

**“LEARNING FROM THE PAST  
Black History and its Meaning for Black Males in the  
Toronto District School Board”**

**by**

**Amy Crystal Paul, M.S.W. Carleton University**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Social Work**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1-20
Introduction of the Issues.....	1
Research Questions.....	2
Statement of Problem.....	2
Historical Background.....	8
Curriculum Concerns.....	15
Conclusion.....	17
CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	21-49
Introduction.....	21
Definition of Terms and Concepts.....	23
Anti-oppression Approach.....	30
Critical Race Theory (CRT).....	32
Afrocentrism.....	34
Literature Review.....	36-48
Black Students' School Related Experiences.....	36
Antiracist Education and Inclusive Schooling.....	40
Internalized Oppression and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.....	42
Consciousness Raising.....	47

Conclusion.....	49
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	50-68
Ethnographic Approach.....	50
Focus Groups.....	51-59
Strengths of Focus Groups.....	53
Limits/Challenges of Focus Groups.....	55
Design of Focus Group Guide.....	56
Recruitment and Composition of Groups.....	58
Implications of Changes to Original Sample.....	59
Strengths and Limits of Recruitment Methods.....	61
Procedure.....	62
Data Analysis.....	64
Credibility and Trustworthiness of Data.....	66
Conclusion.....	67
CHAPTER 4: EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL.....	69-90
Introduction.....	69
Teachers.....	71
History Curriculum.....	80
Low Teacher Expectations and the Self-fulfilling Prophecy.....	87
Conclusion.....	90
CHAPTER 5: PUNISHMENT WITHIN SCHOOL.....	91-116
Introduction.....	91

Prejudice and Suspicion Outside of School.....	91
Disproportionality in School Disciplinary Infractions.....	95
The Ontario Safe Schools Act.....	96
Office Referral.....	100
Suspensions.....	103
Police Involvement at School.....	111
Conclusion.....	115
 CHAPTER 6: BLACK HISTORY.....	 117-136
Introduction.....	117
Curriculum and Consciousness Raising.....	118
Experiences with Black History and Black History Month.....	119-135
Black History in School.....	119
Potential Impacts of Black History.....	125
Black History for All.....	133
Conclusion.....	135
 CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION.....	 137-152
Review of Research Questions.....	137
Research Journey.....	138
Summary of Research Findings.....	140
Limitations and Considerations.....	146
Directions for Future Research.....	147
Implications for Social Work Practice.....	149

<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>152-160</b>
<b>Appendix A: Focus Group Preamble and Guide.....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>Appendix B: Informed Consent Form.....</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Appendix C: Information Letter.....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>Appendix D: Recruitment Poster.....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Appendix E: Focus Group Tips.....</b>	<b>160</b>
 <b>REFERENCES.....</b>	 <b>161-177</b>

## ABSTRACT

For decades, Black male students in Canada have experienced high levels of academic failure, high dropout rates, and disengagement with curriculum. This study utilized a series of three focus groups to examine the school experiences of ten males who attended a school in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Results indicated that participants appreciated supportive, authoritative interactions with teachers and found unsupportive interactions as alienating. Participants felt that the Safe Schools Act reinforced cultural representations of Black males as criminal and threatening and further disengaged at-risk students. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with predominantly Eurocentric curriculum and the quality and quantity of Black history in school; instead they wanted to make critical connections between Black history and the present. They felt such increased Afrocentric curricular content could foster social change for the Black community as well as for White students learning the information. This thesis concludes with directions for future research and implications for social work practice.

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## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

### Introduction of the Issues

We hear the familiar refrains constantly; “learning for life,” “knowledge is power,” and “don’t be a fool, stay in school.” These are powerful messages, yet they only seem to be reaching the ears of certain students. As a group, Black students in Ontario are *not* getting the message and it is affecting their academic futures. Although high school completion rates for Black students are not available, studies done in Toronto over the past few decades have shown that systemic factors such as racism and low socioeconomic status lead to Black youth being streamed into the general and basic levels, leaving school earlier, and dropping out in disproportionate numbers (Cheng, Tsuji, Yau, and Ziegler, 1986; Cheng and Yau, 1999; Cheng, Yau, and Ziegler, 1993; Dei, Holmes, Mazucca, McIsaac, and Campbell, 1995; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine, 1997). When we consider the size of the Black community in Toronto, this issue becomes one of national importance.

According to the 2001 Census, 593,335 Canadians identified themselves as Black (not including the 70,000 who identified themselves as Black with European ancestry) (Statistics Canada, 2001). Toronto is home to nearly half of all Blacks in Canada (Ibid). Furthermore, two out of three Blacks in Canada are under the age of 35 (Ibid). If youth truly are our key to the future, these figures represent a great challenge to the present and future generations of Ontario. It is these challenges that were the impetus for this study. Specifically, I intend to explore some of the factors that may be involved in Black youths’ lag in academic achievement.

Although I am focusing my discussion on Ontario, and Toronto, in particular, these issues are not unique to this region. There is evidence that concerns around Black youth participation in education in Ontario parallel those that exist across Canada in such diverse regions as Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Quebec (Brathwaite and James, 1996). There are myriad factors that lead to Black students' disengagement from education including socioeconomic status, curriculum concerns, peer group influence, parental involvement, systemic discrimination, and quality of schools (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, Rummens, Edny, Michaud, and Cote, 2005). I will attempt to investigate whether there is a possible connection between a curriculum that does not reflect the experiences of Black youth and how this might relate to their disengagement from school; if this is the case I will also look at whether it can also be used as a tool of re-engagement.

### Research Questions

The main research questions then, are: 1) what are experiences of a group of Black males in school and society as racialized persons; 2) what is the current perception of the quality and quantity of instruction on Black history that selected youth in the TDSB are learning in the classroom; and 3) what is the desire (if any) for more Black history in the curriculum and if this desire exists, what type of information is preferred?

### Statement of Problem

Although both young Black males and females are having issues at school some research suggests that the problems facing Black males are more chronic and extreme, and thus deserving of special program and curricular attention (Davis, 2006; Noguera,

2003). To highlight some of these issues I use data from both the U.S. and Canada. In part because the issues in the U.S. are so much more severe, there is a multitude of research on the topic, whereas in Canada there is less current information regarding Black students' performance. This could be related to a number of factors, including government cuts to a number of non-essential services and programs (which could include cuts to research into Black students' poor academic achievement). Although current statistics are not being officially published by TDSB or the Ministry of Education, a number of groups of concerned citizens (including The Urban Alliance on Race Relations, The Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, The Toronto Coalition for Equity in Education, and the Organization of Parents of Black Children, to name a few) recognize the troubling issues that Black students in Canada continue to face in the education system and are spearheading their own research into the issue (Dei, 2005).

It is for these reasons that I begin by outlining some U.S findings and then turn to the Canadian research that is available to highlight the similarities of the issues. In the U.S., by the time African-American boys reach high school, census statistics show that 42 percent will have failed an entire grade at least once and only 18 percent of Black men aged 20-21 are enrolled in college (Few, 2004). For African-American youth in major urban centres, the dropout figures surpass 50, and in some cases, 70 percent (Davis, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

For Black Canadian adolescents, the issues take a similar, yet more subtle direction (see also Yau et al., 1993). Throughout the early and mid-1990s a number of studies were conducted regarding the experiences of Black youth in the education system. The Royal Commission on Learning's 1994 report states that many parents from a

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<sup>1</sup> For additional figures see Davis, 2006; Noguera, 1996; Noguera, 2003.

number of language, ethno-cultural, and racial communities approached them “concerned about lost opportunities: too many of their children are failing, are in special education, or non-university streams, or are dropping out of school” (Royal Commission on Learning, [RCOL] 1994, p. 4). Until late 1993, students entering Grade 9 in the Ontario public school system were placed in three different course levels, based on “academic ability”: the basic or vocational level, the general level, and the advanced level (which included courses leading to university entrance). This process was known as streaming. Many Black parents complained about the practice because it was argued that it limited many Black youths’ opportunities for higher education. Studies have shown that Black students from working-class backgrounds were disproportionately streamed into basic and general programs (Radwanski, 1987, cited in Yau et al., 1993). In September 1993, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training abolished the practice and requested that all Grade 9 classes be destreamed, however “informal streaming” often begins when children enter school (Dei, 1996)

Although there are no comprehensive studies conducted by the Ministry of Education on province-wide achievement patterns based on particular sub-groups of students, individual school boards have conducted their own studies. This data was collected between ten to twenty years ago, and only begins to reflect on some themes of Black youth school performance. In the absence of any school board studies conducted subsequent to 1997, I will use these studies to set the stage for the current research. The Every Secondary Student Survey (ESSS) began in 1970 on a periodic basis, and its ninth

survey was completed in 1997<sup>2</sup> (Cheng and Yau, 1999, p. 1). The first survey emerged from a question posed by the Toronto Board of Education's Special Committee regarding educating new Canadians. This question was "do a disproportionate number of the children of poor people and immigrants go to special classes?" (Wright, 1970, cited in Yau et al., 1993). Aside from capturing the demographics of the students attending Toronto high schools, the survey attempted to ascertain whether students of all backgrounds had equal access to school programs. Over the years, the survey findings suggested that Black students were lagging behind their White and Asian counterparts.

In 1987, the Race Relations Committee requested that the relationships between various student characteristics (including those of socioeconomic status, race, gender, and foreign-born versus Canadian born students) and educational outcomes be examined (Cheng et al., 1991, p. 1). Until 1999 (when the results of the final 1997 ESSS was published) educational achievement data along with information from the ESSS were used to provide a comprehensive picture of factors that might influence unequal outcomes in education in Toronto schools. The ESSS was used to track patterns in education among various groups in order to identify student needs and develop programs to help students of all backgrounds to succeed in school (Ibid). The surveys were handed out in class to be completed by students and had a logical design with quantitative methods (Cheng and Yau, 1999). Information provided from the surveys was used by school board officials in planning programs to help students achieve in school and by community groups to better understand and serve the needs of students (Ibid).

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<sup>2</sup> The Every Secondary Student Surveys were conducted in 1970, 1975 (all elementary and secondary students); 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 (all grade nine students); and 1987 and 1991 (all secondary students) with the final one conducted in 1997 (Cheng and Yau, 1999, p. 1).

Part III of the 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey (Program Level and Student Achievement) conducted by the Toronto Board of Education found a number of startling figures about Black youths' school performance (Yau et al., 1993). At that time the representation of Black students in the general and basic levels was double what it was in the advanced levels; thirty-six percent of Black students were at risk of dropping out of school. While gender was divided more or less equally among males and females in the advanced level, in the general level, males made up almost two-thirds (62%) of that group. A less pronounced gender disparity was also present at the basic level (56% versus 44%). About half of the students in the general and basic levels were at risk of dropping out. Overall, females tended to fare better academically, with 56% of them represented in the two high achievement levels, while 57% of males were in the two lower achievement levels. This pattern was consistent even when taking race into account (Ibid).

In the 1997 Every Secondary Student Survey's Detailed Results section, 53% of the TDSB population was visible minorities, with 10% identified as Black students (Cheng and Yau, 1999, p. 2). This survey employed a class analysis of the data over a race analysis; however, visible minority students were still overrepresented in the low socioeconomic status group at 63% versus 38% (Ibid, p. iii). Studies that have examined the influence of race on socioeconomic status have clearly shown that there is a direct correlation between race and educational attainment, occupation, and income (Colin and Preciphs, 1991). Even when there is no discrepancy relative to the amount of formal education between Whites and other groups, there is still a significant gap in income (Colin, 1987, cited in Colin and Preciphs, 1991; Ogbu, 1978).

In the absence of more recent board-published data about the performance of Black students in the TDSB, these statistics paint a stark picture of the recent history of Black youth in education. The intersection of gender and race become evident in the differing experiences of Black males within school. There is data that suggests that Black males are subject to different experiences in schools than Black females. For example, Black males face heavier surveillance, increased disciplinary measures, violence inside and outside of school, and stereotyping (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997). Of the students Dei et al. (1995) interviewed who had dropped out of school the ratio of males to females was approximately three to two across three Ontario school boards. A number of years later, very little has changed. Visible minority students who are male were more at-risk for dropping out than those who were not visible minority students and female (Ferguson et al., 2005).

Furthermore, Black boys are overrepresented in school disciplinary sanctions (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002). In virtually every study presenting school disciplinary data by gender, boys are referred to the office and receive a range of disciplinary consequences at a significantly higher rate than girls (Ruck and Wortley, 2002; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams, 1997). They display higher prevalence rates for a range of disruptive behaviours including bullying, school violence, theft, lying, conduct disorders, and delinquency (see also Skiba et al., 2002). Often, Canadian research talks about Black students collectively and there is much less research on Blacks in education that looks specifically at gender. In part because of U.S. findings that show that Black males have different, more extreme experiences, I have chosen to



explore this further in a Canadian context, by centering my research on Black males in the TDSB.

After looking at the educational disparities that existed in the 1990s between Blacks and other students it is helpful to explore some of the potential reasons for these differences. I will begin by mapping the historical context from which these contemporary statistics emerge.

### Historical Background

One wonders why the chances of academic success are so dismal for Black male students. There are two possible explanations that are often put forward; one that attends to inherent differences of Blacks, the other focusing on historical content and contemporary social relations. In this section, I will argue that the latter construction of the problem provides context to the relationship between Black students and education.

As many researchers have argued:

The inequities found between the different ethno-racial groups in Toronto, cannot be attributed to 'essential' differences among the groups but to 'the particular historical processes including the period in which non-Aboriginal groups came to Canada and the circumstances of their migration... (Ornstein, 2000, cited in Smith, 1993, p. 168).

Some of these general differences between ethno-racial groups include those between Blacks and Whites in terms of socioeconomic status and educational attainment. These differences, instead of being inherent, are grounded in the context of these groups' arrival to Canada. Blacks, unlike any other group that migrated to Canada, came from a history of forced labour and slavery. The reasons I am including a discussion about slavery in a research project dealing with the education of Black students in Toronto may seem curious; this is no mistake. My study concerns itself primarily with Canadian citizens or

landed immigrants whose ancestors can be traced to Africa and/or the Caribbean and who self-identify as Black (the one exception to this is a Latino participant whose inclusion is addressed in chapter 3). Both Africa and the Caribbean had long legacies of slavery, the effects of which continue to reverberate through subsequent generations.

While Canadian society is not as enmeshed with slavery as the U.S., Canada does have links to the slavery experience. From 1628 until the early 1800s, Black slavery existed, particularly in Eastern Canada, where Loyalists emigrating from the United States would often bring slaves with them (Milan and Tran, 2004). Between 1763 and 1865 most Blacks migrating to Canada were fleeing slavery in the U.S. (Canadian Encyclopedia Online, 2007). Another connection is that slavery was very active in the Caribbean, where 70% of the Black population in Canada traces their origins (Statistics Canada, 2001). Whether the descendants of former slaves who have lived in Canada for many generations or second- or third-generation Caribbean immigrants, a large proportion of the Blacks currently in Toronto and Canada are a part of this legacy of slavery, thus, it is important to look at the possible role this experience may have played in their histories.

The psychological trauma of slavery is not easy to dismiss and has had long lasting effects on those of African descent. Barbara Smith Fletchman states:

The inescapable reality of a past which includes the trauma of slavery has an important influence on this distress [of British people of Caribbean origin]...To my mind, then, trauma on a massive scale has been handed down, and is hard to express and conceptualize. Nevertheless, the way in which this happens can be observed in how individuals relate to themselves and others...[Psychoanalysis] has taught us what can be gained from looking beneath the surface, and this also entails looking backwards. It is by studying the past of an individual that the present within him or her begins to make sense. (Fletchman, 2000, p. xxi)

Fletcher suggests that the past experiences of those whose ancestors have been impacted by slavery can have very real effects on their present. Although Fletcher speaks from a British context, this pattern is also true of the Caribbean:

All of [the Caribbean's] member societies, notwithstanding their own special individuality...have been shaped by the same architectonic forces of conquest, colonization, slavery, sugar monoculture, colonialism, and racial and ethnic admixture. All of their characteristic problems, lasting into the period of the present day – poverty, persistent unemployment, underdevelopment, economic dependency, social rivalries, and ethnic animosities, weak personal and social identity, political fragmentation and the rest – have their roots in that very background. (Lewis, 1983, p. 3)

Thus, many of the unique social patterns that those in the Black Diaspora exhibit can be linked in some way to the rigid social relations and survival mechanisms that developed during slavery times. As one example, Wagley (1961) describes how patterns of slavery continue to influence the lack of community seen today in Caribbean societies and the Black Diaspora:

The lack of a strong and well-defined community in the Caribbean region is the result of slavery and plantation economy...The transferred population of African slaves from many tribes and nations were unable under conditions of slavery to form communities...While paternalism and common residence often united the slaves of a particular plantation into a neighbourhood, they were unable to develop a full community life. Even after abolition, the plantation system continued to exert an influence unfavorable to the development of a strong and cohesive local community...Brazil, and to a certain extent the southern United States, share this historical heritage of the plantation and slavery and the resulting weak, divided, and amorphous community. One is tempted to generalize that wherever the plantation and slave system, were present, the rural community could not become an efficient and cohesive social unit. (Wagley, 1961, cited in Beckford, 1971, p. 16)

Because slavery emphasized division between slaves and discouraged community-building in order for the exploitation of Africans to continue, it was difficult to begin to create a sense of community even after slavery ended. The magnitude of the

indoctrination by colonizers and the psychic scars that remained are still being battled to this day (Beckford, 1971). It is estimated that for the duration of the slave trade from 1450-1888 that approximately 10 million Africans were abducted and taken to the New World. These numbers are underestimates and are likely even higher (Lewis, 1983).

During slavery a process of “seasoning” was conducted in order to “adjust [slaves] for work on the plantation” (Beckford, 1971, p. 12). Seasoning was a period of one to three years, when the slaves were branded, given a new name and put under apprenticeship to creolized slaves (Brathwaite, 1971). Priming the newly arrived Africans to their future life in the Caribbean involved socializing them to the endless toil on plantations and suppressing any inclinations they had to revolt. As the saying goes “knowledge is power,” and without the former, the latter ceases to exist; thus, one of the first tasks of the slave masters and overseers was to eliminate the slaves’ desire for, and access to, knowledge and basic forms of communication:

During slavery educational opportunities had been restricted. Slaves were only trained in the skills useful to the plantation – artisan skills which could make the slave a more productive and contented servant. Illiteracy was almost universal among them because their masters believed that skills of reading and writing would not increase their productive value and might even put ideas of insurrection in their heads! (Beckford, 1971, p. 14)

These efforts were largely responsible for the anti-intellectual character of the slavery regime. Frederick Douglass alludes to the purposeful ignorance that slave masters instilled in their slaves in recounting his life in “The Classic Slave Narratives”; “by far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (Gates, 1987, p. 255). Douglass goes on to describe a more vivid example of the lengths slave

masters would go to in order to ensure that slaves would remain illiterate and ignorant.

Here he recounts an experience he had after travelling to live with new slave masters:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C...Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said 'if you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell [*sic*]. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. 'Now,' said he, 'if you teach that nigger...how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.' (Emphases in original, Gates, 1987, p. 274-5)

Although this is Douglass' personal experience, slaves all across the Caribbean and U.S. had similar experiences (see also Yetman, 1999). This process had a number of advantages for the profiteers of slavery. Slaves were kept illiterate, forbidden from reading and learning information which could have empowered them and made them aware of the nature of their plight. This, in turn, could have led to chaos and mass revolt in the system.

To further thwart communication between slaves they were "herded together as an undifferentiated mass...Because the slaves were drawn from different cultures they had to develop a language on the plantation in order to communicate with each other" (Beckford, 1971, p. 13). Africans of different clans would be housed together; sharing different languages and cultural norms that not only made it virtually impossible to communicate, but fostered divisions and mistrust (Beckford, 1971). This situation made it difficult for slaves to develop a sense of solidarity that might have led to an overthrow of

the system. Beckford writes that “this pattern of acculturation was to have a long lasting effect on the lives of Black people” (Ibid).

The purposeful dividing and degradation of slaves was comprehensively outlined in the “Willie Lynch Letter,” a systematic document written by a slave owner 300 years ago that outlined how to mentally break a slave (Lynch, 1712). As part of this process, Lynch advocated depriving slaves of language:

For example, if you take a slave, if you teach him all about your language, he will know all your secrets, and he is then no more a slave, for you can’t fool him any longer, and being a fool is one of the basic ingredients of any incidents to the maintenance of the slavery system. (Ibid)

Lynch wrote that “the Black slave, after receiving this indoctrination [contained in the document], shall carry on and will become self-refueling and self-generating for hundreds of years, maybe thousands” (Ibid). Lynch did not know how accurate his prediction would be. Keeping slaves in an ignorant state was central to the propagation of slavery, and years of denial of education had long-lasting effects after slavery, just as Lynch had foretold. The abolition of slavery occurred in 1838 in the British colonies in the Caribbean and in 1848 in the French colonies, but it was freedom in name alone (Brereton, 1989). In the post-slavery period, rigid race relations and structural inequalities continued to be a daily occurrence in the lives of Blacks in the Caribbean:

It is almost a truism that emancipation did not transform the nature of Caribbean societies, nor the fundamental patterns of race relations, nor the way power was held and exercised, nor even the values and attitudes that had most prestige...The grossly unequal distribution of economic resources, of wealth and poverty, was not fundamentally altered in the century that followed emancipation. (Brereton, 1989, p. 85)

After emancipation, governments moved slowly to establish formalized systems of primary education for children. Many upper class Blacks in the Caribbean were not eager

to spread education among the offspring of those who but a few years before were destined to toil in plantation fields for all their days. Education was not seen as something that was befitting this group of newly-freed slaves:

A retired Trinidad inspector of schools commented in 1898, 'how often have sugar planters and others said to me 'what do you want to educate little niggers for? Put hoes in their hands and send them to the cane pieces.' It was the mentality of the prominent Guyana planter and politician who is said to have muttered, when he heard about a newly qualified Black lawyer, 'another good shovelman spoilt.' (Brereton, 1989, p. 107)

In the British colonies, it was not until after World War I that education ceased to be solely the domain of upper- and middle-class children. Even if there was an impetus to educate the newly-freed slave class, the resources simply were not there. Schools in the Caribbean received limited to no funds, were poorly equipped, and had low paid teachers who were often trained poorly or not at all (Ibid). These schools:

...Were modernizing, westernizing agencies which spread European culture and values among the people...They offered a highly elitist form of education, based on the English upper-class public or grammar school – just as the French lycée, established in the Antilles after 1880, followed the identical curriculum and used the identical textbooks as the metropolitan model. (Brereton, 1989, p. 108)

The curriculum that children received in the Caribbean was indistinguishable from that of their British or French counterparts (Ali, 2000). Even the most general information about Africa within the school curriculum was impossible to come by, and years of cultural denial had all but erased the collective cultural memory of those of African descent living in the Caribbean. Today, issues of curriculum, primarily its Eurocentric focus (Dei et al., 1997) are at the forefront of the debate on Black students and education. I will now turn to this important element in understanding the educational experiences of Black youth.

### Curriculum Concerns

While there is a complex interplay of factors leading to Black students' disengagement from school, cultural connection is often articulated as one means of making school more meaningful (Asante, 1991; Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al., 1997). The purpose of this study is to elicit the experiences of a small group of Black males enrolled in TDSB high schools and to examine their feelings about Black history and their potential desire for more culturally specific curriculum. George Dei, an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at OISE in Toronto, has conducted research on the experiences of Black students within the Toronto and Ontario public education system. Dei and his colleagues interviewed 150 Black high school students in the Greater Toronto Area to gain a sense of why so many Black youth feel disengaged from school and drop out (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997). They found that a major factor in Black youths' decision to drop out centered on curriculum. In school, Black youth are taught a Eurocentric curriculum that does not take their particular needs into account (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997). One of the themes that emerged from their research was that Black students felt the curriculum promoted a notion that "only White people ever did anything" (Dei, et al., 1997, p. 137). Denise, a participant in Dei's study who dropped out of school, discusses an African history class she attended and contrasts it with the curriculum before she dropped out:

The curriculum was one-sided, especially when it came down to history. There was never a mention of any Black people that have contributed to society. I mean, everything, it's the White man that did. History is just based on the European Canadian that came over... There was no mention of the Africans that helped build a railway, that ran away from the South and came up to Nova Scotia and helped work and build Canada too. (Dei et al., 1997, p. 138)



Denise was specifically talking about Canadian history she learned in school being one-sided. This is notable because absence of Black images and histories in this subject area serves to further marginalize the status of Black people as “Canadians” (Ibid). In schools history is often taught as a subject; a subject that informs the experiences and worldview of youth. If only White images are being held up in the curriculum as great examples of Canadian history, then where does that leave Black people? When Black youth do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, as having made historical or educational achievements, they come to feel that the academic dimension is not something worth striving for and this can lead to disengagement (Davis, 2006; Dei et al., 1997; Nelson, 2006; Tatum, 1992). Dei et al. (1997) found that many Black youth yearned for curricular content that was more relevant to their racialized lives:

Virtually all drop outs felt the curriculum had not included anything relevant to their experiences, whether in the form of Black history or in the form of an understanding of Black experiences in general. There was a pervasive feeling of being systematically excluded. Dropouts recalled how in every class they experienced exclusion, an absence of themselves in the curriculum. In fact, dropouts directly associated the lack of Black history with their inability to stay in school. (p. 138)

Although I did not drop out of school, I too recall the sense of not feeling connected to the curriculum because I never saw myself reflected in its lessons. In my junior high and high school history class, I learned primarily about White, Canadian history with smatterings of Métis or Aboriginal history. A few years later, in Grade 12, I took a class called Modern Civilizations, which began immediately following the Dark Ages. Not only was I unaware that the European Moors were of African heritage, I had never even heard of them. The annual Black History Month celebrations I had witnessed from elementary school onward were filled with the same recycled slavery and post-slavery

facts and faces, with no mention of anything prior to that time. I cannot recall ever reading a book by a Black author in high school. I cannot remember ever hearing a positive affirmation about Africa or anything African within any of my classes. It was not until my first year of university, at almost 20 years of age, that I had any inkling of the great contributions and achievements of African-American and African-Canadian figures; from slaves to scholars. Although I grew up in what could be called a disadvantaged neighborhood I was blessed with the support of my family, a keen childhood interest in reading and writing, and academic support through enrichment programs, without which, I might never have continued in high school long enough to discover these wonderful facts about my ancestors, and consequently, myself. Sadly, the majority of Black youth in the TDSB are not nearly so lucky.

