at all prepares you enough for the real world, either a Caribbean student or a normal Canadian student.

(Dillon, Transcript, p. 13)

These views expressed by Dillon relay his strong feeling surrounding what he believed the literacy classroom and school in general should provide for students. As evident in his response, Dillon saw opportunities to engage in problem solving and critical thinking within the classroom context as a means of bridging the gap between literacy and the real world making classes more relevant to students' lived realities.

Griner (2012) expounds that culturally responsive practices in classrooms have been depicted by a broad research base as an effective means of addressing the achievement gap and the disproportionate representation of certain groups of students as low achievers. Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive pedagogy as teaching "to and

through [students'] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments" (p. 26). Making classrooms more responsive to the strengths, capabilities, needs, interests, and identity of all students, not just themselves as Caribbean learners but students of all backgrounds, was a point strongly agreed upon by all participants.

### **Agency: Choice and Variation**

In addition to relevance, incorporating the element of choice and variation into the classroom context was found to be a theme in the data collected. The participants desired agency. They wanted some measure of control, input, and power as students in the classroom. All four participants agreed that choice was of critical significance in this regard. They saw choice as a potential means of giving them as male Caribbean students improved chances of having their needs, interests, and identity catered to in the Canadian classroom. The data collected suggested that participants viewed choice in regard to reading and writing as an important factor in their engagement as learners. The right to choose, some participants felt, was not a luxury they were afforded in classrooms, especially at the high school level. The data did not give insights into why there was a lack of choice in literacy classrooms. Such insights would have been helpful in understanding the rationale behind what participants viewed as a rigid class structure directed by teachers' choices. This lack of choice deterred some participants from enjoying English/Language Arts classes and was a barrier to their appreciation of the course despite the value they ascribed to it.

Caribbean students come to school with vast funds of knowledge and literacy traditions passed on through their homes and communities. Children as Purcell-Gates et

al. (2011) claim use this knowledge as they begin formal instruction in educational setting. It is imperative that those who work in the field of education be culturally responsive, actively learning about the family and community literacy practices of children and finding ways to encourage children to incorporate these funds of knowledge (Moll et al.,1992) into classroom encounters. The element of choice allows students to incorporate more of their knowledge, interests, and identity into learning endeavours allowing them to showcase more aspects of who they are and the knowledge they possess as individuals. When teachers are cognizant of this fact, it allows for a classroom that values a broad base of literacy practices that are not solely school based but incorporate home- and community-based literacy practices.

For instance, Omar in commenting on why English/Language Arts was not one of his favourite classes explains that the issue of choice was a strong factor. Omar stated,

Just the whole way it was pretty much set up especially in high school, we didn't get to choose what books we wanted to read. We had to stay by specific books that they wanted us to read. That was one of the reasons why I didn't like it so much. (Omar, Transcript, p. 7)

When asked what he thought would have made his experiences in the literacy classroom better, Omar's response indicates that being given more choices would have impacted his engagement and affection for the subject greatly. Omar stated, "Well if we got to choose what we wanted to read and pretty much got to write about that, rather than what they wanted" (Transcript, p. 7). Omar here, as the evidence indicates, wanted to make an input in the classroom decisions; he desired agency. He felt that choice in this regard would have enhanced his appreciation for the subject and influenced his engagement positively.

For instance, Omar enjoys reading the newspaper and articles about cars and sports, but he notes that these interests were not filtered in as part of the choices he was given in relation to reading material in school.

The men believed that school did not bridge the gap between home and school literacies because of lack of choice. Participants felt that school and home literacies were distinct from each other because their interests catered to at home due to free choice were not catered to at school. Classroom literacies were not generally based on their interests, and these personal interests were seen as a chief element in guiding the literacy choices they made at home.

For instance, Omar in discussing the bridging of gaps between home and school literacies states,

No they always picked out especially in high school, picked out what you were supposed to read rather than you picking out what you wanted to read and doing an essay on it. I don't think that they pretty much bridged that gap or that they actually covered your interests at what you do at home or what you read at home, in school. (Omar, Transcript, pp. 14-15)

Home literacy practices differed among participants, depicting that each individual was unique and had varied personal interests which impacted their literacy choices. These practices included news, urban and mystery novels, books on cars, Black history, philosophy, Black entertainment, listening to rap, hip hop, and reggae, sports, internet surfing, just to name a few. These variations show that even though students shared a common heritage it could not be presupposed that their interests would be necessarily similar.

Choice in terms of writing was also mentioned, as one participant noted that he struggled with literacy because of the rigidity of the writing structure expected of him and the types of topics about which he was assigned to write. Omar stated, “Yeah the topics and how they wanted it, it had to be structured in a specific way and so it was kind of hard to get accustomed to that” (Transcript, p. 7).

The data collected showed for the most part that although choice was desired in school life it was not often the reality, especially at high school. Despite their strong desire for some measure of control, input, and power in the classroom, the participants seemed compliant with the system as it was. The data do not show if they ever spoke up about their feelings in the classroom or asked their teachers to try another approach. It would have been helpful to gain insights into how they were responding to this lack of agency in the classroom.

One participant however, Sheldon, did not agree completely on the element of choice as not always being afforded to students. He explained that in some classes choice was given, explaining that you would get to choose your own book to do a book report on, and in those cases he agrees that those choices he made would be based on his interests. It would have been insightful if the data had showed why Sheldon’s teachers allowed some measure of choice and the others did not. Did offering choice in that classroom inspire greater engagement among those students? Was the teacher aware of the effect choice could have on her students’ participation in class? The data do not offer answers to these questions or suggestions as to why Sheldon’s experience was different from the others’.

Participants desired choice not only in terms of the topics for reading and writing in the literacy class but also choice in regard to courses that related to their identity as male Caribbean learners. One participant with experience at the tertiary level noted that at the higher level there were courses available which tied in more with one's identity. Identity here is shown to be a factor in the element of choice. For example, Dillon in discussing having his cultural identity tie in with the school context states,

In university now or in college you can go to a class where you know you will, you can take African Studies, you can take media, you can take classes that you feel you can relate to. In high school it is a lot harder .... No racism intended but for a White person they don't have to go and find something to relate to in school, it's all there but for a Black person you have to go and find something. You have to put out the effort to find something you can relate to. It's not just offered to you. You have to go and make the effort to find it. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 14)

This participant was of the opinion that it was hard to find things that tied in with his identity during high school: materials which engaged him on the cultural level. He felt that more choice could have been offered to students at this level or more integrated into the experience that he could have related with and made connections with his identity. Dillon had to make an effort on his own time to interact with material that connected with his cultural background. Dillon ascribed cultural connections to different classes he encountered at the university level. He felt that in the case of Blacks these connections were hard to find as there were not many culturally relevant classes to choose from in comparison to Whites. It would have been interesting to explore further

Dillon's understanding of the identities of Whites and his ideas surrounding why he felt they did not have to work as hard to look for connections as Blacks had to.

### **Interest and Motivation**

While all the participants reported a vast array of interests in terms of home literacies, those interests were not mirrored in the school system. Participants saw engagement in reading as being tied to interest, and throughout the data collected both in the focus group session and in the individual interview alike reference was made to the importance of there being established a connection between literacy practices and learners' interests. The idea of interests was central to themes already discussed (the themes of relevance and agency), but because of its centrality to the data collected, it is being explored as a theme on its own. This is because the overlap between interest and other themes presented earlier points to its significance in the context of literacy practices in the classroom. One participant, Dillon, noted that in one of his courses he discovered that he was just going through the motions and felt himself struggling. Upon assessing the situation and searching within himself he realized that he was struggling because of a "lack of interest" (Transcript, p. 3). Another participant, Omar, shared how interest affected his literacy practices. Omar's comment gave evidence of the impact of interest on his willingness to read and his engagement with the whole process. Omar stated,

If I am reading something that I want to read then it's more engaging, you tend to be into it more than something you don't like reading and you don't feel like you want to be reading at the moment. It all stems out to how you're feeling and if you like what you're reading. (Omar, Transcript, p. 8)

Dillon notes similarly that interest was also at the heart of his literacy practices indicating a connection between interest and engagement. Interest, the data suggest, could be generated because of a need to increase knowledge on a particular topic or even for the sake of entertainment. They were all subsumed under interests however. Dillon stated,

When I read it's split between my interests like when I would pick up a novel because I am interested in it or because there's something I want to know so if I want to know more about a certain topic I will go get that ... It's divided between that and entertainment for me where reading is concerned. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 17)

Nigel notes similarly that when choosing reading material he looks for something that would "catch" (Transcript, p. 21) him, referring in this instance to something that interests him. He also notes that he is sometimes motivated by the interests of his peers, noting that if someone said they enjoyed a particular book he might look towards that book as a possible choice for reading. He stated, "When I am reading I would read the first or last page and try to find something that would catch me and if it does I would continue reading or I would hear somebody talking about the book, how good it is and then I would read it" (Transcript, p. 21). In another instance, relating reading to his cultural heritage, Nigel shared that at times he would look to find reading material that related to the stories he heard his family retell at home. The Caribbean has a rich oral tradition and as such many traditional stories have been handed down through generations. These stories focus on many characters, but chief amongst these is the legacy of Anansi the spider man, half spider and half man. Anansi is a greedy, cunning, and mischievous character who often outsmarts his fellow animal friends with trickery

and wit. Nigel states that these stories are a part of his cultural heritage and were told to him by his parents so at times he would try to find books like these to read. Nigel explains “Stories that your parents tell you, you hear them often so you try to find books that tells a lot of stories that would be close to the stories that your parents told you, like Anansi and them” (Transcript, p. 21).

