Tackling Student Disengagement: Examining the Perspectives and Philosophies of Black Educators in a Canadian Context

by

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DEDICATION

To all the students who want to give up on education – please hold on.

ABSTRACT

Disengagement amongst Black students is a pressing matter as recent studies suggest a disproportionate number of dropouts amongst Black students compared to their non-Black counterparts.

This study begins with an analysis of multiculturalism in Canada, which provides the foundation for the discussion of race and equity in a Canadian context. The unjust inherent nature of multiculturalism fuels the systemic racism and inequality prevalent and institutionalized in society, through the education system. The myriad issues related to race, power, privilege and class inform the current situation in our schools – Black students are disengaged and as a result are dropping out of school at alarming rates. This study will focus on the issue of disengagement and the possible causes leading Black students to leave school prematurely, through the eyes of Black educators.

Through a qualitative research design I conducted a series of phenomenological interviews with Black educators within the Toronto and Peel District School Boards in order to ascertain their philosophies and perspectives as they pertain to disengagement in schools amongst Black students. Through a culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy and anti-racist framework I engage in an interview process that captures the voice of Black educators on what they see as the causes for disengagement.

The final chapter of this study suggests that mentorship, care, low expectations for students, culturally relevant teaching and curriculum, and diversity amongst staff are significant factors impacting disengagement. The analysis of these themes suggests ways of closing the gaps in the education system so that Black students can reengage in schooling.

RÉSUMÉ

Le désengagement scolaire parmi les étudiants noirs est une question urgente, soutenue par des études récentes suggérant un nombre disproportionné de décrochage scolaire parmi les étudiants noirs versus leur homologues provenant de d'autres races.

Mon étude débute avec une analyse du multiculturalisme au Canada, offrant la fondation pour une discussion concernant la race et l'égalité dans un contexte canadien. La nature intrinsèquement injuste du multiculturalisme attise le racisme systémique et les inégalités présentes et institutionnalisées dans la société, découlant du système d'éducation. Les multiples problématiques concernant la race, le pouvoir, le privilège et les classes sociales nourrissent la réalité dans les écoles : les étudiants noirs ne sont pas engagés, ce qui entraine un taux de décrochage préoccupant au sein de ce groupe. Cette étude se concentra sur les enjeux du désengagement et les causes probables qui entrainent les étudiants noirs à quitter l'école de façon prématurée, selon des éducateurs également noirs.

Utilisant un modèle de recherche qualitatif, j'ai effectué une série d'entretiens phénoménologiques avec des éducateurs noirs au sein de la Commission Scolaire de Toronto ainsi que celle du district Peel afin de déterminer leurs philosophies et perspectives relatant au désengagement des étudiants noirs face à l'école. Utilisant une pédagogie critique et pertinente à la culture, dans un cadre antiraciste, je me suis engagé dans un processus d'entrevue permettant de saisir les voix des éducateurs noirs afin d'exprimer ce qu'ils croient être les causes de ce désengagement.

Le dernier chapitre de mon étude propose que le mentorat, les soins, des attentes basses face aux étudiants, un enseignement et un curriculum plus culturellement pertinent, et la diversité au sein de l'équipe scolaire sont tous des facteurs importants ayant un impact sur le

désengagement scolaire. L'analyse de ces thèmes offre des solutions afin de resserrer l'écart existant dans le système scolaire ainsi que promouvoir un réengagement des étudiants noirs face à leurs études et à l'école.

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PROLOGUE

This story lends a voice to the complexities, contradictions and intersections within education, curriculum and reality. I hope to tell a story that critically examines the complexity of education and learning as it relates to children who live very different lives and realities from mainstream students; and highlight the impact educators can have in bridging the gap between home and school in order to encourage success and engagement in the classroom. The concept of currere theorized by Cynthia Chambers in "Stories Take Care of Us" is salient through this piece and will become a cornerstone or rather "touchstone" in negotiating the ideas of curriculum and the lived experiences of students. Currere is the active and critical engagement within curriculum, and is also the dialogue between lived experiences (either past, present or future) and academic knowledge.

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"I hope you two feel it! We're really getting somewhere with these boys, right?", Dr. Spencer said with a smile. "Absolutely!", Ms. Greens responds, as Mr. Colvin nods profusely. "I was taking notes as the kids worked", Dr. Spencer continued. "And everything we thought is being confirmed. I know this is just a research study pilot for the year but we allowed them to open up about their lives in the context of this classroom, we provided a space of non-judgment and peer conversation; we allowed them to teach us about the corner to build their confidence – and now they see themselves as knowledgeable beings, not just the bad kids in the "special" class. "I know right!" Ms. Green chimed in. "Just imagine these boys are labeled as the worst in this entire middle school, yet they have shown tremendous growth these past few weeks" she

continued. They not only built confidence from talking about the corner, but they can now see that school is kind of useful to them", Mr. Colvin adds. "Their lives are a place of so much rich knowledge and education and now they can see that", Ms. Green says. "They are starting to see the parallels between the streets and school, and that's good!" Dr. Spencer notes. "We've tapped into a potential that has been there all along but because these kids were so alienated from what they were learning, no on ever saw it. "Suzy buying apples for her friends Bob and Sue" is not relevant to these kid's lives, but what we discuss in class is! They are learning math, language, critical thinking, problem solving, history of their neighborhood and city, science – just about every subject in school! And they are doing it all by looking at their life on the corner. It's their lives as curriculum", Dr. Spencer states. They all breathe a sigh of relief and contentment, as if Dr. Spencer had finally put into word what they all were thinking.

Just then Dr. Spencer turns his back, walks over to a desk and sits down facing them. "Now how do we sell this to the Board?" He says doubtingly. "The Board? We have time to think about that! Let's just focus on the kids for now and the progress we're making", Mr. Colvin responds. "Actually we don't!" Dr. Spencer informed his partners. "I got a call earlier today, while we were at the store and it was Julie from the committee. She wants to review the project. The timing seems off to me. It's too much of a coincidence, so I think Mrs. Foster must have called in". Dr. Spencer explains. "You think the principal told on us?" Ms. Green exclaims. "Well if not her, then who?" Dr. Spencer responds. "My guess is she overheard our discussion in class or overheard one of the kids in the hall, either way Julie calling out of the blue to "check-up on us" doesn't make sense!" He adds. The three pause despairingly. "So how much time to we have before she shows up?" Mr. Colvin asks. "I don't know I assume sometime this week or the next. She didn't say, all she said was she wanted to pop in to review the progress of the study"

Dr. Spencer responds. “Well in that case we might have some time to get this right! We’re onto something, we just need to make sure that Julie and the Board see that!” Mr. Colvin confidently states. “Let’s not worry, we’ll continue working with the kids the way we have and wait!” He adds. Dr. Spencer and Ms. Green nod in agreement and are calmed by Daniel’s calm and cool demeanor. “All we can do is wait”, Ms. Green adds with a smile. “Okay!” Dr. Spencer replies with a calm tone. “Let’s just continue what we’re doing and wait. See you tomorrow then”, he adds.

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Yo man we love it here, we really do. And I’m sorry for my badass behavior but please don't go!

– Brian Boyce

“Morning!” Mr. Colvin says as he enters the quiet classroom. He looks around and realizes they are the only two there. “Where is Dr. Spencer?” He asks Ms. Green, confused by the doctor’s absence. Ms. Green nervously looks down to avoid eye contact. “He’s in a meeting”, she replies. “A meeting? It’s 8 o’clock in the morning. School hasn't even started”, he replies. “Well he was called in early”, Ms. Green reveals. “Julie called!”She adds. “Already?” Mr. Colvin replies in a frustrated tone. “I mean he only got the call last week, not even!” He adds. “Well I checked my email early this morning and Dr. Spencer said that Julie and Mrs. Foster called him in early to ‘chat about the direction of the project’”, she explains. “So it was her?” Mr. Colvin inquires. “Looks so!” Ms. Green replies. She sighs. “Look Daniel, all we can do is trust that Dr. Spencer explains to them the work that we’re doing and tells them about the progress we're making with these kids. Right now it's out of our hands”, she adds. Mr. Colvin sighs as if defeated. “You’re

right Michelle, its out of our hands" he echoes.

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Thirty minutes later, after Mr. Colvin and Ms. Green discuss the lesson and activity for the day, Dr. Spencer enters the classroom with a dazed look in his eyes. The two turn their attention to him immediately, "so what happen?" Ms. Green blurts out. Dr. Spencer sighs, "well I'm not sure", he replies. "What do you mean you're not sure", Mr. Colvin asks. "Mrs. Foster doesn't agree with the "new direction of the study", she said she's "not comfortable with us promoting a negative lifestyle in her school!" I tried to explain to her that we are not promoting this "lifestyle"; rather we are exploring it in the context of the classroom as a form of curriculum".

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Although fictional, this creative narrative speaks to the issues facing racialized students in Canadian classrooms and speaks to the cultural irrelevance that occurs in classrooms often leading to disengaged students. This was my experience. My lived experiences within Canadian society often did not reflect Canada's identity of multiculturalism. I grew up in a predominantly Afro-Caribbean neighborhood and attended a largely Caucasian school. While in school there was always a disconnect between the curriculum and me. I felt excluded from aspects of curriculum, as I could not identify with it. My history and identity was not recognized or discussed in the classroom. My cultural beliefs and norms – i.e. my values towards schooling, the way I spoke, my associations, my choice in dress and music, etc. were often scrutinized and

labeled as different. As a visible minority, I experienced the demoralizing and oppressive aspects of the education system, and strongly feel that Canada's educational system needs to do more in creating an inclusive curriculum in order to encourage interpersonal growth and a sense of self among students from traditionally marginalized groups. In order to rectify this disconnect, there needs to be a critical analysis of the curriculum and practices in the education system, as well as policies and initiatives that aim to foster inclusion and equity within classrooms.