### Conclusion

This thesis begins where the ESSS left off in its investigation of the educational prospects of youth in Toronto schools. It builds on earlier work that attempted to determine any potential relationships between student characteristics (of which race was one) and educational outcomes. These early works revealed a relationship between students' ethnic background and what placement level they were in at school. It was found that Black students were being disproportionately represented in the basic and general streams. While the system of basic, general, and advanced student classroom placements was abolished in 1993, the pattern of Black students' poor school performance has continued to be an issue in the 1990s and early 2000s (Codjoe, 2001).

Given that past research has found that these trends are particularly salient for Black male students, this thesis will focus particularly on the experiences of a small

group of Black males. The work does contain one exception to this. A single participant was Latino commenting on the experiences of Black students. The implications of his contributions are addressed in the Methodology section in chapter 3. The focus of this thesis is on the potential significance of Black history on the experiences of Black youth in the TDSB. This situates the work within existing Canadian research that points to Black students' ongoing dissatisfaction with predominantly Eurocentric curriculum and invisibility of Black images and narratives. While focusing on Black history the work also draws upon a critical theory framework to make sense of the ways in which broader cultural images and structural relations shape the curriculum. In the end the thesis attempts to integrate the Afrocentric vision of Black pride with a theoretical understanding of the complex social relations and cultural images that shape Black students' experiences in the TDSB

This thesis is organized into four sections that analyze and explore the relevant themes and concepts that emerged from the data. Before turning to the findings of this research, chapter 2 contains the definitions of relevant terms, an outline of the integrated theoretical framework that was used to make sense of the data, and a brief literature review.

Chapter 3 details the ethnographic, qualitative methods used in collecting data for this study. I go step-by-step through how the research unfolded, from making the initial contacts with agencies serving my target group, to the analysis of the data.

In chapter 4 I explore Black male students' positive and negative experiences in school. These experiences are analyzed in terms of moments during which teachers communicate a lack of support or disdain for Black students, the quality of the

curriculum and the ways in which social constructions of student expectations determine young Black males' daily experiences in Toronto schools. This chapter also explores the ways in which Black males, particularly those from poor communities, approach their schooling with a significant set of needs that must be met in order for any engagement with the educational process to occur.

Chapter 5 deals with the ways that participants are disproportionately targeted for criminalization both in school and outside of school in places like stores and malls. This section is introduced with the premise that participants face prejudice and increased observation outside of school because of the negative stigma that has been created around Blackness, which can lead to suspicion and even arrest. These types of beliefs about participants based on stereotypes and prejudice are prone to replication inside of school. Within school, I speak about how discipline including reprimands from teachers, being sent to the office, suspensions, and police involvement in school-related matters occurs, when, and by whom. The participants' feelings around school punishment will be examined in the context of the disproportionate impact school policies around punishment have been shown to have on Black students. Drawing on Critical Race Theory these findings are also explored in terms of the ways they replicate certain cultural representations of poor, Black youth, leaving them with a narrow range of behaviours to choose from. In the end, participants pointed to the problematic ways in which their peers often "take up" the image of Black men, in order to manufacture a self that meets social expectations.

Chapter 6 shifts to the main research questions concerning Black history including participants' level of satisfaction with the Black history they learn in school,

the types of Black history they desire to learn, potential impacts they see in learning Black history, and whether Black history should be available to all students will be looked at in-depth. While it is clear that Black history, in and of itself is not sufficient to address the problems facing Black youth in the TDSB, in this chapter I develop the argument that the possibility of pride and the opportunity to see alternative positive images of Black contributions to society may, in combination with broader social change and community development, provide young Black men with more representations of success as a signifier of Black pride, rather than selling out to White culture.

Finally, I will conclude with a review and analysis of the findings, limitations of the project, directions for future research, and implications for social work. This will include a reflection on oppression as something that objectifies youth and as a phenomenon youth actively and strategically negotiate.

## CHAPTER 2 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

Black male students in Ontario have been said to be in a “crisis” situation in regards to education (Scarborough Board of Education, 1991, cited in Lewis, 1992). Their experiences differ from those of other students because the cultural experience of Blackness is determined by relations of racism and practices of discrimination and stigmatization (Alladin, 1996; Dei et al., 1997). Stereotypes about Black males as lazy, unintelligent, and aggressive (Devine and Elliott, 2000; James, 2007) follow these students into the classroom and affect all facets of their school experience (Davis, 2003; Noguera, 2003). These images of Black males not only affect them, but also the ways in which the educators they encounter respond to them (Ibid). In part because of this, they behave in ways that oppose these structures and expectations (James, 2007). The limited possibilities for success in White educational systems results in a significant percentage of Black youth disengaging from a predominantly Eurocentric curriculum (Dei et al., 1997), opposing school disciplinary rules (James, 2007), and, at times, leads them to fall in with the low expectations educators have of them (Tauber, 1997).

In order to makes sense of these experiences, it is crucial to have a framework by which to analyze the data in light of the racism that Black males face in school. This chapter begins with definitions of the key terms that figure prominently in this research. I also outline three major theoretical approaches that guide this research; the anti-oppression approach, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Afrocentrism. The anti-oppression approach looks at how certain identities and ways of being are privileged in society while others are marginalized (Kumashiro, 2000); CRT centres race in any discourse of society

or its institutions, including education. It also explores how the experiences of racialized persons are shaped by broader relations of power (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Parker and Lynn, 2002); while Afrocentrism is a frame of reference that aims to revision society and seek social justice by viewing phenomena from an Africanist-based perspective (Asante, 1991). The conceptual framework and theoretical framework will be followed by a literature review focusing on the four areas that form the foundation of this thesis; the first looks further in-depth at Black students' experiences in the Toronto District School Board and how the articulated curriculum acts as a tool that both engages and disengages them (Dei et al., 1997). Secondly, I look at antiracist education and inclusive schooling as a means by which to address the expressed needs of Black youth by including them in discourse on education while fighting for social justice in all aspects of society. The third body of literature examines internalized oppression and the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy. While Black youth strategically negotiate their choices about engagement in education, they are also vulnerable to internalizing the dominant messages of society that tell them they are inferior. This can lead to them acting out in ways which fulfill negative perceptions and lead them to behave in line with negative expectations. Finally, I look at the concepts of consciousness raising and conscientization as tools for Black youth to begin to become empowered within education. Consciousness raising is a first step in creating meaningful personal narratives and in developing political awareness of oppression and one's place in it. Together, these approaches and bodies of literature provide the lens through which to view the experiences of the young men who are the subject of the current research.

## Definitions of Terms and Concepts

Before exploring the conceptual framework and literature review that will be used for this study it is necessary to define key terms that will be relevant to this discussion to provide context to the research data that will be used throughout this paper.

In this study, I employ the terms Black and White in order to denote the racialized identities students claim and are labelled with within the educational system. These terms are not used to describe essential characteristics or to suggest the legitimacy of the idea of race. Instead, they are presented as social constructs - what we imagine as our own identities and those of others whom we encounter (Blackburn, 2000; Hall, 1997; Omi and Winant, 2002). From this perspective, Black, in terms of participants, refers to Canadian citizens or landed immigrants whose ancestors can be traced to Africa or the Caribbean and who self-identify as Black. This usage denotes a geographic origin and a self identity. It also attends to the ways in which “the issues of race and social difference [are] issues of power and equity, rather than as matters of cultural or ethnic variety” (Dei, 1996, p. 25). Terms like Black or Blackness can refer to the shared experiences of oppression based on differential power relations between non-White groups that have historically faced prejudice, oppression, and structural inequality (Dei, 1996). Conversely, the racial classification of “White” is based less on skin colour and more on the idea of hegemony; the way in which society is organized and ruled (Omi and Winant, 2002). Those who are White are politically, socially and culturally dominant in society while those who are considered “Black” are subordinated (Ibid).

The African Diaspora refers to “the way in which nations, real yet imagined communities, are [fabricated], brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and



politics, both on the land people call their own and in exile” (Cohen, 1998, p. 21). In this research, I use African Diaspora to refer to areas across the world where Blacks have been dispersed from their original homeland of Africa.

At-risk will be used to refer to youth who are vulnerable to significant school failure or leaving school early as evidenced by low marks and the pace at which secondary school credits are acquired (Cheng et al., 1993). Such students are vulnerable to failure in school and dropping out. In this thesis I am generally looking at students who are at-risk due to their race and class. The use of the term “at-risk” to mark this group of students is not without its own dangers. It is likely that by attending to those students who have not had the necessary protective factors that prevent low school performance and leaving school early, that the notion of “at-risk” becomes conflated with poor and Black (Colin and Preciphs, 1991). Social scientists and psychologists have identified a number of risk factors that when combined, are thought to have a multiplier effect on risk behavior. Lack of access to health care, adequate nutrition, and decent housing, growing up poor and in a single-parent household, being exposed to substance abuse at a young age, and living in a crime-ridden neighborhood are some of the variables most commonly cited (Earls, 1991, cited in Noguera, 2003). Similarly, anthropologists and sociologists have documented ways in which certain cultural influences can lower the aspirations of Black males and contribute to the adoption of self-destructive behavior. For example, Ogbu (1987) argued that community-based “folk theories” that suggest that because of the history of discrimination against Black people, even those who work hard will never reap rewards equivalent to Whites, could contribute to self-defeating behaviors (p. 23). There is also evidence that many Black males view sports or music as more promising

routes to upward mobility than academic pursuits (Hoberman, 1997). In light of this, it is clear that looking at risk primarily in terms of race and class is an oversimplification of the problem. However, given the general trends in the school performance of poor Black males, I have used this term, with some reservation, so as to pull together the voices of those who are most marginalized in the school system.

Engagement as used in this thesis means “active involvement, commitment and concentrated attention” in contrast to disengagement which is “superficial participation, apathy, or lack of interest” (Newmann, Welhage, and Lamborn, 1992, cited in McMahon, 2003, p. 259). Like risk, engagement can also be influenced by numerous factors both inside and outside of school; namely, cultural representations of Blackness, the organization of institutions, the realities of Black communities and their future prospects (McMahon, 2003). Cultural representations of Blackness often promote stereotypical images that leave little room for academic achievement (Davis, 2006). While the addition of Afrocentric materials is an important step in dealing with engagement, Black families often face additional challenges like racism, lowered socioeconomic status, and increased responsibilities that students hold outside of school (Cheng et al., 1993). These factors may take students’ focus away from school for any number of reasons other than the curriculum. Thus, even though the addition of Afrocentric curricular materials is an important step in dealing with engagement, it needs to happen in conjunction with broader institutional and social change that offers cultural representations of engaged Black youth and the possibility of concrete outcomes that will result from the effort involved in engagement. In this thesis the notion of engagement will be considered in terms of specific moments of interaction between students and the educational system,

but some attention will also be paid to how the broader social forces through which the educational system is sustained make the possibility of engagement (as a local practice) difficult to put into effective pedagogy.

Toronto refers to the Greater Toronto Area as well as the former regional municipalities of York, East York, Toronto, North York, Scarborough, and Etobicoke. The Toronto District School Board was created in 1998 to replace the seven school boards for these formerly independent municipalities after Toronto's amalgamation (Brown, Baird, and Resolen, 1999).

A number of concepts related to race<sup>3</sup> and racism will also be explored in this paper. Race is a term that had undergone much debate in recent decades (Blackburn, 2000). There has been a tendency to think of race in essentialist terms; that for example, if someone has certain attributes or biological characteristics, including skin colour, that they are by essence, of a certain "race." (Ibid). This has proven to be an erroneous notion. If going solely by these criteria, racial categories would be formed that do not reflect certain populations' evolutionary history. In this "race-as-biological-trait-theory," Inuit would be classified as genetically closer to Swedes and French populations than they are to North American Indians; North American Indians would be genetically closer to the Swedes, French, and Inuit than they are to South American Indians (Edwards, 2003, cited in Graves, 2006). In fact, there has been found to be greater genetic difference between members of the same "race" than compared to members of other groups (Cavalli-Sforza, 1994, cited in Graves, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> A full discussion of the legitimacy of race as a construct is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information on this idea see Blackburn (2000).

Instead, many social scientists have argued that race is actually a product of economic processes (Hall, 2002) and particular sociohistorical eras (Omi and Winant, 2002). It is the social constructionist theory as opposed to the biological trait theory that I use in this thesis to define race. Race can be understood as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (Omi and Winant, 2002, p. 123). This definition implies that race is not static; it can change depending on who holds power in a given society and the economic and social gain available in classifying groups based on arbitrary characteristics (Blackburn, 2000). While the idea of race selects particular characteristics to signify itself, this process is necessarily a social and historical process (Omi and Winant, 2002).

Humans are notorious for categorizing the myriad stimuli they are bombarded with and this is made all the easier when there exist obvious physical differences between groups (Nelson, 2006). Thus, while I suggest that race is not “real” in the concrete, enduring sense, its acknowledged existence and role in structuring society makes it difficult to abolish (Omi and Winant, 2002). It is more realistic to recognize that race, as imperfect a category as it is, “plays a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world” (Ibid, p. 124) and to find ground somewhere between the two polarities of essentialism versus illusion.

Generally, racism can be considered “a doctrine that unjustifiably asserts the superiority of one group over another on the basis of arbitrarily selected characteristics pertaining to appearance, intelligence, or temperament” (Elliott and Fleras, cited in Alladin, 1996 1992, p. 52). It is not these arbitrary characteristics that have significance, but “the public recognition of these differences as being significant for assessment,

explanation, and interaction” (Ibid, p. 55). A key element of racism is power; “not in terms of the ‘everyday’ influence that one individual might have over another, but in terms of influence that is supported by ideological, economic, political, social, and cultural conditions of the society” (James, 2003, p. 136).

Racism “occurs when the rules of the dominant culture are imposed on diverse peoples in the name of integration...and presumes that different races have unequal levels of intellectual, cultural, economic, and political progress, rather than simply different ones” (Fletcha, 1999, cited in Codjoe, 2001, p. 344). Racism occurs when the ideology that considers a group’s unchangeable physical characteristics are linked in a causal way to perceptions of psychological or intellectual characteristics (Codjoe, 2001). On this basis a distinction is believed to be made that distinguishes between superior and inferior racial groups (Codjoe, 2001, p. 281). Within current North American educational practices, the image of the Black student as an academic failure is viewed in this context, and it is “manifested in discriminatory treatment by teachers, counsellors and administrators, and in curriculum and school practices that exclude Black students” (James and Brathwaite, 1996, pp. 18–19).

Racism may be conscious or subconscious and is expressed in actions or attitudes initiated by individuals, groups, or institutions that treat human beings unjustly because of arbitrarily selected characteristics (Colin and Preciphs, 1991). Institutional racism, also known as systemic racism “exists where the established policies, rules and regulations of an organization or institution systematically reflect and produce differential treatment of various groups within that organization or institution and in society generally” (James, 2003, p. 137). There is a strong connection between individual and

institutional racism in that individual racism is legitimized and sanctioned through the organization or institution in order to maintain the status quo (James, 2003).

Racialization is “a process or situation wherein the idea of ‘race’ is introduced to define and give meaning to some particular population, its characteristics and actions” (Hatcher and Troyna, 1994, p. 109). In other words, it is the process by which groups become socially constructed as races. These constructions are not necessarily biological or enduring, however there is an illusion that they are due to the unique physical characteristics of differing groups.

Discrimination is a type of behaviour, whereas the above mentioned concepts are attitudes. Simply, discrimination is the act of “putting negative cognitions into practice” through the granting or denying of certain rights to individuals or groups (Elliott and Fleras, 1992, cited in Alladin, 1996, p. 56). Researchers have generally viewed attitudes as having three components: cognitive, affective, and behavioural (see also Nelson, 2006). These three aspects correspond to stereotypes (thoughts), prejudice (feelings), and discrimination (actions), respectively. The ideas of racism, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are relevant to this study because participants describe experiencing these attitudes in school and society.

Stigma is defined as “characteristic(s) that mark the individual as deviant, flawed, limited, spoiled, or generally undesirable” (Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, and Scott, 1984, p. 8). Stigma encompasses the usual situations where prejudice is shown (including racism) and also encompasses any physical, behavioural, or psychological markers which elicit negative attitudes and behaviour from society (Goffman, 1963).

## Anti-Oppression Approach

This study draws upon an anti-oppression framework (Bishop, 1994; Dominelli, 2002; Kumashiro, 2000; Mullaly, 2002) to understand the relations between different groups in the TDSB. Bohmer and Briggs (1991) define oppression as:

...Those attitudes, behaviours and systematic social arrangements by which members of one group are exploited or subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges. (p. 155)

This definition acknowledges connections between individual, cultural, and structural oppression, all of which are faced by Black youth and are inextricably linked (Bohmer and Briggs, 1991). This framework allows us to see that power is shared unequally in society and that these power relations follow students into educational institutions (Alladin, 1996; Kumashiro, 2000). This framework suggests that one group is privileged at the expense of another group, who is subordinated. The anti-oppression framework takes a broad approach to understanding inequality and focuses on the multiple intersections of oppression including gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. that can allow these factors to be analyzed and deconstructed (Kumashiro, 2000; Mullaly, 2002). As Wineman (1984) says, “different oppressions intersect at innumerable points in everyday life and are mutually reinforcing, creating a *total* system of oppression in which one continuum or stratification cannot be addressed in isolation from all others” (emphases in original, cited in Mullaly, 2002, p. 151). This model accounts for the multiple identities that mediate one’s experience of oppression. In looking at young, Black males at-risk, for example, their race, gender, and socioeconomic status all intersect, which shapes their experience.

The anti-oppression perspective is useful to this study because it makes visible the harmful ways (either by action or inaction) that certain students are treated within school due to oppressive power relations (Kumashiro, 2000). It can be used as a framework for analyzing assumptions and expectations of the dominant group about the Other (particularly in education) and who or what they should be; who the Other is not but who they should become, and who the privileged must be in order to *not* become the Other (Kumashiro, 2000). For example, Sidanius and Prado (1999, cited in Mullaly, 2002, pp. 116-117) identified an oppressive system within education that produces differential teacher expectations of subordinate groups that consequently influence how such students are viewed and treated (see also Miller, 1995). This is part of the nature of oppression; that a dominant group is viewed as capable and “normal” while the Other is viewed as deviant and flawed (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999, cited in Mullaly, 2002). In terms of what is chosen as valid curricular content, oppressive power relations valorize and make normative Eurocentric images and systems of knowledge and by their absence, other ways of knowing and other cultural frames of reference are rejected as inferior (Dei, 1996; Kumashiro, 2000). Thus, an anti-oppression framework creates the space to critique the marginalization of certain voices and opens spaces in which these voices can be heard on their own terms (Mullaly, 2002).

An important part of the anti-oppression framework is the idea of internalized oppression. Oppression and its associated conditions of discrimination, powerlessness, subordination, exclusion, exploitation, scapegoating, low social status, and blocked opportunities is bound to have deep psychological effects on the oppressed. One of these effects can be the acceptance of the negative identity defined by larger society (Mullaly,



2002). Oppression can lead to a belief in one's own inferiority as well as behaviours that are self-harming and contribute further to one's oppression. These self-destructive behaviours create a cycle that serves to reinforce the dominant society's view of the oppressed as inferior thereby increasing negative self-perceptions of the oppressed and so on and so forth (Ibid). In summary, this approach opens up spaces to see unequal power relations, the intersections of multiple oppressions, and how oppression affects oppressed groups; it helps us make sense of participants' personal accounts of oppression within school and society.

### Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) evolved from Critical Legal studies (CLS) which critiqued and challenged the prevailing legal liberalism that purported to be objective and neutral (Aylward, 1999). While this theory acknowledged that legal concepts are "manipulable" and that the law legitimates existing "maldistributions," scholars of colour criticized CLS for ignoring the realities of people of colour and for its lack of analysis in the role racism plays in the legal system (Ibid., p. 26). Although CRT was initially developed to respond to the ways in which the American legal system systematically disadvantaged African-Americans, it has been extended to education as a way to "transform the structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórazano, Ceja, and Yesso, 2000, p. 63).

CRT allows us to see the ways in which the education system "is both a product and a promoter of racism" (Aylward, 1999, p. 30). CRT identifies critical components of

Black males' academic failure to be attributable to racism, educational inequality, and institutional practices that adversely impact them (Berry, 2001). Yet CRT, instead of simply pointing out the vast flaws of institutions in society also provides tools for transformation. Just as education now contributes to racial injustice, it can and should be used in the battle against it (Ibid). CRT and its methods provide a way to express divergent experiences, to seek and articulate the meaning of race and racism in education, and to provide a critical understanding of education (Ibid, p. 30). While CRT speaks to systematic disadvantage in the legal system its dominant themes can be easily applied to education. These are an acknowledgement of racism as the primary influence in Black males' experiences in North America, rejection of the "colour-blind approach to education, the centrality of Black male's experiences, a commitment to social justice, and a commitment to challenge dominant ideology (Aylward, 1999).

These principles inform this project in the following ways: I will use CRT to look at the role racism holds in education, both overt as well as more subtle forms that are sanctioned by the status quo (like institutional racism), policies that disproportionately affect Black students, and prejudice that consciously or unconsciously influences behaviour towards Black students. CRT shows us that education cannot be blind to race when the curriculum primarily depicts Eurocentric perspectives that do not take the experiences and worldview of Black students into account. I seek to place participants' narratives at the centre of this research and explore how the potential impact of an Afrocentric-based curriculum can aid in centering the experiences of Black students. CRT will also be used to question how certain educational principles and policies keep

Black students suppressed and how solutions, embedded within education itself, can be used to challenge institutional racism.

### Afrocentrism

Afrocentricity is an understanding that Black identity “must focus on an ethnic and cultural identity that is rooted in an Afrocentric worldview paradigm that critically examines and affirms African cultural values as forming the foundation of Black identity and culture” (Cokley, 2005, p. 518). Afrocentric values that are consistent with an Afrocentric paradigm include an emphasis on spiritualism (i.e. belief in spirit as the underlying basis of everything in existence), collectivism, communalism, and a belief in self-knowledge as the basis of all knowledge (Ibid). Many of these values are not exclusive to people of African descent and can be held by individuals of various ethnic groups and cultures throughout the world (Cokley, 2005).

In education, centricity refers to a perspective that involves “locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives” (Asante, 1991, p. 171). In education, Afrocentrism is thus, locating students within an African perspective in the context of their learning. Afrocentrism is not merely a “Black” Eurocentricity because Eurocentricity is based on a White supremacist system that seeks to maintain White privilege. While Eurocentricity presents European history as being the only valid perspective by ignoring and devaluing other perspectives, Afrocentrism does not promote ethnic pride by degrading other groups’ cultures and worldviews; instead it attempts to

provide an alternative to one type of history that has been valorized (Asante, 1987, cited in Asante 1991).

For education to be meaningful within the context of North American society, it must first address the African's historical experiences, both in Africa and in North America (Asante, 1991). The recognition that something is severely wrong with the way Black students are educated (and their persistent underperformance attests to this) provides the principal impetus for considering the Afrocentric approach to North American education (Giddings, 1990). In essence, this approach allows this thesis to see the ways in which predominantly Eurocentric curriculum can be detrimental to Black students and the ways a more Afrocentric curriculum can be used to make education a more substantive and meaningful place. Afrocentricity is the guiding principle in exploring the role that Black history can play in the educational experiences of Black students. It looks at the way in which this shift, from Eurocentricity to openness to an African-centred view, can bring Black students from the margins to the centre of education.

Afrocentricism and Critical Race Theory share many similarities. Both recognize that schools are reflective of the societies that develop them (i.e. a White supremacist-dominated society will develop a White supremacist educational system) (Asante, 1991; Aylward, 1999). This idea is central to the choices of what is considered appropriate curriculum. Afrocentrism, like Critical Race Theory, acknowledges that Blacks do not hold the same position in North America as Whites due in part to racism (Ibid). Failure to recognize this could lead to the “psychological and cultural death of the [Black] population” (Asante, 1991, p. 170). Both theories situate race at the forefront of their

perspectives, however, while Afrocentrism looks to primacy of African perspectives as its guiding principle, CRT looks to the power of education as well as structures in society for change.

### Literature Review

This thesis draws upon four key bodies of literature: 1) research of Black students' experiences in school; 2) antiracist education and inclusive schooling, 3) research on stereotypes and prejudice and internalized oppression, and 4) consciousness raising as a means of recognizing the historical context of oppression, one's role in that oppression, and how to begin to break free of the invisible chains that continue to keep people oppressed.

#### *Black Students' School-Related Experiences*

The literature on Black students' school experiences shows a trend of disengagement and disinterest (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997; Noguera, 2003). At-risk youth are not being encouraged by teachers and guidance counsellors and "consistently, schools that serve Black males fail to nurture, support, or protect them" (Noguera, 2003, p. 436). Information on the experiences of Black students in Toronto high schools is scarce and a bit dated although studies that have been conducted show similar findings as those in the U.S.; that Black youth are calling out for attention (Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1991; Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997; Lewis, 1992). Some of the issues that have been identified as negative factors for at-risk youth are exposure to racism and prejudice in school; differential treatment according to race; absence of Black teachers (Brathwaite and James, 1996; Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1991);

difficult interactions with administrators; higher rates of detentions, suspensions, retentions; unfair/ineffective discipline (Ferguson et al., 2005); the absence of Black history in the classroom and non-relevant curriculum (Dei et al., 1995; Dei, 1996; Dei, et al., 1997); low academic involvement; low familial educational levels; and limited support for remaining in school (Cheng and Yau, 1999). Because of the dearth of contemporary first-person narratives of school experiences from Black youth in Toronto, I will briefly outline some works from the U.S. where Black students face similar (although more extreme) issues as those in Canada.

Black males are both loved and hated in the classroom. They set the standards for what is cool; yet, they are negatively stereotyped and continue to experience disproportionate levels of punishment and academic failure (Davis, 2006). Black males are more likely to be labelled with behavior problems, as less intelligent than other students even at a young age, and are more likely to be severely punished in school for minor offenses, often without regard for their well-being and educational attainment (Noguera, 2003). Increasingly, Black males are being given the message that they are inferior or incompetent compared to the rest of society (Fordham, 1996; Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 1994). With education viewed as exclusionary and lacking in rewards, many poor, Black males then affiliate themselves with those identities that they *do* seem to fit in with – those of gang members, criminals, drug users, and dropouts (Wilson, 2001). These identities are not randomly chosen, rather, they are influenced by dominant cultural representations in the media that portray Black males in stereotypical ways: violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, disengaged and hyper-masculine (Harper, 1996, cited in Davis, 2006). These perceptions follow youth into the classroom and lead to a range of

behaviors and strategies that set the tone for the growing achievement and attainment gap of Black boys (Sewell, 1997, cited in Davis, 2006).