In terms of interest, the data further reveal that the teacher had a significant role to play in stimulating interest. Sheldon used an interesting analogy to explain his thoughts on interests relating it to feeling a connection with a girl. Sheldon stated,

If there’s not really a connection you’re not really going to want to go to that point. It’s like me seeing a girl. If she’s not showing me the right things for me to be interested in her then I am not going to go toward her ... a teacher sees the interest for something she likes but it may not be the same thing I like. (Sheldon, Transcript, p. 15)

The situation above showed that in class, if the course content was based on the teacher’s interests or choices alone, it could potentially deter the students’ interests. The comparison to courting a girl is an interesting one as it makes the participant’s point quite clear. His interest in pursuing that girl would be based to some extent on the things she showed him to capture his interests. If his interests were not captivated he would not want to pursue her. This allows the point to be made that capturing students’ interests in the classroom is important as it produces engagement and a desire for participation. However, Dillon noted that even if course content was not in relation to his personal interests the teachers played a pivotal role as their presentation of the topic could

stimulate interest that wasn't there before and in so doing broaden his scope. Dillon stated,

There were times like for example in my writers craft class in grade 12, there were times when something in class interested me enough for it to be something that I did at home by myself. We did a section of it in class and because of that I wanted to learn more about it so it became an interest for me at home. That happened but whereas something I am interested in for them to cover it at school, that never happened. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 15)

Teachers also aid in stimulating interests when they establish greater personal connections with each child. This is difficult in larger classrooms, but in a classroom with a manageable number of students a close-knit relationship with students must be cultivated so as to learn the signs of each individual student's engagement in literacy in the classroom. In the individual interview Nigel stated, "The only time I was struggling was when the classes were a large amount so the teacher would less see you but when I got to grade 10 and 11 that's when the classes got a little smaller so I connected more with the teacher and understood them more" (Transcript, p. 20). The relationship with the teacher in a class can therefore both positively and negatively influence a child's interest or motivation in the classroom. Dillon noted an instance where a negative experience with a teacher which should have deterred him actually acted as a positive influence, allowing him to keep striving for good grades in a particular class. Dillon explains,

One time I got a good grade on a test and the teacher was surprised. That really made me angry. In a sense it benefited me because it motivated me to keep doing

well so I could shut her up, make her feel bad. But yeah I think I got 92 on a test and she was like she picked up the paper and she was like oh Dillon, oh really this is yours. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 18)

The teacher's surprise at Dillon's good grade allows for the inference to be made that she positioned Dillon in a certain way. Her positioning of Dillon was disturbed when she saw his grade.

Interest and motivation are therefore key elements in ensuring each child in the classroom remains engaged. Motivation and interest can be sourced from virtually any source and is based on the individual. It is therefore difficult to suggest a list of topics or issues that would motivate or be of interest to the Caribbean student as each individual, though sharing a common cultural bond, is unique. One individual's interest or source of motivation may therefore be different from that of another individual. If however the teacher is sensitive to what is occurring around him or her it may be a means through which he or she can discover ways of motivating and meeting the interests of the Caribbean child.

### **Not Just Helpful, Vital**

Education is highly valued in Caribbean society and the home and likewise the community endeavour to teach youngsters the merit that is always present in a sound education. Slinger Francisco, whose stage name is The Mighty Sparrow, is one of the Caribbean region's most famous calypsonians. In the lyrics of the song "Education is essential" sung by Francisco (2002), The Mighty Sparrow summarizes well why education is valued in the Caribbean and what it is believed to do for Caribbean people.

Children go to school and learn well

Otherwise later on in life you will catch real hell  
 Without an education in your head  
 Your whole life will be misery  
 You better off dead  
 There is simply no room in this whole wide world  
 For an uneducated little boy or girl  
 Don't allow idle companions to lead you astray  
 To earn tomorrow you have to learn today

Likewise, Peters (1997), whose stage name is Gypsy, used the art form of calypso to speak more specifically to the issue of the Caribbean male and the value of gaining an education in his song "Little Black Boy."

Little Black boy, go to school and learn  
 Little Black boy, show some concern  
 Little Black boy, education is the key  
 To get you off the streets and off poverty

All participants likewise expressed strong beliefs surrounding the power of education and more specifically the importance of literacy. Their discussions provided insights into and meaningful indicators of the ideologies of reading they held and the way in which those ideologies exerted influence on their literacy practices. The data collected depicts reading as being of vast importance to all the participants and one which they interpreted as being worthy of giving emphasis to at all levels of the school system.

The discussion on the importance of reading took place in the focus group session and asked participants to discuss their beliefs surrounding reading or ideologies

of reading. These ideologies, though similar, depicted a few differences. While Dillon ascribed the importance of reading to future success in the job market, Sheldon expanded on this idea, noting that reading was not only necessary for jobs that required intellectuals as Dillon had noted but was needed in every type of career. Omar explored reading however, in light of the information it gave to the reader. Information which Dillon added was permanent and could not be taken from you, a value he recalled his mother teaching him as a child. Participants saw reading as not just a helpful component of life but as something that is vital. Vital in regard to the knowledge it transfers to the individual and vital in relation to its potential to determine future success, not only academic success but, what seemed most important to them, success in regard to achieving life and career goals.

For instance, Dillon in discussing his beliefs surrounding literacy emphatically stated, “I just feel it’s necessary, not even necessary, vital. It’s extremely important” (Transcript, p. 16). Likewise, in a previous conversation in the individual interview Dillon noted similarly, “I feel it’s very important. I don’t feel it’s stressed enough in school, not even in just high school but in primary school, in middle school, in elementary school” (Transcript, p. 4 ). The ability to read is ascribed great importance in Caribbean society, and most parents ensure that that they pass on the value of reading to their children. Even though a child may be a struggling reader he or she can articulate the importance of reading.

During the individual interviews, participants in discussing the vitality and importance of reading related it to what it gave them as readers: increased vocabulary, the ability to write well and articulate clearly, and its general ability to add to their

knowledge base as readers because of the vast information it provided. The data collected pointed specifically to participants' beliefs surrounding the power reading gave them as readers and the influence that they saw that power having on their success, not merely as students but in all aspects of their daily life. For instance Omar in agreeing that reading was vital stated, "In anything you read, you gather information and information is always needed in any aspect of life, so you should actually want to go out and grasp as much information as possible. I totally agree that reading is vital" (Transcript, p. 17). Dillon stated further,

My mom used to always tell me that, they can take your money, they can take your clothes but they can't take your education. Make sure you get that because they can't take that from you. It gives you something that is always forever going to be with you. Once you have it, you have it. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 17)

Statements such as these reflected throughout the data collected provided evidence of the ways that literacies shaped the participants' identity. Such statements also showcased participants' strong beliefs surrounding education and the value they placed on it as individuals and the subsequent impact that they saw it having, not just on their classroom endeavours but their daily lives. They saw the information gained through their literacy practices as something permanent, something that could not be shifted once it was placed into their memories. Their ideologies of literacy were grounded in these beliefs and impacted in many ways their literacy practices.