My experience in schooling like many racialized students is characterized by a lack of racial, cultural and ethnic representation amongst educators. Rather I, like many are surrounded by a white homogenous group of teachers, administration and staff that do not look like me. This research study argues that Black educators who have shared some of the school and social experiences of Black students have something important to add to the pressing discussion about disengagement amongst Black students. In this study, I turn to Black educators for their philosophies and perspectives on the matter and gather valuable information about what is being done to address this issue of disengagement amongst Black students and where to go from there.

Chapter One

Introduction

What I look at it in terms of education, I was put in education for a purpose. Whether you look at it from you know a religious standpoint or a higher perspective of a higher authority, or a higher belief, I was put into education for a reason. I chose education for a reason. And therefore I must use all of the tools, the skills, the trials, the tribulations that I've gone through, that I've learned to influence somebody who looks like me in the same way (Mr. Koss, personal communication, December 5, 2013).

This excerpt from an interview done with Mr. Koss, a Vice Principle in an inner city school in the Toronto District School Board, reflects the connection and relationship between Black educators and Black students. Recent studies suggests that Black teachers are viewed by Black students as being able to provide positive models, advice, hope, encouragement, and opportunities that exist for them (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Zine, 1997, p. 173). Mr. Koss expresses a deep commitment to ensuring the success and achievement of Black students by drawing upon his own experiences as a Black person in order to influence Black and other racialized students in transformative ways.

This research study will aim to ascertain the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students. In order to understand the complexities of this issue, there will be a brief history and overview of the social climate in Canada that effects disengagement amongst Black students.

1.1. Contextual History

Globally, Canada is perceived as one of the most liberal nations in the world, with peacekeeping federal policies and progressive laws. It stands as one of the only countries with multiculturalism written into the national Constitution, thus presenting a highly favourable view of Canada and Canadians to the outside world. Multiculturalism in Canada is a symbol of Canada's commitment to ensuring the equal treatment of all citizens. Theoretically, multiculturalism appears to be a progressive system working towards the full inclusion of all peoples. However, systematic racism and institutionalized inequality are still very prevalent within Canadian society (Howard 2013). Further to this, it is Howard's (2013) claim that "…Canada's multiculturalism policy with its superficial attention to racial and cultural difference [are] amid a tendency to erase histories of inequality and exclusion…" (p. 1). Under the guise of Canadian multiculturalism, the systemic inequalities and injustices that make up Canada's identity are silenced in order to uphold the beliefs of an equal society. According to Fleras (2004), Canada is governed by a monocultural ideology that perpetuates Whiteness as the norm. This subtle "norm" filters through society and discreetly creates the "other". As noted in Fleras (2004), there is a "multicultural racism" prevalent in Canadian society, "[That] derives its legitimacy from the logical consequences of a 'monocultural' multiculturalism, with its privileging of consensus over challenge, conformity over dissensus, containment over empowerment, control over change, universality over particularity, and uniformity over diversity" (p. 431). It is Fleras' claim that Canadian multiculturalism is in fact a fallacy – a result of the ideal norms in place that hinder the possibilities of true multiculturalism. Instead, minority and racialized groups are taught to conform through the subtle denial of difference. This contradictory attitude towards multiculturalism is not often consciously considered, but is deeply

entrenched in the deliberate exclusion of minority groups within Canadian society. Howard (2013) discusses the nature of racism in Canada and points to the obvious inequality evident in Canadian society:

> Canadian racism is certainly not just a thing of the past, but the racist structure of Canadian society is still in evidence today. With respect to people of African ancestry in Canada, one need only to consider, among other things, the ongoing racial profiling of Black men (Chung 2010; Rankin et al. 2002; Tanovich 2006) and the evidence that the unemployment rate for both Black university graduates is equal to that of white grade 10 dropouts in both Montreal and Toronto (Chung 2010; Solyom 2001; Torczyner 1997) (p. 2).

These startling reports highlight the presence of racism in Canada. Although racism is evident, it is subtle and covert which creates a silence and denial of its use and effectiveness. This silence and denial of difference is embedded in the social fabric of Canadian society and is deeply entrenched in the education system, which produces a colour-blind discourse of unchallenged norms. To deny race as a legitimate marker of difference is to silence the issues of power and dominance that are apparent within Western society (Dei, 2003, p. 248). Howard (2013) notes that "For Black students, the situation is worse to the extent that education systems *themselves* mistreat Black students, for while within these systems there is an unspoken insistence upon colour-blind discourse, racism is a very normal part of what happens in schools" (p. 3).

The education system reflects this denial of difference by ignoring the conversations about race, racism, ethnicity, power, privilege, and class within the classroom. The absence of these conversations in schools further reproduces the status quo and reinforces the disparities and social inequalities present in the classroom (Dei, 2007, p. 353).

1.2. Current Predicament: Canadian Education

The Canadian education system is rooted in a Eurocentric model, which excludes the lives, identities and histories of its diverse population. Elliot and Fleras (2002) suggest that the education system is organized to facilitate cultural indoctrination and societal assimilation of minority students. They examine two ways in which these reproductive functions are accomplished – in a direct manner through Eurocentric course content, pedagogical styles and methods of evaluations; and indirectly, through teaching values and norms embedded in curriculum. The direct reproductive function of current, unquestioned ideological norms is embedded within curriculum. The material that we learn and subsequently do not learn is intentional in the perpetuation of dominant ways of thinking (Howard, 2013, p. 39; Kumashiro, 2002, p. 67). Canadian curriculum is a direct reflection of the ideological hegemonic norms, values and beliefs upheld in society. The education system serves as a means of reproducing a certain type of knowledge, while continuously excluding aspects of knowledge in order to perpetuate the current social structure. In exploring patterns of educational exclusion, Kumashiro (2002) draws upon Butler's work, "…which views oppression in society as being characterized by harmful repetitions of certain privileged knowledge and practices" (p. 67). This mirrors the systematic oppression that occurs in the education system where the experiences, identities and histories of the dominant culture are celebrated and integrated in curriculum; in contrast, minority groups are often excluded and/ or misrepresented in curriculum and the classroom. Further, Kumashiro discusses the "…systematic inclusion and exclusion of different groups, valuing and denigrating of different identities, and normalizing and dismissing of different practices" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 68). The education system is rooted in oppression as the dominant hegemonic ideology works to exclude, silence and push out difference. As a result,

"Black students in Canada are not only miseducated with respect to reading the world outside the school, but since the school is part and parcel of that world, they are also ill-prepared with respect to understanding their own experiences within schools" (Howard, 2013, p. 3). The colour-blind approach and denial of race and difference in education creates silences and gaps in educating racialized students as they are not reflected or represented in education.

There exist contradictions between the theoretical ideas of multiculturalism and the manifestation of it in society and institutions; in the education system this presents a problem for racialized students. The Ontario education system has expressed a commitment to ensuring the success of all students through the development and implementation of the "Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy", which aims to "understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students' prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society" (Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009, p. 6). These objectives are guided by three core priorities, which are to ensure (1) High levels of student achievement; (2) Reduced gaps in student achievement; (3) Increased public confidence in publicly funded education (p. 5). The commitment to equity and inclusion has also been enacted in local school board policies across the province. The Toronto and Peel District School Boards, the two largest and most diverse school boards in Canada, have created policies that echo the sentiments of Ontario's commitment to equity and inclusion. The Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) "Equity Foundation Statement and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation" (2005), acknowledges inequalities present in the school system, and commits to ensuring that "[the] curriculum of our schools accurately reflects and uses the variety of knowledge of all peoples as the basis for instruction…" (p. 2). Likewise, the Peel District School Board's (PDSB) "Equity and Inclusive Education" policy states: "One of the Board's key goals

is the following: " [To] achieve equity for students and staff – we provide equity of access and opportunity for students and staff to learn, work and develop in an environment that is safe, nurturing, engaging, respectful and inclusive."”(Policy #54, 2010, p. 1). Both the TDSB and PDSB express a strong commitment to the success of their students and staff through equitable and inclusive policies and initiatives.

There are numerous initiatives introduced and resources being poured into schools, especially those with students deemed as “at risk”. In the report, “Toronto District Urban Diversity Strategy: Focus on Student Achievement - Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap 2008”, the TDSB Student Census and the Student Information System (SIS) statistics are used to examine various factors that assist in determining who might be “at-risk” students. These factors include: the student’s region of birth, student’s racial background, student’s language, the student’s sexual orientation; also looking at the parent’s place of birth, parental presence at home, parent’s educational background and the family socioeconomic status (SES). These possible causes are considered amongst two groups of students – Grades 7-8 and 9-10. The report concludes:

> For example, male students, self-described Black students, students born in the English speaking Caribbean, those speaking Spanish and Somali, students from more challenged socio-economic circumstances, and those living with one parent are more likely to have academic challenges in their first years of high school…. Similar patterns are seen with elementary panel results, in looking at key studies of the senior elementary (p. 7).