Research by Stephen Lewis (1992) and George Dei et al. (1997) looks into some additional reasons why Black youth in Canada are disengaged from school. In Lewis' 1992 "Report to the Premier on Racism in Ontario," he outlines just some of the potential factors that can lead to school disengagement:

Everywhere, the refrain of the Toronto students, however starkly amended by different schools and different locations, was essentially the refrain of all students. Where are the courses in Black history? Where are the visible minority teachers? Why are there so few role models? Why do our White guidance counsellors know so little of different cultural backgrounds? Why are racist incidents and epithets tolerated? Why are there double standards of discipline? Why are minority students streamed? Why do they discourage us from university? Where are we going to find jobs? What's the use of having an education if there's no employment? How long does it take to change the curriculum so that we're a part of it? (Lewis, 1992, electronic version)

To investigate some of these trends, Dei et al. (1997) conducted a critical ethnography of Black students' disengagement from school. In interviews with over 150 Black students in the Greater Toronto Area, Dei and his colleagues discovered that many did not simply dropout so much as they felt that they were pushed out of school. In other words, dropping out was not a flippant decision made for one reason, but rather was the culmination of a number of factors. Prejudice and racism in school were frequently cited reasons for school disengagement; these instances included prejudice from teachers, a sense of alienation as racialized students within school, and negative stereotypes held by other students, to name a few (Ibid).

Another of the main themes of Dei's interviews was the absence of Black and African-Canadian history in the classroom (Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997). Because the

TDSB history curriculum was primarily White, Canadian history with derogatory or absent information about Africa and Black/African role models, many Black students felt alienated and frustrated with school (Dei et al., 1997). When students did not see themselves or their interests represented in school, they developed a fatalistic attitude about themselves, their education, and their future (Ibid). Not seeing any images or narratives relevant to their experiences made Black students bored with school, and also reinforced notions that school was not meant for them, but rather for Whites (Ibid). They then began to become disillusioned about school and the role it could play in their future. In one of Dei's interviews, Michael, a 19-year old Black student in general classes had the following to say:

I only know about Canadian history, which is White history. I did not learn anything about Black people... We just learned about the - not even the people, but just the city or the country. Basics, nothing deep. Is it tough? I mean, I would like to know more about my history, yes. A lot more. I think I need to know a lot more than I know. (Dei et al., 1997, p. 173)

Absence of representation in this subject area served to further marginalize the status of Black people as Canadians (Dei et al., 1997). If only White images are being held up as great examples of Canadian history, then where does that leave Black Canadians?

After a time, learning exclusively about someone else's history began to take a toll on students, creating a situation ripe for school disengagement. One Grade 10 student had this to say about her friend's decision to dropout: "bored, just bored; not getting what they want, like learning different things. I thought Black history would be good to learn, but they didn't teach that in [her] school... Sometimes I think that's why she dropped out, because she wanted to learn Black history too" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 132). Lewis' (1992) and Dei et al.'s (1997) seminal works, each written over a decade ago, still reflect many



of the concerns of Black parents and students today; racism (Codjoe, 2001), low expectations (Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane, 2004), curriculum irrelevance (Giddings, 2001), and disproportionate disciplinary infractions (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

Clearly, the problem of Black underachievement and subsequent dropping out is complex and multifaceted. In this study I hope to examine these connections between curriculum and Black male students' experience of school and whether this relates to the desire for more Black/African history in school. The next section will look at educational approaches that attempt to create more inclusive spaces for marginalized students.

### *Antiracist Education and Inclusive Schooling*

The second body of literature that is relevant to this study is the material that explores what an antiracist model of education might look like and how this can open up spaces for Black youth to excel. Antiracism education may be defined as:

An action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression. Antiracism is a critical discourse of race and racism in society and of the continuing racializing of social groups for differential and unequal treatment. Antiracism explicitly names the issues of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as matters of cultural and ethnic variety. (Dei, 1996, p. 25)

Currently, values of meritocracy that fall under the protestant work ethic posit that wealth and other social values are distributed appropriately based on deservingness. This theory assumes that any individual failure is due to an issue located within the person (i.e. they were lazy or just did not make the right choices) (Freire, 2003). Antiracist education locates the challenges facing Black students within a larger context of race and power as the primary basis of difference in school.

Historically established relations of domination and subordination are embedded in the institutions of society, including schools (Alladin, 1996; Aylward, 1999; Cannon, 1995; Kovel, 1984). While race is the primary concept I will use look at to power relations within school, like the anti-oppression framework, antiracist education sees other categories of social difference including class, gender, sexuality, religion and disability as part of the multifaceted identities that individuals live (Kumashiro, 2000). Moving away from the “single-strand” perspective that sees only discrete forms of oppression, this paradigm shows how oppression is mediated by the combination and connection of various identities (Mullaly, 2002).

Although there can be multiple centres of knowledge in school curriculum, it is the Eurocentric paradigm that has been overwhelmingly privileged (Brathwaite and James, 1996; Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; Kumashiro, 2000). Antiracism education questions this marginalization of certain voices in society and the devaluation of the knowledge and experiences of subordinate groups (Dei, 2000, cited in James, 2007, p. 33). Based on the antiracist education model, inclusive schooling challenges the definition of valid knowledge and acknowledges there are multiple ways of knowing and making sense of the world based on diverse ethnocultural and spiritual traditions (Zine, 2002). Inclusive schooling “refers to educational practices that make for genuine inclusion of *all* students by addressing equity issues and promoting successful learning outcomes, particularly for students of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds” (emphasis in original, Dei and Razack, 1995, cited in Dei, 1996, p. 78). It involves:

- 1) Dealing foremost with *equity*; that is, dealing with the qualitative value of justice.

- 2) Addressing the question of *representation*; that is, having a multiplicity of perspectives entrenched as part of the academic discourse, knowledge and texts.
- 3) Making school instructional practices respond to the challenges of diversity; that is, responding to the social construction and structuralization of difference (e.g. issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability) within the school system and in the wider society. (Emphases in original text, Dei, 1996, p. 78-79)

Basically, for the antiracist, inclusive schooling method to be successful requires “reform [of] every aspect of the school system so as to reflect the diverse concerns, interests and aspirations which make up our society” (Dei, 1996, p. 79). The antiracist education approach proposes that no longer can one way of thinking, one type of history, and one way of seeing the world inform the multiplicities and complexities of students’ lives. In effect, marginalized groups must move from the borders to the centre of educational discourse, not be “grafted” onto the existing social order. This involves addressing larger societal issues of racism, sexism, and classism that are reproduced in the classroom, rather than merely incorporating difference into existing dominant structures (Dei, 1996). Thus, the goal of antiracist education is not only a balanced and just classroom, but a balanced and just society.

### *Internalized Oppression and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*

The third body of literature that is relevant to this study is the material that explores stereotypes and prejudice, particularly the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is 20th-century sociologist Robert Merton who is credited with coining the expression “self-fulfilling prophecy.” In his book “Social Theory and Social Structure” (1949) Merton describes the self-fulfilling prophecy as:

...In the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come 'true' This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning. (Cited in Tauber, 1997, pp. 9-10)

In other words, the self-fulfilling prophecy is the process by which a perceiver's expectations about a target eventually lead the target to behave in ways that confirm the original expectations. While the expectation(s) may be subconscious or overt, they are regardless perceived on some level by the stigmatized group member (Nelson, 2006; Tauber, 1997)<sup>4</sup>. Seeing evidence of the attribution both from behaviour of out-group members towards them as well as from within the group itself, one of two reactions may occur; either the person passively comes to believe the attributions about themselves and act accordingly, thus, "fulfilling the prophecy," or they make a conscious choice to embrace the attributed behaviour because the belief regarding it is so prevalent and resistance seems futile (Nelson, 2006).

Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) were some of the first social psychologists to study the self-fulfilling prophecy resulting from teachers' expectations. Rosenthal and Jacobsen gave an intelligence test to all of the students at an elementary school at the beginning of the school year. They then selected 20 percent of the students at random (irrespective of their actual intelligence test results) and told the teachers that these students could be expected to "bloom" academically that year. At the end of the year, they came back and retested all the students. Those labelled as "bloomers" gained an average of twelve IQ points compared to a gain of 8 points for the unlabelled group. Simply put, when teachers expect students to do well and show intellectual growth, they

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<sup>4</sup> For additional research about self-fulfilling prophecies, see Word, Zanna, and Cooper, 1974; for reviews see Jones, 1986; Jussim, 1986; Jussim, Eccles, and Madon, 1996.

will, but when teachers have low expectations, performance and growth are stifled. Although, in this study I will be speaking primarily about negative attributions, it should be noted that self-fulfilling prophecies can also result based on positive beliefs (Diamond et al., 2004; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968).

Many researchers agree that the external environment plays an important role in influencing people's psyches (Moane, 1999, cited in Mullaly, 2002). At the same time, individuals play an active role in managing the effects of these external influences (Mullaly, 2002). Internalized oppression is closely related to the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies. It is a phenomenon that results when individuals come to accept the negative beliefs about them held by others (Mullaly, 2002). These beliefs serve to limit the individual, thereby, oppressing them from within:

Through a process of cultural and ideological hegemony many oppressed people believe that if they cannot make it in our society, that if they are experiencing problems, then it is their own fault because they are unable to take advantage of the opportunities that the dominant group says are available to everyone. It is, as Paulo Freire (1970) said, as if the oppressor gets in the head of the oppressed. (Mullaly, 2002, p. 65)

This view of internalized oppression does not account for personal agency in how these messages are negotiated by the oppressed person. This more "passive" form of internalized oppression can also appear as members of marginalized groups who hold an oppressive view toward their own group, those who start to believe in negative stereotypes of themselves, and in the process of "mental colonization," which is passive resignation and acceptance of life as it is<sup>5</sup> (Webb-Johnson, 2002). Another characteristic

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<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire (1994) refers to these concepts as horizontal violence, self-depreciation, and fatalism. respectively (cited in Mullaly, 2002, p. 66).

of some oppressed persons is that they begin to identify with the oppressor, valuing their norms and striving to be like them (Mullaly, 2002).

Today, there is increasing agreement that people are not simply passive receptacles of powerful cultural forces beyond their control; they also make choices about how they will respond to oppression (Mullaly, 2002). One way this is done is through consciously resisting the dominant norms of school and society:

Often, African-Americans are either invisible (simply omitted from discussion) or represented in ways that are based on negative stereotypes. Absent or distorted images cannot inspire or reinforce the positive outcomes of educational and economic achievement...One consequence of these cultural distortions and omissions is that Black students often *adopt* oppositional identities that lead them to *reject* academic achievement... (Emphasis added, Tatum, 1992, p. 332)

Such conscious, active resistance is known as “disidentification”:

Individuals disengage their identity from the achievement domain in question, such that their self esteem and sense of self competence is preserved and shielded from the negative effects of associating identity with performance on a stereotype relevant dimension (Aronson, Quinn, and Spencer, 1998, p. 90)

The processes that lead Black youth to disidentify with formalized education can be seen in the early teen years, however there is growing evidence that this occurs in the primary school years and worsens through the secondary school years (Davis, 2003; Osborne, 1995; Roderick, 2003). Osborne (1995) found that the correlation between the self-esteem of African-Americans and school performance was strong until about Grade 8; “[Then] something happened to weaken their identification...It is probable that the African-American students...may begin to see the academic environment as discriminatory and lacking in rewards, and begin disidentifying” (Osborne, 1995, p. 453).

One explanation for many Black youths' disidentification with school could be connected to the ubiquity of stereotypes. Common stereotypic images suggest that Blacks are not as intelligent as White people (Devine and Elliott, 2000; Fordham, 1996; Nelson, 2006). As with most groups, Black people are well aware of the stereotypes surrounding them. This idea is known as metastereotypes; the perceptions of another group's stereotypes of one's own group (Seligman and Tuch, 1997 cited in Nelson, 2006). Being a member of a group that is stereotyped as unintelligent can be threatening to one's self esteem as no one wants to be considered unintelligent (Devine and Elliott, 2000). In order to maintain self-esteem, many Black youth may have engaged in disidentification from the stereotype-relevant dimension of intelligence (Steele, 1997). This process can have both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand it can be an adaptive response by preserving self-esteem and self-identity in the face of racism or prejudice (Major and Schmader, 1998). "Because some high school students do not value academic achievement very highly, and instead emphasize non-academic activities and values, their general sense of self-esteem is sheltered from the negative reminders of academic failures" (McLeod, 1995, p. 101). In other words, it is as if these youth are saying "if you think I am dumb then I do not want to be part of your education system anyway!" On the other hand, this way of thinking can impede the potential success the person could achieve on a dimension (intelligence) that is not only considered important by society but one that has a large role in determining future success (Ibid).

Further compounding the issue, researchers have found that for some Black students, doing well in school is perceived as a sign that one has "sold out" or opted to "act White" for the sake of individual gain (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1990). For these

reasons, Black youth may oppose anything that Whiteness represents and defy the system (Webb-Johnson, 2002). These are all instances where the subject makes a choice whether or not to reject academic pursuits based on the available information. So in one case there is passive acceptance of oppression, and the other, active resistance. Both can result in the identical consequences, however, the two views recognize that there is a complex interplay of factors related to the choices people make.

### *Consciousness Raising*

Consciousness raising in relation to this study generally refers to learning about the historical past of groups who have been continually oppressed. It is useful to turn to the work of Paulo Freire (2003) on this topic that he calls *conscientização*. Conscientização, or consciousness raising, is:

...A group pedagogy, usually initiated by a facilitator that seeks to promote horizontal and reciprocal relationships for participants. These relationships are fostered through discussion of concrete historical experiences in a dialogue intended to lead to mutual learning about the participant's social reality. Freire is most often cited for his rejection of mass education, which he feels imposes silence and passivity, stifles criticism, and makes participants objects rather than subjects of reality. He contends that education cannot be neutral; it should be participatory and must involve self-reflection and critical thought about the individual and society. (Labelle, 1987, pp. 201-202)

Key to this definition is the rejection of conventional education methods that seek to transfer knowledge from the teacher, who is "learned," to the student, who is not. Similarly, Maher and Tetreault (1994) have argued that "if the classroom setting can help students to understand the workings of positional dynamics in their lives...then they can begin to challenge them and to create change" (p. 37). This approach proposes that it is critical knowledge and thinking that impels students toward resisting and challenging



oppression. Educators also have a role in consciousness raising; a strength of this particular approach is that it calls on educators not only to teach about oppression but to try to change society as well (Kumashiro, 2000).

Bishop (1994) and Mullaly (2002) talk about consciousness raising and healing as a means of battling oppression and beginning to shed notions of internalized oppression that can be so damaging:

Critical analysis and the development or awareness of consciousness raising regarding oppression are seen by most writers as key in the process of building strengths... 'recovering historical memory' [may be used] as a means of fostering identity and a sense of culture and community. (Mullaly, 2002, pp. 173-174)

Learning about a rich, varied cultural past and using that information as a tool of empowerment may begin to heal some of the historical trauma oppressed groups have faced. It could also foster connections between members of the Black Diaspora that can act as the basis for organized change.

Not only is consciousness raising a means of healing past and current oppression, it can also act as a site for politicization of personal experiences. Work on this aspect of consciousness raising has been examined with feminist pedagogies that were pioneered by U.S. radical feminists in the 1960s. These feminists drew on Marxist notions of consciousness raising to mobilize women towards greater equality. Although consciousness raising became popular with women, this philosophy is easily applicable to other oppressed groups. Consciousness raising in this sense can be exemplified by the expression "the personal is political." By groups engaging in a thorough analysis of history and a dialogue-sharing process, a group-based point of view can develop that can provide grounds for collective action to achieve social justice for marginalized groups (Collins, 1998, p. 47).

## Conclusion

In this thesis I utilize definitions of Blackness and race that are socially constructed. While not “real” these racial representations have a profoundly negative effect on the lives of Black males. Together, Critical Race Theory and the anti-oppression model show how societal structures and unequal power relations disparage oppressed groups and privilege dominant groups. In school, intersections of race, class, and gender and racist beliefs and policies act in part to influence the success of Black males. It is difficult to tease out the connections between these factors; however, they will all be used in looking primarily at how race influences these dimensions. Research shows that Black males are struggling in school and that Black males in particular have different experiences than Black females or other students. This is due in part to cultural representations that stigmatize and demonize Black males (Davis, 2006, Noguera, 2003). These representations are external and the ways in which race stays in play can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads Black males towards academic failure. I will look at the ways in which these factors affect Black males’ schooling and how principles of antiracist education and consciousness raising can offer tools to combat oppression. Together, these ideas form the conceptual foundation to make sense of the data that emerged from the focus groups. In the next section I will outline the methodology used to gather data for this thesis. The methodological process includes the research methods that were used, participant selection and recruitment, the strengths and challenges of the research methods, and the process of data analysis.

## METHODOLOGY

### Ethnographic Approach

The design of this research study takes an ethnographic approach. Ethnography first originated in the field of anthropology as a way to study and understand different cultures although today ethnographers study more familiar groups and cultures (Patton, 2002). The term is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* which means *a people*, thus ethnography is “devoted to describing ways of life of humankind..., a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood” (Vidich and Lyman, 2000, cited in Patton, 2002, p. 81). A guiding principle of ethnographic enquiry is that any group of people who interact together for a period of time will develop their own culture (Patton, 2002). Culture is that “collection of behaviour patterns and beliefs that constitutes standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it” (Goodenough, 1971, cited in Patton, 2002, p. 81).

I adapted Reinharz’ (1992) approach of Feminist ethnography to look at the culture of Black students in the TDSB. While Reinharz (1992) speaks specifically of women, the goals of Feminist ethnography can also be used in looking at other groups. The goals of Feminist ethnography are: 1) to document the lives and activities of a group (in this case, Black students), 2) to understand the experiences of the group from their own point of view, and 3) to conceptualize behaviour as part of the larger social context (Reinharz, 1992).

Within this ethnographic approach, I used qualitative research methods. The qualitative approach refers to “gathering information in an open-ended manner to answer

exploratory evaluation questions” (Brun, 2005, p. 125). In qualitative research, the participants become experts on the research question because it is their responses that form the content of data analysis. Because of this, researchers remain open to the responses given in the participants’ own words. Qualitative research methods allow in-depth study of selected issues, are longer, more detailed and variable in content, and analysis is more difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized (Patton, 1990, cited in Patton, 2002). Direct quotations are the main source of data in qualitative analysis revealing participants’ depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences and their basic perceptions” (Ibid, p. 24). The task for the qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that accurately and thoroughly presents their points of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are talking” (Patton, 1990, p. 24). The specific qualitative methods that I used were focus groups.

### Focus Groups

I used the qualitative data-collection method of focus groups for this research. The purpose of a focus group is to understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, service, or idea (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Ideally, it involves six to eight people (but can range from as few as three to as many as twelve), a skilled moderator, and a comfortable, permissive environment (Ibid). The rule of thumb is to plan three or four focus groups with any one type of participant (Ibid). Once these have been

conducted, one must determine whether they have reached saturation (the point when one has heard the range of ideas and is not getting any new information (Ibid).

Initially, this project was envisioned quite differently. I was to conduct a series of one-hour long interviews with six to eight Black males between the ages of 16 to 18. I had devised 20 interview questions using a semi-structured approach. A part of this original research design was a Black/African history information sheet around which the focus group guide questions were based. After having my plan approved by my supervisor and my thesis defense committee, upon ethics review, I was unable to proceed. The information sheet of pre-slavery information that I had compiled was rejected as spurious. I reduced the number of facts, added references, made the information as value-neutral as possible and resubmitted it. Once again, this information sheet was rejected as wholly inaccurate and was compared to a doctor dispensing incorrect medical advice to patients. It appeared that I would not be able to maintain this integral component of my original research plan and I was devastated. The time for me to collect my data was drawing near and I did not have interview questions that did not rely on the information sheet, nor had I received ethics approval. I worked quickly to create a new plan.

As part of revisioning my research design, I began to consider focus groups for several reasons. It was imperative that I conduct the research in Toronto because I had selected TDSB as the focus of my inquiry. However this choice presented a slight problem as I was living in Ottawa at the time the data needed to be collected. I only had a one-week period to collect my data and I needed to be confident that it would be completed in this brief time. Upon speaking with my agency contacts, I began to realize how difficult and time-consuming it would be to meet my original goal of completing

eight to ten interviews. They advised me that the group of participants I was seeking (Black male adolescents) were highly unpredictable and elusive and it might be difficult to gain their commitment to participate. Due to the nature of social service community centre agencies, there was also no appropriate space in which to conduct the necessary number of interviews in the time allotted. Even if I had been able to find eight participants who were able and willing to speak with me, due to the limited time available to collect data, I would have had to conduct several interviews in the span of a few hours which would have been very taxing on me. So, after careful consideration with my thesis supervisor, I decided to change the format of my research to focus groups. This change allowed me to collect the requisite data in a shorter period of time, maximize community centre space, and gain data from more than one person at a time.

### *Strengths of Focus Groups*

In retrospect, the change from interviews to focus groups provided a number of advantages. Focus groups are great when one requires information to shed light on quantitative data that has already been collected (Krueger and Casey, 2000). There has been a lot of data collected on the topic of Black students, which provided me a starting point of how I should conduct my own research. While there has been research on the topic of Black students within education in Toronto, the most comprehensive work on the subject (Dei et al., 1997) is a decade-old and did not focus specifically on males. In my goal of further investigating the need and desire for more culturally-centered curriculum in the TDSB, the focus group format allowed me to pilot test ideas.

Focus groups are also ideal when looking for range of ideas or feelings that people have about something (Ibid). Because race, adolescence, and education are all such complex topics, I wanted to gain as broad a range of perspectives and experiences from participants as possible and the focus group format allowed me to do that. Although I had a focus group question guide and a working theory in mind, I remained open to new ideas encountered during the data collection process and placed no limits on the scope of responses I received (Brun, 2005). The semi-structured focus of the questions allowed for spontaneous, unstructured responses, which gave me deeper insight into the challenges facing young, Black males. As the voices of Black male youth are often silenced in the larger discourse of education, the groups were conducted in a more conversational manner that allowed participants to generally lead the discussion and discuss topics of relevance to them. This design proved immensely valuable, because I got insight into a number of areas that I never would have thought to ask about.

The focus group guide asked questions regarding the school experiences of Black males as well as questions based on curriculum and Black history (see Appendix A). Due to the nature of these questions and the age of the participants, it was possible that discussions on negative school experiences, race, slavery, or other potentially triggering topics would emerge. Such experiences can often be intensely personal and participants may not have felt comfortable sharing this information in an interview setting with someone whom they had never met before. Having people that they might have known participate with them in the group may have increased individuals' comfort levels and permitted them to speak more freely than in a one-on-one situation (Ibid). Furthermore, focus groups offer the possibility of "explicit use of the group interaction to

produce data and insights that would not be accessible without the interaction found in groups” (Morgan, 1988, cited in Brown and Kelly, 2001, p. 505).

### *Limits/Challenges of Focus Groups*

As with every research method, there were also limitations to the focus group approach. The smaller size of the groups resulted in a smaller pool of total ideas (Kruger and Casey, 2000). In focus groups, one person may dominate and consequently others will not have as much time to speak. In these cases, it is often difficult to return to the original topic when there are interruptions. Because there are multiple people in focus groups, it can be challenging to draw out less talkative members of the group and their opinions may not be able to be heard and used in the final reporting. I attempted to be attuned to this and to make space for such members by asking things like “you’ve been quiet, is there anything you would like to add?” or maintaining eye contact with those who I wished to hear more from. So while focus groups present a more natural environment than individual interviews (because participants are influencing and influenced by other, just as they are in life) this can also lead to topics becoming sidetracked, people changing their opinions midway during the focus group, and/or people withdrawing as more dominant members speak up (Ibid). There were also a few challenges of which I may not have been aware, but may have occurred nonetheless. One was that people might not have felt as comfortable delving into more sensitive topics as they may have during an individual interview. Another challenge was that there may have been possible power differentials between the high school graduates and those who were still in school.



### *Design of Focus Group Guide*

My research questions were central in designing my focus group guide. Due to the change from interviews to focus groups, I shortened the number of questions asked to get a broader range of responses. The participants were asked eight primary semi-structured questions and two member-checking questions following the funnel design (Morgan, 1997). This involves beginning with questions of a general nature and then narrowing the questioning to those topics of most interest to the researcher. This design allowed participants to begin to feel comfortable in the situation by starting with general questions about what they liked and did not like about school and ending with asking them specific questions about their experiences with Black history in school.

The first question was a very general opening question that asked participants “what is your favourite thing and least favourite thing about school?” This initial question was designed to establish rapport and to make people comfortable. The next question was an introductory question; “what is an average day at school like for you?” intended to further stimulate discussion. These first two questions were designed to get the group off to a fast, conversational start.

These questions were then followed by two transitional questions; one asking whether participants felt that school curriculum reflected diversity in Canada and the second asking participants what first came to mind upon hearing the phrase, Black history. These two bridging questions were meant to move the conversation into two of the key topics for the study: curriculum and Black history. For the question regarding Black history, I had participants make a list of their responses as a means to engage them

in the topic. I then had everyone read out their lists and used that information as a springboard for discussion of what people had written down.

Next came the key questions of what participants had learned about Black history in school, whether they wanted more information about Black history in school, and whether a Black history class in their school should be a separate course or integrated into regular classes. Finally, I concluded the groups with two ending questions<sup>6</sup>; “what do you think have been the most important points of our discussion? Have we missed anything? Is there anything we should have talked about, but did not?” I also gave a summary of the main points of the discussion and asked “is this accurate?” These questions allowed participants to reflect on what came up in the group and to identify which aspects they considered the most important.

In selecting the wording of the questions, I generally chose short questions that were easy to pronounce, had good flow, and sounded conversational. About half the questions were open-ended because they are “important when you want to determine the salience or importance of opinions to people, since people tend to mention those matters that are important to them” (Spencer, 1995, cited in Codjoe, 2001, p. 348). The rest of the questions were closed-ended, followed by “why or why not?” I used this format so that I could first get participants’ individual views on certain topics (yes or no), while then allowing them the opportunity to elaborate. This was intended to reduce participants changing their answers solely based on others’ responses.

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<sup>6</sup> Initial, opening, transitional, key, and ending questions from Krueger and Casey, 2000, pp. 102-105.