When asked to articulate how their beliefs about reading and literacy guided their literacy practices, it was evident that there was some measure of underlying influence in

this regard as the evidence dictates that participants' ideologies of reading motivated them to read and be more engaged in the process. For example, Dillon stated,

When I read something not a novel necessarily but if I read like an article or something and I find out something that I had no idea about I feel left out. I feel like wait this whole time I didn't know about this and so I feel like what else is there that I don't know about, what else is there that's going over my head that I should know that I don't. And so it motivates me to want to read more things, just so that I can know more about it. If I am in a conversation with people and they are talking about something that sounds interesting and I can't be in the conversation because I am not exposed to what they know I will feel left out, I'll feel like I am at a disadvantage so that motivates me to read more too. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 5)

Dillon's ideology of reading as vital is clear in this example, just as the way in which these ideologies influenced his literacy practices are also clear. Dillon's comments hint at an element of competitiveness in that he did not like feeling that others were versed in a topic he knew little about, and rather than let himself feel powerless in such a situation he would look to reading to fill this information void. His belief in the power of the knowledge that reading gave to him motivated him to read so that he would erase the sense of feeling left out caused by a lack of knowledge on particular topics he may have known little of in comparison to his peers. Dillon obviously saw power in knowledge, and that power he saw as being connected to reading as he noted that he would read to fill the gaps in his knowledge as he discovered them. In a subsequent conversation the power Dillon ascribed to the knowledge reading gave to him and the way this quest for

knowledge influenced his literacy practices was made even clearer. He cited the fact that he would read to learn about things he wasn't necessarily interested in just so that he could be able to relate on a greater level with those around him who were an important part of his life. Dillon stated,

I might not even be interested in it but because there is a need for me to have it, for example, if somebody I want to have a relationship with knows a lot about this subject so I need to have a relationship with this person it will be good if I knew a lot about it so I am going to read that. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 17)

Dillon's reading ideologies exerted influence on his literacy practices. This feeling of powerlessness that Dillon felt did not transfer however. One other participant however, in noting why he would choose certain types of books, explained that he would read a book if he heard someone talking about how good that book was. Nigel states, "I would hear somebody talking about the book, how good it is and then I would read it" (Transcript, p. 21). The rationale behind Nigel's choice does not convey a sense of powerlessness as Dillon's response did, but does connect as it shows that Nigel was willing to make a choice to pick up a book so as to be able to share in the experience of his peers.

Other participants' literacy practice, the data, suggested was also influenced by their beliefs in terms of reading. Sheldon for instance stated,

I keep going back to this but me being poetic sometimes I use the same words over and over and when you read you learn new words to use, you learn new meanings, new definitions and so you take what you've learnt through reading and put it into something that you do on your own time like a hobby. I feel like

that influenced me to read more, in order to make more meaning, to make more sense and make the poetry more meaningful. (Sheldon, Transcript, p. 12)

Sheldon's belief surrounding the vital essence of reading as a means of expanding his vocabulary led him to read more so that the knowledge he gained through reading could be transferred to his everyday hobby of writing poetry. He felt that his poetry was more meaningful and enriched as a result. All the data collected points to participants' strong ideologies of reading and the influence that these ideologies exerted on literacy practices not only in regard to school but in regard to staying informed for social encounters and even transferring to hobbies. Reading was seen to be of vital importance, and that importance ascribed to reading affected motivation to read and reading engagement.

### **Literacy: A Determinant of Success**

Participants' views of literacy as vital, although shown above as integral to classroom engagement and literacy practices in general extended, beyond just the constructs of the classroom. Evidence gathered suggested that participants held the strong belief that the choices they made within school in terms of literacy exerted an effect on their school success but also played a major role in shaping their future success. These beliefs were partly because of the stories they were told by family and community members. In general, participants' ideologies of reading pointed to their belief in the power literacy held as a determinant of their achieving career and life goals and subsequently the type of future they would have access to. For instance, Sheldon referring to reading stated, "It can lead you to a whole lot of other opportunities in life"

(Transcript, p. 12). In a subsequent conversation in the focus group discussion he noted further,

In most jobs you need to read. Like me, if I want to be a pilot I'd have to be able to read a map ... you need reading if you want to be a journalist; you need reading if you want to be a rapper; you need reading. (Sheldon, Transcript, p. 16)

Sheldon's position on the importance he ascribed to reading as a determinant of future access to the job market was clear. Reading was seen as being needed across the spectrum of all careers, from ones that involved extensive reading and writing, such as journalism, to those that focused on performance and stage presence, such as rapping.

Dillon expressing similar feeling stated,

Especially for the day and age we live in now, where more and more in the job market an intellectual is being looked at as a necessity for a job; whereas in years gone by a high school degree wasn't even needed. You could leave high school and get a practical job. Now that that's the turn its making where companies are looking for intellectuals and people that are educated then in a sense now I feel like it's even more important than ever before. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 16)

Comments such as the one above reflect that participants held reading in high esteem, as links were clearly established between literacy, education, and future success. Links between reading and education were established in the data; even though the questions asked surrounded literacy, participants kept interchanging the term for education. Reading, the data reflects, was clearly seen as vital for success in the future and so maintaining good grades in the literacy classroom was viewed as a potential way of increasing the likelihood of this success in regard to one's future endeavours.

The issue of grades as a measure of success kept resurfacing, both in the individual interviews and in the subsequent focus group session. The quality of the literacy grade was viewed as a pivotal element in determining one's future. In discussions on the relevance of literacy classes, one participant brought up the idea of grades, making the claim that your literacy grade determined your future in a big way and was very important.

The importance of attaining a good grade seemed to be the major marker of success for the participants. Personal growth and understanding of a topic were not cited by participants as evidence of success. This could be an issue relative to their ideologies/identities and the power ascribed to grades. Data showed participants' willingness and drive to "make that grade" even though compromise was sometimes deemed necessary. The importance of the grade and doing well was expressed often and shown to be a factor in the participants' classroom efforts. The sense of sometimes compromising for the sake of doing well was felt, as all participants agreed that in many instances you tried hard to do well and get that grade despite the assignment not being within your realm of interest and despite your being asked to do something that went contrary to your identity and the ideals you held as an individual. Participants summed it up basically as "at the end of the day, everybody is trying to get a good grade." Dillon in responding to staying true to his identity in the classroom stated,

Sometimes you can't for a grade. For example, in college last semester, I took a philosophy course and I had to write a paper about God and philosophy. I knew what the professor wanted to hear. I wanted a good grade so I wrote what he wanted to hear; not necessarily what I believe, not necessarily what I feel is true

but for that grade. In discussions you can, in discussions it's important that you stay true because you're graded on your participation so you can be true to yourself but for that mark I didn't feel I did but I felt it was necessary. (Dillon, Transcript, p. 18)

The Caribbean is a very religious society and many individuals, although they may not be avid church goers, have a reverence for God and the teachings of the church. The paper Dillon had to write went against these deep-seated beliefs taught to him since childhood. He had to make a choice between writing a paper he knew went against his religious beliefs, which he felt would ensure him a good grade, and submitting a paper that went contrary to what he felt the teacher wanted to hear. Dillon chose to write the paper which he felt gave him the chance of a higher grade. His choice to write the paper as the teacher asked and not argue his position had to do with his respect for the authority of the teacher in the classroom and his desire to succeed in the class despite the teaching and the assignment being against his own thinking on the subject. He gave the teacher what he wanted to hear. This hinges on something that is part of Caribbean school culture in that arguing against the point of view of the teacher in the Caribbean classroom may be viewed as disrespect for authority.

While none of the other participants shared similar experiences, Omar noted an incident in high school where he was asked to do something which he felt went against his idea of masculinity as he had to pretend to be a girl in a dramatic presentation in class. He did not want to do it but did it for the grade. He wanted to do well in the class. He didn't argue with the decision that he should play the role but simply did it because he

wanted to succeed in the class. He felt that if he had not accepted the role he would have not got a good grade in that class.

Dillon and Omar both made the decision to explore new positions in both assignments. These positions were new to both of them and seemingly went against what they believed to be, but they did it out of a desire for success. These experiences however are etched in their memories because of the mental battle it possibly caused them as the decisions to comply with the requests of the teachers were made. Indeed, identities are flexible, and in exploring these new positions their decisions became a part of their multilayered identities.

Omar used a sports analogy to sum up the idea of reading and doing what was expected of you in class to ensure a good grade despite the requirements being outside of your interests.

It's just like if somebody says they don't like one sport but they like another sport. You're going to play harder at the sport you like rather than the sport you don't like. I don't like tennis so I wouldn't play hard at tennis but if I'm playing basketball I would play hard because I like that. It does kind of affect most people but from my standpoint everyone is trying to get a good grade. You would still try hard but you would do better if you actually had something that interested you.

(Omar, Transcript, p. 16)

These comments by Omar showed a link between interest and success. Omar, although saying that his interest played a role in his efforts within a class, noted quite clearly that despite the course not being within his interests he would still try hard to ensure that he gets a good grade and does well. Caribbean males are very competitive and, much like

the sports analogy used, aim hard for success not only in sports but in many aspects of their lives. In many instances their interests vary and their focus tends to lie where their interests are, but Omar states that he may not be motivated by the subject itself but may be motivated by the thought of success. Dillon, in expressing similar ideas in the focus group session, expanded on the same sports analogy used by Omar. He stated further,

If somebody told me the only way I would ever get to play basketball is if I played tennis and did well then I'm going to try really hard at tennis because I know that that's the only way I'd get to do that, even though I don't have no interest in tennis at all. That's the same thing even if I didn't have any interest in that course if I knew that me doing well in this course would allow me to reach somewhere else that I wanted to go, even if I hate that course I am going to try to do well in it. (Omar, Transcript, p. 16)

Data collected thus suggests that participants would make the effort to complete literacy tasks and stay afloat in the literacy classroom for the sake of doing well so that the possibilities for their future accomplishments could be enhanced. There is, as the evidence collected suggests, an underlying willingness to succeed in the future embedded in participants' literacy practices. Participants viewed education as a bridge to their success in the future, one which they had an increased chance of having if they fought to maintain good grades.