This report identifies groups of racialized students that are most regarded as “at-risk” and in need of assistance, and further proposes initiatives to close the gap of achievement and attain student success amongst these groups. Canada’s two largest school boards have expressed and

committed to ensuring the success and enrichment of all students by first acknowledging that systemic inequalities exist and implementing ways in which to transcend those barriers. The commitment to the inclusion and equitable treatment of all students is evident in the policies and initiatives mentioned, however the education system has very deeply entrenched and ingrained ideologies that have not been challenged or changed. These silences have ramifications, as they teach students, especially traditionally marginalized students, that oppression, race, power inequalities, socioeconomic differences, and issues of access and privilege do not exist or are not important. The contradiction between lived experiences and schooling creates a fundamental disconnect between theory and practice.

1.3. Disengagement

Disengagement in the context of this study can be defined as "…the physical presence of Black bodies in schools but an absence in mind and soul" (Dei 2008, p. 349). Further to this, McMahon (2003) notes:

> Student engagement proposed by Newmann, F., Wehlage, G. and Lambom (1992); namely, "engagement stands for active involvement, commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy, or lack of interest" (p. 11). This is consistent with the concept of the term employed in the National Report on Student Engagement (Smith, W., Butler-Kisber, L., LaRocque, L., Portelli, J., Shields, c., Sparkes, & Viben, A., 1998). These findings indicate that "engaged students were involved in their school work in more than a superficial way that signified some leve1 of commitment and that this engagement extended beyond oneself and one's own work to encompass the wider world of the school and its community" (p. 5)" (p. 259).

The two definitions serve as a means of providing a context for the discussion of disengagement in schooling.

According to TDSB Research Report findings, "Canadian studies indicate that the realities and experiences of Black students are absent from the curriculum in Ontario and Canada in general. This absence contributes to their subsequent disengagement from their schooling experience" (Williams-Taylor, 2006; Dragnea and Erling, 2008, p. 3). The verbal commitment to student success and the understanding of issues plaguing at-risk students is evident in the policies developed by school boards, however there seems to be a fundamental disconnect in the practice and application of these theorized philosophies, as key indicators to student success has remained the relatively unchanged. Dei (2007) points to astonishing statistics, stating:

> We know that in 1994, the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) described a "crisis among Black youth with respect to education and achievement." We also know that in the 1990s the Every Secondary School Survey of the old Toronto Board of Education revealed a disturbing dropout rate for Black, Portuguese and Aboriginal students. In one such report (R.S. Brown, 1993), the graduation rates of Black students is provided as 44% and the dropout rate 42% (Dei, 2007, p. 351).

The 1994 Ontario *Royal Commission on Learning* statistics also indicated a 42% dropout rate amongst Black students in the province; this unfortunate reality has not improved, rather over a decade later it is nearly the same. According to "*Improving Success for Black Students: Questions and Answers* (2006) released by the Toronto District School Board, the dropout rate of Black students in Ontario remains at 40% (Brown, Popplewell, 2008, p. 1). This telling statistical data is not only the case in Ontario. In a Montreal based research study conducted in 2010, Howard (2013) notes "Hampton indicates that close to 50% of Black students [in Montreal] do

not complete high school on time" (p. 5). These disturbing numbers point to a systemic problem – Black students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate, which prompts the question of why Black students are dropping out of school? Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Zine (1997) conducted a research study that examined reasons for the dropout epidemic amongst Black students; the researchers in this study noted that Black students "tended to construct dropping out as a gradual disengagement process…" (p. 70). This process is fuelled by numerous factors. According to Dei (2003):

> Our research on student disengagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, gender, race/ ethnicity, power, history and particularly students' lived experiences and social reality, reveal a complexity of factors that lead racial minority youth to leave school prematurely. It is reasonable to assume that addressing questions of power, equity, and social difference is significant to ensure student engagement and retention in schools, leading eventually to enhanced learning outcomes (p. 249)

Further, the literature on student disengagement notes that low teacher expectations, lack of curricular sophistication, absence of minority faculty (Dei, 2008, p. 349) and streaming (Segedin, 2012, p. 94) are contributing factors to the disaffection and disengagement of Black students. Black student disengagement is a complex issue that creates a web of intersecting factors and causes that aim to examine this phenomenon. The aforementioned factors often overlap and inform one another, creating more difficulty in getting to the substratum of this pressing matter.

1.4. Context of Study

Kumashiro (2002) states that, "By focusing on only certain stories and perspectives, such curricula normalize and privilege certain groups in society while marginalizing others" (p. 70)

It is with this in mind that I turn to Black educators for their stories, philosophies and perspectives on disengagement amongst Black students. In order to address the concerns about disengagement amongst Black students, this study will look to Black educators for insight. The voices of educators, specifically Black educators in this context are crucial in the understanding of disengagement amongst Black students. As Howard (2013) notes through his study: "Politically conscious Black educators feel compelled to take action to protect and support Black children and to provide them with a framework to understand their experiences" (p. 16). This is significant to this research study as I was careful to select Black educators that demonstrated a politically conscious awareness to contribute to this study.

Literature on student disengagement amongst Black students points to Black educators as instrumental in changing this paradigm. In Dei et al. (1997), the researchers note: "Black teachers were seen by Black students as being able to provide students with positive role models, as well as advice, hope, encouragement, and a sense of the wide range of opportunities that exists for them". As well "Black teachers were also seen as able to provide a social perspective more congruent with that of Black students; one that emanates from similar experiences and struggles" (Dei et al., 1997, p. 173). Studies point to the significance Black educators can have in the lives of Black students. The purpose of this study will be to engage in a formal dialogue through phenomenological interviews with educators about their personal experiences as Black educators in the Ontario education system, as well as their perspectives and philosophies on disengagement amongst Black students. The research questions that guide this study are:

What are the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement and how to best combat it amongst Black students in the Ontario education system?

How are the educators' philosophies and perspectives related to their racialized experiences as students and educators?

Sustainable educational change needs to be informed by the experiences that occur within the classroom, not solely imposed reform from external institutions absent from the contextual dynamics and complexities that occur within the four walls of schools. If we begin to rely on the insight and expertise of teachers and educators who are on the front line of these issues, shaping the lives of the future, perhaps we can shift towards change that is lasting and palpable in our schools.

1.5. Research Outline

In chapter two there is a thorough analysis of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that shape and inform this research. This analysis is conducted through a close read and review of pertinent theories and concepts such as: culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, anti-racism, which support the need for this research. In chapter three the qualitative research design and methodologies implemented during the course of this study are examined. The research methods, tools and limitations will be addressed in order to provide a critical view of this study. Chapter four examines the findings derived from the research. The transcribed interviews and supporting research is analyzed in order to ascertain the research findings. Lastly chapter five offers recommendations, the future direction and possibilities of this research based on the overall findings.

Chapter Two

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I develop a multi-disciplinary conceptual framework, which informs my understandings of the issues central to disengagement amongst Black students in the context of this study. My framework draws upon concepts from culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and antiracism education, and in particular the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, George Dei and Paulo Freire. The framework focuses on race, racism and cultural difference as fundamental to understanding disengagement amongst Black students as well as the societal, and political factors that influence education. It offers suggestions of ways to rectify the disparities within the Canadian education system.

2.2. Cultural Relevance and Irrelevance

The Canadian education system is based in a Eurocentric model that ignores cultural difference, while reinforcing a dominant White hegemonic presence in the classroom. The diversity of students is not celebrated, but rather silenced by the pervasive mandated curriculum that largely represents the dominant class. The effects of culture on learning, and the specific cultures of students, are often ignored, yet they are crucial to student learning. Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* discusses at length the importance of teaching through a cultural lens as a means of educating students, particularly African American students.

Ladson-Billings coins the term *culturally relevant pedagogy* (CRP), which asserts that culture plays a crucial role in student achievement and learning. Ladson-Billings (1995) states

"A next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate. I term this pedagogy, *culturally relevant pedagogy*" (p. 469). This definition encapsulates the essence of this framework and its importance to this study. The recognition and celebration of cultural difference is necessary in order to eradicate the inequalities present within the Canadian education system. Jacqueline Irvine (2010) states,

> A culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the premise that learning may differ across cultures and teachers can enhance students' success by acquiring knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and translating this knowledge into instructional practice. Culturally relevant pedagogy has theoretical roots in the notion that learning is a socially mediated process and related to students' cultural experiences (p. 2).

Diversifying representations of culture in curriculum is a fundamental tool in transcending subject matter and moving to a place of relevance and familiarity for students, allowing racialized groups to see themselves reflected in the classroom and curriculum. Gloria Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* discusses the importance for CRP in educating African American students as necessary for their success. In theorizing CRP, she asserts that teachers, despite their formal professional training, must develop culturally relevant teaching strategies to ensure the success of African-American students. Ladson-Billings (2009) further defines culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in

their own right" (p. 17). Additionally, Ladson-Billings' notion of CRP is multi-tiered as it encompasses the strategies within teaching as well as examining teacher's perspective and expectations of students. She examines the roles of teachers in developing culturally relevant teaching strategies, which provide a practical element to the theoretical framework. Ladson-Billings (2009) notes "culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture. The negative effects are brought about, for example, by not seeing one's history, culture, or background represented in the textbook or curriculum or by seeing that history, culture, or background distorted" (p. 19). Adopting culturally relevant teaching strategies assists teachers in making meaningful connections with students' lives, identities and histories, and resists the dominant Eurocentric mainstream education in place. Culturally relevant pedagogy is central to this research study, as it will be used to analyze the barriers and limitations experienced and observed by participants within their respective institutions. As well as provide insight into further recommendations for engagement strategies amongst Black and other racialized students.