### *Recruitment and Composition of Groups*

Before conducting groups, I had considered specifically recruiting participants at-risk of significant school failure or dropping out, however I chose not to. Adding this additional criterion would have made the task of recruitment much more difficult and would have required agency contacts to question youth extensively to determine their risk status. This questioning could have alienated potential participants and might have reduced the pool of participants even further. I felt that by not limiting participants to those at-risk, I could gain the insights of those at-risk as well as not-at risk. As well, by not being aware of participants' risk status, this reduced any potential biases I would have had with this knowledge as moderator. Based on some of the data and the fact that participants were recruited from public community centre agencies, it is clear that some participants were at-risk, so while this was not explicitly part of the recruitment criteria, the insights of this group were included.

Participants were initially approached to participate in focus groups by staff at the community centres where the groups would be held. I sent my agency contacts the informed consent letter (Appendix B), information letter (Appendix C), and the recruitment poster (Appendix D) via email, to aid them in the task of finding suitable participants. Participants self-selected in that they voluntarily chose whether or not to participate.

I conducted three groups in total; the first group had three people, the second group had three people and the third group had four people; groups of this size are also known as mini-focus groups (Kruger and Casey, 2000). There were between three and four participants per group because this was the ideal size for the community centres in

which the groups were held because space is at a premium. There were a total of ten participants in the three focus groups. Two participants had already graduated from Toronto high schools within the past four years, the eldest being 22. The remainder of participants were between the ages of 16 to 18 and were enrolled in a Toronto District School Board high school at the time of the group.<sup>7</sup>

Originally I had planned this research to be conducted exclusively with Black males between the ages of 16 to 18 who were enrolled in TDSB schools at the time of the group, however, this did not end up happening due to a miscommunication between myself and my agency contact. Two participants were high school students and one participant was Latino. I will explain the reasons and implications of including a Latino participant in a study examining the experiences of Black students in the following section.

### *Implications of Changes to Original Sample*

Excluding the participants who did not meet my original sampling criteria would have reduced my total number of participants from 10 to 7, which might have compromised my data due to the limited sample size. The inclusion of participants no longer in the TDSB system presents some challenges to the data as it possible, even likely that their memory of certain experiences may have been reshaped with time and distance or that certain things of which they spoke had changed since their enrollment. However, as the data emerged it was clear that students who were not in school, but had graduated within three to four years of when the focus groups were conducted, did not report

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<sup>7</sup> Group 1 consisted of three self-identified Black high school students; Group 2 contained two high school students and one high school graduate; all of whom self-identified as Black; Group 3 contained one Latino student, two self-identified Black high school students and one self-identified Black high school graduate.

significantly different experiences compared to the students who were enrolled in school at the time of the data collection. These potential challenges are not as pressing as those presented by the Latino participant so I will primarily address his participation in the sample.

There were several reasons that I included a participant of a different ethnicity from my study focus. To be clear, the primary reason for his involvement was that I needed his participation to achieve the numbers necessary for the focus group to continue. However, before proceeding with the group, "Malcolm"<sup>8</sup> and I discussed that the topic of the group was the experiences of Black students. Clearly, to have Malcolm speak to the issues of those from another racialized group presents problems for the quality of the data. My reason for proceeding, despite this limitation was that research has suggested that young Latino and Black males' experiences in the educational system are shaped by similar relations of racism (Grayson, 1998; Soto, 2007). This being said, Malcolm's contributions to this thesis are those of an outsider and as such do not represent the first-hand experience of Black youth that form the most substantial data. Whenever possible, I have made sure that Malcolm's contributions clearly identify that he is not speaking about his own experience, but rather what he has understood as the experiences of the Black youth with whom he has attended school. While Malcolm is not Black, he attended the same high school as a number of other participants which serves a predominantly Black area and he seemed well integrated with staff and a number of the Black youth at the community centre.

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<sup>8</sup> A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity.

### *Strengths and Limits of Recruitment Methods*

To recruit participants for focus groups, I worked closely with my contacts at the agencies that approached potential participants for me. Having them do this was useful because they would have had a greater rapport and connection with potential participants who utilize the community centres. It was not possible for me to visit the centres and personally recruit participants, so having others aid me in locating potential participants whom I could accept or reject saved me time and money in frequent trips to Toronto. I understand that focus groups require time and effort, so soft drinks and pizza were offered during the groups which may have enticed this otherwise difficult to reach group.

Because of my distance from the locations where the groups were to be held, the agency contacts had some influence on the outcomes of the research, since they were the ones who approached potential participants. My agency contacts or I may have overlooked certain aspects of the problem or neglected individuals with unique points of view. The nature of the types of participants that I required (Black male high school students) made it challenging to recruit them. There was no guarantee that participants that had been recruited before the focus groups would arrive on the date they were supposed to. The contingency plan if pre-selected participants did not show up was to recruit people who were present at the centre. This plan may have led to changes in the types of participants selected. As with any research, there was a balancing act between the ideal situation and what was feasible with the available resources (time, space,

finances, etc.). If resources are limited, fewer groups can be conducted (Kruger and Casey, 2000).

### Procedure

The focus groups were held in private rooms at two different youth community centre organizations in two well-known, predominantly Black and multicultural neighborhoods in Toronto in February 2007. To maintain anonymity, the centres are not be referred to by name. Before beginning the groups, I introduced myself to participants, discussed their rights with them, ensured that each participant was at least 16 years of age, and collected the signed consent forms. I advised participants that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to and that they could stop the interview at any time. I then advised them about their own anonymity and that of other participants. Everyone was made aware that any personally identifying information they shared would not be revealed in the final report although their responses might be quoted. Any names associated with responses were pseudonyms. To protect others' confidentiality, everyone was advised that what was discussed during the focus groups was not to be discussed outside of the group. Participants were then invited to have refreshments, including fast food and soft drinks. When participants were again seated before beginning the discussion, I asked permission to record the session and with permission secured I turned on the digital recorder.

I moderated the focus groups asking each of the eight questions. Although there was a guide to direct the sessions, questions were created during the focus group, building on responses, allowing both myself and the focus group participants the

flexibility to probe for details or discuss relevant issues. Because of this semi-structured approach, certain topics emerged and were discussed in some focus groups and not others. During the groups I asked participants to define certain terms and expressions they used where applicable in order to put their perceptions in the appropriate context and to clarify meaning for those who will read the report and are not familiar with the terms used (Dei et al., 1997). When all the focus group questions had been asked, I asked participants what they thought were the most important points of our discussion and if they had anything else to add. Finally, I summarized the discussion and then asked “is this accurate?” At this point, the groups ended and participants left.

The groups lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. I transcribed the focus groups shortly after they ended. During, and immediately after the group, I wrote brief notes in a reflective journal to capture any insights that came to me during the focus group as well as to record observations and potential biases (Brun, 2005). As I reflect on this journal and the project itself, it is clear that my belief that an Afrocentric curriculum can have a positive impact on the learning experiences of young Black men, has shaped the ways in which the project was designed and the interpretations of the data. I have tried to mitigate the effect this has had on the analysis by attending to the broader social relations that also shape education and by trying to ask open-ended questions to participant’s that allowed them the opportunity to present their views, unimpeded by my own beliefs and expectations. Despite these measures, my beliefs are as much a part of this work as the contributions of participants and it is hoped that as I



integrate them, they provide useful insights into the possibilities of Afrocentric curriculum content.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of “examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence, to address the initial proposition of a study” (Yin, 1984, cited in Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 125). I used the unabridged transcript and my personal reflective notes as the basis of my analysis. I used the computer to help manage data by copying and pasting portions of each transcript into the popular data analysis software, *Nvivo*. This qualitative analysis software allowed me to organize my data into folders based on themes and sub-themes. This way, I could see at a glance from which focus group specific comments emerged. I used theme analysis to reduce the data of the transcription to codes, categories, and themes:

Codes are symbols or labels given to words or phrases that that compose a single idea...Categories are the labels given to groupings of codes addressing similar topics...Themes are more general, conceptual ideas that capture related categories. (Brun, 2005, p. 162)

I used several methods in order to select codes, categories, and themes for the final report. The first was a question asked at the very end of each focus group: “what do you think have been the most important points of our discussion? Is there anything we should have talked about, but did not?” (adapted from Krueger and Casey, 2000). This verifier question allowed the importance of what was discussed in the group to come from the group itself, thus increasing validity. I used information gained from this question to help piece out which main themes and categories were relevant.

The second method I used to analyze data was simply to follow the line of questioning that I used in the focus group guide. There were specific concepts central to the thesis of my research (namely, Black history and curriculum) and categories and codes that connected with this theme were included. I designed the guide in sequential format with key themes in line with my research question towards the end. I utilized those key questions to identify the broad themes to include and placed my attention on parts of the group discussion where the most relevant conversation was held.

The third method of data analysis was to identify common topics that emerged in each group. If topics that were not part of the focus group guide emerged in more than one group I took that as a sign that it was a relevant issue to participants and made sure to include it in the final analysis. Breaking themes down into sub-themes and categories was less complex. For example, teachers, suspensions, and assignments could all be categorized under “school” because they are all events or people that are involved in the broader experience of school. It was possible for some categories to fall under more than one theme, like perceived experiences of racism or prejudice in school; such instances could be classified under either “racism,” or “school,” or “racism in school.” In these cases, if there were enough references to such dual categories, a new sub-category would be created that reflected both aspects.

Codes that were used included certain words that related to specific categories. For example, a category emerged that I dubbed “hidden history,” which refers to the participants’ feelings that Black history had been willfully obscured. So during the discussion of Black history, anytime someone said “hiding,” or “hidden,” made reference to not being told information, or to being told selective information, I would classify this

in the “hidden history” category, which fit under the larger theme of “Black history.” Some categories or codes that emerged were not echoed by other participants or were mentioned briefly as part of a larger discussion. Such data was filed into a category in *Nvivo* software called “free nodes” to indicate that that these were stand-alone pieces of data that did not fit easily into any of the main categories.

In terms of individual quotes, those were chosen for various reasons. Although group participants may have agreed with something said by one or two individuals, some participants encapsulated complex themes very eloquently in their statements and these quotes were chosen for their depth and clarity. I paid special attention to specific examples in the first-person, as opposed to hypothetical, third-person answers. Some comments were chosen because they contradicted common responses and were highlighted to portray alternate points of view, which were analyzed in context. I always considered the purpose of the study in choosing which quotes to use. While a number of interesting, passionate quotes were made on certain topics, they did not relate to the central thesis of Black student’s experiences in school and feelings around Black history, and were thus, omitted.

### Credibility and Trustworthiness of Data

One means I used of ensuring credibility and reliability was member-checking (Krueger and Casey, 2000). When all the focus group questions had been asked, I asked two additional questions: I summarized the discussion and then asked “is this accurate?” and then asked what participants thought were the most important points of our

discussion. These last questions allowed the importance of topics to be determined by the groups themselves which aided me in determining salient themes for data analysis.

I also maintained an audit trail at all points of my research process to help ensure credibility (Brun, 2005). This included digital recordings of the focus group sessions, written transcripts, a record of origin of selected quotes, lists of categories and hypotheses I used while analyzing the data, etc. This audit trail helped ensure that the information I used in data analysis can be traced back to specific sources and originated from the focus groups I conducted.

Evaluator credibility refers to whether the person conducting the evaluation is both trustworthy and competent to perform the evaluation, so that the evaluation findings achieve maximum credibility and acceptance (Brun, 2005). I had not conducted focus groups before, although I read extensively on the subject before I began. I maintained a list of tips to consider (Appendix E) as I conducted the focus groups, to increase reliability and credibility in my actions. As a member of the same racial group of many of those who participated, I feel that while that may have biased me, it also may have given me a greater insight into some of the issues and feelings than someone who was from a different racial group. To keep a check on this, I maintained a reflective journal that I consulted during the analysis to ensure that my own biases were not influencing the analysis.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined the ethnographic approach and qualitative research methods that I used in this project. This project design was reworked over a number of

months as ethics committee demands, time, and participant availability became issues to which I needed to respond. Of particular importance are the shifts in sample that meant while this work focuses on the experiences of Black youth in TDSB, 2 participants were not currently in the system, and 1 participant identified as Latino. Thus the data is more textured than I had initially imagined. It brings together the experiences of Black youth in the system, those who recently left the system, and one individual who does not identify as Black, but whose experiences in the TDSB with Black youth provided another interesting perspective on the challenges faced by young Black men. I now turn to the findings of my research covering three main areas: participants' general experiences in school, participants' experiences with punishment in school and stereotypes and prejudice faced outside school, and participants' views on curriculum and Black history. This will then be followed by a conclusion, summary of the findings, directions for future research, as well as implications of the research for social work practice.

## CHAPTER FOUR - EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL

### Introduction

School, arguably considered neutral ground for all, seems not to be experienced as such by many Black male students. Previous research has shown that Black males in the Toronto District School Board are failing within the education system. They are disproportionately represented in special education classes, are receiving poor marks in classes, are at risk of dropping out, and are less likely to go on to secondary education than other students (Dei et al., 1997; James, 2007; RCOL, 1994). Part of the reason for these differential outcomes lies in the ways in which relations of racism are replicated within American and Canadian school systems (Alladin, 1996; Aylward, 1999; Cannon, 1995; Lewis, 1992). The structured inequalities of society such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism are reinforced in schools (Aylward, 1999; Dei et al., 1995; Kumashiro, 2000).

While free and accessible, the formal education system is not solely a benevolent or charitable gesture; public education systems are also the means by which states instill common cultural values and expectations. Part of the impetus for developing public schools in central Canada in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was to ensure that large numbers of German, Scottish, and Irish immigrants were socialized into the dominant values of the day (Levin and Young, 1994). There were few efforts made to maintain or support immigrants' own languages or culture. An inspector of schools in Saskatchewan wrote in 1918 that "... [the] public school...is the great melting-pot into which must be placed these diverse racial groups, and from which will eventually emerge the pure gold of Canadian citizenship" (Ibid, p. 85).

Any deviation from such a singular, universal and highly regulated curriculum results in exclusion; instead of questioning the interplay of dynamics like race, sex, class, cultural representations and racism when groups do not excel within the education system, they are often perceived as deficient (Giroux, 1992; Kumashiro, 2000). There is a widely held belief that education is unbiased and that anyone who wants to work hard will succeed and those who do not, will not (Dei et al., 1997; Freire, 2003). Often it is easier to shift the onus of the problem to those who are not part of the mainstream and to use “Black culture” as a scapegoat for Blacks’ persistent educational failure (Harrison, 2000, p. xxi). This thinking is detrimental because it implies that the Other is the problem; it implies that without the Other, schools would not be oppressive places. Such an understanding fails to recognize the impact of persistent racism on some students (Kumashiro, 2000).

In this study’s focus groups, many echoed experiences that are well documented in the literature. These include Black students’ experiences of racism (Alladin, 1996; Codjoe, 2001), their feeling of increased surveillance compared to other students (Fine, 2003; Lipman, 2003), lack of relevance of curriculum to their lives (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997; Noguera, 2003), stereotyping (Davis, 2003; Diamond et al., 2004; Nelson, 2006); and a sense of negative differential treatment according to race (Brathwaite and James, 1996). In order to begin to look at some of the complexities faced by this group of Black youth within the education system, I will outline some typical school experiences that were discussed in the focus groups; the first is in the ways in which teachers interacted with Black youth as a mediating factor in their experience of school. Participants’ made the distinction between what they perceived as supportive, caring

teacher interactions, and those that they thought showed a lack of commitment to them as students. Participants explained the differences between these types of behaviours and how they made them feel. I then explore participants' perceptions that their history curriculum was Eurocentric. Finally, I will conclude by exploring the participants' observations of the process and development of a self-fulfilling prophecy related to academic failure that results from the low expectations and labels that can be faced within school. All of these factors served to make school a space of disengagement for participants. While the participants in the project understood their interactions with educators as a transparent sign of the essential nature of these teachers, my analysis of the data suggests a more complex interpretation of student-teacher interactions. Whereas the youth used these interactions to categorize and essentialize teachers, I am going to suggest the ways in which these moments of performance of the teachers are also shaped by the broader social relations that determine the educational system and the community and family experiences that determine the needs and expectations young Black men bring into the classroom.

### Teachers

Teachers hold an important place in the lives of students. They are with them several hours every day, five days a week and are likely the adults with whom students are most familiar, with the exception of family members. Teachers are in positions of leadership and respect, and as such can hold influence over students. In terms of Black students, teachers may have an even larger impact than for other students. Current trends indicate the probability that Black students will mostly experience White teachers in their school careers (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2001). With the



knowledge that racism shapes Black students' behaviour both inside and outside of school (Codjoe, 2001) and the obvious power differentials between teachers and students, this can set the stage for tense relations, avoidance, or misunderstandings between Black students and their White teachers. For many teachers, broader social images of young Black men also shape their expectations, fears and hopes for Black students. The distrust and anxiety that emerge in a city where the dominant image of young, Black men is that of a criminal (Wortley and Tanner, 2003) can make it difficult for young Black men and White teachers to encounter each other in an authentic manner. Instead, it seems from past research and the participants in this study, the relationship between White teachers and young Black men (particularly poor, Black men) is one of distrust and misunderstanding. The ways in which relations of racism shape Black youths' experience in the educational system also extend beyond individual teacher-student interactions. Teachers and students are impacted by the systemic nature of racism and differential treatment that contributes to a lack of achievement (Yon, 1994, cited in Codjoe, 2001).

In conducting the focus groups, although none of the questions focused on students' experience with teachers, the topic emerged quite frequently in response to the question "what is your favourite and least favourite thing about school?" Participants responded to this question with accounts of interactions with teachers that led them to categorize their educators as those who were more supportive or less supportive to their needs.

When teachers engaged in a series of non-supportive interactions, they were often categorized by participants as "paycheque-teachers." This term was used because participants felt that these educators behaved in a manner that indicated teaching was

merely a means to receive a paycheque without further involvement. Whatever the reason behind these unsupportive interactions, they worked to reinforce the dominant cultural image of Black youth as not part of the mainstream, disengaged, and suspicious. Here, two participants<sup>9</sup> spoke of their experiences where teachers acted in an unsupportive way:

*Jason:* Certain teachers, as soon as you come in they're like 'sit right down! Why are you here?! Go over there!' Those are paycheque teachers. Just wanna go there for the pay it's not their career, it's their job.

*Bennett:* They say 'I'm just gonna go get some money today; I don't care about this right now' and just go home and sleep.

What students perceived as teachers' attitudes of disinterest and frustration had subtle, yet significant influences on their schooling experience. For Black students at-risk of school failure, unsupportive interactions with teachers further alienated them and made school a less inviting place. Another unsupportive dynamic was participants' sense that some teachers were fearful of young Black men in their classrooms:

*Richard:* They treat you differently because you're Black, they think you're gonna do something. More scared and stuff.

This type of reaction clearly relies upon the broader cultural issues of young Black men which portray them as threatening (Codjoe, 2006). Experiences like these were recounted with a profound sense of frustration. Researchers like Smitherman (1977; see also Davis, 2003; Ferguson, 2000) have argued that Black children, and males in particular, often behave in ways that are perceived as hostile and insubordinate by adults. This may not be due simply to stereotypes, but may actually be based in the behaviour that Black males consciously adopt. The reasons for this are complex:

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<sup>9</sup> All participant identities have been protected. The names used here are pseudonyms.

Given the range and extent of the hardships that beset this segment of the population, there is no doubt that there are some legitimate reasons for young Black males to be angry. Yet, it is also clear that this thinly veiled rage and readiness for conflict can be self defeating and harmful to their well-being. One of the consequences of this hostility and anger may be that such attitudes and behaviors have a negative effect on their academic performance. Adults, especially women, may be less willing to assist a young male who appears angry or aggressive. Ferguson (2000) found in his research in Shaker Heights, Ohio, that Black students were more likely than White students to cite 'toughness' as a trait they admired in others (p. 23). If these researchers are correct, and if the toughness admired by Black males evokes feelings of fear among some of their teachers, it is not surprising that trouble in school would be common. (Noguera, 2003, p. 455)

The impassioned and emotive manner of speech and behaviour popular among young Black males may be interpreted as combative or argumentative by unfamiliar listeners, particularly women. Often women can feel more threatened by such behaviour coming from males who are represented as powerful and potentially dangerous in our culture. Combined with the stereotypes of Black males as more aggressive and dangerous than White males (Codjoe, 2006; James, 2007), this threat can seem even more imposing. This is in contrast to a common stereotype of Black females. Instead of being viewed as physically threatening, Black women are more often viewed as sexually promiscuous "temptresses" (Pilgrim, 2002). They are not feared in White society; they are desired with an ambivalence that comes from coveting "forbidden fruit" (Ibid). The fear due to internalized stereotypes of Black males, can lead to alienation and suspicion. Such fears may also contribute to over-referral of Black students to the office:

*Richard:* They're quicker to send us to the office too. They don't hesitate to send you to the office or getting you suspended.

Teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent Black males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority (Ruck and Wortley,

2002). For example, a teacher who instantly views a student as a troublemaker without reflection on how they arrived at these beliefs will likely find his or her actions toward that student becoming influenced by their thoughts (Noguera, 2003). In this way, we can reconfigure our analysis of educators as acting out and, thus, sustaining relations of racism. For most of the participants, the inequality that is at the core of racism was recognized in moments that they saw as unequal treatment of racialized and White students. Jason said he felt that White students received extra help from teachers and were able to “get away” with things like reading magazines instead of books during reading time. Bennett felt that White students were permitted to do things that Black students might not, such as being allowed to listen to their ipods in class.

These interpretations present a further problem to Black youth. They have the effect of situating Black youth as victims and powerless against the White system. These types of reflections on their day-to-day experiences were seldom paired with statements of active resistance. Instead, the system and teachers as representatives of that system become all-powerful and it was sometimes difficult to hear youth account for their agency in disrupting the relations that they experienced as oppressive. Rather than situating the possibility of change with themselves, participants tended to see the possibility for a better experience as resting with educators.

In contrast to unsupportive interactions, what is interesting is that what participants saw as supportive had little relation to the curriculum or the effectiveness of the pedagogy, but rather interpersonal kindness, which seem to offer some validation of their presence in the school. Previous research confirms that Black and White students have very different expectations regarding the behaviours their teachers exhibit. Sizemore

(1981) conducted a study to see if there were differences between Black and White students in terms of desirable teacher characteristics. He found that while overall, both Black and White students identified several core behaviours they felt were important; White students rated teacher behaviours such as “good organization, systematic behaviour, and stimulating and interesting” highly, while Black students tended to value warm teacher behaviours such as being “‘nice’, being helpful in personal matters, and listening to students” (Sizemore, 1981, p. 52). In a society where the dominant cultural representation of Black youth is that of the dangerous aggressor, moments of kindness seemed to provide a disruption, opening up new possibilities for young Black men to participate in the system. Like the participants in Sizemore’s study, the focus group participants in this study named similar characteristics that they valued in teachers. For example, supportive, pre-emptive actions such as warning students that they were in imminent danger of getting into trouble as a sort of “heads-up” that could give them a chance to change their behaviour before they got into more serious trouble:

*Derek:* Like, if I get in trouble, the teacher...will come to me, and she’ll tell me they’re watching me and they might kick me out of school, and then she’ll let me know. So, and she’ll like help me and all this stuff too.

This interaction was so important for Derek because it did not assume his deviance, but rather provided him an opportunity to behave in different ways. Participants also described strategies that they used to help encourage such supportive relationships with teachers. Jason recommended “getting to know teachers” as a way to become allies and strengthen the bonds of trust and communication:

*Jason:* I really got to know my teachers off of class time. So when I would get in trouble they wouldn’t send me to the office, they would talk to me first.

Participants felt that when teachers acted in ways that suggested that they genuinely cared about them and wanted to see them succeed that it really made a difference in their enjoyment of school. Jason, a former student, identified his relationship with one of his teachers as being a motivating factor to attend classes he did not like and in turn, to become a better student:

*Jason:* I was a troublesome kid in Grades 9 and 10 and halfway through 11. I was the worst kid to have in a class before teachers got involved with me. They used to look at my name and pray that they don't have me in their class. They used to highlight my name on the attendance in class. Other teachers I never liked, but when I got to teachers in Grade 11, Grade 12 and stuff, and met teachers that really took care of my future and really wanted me to do something. They took extra time to actually help me. I showed more respect for those teachers. I went to their class as much as [I could]. Normally I never went to class. Grade 10 math I never went; Grade 11 and 12 math, I went and passed nice, because I actually got to know the teachers. I didn't just look at it as 'going to class, ugh! I don't want to face this teacher.' I looked at it as 'ya, I have a friend in class. I have my teacher. I can go chat with her.' I'd go to class and go sit next to the teacher and talk to her before class started. Those are teachers right there; that actually conversate [*sic*] with you.

Jason began as an at-risk student; however, as he developed relationships with teachers his behaviour and path changed. Jason felt that his teacher looked out for his future and "really wanted him to do something" which inspired him to succeed. Jason experienced these high expectations as indirectly encouraging him to take an interest in school and in improving his performance. There is research that suggests that the performance of Black students (more so than other students) is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2000). In line with this, another participant describes one of the differences between supportive and unsupportive teacher behaviour as interest and warmth:

*Malcolm:* You feel the interest towards you. You feel it, you see it, you hear it. Like when they say ‘how are you doing?’ or ‘what happened?’ or ‘what’s wrong?’ Or let’s say I’m crying in the hallway and one of the teachers that are *different*, in the negative way, will just pass right by me and the teachers that I like and enjoy having their class will say ‘what’s wrong? What happened? Can I help you?’ So that’s the kind of difference.

Malcolm described the expressed concern and care into his life that he received from teachers as those whose class he enjoyed. Although it is difficult to determine whether he liked the teacher’s class and as a result, the teacher’s behaviour towards him was warmer, or whether the teacher’s behaviour led him to enjoy their class, the fact that there was a relationship between Malcolm’s enjoyment of class and warm, friendly teacher behaviour is evident.

Cooper (2003) sought to discover the qualities and similarities of effective White teachers of Black children. Although the study focused on three White teachers at a primary school, similar positive and effective attributes were identified in the current study. One of the things that Cooper (2003) found was that the teachers in her study used an authoritative teaching style. Authoritativeness is to be distinguished from authoritarianism, which is favoring complete obedience or subjection to authority as opposed to individual freedom (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). Alfred North Whitehead (1929) wrote that “authoritativeness should be an aim of education because of its emphasis on the use of *power for the student’s good* and never as an end in itself or aggrandizement of the teacher’s position” (emphases in original, cited in Cooper, 2003, p. 420). Just as students in Cooper’s study (2003) were not upset or hurt by such a teaching style; nor were participants in the current study. Jason said this of an authoritative teaching style:

*Jason:* Even when [teachers] pressure you, even when they yell at you, you don't take it as a negative thing you look at it as 'you're correcting me.' You understand it.