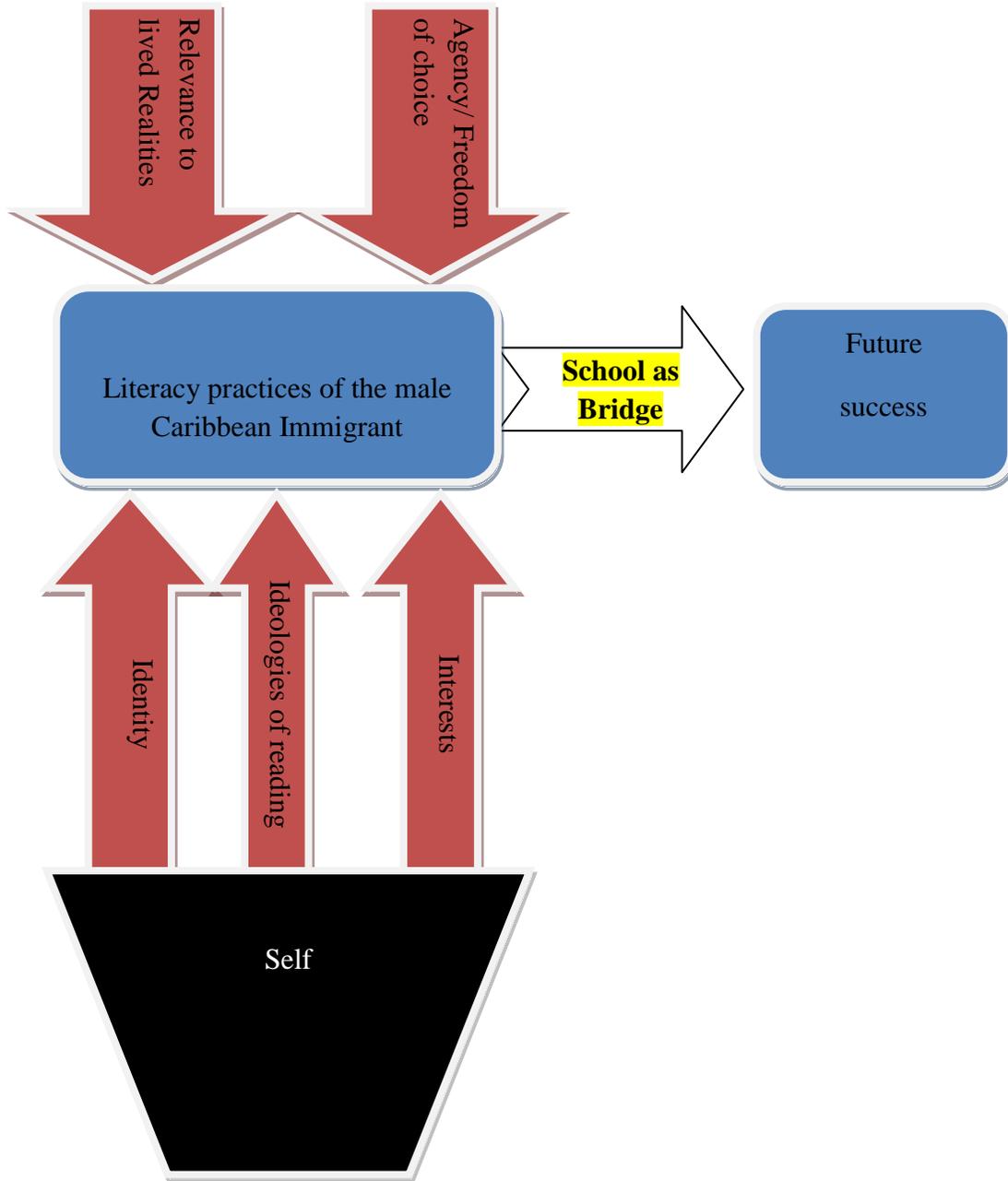
There is a level of disconnect however as participants such as Omar, although he possessed such strong beliefs about the power of reading and the willingness to work hard, did not have good grades in literacy. Dillon however described his literacy grade as good and shows an interest in working hard at the subject throughout the data collected.

Participants showed that willingness to pursue success despite their having to make compromises in terms of both their interests as learners and their identity. The data thus demonstrate that participants' ideology of reading as a determinant of future success influenced their literacy practices, as they would make extra efforts to succeed in that class despite potential hindrances. From my experiences as a teacher however, I have noted that this motivation to succeed alone does not guarantee success, as frustration may set in and deter efforts at success at a particular subject if repeated efforts do not yield success. Efforts at success therefore wane, and sometimes students give in to defeat and lose their zeal. It is up to the educator therefore to recognize efforts made by the students and try to scaffold their learning towards the success they obviously so desire.

### **Interrelations Amongst the Findings**

The major themes discussed thus far are interrelated constructs that help to provide answers to the research questions guiding the study. Integral to the entire study was the issue of literacy practices among male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. These literacy practices, as Figure 1 shows, are supported positively by participants' interests, identity, and ideologies of reading. These elements, the data suggest offered positive support to literacy practices and allowed for the participants to be more engaged in the area of literacy. Significant to this support is the fact that these elements (identity, literacy and ideologies) as the diagram clearly indicates, are deeply rooted in expressions of self and what participants held close to their heart as readers.

The research analysis and findings demonstrate that these participants' literacy experiences were impacted by issues of lack of relevance and choice, negatively impacting their literacy learning in the Canadian classroom. This is depicted in Figure 1



*Figure 1.* Details of the interrelations existing between the literacy practices of male Caribbean immigrant and the self.

as relevance and choice are seen as pushing against literacy practices. Being made to function in a situation where literacy expectations are not relevant to participants' needs, interests, and ideologies of reading and situations where participants are not given choices in regard to making their learning applicable to their needs was found to be a factor in negatively impacting literacy practices among Caribbean students. This can result in loss of motivation and interest in the literacy classroom. This weakening of literacy practice can ultimately damage the bridge which participants saw their literacy practices within school as connecting them to: future success both academically and occupationally.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the themes found to be overlapping throughout the data. Each theme presented is an important element which was formed based on my interactions as a researcher with this rather complex case, one which had many variables at play within it. The data collected, as the presentation of the findings indicates, gave great insight into the complexities of the phenomenon under study.

Literacy practices among Caribbean males, as the data collected suggested, was found to be influenced by the interests, identity, and ideologies of reading of these individuals of Caribbean heritage. Classrooms were found to be lacking in regard to catering to these elements of influence. It was thought by participants that classes needed to be more connected to their lived experiences as students of Caribbean heritage. Participants believed that this could be achieved if educators got to know them more as students and further allowed them some measure of agency in regard to the selection of reading and writing material in class and even in some instances, course selection.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY**

### **FINDINGS**

The issue of “boys’ achievement” is still a very prevalent discussion in educational circles today. Gurian (2002) expounds that many boys are successful at school. The argument made by Martino (2008) is that in addition to asking questions such as why boys fail in literacy achievement, the question of which boys are failing and subsequently which boys are succeeding must be entertained. Froese-Germain (2006) supports this focus by suggesting that educators need to carefully consider which boys are not doing well as opposed to assuming that all boys are encountering difficulties.

This qualitative study with an interview design explored the literacy experiences of four male Caribbean immigrants and so focused on one of the groups of male learners who are often portrayed as “atrisk” of encountering difficulties in the classroom. The research study specifically sought to provide insight into these experiences so as to explore the possible links between the remembered literacy practices and discursive identities of students of Caribbean heritage. The results of the study sensitize the reader to the interplay between the literacy practices and discursive identities of the group of four participants studied. This chapter will present a summary of the study conducted; it will discuss the knowledge claims made in the findings presented; it will delve into the implications of these findings for practice, theory, and further research; and last it will give final words of conclusion.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This study sought to investigate the longstanding educational issue of male achievement, not by focusing on the entire male population but by looking specifically at

the male Caribbean immigrant population in Canada. The emphasis of this study was not on this group's underachievement as was found to be the case of focus in many previous studies of this nature. It did however zoom in on the sample's remembered literacy practices and educational experiences in the hope of adding to the research on how achievement could be attained and maintained among this particular subgroup of males.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

Qualitative research was chosen as the methodological framework of this study. An interview design was utilized in keeping with the researcher's intent to maximize opportunities for participants' voices to be heard in as natural and comfortable a setting as possible throughout data collection.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Strategies**

Data were collected through two forms of interviewing: semistructured interviews with each participants and a focus group session in which all participants were interviewed as a group and asked a number of open-ended questions. The data collected through these means were analyzed via inductive thematic analysis which yielded several themes. These themes are at the heart of the knowledge claims made in presenting the findings and will be highlighted in the discussions to follow in this chapter.