2.3. Political Conscientization

Another key concept in this study of the perspectives of Black educators on the engagement and disengagement of Black students in Toronto and Peel region schools is critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings addresses the pervasiveness of structural inequalities within the education system in an American context and examines the historical implications of education for African-American students. She notes that failure to properly educate racialized students is still an issue that is plaguing the current education system and points to the lack of cultural relevance in the classroom. Like culturally relevant pedagogy, *critical pedagogy* seeks "to

explore how relations of power and inequality, (social, cultural, economic), in their myriad forms combinations, and complexities, are manifest and are challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults" (Apple, Au & Gandin 2009, p. 3). This definition provides a comprehensive understanding of the overarching ideas of critical pedagogy. Apple, Au & Gandin discuss Freire's critical pedagogy and asserts that it allows students and teachers to develop a critical consciousness of their existing relationship, and helps students and teachers become aware of their particular conditions within the classroom and society as a whole. In Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), Freire theorized the term *conscientization*, also referred to as *critical consciousness*. Critical consciousness is "the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence" (p. 101). The investigation and questioning of one's social, political and economic surroundings within the classroom is a fundamental key to awakening one's critical consciousness. Posing questions that produce real answers in uncovering the truths about the functions of education is a main component in critical consciousness. Not only is the critical consciousness present to challenge the social order but also take action against such oppressions. In examining the theory of critical pedagogy, the notion of critical consciousness is significant as it provokes students and teachers alike to interrogate their place in the classroom. The concept of critical consciousness, which emerges from the theory of critical pedagogy, is crucial to this study as it constructs a framework for students and teachers to examine the unequal power relations within the classroom and address privilege and oppression as it relates to education. This deep examination and analysis of one's place in education would allow for reflection of: current systematic failures and power relations; the absence of and silence about issues of race, culture, and inequity in the classroom; historic and current implications of race relations; and intersections between race, education and equality.

2.4. Power Relations In Teaching

Key to combatting inequities within education is transforming teacher-student relationships. Raffo et al. (2010) notes that we need to "change the ways in which it [education system] embodies unequal power relations" (p. 47). Raffo et al. draws on the theories of Freire who conceptualized an education system that is engaging for the student and requires participation from both the teachers and students. Freire addresses the 'teacher-student contradiction' in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; here he suggests that the current education system places the teacher as an opposite to the student and does not allow for interaction on both parts, and argues that this reproduces dominant ideologies that exist within society. He labels this type of education as oppressive and suggests ways to emancipate students and rid the education system of its oppressive nature (p.42). As Raffo explains, "Freireian pedagogies, for example, aim to challenge conventional hierarchies and to re-define a range of features of educational processes, including non-hierarchically based teacher-student relationships…" (Raffo, et al. 2010, p. 47). From this perspective, the issue of disengagement amongst Black students and, in particular, the high number of dropouts amongst African/Caribbean Canadian students, is not the fault of these students, but rather it is evidence of the inequalities and differential treatment of Blacks mirrored in society. In order to remedy these injustices we need to first address the issue of power in society – a concern echoed amongst participants. Lastly, we need to examine the relationship between student and teacher, and empower students to engage as active members in the process of learning.

2.5. Structural Racism

The intersection between race and education is central to the framework of this study as the issue of disengagement is a racialized problem. Black students are dropping out of school at alarming rates – this indicates a systemic racial issue that needs to be addressed and rectified. Issues of race and racism are direct reflections of the hegemonic ideology within society. Racism in North America is a systemic problem that is deeply entrenched in the ways in which students learn and see themselves in education. Keleher and Lawrence (2004) note:

> Structural Racism in the U.S. is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of …racially oppressed people (p. 1)

Racism is a shared dilemma that affects all areas of society including education. Structural racism creates a sense of normalcy, which is blind to white privilege and ignores the racial inequalities prevalent within North American society. Therefore race becomes a crucial focal point in education, as the need to un-learn these societal constructions is significant in educating students, particularly racialized students. The *anti racism* theory discussed in Dei's (1996) *Anti racism: Education Theory and Practice* is used in this study to assist in conceptualizing the pervasiveness of race in Canadian classrooms and theorizes ways to combat racism in schools. Calliste and Dei (2000) note, anti racism examines the issues of "race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy and defend spaces" (p. 21). Anti racism acknowledges that race plays a crucial role in the societal, institutional and systematic structures of daily life and therefore, requires careful consideration and critical navigation in order to deal with and rectify the

discrepancies and disadvantages amongst racialized groups. Dei (2011) discusses the aim of anti racism that is to interrogate "broader questions of structural racism, social oppression, domination, and marginalization of peoples in society" (p. 15). This is the central purpose of this approach, as the question of power is closely examined through a racial lens. Within the education system, anti racism education is employed to assist with the critical thinking and inquiry of power relations, as it relates to race and racism, within the classroom. This theory is pertinent to the field of education, as it aids in the discovery of self, specifically in reference to racialized students, as well as it allows space for lived experiences to be engaged within an academic setting. Dei (2011) notes "Anti racism education is involved with learning about the experiences of living with racialized identities and understanding how students' lived experiences in and out of school are implicated in youth engagement and disengagement from school" (p. 17). The anti racism theoretical perspective is one that challenges structural and systematic racism and critically examines the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, gender, power and difference intersect. An anti racism approach assists in creating an environment for students to: challenge power structures and inequalities within schooling and society; provide a more comprehensive understanding of race and racism in Canadian society; work towards an equitable and inclusive environment; build confidence amongst students who are traditionally alienated, misrepresented or underrepresented in curriculum; and provide a platform for representation of the diverse lives, identities and histories in the classroom. Dei (2011) argues, "…Without recognition of diverse cultures, histories, identities and experiences, we [as scholars, educators and researchers] fail to create room for multiple knowledge's to flourish in our educational institutions." (Dei, 2011, p. 15). According to an anti racism approach, it is the calling of educators to recognize and cultivate a space that embraces difference in ways that celebrate those

represented in the classroom. The theoretical framework of anti racism also brings into question the following in terms of what is taught in school: "What is being affirmed and what is being lost? What histories, identities, and cultures are we denying – and, simultaneously, what is being privileged and at what and whose expense?" (Dei, 2011, p. 18). These questions echo the sentiments of Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy as they seek to uncover that which is lost and neglected in education, specifically in relation to Black and other racialized students. The silences, denial of race and difference, and issues of value and where these are placed within the classroom are prevalent within the education system and are reoccurring themes addressed in this study. The anti racism theoretical framework is significant as it weaves through the fabric and foundation of this research study to provide a cohesive understanding of the issues and importance of race and racism in the education system. Calliste and Dei (2000) note, "The task of anti racism is to identify, challenge and change the values, structures and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppressions" (p. 21). Anti racism in education would better equip students to challenge and resist the systemic inequalities and injustices present within current society, as well as provide a platform for societal change. Anti racism education assists in contextualizing this research study and allows a space to interrogate questions of race, power, equality and inclusion in the classroom.

2.6. Conclusion

This research study aims to ascertain the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students. The overarching theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform this study are: culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy and anti racism education. Through close examination of the aforementioned

frameworks we begin to negotiate issues of race and racism as integral fixtures in the education of Black and other racialized students. Gillborn (2006) argues that racism is ingrained "legally, culturally, and even psychologically'' (p. 21). Race is not neutral or colorblind; rather it is a fundamental aspect of society and needs to be critically questioned in education in order to erode its systematic dominance.

Power, representation and privilege are also called into question in the discussion of equitable and inclusive education for Black students. It becomes evident through the works of Ladson-Billing that there exists a need to change the curriculum to reflect the lives, histories and identities of all students in order to reengage students in the learning process.

In the next chapter, I explore the methodology I use to interrogate the issues of disengagement amongst Black students from the perspectives of Black educators.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss my research approach in analyzing Black educators' perspectives and philosophies on disengagement amongst Black students. I will also provide justifications, explanations and reasoning for the research methods and tools employed in this study. Finally, I will address validity issues that may pose a threat to the findings, and discuss in detail the methods, setting, participants, data collection and ethical considerations in this study.

3.2. Research Methods

In conducting this case study on the perspectives and philosophies of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement, I adopted a qualitative approach. *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide* (2005) defines qualitative research as seeking "to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of specific populations." (p. 1). Qualitative research in this academic context was an advantageous approach as the aim of this study is to ascertain the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators.

The research questions that guide this study are: What are the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement and how to best combat it amongst Black students in the Ontario education system? How are these philosophies and perspectives related to the educators' experiences as students and educators? In order to collect

this data, the research method that has been employed for this study draws upon aspects of the *phenomenological interview* (Seidman 2006, p. 15).

3.2.1. Why Interviews?

Interviews are ideal for collecting data when dealing with sensitive subject matter, as well as gaining insight and perspective into the personal lives, histories and experiences of the interviewees (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namely, 2005, p. 2). This research method was ideal as it allowed for a confidential, open and comfortable environment for participants to express their thoughts and ideas on sensitive and personal matters. Interviews are particularly useful tools in researching aspects of education because they allow for the voice of those on the front line to be heard. As Ferrarotti (1981) argues, "Social abstractions like 'education' are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built (in Seidman, 1998, p. 4). Allowing the voice, lived experiences and perspectives of educators to be heard in this study creates a platform for authentic representation of the issues that they (as Black educators) see as affecting disengagement amongst Black students.