Jason recognizes that the teacher's firm manner comes from a place of care and he seems to appreciate it. The teacher is almost acting in the role of a parent, who pushes his or her child not out of malice, but rather out of a desire to see them succeed. The pseudo-parental role of the teacher as "Othermother" was also found to be beneficial for students in Cooper's (2003) study where the successful teachers of Black students said they treated their students similarly to how they would treat their own children. Of Othermothers, Patricia Hill Collins says "in African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children" (1991, p. 119).

It is important to note that some of the challenges faced by poor Black communities in Toronto have resulted in a diminished capacity for many communities to offer comprehensive support for their children (Brathwaite and James, 1996; Cheng et al., 1993). Such problems include Black adolescents often needing to take on adult roles outside of school, limited support for remaining in school, low socioeconomic status, and the difficulties in encouraging fathers to stay involved in the lives of their children (Ferguson et al., 2005), thus many of these young people seemed to be looking for that communal, mothering support from within the school system. The school system remained clearly unable to meet such demands. Thus, we see two tensions colliding in the narratives of the young, predominantly poor Black men. First, given the challenges they face in their communities and families they come into the school system with increased demands. Second, as an institution that reflects the cultural practices of racism



the school system not only fails to meet these demands, but actually works to reinforce dominant cultural expectations of young, Black men as not capable of the academic performance that is expected (Ibid). It is with this analysis that we can begin to see the ways in which broader social problems that result from racism and classism converge in the schooling experiences of these youth (Alladin, 1996; James, 2007).

Based on the narratives of the focus groups, supportive teacher attributes included a sense that teachers were interested in students' lives, problem-solving of small issues before they became bigger ones, encouragement, high expectations, friendliness, familiarity with students' lives outside of class, and most simply, interest. At-risk youth are in dire need of people who express that they believe in them and transmit those high expectations through actions, especially when this support may be lacking at home. Those who will "take on the challenge of being a loving family, trusting friend, and dedicated teacher" (Wilson, 2001, p. 19) were recognized and appreciated by the students I spoke with and influenced their lives in untold ways. When school is experienced as nurturing and supportive it becomes a source of help and opportunity rather than a place students seek to actively avoid (Noguera, 2003). Now that the influence of student-teacher interactions have been looked at, in the next section I shall explore participants' thoughts on the curriculum and the ways it reproduced Black students' marginality.

### History Curriculum

In previous research, school curriculum was often identified as a tool of both engagement and disengagement for Black students (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997;

Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat and Curriculum Services Canada [LNSCSC], 2004; Noguera, 2003). Dei et al. (1997) found that many Black students described school as boring, in part because class lessons primarily depicted Whites as having been key figures in history. Participants in this study expressed more than feelings of boredom in describing history curriculum; they expressed indignation at the absence of Black information.

A question that was asked in all the focus groups was “do you feel the school curriculum reflects the diversity in Canada? Why or why not?” In answering this question, there was an undercurrent that participants perceived they were being *deprived* of Black history information. This notion was troubling to participants and signified far greater ambivalence to the perceived Eurocentric curriculum than may have been expressed in other studies. Martin felt that he was receiving a version of history that was not reflective of Black perspectives:

*Martin:* They just tell you stuff, that in their words is true, but in the Black words is not true. They take everything from the Black person and change it over to them. It's like that to me.

*Jason:* They don't teach us what's really important to us, but what's important to them.

The underlying feeling expressed in both these quotes is that the curriculum is depicting information and figures important to educators and curriculum designers, but not to Black students. Participants clearly felt that they were not learning about what was important to them but rather what educators and curriculum designers deemed worthy of study. As an institution through which Whiteness is secured, the history curriculum that these students experienced seemed to be based on foregrounding White experiences, while Black experiences are sidelined (Apple, 1990). For participants, this reinforced the erroneous

message that only White people ever did anything of consequence and that Black leadership and versatility does not exist (Dei et al., 1997).

Inherent in participants' comments was a deep sense of distrust about who was making these curricular choices and why. Participants seem to implicitly realize that as part of the White supremacist system's continued functioning, it is imperative to regulate the information taught in schools (Dei, 1996). Apple (1990) has argued that the selection and organization of knowledge for schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups. It is what Apple (1992) has called the "selective tradition": "someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, one that in the process of enfranchising one group's cultural capital disenfranchises another's" (p. 5). Increased incorporation of Afrocentricity in the curriculum was found to have the opposite effect; engaging, instead of disengaging Black youth (Giddings, 1990; Wente, 2007). (The potential impacts of Black history on the learning experiences of Black students will be discussed in more depth in chapter 6).

Certainly in this study, participants perceived history curriculum as predominantly Eurocentric. As a result, these young Black men were left trying to secure other self-representations to grab onto. Unfortunately, the limited range of Black male representations often led them to construct themselves as disinterested. Without a content to foster a sense of self-significance, or a broader cultural representation to support sustaining attention within the context of learning White history, these youths seemed to disconnect from schooling altogether. Yet, other groups who do not see themselves represented in the curriculum either thrive or do not face challenges as severe as Black males. A common group contrasted as "model minorities" compared with Black

students are Asians (Lew, 2006). However, Asians' status as model minorities - a stereotype that often conflates them with Whiteness - plays an important ideological role in perpetuating ideals of individual meritocracy, especially for poor minority students. It is believed that the "Asians did it, anyone can!" (Ibid). Often it is believed that the "strong work ethic" and focus on academic achievement that is considered part of Asians' culture is what ensures their success in contrast to Black students' "dysfunctional culture" in which to be aligned with academic achievement is to "act White" - an undesirable outcome (Ogbu, 1987). Designations of Asian "success" or Black "failure" cannot be based solely on cultural explanations, but have to take into account changing social contexts.

Work by Lew (2006) looked at the ways that academic achievement among Asian-American students involves a complex relationship between culture, class, race, and schools. Lew (2006) looked at both high and low-achieving Korean-American students to see the ways that they shaped their identities and perceived school. The high-achieving students, in an attempt to resist the racial minority status and the accompanying marginalization, emphasized the value of education and working even harder to compensate for racial barriers. These students also had a strong network of other Korean-Americans, strong social support for education at home, and attended a school renowned for its academic achievement. On the other hand, the low-achieving students struggled financially at home and faced limited support in school. The urban schools they attended were mostly populated by poor minorities and recent immigrants, were fraught with violence, and had high dropout rates. In this school context, the low-income Korean-American dropouts rarely came into contact with wealthy Asian-Americans or Whites.

Rather, most of their peers were working-class and poor Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics with whom they identified. They even went so far as to distinguish themselves from the wealthy Korean-Americans from privileged backgrounds. Some participants in this study aligned such students with Whiteness because of the way they spoke and their academic success. Both groups of Korean students negotiated their racial and ethnic identities differently according to the changing social and economic context. This case study gives some evidence that identity related to achievement is not static. While increased cultural relevance in the curriculum has been shown to have benefit for Black students, the ways in which other cultures negotiate their identities may preclude different strategies for their engagement.

In looking at another group that generally has slightly less difficulty educationally, Black females tend to perform somewhat better in school than their male counterparts (Cheng et al, 1993; Cheng and Yau, 1999; Davis, 2003). Schooling contexts are often cited as important sources for gender construction and development (Sewell, 1997). Whether related to background and family resources or opportunities to learn and develop that are influenced by gender relations, African-American males are more often disadvantaged by the intersection of their gender and race. Ford (1992a, 1992b, cited in Smith et al., 2005) conducted one of the few studies exploring gender differences in African-American students' (gifted and non-gifted) beliefs regarding the achievement ideology. They reported that while both African-American males and females indicated support for the achievement ideology, males were more likely to report expending lower levels of effort on their school work. In addition, African-American males were more likely than females to indicate agreement with beliefs that might discourage African-

American children from doing well in school and, hence, contribute to underachievement. The question then becomes why Black males have these attitudes to a greater degree than Black females. Based on these findings, Ford and Harris (1997) suggest that low support for achievement and low effort may lead to diminished expectations by African-American males, which in turn leads to low academic performance.

Even though poor, Black males do not easily navigate between their own cultures and communities and those of Whites, they are still heavily influenced by representations of Whiteness in education. Participants in all groups overwhelmingly felt that history curriculum did not reflect the diversity in Canada. When asked why classes were not showing diversity in the history curriculum, Derek replied that classes depicted:

*Derek:* More... White people. More White famous people than more Black famous people.

For White North Americans, the curricular content has always reflected their sociocultural and intellectual histories and their worldview (McMahon, 2003). Thus, they have been socialized to see themselves in a positive-primary mode, and non-White racial groups in a negative-secondary mode (Dei, 1996). These perceptions are neither challenged nor contradicted by the curriculum. Canadian history class was brought up quite frequently in the discussion on curriculum; it was one of participants' most disliked and frequently skipped classes:

*Jason:* They put me on academic probation for history class. They made me go to that one. If I had a choice I would just drop that class. It made no sense to me.

This statement illustrates the findings of research that if Black students do not feel that they are learning material that is relevant, interesting, or uplifting, they will become

disengaged with classes and are unlikely to make the effort to attend (Brown and Kelly, 2001; Dei et al., 1997; LNSCSC, 2004). Jason's decision not to attend this class was one way he could resist the dissemination of knowledge that he found irrelevant (James, 2007). In a twist of irony, Jason wondered why he was forced to learn about Winston Churchill (who he mistakenly believed was American) in Canadian history class, showing the true extent of his disengagement:

*Jason:* The whole Canadian history is Winston Churchill. You spend a quarter semester on that dude then you have a big assignment on him. Then they give you a so-called independent assignment, ISP, but they give you a list of people you can choose from. How is that independent? Look at the names and you can't recognize them. I don't know who Winston Churchill is up to now. I think he's American. I never once paid attention in that class.

The choice of what is considered appropriate for study in certain classes (for example, the choice of appropriate subjects for an independent study project) has dual effects; it sends the message that topics of interest to Black youth are not significant (by their exclusion) and also thwarts Black students' opportunities to centre their experiences in their learning. Instead, it has been found that opening up alternatives for Black youth to take an active role in their learning motivates and interests them (Brown and Kelly, 2001). Virtually all of the participants agreed that their core classes were not reflecting the diversity of Canada or their own lived experiences, which was one factor involved in them becoming bored. This boredom is shaped by factors both inside and outside of school. It has also been put forward that when Black men see few opportunities for positively correlated outcomes of education and occupational opportunities in society they may choose to disengage from education. (Mickelson, 1990, cited in Smith, Schneider, and Ruck, 2005). This perception of low expectations related to the mobility

of high educational achievement could be more prevalent for Black males who are more feared and distrusted in society and thus, less likely to be easily allowed into the White working world (Smith et al., 2005).

### Low Teacher Expectations and the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Teacher expectations of Black students, regardless of class level, are lower than those they hold for middle- and upper-class White students (Farkas, 1996; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, and Shaun, 1990). The effects of these low expectations are that students tend to exert less effort in school and they develop a reduced academic self-image. In other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy develops that is a prescription for failure (Diamond et al., 2004). Self-fulfilling prophecies have been a recurring theme in research on prejudice and racism and are an intriguing phenomenon (Nelson, 2006; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). Basically, a self-fulfilling prophecy hypothesizes that one person's attitudes and expectations of another person can influence the other's actions, which in turn may cause them to behave in such a manner so as to confirm the original belief (Word, Zanna, and Cooper, 1974). The low expectations that some teachers have of Black students lead them to believe that they will not succeed academically, which can have deleterious effects on their academic performance (Diamond et al., 2004; Tauber, 1997). Labelling matters and the younger the person is that is being labelled, the more it matters (Tauber, 1997). Participants across the focus groups recognized the detrimental effect that labelling, low expectations, and a self-fulfilling prophecy could have on at-risk students. One label that a large proportion of Black students receive in school is that of "special education student." There are studies which show that Black students are



disproportionately represented in special needs classes (Bhattacharjee, 2003; Reschly, 1997). Malcolm describes his feelings on how students in special education classes are labelled and how this can contribute their expected failure:

*Malcolm:* Don't label them either, because when you label kids that's what they feel that they are. Like [labeling] 'special eds' [*sic*] as kids that can't learn. And I know a lot of special ed kids that are smart, way smarter than kids that are labeled as 'normal.' The kids that are special eds in school, *stay* special eds, they *act* like special eds. They should work towards them not being those special ed kids. When you walk by a special ed class, it's hell in there, because that's how they label you, so that's how you're gonna act. 'Oh, ya, I'm a special ed kid so I can act like this.' That's how kids think.

In addition to special education being geared to the learning needs of diverse children, it also serves as a means of reinforcing stereotypes about special needs children and eliciting behaviour consistent with this perception. Even the act of labelling children as "special education students" can unfairly victimize students and cause them to adopt identities in reaction to the labelling that can be harmful (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003, p. 442). Such labelling not only impacts the large proportion of racialized youth within this designation, but is reflective of a larger trend of unfairly labelling any student that does not fit into the dominant mould of a "successful" student. What is lost in these practices is the complex dynamic that exists between students, their families, their communities and mainstream social institutions. The system designates those unable to meet its expectations as deviant, but in this work, I suggest that a more complicated dynamic is at play; one in which students are attempting to manufacture a self within a limited field of opportunity - one that is largely constrained by the system itself.

In Dei et al.'s "Reconstructing Dropout" (1997) Black students reported that they or those they knew dropped out of school because they received messages that they would not succeed or that others were more successful. Dei et al. (1997) show evidence

throughout the work that these students did not necessarily choose to leave school so much as they were discouraged from staying. The dynamics of Black students' disengagement from school is complex:

If a minority student perceives great opportunity awaiting in the occupational system, provided he/she obtains a certain level of education, the student is more likely to put up with immediate, personal costs in terms of self-concept attacks and ego-denigration on the other hand, if he student perceives little opportunity awaiting the completion of additional years of education, then he/she will be less likely to continue in such costly exchange transactions, and, according to the exchange model, will develop anger, disengage from the exchange, and drop out of school. (Felice, 1981).

To someone who already doubts the utility of school improving their long-term future, attacks on their ability to succeed make it much less likely that the student will go on to graduate. With the hopeless outlook many Black youth see for themselves, some begin to internalize what they are being told with disastrous results:

*Malcolm:* Because they believe what they're being told. They say 'you're a Black kid; you're bad! You smoke weed and you skip school!' They start believing it, and then they start doing it; they start skipping. And then I ask them 'yo, why you skipping?' One time this kid said 'because I'm Black, I have the right to do that.' (Laughter). He's like 'well, people think I'm bad anyhow, so I'm gonna be bad.'

This quote speaks to the power of cultural representation in shaping reality. Dominant cultural messages abound about Black males that portray them in very stereotypical ways - violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, disengaged and hyper-masculine (Harper, 1996). Many Black males adopt these identities that have been prescribed for them which makes it appear that they have become what others expected of them; however, this phenomenon speaks to the ways in which people navigate limited alternatives. Presumably seeing other Black youth engaging in the same behaviour, and facing expectations that behaviour such as smoking marijuana and skipping class is simply "what Black kids do," the student chooses to become what he is perceived to be. When

there are so few other options available, there is a degree of cultural coercion in the decision to engage in stereotypical behaviours. Unless students are part of families or communities that able to provide other possibilities for manufacturing Black masculinity, these students often replicate the dominant social image available to them (Davis, 2006). Essentially, this hypothetical student's self-esteem drops and they begin to adopt the identity of the "bad Black male." This is an active form of the self fulfilling prophecy, whereby Black youth become agents in their own failure but only because that is all that they seem to see (Davis, 2006; Noguera, 2003).

### Conclusion

The next chapter will look at the ways in which Black youth are surveilled and punished in school and society. This builds on the argument developed here that Black students face additional challenges because they come into school with the baggage of identities that have largely been socially constructed and defined through the media and stereotypes. They are marginalized further through curriculum that makes invisible their history and realities. This can limit the range of ways they can be viewed as well as the opportunities that they may view for themselves. Combined with discipline within school that does not serve to nurture or protect them, but disconnects them further from school, and there emerges a path to increased disengagement from education. In everything from office referrals, to suspensions, to police involvement in school matters, participants expressed that they felt singled out, discriminated against, and disengaged with school. What was interesting was that participants also described feeling this way outside of school as well.

## CHAPTER 5 - PUNISHMENT WITHIN SCHOOL

### Introduction

Black students remain on the margins even within the confines of education, which is presumed to be race-neutral. However, given its location within a society that relies upon differential treatment of racialized and classed bodies, it too reproduces oppression of marginalized groups (Aylward, 1999). Black males are dually marginalized in school and society due to all the expectations of race and gender in North American society. Throughout this chapter, I will provide participant reflections of discrimination and prejudice faced inside and outside of school; both through school disciplinary policies and the ways they were criminalized in spaces such as stores and malls. The expectations of Black males are generally negative with them being perceived as at-risk low achievers, criminal, and aggressive (Codjoe, 2006; James, 2007). Such representations of young, Black males are propagated through media and other cultural representations that seep into the educational system where they are imagined as a danger to the system. The interesting dynamic that is explored in this chapter is that such a representation tends to result in an inversion where the education system itself is perceived as a danger by Black males.

### Prejudice and Suspicion Outside of School

In light of September 11, there has been a change in the public gaze and in surveillance of those considered threatening or the Other. 9/11 created a sense of fear and a desperate need for a sense of security, no matter how tenuous, and this has contributed to a time when anyone is a suspect and everyone is guilty until proven innocent (Giroux, 2003, Merskin, 2004). This trend has also extended to children and

youth; the normal, adolescent acting out, hanging out, and “disorderly conduct” that could describe the behavior of most normal teenagers at some point in the day has become trespassing, loitering, and other criminal behavior (Giroux, 2003). With adolescents in general facing these challenges, Black youth feel increasingly targeted by this criminalization (Fine, Freudenberg, Payne, Perkins, Smith, and Wanzer, 2003; Lipman, 2003). Prevalent stereotypes of Black males are that they are aggressive, violent, criminal, and unintelligent and these beliefs shape perceivers’ interactions with them (Devine and Elliott, 2000).

In just one example of how Black males are criminalized in society, studies have recognized that there is indeed bias in the negative portrayals of Blacks as criminals in the media (Dixon and Linz, 2000; Entman, 1994; Fujioka, 2005). A 1994-study by Entman analyzed a selection of news coverage from ABC, NBC, and CBS nightly-news programs to examine visual representation of Blacks as well as transcripts of ABC news for an entire year (1994). There were a number of interesting findings; among them that Blacks were more likely to be depicted in the physical grasp of a police officer and that stories about White victims of violent crime lasted 74% longer than those of Black victims. Such constructions of Black as aggressor and White as victim can begin to mold Whites’ perceptions of Black males and Black males’ own self-perceptions. One finding of Entman’s study (1994) was that the network news produces and disseminates images of Blacks that may reinforce Whites’ antagonism toward them, especially among audience members who are already predisposed toward hostility and resentment. For the majority group, Blacks in the news may represent or symbolize all Blacks in a way singular Whites do not stand for all Whites (Entman, 1994; Nelson, 2006). A White

person who is rude, inarticulate, or unproductive at work need not be concerned that others will look at them as representative of all White people (Nelson, 2006). Blacks and many other minority groups are not afforded the same privilege (Ibid). Since the news presents itself as a kind of sample survey of the world's events, White audience members, especially those having limited personal contact or hostile predispositions toward Blacks, may assume those Blacks who appear in TV news are representative and thus generalize from them (Entman, 1994).

Generalizations like this occurred for almost all participants, who expressed feeling like outside authorities in malls or stores were “always watching teenagers like us.” In focus group 1, participants talked about being perceived as criminals or thieves when they were in stores or the mall:

*Richard:* And also if you go in a store, they watch you more because they think you'll take something, so they'll have their eye on you.

*Derek:* I can't even do things without precautions. Like, when I walk through the mall, I have to be careful, because these guys, like security in the mall, they watch you every second. And they're not even actually watching people that are stealing in the mall. The average shoplifter is a middle aged, White woman.

Both Richard and Derek were watched with suspicion by store and mall authorities because of the ways in which their race was constructed. This image of Black males as prone to crime and violence continues to persist with frequent references to the negative portrayals of popular culture - often rap and hip-hop (Mahiri and Conner, 2003). While certain forms of hip-hop may glorify a criminal lifestyle, this type of music represents only one segment of the wide diversity within hip-hop. Still most Black males seem to be lumped together in the idea that all young, Black males are “gangsters” or “violent” (Ibid). Because of the ways in which these perceptions influence their interactions with

others, some research shows that Black youth do not feel that they are trusted by others (Fine et al., 2003). This sets up an antagonistic binary between Black males who are presumed guilty and those who need to be wary of them, namely White people (Gabriel, 1998).

This sense of being targeted for suspicion by others was again expressed by Derek, who recounted an incident where he was kicked out of the mall for jumping up to hit a sign. A playful kid who wanted to see if he had grown from the previous year and could now touch the sign that had seemed so out of reach a few months ago was banned from that mall for the rest of the day. When he tried to meet his friends later that same day at the movie theatre adjacent to the mall, the police stopped him again and informed him that even though the movie theatre was separate from the mall, it was “technically the mall too.” They then arrested him. This regulation of behaviour from authorities was a recurring theme in focus group 1 and may have been a way to reduce the sense of threat some perceived in young Black men.

Focus group participants who were not engaging in criminal behaviour were treated as criminals simply because that was what the authorities expected from them. A common prejudgment was that participants were likely to steal from stores. When I asked participants how this made them feel, responses ranged from “frustrated,” “ignorant,” “mad,” and “confused,” to feeling like they then actually wanted to steal something. One consequence of continual suspicion can be the conscious adoption of negative behaviours. During the group, Elroy told us about a “true story” that had just happened. He was in a dollar store at the mall shortly before coming to the focus group. While waiting to buy something, he was being watched suspiciously by an employee. He

ignored it, bought his juice, and left the store. But that was not the end of it; he then went back to the same store in order to steal something. Here was his explanation:

*Elroy:* Well, if people are watching me and they think I'm gonna steal and I *don't* steal... [I] might as well [because] they're still gonna think [it]...I don't really care. That's funny! (Group laughing).

To Elroy, living up to a positive image was futile in the face of negative expectations. Eventually, at least for him, it became easier to do the wrong thing, because what difference did it really make if people were convinced you had done it anyway? This may seem like giving up, but is actually resistance against the perception that has been imposed on him. Even if the choice will actually harm Elroy further in the long run, identifying with the negative attributions can allow him to stop being a passive object whose identity has been constructed for him and to take at least some control of his destiny.

Negative judgments continued to impact on participants' lives as they entered school. For complex reasons Black males are disproportionately represented in school disciplinary infractions. A large part of this stems from school authorities' subjective judgments of Black students that that will be explored in the following section.

### Disproportionality in School Disciplinary Infractions

Just as Blacks are more likely than Whites to be viewed suspiciously in a racist society, there is overwhelming evidence that Black males are much more likely to be referred to the office and suspended from school than White males (Ruck and Wortley, 2002). Even though this is the case, no previously published research studying differential discipline and rates of behavior by race have found any evidence that the



higher rates of discipline received by Black students are due to more serious or more disruptive behavior (McCarthy and Hoge, 1987; McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang, 1992; Shaw and Braden, 1990).

Although Black males are disproportionately represented in the area of school discipline, it is important to consider that statistical disproportionality in and of itself is not a definite indicator of discrimination. While certain conditions, such as more severe punishments for Black students, or punishment for less serious behavior, would suggest bias in the administration of school discipline, under other conditions (i.e. high levels of disruptive behavior on the part of Black male students) disproportionality would not represent discrimination. Even after controlling for socioeconomic status, racial differences in punishment were found to be slightly higher than those of socioeconomic status. Skiba et al. (2002) found that racial disparities in school suspension appear to find their origin primarily in the disproportionate rate of office referral for Black students. Perceptions of disproportionate punishment within school were a recurring theme in all the groups - everything from getting sent to the office to being suspended. A heated topic of discussion in focus group 3 was the Safe Schools Act, which most of the participants thought was ill-conceived and subject to teacher's personal biases around Black males. I will first outline the history of the Safe Schools Act before moving into participants' perceptions of the Act.

### The Ontario Safe Schools Act

The Safe Schools Act is an Ontario bill implemented in 2000 that is part of the Education Act. It provides a definitive policy regarding punishments that must be issued

for students. The Safe Schools Act is often referred to as a “zero-tolerance” policy, defined by The American Heritage Dictionary (2000) as “the policy or practice of not tolerating undesirable behavior, such as violence or illegal drug use, especially in the automatic imposition of severe penalties for first offenses” (Online reference) Skiba (2000, cited in Bhattacharjee, 2003) points out that the typical definitions of zero tolerance emphasize punishing a range of behaviors, both major and minor, equally severely.

The first steps towards a zero-tolerance policy within schools began in the mid-1990s. In 1993, the Scarborough Board of Education adopted a Safe Schools Policy on Violence and Weapons. Just before the 1999 provincial election in Ontario, the Progressive Conservative Party promised a zero tolerance policy for misbehaviour in schools. In April 2000, then-Education Minister Janet Ecker released a Code of Conduct for Ontario schools. One month later, she introduced the Safe Schools Act, which provided teachers and principals more authority to suspend and expel students. The Act was passed by the legislature in June 2000 and came into effect in September 2001 (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

Prior to the Safe Schools Act, suspending a student was the principal’s responsibility and expulsion was that of the school board’s. Although making such decisions was discretionary, a student could only be expelled from all of the board’s schools if their conduct was so “refractory” that the pupil’s presence was “injurious to other pupils or persons” (Ibid, p. i). Now, under the Safe Schools Act, both teachers and principals have the authority to suspend a student. A teacher may suspend a student for up to one day and/or refer the matter to the principal, and the principal can suspend a

student for up to 20 days. Expulsion decisions are shared between the school board and the principal.