### **Synopsis of the Results of the Study**

The analysis of the results through the methods outlined above yielded themes that suggested that ideologies of reading, identity, and interests all exerted influence on the literacy practices and engagement of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada.

**Ideologies of reading.** Study results indicated that ideologies of reading were an important element impacting students' engagement in the literacy classroom. Reading

was perceived as being vital, especially in relation to what it provided to the reader: information, an extended knowledge base in regard to vocabulary learning, and a means of enhancing reading and writing skills. Literacy was also perceived as playing a role in determining future academic and occupational success. These ideologies of reading were found to influence reading engagement and participation, as the data demonstrate that participants worked harder during literacy classes as they saw the grade they got there as pivotal to their future success. Even though the class may have been outside the scope of their interests, the study participants noted that they worked at it with the hope of achieving success not only for the present but for the future.

A disconnect was observed however because, despite positive ideologies of school and schooling practices surrounding literacy, the males studied sometimes encountered difficulties in the literacy classroom. The participants found it difficult to connect with classroom content due to what they described as assignments and materials being rigidly assigned outside of their scope of interest. This allowed for feelings of disengagement at times in the learning environment.

**Relevance and choice.** Participation and engagement were encouraged when classroom content was found to be relevant to the participants' lived realities and when personal choice was factored into the classroom experience. Participants found that they were more engaged in classroom contexts that were real and authentic.

Home and school literacies were seen as two distinct sets of practices. Home literacies were varied based on the uniqueness of each participant and based on personal interests and choice. School literacies hinged, however, on the teacher's choice, often outside the realm of the participants' interests. Factoring in the element of choice

participants felt could potentially increase their engagement in the classroom, giving them the opportunity to bridge their home and school literacies. Participants' desires regarding bridging home and school contexts were not often found to be the case based on their encounters in the literacy classroom, and so a disconnect was cited between their beliefs surrounding what school should be and how it was actually practiced.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The findings of this study give insights into the ways that four Caribbean males perceived school and encountered literacy practices in Canada. It provides evidence for school success for this particular group: Black Caribbean males. Ideologies of reading, identity, and interests all influenced literacy practices positively. However, if school literacies were seen as irrelevant to these elements, literacy engagement and practice could suffer. Identity, interests, and reading ideologies were found to have direct bearing on the motivation and engagement of male learners of Caribbean heritage. The participants' ideologies surrounding literacy and education continue to shape their identities and their drive towards pursuit of higher education. One participant is at the university level presently, another just finished college and is employed, another just finished high school and is employed trying to save money with the intent of going back to school in the near future, and another is in his final year of high school and hopes to continue his education after that. Participants' schooling experiences and their individual struggles within the classroom have not deterred them from the desire to pursue education beyond the secondary level. There is an obvious value placed on education, as their choice to want to pursue higher education proves. It took me as the researcher 10 years of working, dreaming, and saving to finally return to school at the university level

to earn a bachelor's degree, but the desire to achieve this goal inspired through home and community encounters was never extinguished. Each person's experience is different, but for the most part high value is ascribed to education in Caribbean society.

### **Identity and Ideology Reflected in Literacy Practices**

The findings of this study personify McLean's (2011) position that Caribbean immigrant students are reflective of issues of identity, literacy, and culture in the classroom. The research focused on giving Caribbean males a voice within which they could freely discuss their educational experiences, illuminating the many issues in the educational journey to be made visible

**Ideologies of reading.** McLean (2011) in her discussions notes that an individual's identity is reflective of his/her expressions of self, his/her sense of who he/she is as determined by historical, social, and cultural contexts. The identity of students of Caribbean heritage is reflective of each of these contexts (historical, social, and cultural). Each context intertwines with the next to exert an influence on such individuals' ideological stance surrounding literacy and their ensuing literacy practices as Black males. Identity, as Lewis et al. (2007) highlight plays a major role in the way one engages with a variety of texts and the literacy practices one uses and understands. Purcell-Gates (1989) furthered that whatever children learn about literacy before starting formal education is shaped by traditions within their communities as well as the demands of their everyday lives. Children in turn, Purcell-Gates et al. (2011) claim, take this knowledge with them as they begin formal instruction in educational setting.

Kirkland (2011) in a study of Derrick, which formed part of a larger ethnographic study, claims that for young Black males reading was in correspondence with "those sets

of belief-influenced practices that intersect with the cosmologies of identity: belief about one's self and one's place in the world and possibilities for acting" (p. 199).

Reading for the Black male, as Kirkland asserts, is complex in that it centers on the self and as such is an ideological act. The participants of this study noted that they desired connections to be made between school and life, a classroom experience that was authentic not synthetic. The participants had a wide range of out-of-school literacy practices which included interests in sports, news, music, poetry, Black history, cars, and others topics, interests not often reflected in the classroom. The four participants also brought cultural capital to the classroom which was valued in their communities inclusive of respect for authority figures, subtletics of language, a rich oral tradition inclusive of many traditional stories, national pride, respect for self and others, and many other elements of culture. It was the participants' desire for these to be incorporated into the classroom experience. Their remembered literacy practices in school however show that it was a rare event when they felt what they brought to the classroom was valuable enough to be incorporated into the learning context.

**Reading as an expression of self.** All the themes associated with the data collected in this study point to participants' ideologies of reading and the way in which these ideologies allowed them to see themselves as Caribbean learners in the Canadian classroom. The findings of the study demonstrated how these ideologies influenced the group's reading practices. Participants saw reading as an expression of the self, both the internal self and the external self: the internal self in regard to the connection seen between reading, personal interest, and identity and the external self in regard to the desire held for reading to be linked to their lived realities as individuals. Like the

participants in Kirkland's (2011) study, the participants of this study were more engaged with texts which represented their view of the world around them, their interests, and identity, indicative of the connections they made between the internal and external self and the act of reading and literacy. Three of the four participants demonstrated this connection of literacy to self through their engagement with the writing of poetry and music. Participants' personal engagement with these avenues of expression allowed them to use literacy to express emotions and speak out on issues that affected their daily lives. These avenues of expression have been a popular means of speaking out since the years of slavery when African slaves in the Caribbean region used drums, music, and chants to speak, in a discreet fashion, against the injustices they faced. Today it is common to see many popular Caribbean poets and authors use poetry and drama to speak on current events and matters affecting the region. Music is also often used as an avenue to express thoughts surrounding various societal issues affecting individuals and their communities. The participants likewise used the writing of poetry and music as a means of self-expression.

**Value of literacy.** This study found that participants' beliefs surrounding the importance of reading influenced their literacy practices and engagement. It was found that participants ascribed great value to literacy and viewed reading specifically as a vital element of life. In addition, literacy was also viewed as a determinant of future success. The study participants viewed reading as linked to achieving their future goals not only academically but also occupationally. Literacy was even used interchangeably by participants for the term education, pointing to the weight they ascribed to it.

Research indicates that the educational aspirations of both first and second generation immigrants tend to be high, reflective of the role such students see education as playing in linking them to social and economic goals (Glick & White, 2003; Krahn & Taylor, 2005; OECD, 2005). Immigrant adolescents Krahn and Taylor (2005) claim generally value the importance of education and invest considerable effort in their studies at school. This is often the case as immigrant students are taught in their homes and communities that education is the means out of their present circumstances and is the pathway to success and a better life. Education is often highlighted in the home as a means of not enduring the hardships which parents, grandparents, and other family members may have had to endure in their life journey. Despite the focus of this study being literacy, this research quite interestingly contributes to such existing bodies of knowledge surrounding immigrants' high educational aspiration. This support was gained as participants throughout the data collected often used the term literacy interchangeably with education. This gave insight into their educational aspirations and the power they saw embedded in education as a route to their achieving life and career goals.

**Making the grade.** Great worth was ascribed to the literacy grade, and participants shared a willingness to make compromises so as to make that grade a good one. They expressed willingness to work hard to attain a good grade despite the activities for a given session being outside of their realm of interest or identities. There were times when activities or assignments conflicted with their ideas on religion, as in one example given, or their ideas surrounding masculinity, as in another example provided; but rather than speak up and share their point of view they did the assignments for the grade. At the

heart of such compromise is not only the desire for success but more so the ideal held by many Caribbean students that authority must be respected. In the Caribbean, speaking against the views of the teacher can be looked upon as disrespect and defiance, and many Caribbean immigrants may fear that they would be misinterpreted should they speak their opinion in regard to assignment selection openly in the presence of the teacher. One participant noted that he would give his opinion in informal class discussions, but where a written class assignment was concerned he would try to adhere as closely as possible to the expectations of the teacher. This shows that though the student's point of view conflicted with the expectations of the teacher he chose to keep his views to himself for fear of not meeting the teacher's expectations in the assignment.