The interview questions (see Appendix B) were designed to encourage discussion and flexibility. All questions were open-ended in order to allow for reflection and story telling. To better understand study participants' perspectives on disengagement, I felt that I needed to delve deeper into their personal lives and experiences; I wanted to experience through their memories, histories, lives and culminating moments, all of the things that shaped their perspectives on Black youth and school, assuming that these are tied to their past and present lives as both students and educators. Each participant was different yet shaped in similar ways, and I wanted to understand the hows and whys of their individual journeys. The interview process draws upon

some features of what Seidman (2013) refers to as "Phenomenological Interviewing" (p. 14). Seidman notes, "The phenomenological approach to interviewing focuses on the experiences of the participant and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2013, p. 16). The aim of this approach is to have participants reconstruct their experiences related to the topic of study (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). The characteristics of phenomenological interviewing are defined as utilizing "primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants' responses to those questions" (Seidman, 1998, p. 9). Lastly, phenomenological interviews aim to "explore complex issues in the subject area by examining the concrete experience of people in that area and the meaning their experience had for them" (p. 10). These characteristics as outlined by Seidman (1998) are integrated into the fabric of this study, as the interview questions: 1) seek to uncover the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students through open-ended questions; 2) explore interviewee responses by way of follow-up questions and interviews – in some cases; and, 3) understand the reconstruction of experiences and making meaning of experiences. The interviews conducted for this study differ from formal phenomenological interviews, as they do not include three interviews with each participant as outlined by Seidman (2006) (p. 16).

The settings for these interviews reflected a commitment on my part to preserving the participants' anonymity and comfort, since they were locations chosen by the participants in which they felt safe. These locations ranged from the participants' homes to secluded classrooms.

3.3. Sampling Method

For this study, I adopted the purposeful sampling method, "Snowball Sampling," as outlined in Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao (2004): "Snowball sampling may be defined as a technique for gathering research subjects through the identification of an initial subject who is used to provide the names of other actors. These actors may themselves open possibilities for an expanding web of contact and inquiry" (p. 1043). This research method is often employed to access "hard-to-find groups" (p. 1044), as was the case with this study. Self-identifying Black educators who are willing and open to share their personal and professional experiences are difficult to find, thus the snowball sampling method allowed for interested respondents to come forward and participate. Once an interested participant was located, contact was made by way of a correspondence outlining the details of the study and a formal request for participation was sent via email (See Appendix A).

3.3.1. Participants

The sample consists of six Black educators working in the Ontario education system, drawn from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Peel District School Board (PDSB). The participants' professional backgrounds vary: two of the educators interviewed are high school teachers, two are elementary school teachers, one is a Vice Principal of a high school and one is an Instructional Leader with a focus on equitable and inclusive schooling practices within the school board. Of the six participants, five have obtained their teaching degrees domestically, whereas one educator was internationally trained as a teacher. The participants' are all West Indian Black descendants – three of the educators were born in Jamaica, one of whom migrated to Canada at an early age, whereas two came to Canada as adults. The remaining three educators were born in Canada, and grew up in various cities in Ontario including: London,

Scarborough and Mississauga. These three Canadian-born educators also disclosed that they are first generation Canadians.

Three of the educators interviewed discussed their experience working on special projects within their respective Boards in order to enact new policies and programs across Ontario with focuses on Mentorship, Gender Education and Model School reform for Inner-City Schools. Although my sample is small, this diversity of experience allowed for a range of perspectives on the issues surrounding disengagement amongst Black students. This is known as a "Maximum variation sample", which is defined as "a purposefully selected sample of persons or settings that represent a wide range of experience related to the phenomenon of interest. With a maximum variation sample, the goal is not to build a random and generalizable sample, but rather to try to represent a range of experiences related to what one is studying" (Zint, 2014). The diversity in experience amongst the participants is intentional as it allows for a more holistic view and representation of perspectives through different lenses.

3.4. Data Collection

I conducted individual interviews with six participants. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length and focused on the personal experiences of the participants as Black educators in the Ontario education system, as well as their philosophies and perspectives on disengagement amongst Black students. The data format is textual and consisted of field notes and audio recordings that were later transcribed. The written data was coded and pseudonyms were used to conceal any potentially identifiable information provided by the participants. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants, as outlined on the Informed Consent forms given and read to all participants (See Appendix C). For the purpose of

this study, I used the method of coding the transcribed data by highlighting and categorizing specific and reoccurring themes throughout the interviews.

3.5. Limitations

Qualitative Research Design (2013) cites sociologist C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) when he notes: "The most admirable scholars within the scholarly community…do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such a dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other (p.195)" (Maxwell, p. 45). This phenomenon of bridging one's research and life greatly informs the approach taken in this study. My intention, interests, biases and preconceived notions, not only informed my research, but also had to be interrogated and negotiated in the development of this study in order to allow for an authentic representation of results. In order to avoid manipulating or interpreting results through a lens of my own partialities, I instead reflected upon my prejudices and predetermined ideas in order to, as Mills (1959) states, "use each for the enrichments of the other" (Maxwell, p. 45). As seen from my preface, as a visible minority I experienced both the demoralizing and oppressive aspects of the education system as well as the richness and knowledge that lie therein; taking this into consideration allowed me to approach my research with an open mind. A conscious awareness that my professional experiences differ from that of the participants, since I have not worked as a teacher in the K-12 system, assisted me in conducting this study without assumptions and predetermined notions of what I would discover, thus creating trust with the participants and ultimately readers that the data collected is an authentic representation of the perspectives and philosophies of the participating educators.

3.6. Validity

Bryman, Lewis-Beck and Liao (2004) define validity as "the extent to which any measuring instrument measures what it is intended to measure" (p. 1171). In this case, the measuring instrument is the interview, thus the question is: Are the interviews measuring they were intended to measure and to what extent? In order to determine the accuracy and effectiveness of the interviews, I examine the validity threats surrounding this study. Validity threats for this study have been addressed by taking a closer look at reactivity, theoretical, descriptive and interpretative validity and the validity of the instrument being used. Also, there has been a critical examination of the issues around transferability, credibility and trustworthiness.

Maxwell (2013) defines reactivity as "the influence of the researcher on the setting or the individuals studied" (p. 124). This excerpt infers that participants may feel obliged to answer questions dishonestly or in a deceiving manner to assist in "helping" the results of this study. In order to minimize the affects of this threat, I was careful not to disclose my personal beliefs during the course of the interviews, nor ask "leading questions", which may also suggest my intentions (Seidman, 1998, p. 69). During the interviews I was cognizant of my body language and tone to ensure that I was not influencing the participants' responses.

Descriptive and interpretative validity threats were also addressed in this study. Descriptive validity is defined as "the accuracy of the data", which means that "[t]he data must accurately reflect what the participant has said or done" (Thompson, 2011, 78). In order to account for descriptive validity, a tape recorder was used to accurately gather information. In transcribing the data, it is imperative to remain unbiased and transcribe the responses as they are

said – without interpretation, in other words, to simply write what is said without trying to gather underlying meaning from the responses.

Interpretive validity "captures how well the researcher reports the participants' meaning of events, objects and/or behaviours (Maxwell, 1992)" (Thompson, 2011, p. 79). In order to effectively gather and discuss meaning derived from participants' responses, the transcriptionist was asked to review the data to ensure accuracy and unbiased representation of the participant's responses. This study also incorporated "member-checks", which allowed participants to explain their responses further and provide reasoning if needed (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126).

The validity of the interviews, as a research instrument, is addressed by first recognizing that I am part of the interviewing process (Seidman, 1998, p. 16). This recognition assisted in making me aware that I am intrinsically involved in the meaning-making process by virtue of this interaction. The interview questions are shaped by the interviewer; informed by the interviewer's perspectives on the issue being studied; and final results are analyzed by the researcher. Thus the interviewer plays a critical role in the validity of the instrument. In order to effectively address the validity of the instrument, Seidman (1998) notes, "only by recognizing the interaction and affirming its possibilities can interviewers use their skills to minimize the distortion (see Patton, 1989, p. 157) that can occur because of their role in the interview" (p. 16-17). As an interviewer, I recognize my place and influence in the interviewing process and work fervently to minimize the possible validity threats that could skew the results of data collected. I also recognize that my identity as a West Indian descent, first generation Canadian, and Toronto resident and previous student within the Toronto District School Board enriches this study as I am closely linked to the need for such research. My research and subsequent interviews were conceived from my personal experiences and observations of disengagement amongst Black

students. As a result, I feel this firsthand knowledge not only strengthens my passion to uncover the issues central to student disengagement but also that my identity and role as a researcher created an environment of familiarity with the participants of this study. Participants were very open, often easing into a comfortable state where interviews became discussions and lessons. The formal structure of the interviews was lost and narratives emerged, which made for a richer and more honest dialogue. Many participants spoke in Jamaican patois before, and especially after the interviews, signifying for me a strong cultural connection. When difficult conversations arose, for example in the two interviews in which participants discussed the "mentality of slavery" as a reason for the disconnect between academia and Black students, there was a sense of openness. There seemed to be no pretences or justifications for their claims; this was simply a concept that they assumed I understood. We established a strong personal rapport during the interviews, which I felt was, in part, a result of my identity.