One of the most significant sections of the Safe Schools Act has been the provision of mandatory suspension and expulsion of students as well as police involvement. Although the Safe Schools Act is known as zero tolerance there are mitigating factors in the legislation that preclude it from being zero tolerance in the true sense. Because of this, teachers are getting mixed messages; although the policy is known as zero tolerance (which prescribes mandatory action for offenses) teachers are also being directed to apply mitigating factors in certain cases. Mitigating factors, whereby the suspension or expulsion of a student is not mandatory are if:

- (a) The pupil does not have the ability to control his or her behaviour
- (b) The pupil does not have the ability to understand the foreseeable consequences of his or her behaviour
- (c) The pupil's continuing presence in the school does not create an unacceptable risk to the safety of any person. (Ibid, p. ii)

For example, a student with Tourette's syndrome should not being unduly punished for uncontrollable swearing or tics because he or she is unable to control their behaviour. This is a case where mitigating factors should be applied to the application of zero tolerance for misbehaviour. While some school administrators may apply the mitigating factors listed above, others may practice true zero tolerance without consideration of other variables, leading to inconsistencies within the system and disproportionate punishment for certain groups (Bhattacharjee, 2003). If teachers and principals have a choice in whether to apply mitigating factors this allows ample room for biases to enter the picture in decisions of suspension, expulsion, and police involvement,

It could be argued that zero tolerance policies are colour-blind and fair because all the students who commit the same offence will be treated the same (Ibid). The school board does not collect data on the race of students who are suspended or expelled, yet a number of studies continue to show that the Safe Schools Act and related policies are not “colour-blind” since the majority of those showing up in offices, being suspended, and attending suspension appeal hearings in Ontario are youth of colour (Ibid). In an interview conducted by the OHRC, a lawyer at a legal clinic that serves the Black community pointed out the correlation between race and disproportionate punishment:

I think that systemic issues allow the individual principal and teacher to act on their stereotypes as opposed to confronting their stereotypes. No one would ever say that they suspend because of colour or race, but they don't spend time consciously thinking about why so many of the students who are getting in trouble and coming to the office are Black. They take the attitude that everyone is treated the same way, so they never ask critical questions. By never looking at why some of those things are happening, you are, in fact, perpetuating the inequality. (Ibid, p. 48)

Very rarely do schools look at factors such as racism, income inequalities, and lack of connection between school and the lived realities of Black adolescents are factors that may be involved in a student's misbehaviour. It has actually been shown that such factors can influence marginalized students' opposition to school authority (James, 2007). Because schooling and the norms of society are so intertwined, the overrepresentation of Black students in school disciplinary infractions contributes to racial stratification in both school and society.

A similar study to the OHRC's was conducted in the United States, entitled “Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline Policies” and looked into disproportionate representation of Black students in school suspensions (Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project [APCRP], 2000).

Its impetus came from the collaboration between The Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University. This was the first comprehensive national report to examine the impact that strict zero tolerance approach to discipline is having on American children. This study found similarly striking findings to those of the OHRC's report. In 1998, more than 3.1 million children in America were suspended and another 87,000 were expelled. Minority students are disproportionately disciplined, with African-Americans suspended and expelled at much higher rates than Whites within the same schools. According to findings from the U.S. Department of Education, zero tolerance policies are more likely to exist in predominantly African-American school districts. Zero tolerance policies do not provide guidance or instruction and often breed student distrust toward adults, fostering an adversarial attitude. Suspensions also cause students to suffer academically. Only 26 states required alternative educational assignments for suspended or expelled students, and many such programs provide inadequate education (APCRP, 2000). The report illustrates that zero tolerance is unfair, is contrary to the developmental needs of children, denies children educational opportunities, and often results in the criminalization of children (Ibid).

### Office Referral

Focus group participants' stories suggest that they also have similar experiences as those outlined in the "Ontario Safe Schools Act Report" (Bhattacharjee, 2003) and "Opportunities Suspended" (APCRP, 2000). One of the mildest punishments identified by focus groups was being sent to the office, which was at the discretion of the person doing the referring. Research shows that subjective infractions that do not have an

objective result were more often reported to be committed by Black students (Skiba et al., 2002). In other words, whether a student's disruptiveness warranted a trip to the office was solely at the discretion of the teacher. Offenses that warranted a trip to the office for participants ranged from turning off the lights, calling a teacher by their first name, and standing up during reading time, to name a few. One student said he was sent to office simply for opening the door for his teacher. These offenses were all subject to interpretation, which presents challenges when it is found that students from a group that is perceived as being more disruptive and deviant (Codjoe, 2006) are being disproportionately punished.

Skiba et al. (2002) did an interesting study on the types of incidents that could get White and Black students sent to the office. While White students were significantly more likely to be referred to the office for smoking, leaving without permission, obscene language, and vandalism, Black students were more likely to be referred to the office for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering (p. 334). Although it is difficult to say which of these offenses are "more serious" the majority of reasons for which White students were referred more frequently seemed to be based on an objective event (e.g., smoking, vandalism) that cause an undisputable result. Reasons for Black referrals to the office, on the other hand, were infractions that required more subjective judgment (e.g. disrespect and excessive noise). Even the most serious of the reasons for office referrals among Black students, uttering a threat, was dependent on perception of threat by the staff making the referral (Skiba et al., 2002).

Just as in school, participants found that their behaviour was viewed subjectively and punished by authorities outside of school in malls or stores. Often the offense was

labelled by authorities as “loitering.” Derek told the group of an incident where a mixed-gender group of his friends were hanging out and security told them there was “too many” of them and had them each leave in separate directions. Derek felt there was no basis for this action saying “we didn’t get kicked out for fights, weapons, nothing! Stupidness!” The mall was a space to be policed where patrons could be kept free of the unpredictable (and thus, threatening) presence of boisterous, Black youth. Elroy told of a similar experience:

*Derek:* Oh! You see my friend, Jamal<sup>10</sup>, he got kicked out from - there was a group of guys, a group of girls, we were all together, and they’re saying there’s too much, so split up, girls go that way, guys go that way. So, after, Nathan went with the girls; I forgot what he said it was, soliciting, [sic] I think...they told him he couldn’t come back, but later on I think he came back; I think it was late at night. Everything was closed, he just came in to use the washroom and they arrested him.

Part of the targeting of groups of Black youth that participants reported may be due to “society’s discomfort with assemblages of Black people [that] is represented by pervasive conspiratorial notions frequently associated with such gatherings” (Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 2000, p. 39). The misperception that large numbers of Black youth who spend time together are automatically “gangs” and thus, are appropriate to view with apprehension is a subjective judgment subject to racism and biases. In reality, the reasons for Black youth forming tight bonds may be more a coping mechanism than a sign of an ulterior motive. Beverly Daniel Tatum noticed this trend for students of the same race to “stick together” and wrote a book on the topic called “Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria” (2003). Tatum says the reason minority youth do this is to form racial identity with others who share similar experiences, backgrounds, and culture, free of imposed judgments. Forming close bonds is an adaptive mechanism, a safe space

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<sup>10</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect identities.

where culturally similar youth can be themselves and be free from many Whites' discomfort of them. The tendency to characterize this innocuous behaviour as suspicious results in part from the perception of Black males as criminal, aggressive and deviant (Devine and Elliott, 2000). Stereotypes are a lens which shapes how one perceives someone or something, which consequently affects behaviour. For someone who maintains these beliefs about Blacks, a group of Black youth may be perceived as being "up to something," and hence must be watched and controlled. These trends of viewing innocuous behaviour of Black males as threatening were reproduced in schools, through the control of Black bodies.

### Suspensions

Moving up the disciplinary scale came suspensions, which were a heated topic of discussion among focus group participants. Bullara (1993) argues that the typical classroom management style in many schools relies heavily on negative consequences that contribute to school rejection and dropout by Black youth. Most of the students in focus group 3 reported having been suspended, which they experienced as a further way to disengage them from school rather than deterring bad behaviour:

*Jason:* They suspend you for skipping class. That's what I wanted to do anyways, I wanted to leave.

*Malcolm:* So you know what I think they should do, the school board or whatever, who runs this stuff, find a solution for the kids, the kids that like to skip. "Why do you skip, why do you miss class? Why?" Work towards a solution, because really what they're doing when they suspend me or they suspend us, is they're working towards our failure! There's gonna be a point because some kids are ignorant enough that they say 'damn, I'm tired of being suspended, let me just go work.' Then from 17, they work until they're 65, when they could've stayed in a school and they could have been something different. So I think that the decisions that people in



school make have a lot to do with the kids' future. So really, suspensions, they should work with them.

The true intent of suspensions is unclear to these participants because they are simply fulfilling the student's desire to escape from school, further pushing them out (Dei et al., 1997). This happens both because students are physically absent from school and because they have been psychologically "pushed out" (Dei et al., 1997). For such students "the choice of either staying in school or dropping out may be less of a choice and more of a natural response to a negative environment in which he or she is trying to escape" (Bullara, 1993, p. 362). In fact, American studies show that suspension is a moderate to strong predictor of a student dropping out and that suspension and expulsion are one of the top three school related reasons for dropping out (Dei et al., 1997; DeRidder, 1991). A former equity advisor to a school board in the Greater Toronto Area believes that if studies were done in Toronto, they would show that suspensions and expulsions increase the dropout rate of Black and other disadvantaged students:

We did some research at [a school board in the Greater Toronto Area] on dropouts and it was quite alarming. There was a correlation between the schools with high drop out rates and the proportion of Black and socially and economically disadvantaged students. If those students are being disproportionately impacted by suspension and expulsion, then the correlation is that the disproportionate drop-out rate for those groups will become even worse. (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 57)

It is easy for a student to become disengaged and potentially dropout when the suspension gives them time away from school and no accountability for marks. One former student, Jason, explained how he felt the system of suspensions worked. Basically, students did not lose any marks for assignments missed while they were suspended. When they return to school, it is as if they have never left. According to him,

a student who has been suspended can still pass a course, even if they have missed several weeks of classes:

*Jason:* It is an opportunity. I like when they suspend me. The first three times I got suspension, I was cheesed [*sic*]. I thought my marks would suck, but when I got back - all the work, I saw what everyone was doing, my mark was the same. I'm like 'wait, I got suspended four times last semester, how come my mark's still the same? The teacher is telling me it doesn't count; your mark stays the same... When you get suspended that mark doesn't count against you when you miss an assignment, it just stays blank, and your mark stays the same, and your next assignment keeps building it.

The lack of unaccountability for marks on assignments that were missed while a student is suspended can have long term, negative consequences. Basically “while the student is not receiving academic programming, the student regresses academically” (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 54). Although the TDSB’s Safe Schools Procedures Manual (cited in Bhattacharjee, 2003) directs schools, where reasonable and practical, to offer relevant schoolwork to suspended students, they rarely receive schoolwork. Furthermore, there is a lack of support for alternative programs for students who have been suspended; many students do not, or can not take advantage of them (Bhattacharjee, 2003). In part because Jason was not receiving any remedial work, suspension was not a punishment, but rather, “an opportunity” for him to get a break from school. Even the consequences that he may have faced from angry parents paled in comparison to the “benefits” of being suspended:

*Jason:* You get a suspension, you go home, you might get a five minute cussing from mom but after she's done and goes to work the next day, I'm *chilling*, I'm having fun. Then I go back to school, all the homework that they did, I have an excuse, so that way, that mark doesn't count against my thing, so that works for me. When you get suspended, it's a benefit; it's a profit for me.

However, it was not all fun and games for suspended students. The school was helping to push Jason, an already vulnerable student who required connection more than ever, out. A suspended student home alone during the day without parental or school supervision is at-risk and in need of more support than ever. An elementary school principal interviewed by the OHRC who has worked extensively in schools in low-income communities made a similar observation, saying “this community...is not the safest place for kids to be on their own during the day when everyone is at school...There have been examples of kids under suspension who have got into way bigger trouble than what they were ever suspended for” (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 59). Poor, Black males alone in their neighbourhoods during the day are ripe for this occurrence. An expert on at-risk youth at an Ontario university also interviewed by the OHRC states that there is “good evidence” that suspending and expelling students increases the risk that they will become involved in anti-social activities or behaviour, which leads to heightened problems for the individual, their community, and society-at-large in the future:

Once kids are out of the mainline and expelled...they may make contact with older kids or other kids who are having difficulties. That can escalate their anti-social behaviour...It can have an impact on the community in which they live and, of course, it contributes to an important problem in Canada, which is serious anti-social behaviour, both violent and non-violent. (Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 58)

In this way, there emerges a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the student that has been labelled as a problem that needs to be removed, who when removed, ends up getting into even more trouble, confirming the original perception. Among the risks of suspension for at-risk students is that they can become labelled as “problem children.” Once the student who has been suspended once or twice is labelled, people may begin to treat them differently which can lead to internalized negative self-perceptions. Adolescence is a time

when many are already struggling with self-esteem and being stigmatized for suspension can be something the student carries with them for some time (Bhattacharjee, 2003). This labelling can also make students the targets of increased scrutiny which can lead to them being punished more, creating a vicious cycle:

*Malcolm:* What I dislike about my school is the fact of kids being suspended for odd reasons or minor reasons. And they make the situation look worse than it really is. So when that kid comes back to school, he's labelled. And as soon as he's labelled, anything, any minor thing that this kid does, its suspension automatically. They call it the Safe Schools Act, that's what they call it.

Malcolm feels that schools are not a source of support for suspended students and in fact, suspensions stigmatize students instead of keeping them connected. His last statement speaks to the disconnect he sees between the name of the Safe Schools Act and its actual effectiveness in protecting the most vulnerable students.

A large number of participants reported that they had been suspended for more subjective offences like being disrespectful to the teacher or questioning authority. Jason provided a particularly poignant example:

*Jason:* For some stupid reason, the teacher lied on me. I got suspended because the teacher told me to shut my mouth and I wasn't even talking and I told her "don't call my name," but she said "Jason, shut your mouth." It was a White teacher too. I said "don't call my name" and I got suspended for two days. I walked out and I got a phone call saying "you threatened the teacher and you're going to jail." When I told the principal there was six kids in the hall who could say I never said that to the teacher, when the cops went there he never told them. When I called back the principal and asked him why he never told them he said he forgot...He never forgot. He just never wanted me in the school!

There is a deep sense of frustration and distrust in Jason's story. He did not trust the teacher who made the original referral, feeling that she "lied on him." Nor did he trust the principal who failed to notify police there were witnesses who could corroborate Jason's

version of events. Jason was alienated from the two authorities in school who could have worked with him to come to an alternate resolution. The subjective nature of the incident left him wondering about the true motives for his punishment. This disconnection and distrust likely remained even after Jason returned to school, making him less engaged in an environment he perceived as hostile. If indeed Black students are more likely to be sent to the office, suspended, and expelled for reasons requiring more subjective judgment, it might well be expected that students will come to view disparities in discipline as intentional and biased (Ruck and Wortley, 2002; Skiba, et al, 2002). So while the school may have viewed Jason as a threat, the lack of support and his labelling made him come to view school as a threatening place where he could not trust school authorities.

Participants continued to express that they felt that teachers and principals racially discriminated against them in terms of punishment and could not be trusted. Ruck and Wortley (2002) investigated this idea and collected data from 1870 students from Grade 10 and 12 classes from 11 randomly selected high schools from a racially and ethnically diverse school district in the Metropolitan Toronto area. They used a confidential questionnaire to gather the opinions of ethnically diverse students on school disciplinary practices. Black students were more likely than South Asian, Asian, White, and students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds to believe that students from their racial group would face discriminatory treatment compared to students from other racial groups. One of the most striking findings was that, in general, students from all these four racial/ethnic minority groups were significantly more likely than White students to perceive discrimination in terms of various aspects of their treatment at school. Nearly all the

interviewees identified discrimination – direct and systemic – as the main reason why the application of discipline in schools had a disproportionate impact on racial minority students and students with disabilities (Ruck and Wortley, 2002). Malcolm described a sense of discrimination he felt from his principal:

*Malcolm:* It's not even that, it's the way they look at the problem, depending on what kind of student it is. If it's me, for example, and I'm getting judged of doing something wrong, he'll have *no doubt* that I did do it. But if somebody else comes, like a White kid or somebody, my principal, he'll have his doubts. He'll ask them "did you really do it?" Because I have seen it. [He'll say] 'did you do it, or did you have anything to do with it?' That's what they'll ask those kids, but when it comes to me or others, they say '*why* did you do it? You're gonna be in trouble for this.' So you see the difference.

The difference between how Malcolm perceived himself and a White student being treated by school authorities is striking. This evident association between race and crime has led many in society to develop negative stereotypes of persons based on their racial identities. In Canada these negative impressions stem not only from actual experiences of prisoners in the criminal justice system, but also from images in North American culture and media (Manzo and Bailey, 2005). The mass media, especially the film industry has created a steady stream of fictionalized accounts of Black and Latino aggression and threat towards White people, particularly White males (Gabriel, 1998). While Malcolm does not specify whether this treatment is due to his race the teacher's own biases against him have already shaped his judgment of the situation. There is nothing Malcolm can do, he has already been tried and sentenced in the teacher's mind. Derek recounted a similar example of an automatic prejudgment of guilt and perceived discrimination he felt from school authorities:

*Derek:* Ok, say, if it was a White girl and if it's me and say if something got missing in the class and it was only us two in the class. They'll more

talk smooth, softly to the girl, like ‘ok, you’re sure you haven’t seen nothing?’ They’ll still try to think it was her, but they’ll talk softer to her. They’ll be like (to me) ‘Derek, stop messing around!’ They’ll do stuff like that; they’ll start harassing me and stuff and think it’s me. And they’ll try to batter me up and stuff. That’s what I hate.

Black males and White females have vastly different racial constructions. Black males are often defined in terms of the threat they pose to White females (Gabriel, 1998). So a dichotomy is set up where Black males are deemed perpetrators and White females are potential victims to be treated gently and protected (Ibid). Derek’s differentiation between himself and a White female are consistent with the ordering in the likelihood of suspension at the junior and senior high school levels from greatest to least: Black males, White males, Black females, and White females (Taylor and Foster, 1986). In this ordering we can see that masculine bodies are more carefully policed and controlled within school to suppress their potential threat, while females are less likely to be controlled and punished. This has as much to do with the ways they are perceived as the ways they are permitted to act in society. Males often display a more aggressive, energetic style as compared to females who are socialized to be more docile and polite (Ibid). However, it is important to note that both Black males and females are more likely to be suspended than White males or females, respectively. While Black males and females may be more *likely* to be punished within school, this does not mean they are more likely to be guilty than other students (McCarthy and Hoge, 1987; McFadden et al., 1992; Shaw and Braden, 1990).

## Police Involvement at School

The police are a group who has been accused of racism and racial profiling towards Blacks and a group whose incidence of violence against minorities has been well documented, most notably in the 1991 police assault against Rodney King. Relationships between Blacks (and other minorities) and the police and legal justice system continue to be strained (Aylward, 1999; Fleras & Elliott, 2002). In Toronto, a 2002-exposé by the Toronto Star on the police tactics of the O.P.P. brought to light the ugly issue of racial profiling (Wortley and Tanner, 2003). Based on racial statistics compiled by the police force itself, the Star found that Blacks in Toronto were over-represented in certain offence categories like drug possession and in what were called "out-of-sight" traffic violations, such as driving without a license. The latter could only be found *after* the suspect was already stopped for another reason. This has led to charges from some in the Black community of being guilty of nothing more than "driving while Black" (DWB) (Wortley and Tanner, 2003). The analysis also suggested that Black suspects were more likely to be held in custody for a bail hearing, while White suspects facing similar charges were more likely to be released at the scene (Wortley and Tanner, 2003). Some have even gone as far to suggest that police culture has actually promoted racism within society (Gabriel, 1998). The police as state-sanctioned agents of protection mirror and enact the dominant relationship of society towards Black males as one of distance and suspicion (Fine et al., 2003).

Although the particular incidence of "driving while Black" was not mentioned, several participants expressed fear or disdain of the police, which makes police involvement in schools (that seems to be increasingly associated with Black students) so



troubling (Bhattacharjee, 2003). In line with the Safe Schools Act, there is mandatory police involvement for threat and theft. If one is suspected of either, the police can and will be called. Once again, experiences outside of school do not exist in isolation from what occurs in school. Both Jason and Malcolm had negative experiences with police outside of school:

*Jason:* I've had racial comments tossed to me and I don't have it like that. I had a cop call me [a nigger] and I got beat up in a staircase cus I don't have it like that. I defend my own and my race. A cop tried to make a comment to me I the staircase and I started cussing back too and I got beat up in the staircase for that.

*Malcolm:* Usually when I see cops, I run, because I don't like them; because I'm scared of them.

This theme of Black youths' antagonistic relationships with the police has emerged in other research. For example, Fine et al.'s (2003) study found that instead of feeling protected or safer by police presence, Black youth felt "angry," "scared," and "discouraged" with police (p. 154). Considering the Black community's history with the police, bringing this presence into the school can exacerbate highly unequal power relations and create a sense of oppression on the parts of Black students.

Ruck and Wortley (2002) found that racial minority students, particularly Black students, were much more likely than White students to perceive discrimination with respect to the use of police by school authorities, and police treatment at school. This was no different in the current focus groups; many participants had personally dealt with the police being called by the school for something they were accused of doing and were often embarrassed publicly:

*Jason:* They like embarrassing you. They'll call the cops into the classroom and drag you out like a criminal. Literally put cuffs on you in class, put down your books and everything and bring you outside...

It is an intensely emotional experience to be arrested. To not only have this done within the school, but in class clearly left an emotional scar on Jason. The image of a Black male being led from handcuffs in the class reinforces that Black males are associated with criminality, can increase negative stereotypes of this group, can create divisions among students, and can leave a lasting impact of shame on the student being arrested.

Calling the police was sometimes the first line of defense for minor incidents that could have been more easily and effectively solved by a little communication. This “arrest first, ask questions later” approach to discipline is alarming and leads to an increased criminalization of children, often for conduct that does not threaten the safety of others (APCRP, 2000):

*Malcolm:* Let’s say that [I] took somebody’s hat, instead of coming up to me and saying ‘I heard you took someone’s hat, would you give it back to him?’ They would call 911 and say ‘we have a thief in the school,’ and then they’ll have police come and arrest us...That’s happened to me. *Numerous* times.

Malcolm speaks of himself here, but similar observations were recounted by Black participants. While unsettling behaviour, a student suspected of taking the belongings of another can be approached in ways other than in immediately calling the police. Yet because of the dominant perception of Black (and increasingly Latino) males as criminals (Lipman, 2003), pre-emptive behaviour of involving police serves to protect those at-risk from supposed “thieves” without regard to investigating the actual situation. In this construction a racialized person has been constructed as “perpetrator” while White students and authorities are potential “victims.”

Going one step further, participants sometimes felt that teachers and principals would employ trickery to ensure that Black students were punished, perhaps in a way to

validate the perceptions they held of them. With the mandatory police involvement specified in the Safe Schools Act, over the last decade the police have become a major presence in Canadian schools. They deal with unacceptable student behaviors (such as fights, thefts, etc.) often through the laying of criminal charges (Ministry of Education and Training, 1994, cited in Ruck and Wortley, 2002). Participants recounted their schools surreptitiously calling the police and being “ambushed” by them in class or the office:

*Malcolm:* Like if there was someone going on that day or the day before and then they come the next morning and they ask us about it, they say “don’t worry, you’re not in trouble. Just tell us what happened. Just go to the office.’ Then they bring us to the office, they sit us down and they tell us ‘don’t worry, you’re not in trouble.’ Three minutes later, cops are there, so that means they just trick us into feeling comfortable and then they trap us and then when the cops are there we’re trapped, we can’t run.

*Richard:* Like, some robbery took place at the school, the next day I came to class, just chilling, and after the principal came to my class and was like “come to the office, we need to change the attendance; something’s wrong with the attendance.’ And when I went in the office, three [police officers] were waiting for me to arrest me out of the school.

In a place where these participants already felt disconnected and distrustful, being “surprised” with police presence magnified these feelings. From these incidents came the feeling that systems of authority within schools were not supportive of these youth and could not be trusted. The effects of criminalization and suspicion from those in authority at school could have detrimental effects later on, as alluded to by Jason:

*Jason:* They treat you like a criminal in high school. Before we even get into the real world we’re treated like criminals.

In this quote we can see the reciprocal relationship between racism in society and that in school; neither can exist apart from the other, they reinforce each other. Evident here are the complexities of racialization and how identities both shape and are shaped by

representations in society. Some researchers have argued that the focus on Black youth as perpetrators of violence has worked to obscure other realities of violence and crime in North America. Males (1999, cited in Mahiri and Conner, 2003) suggests that young, Black males are essentially being framed through the prevalence of a number of social myths about them. Males' (1999) work in the U.S. looked at Department of Justice figures and saw that "it is not minority teenagers, but adults over the age of 30 - White adults, most specifically - who consistently display the largest increases in serious (felony), violent, property, and drug-related crime rates" (Males, 1999, cited in Mahiri and Conner, 2003, p. 124). Black males who already carry so much baggage of their imposed identities become the perfect scapegoat for White fears (Gabriel, 1998). The question becomes, what kinds of future generations are being nurtured if in fact schools are treating participants like criminals before they even graduate?

### Conclusion

The participants in this study were viewed and treated as delinquent and criminal both inside and outside of school. Because the racism that has constructed Black males in this way permeates all major aspects of society, their construction as threatening and violent has followed them into the class setting. This is both a function of their race and class which positions poor, Black males as particularly dangerous to Whites (Gabriel, 1998). This idea has a long history in the media and popular culture, seen for example in the frequency that inner-city working-class uprisings are often framed in racial terms and deemed "race riots" (Ibid) to Black representations as criminals in the news (Entman, 1994) and media (Gabriel, 1998) to racial profiling by the police of Black males (Wortley

and Tanner, 2003). The ways in which poor, Black males are policed in school through policies such as the Safe Schools Act set them up as criminals within school, calling for “mandatory” police arrest and removal from school in order to “protect” others and keep schools “safe.” These ideas shape the ways that Black males are treated and serve to alienate them from school authorities and staff. This distancing between Black males and the school system, combined with other risk factors like their class and race, can be additional factors in local disengagement within the classroom. In looking at the ways to address these issues I turn to the idea of Afrocentrism and how it can be used in education as but one means to bring Black males from the margins of education closer to the centre; where they can learn about and shape alternate identities other than those that have been prescribed for them.

## CHAPTER 6: BLACK HISTORY

### Introduction

Chapter 4 summarized some of participants' experiences in school including their reflections on interactions with teachers and administrators, how stereotypes and perceptions of them from the larger society impact interactions in school and society, and how policies like the Safe Schools Act reinforce layers of racism. Based on these experiences, participants described being pushed away from school rather than being engaged in their own educational process. Considering the tensions participants indicated that they faced on all sides, in this section, I am going to draw primarily on Afrocentrism to develop an argument for the positive effects that can be gleaned from integrating more Black history into the curriculum.