The worth the participants ascribed to the literacy grade as a determinant of their future allowed them to work harder in the course and strive for success. The focus on future goals, which they viewed the literacy grade as allowing them to come closer to, hints at the educational aspirations they possessed: aspirations which they tried to hold on to by getting good grades. The participants still encountered struggles in the literacy classroom depicting a disconnect between the value they ascribed to literacy and their actual performance in the literacy classroom. They each encountered struggles in the literacy classroom in a variety of ways. Two students shared openly that these struggles affected their performance negatively in the literacy classroom but shared further that they still kept pressing on because they knew the importance of literacy. This disconnect therefore did not seem to deter them from continuing to strive for success in the midst of their individual struggles.

## **New Literacy Studies and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) credit new cultural, technological, and economic conditions arising largely out of globalization as playing a role in generating what is referred to as “New Literacies.” Efforts have been made by the research community to embrace shifts in the conceptions of literacy as more than just a “page bound practice” (Danzak, 2011, p.188). The reconceptualization of literacy frameworks has evolved in past years through the sociocultural framework of new literacy studies and the ensuing shift in literacy from being heavily focused on the acquisition of skills towards the idea of literacy as a social practice (Gee, 1991; Morrell, 2008; Street, 1984, 1996). Literacy researchers Kress’s (1997) and Wohlwend’s (2009) claim depicts children’s interactions with texts as being semiotic in nature, multimodal, and social since children according to Genishi and Dyson (2009) and Vygotsky (1978) draw on their everyday discourse to navigate their way into classroom encounters. In this view, Heath (1994) suggests that literacy is deeply rooted in culture. These changes, although embraced by many in the world of academia, seem to be slow in penetrating the walls of schools and affecting the necessary revolution needed in literacy classrooms to make them reflective of these new ideologies of literacy.

Kozol (2008) illustrates that there are many injustices that impact our education system: unequal distribution of resources, underachievement of racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students and the disproportionate representation of such students. These injustices Griner (2012) argues leads to a divide between home and school culture. Schools and teachers who adopt culturally relevant teaching have the potential to act as change agents in their respective schools to help bridge this divide and

ensure more equitable schooling experiences for racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students (Kraft, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive pedagogy is described by Gay (2010) as teaching “to and through [students] personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities and their prior accomplishments” (p. 26). Culturally responsive teaching, Irvine (2009) further explains, views the acceptance and incorporation of the cultural traits and behaviours that students bring into the classroom as central to teaching and learning.

**Relevance to lives and interests.** Participants of this study are students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have grown up in the era of changing conceptions of literacy. The study results depict classrooms that reflect little relevance to the lives and interests of some of the students within those classes. Here in this study, the four Caribbean males desired a classroom that incorporated the element of personal choice in regard to reading material, writing material, and course selection. This element of choice in the classroom, participants viewed as a means of connecting classroom content to their interests, needs, and lived realities. This study and these results direct one to question how far we have travelled along the path of acceptance of these new conceptions of literacy and how much classrooms have actually changed to reflect such in relation to culturally relevant pedagogy and practice.

The study participants in their cry for a literacy classroom that afforded them relevance to their lives and interests seem to be searching for literacy to engage them, as Flynt and Brozo (2010) would articulate, beyond the functional level. Participants desired different modes and genres of texts, culturally infused and relevant to their lived realities and interests and further opportunities to engage with literacy at a critical level. These

desires for a literacy classroom are in keeping with Gee's (1999, 2008, 2011) conception of literacy as all activities inside and outside school, highlighting the relationship which should exist between people's literacy practices and their personal actions, behaviours, beliefs, values, and discourses. Participants spoke of school as being based too much on memory, not catering to their interests, and not connected enough to the real world. It is evident therefore that there was some measure of disconnect for them between their lived realities and their school realities.

Genishi and Dyson (2009) argue that there are distressingly few classrooms and curricula which empower students to learn about or through language by affording them the choice to utilize in the learning context what they already know. Researchers such as Genishi and Dyson argue that this situation as it exists in classrooms today is constraining and as such should be revisited. The unique histories of learners and what they are capable of doing both inside and outside of the classroom must be taken into account and must be given space to blossom and bloom in the classroom.

**Disconnects between home and school literacies.** Theorists such as Bandura (1986) and Bruner (1986) expound that students construct knowledge by building on previous cultural experiences, values, and beliefs (Elliott & Woloshyn, 2013). Researchers such as Morrell (2008) therefore claim that, in response, literacy researchers have progressed throughout the years to conduct research that is more culturally and socially situated. Morrell indicates that research through these lenses has highlighted a mismatch between home and school literacies as an issue to consider in the incidence of academic underachievement among certain groups. This may be a factor which needs to

be considered in the case of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada, as this study highlights.

In this study, a mismatch was evident between participants' home and school literacies. The participating males described sophisticated literacy practices at home, including appreciation for a variety of genres of music, connections to traditional stories, love for composition (namely poetry and music, drama, sports), interactions on social media and the internet, interest in world events as featured in the news, and a desire for knowledge surrounding current events. These literacy encounters reflected their interests and identity, but they were quick to point out that these interests were not always valued at school. As discussed by Sfard (1998), how individuals make meaning cannot be seen as separate from their context, experiences, and relationships. This statement by Sfard concurs well with the findings of this study as the four participants did not see themselves as separate from their context, experiences, or relationships. This was evident in their desire for classrooms to be more culturally infused and relevant to their lived realities.

Hull and Schultz (2001), in their review of research conducted on bridging the gap between students' school and home literacies, asked the question, "How might out of school identities, social practices and the literacies that they recruit be leveraged in the classroom?" (p. 603). The findings of this study provide insights into answering this question. For example, participants suggested that what is done in the classroom be made more meaningful by establishing authentic links between class content and their lived realities as students. The participants further discussed the importance of utilizing different modes and genres of texts in class and providing opportunities to engage with

literacy at the critical level. These suggestions for the literacy classroom highlight ways greater connections can be established between students' social lives and school literacies.

The participating males in this study were all avid readers but did not find that there was a match existing between their home literacy practices and what was expected of them in terms of their school literacies. Vasudevan and Wissman (2011) point out that many students have school literacies that reflect low test scores, placements in remedial classes and labels such as 'reluctant readers', 'below grade level', and 'at risk; however ethnographic research provides contrasting images of these very same young people successfully navigating a range of sign systems, including print, outside of school. (p. 99)

The recalled experiences of the participants confer such images of the "at-risk" Black male are still prominent in the Canadian literacy classroom. This image fails to incorporate the strengths, assets, and accomplishments of the home literacies of these participants.

**Engaging youth.** Alvermann and Marshall (2008) explain that research often acknowledges that young people regardless of race or gender are active readers and writers who engage in vast social worlds with a range of literacies. In classrooms today Kirkland (2011) argues therefore that it is not a situation in which youth are failing to engage texts but rather a situation in which the texts used in schools are failing to engage youth. Similarly, participants in this study noted that many of the texts used at school were not engaging, as they were not found to be within their scope of interest and identity as learners of Caribbean heritage. Participants therefore viewed choice as a means of

changing these circumstances, making literacy classes more meaningful and relevant to them as Caribbean learners.

Cooks and Ball (2009) note several useful strategies which if used in the classroom would engage youth through an effort to build on the literacy resources and literacy ideologies they bring to the learning context. The strategies suggested by Cooks and Ball include: (a) establishing connections between home and school literacies; (b) including literacy community practice in classroom encounters; (c) engaging students in work as critical ethnographers of their personal and home literacy practices; (d) utilizing critical language pedagogy within the classroom setting. Intrinsic to each of these strategies is bridging the gap between home and school literacies, fostering greater engagement among students in the classroom.

Vasudevan and Wissman (2011) cite several studies done (Knobel, 2001; O'Brien, 2006; Staples, 2008) which inquired into distinctions made between in-school and out-of-school literacies and examined the role such disconnects played in the separation seen to exist between youths' lives and literacies in and out of school. It is noted by Mahar (2003) that when teachers design opportunities to engage the out-of-school history and fonts of knowledge students carry with them, classrooms can become more inclusive. The students of Caribbean heritage in this study were seeking this type of classroom. The recommendations they made in regard to choice and relevance align well with suggestions made to achieve this in the research highlighted. They asked for classes to be more practical, involve drama and role play, real-life scenarios, critical reading and writing, more choice in relation to texts used and writing styles, and increased opportunities to work in groups to interpret texts based on personal experiences. These

recommendations, if incorporated into today's classroom, can lead to greater engagement among students in today's classroom.