Lastly, "internal generalizability" has been addressed in this research to avoid or minimize this validity threat. As Maxwell (2013) states, "the validity of the conclusions of a case study depend on their internal generalizability to the case as a whole (p. 137). Internal Generalizability, as defined by Maxwell (2013) "refers to the generalizability of a conclusion *within* the case, setting, or group studied to persons, events, times and settings that were not directly observed, interviewed or otherwise represented in the data collected" (p. 137). In other words, internal generalizability seeks to determine if the results from one case study can be applied to another under similar conditions. This has been addressed in this study through the comparison of participant responses. Participants are interviewed individually and common themes are derived from the participants' responses. Therefore, if the conclusion from this study is applied in another similar setting the results should be consistent. This is explained further by

Berg (2004), who states: “the logic behind this has to do with the fact that few human behaviours are unique, idiosyncratic, and spontaneous” (p. 259). Thus, if human behaviour is predictable (in a sense), applying this research to another setting, in a similar context should yield comparable results. Engaging in a close analysis of the aforementioned validity threats (i.e. reactivity, descriptive and interpretive validity, validity of the instrument, and internal generalizability) will aid in strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. The findings of this study will be reviewed in relation to the existing literature on Black student disengagement. Connections between contemporary research and what will be discovered in this study will strengthen the validity of these findings.

3.7. Ethics

Ethics for this study were considered and addressed under the guidance and approval of the *Research Ethics Board (REB)* at McGill University. This document outlined ethical considerations throughout this study, which included: informed consent, confidentiality, potential risks and data protection. Informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews. Participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix C) prior to being interviewed, typically via email anywhere between 2-4 weeks before the interview for review. At the start of each interview, participants were provided with a physical copy of the form, where we went over in detail the content of the informed consent forms, and had the participants sign and date the form for the record. Participants were explicitly informed of their rights as participants – that their participation is entirely voluntary and that at any point they have the right to withdraw from the study, the nature of the study and any potential risks to participating in this study (Berg & Lune, 2011, p. 307). There are no foreseeable risks associated

with participation in this study. The confidentiality of participants in this study was paramount. Participants were promised that any and all identifiable data would be removed from the dissertation, and the participants themselves given pseudonyms. As these educators often reveal issues within their respective schools and Boards, it was imperative that the highly confidential disclosures, stories and experiences be treated as such. Towards this end, audio recordings, field notes and transcriptions are kept in a safe to which I solely have access.

3.8. Content Analysis

The narratives of the six participants were analyzed using a multi-level process. Data obtained from the interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, categorized into themes and a cross-referenced with participants' recorded responses, transcriptions and field notes. Berg (2004) provides information about content analysis that is particularly useful in this study; he notes, "Content analysis is accomplished through the use of *coding frames*. The coding frames are used to organize the data and identify findings after open coding has been completed" (p. 280). In this context, open coding "allows researchers to identify and even extract themes, topics, or issues in a systematic manner" (Berg, 2004, p. 180). In this study I used the "axial coding" frame to assist in categorizing and organizing the data collected. Berg (2004) states, "axial coding occurs after open coding is completed and consists of intensive coding around one category" (p. 280). Once the process of open coding was completed and salient themes were extracted, I utilized the axial coding frame in order to organize and categorize these themes.

Each transcribed interview was read three times during the analysis phase of this study. The initial read focused on identifying common themes and trends. Both the field notes and transcribed interviews were crosschecked for commonalities. Prominent ideas were highlighted

using a color-coding system and quotations on the particular subject area were extracted to compile lists. For example, the theme of "Mentorship" was identified and highlighted in green; direct quotes were then extracted from each interview containing content related to "Mentorship". The second and third readings of the transcribed interviews and field notes were in-depth readings that aimed to ascertain the overall philosophies and perspectives of each educator. I wanted to capture the voice of each educator and represent an authentic view of his or her individual journeys and experiences. This closer analysis of the data collected allowed me the opportunity to not only read and reread but also to simply listen. Through this deeper analysis, I realized the significance of preserving the voice of Black educators, not only in this study but also, in the overall discussion of education in Canada (Tillman, 2009, p.328). Through this study I recognize the importance and wealth of knowledge possessed by these educators that is rarely tapped into by mainstream discourse.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

4.1. Introduction

This research project aimed to ascertain the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students. In order to do so, I conducted a series of phenomenological interviews with six Black educators within the largest and most diverse school boards in Ontario – the Toronto District School Board and the Peel District School Board. The research questions that guide this study are: What are the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement and how to best combat it amongst Black students in the Ontario education system? How are these philosophies and perspectives related to their experiences as students and educators? These questions assisted in providing a framework for the participants to discuss their thoughts, ideas and experiences in a safe and open space.

Through close analysis of the interviews conducted, both auditory recordings and transcriptions, I have identified five salient themes that are weaved throughout the framework of this study. These themes will serve to organize and communicate the most significant factors contributing to disengagement amongst Black students. The main themes pulled from the interviews are: mentorship, care, low expectations for students, culturally relevant teaching and curriculum and diversity amongst staff. One theme that was woven throughout all the aforementioned areas was the social construction of race and how that affected and influenced the preceding themes.

In this section I will engage in an in-depth analysis and discussion about the salient themes mentioned in the interviews, as well as provide supporting research that speak to the

validity and necessity of these practices, and how they may impact disengagement amongst Black students.

4.2. Mentorship

The idea of mentorship as a means to address disengagement amongst Black students was a conversation that came up frequently during interviews. Some participants were actively engaged in a mentorship program developed by themselves or implemented throughout their school as an administrative initiative. This was seen as crucial in creating safe spaces for students, providing support, showing care and opening the door to meaningful discussion. San Vicente (2011) defines mentorship as:

> …Investing in relationships with young people and their families; not 'accepting' individuals but embracing them; committing to the holistic development of children both inside and outside of the classroom and school; being conscious of the popular story and critical of its 'truth' and impact; chillin' out listening to music and talking; watching a movie and having a follow-up discussion; going for a walk; going on a camping trip; pounds and high-fives in the hallway; collective goal-setting; advocacy; self-reflection; laughing together; dinner and a movie; moral purpose; diversity; academic and social/emotional support; opportunities to develop the leader in us; active citizenship; and social consciousness (p. 10).

This comprehensive description of what mentorship looks and feels like in schools is ideal for this context. When participants discussed mentorship in their respective institutions they described more than a buddy-up program that focused on academics; rather they delved into the

deep investment and commitment they had with their mentees and school at large. Mr. Vernon described the impact and influence of a mentorship program he created:

> I used to run a boys program, mentorship program… So this was, some of the students were in my class but many of them were not and so this was you know, meeting with them once a week at least, after school lunch time and just opening up my classroom that they could come we would play some music, play some dominoes talk, whatever. But it was first creating a safe space where they felt welcomed, right? And then we could get into some of the deeper conversations around, so you know. *"How's things going at school? What are you struggling with? Right? What kind of supports do you think you need?"* Right? (personal communication, December 9, 2013).

By simply cultivating a "non-academic" open space for students to be apart of, Mr. Vernon was able to include students in activities that reflected their personal interests, while at the same time engage in deeper conversations about their experiences in the classroom. Creating a space for students outside the confines of a traditional classroom, yet still within the school, allows students to feel included and valued in a place they may have felt marginalized previously.

Similar to Mr. Vernon, Mr. Watson also discusses mentorship as having an impact on the lives of racialized students. This mentorship program differs from the aforementioned as it is a school wide initiative implemented by the principal. This program is designed in such a way that every teacher is a mentor to an identified "at-risk" student – the mentee.

> Yeah so she's [the principal] been amazing and the mentorship program has had the biggest affect. 'Cause each kid has a teacher to confide in and to talk to…a lot of teachers have lunch with their kids-that kid. *"You know. Come into my classroom. This is your day for lunch let me buy you some from the cafeteria, how's your week going?"* And then we

> saw the behaviours going down dramatically. But these are the 45 bad kids in the school and when they're getting that close mentoring, behaviours were cut in, cut by 80%. It was crazy. Just totally crazy. So that's-that's been the biggest one. The mentorship program. (Mr. Watson, personal communication, October 6, 2013)

Mentorship in Mr. Watson's school looked differently than that of Mr. Vernon's. The mentorship program was a school-wide initiative and actively involved all teachers in the school. This structure gave teachers the flexibility to engage with students in different environments and on diverse platforms, but maintained the essence of care and providing guidance in non-traditional ways. Mentorship can be such a rich practice that aims to reconstruct the teacher-student dynamic in a way that fosters relationship rather than subordinates. In *Creating Caring Classrooms* (2011), San Vicente describes his experience with his mentorship program:

> Mentorship became a transformational opportunity for me. It allowed me to refine any pedagogical practices, challenge preconceived notions I had about certain families and communities, build relationships with parents and communities, engage in curriculum that was relevant and grounded in a more in-depth understanding of the lives of my students – all within an approach that was less traditional and more responsive (p. 42).

Like San Vicente, the mentorship program for Mr. Watson and Mr. Vernon was a transformative practice that allowed for openness and transparency between the teacher and student. Teachers were exposed to the interests, experiences and lives of their students outside the context of the academic classroom, which allowed for a deeper understanding and relationship to be formed amongst mentor and mentee. Mr. Watson's account of the mentorship initiative in his school was linked to a decrease in behavioral issues amongst mentees. This perceived correlation between

mentorship and a decline in behavioural issues suggests that developing deeper relationships with at-risk students can lead to a change in negative behaviour.

Mr. Koss, a secondary school Vice Principle in the Toronto District School Board, discusses two important points in relation to mentorship as a transformative practice. Firstly, Mr. Koss points to the lack of representation of Black educators present in schools and secondly looks at role modeling as a way to inspire:

> I was the first black teacher that they saw growing up in the Jane and Finch, in the Jane and Sheppard area. So you know it was really scarce and as a black educator now for me I felt that I needed to be a role model to all of these black student that I taught because I wanted them to be able to aspire to something other than the stereotypical profession that society may say that our black students need to be in (personal communication, December 5, 2013).