Information about the past may seem insignificant in facing such huge obstacles. Knowledge, however, truly is power, and is but one step in beginning to present new constructions of Black identity free from the imposed judgments of a White supremacist culture. A return to Afrocentric principles and narratives can raise consciousness of Black males' oppression in society and ways in which they can combat it. Consistent with this paradigm I look at the ways in which engagement can be stimulated in the context of schooling by adopting an antiracist, Afrocentric, critical view. In the chapter that follows, I outline the ways in which an Afrocentric view towards curriculum in particular can begin to see relations between individual lives and larger social processes. However in order to truly change the experiences of Black youth in the education system, these changes would also have to be accompanied by broad structural and ideological change.

### Curriculum and Consciousness Raising

Much of the research on Black males' experiences within school inevitably addresses curriculum as both a tool of engagement and disengagement (Asante, 1991; Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 1996). When students see images of themselves that are stereotypical and stigmatizing and when they do not have their experiences addressed in education, they resort to adopting the dominant identities that have been constructed of them (Davis, 2006; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2007). Without portrayals that show them in alternate contexts, Black males will often adopt the limiting identities that are available – athlete, drop-out, or gangster, to name a few – that reproduce dominant perceptions (Wilson, 2001). In this project, consciousness raising through curriculum emerged as one possible strategy of student engagement and production of alternate identities. Paulo Freire, in his groundbreaking work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2003) refers to consciousness raising as *conscientização*. Freire explains consciousness raising as a sociopolitical educative tool that engages learners in questioning the nature of their historical and social situation; what Freire called, "reading the world" (Freire, 2003). It involves learning "to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2003, p. 17). Similarly, Maher and Tetreault (1994) have argued that "if the classroom setting can help students to understand the workings of positional dynamics in their lives...then they can begin to challenge them and to create change" (p. 203). Consciousness raising, Critical Race Theory, and Afrocentrism all hold this goal at the forefront of their vision for society (Asante, 1991; Aylward, 1999; Freire, 2003). This change can include both personal and larger-scale change.

Consciousness raising is what impels marginalized people toward action and change and toward resisting oppression. In the contest of Afrocentric education, part of this change comes from production of alternate identities, an idea that will be further explored in this chapter. The strength of this particular approach is that it calls on educators not only to teach about oppression but to try to change society as well. A curriculum imbued with such a critical consciousness can be an effective tool in increasing students' awareness of their own histories and place in the world, analyzing their oppression, and beginning to transform their social reality (Freire, 2003). Participants in this study saw the need for this type of education and craved additional knowledge of Black history that they felt could help raise their consciousness and potentially improve their school experience among other things.

### Experiences with Black History and Black History Month

#### *Black History in School*

In response to the question, "What have you learned about Black history in school?" overwhelmingly, groups said, "not much":

*Jason:* I never learned *nothing* about Black History! I never learned *nothing* about no Black guy! I never seen a Black guy with a picture posed. I always see them in the background, but never the frontline.

Jason's claims that he has learned "nothing" about Black history in school, while perhaps an exaggeration, reveal his sense of marginalization. While negative portrayals and images of Black people can reinforce White supremacy, so too can absence of representation (hooks, 1992). The latter is perhaps worse, because as a dominant socializing institution within Canada, this invisibility of Blacks within school sends the message that they are irrelevant within Canada (Dei et al., 1997). Whites proliferate in



history books cementing their “rightful place” as accomplished Canadians (Ibid). As a Black male Jason is already marginalized in society and school reinforces this through a dearth of images depicting those who look like him or to whom he can relate. If Black students are not seeing themselves in the curriculum this can have powerful consequences: Black people can become “convinced that our lives are not complex, and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). Without this complexity it becomes much more likely that Black males will adopt the one-dimensional identities based on stereotypes that predominate (Davis, 2006)

Students in many studies have expressed their displeasure with the level and quality of Black history they receive in schools (Ali, 2000; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; LNSCSC, 2004; Nobles, 1990). James and Brathwaite (1996) note that “the curriculum concerns are some of the most damaging elements in our students’ schooling, and this is an area that has attracted much attention in the Black community and among educators” (p. 29). These concerns refer to the near-absence of information about Black history in the curriculum.

While Jason’s response was extreme, other participants indicated that even though they had been exposed to some information about Black history in school, it was superficial. In contrast to criticisms that Black history is simply a means to feed Blacks spurious information in order to build their self esteem (Prince, 1996), for many of the youth I spoke with, the information they were learning had long since ceased to do this. Actually, they found that what they learned as part of Black History Month was a mere rehashing of already well-known historical figures. Across groups participants reiterated that they were not engaged by the Black history they were learning:

*Interviewer:* What are you learning about Black history in high school?

*Martin:* Just the basic stuff that they want to tell us.

*Interviewer:* So, would you say it's basically the same as what you learn during Black History Month?

*Martin:* Ya.

*Interviewer:* So, during history lessons or Canadian history, are you learning anything new that you don't know?

*Martin:* No, everything that I learned, every year it's the same thing.

Martin seems apathetic in his response to what he had learned about Black history, speaking to his level of disengagement. It seems that for participants, just as there are unitary representations of Black males that constrain the identities they can hold, Black history narratives have been contained within a narrow focus. Martin was seeing the same cultural representations of Blackness that he always had and it had become monotonous. Because of this, it was unlikely that the Black history that Martin learned in school could be effective as a transformational tool because the Black history images were just as limiting as those of Black males.

In speaking with other participants about what they wanted to learn about Black history, while responses varied, a consistent theme was that they sought critical connections between historical material and the present day. Part of this involved seeking out alternate representations of Blackness and making the presence of Blacks throughout history visible (Ali, 2000). Many others mentioned that they desired to learn about Black history "from the beginning" and to make links to pre- and post-slavery experiences. As part of the participants' developing critical consciousness, Black history was also seen to encompass geographic territory with participants in one group saying Black history should be "worldwide." This statement connects the experience of Blacks in Africa to other oppressed groups throughout the world. One student mentioned the entire African Diaspora as being part of Black history:

*Malcolm*: From the first Black civilizations, that's where it should start from, to this last second. That would take a PhD, because when you think of Black history, you gotta first start in Africa and then slavery, and then the other countries where Black people exist, so that's Black history. So I think that to cover Black history, you gotta, first, it should be called *world* history. First cover Africa, then cover the history of how it took place...to East Africa to the Caribbean to South America and then learn till this last second and then, to me, that's Black history...Start at the very beginning.

For participants, learning rich information encompassing time and space about the experiences of Black people provided deeper context to the notion of Black history. Malcolm's statement spoke to the saying that "African-American history is American history" (Giddings, 2001). Malcolm goes one step further however, in saying that *African* history is indeed, the *world's* history. Supporting this, Asante (1991) says "not only did Africa contribute to human history, African civilizations predate all other civilizations. Indeed, the human species originated on the continent of Africa - this is true whether one looks at either archaeological or biological evidence" (p. 178). Learning about the Black experience in the context of human history is one way of "reading the world" and questioning the nature of Blacks' historical and social situation. Opportunities for comprehensive, critical questioning like this would be engaging to Malcolm as well as provide him more insight into how Black history connects with the oppression of other groups across the world, including his own. This knowledge could provide greater context of how gender, class, and racial oppression is sustained and reinforced in Western society.

Tyrone, another participant, also sought to engage in a deeper analysis of Black history. In the discussion on what participants had learned about Black history, Tyrone took offense to the fact that Black History Month had become primarily a showcase of U.S. civil rights figures, without a deeper examination of the context of that era:

*Tyrone:* For Black History Month, they don't go into it; they don't go deep into it. It's like they tell you the basics, the top of it. They don't go inside, they just say, Martin Luther King did this and that. What really pushed Martin Luther King to make the 'I have a dream speech'? What really pushed him to raise up the movement or freedom and all that? What about the [Ku Klux Klan] and what they did? They don't get into that; they just get into freedom...They don't tell you what other people went through. When you hear Black History Month, you remember Martin Luther King and that's it...At my school, when they make up a skit, it's always about Rosa Parks not getting a seat, it's always about that and it's more than just what they show people.

Tyrone seemed frustrated by the fact that the experiences of people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks were the most well-known legacy of the African Diaspora. Such a "contributions approach" to Black history and certain types of multicultural education typically take the form of merely celebrating ethnic holidays and heroes (Giddings, 2001). This approach is seriously limiting because "students do not attain a global view of the role of ethnic and cultural groups in U.S. society" (Banks, 1988, cited in Giddings, 2001, p. 466). This view towards learning the history of certain groups is not intended to be an essentialist idea, but rather is intended to be a beginning point in looking at the experiences of varied groups and how their identities have been structured throughout history (Giddings, 1990). As part of Codjoe's (1997, cited in Codjoe, 2001) interviews with Black and African high school students in Alberta, he found that they unanimously agreed that there was a very narrow focus of Black history in schools. One of his participants said that Black education in Alberta's schools, if mentioned at all "tends to start and stop with Martin Luther King. That's about it. There are a whole lot of other historical Black genres - music, science, you name it. Even in this country alone, there are a lot nobody knows about" (Codjoe, 1997, p. 174).

Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps a “safe” figure around which to base courses in Black history. He proposed a non-violent, passive approach to garnering civil rights for Blacks that while experiencing moments of success, was relatively non-threatening. For a lot of Whites, Martin Luther King Jr. serves as a conservative icon that can placate potentially militant tendencies in Blacks (Hood, Morris, Hickman, and Watson, 1995). It is suspected that “many Whites prefer that African-American males identify with Martin Luther King Jr. rather than Malcolm X precisely because the former is likely to be perceived as more socially acceptable insofar as his message of nonviolence can be construed to mean nonaction” (Ibid, p. p. 383). In a rejection of this desire, participants wanted to learn about the range of Black figures and their experiences that had occurred throughout history.

Black history that is useful should provide guidance as to how we reached the point where we are today and, quite simply, should not just be an antiquarian history for history's sake. It should include a diverse range of experiences and figures that can provide alternative narratives of the Black experience (Hope-Franklin, 1997). While Tyrone acknowledged that the individuals he named were great, he desires to learn about more than the limited choices he has been presented with. He has many questions about his cultural past that cannot be answered in the current framework of Black history school curriculum. Tyrone suggests that just as it is important to present the positive, uplifting (safe) legacy of Blacks and Africans, so too must the accompanying history of struggle and conflict. The latter should not be viewed as threatening, but rather be shown to present a comprehensive picture not only of Black, but human history (Asante, 1991). If this happens students can begin to see that Black and African involvement in human

history does not begin at slavery nor end with the NBA draft picks of the season; they can gain a more nuanced view of the power relations present throughout history that shape the present day. Knowledge of this sort can open up new paradigms of seeing the world, create new inquiries of thought, and give Black students a voice in education and in their own lives. Shor's (1992) work on critical pedagogy is useful to look at here in analyzing the ways in which to address this lack of critical analysis of Black history. Critical pedagogy includes:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor, 1992, p. 129)

By engaging in this process, students can begin to question ideologies and practices that they themselves find oppressive and encourage liberatory responses (both individual and collective). Such a direct connection of the material studied in class and students' lived experiences "serves as a tool for student engagement, transformation, and empowerment" (McMahon, 2003, p. 265).

### *Potential Impacts of Black History*

Research has shown that there is a relationship between culture and Black student achievement (Giddings, 2001; Nobles, 1990; Pilgrim, 2006). Asante (1991) argues that "through observation, inquiry, and discussion, I've found that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students; more disciplined, and have more motivation for school work" (p. 172). A student who is centered within their own culture

in the learning process is likely to be more engaged in their schooling and have higher self-esteem (Wente, 2007).

It is here that some of the complexities around race emerge. While I acknowledge race as a social construction, I also propose that this very same “unreal” construction be used in a movement (Afrocentrism) that recognizes the differences between those who are “White” and “Black.” Essentialist constructions are often used to mask relations of power, however looking at culture in an essentialist way is not always necessarily bad. For example, when a group is believed to have a dysfunctional culture, emphasizing cultural values and practices can act as an important oppositional tool (Razack, 1999). I will attempt to work through some of these contradictions in looking at the benefit participants saw in Black history in the curriculum.

Participants also made the link between deprivation of Black history and the negative effects that could have. A few participants felt that the lack of Black history was one of the key features in maintaining the oppression of Black people:

*Martin:* Because as I said, they don’t want us to know everything because they know that if all Black people get together, it would be over, that’s why. They don’t want that to happen. They want us to kill each other and then there won’t be no more Black people.

*Malcolm:* When I said ‘history,’ when you know your history, you can go out there. I had a cousin, she didn’t know who her mom was, who her dad was, so she didn’t have family. She was *stuck*. She didn’t know who she was. But one day she started going back and trying to find out where she came from, and one day she found out who her mom and dad was and since that day she was successful, so when I say that when Black people learn their history they will be successful, and by stopping, and not allowing, and probably not even mentioning Black history in schools, I think that’s one way of keeping the people the way they are, really. Because this kid said “I’m Black, I’m bad, I’m a thief” so that’s the way they’re thinking because that’s the way they want them to think. So when you really learn about your history, you’re going to go out there and do your do [*sic*] and you’re going to be successful. And that’s why I think

Black history is not really involved in the curriculum because when Black people learn their history, they're going to rise, and that's what they fear.

Malcolm felt that without the missing knowledge of their history Black people would not be able to "rise" above their oppression. He provides an example of a Black male who had internalized dominant notions about his race and gender, only because he has no alternative representations. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) agrees with this idea:

"The shadow obscuring the Black women's intellectual movement is neither accidental or benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970; Scott, 1985). Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas is critical in structuring patterned relations of race, gender, and class inequality that pervade the entire social structure. (p. 5)

Even though Collins speaks of Black feminist thought, the general ideas she speaks to are quite similar to those of Afrocentrism. Both do not see the exclusion of their perspectives as mere oversight (Asante, 1991). There is vested interest in keeping society as it currently is and knowledge of one's self, community, and history all run the risk of rupturing the status quo relations of gender, race, and class. This was an idea that came out of the groups; that collectively if Black people were aware of their history that *something* would change and according to participants, that something would be revolutionary. The link between knowledge and power is well established in their perceptions as well as in literature on consciousness raising. Consciousness raising proposes that oppressed groups who are able to gain knowledge of themselves can begin to build strengths and foster a sense of culture and community (Mullaly, 2002). This also holds true for Black females in education. Even though they may face different



experiences than Black males “when an individual Black woman’s consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become more empowered” (Collins, 2002, p. 445). While the experiences of Black males and females may differ, increased Afrocentric content in the curriculum has been shown to be beneficial for both groups (Dei, 2005; Dei et al. 1997; Codjoe, 2001). Conversely, by not having access to information which provides rich alternate representations of Black people, it is likely individuals and groups will stay confined to dominant representations.

When participants were exposed to Black history and stepped inside from the margins, there were marked changes in how they described school and their learning. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that Jason was uninterested in history class and had not learned about Black people in his lessons, he took great pride in Black History Month; feeling that it was “his time to shine.” The focus on Black culture, if only for four weeks, validated Jason and made him feel special:

*Jason:* It’s the one month that you get to be yourself; you get to express yourself in different ways. You have the freedom of being *Black* for that month. That’s *our* month in school; everything’s controlled by Black kids. We take the assemblies, we plan the activities; everything’s us for that’s month. It’s just us. There’s hardly any Black kids on the chess team, but as soon as Black History Month comes around we have extra curricular activities after school, you find everyone’s there.

The enthusiasm Jason feels about the focus on Blackness during Black History Month is evident in his quote. A self-described at-risk student who was often in conflict with school authorities and close to total disengagement, Jason’s perceptions of school changed dramatically during Black History Month. Marginalized the rest of the year, the arrival of Black History Month was an opportunity for Jason to take centre stage, and he reveled in it. For one month, he was able to be like students in the dominant cultural

group and see his narratives and histories showcased and celebrated. Instead of Blackness as a stigma, during Black History Month it became an asset for him. Even though there is some limitation in the range of Black experiences that are depicted in school during Black History Month, it seems to be the centering of identity that is so powerful for Jason.

Potential impacts of Black history and Black History Month were not only described as short-term; the young men in focus group 3 illustrated the positive effects they felt that learning about Black history could have on the Black community as whole. This linkage between knowledge and social transformation is central to both the aims of consciousness raising (Freire, 2003) and Afrocentrism (Cokley, 2005). Participants felt that increased knowledge of Black history could have broad consequences that ranged from promoting unity in the Black community to “increased success in life.” Afrocentric cultural reformers also have grand hopes for the potential inherent in learning Black history, including alleviating teenage pregnancy and the crime and learning epidemics on the Black community, and disrespect for self and elders...” (Giddings, 2001, p. 469). There was a sense that Afrocentric knowledge could link disconnected youth to a forgotten cultural past giving them the wisdom to realize they are trapped in a continuing cycle of oppression. Jason felt that through knowledge of struggle learned from Black history a desire to change the present for the better would occur:

*Jason:* Ya, you’ll learn more about the struggle that everyone went through. Back in slavery days, Black people stuck together because of slavery. And if Black youths could see that, it’s a long shot, but they might see it as a positive note too. To say ‘back then we stuck together, so it’s time for us to come together now’ because Black people are killing Black people now. You skip school to kill, to shoot your own [community members]. So if you go to class and you learn more about your people maybe you will understand.

Jason's musings illustrated the idea of consciousness raising and its transformative potential. Arlene Goldbard (2006) finds the concept of consciousness raising to be a foundation of community cultural development. By gaining consciousness of the history of Blacks in the African Diaspora, it is possible that students can break through taken for granted ideas about "the way life is" and reach new levels of awareness of oppression (Ibid). It is through learning the historical context of present day oppression that the cycle can be disrupted and empowerment from external and internal oppression can occur. As Asante (1991) says:

Certainly, if African-American children were taught to be fully aware of the struggles of African ancestors they would find a renewed sense of purpose and vision in their own lives. They might cease acting as if they have no past and no future. For instance, if they were taught about the historical relationship of Africans to the cotton industry - how African-American men, women, and children were forced to pick cotton from "can't see in the morning 'til can't see at night," until the blood ran from the tips of their fingers where they were pricked by the hard boll; or if they were made to visualize their ancestors in the burning sun, bent double with constant stooping, and dragging rough, heavy croaker sacks behind them - or picture them bringing those sacks trembling to the scale, fearful of a sure flogging if they did not pick enough, perhaps our African-American youth would develop a stronger entrepreneurial spirit. If White children were taught the same information rather than that normally fed them about American slavery, they would probably view our society differently and work to transform it into a better place. (p. 177).

Just as Asante proposes, participants had strong feelings that viewing Black history with a critical eye and making links between events of the past and the present could have much larger impacts than solely for the individuals involved. For Malcolm, Black history could give Black people a vision to direct their futures:

*Malcolm:* Black history is very important for us to learn, because I heard somebody say if you don't know your history, you can't let go of your problems or whatever is keeping you in the situation where you are. So when you learn about your self, or your history, you'll say 'yes, this is

where we come from, this is what we went through, and this is what we're gonna do in the future.'

Malcolm implied that without an understanding of the historical experiences of African and Black people, they cannot make any real headway in addressing the problems of the present (Asante, 1991). Black history as a form of consciousness raising emerges as a process of accepting, exploring, and ultimately reconstructing one's past and present and one's future orientations (Karabanow, 2004).

Although some participants believed that Black history could be beneficial to themselves or others, there were a couple of participants who felt that the impact was negligible. Elroy felt very strongly about this. An interesting moment occurred when Elroy and Derek began having a mini-conversation during the focus group. They were talking about whether learning Black history in school would make any difference to their lives. Elroy thought it would not, but Derek was less sure. Derek felt that there could be an impact on him, but he could not quite articulate what it would be:

*Elroy:* Let me ask you, [turns to Derek] do you think, if like once a week, you had a Black history moment in our classes, do you think that would change the way you think and do anything? You'll still be the same, don't lie!

*Derek:* Probably not.

*Elroy:* Huh?

*Derek:* I don't know. I don't think so.

*Elroy:* You'll still be the same right?

*Derek:* I don't think so.

*Elroy:* You think you'll change?!

*Derek:* If I learned more, yes.

*Elroy:* Learn about more people, different people, you'll change? I strongly don't think I would change

*Derek:* I don't know how, I just think that if I learn more stuff I'll be slightly different. Everyone will. If you know more about something, you act slightly different. Because I don't know that much about Black history, the things I wrote down is only a few people I know, so if I knew more stuff about what happened, of course I'll change.

Derek felt that something within him would change, yet he could not conceptualize how historical knowledge would impact his life. Asante (1991) provides more explanation into how this process could work:

Thus, American children are not taught the names of the African ethnic groups from which the majority of the African-American population are derived; few are taught the names of any of the sacred sites in Africa. Few teachers can discuss with their students the significance of the Middle Passage or describe what it meant or means to Africans. Little mention is made in American classrooms of either the brutality of slavery or the ex-slaves' celebration of freedom. American children have little or no understanding of the nature of the capture, transport, and enslavement of Africans. Few have been taught the true horrors of being taken, shipped naked across 25 days of ocean, broken by abuse and indignities of all kinds, and dehumanized into a beast of burden, a thing without a name. If our students only knew the truth, if they were taught the Afrocentric perspective on the Great Enslavement, and if they knew the full story about the events since slavery that have served to constantly dislocate African-Americans, their behavior would perhaps be different.... If the curriculum were enhanced to include readings from the slave narratives; the diaries of slave ship captains; the journals of slave owners; the abolitionist newspapers; the writings of the freedmen and freedwomen; the accounts of African-American civil rights, civic, and social organizations; and numerous others, African-American children would be different, White children would be different - indeed, America would be a different nation today. (pp. 175-176)

It is no surprise that it is difficult for Derek to articulate the magnitude of ideas expressed in Asante's quote. What Asante describes is painful and horrific, yet there are lessons imbued within the experience; lessons that if more Black students could become aware of, could have transformational impacts on not only their experience of school, but their lives. The reality is likely somewhere between these two polarities. With the range of risk factors facing poor, Black male youth, only learning about history is unlikely to change embedded social patterns and racism in society. It should be considered as one element in an integrated campaign of social change. Changing consciousness through awareness of

oppression is only a first step that brings with it the possibility of confronting any number of issues affecting society (Freire, 2003).

### *Black History For all*

In the previous section, participants spoke about the effects they felt that Black history could have for the Black community. While social manifestations of Black separateness (such as in learning an Afrocentric curriculum) are often the only places of acceptance and sanctuary to which Black people can escape, they can be viewed as threatening and as signs of “racism” towards Whites (hooks, 1992). This does not have to be the case with Afrocentric principles, which are applicable to everyone (Cokley, 2005). Just as Asante (1991) envisioned, Black history can also deeply influence the lives of students who are not Black. All students can benefit from a curriculum that includes accounts of Black peoples’ contributions to the world. The truism that African history is indeed world history represents one of the most powerful arguments for the infusion of Afrocentric content into the existing Eurocentric curriculum (Giddings, 2000). All participants overwhelmingly felt that if Black history classes were offered, they should be available to everyone. Here is one specific participant reflection:

*Elroy:* You see, the Black people are always like ‘we need to hear, we need to hear’ [about Black history], but no White people are like ‘we need to hear’ because they don’t really care. Maybe *they* need to listen to it.

As an oppressed group that is often marginalized within school, it is not surprising that Black students recognize the value of increased Black history. Yet as members of a dominant group it is perhaps even more crucial that White students come to learn about Black history as well. Yet making this knowledge available to all students is often not considered. Rather than embracing diversity within core curriculum, some schools

address the issue of diversity by offering courses targeting specific groups such as women's studies or Black history. Supporting participants' belief that it is imperative for White students to be educated about Black history is some evidence that dividing classes into distinct course offerings can have the detrimental effect of marginalizing groups and attaching a stigma to the classes (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2006; McMahon, 2003). In one study at the university level, African students who took African studies courses:

Experienced emotional torture, disempowerment, intellectual deprivation, and cultural powerlessness due to the racist and propagandist manner in which the courses are taught in the classroom settings. As well, African students who took those courses invariably engaged in self-pity and psychological denunciation of their African identity and connectivity. (Fredua-Kwarteng, 2006, p. 7)

Instead of providing opportunities for empowerment through consciousness raising there is a risk that specific course offerings (thinly veiled token gestures towards inclusivity) can further marginalize people's histories and create alienation. By offering specific classes dealing with diverse groups, schools can claim to be responding to criticisms of Eurocentricity without integrating marginalized peoples' histories into the mainstream, compulsory curriculum. Participants provided their thoughts on why it was so important for Black history to be a part of the mainstream:

*Derek:* it needs to be heard by everyone. If it's just heard by one race it's gonna seem like it's not real. Like it's not a big thing.

Derek's sense of the marginality of Black history is evident in his statement. He feels that having Black history as a separate class that only Black students attend will again put them on the margins, making knowledge of Black history seem insignificant. If something is of concern to only one segment of the population, it can appear as though it is not an issue that everyone should be involved in. Yet just as Black students have not

been educated on Black history in school, neither have other students, thus, the benefits could impact everyone.

*Martin:* I think everyone should go to that class because if you're not Black, you don't know either, so I think they should know too. I don't think only Black people should know what they did.

*Tyrone:* If some Black people don't know, then White people they don't know anything about it too.

*Martin:* The Asians, everyone, they don't know

*Tyrone:* Everyone should learn about it.

Finally, another reason given for widespread knowledge of Black history was that it could begin to change others' perceptions of Black people:

*Martin:* They look at us like (we're) nothing right now so I think they should know.

Just one of the benefits of all students learning Black history is that it could be a first step in correcting over three centuries of the development of negative attitudes towards Black people that give White people an unrealistic image of themselves as superior (Ali, 2000).

### Conclusion

Consciousness raising is a powerful means of critical education and social transformation. Heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (2003), consciousness raising is ideally suited for use with oppressed groups because it can aid them in seeing the links between history and knowledge and the maintenance of oppression (Ibid). The tightly constrained range of identities available in the dominant society can be reconsidered with the realization that identity is shaped across time and space. Participants in this study had a strong desire for increased Black history in the curriculum even though they were receiving very little. They felt that just as knowledge of Black



history could liberate Black people; its absence could continue to oppress them. Overall, they felt that Black history could be valuable to their own lives, for the Black community, as well as for the White community, who they felt could benefit greatly from critical awareness of Black history and its links to the present day.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

### Review of Research Questions

In this thesis I delved into the experiences of participants who were students in the Toronto District School Board. The main research question had three components: 1) what are the experiences of a group of Black males in school and society as racialized persons; 2) what is the current perception of the quality and quantity of instruction in Black history that selected youth in the TDSB are learning in the classroom; and 3) is there a desire for more Black history in the curriculum and if so, what type of information is preferred?