### **Critical Theory and the Links to Relevance and Choice**

This study is framed within the ideological perspectives of critical theory. Siegel and Fernandez (2002) outline critical theory as having two major thrusts which lean towards a critique of positivism and a focus on the relationship that should exist between theory and society. Schools, in embracing critical theory, reject the notion of the school and the teacher as the lone font of knowledge in the classroom. Instead schools which adhere to this framework view each learner as bringing a unique perspective to the learning context based on their individual experiences as learners. Viewing education through the critical theory lens is, as Siegel and Fernandez purport, a means of connecting “institutions, the activities of daily life, and the forces that shape the larger society” (p. 68).

**Questioning literacy frameworks in the classroom.** Reading from a critical literacy perspective is grounded in Freire's (1983) stance that making meaning involves much more than just decoding language but is more a process preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Critical literacy, as Luke and Woods (2009) claim, therefore provides a way for teachers and students to “reconnect literacy with everyday life and with an education that entails debate, argument, and action over social, cultural, and economic issues that matter” (p. 16). Critical literacy approaches have been found to be successful in classrooms today because language and reality are viewed as interwoven; therefore critical reading of a text allows for relations to be made between texts and the reader's context (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2011). The findings of this

study allow for the consideration to be made that many classrooms still lack in their scope of what literacy practices in the classroom should entail, despite the value ascribed to critical literacy within the past decades. This can be said as participants described the language class as one based “too much off of memory” and not enough on critical reading, solving problems, and teaching the reader how to think in the context of the real world. Each of these stated desires by the participants aligns with the definition of critical literacy and is useful in allowing one to question literacy frameworks adopted in the participants’ literacy classrooms.

**Whose culture has capital?** In today’s society, because of the work of theorists such as Bourdieu (1977), there is often reference to the term cultural capital, and in classroom situations such as those described by the participants many questions can be asked. Is the culture students bring to the classroom counted as capital in the classroom context? Whose culture is seen as having capital? Whose capital does the school promote? These questions are ones which seem natural to ask in the case of Caribbean immigrants to Canada, this group of learners being very much among the minority in the Canadian classroom.

Every learner, as Bourdieu ascribes, brings rich cultural capital to the classroom (Fowler, 1997). Researchers such as Brooks and Thomson (2005) argue however that many classrooms do not value, acknowledge, or use the cultural capital of some groups of students, resulting in these students feeling like they have no acceptable means of expressing themselves in the school setting. Situations such as these all conspire against some groups of learners, causing frustration, resentment, resistance, alienation, and disenchantment with school, negatively impacting students’ academic progress.

In schools there are many factors which work against children who are not representative of the dominant group. In this study, English language arts classes were described as places in which the teacher held the reins of power and that this power dictated what occurred in the classroom. This is confirmed by the picture painted by the four participants of a literacy classroom where their interests were not always catered to, one whose content often seemed culturally irrelevant, and one in which personal choice was not often the reality.

The Caribbean learners in this study did not see themselves, as minority students, reflected in daily classroom processes. They worked to achieve despite what could be viewed by many as roadblocks to their learning. The scenarios shared in which participants did not feel that the literacy classroom catered to their interests and identity or connected with their daily lives leaves one to ponder on the idea of whose interests and identity the systems they were a part of catered to and in so doing examine how the system favoured one group of learners over the other or put one group at an unnecessary advantage over another.

Critical approaches to the study of literacy instruction examine ways in which literacy instruction can play a role in continuously reproducing persistent inequalities such as these and also how literacy instruction can be utilized as a means of counteracting the status quo (Siegel & Fernandez, 2002). As Genishi and Dyson (2009) purport, we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet we seem stuck in a timeline in which children who embody certain kinds of diversity have become the problem and standardization has become the fix. This fix, Genishi and Dyson claim, should instead be made possible via the establishment of diverse curricula which take into account children's individual

histories, identities, and what they are capable of doing not only within the classroom but outside of it.

**Responding to diversity.** Irvine (2009) advocates for culturally responsive teaching, pedagogies that view the acceptance and incorporation of the cultural traits and behaviours that students bring into the classroom as central to teaching and learning. Culturally responsive teaching Irvine further offers a way of opening up communication across cultural worlds by acknowledging and addressing the cultural needs and literacy practices that all learners bring to the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching is a viable response to diversity in today's classroom as it allows for each student regardless of his/her cultural background or heritage to have equal access to success in the classroom.

By providing a glimpse into the educational experiences of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada, the results of this study demonstrate that more needs to be done to ensure that each of our diverse students feels that sense of connection entering the classroom situation. Disconnects existing between the realities of classroom life and the social encounters of students of Caribbean heritage were a major discussion point focused on in the findings of this study. This bears much relevance to education today as it has direct implications for the teaching and learning of our most diverse members of the student population. Schools must meet the needs of all groups of learners in the classroom, and studies such as these are pertinent as they help to facilitate greater understanding of how such needs can be met.

## **Implications**

This study in its investigations surrounding the academic achievement of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada was guided by a number of research questions. These research questions bore tremendous significance relative to gaining insight into the phenomenon under study. The findings of this research, unraveled through the many themes discussed previously, suggest possible answers to each question which the study sought to answer.

### **Implications for Practice**

The outcomes generated from this study can in a number of specific ways exert some measure of influence or even instigate change in relation to the classroom practice of educators working with the group of males such as the one under study. As such the results infer many implications for practice.

**Connecting home and school literacies.** Elliott and Woloshyn (2013) note that in today's society "the meaning of the term *text* has moved beyond the printed word to include digital text, which is non-linear, multi-modal, and visual" (p. 401). These texts are innovative and interfaced through many technologies. These various kinds of "texts" students interact with outside of school make contributions to the development of their identities, beliefs, values, and worldviews (Luke, 2000).

Participants of this study highlighted that their home and school literacy practices did not always intersect. This disconnect it was evident in the participants responses had a negative impact on classroom engagement. In reaching Caribbean learners and by extension all learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, there needs to be some level of intersection existing between home and school literacy practices. As shown in the

findings presented in this research and the supporting literature, matching home and school literacies can impact students' literacy practices positively and enhance student engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. In this era students engage in many forms of sophisticated literacy practices at home, practices which the classroom needs to find means of incorporating into the learning context. Efforts must be made by educators to integrate these two literacy sites (home and school) so as to maximize learning opportunities for all students.

**Agency: Choice and Variation.** Participants in this study felt strongly that as learners of Caribbean heritage, they should be able to see themselves reflected in the literacy classroom in a deeper sense. The participants shared that this could also occur if they were given some measure of choice in regard to reading materials and writing materials in the literacy context. The students wanted to see themselves reflected in the classroom context by being given the power to choose. Choice was viewed by the participants as a means of bridging the gap between themselves as learners (their interests, accomplishments, identities, and lived realities) and classroom content. Kirkland (2011) encourages educators to think of reading as an extension of self. Engaging the knowledge of self Eva-Woods (2008) views as a viable means of allowing Language Arts classes to be have greater meaning for students. This can be achieved only if students are allowed to become more of an integral stakeholder in classroom learning situations.

**Ideologies of reading.** Ideologies reflect individuals' way of looking at things and impact their engagement and participation in activities such as reading and other activities that are social and cultural in nature (Au, 1997; Jordan, 1999; Moye, Overby,

Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). The research findings pointed to the fact that Caribbean males possessed strong ideologies of reading. The ideologies of reading which Caribbean students possessed allowed them to see reading in a positive light. For the participants of this study, literacy was viewed as vital in regard to the information it had the power to relay and vital in regard to its role in determining their future success. These ideologies of reading were a source of motivation, prompting participants to work hard to achieve good grades in the literacy classroom despite assignments being outside of their realm of interest or identity.

Ideologies of reading were an element in participants' desire to succeed, as they saw literacy as a means of achieving life and career goals. If educators begin to see students as having such deeply seated ideologies and belief systems surrounding literacy, more can be done to assist students in maximizing their potential and so attain the social and economic goals which they see literacy as being a bridge to. Many educators hold negative images of the Black male as disengaged and unmotivated in the learning contexts; such conceptions of the Black male need to be changed to accommodate future change.

### **Implications for Theory**

This study was framed within the ideological perspective of critical theory. McLaren (2000) describes critical theory as “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school and the social and material relations of the wider community, and nation state” (p. 35). Integral to the analysis of the data through a critical theory lens was examining what was hinted to in McLaren's discussions: the way

in which knowledge was produced in the classroom and the relationships which existed between classroom context and the wider world. The findings of the study thus have implications for the support of such a theoretical framework in classrooms of which Caribbean males are a part.