During my interview with Mr. Koss he talked about his hands on approach with the students he encountered. He talked about checking up on students in the hallways at school; talking one on one with students who struggled staying in school; he talked about his going to the local mall after lunch to round up students and usher them back into the school and to their respective classrooms; he talking about the token initiative he facilitated in order to assist students with bus fare to be able to get to school and the breakfast club he promoted in order for students to start the day with a balanced healthy meal. These were just some of the steps Mr. Koss took in mentoring and affecting change in the lives of his students. His selfless actions and dedication to his students, especially Black students, were a result of a sense of personal responsibility he had as a Black educator. As noted in the aforementioned excerpt, his positions as a teacher and vice principle were significant in providing an alternative view and lifestyle of the stereotypical roles

of blackness and what it means to be Black in the minds of his students. Mr. Koss discussed at length the role of society and media in the perpetuation of stereotypical images of Black peoples in North America especially through sports and the arts – an idea that will be further examined later in this paper. The issue of representation that Mr. Koss raised is imperative to this study, as it was another salient theme that many participants raised as factors affecting disengagement amongst Black students.

4.3. Diverse Teacher Representation

The lack of diversity and representation amongst staff is a troubling reality across Canada. Racialized students are unable to locate diverse cultural and ethnic identities amongst staff, which points to a failure of the education system to hire equitably in order to reflect the diversity of the student population amongst staff. Mrs. Peters describes a systemic issue in regards to the unequal hiring practices of Black educators:

> So if I look at the systemic issue I would take it all the way back to even their hiring practices. I find that if you look even in Brampton in terms of the black educators you find that most of the schools the teaching staff is not representative of the student population (personal communication, October 5, 2013).

This is a significant observation as race and racism in Canada is a systemic issue that needs to be eroded in order to see sustainable change is all facets of society in particular the education system. Mr. Koss also speaks to the lack of equitable representation in the school boards, he notes:

> Up until about give or take a few years I would say about 10 years, 10 years ago the amount of black teachers let alone the amount of black administrators was scarce. When I

> first got to [school name] which is an inner city school, (which is also would say at the time 60%70% racialized or black students) I was the only black educator in that school. The only one! (personal communication, December 5, 2013).

The statistic that Mr. Koss observed in his experience represents a disproportionate ratio of Black educators to Black student population. 1:70 is a troubling reality for students as they are left unexposed to the diversity that represents their student body. The sentiments of Mr. Koss' accounts echoed through all of the interviews with participants, as they spoke to the lack of Black educators as a factor contributing to disengagement amongst Black students. The overall consensus from the interviews was that Black caring educators are essential to effectively educating Black students. This is a concept thoroughly discussed in Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, however the reality in North American schools is quite the opposite. Ladson-Billings (2009) notes: "Irvine has suggested that what happens between African American students and their teachers represents a lack of "cultural synchronization". She further suggests that this lack of cultural synchronization and responsiveness relates to other factors that inhibit African American students' school achievement…" (p.19). In other words, the lack of racial and cultural diversity amongst staff has created a lack of cultural synchronization or lack of cultural harmonization amongst staff and student. Ms. Moore speaks to the lack of cultural synchronization she experienced in her own schooling: "And my professors for the most part except for one professor who I again keep in touch with and she was my only black professor from Trinidad. My other professors, no. We didn't connect. We couldn't relate to each other and it just got me really upset and it made me question if education was a place for me to be in" (personal communication, November 12, 2013). This discourse about disconnectedness between Ms. Moore and her non-Black professors

sheds light on the importance of racial and cultural diversity and representation in the classroom as a way to "connect" with racially diverse students. This is not to say that non-Black educators cannot connect or make an impact in the lives of Black students, but race does matter and representation of racialized educators is significant in, as Mr. Koss discussed, inspiring students to be more than the stereotype (personal communication, December 5, 2013). The idea of role modeling an alternative trajectory for Black students is touched upon again. Seeing a Black educator, police officer, lawyer, judge, doctor, nurse, etc. is transformative and opens the minds of students to the many possibilities available to them other than the stereotypical roles seen in the media. Racially and culturally diverse educators are crucial in Canadian schools as they can provide new and alternative perspectives of blackness in a Canadian context.

4.4. Caring

"The kids who need the most love will ask for it in the most unloving ways" - Unknown

This quote from an unknown author truly speaks to the necessity of care in the practice of being an educator. In addition to having Black teachers, Black teachers who care are essential in educating students at large. The need for Black teachers who care is imperative to the success and engagement of Black students, according to the observation and experience of Mr. Watson:

> Lack of teachers who are black and care or who care. There's not a lot of, it's getting better but when kids can see a teacher from their own culture and that teacher cares that's important. Cause I've seen teachers who think *"Ok,"* You know, *"the kid's black, we're black, I've made it and they're down here."* And they don't care. But a teacher of your own culture who actually cares, that's big. That's really big. And the kids see a role model. Yeah. My school's really good at that but again growing up, you know we all got

> excited. There's two black teachers in the whole high school and you're like *"Yes, two black teachers."* That's not enough. And you get excited, you know, *"I wanna be in that teacher's class!*" The other sixty staff and there's two blacks. Come on. The kids really need to see much more of that, right? (personal communication, October 6, 2013).

Black teachers who care have a significant influence in the engagement of Black students as per the accounts of Mr. Watson. Here the educator makes a distinction between Black teachers and Black teachers who care. The importance of caring teachers can make all the difference in the lives of students, as this may very well be the only caring interaction a student has received.

Educating students through a lens of care can often mean looking beyond the surface behavioural issues or perceived disengagement displayed by students, and discovering a student who is simply looking to be seen and loved. The issue of care in the classroom is one that was prominent in my conversations with participants of this study. In general terms, the overall consensus was simply: caring matters. However where is that stated in the curriculum?

In a school system that is largely characterized by ridged curriculum, standardized test and producing results, there has been a lack of care on the part of educators. This may be a result of increased demands on teachers to teach prescribed curriculum and very stringent time restraints. Teachers have no time to care; they are not given the opportunity to be authentic, giving, caring beings in the classroom. Rather they have become machines, alienated from the practice of teaching and are instead following the 'banking system' as described by Paulo Freire in the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed". Teachers are reduced to 'depositors' who deposit knowledge into students. This process lacks engagement and active participation on both the teacher and students' end. Freire notes that this is a demoralizing process that further alienates the teacher from the art of teaching and alienates the student from learning. The art of caring in the

classroom can be transformative in that it engages students in greater ways than academically. Noddings (1992) discusses the relationship of care in the classroom, noting, "When we discuss teaching and teacher-learner relationships in depth, we will see that teachers not only have to create caring relations in which they are the carers, but that they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care" (p. 18). The aim of an educator is not simply to regurgitate regulated curriculum, rather educators have been placed in a position of great authority in imparting moral character development, in part through being a caring example. Here, Mr. Vernon discusses the importance of care in the classroom and ways in which educators can alter how they "correct" students in order to demonstrate a genuine care and concern for them:

> I always come back to this quote that "students don't care what you know until they know that you care". So I would say that for some students they don't get the message that the school, the adults you know, the system believes in them. Cares about them, you know. And so I think that is a major factor, right. So we might get on them and say *"Well where's your homework? Oh you came without a pencil. Oh you're not lined up properly"* all these kinds of things. Those things don't indicate to someone that you care about them. And if we see that just as you know, somebody trying to impose their authority on me, then you know you might rebel against that right? ... So I think that that's one key piece of why students might be disengaged right? (personal communication, December 9, 2013).

Mr. Vernon provides a key insight into the matter of care, which is so often overlooked and unchallenged. The connection between care and curriculum engagement is made clear as Mr. Vernon further explains his notions of care in the classroom:

> So for example if it's something as simple as like, you know, creating a caring environment from the first time they get there. So you say "Good morning" you welcome them to the class, even if they're late you say "Oh sorry you didn't get here on time this morning". Right, and then you get them started and then later you could come back to them and say *"So we need to get you here on time cause you're missing some valuable information here so how could I support?"* It's a different conversation than *"You're late go to the office"* right? (personal communication, December 9, 2013).

What is so fascinating about Mr. Vernon's observation and insight is that his examples are probably the most common ways to address issues of lateness or incomplete homework, yet he offers very practical and concrete ways to shift the focus off the behaviour and onto the wellbeing of the student. Mrs. Carter too feels that some educators are too quick to dismiss students for nugatory situations that occur in the classroom, which further disengages students from learning. She notes:

> So I'm not into that. Like I'm like what is it? So I send them to the office? It's hardly learning to listen to me. And some people just want them out of their sight right? So I'd rather them sit here, have some time at the table…go sit in a corner or whatever and they're still hearing what's going on. But again, they might think that I might be firm or whatever, but at the end of the day you still care. You care enough to do that as opposed to say '*Get out'*. You know? So yeah. You know you want the best for your people. You want the best for all students but our people have issues…(personal communication, October 31, 2013).