These questions were of the utmost importance for a number of reasons; one is the sheer size of the Black community in Toronto. Seventy-five percent of Blacks in Ontario reside in Toronto and their numbers are rising (Statistics Canada, 2001). As these populations continue to grow, so too have their educational challenges. It is untenable to sit idly by while an entire group of people do not achieve the academic status necessary to succeed in a society that places high value on education.

There were other, more personal reasons for this project. The topic of Black youth and education has always been dear to my heart. I have been discussing their challenges with friends for more years than I can remember. I have pondered the reasons for Black youth underachievement its occurrence, and mused about the possible solutions. When I had the opportunity to write a thesis, I knew immediately that Black students in the TDSB would be my topic. I was confident that it would sustain my interest and motivation for the long, arduous journey ahead.

As a Black student who attended the TDSB I had a close connection to the topic. While I was one of the “success stories,” I realize that I was an anomaly. I endured ridicule and was often excluded because I was one *of those*; I was a “brainer” and “acting White” simply because I did not hate school and received good marks. My experience illustrates the idea that to achieve academic success is to be a “traitor” to the culturally represented values of Blackness (Hemmings, 1998). While I excelled in all my classes, the lack of Black history was something that I never even noticed. It was only with an immersion in Black history in my first year of university that I now see how little I knew about Black history and the ways that absence affected me. Now, I am proud of my Black history, my Black identity, *and* my academic success, none of which are mutually exclusive. As an adult who has traversed the TDSB and beyond, I have a new lens through which to view Black students’ school experiences and the ways that Black history and curricular relevance connect to them. It is with this personal experience and knowledge that I embarked on this project, in the hopes that I could be a part of shedding some light on the complex issue of Black youth in education.

### Research Journey

The data on which this project relies emerged from three focus groups carried out in two community centres in Toronto. The focus group approach allowed me to gain more insight into a range of ideas that have been found in previously published qualitative data about Black students’ experiences. I was able to look specifically at a group of Black males in the TDSB, an area that has had little research. The semi-structured approach of the group created a less formal environment that mimicked the

natural flow of communication where people are influencing and influenced by each other. This approach provided me the opportunity to hear participants' narratives in their own words and for them to build upon responses, presenting data that was not part of the original focus group guide. In beginning this project, I did not have a sense of how participants would contribute in the group, yet I was amazed by how much insight they possessed. They expressed difficult concepts in an honest, thoughtful way and had a unique understanding of issues. It was a pleasure meeting and speaking with them and I learned a great deal from the experience.

The research journey also gave me more insight into myself. Never having done work of this scope before, it was a challenge in many ways. It was a challenge moderating focus groups and holding myself back when participants said things that resonated with me. It was also difficult to hear some of participants' narratives because I could understand what they were saying on a deep level. In moving through this project, I have had to reflect on my own experiences as a TDSB student, some of which I did not even identify until now. While not necessarily easy, I feel that this reflection gave me more insight into myself and the type of social worker I want to be.

Inevitably at the end of any project of this magnitude, one considers the things they would have done differently (or not). In considering my original research plan involving individual interviews and a Black history information sheet I created, I realize this was not the best approach and I am pleased that a change was made. The sheet reflected my values, my beliefs and its inclusion may have blinded me from seeing participants' own narratives and feelings on Black history emerge. While at the time I was disappointed that it had to be excluded, I now realize that it was for the best.

## Summary of Research Findings

This project began with the premise that Black youth are in a crisis situation in regards to education (Lewis, 1992). From the early 1990s until the present day, Black males are failing in almost all aspects of school. They have been disproportionately represented in the two lowest academic levels in school (Cheng et al., 1986; Cheng and Yau, 1999; Cheng et al., 1993), they are receiving poor marks in school and are at great risk of dropping out (Codjoe, 2006; Davis, 2003; Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997); their chances of continuing on to post-secondary education are lower than other groups (Few, 2004); Black males face heavier surveillance, increased disciplinary measures, and disproportionate representation in suspensions and police involvement; they also face racism, prejudice, and stereotyping inside and outside of school (Alladin, 1996; Bhattacharjee, 2003; Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997; Franklin and Boyd-Franklin, 2000). The intersection of relations of class, race, and gender situate Black males in a disadvantaged social location. This group is positioned as both biologically (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, cited in Codjoe, 2006) and culturally (D'Souza, 1995, cited in Codjoe, 2006) inferior in regards to academic achievement. These essentialist explanations, however, fail to look at factors within society that contribute to this underachievement. The experiences of poverty, racism (seen in the stereotypical image of Black men), and household and community stress combine to severely constrain the possibility of academic success for young, Black males (Ferguson et al., 2005). Clearly then, poor, Black males are at much heightened risk for academic challenges. With all of these pressures it would be more surprising if poor Black males were actually performing well in school.

In looking at the dynamics of this issue, one factor that has resurfaced again and again in the Afrocentric literature is that Black history is something that Black students, at-risk or not, have identified as something they want more of in school (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997). The most commonly cited factors for school disengagement were school-risk factors, of which lack of curricular relevance was one (Ferguson et al., 2005). Black students and educators have observed the connections between being represented in the curriculum and the effects on self esteem and engagement (Dei et al., 1995; Dei et al., 1997; LNSCSC, 2004). As a marginalized group in society, Black males may have an even greater need than other groups to see alternate representations of themselves (LNSCSC, 2004). The nature of the historical relationship of Black people to education in addition to the prominence of negative cultural notions of them often lead Black males to believe that effort put into education will not reap rewards and therefore, there is little point in seeking academic achievement (Mickelson, 1990, cited in Smith et al., 2005). Difficulties encountered outside of school in seeking employment due to racism may reinforce that idea that academic and economic success are not easily available to them and they may manufacture self-identities that are easily accessible – that of gangster, drop-out, drug-dealer, or athlete (Wilson, 2001). The importance of curriculum is clearly entwined with the social, economic and political context in which these students live their lives outside of school. However, such a broad analysis does not negate the impact that an Afrocentric curriculum might have in providing some measure of resilience to these forces and, possibly a starting point for imagining strategies for reinvigorating Black resistance to oppression. As part of envisioning alternate realities and seeing that there exists more than that ubiquitous construction of Black men as

criminals, I argue that incorporating Afrocentric content in the curriculum engages Black youth and opens up alternatives for them to take an active role in their learning (Asante, 1991; Wente, 2007).

Much of my thesis explores the specific possibilities that Black history may present as the foundation for enhancing Black student's resilience and ability to resist the relations of racism and classism that diminish their life opportunities. Before even looking at participants' feelings around Black history, I first outlined their educational experiences. Participants described teachers in dichotomous terms of "good" and "bad." I used this as a starting point to explore the ways that interactions between students and teachers either served to reinforce racist stereotypes and interactions, or opened the possibility for young, Black men to see themselves as integral to the learning environment. Given the many challenges these young, often poor, Black men faced in their homes and communities supportive interactions with teachers were of paramount importance. They created a community space in which the possibility of engagement could emerge. In addition to this analysis of the interpersonal interactions, I also unpacked their reaction to a history curriculum that they perceived as Eurocentric and disengaging. History curriculum was considered boring by almost all participants largely because they found they were only presented with White images while Black narratives remained absent. The lack of representation and curricular relevance left them with a desire to learn about Afrocentric knowledge that remained invisible. Furthermore, participants did not simply feel that there was not enough Black history in the curriculum, they felt that the choices of what was considered appropriate curriculum denied the legitimacy of Black experience. The latter finding is significant because it reveals a sense

that participants felt oppressed by the pedagogical choices of the curriculum; they felt Eurocentric history was being valorized *at the expense* of their own. This experience of school material as inherently oppressive served to reinforce their general experience of marginalization and exclusion from mainstream, White society.

Punishment within school also emerged as a salient theme in participants' experiences. These practices were perceived as reproducing broader systems of racism and oppression. In linking experiences inside and outside of school, participants told of the prejudice that they experienced outside of school. They specifically spoke about malls and stores where they were viewed suspiciously and often reprimanded, controlled, and even arrested. Stereotypes of Black males as criminal, deviant, and dangerous (Fries-Britt and Turner, 2001, cited in Codjoe, 2006) influenced these interactions where Black males felt constrained by imposed identities. In school a similar criminalization of participants was evident. Research has found that Black males are more likely to be punished and punished more severely than other students in school (Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002) and are disproportionately represented in school disciplinary offenses (APCRP, 2000; Bhattacharjee, 2003). Three areas of school discipline emerged from focus groups; office referral, suspension, and police involvement. Participants indicated that they felt all three categories were heavily influenced by subjective judgments made on the part of school authorities.

The experiences of surveillance and suspicion outside of school, disproportionate punishment within school, and adversarial relations with school authorities created a hostile school environment that reproduced social biases against participants. The practice of punishment based on subjective judgment that participants experienced made



them distrust the motives of teachers and principals that punished them. As school authorities viewed participants as threats and worked to control their behaviour to reduce this threat, participants too, came to view the school and authorities in threatening, unsupportive ways. These practices of inequality served to further alienate students from educational institutions, making school a particularly dangerous place for poor, Black men to find themselves. In turn, many retreated to their communities, where there was at least a modicum of protection from the broader, White dominated society.

In light of these factors – racism inside and outside of school, negative interactions with school authorities, disengagement with curriculum, and a deep sense that there is a system of White oppression actively working towards their failure – I turned to look at Black history as a potential ameliorative tool for participants. There are benefits in addition to knowledge that can come from learning Black history. Black history can be used as a tool of consciousness raising, which involves learning "to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 2003, p. 17). Through learning about Black history and the oppression that has been such a part of the Black experience, it is possible to increase students' awareness of their own histories and place in the world, understand the workings of positional dynamics in their lives and to begin to challenge them to create change (Maher and Tetreault, 1994). This could involve the creation of new identities that resist those that have been supported by North American culture. More specifically, if marginalized students gained knowledge of Black history, Afrocentrists argue that "they would find a renewed sense of purpose and vision in their own lives" (Asante, 1991, p. 177).

As part of a desire to use Black history to change the consciousness of society, it was very important for participants that any information about Black history not be partitioned into separate classes. They insisted that *all* students – not just Black and White, but *everyone* – should be able to access Black history information. This was important for them because they felt it could begin to correct centuries of negative perceptions and misunderstandings that have become entrenched about Black people. Just as it was important to their sense of self and personhood to see and learn about alternate representations of Black people and their history, they felt it was just as important, if not moreso, for those in the dominant group who maintain these erroneous beliefs to see the truth as well. With such a new, shared understanding could come larger scale changes in how Black males are perceived and represented.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, the integration of Afrocentric history in school curriculums is not, in and of itself, sufficient to change the experiences of Black men in our society. Clearly, to have a significant impact, the curriculum of educational programs must change in conjunction with a reinvigoration of Black communities, more economic opportunities for Black youth, and broader challenges to cultural representation of Blackness in Canadian societies. The recommendations that emerge from this thesis focus only on one small aspect of this, but I remain aware that it must be integrated into a broader system of social change.

## Limitations and Considerations

Due to the nature and scope of this research, there are limitations to the data. Because this research examines the experiences of a small number of males who have been involved in the TDSB, the results cannot be generalized to larger groups of students. Rather participants' stories can provide some insight into the individual experiences of this small group of students facing a learning crisis in TDSB. It is also important to remember that regardless of what participants say, their responses are perceptions and must be viewed as such (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005).

Those who participated in the focus groups were not randomly chosen, but were recruited by agency staff as suitable participants. Many of them may have known each other through attending similar programs at the community agencies or outside of the agencies. These previous relationships may have had an impact on participants' interactions or level of comfort in speaking (Krueger and Casey, 2005). Furthermore, because the participants in the focus groups were utilizing public community agency programming which often targets at-risk youth, this may also have affected the sample.

My presence as moderator may also have influenced the data in the focus groups. A study from archival data (McDonald, 1993, cited in Morgan, 1997) found that different styles of moderating produced different focus group results. I did make efforts to moderate consistently and to limit any biases I may have demonstrated, however I may not have done this at all times. Part of checking this process involved keeping a detailed reflective journal to document how my "thoughts and actions intertwined with the participants' words" and my role in the group dialogue (Brun, 2005, p. 161).

As Macias (1993) reminds us, Black underachievement is a “complex social [phenomenon that] must be explained within a historical, socio-structural view” (p. 411). The research questions that I have posed are but one small part of the problem/solution. It would require further research to determine how the potential impact of increased curricular relevance intersects and contrasts with other factors (socioeconomic status, peer group influence, parental involvement, systemic discrimination, quality of schools, etc) that have been shown to be contributors to Black students’ poor school performance (see Ferguson, et al., 2005).

Also, while Afrocentric education can be helpful for some students, it may not address the needs of all Black students who are struggling in school. For example, foreign-born students of African descent may face different issues from Canadian-born Black students. If these foreign-born students came from countries where there is political and civil warfare and instability, different measures might need to be taken to address any gaps in their educational experience. I chose to focus on Canadian-born Blacks or landed immigrants who self-identified as such; looking at Black students who are foreign-born and what measures can help them better to navigate the Canadian education system could provide new layers to understanding the issue of education in members of the Black Diaspora.

#### Directions for Future Research

From this research are a number of areas worthy of additional inquiry. There is a multitude of research (especially in the U.S.) on the risk factors and dynamics of school (dis)engagement of Black males (see Codjoe, 2006; Ferguson, 2005). However there is

much less research that looks at the ways in which Black students can be successful (see Codjoe, 2001; Codjoe, 2006). Often Black education (particularly Black male education) achievement is steeped in a discourse of failure. While important to know what puts students at-risk, taking this view can also eclipse narratives of success. It is just as important to look at the ways that Black students navigate the education system while constructing identities compatible with school success. The ways in which this can be done are complex. For example, there has been work that suggests that for some Black students to succeed, it is at the expense of their racial identity (Fordham, 1988). Other research has looked at the ways that Black students create identities that affirm Blackness and make it consistent with, and not opposed to, academic success (Cokley, 2005; Fordham, 1996). Further research into the nature of Black students' academic success could reveal relationships between low-achieving and high-achieving students and the ways in which to make education fulfilling for all types of Black students.

There is significantly less research on the issue of at-risk Black students in Canada than in the U.S. and even less looking at each gender. In this thesis I attempted to look at the school experiences of Black males in Toronto high schools; further research looking at Black females' experiences within Toronto schools and their perceptions would be worthwhile. While also struggling in school, Black females have seemed to surpass Black males' in academic performance. Looking more into the reasons for the occurrence could provide important information about the connection of gender in the Black community and differences between Black females and males that support the academic achievement of one while discouraging them in the other. Looking at how

these layers unfold may provide strategies for understanding the nature of engagement for Black females and how Black males might be able to be engaged in similar ways.

I investigated the ameliorative potential of increased Black history in the curriculum for a small group of students in the TDSB with positive feedback from them. Going even further with this idea is the investigation into Black-focused schools that not only have increased Black staff and administrators, but operate using foundational Afrocentric principles that stress the principles of “responsibility, interdependence, respect for elders, transparency, and accountability. The school seeks to centre the learner in her or his own culture, history, personal location and spiritual identity.” (Dei, 2005). Preliminary research into this idea has shown positive results of these schools (Wente, 2007) and further investigation could provide an answer to the crisis facing Black youth in education.

### Implications for Social Work Practice

Keeping in mind the social workers’ Code of Ethics, social workers “shall advocate change in the best interests of the client and for the overall benefit of society, the environment, and the global community” (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers Code of Ethics, 2000, online reference). An initiative that aims to break down racial stereotypes, broaden knowledge, and promote principles of collectivity and spirituality can certainly be viewed as beneficial to society (Cokley, 2005). Social workers can not only advocate for increased Afrocentricity in the curriculum but also for broader structural change as outlined in Critical Race Theory. This involves working to transform the ways in which education relates to marginalized groups and in advocating

for youth within the system in the ways that they deem important. For example, social workers can work with school boards to advocate for issues of concern (including, but not limited to increased curricular relevance) for all students, while recognizing that marginalized groups often require more attention to their needs. They can employ antiracist and anti-oppressive principles that work to challenge structural barriers to success and encourage their use in the organizations for which they work. This could be done by decreasing hierarchies in their organizations or by supporting diversity initiatives with an anti-oppressive focus. Both the Afrocentric and antiracist/anti-oppressive perspectives allow social workers to perceive racism and injustice as primary factors in the marginalization of oppressed groups as well as to work for social change. Just as antiracist education suggests, such change should not be only individual or within the classroom; ultimately the goal is to transform society (Dei, 1996).

At the micro level, this research shows some preliminary evidence that some at-risk Black students have a strong desire to learn about their culture and have their uniqueness recognized. In their practice, social workers can promote Afrocentric principles such as collectivism, communalism, increased spirituality, and knowledge of self in any work they do with Black clients. In offering groups, programs and services to individuals and communities, social workers can ensure that such initiatives are culturally appropriate and do not reproduce oppression.

The findings of this project can provide social workers who work with Black youth or in the field of education with insight into some of the risk factors of this group and others who face oppression. With awareness of these factors, social workers can proactively work to reduce their effects; providing supports to do so. Some means of

engaging Black male students can also be found in this research including authoritative, supportive relationships with authority figures, the transformative potential of Afrocentricism, and high expectations. Social workers who maintain these attributes may find they have a greater degree of success in working with Black males - a vulnerable, yet highly misunderstood, group.

Black males in the Toronto District School Board face untold challenges in attaining high levels of education. This thesis was an attempt to look at some of these challenges and offer solutions embedded within education itself. Black history that critically looks at the role of Africans and Blacks in human history was primarily identified as one way to bring participants away from the margins into the centre of education and make school a viable option for them. The introduction of Black history has not only the potential to benefit this at-risk group; it may provide educators and other students with new ways of seeing a group who has often been represented very negatively or worse yet, remained invisible. By bringing the experiences of Blacks throughout history out of the darkness, it is possible that a new light of hope, for the future of an entire generation of youth, may begin to shine.



## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Focus Group Preamble and Guide

To be stated prior to beginning interview:

My name is Amy Paul; I am a student researcher at Carleton University's School of Social Work. The purpose of this focus group today is to learn in your own words how you feel about school and the curriculum. Although there is an interview guide we'll be following, I want us all to decide on the topics that we'll talk about. I want the focus group to be really informal. I'm also interested in both negative and positive comments. The only rule though is not to interrupt anyone who is speaking because I'll be recording the focus group. I will give each of you a chance to answer each question before I go on to the next one. I'm interested in learning from each of you. So if you're talking a lot I may ask you to give others a chance, and if you aren't saying much I might call on you. The focus group will be between one and one and half hours. Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time, feel free to have a conversation with each other about the questions.

I am just going to go over the details of the interview by reviewing and signing the consent form. You don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to and you may stop the interview at any time. Any information you share will not identify you. In the final report your name won't be used at all. Please respect the confidentiality of others in the room; do not repeat their comments to anyone outside the room.

You all have provided with a pencil and paper so that you may note any thoughts you have so you may share them when it is your turn.

Ok, good. Has everyone had their parents sign the consent form if you're under 18? Please pass it to the front.

And everyone help yourself to pizza and drinks, if you haven't already. You can eat during the focus group.

If it is ok, I'm going to turn on the tape recorder. Please speak slowly, clearly and loudly so that the recorder can capture everything that is being said.

Ok, let's begin...

5 minutes (including getting food and settled)

Focus Group Questions:

1. What's your favourite thing and least favourite thing about school?
2. What is an average day at school like for you? If you were able to change school in a way that would make it better, what would you like to see change?
3. Do you feel the school curriculum reflects the diversity in Canada? Why or why not?

4. Could everyone please write down what you think of when you hear the phrase, Black history; we will then go around and see what everyone wrote
5. Have you learned about Black/African history in school? What kind of things have you learned?
6. Would you like there to be more information about Black history in your classes? Why do you think history might be important?
7. If you were to help create a Black history course, what types of information would you put in the course? (i.e. U.S. Slavery and Civil Rights History, Canadian Black history, etc) (15 minutes)
8. If Black history were taught in school, should it be a separate course or integrated into regular classes? Why or why not?
9. What do you think have been the most important points of our discussion? Have we missed anything? Is there anything we should have talked about, but did not?
10. Give a summary of what was talked about and ask "is this accurate"? (5 minutes)

Thank you!

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Date of Ethics Approval: February 16, 2007

**\*\*\*IF PARTICIPANT IS UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE  
A PARENT OR GUARDIAN MUST READ AND SIGN THIS FORM\*\*\***

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of participant), understand that I am being invited to participate in a focus group for a research project conducted by Amy Paul, a student enrolled in the Masters of Social Work degree program at Carleton University. I have read the letter of information provided to me by the researcher, and I understand that the information that I provide will be used as part of a final research paper as part of the requirements for this degree.

I understand that:

- I/my son must be a Canadian citizen or landed immigrant whose ancestors can be traced to Africa and/or the Caribbean and who self-identifies as Black to participate in the study,
- The purpose of this research is to increase understanding of the experiences of Black students in the Toronto District School Board and how this experience may be different if these young men had more knowledge of African/black history in the school curriculum,
- This focus group will last approximately one to one and a half hours,
- The focus group environment eliminates both anonymity and confidentiality, meaning that other people can hear what you are saying thus what you say will not be confidential
- I/my son may decline to answer any questions or to participate in the session, and/or I/he may leave the focus group at any time,
- If the focus group is left before it is finished, the researcher cannot separate one person's comments from those of others in the group and the data could be used in the final report. My/my son's identity will not be revealed in the final report, however, some of my/his responses may appear word-for-word,
- There is mid-range risk in participating in this study,
- I am aware there is no compensation for participation, nor are there any direct benefits to participating,
- I agree to allow the focus group to be digitally audio-recorded,
- Pizza and soft drinks will be served during the focus group,
- I may request a copy of the focus group transcript and/or a summary of the research project when it is completed,
- I understand that the findings of these focus groups will be presented in a written report to be handed in to Amy Paul's Research Supervisor, Professor Sarah Todd; findings may also be used in conference presentations and published articles,
- I understand that this project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee,

## Appendix C: Information Letter

Date of Ethics Approval: February 16, 2007

### Information Letter for Research Project: *Only White People Ever Did Anything:* Black History and its Meaning for Racialized Males in the Toronto District School Board

My name is Amy Paul; I am a student researcher at Carleton University's School of Social Work. As part of my course work and degree requirements, I am currently working on a research project concerned with exploring the educational experiences and potential interest in more Black history in the curriculum of approximately 10-15 Black male youth, aged 16-18 enrolled in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Black, as used here, is defined as Canadian citizens or landed immigrants whose ancestors can be traced to Africa and/or the Caribbean and who self-identify as black. The purpose of these discussions will be to increase understanding of the experience of these young men in school and how this experience may be different if these young men had more exposure to Black/African history in the school curriculum.

I am interested in facilitating three (3) to four (4) focus groups with three (3) to six (6) participants in each group.

has allowed me to conduct this focus group with youth who use their centre; however, they are in no way affiliated with my research project.

The focus groups will take place at

during the week of February 19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007. I have attached the guide that will be followed to give a sense of what the focus group will be like. The focus group will last approximately one to one and a half hours and will be digitally audio-recorded, with participants' permission, and transcribed by myself and/or a private contractor.

This is mid-range risk in participating in this study because the focus group environment eliminates both anonymity and confidentiality. Although participants have signed an agreement that they will not discuss what goes on in the focus group outside of it, it is still possible that others may be aware of what certain people said. Therefore, the participant must be aware that they could be identified which could result in distress. However, in the final report, participants will be anonymous – their identities will not be revealed although their responses may appear word-for-word. Participants' identities will not be disclosed to anyone in the TDSB. Please note that because the focus group will be with youth who are affiliated with \_\_\_\_\_, it is possible that some people there may be aware of who is participating in the study. Participation in this study will not impact on any services at \_\_\_\_\_.

1125 Colonel By Drive  
Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6  
Tel: 613-520-2600 ext. 4498  
E-mail: stodd@carleton.ca

If you are interested in participating in this project, you will need to sign an Informed Consent Form which confirms that you understand the project, your role in it, and agree to participate in it. If you are under the age of 18, you are considered a minor, and you will need to discuss the research with your parent or guardian and, if they agree with your decision to participate, they will sign the Informed Consent Form which will enable you to participate. I appreciate your interest in this project, and I look forward to the opportunity to work with you/your child.

---

Signature of Amy Paul, Primary Researcher

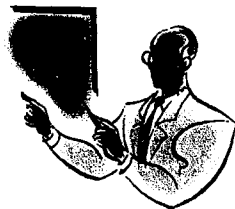
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Signature of Sarah Todd, Research Study Supervisor

Appendix D: Recruitment Poster

**Do you self-identify as a Black male?**  
**Are you a Canadian citizen or landed immigrant?**  
**Can you trace your roots to the Caribbean or Africa?**  
**Are you attending a Toronto or Scarborough high school?**  
**Are you between 10-19 years old?**

My name is Amy Paul and I am a student researcher from Carleton University and I am concerned with exploring the educational experiences and potential interest in more black history in the curriculum of black males in the Toronto District School Board\*



I am not part of the school board in any way  
and anything you say will be anonymous in the final report  
It's totally up to you whether you want to talk to me!

You can share your views with me at

---

during the week of FEBRUARY 19<sup>TH</sup> - 23<sup>TH</sup>

If you have any questions about this project, please contact  
me at 416-247-1745 or [acpaul@connect.carleton.ca](mailto:acpaul@connect.carleton.ca)

**Pizza and soft drinks will be served at the focus group**

\*Approved by the Carleton University Ethics Committee February 16, 2007

## **Appendix E: Focus Group Tips**

- **Consider bringing paper and pens for people to write down things**
- **Ensure that one person does not dominate the group**
- **Reword questions if necessary**
- **Redirect people back to topic of discussion**
- **Say things like “go on,” and “what do you mean?”**
- **Focus on the actual rather than the hypothetical or abstract**
- **Do not put words in people’s mouths**
- **Clarify at the beginning that people should try and speak one at a time**
- **Keep reactions to myself**
- **Have participants identify themselves by name at the start as this will help with voice identification during the transcribing**
- **Chart paper to record information**
- **Reiterate that information is confidential**
- **Mirror responses**
- **Introduce the issues to be discussed**
- **Realize that when asking about past experiences, memories may be biased**

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