**Critical theory.** Participants of this study perceived a literacy classroom that linked to their real life, promoted problem solving, and allowed them to have some choice in regard to classroom content as having the most value. These perceptions align with a critical perspective of literacy. The participants desired a classroom that was relevant to their lives, one which integrated culture into the learning context and offered texts they could identify with and relate to. Central to participants' discussions was the positive effects they saw such an educational framework having on their engagement and participation. This precept is central to the critical theorists' discussions surrounding the benefits of incorporating critical pedagogy into classrooms.

Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos (2001) identified three dimensions of critical literacy, namely: how texts position the reader, how readers position the text, and last how the text is positioned within the sociopolitical landscape. These three dimensions seemed to be missing in the literacy experiences of the participants. Such changes are necessary to meet the needs of the Caribbean male in the classroom, changes that would allow the voices and perspectives of Caribbean males to be appreciated in a deeper sense.

The findings suggest that despite the changing landscape of literacy and the numerous efforts to change conceptions of literacy in the classroom, educators still have a long way to go in this regard. The picture of the literacy classroom that participants

painted in this study is not one that is in line with new conceptions of literacy as a social practice and one that connects literacy to the practice of life.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The findings presented are a good foundation upon which further research can be built. The present study however had a number of limitations which have implications for future research into the issue at hand and so must be considered.

**Narrowed geographic and demographic pool.** The scope of this research was limited by a narrowed geographic and demographic pool, the focus of the study being on only male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. There are other groups of males which empirical research highlights as being at risk for academic underachievement here in Canada. Further research can broaden the scope of investigation by focusing on a sample that is more representative of the entire population of “at-risk” males. In addition, the geographic pool consisted of individuals within only one region of Canada, which further limited the scope of the investigation. Further research can explore the possibility of expanding the geographic pool allowing it to span more than one geographic region, thus facilitating comparisons to be made across boundaries of space.

**Small research sample.** This research, although providing useful insights into the issue under study, consisted of a very small research sample which included only four participants. The sample size was too small to allow for generalizations of the findings to be made across the entire group of male Caribbean immigrants to Canada. Any attempt to fully understand this issue further should incorporate the use of a more extensive sample representative of the selected group to facilitate theorizing across the entire group of male Caribbean immigrant students in Canada.

**Focus on the Caribbean male.** The research done in Canada specific to the Caribbean male is limited. Focusing on the Caribbean male in future research is essential so as to address the issue of this group of learners' chances of enhanced achievement in the Canadian educational system. This issue needs to be addressed in Canada because as empirical research conducted by Anisef et al. (2010) expounds, students from the Caribbean are most likely to be considered at risk in the Canadian educational framework (33%) and have the highest dropout rates (40%) in comparison to their peers. Therefore it is implied that research such as the one conducted in this study is needed desperately so as to gain insight into ways to address issues surrounding the education of the Caribbean male.

**Time constraints.** This study was delimited by time constraints which allowed for there to be only one individual interview for each participant and one focus group session which consisted of all the participants. Future research can gain greater insight into the issue under investigation through a prolonged research period utilizing multiple interviews of participants and focus group sessions over an elapsed time frame. This prolonged period could potentially add more depth and scope to the research, allowing for deeper insight into the issue as hand.

### **Conclusion**

Immigrants, as highlighted by Anisef et al. (2010), are willing to accommodate the cost of relocating to a new and unfamiliar country to seek out economic advancement, higher standards of living, and greater prospects for their children's educational future, the latter rationale especially important to most immigrants. The prospect for a brighter educational future can be dampened however because empirical

results as showcased by Anisef et al. indicate that immigrant and minority children tend to have more difficulty in school than their peers and be at higher risk of early school leaving and dropouts.

Caribbean students have a dropout rate of 40%, a rate that is higher than that of any of their peers in Canada, and when questioned on the reasons behind their dropout, most of these students cited school factors as a chief influence (Anisef et al. 2010). Academic success leads to greater chances for social and economic success for immigrants, but such success is not in only the immigrant's interest. It is also in the interest of Canada to do all in its power to bridge those gaps which are potential roadblocks to the success of immigrant students like the Caribbean male, as there is always a need for a skilled labour force and an informed citizenry. As such education stakeholders must begin to listen to the voices of immigrant students such as the Caribbean male as a means of discovering ways to broaden the scope of the educational encounter for such students in the Canadian educational framework.

This study focused on hearing such voices from a small sample of Caribbean immigrants to Canada. Canada is a diverse multicultural landscape where each year more and more immigrants are welcomed to form part of this unique and culturally distinct society. The school system must aim to meet the needs of all the diverse learners that are integrated into its educational landscape. As Ball and Freedman (2004) articulate, a diverse classroom population brings a range of perspectives and ideologies to the classroom. These perspectives and ideologies are reflected in the values, beliefs, practices, and experiences of Canada's immigrant population and place the immigrant in

a particularly vulnerable position if these cultural resources are not looked upon as valuable in the classroom.

A vital element in school improvement surrounds the possibility of raising the achievement levels of all underperforming groups of students in schools (Demie, 2001). All students must do well because, as Morrell (2008) indicates, it is important for all members of our population to acquire dominant literacies in order to maximize participation in economic and civil life. In the case of underachieving minority students, more needs to be done so that these students are not forced out of our school systems as a result of marginalization. Minority students, such as the Caribbean student, bring to the classroom cultural capital which must be viewed as assets within the learning context. The perspectives of educators Ball and Freedman (2004) argue must be broadened so that they can be more appreciative of the diverse language and literacy practices students bring with them to the learning context. These broadened perspectives underlie the process of bridging the gap to academic success for minority students, a part of today's school population.

There is a growing consensus among “educators, researchers, policymakers, politicians, and business leaders across political and ideological spectrums that *literacy matters*” (Morrell, 2008, p. 2). In our present time frame where literacy is more important than ever to citizenship, professional employment, and future life pathways, Morrell (2011) argues that we continue to witness persistent gaps in literacy achievement between various cultural groups. This should not be happening in this decade of educational enlightenment and advancement. It is hoped that the findings gathered as a result of this study will reach a large target audience consisting of teachers, education

stakeholders, parents, and anyone who is interested in eliminating gender and racial disparity in education. The ultimate aim of education should be to meet the needs of all learners. In reaching such a large target audience it is hoped that this study will help to provide insight into bridging the gap for all learners in the classroom, especially the selected group, highlighted as most at risk in the educational environment. Devising a more inclusive school environment that would enhance the learning process for all youth should be a major goal of the educational sector. The results of research such as this one can potentially be a vital element in beginning to conceptualize novel ways of achieving this objective.

It is moreover anticipated that this research initiative can begin to “disrupt the discourse on male Caribbean students” and challenge existing notions of “deficiency” based largely on hierarchal models of assessment that are perhaps culturally inapt. In its aim of countering the hegemonic view of the Caribbean male immigrant as “at risk” or “underachieving” in the literacy classroom, this study hopes to create a space for academic dialogue surrounding these students to be revisited.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

Please just tell me a little bit about yourself

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest Educational level: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

Were you born in Canada to Caribbean parents? / Did you immigrate to Canada from the Caribbean? \_\_\_\_\_

If you have immigrated, how long have you lived in Canada?

Which Caribbean country do you have ties with?

Please answer the following questions.

1. Describe what you read, watch, or listen to outside of school.
2. Do you write or compose outside of school? If so, what kinds of materials do you write? Describe their focus.
3. Describe your feelings surrounding the English/Language Arts/literacy classes you attended.
4. Tell me what you remember as some of your favourite activities/sessions in literacy. Describe any classes you really connected with and the reasoning behind those connections.
5. Describe some classes you struggled with? Why?
6. What types of materials interest you most as a reader? How did you find those interests catered to at school?

7. What kinds of reading, writing, viewing happens at home?
8. Describe ways in which your cultural background/heritage plays a role in what you like to read, write, watch or listen to.
9. Describe your beliefs surrounding reading.
10. How do these beliefs influence what you read, when you read, to whom you read?

## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Interview Schedule**

1. When you think about reading and literacy, what thoughts first come to your mind?
2. As a young man how do you feel reading around your Black male friends? Is reading considered a socially accepted practice among young Black males?
3. How does your identity as a Caribbean national influence your interests as a reader?
4. Based on your encounters in the Canadian classroom, describe the connections you observe between your real-life experiences as a student of Caribbean heritage and classroom content/instruction.

How do you see yourself reflected in the curriculum and everyday classroom encounters?

Describe any connections you see bridged between home and school literacies.

How has this affected your engagement and performance in the classroom?

5. What would you say is your ideology of reading (beliefs about reading)?
6. How does this ideology influence what you read, when you read, to whom you read?
7. Describe any changes you think can be made to the Canadian educational framework to make the learning experience more meaningful to you as a Caribbean youth.