The dismissal of students from class further disengages them from learning. Caring for students on the other hand may indeed look a lot like what Mrs. Carter describes in her excerpt as being

firm but not excluding her students from learning by asking them to leave the classroom. Mrs. Peters brings to the forefront four very important points in relation to the disengagement of Black students:

> They don't have black teachers representing them in the schools. And sometimes some of the teachers we can't deny the whole issue of racism so you know they feel that when they go into the class the teacher is not really caring, the teacher is not you know showing that you're a person. The teacher is not, you know enforcing anything that would make teaching you know something that's entertaining, so you speak or something that you would want to be a part of. So I find that sometimes it's so exclusion piece…(personal communication, October 5, 2013)

In this excerpt Mrs. Peters not only discusses the notion of racism and how it relates to care but other reasons for black student disengagement: 1) The lack of Black teacher representation; 2) The denial of racism in schools; 3) The need for curriculum that interests students. The links that Mrs. Peters makes are fundamental to understanding the complexities and interconnectedness of disengagement of Black students. Dei (2003) notes:

> As argued in Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Zine (1997) no single cause adequately explains the phenomenon of dropping out for Black youths. In fact, the experiences of these youths suggest we cannot simply fit into neat, theoretical boxes the contextualized accounts of their off-school experiences, school interactions, and the socio-environmental forces and processes that create students' disempowerment and disengagement in the public school system (p. 249)

Mrs. Peters tapped into something that was very important in understanding the issue of disengagement: there is no single reason or explanation that can adequately address or speak to

the cause of disengagement amongst Black students, rather it is a myriad of complexities and intersections that account for why Black students are disengaged.

The connection between care and Black student disengagement is further discussed with Ms. Moore. She expresses a love for her students, as she sees them as the future:

> I look at my kids and I look at them and I see my future. And I don't want my future to be bleak. So it's something deeper. It's something innate that I want my students to do well—my black students to do well. I want them to survive. Not just survive I want them to thrive. I want them to be the leaders. Because that means that I'm going to be one. So I love them deeply (personal communication, November 12, 2013).

To love our students is to love our future generations. The investment that she has in the success of her students, namely her Black students, is not only temporal but with a greater picture in mind. Through the lens of the participants it is evident that caring for our Black students is an integral aspect of engaging students in the process of learning. Educators who care for their students can change the trajectory of ones participation in the classroom and impact their outlook for their future. Caring transcends beyond teaching standardized curriculum, rather it is a sense of responsibility to take care of the whole child including: "the physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic" aspects of a student (Noddings, 2005, p. 8).

> The research on culturally responsive teaching tells us that our teaching must be inclusive and grounded in the lives and communities of the children we serve (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This notion helps to clarify what *love* looks like in the context of mentorship. It means that what we choose to explore with children must include the experiences, perspectives, and cultures of their communities, which then allows mentees to be connected to their educational experience (San Vicente, 2011, p. 10).

4.5. Culturally Relevant Teaching and Curriculum

"They say I gotta learn, but nobody's here to teach me

If they can't understand it, how can they reach me

I guess they can't, I guess they won't

I guess they front, that's why I know my life is out of luck, fool"

(Gangsta's Paradise 1995, Coolio).

The use of hip-hop as a means of addressing the issue of cultural relevance is intentional, as Black youth culture is so deeply informed by their interaction and involvement in hip-hop culture; however there is a fundamental disconnect between Black youth culture and schooling (Low, 2011, p. 84). The lyrics from the 1995 *Gangsta's Paradise* soundtrack speak to the discrepancies with societal expectations and the limitations of the education system. In decoding this except from the song, the artist here is expressing his frustrations with the dichotomy between expectations and reality. He notes that society dictates that he has to learn and go to school, yet he feels there is no one to adequately teach him, as a result of not being about to understand or relate to him. With this realization he concludes that if he cannot be reached by education his life will not have the same opportunities otherwise. These lyrics are so crucial, as they provide a window into the mind of our Black youth and reveal the gap in culturally relevant teachers and curriculum as a means of engaging Black students. The participants of this study echo the same concerns of teaching practices and curriculum that do not reflect Black students. When asked about the disproportionate number of Black student dropouts Mr. Watson saw a lack of curricular relevance as a factor contributing to this issue. He explained:

> No reflection within the curriculum. That's a big one I've seen. You know, somebody challenged me one day when we were doing Black History Month and I was saying

> something like *"Ya you know it's time we're doing something here and it's Black History Month."* And the person was like *"Why do we have to have Black History Month?"* You know? *"What's the big deal?"* And I said you know everyday is white history month cause we learn about every...all the important people are European. They might throw a smidgen in here about I don't know, a black person who did something. But when the kids don't see that, I think it affects them. Like *"Oh my gosh, black people actually did this? This actually happened?"* And it instills pride and there's a lot of examples out there. But when the kids aren't taught that I think it's just-they don't connect. Some of the kids. *"Did you know a black person did this? Did you know the black community did this?"* They get so excited (personal communication, October 6, 2013).

Curriculum that reflects and encompasses student diversity is a fundamental tool in assisting with their learning and engagement in schools. As Mr. Watson observed, teaching about Black history and contributions instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment in his students. Mr. Watson also challenged a preconceived notion that is often taken up in academia – why celebrate Black History? His response was simply because "everyday is white history month". This is significant because Mr. Watson is engaging in a critique of society and the education system that often denounces the need to celebrate Black history for a month when other cultures are not given the same privilege. European history is engrained in Canadian curriculum, which excludes the contributions and voices of the "other" founding members of this land. The celebration of diverse cultures, and in this case Black History, is imperative in broadening the gaze and perspectives of what it means to be Canadian and live equally in this society. San Vicente (2011) mirrors the sentiments of Mr. Watson in addressing the importance of creating space for relevance in schools and speaks to the issue of belonging. In an anecdotal story San Vicente

recalls his experience during his first teaching block when he was asked to work with three Black male students who had exhibited behavioural issues in the classroom. In working with the students outside of the assigned classroom San Vicente notes:

> We explored topics that seemed to interest them (girls, music, gangs) and other materials, which I felt connected to their identity as Black males (e.g. we watched movies like *Malcolm X* and *Roots* and had conversations about these films). The time we had been given to exist outside of the 'institutional space' felt good. While I have no evidence to argue the impact of our relationship on their academic achievement, I know for us the time spent together was a meaningful part of our individual journeys that began to cultivate our sense of belonging in the school (San Vicente, p. 2).

The materials used and discussions that took place within the San Vicente mentorship program for boys was shaped by issues that were of interest to them. These issues reflected the lives, identities and histories of his students and were interrogated in the space in order to create engagement amongst participants. While there was no evidence provided of a direct correlation between culturally relevant material and academic achievement, there was a cultivated sense of belonging amongst the group. This sense of belonging in schools is crucial in the engagement of students. If one feels that they belong somewhere it is easier to engage them on multiple levels.

The issue of curriculum as a factor in engaging students is a point of much discussion amongst participants. Mr. Koss discusses his school's commitment to addressing disengagement through a closer analysis of the current curriculum:

> One of the things that I was pleased with in terms of our commitment is the introduction of curriculum that is relevant to racialized groups. For example at some of the schools,

> not a lot, but some of the schools in the TDSB you're talking about an Afrocentric curriculum being introduced (personal communication, December 5, 2013).

Mr. Koss' school displays a commitment to addressing the specific needs of the students by introducing a curriculum that is relevant to them. He goes on to further explain the premise of the Africentric curriculum:

> So when we're talking about the curriculum you have in your regular English program, if you have 5 novels of study and you know in the past 5 novels of study would have focused on white authors or European authors. Now in an Afrocentric program you have 3-4 of those novels that are by black authors or other racialized authors. Not excluding your European authors or what not, but now it makes it a little more relevant to that black student or racialized student (personal communication, December 5, 2013).

Mr. Koss' explanation of the Africentric curriculum being implemented in his school troubles the preconceived notions held in society about this initiative. It is not a move towards segregation, rather it is a shift towards a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges and celebrates diverse cultures reflected in our society and schools. As a result of the predilections in the education system, the Africentric curriculum was implemented to help bridge the gap and disconnect felt by many African-Canadian youths. Studies suggests that being able to identify with the content in curriculum would affect the ways in which students learn and retain knowledge; thus affecting student performance and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19).

Mrs. Carter also acknowledges her schools commitment to addressing disengagement by examining the curriculum, she notes:

> Also we always talk about the importance of the curriculum making sure it reflects who they are. So you wanna have books that address the diverse culture. I mean you have as I

> said East-Asian, South Asian, African heritage the Caribbean so that's basically what this school is comprised of. So you definitely wanna make sure that you try to celebrate their—acknowledge their celebrations. Right? Even as an art teacher so we talk about the importance of them seeing themselves, bringing in resources. Do a language book. So that they feel that *'Who we are matters.'* So if I speak another language there are books in the library and we try to bring them into your classroom also (personal communication, October 31, 2013).

The introduction and use of resources that reflect diverse identities and cultures assist in bridging the gap between students' lived experiences and academia. Addams (2012) suggests that the home and school cannot be considered as two separate entities, rather they are interconnected and inform the student's way of seeing the world, and learning. Thus it is on this basis that culturally relevant pedagogy is argued for in the classroom as a means of holistically educating and engaging all students. Based on the participants' responses it appears the Boards are taking a step in the right direction in regards to taking a closer look at the issue of disengagement through a lens of culturally relevant pedagogy. Through this lens there have been culturally relevant teaching strategies and curriculum initiatives introduced that reflect the diversity of its students in order to address the needs of all student represented in the classroom.

4.6. Low Expectations for Students

The expectations for students both by teachers and parents are significant in informing the ways that students choose to engage or disengage in school. Teacher expectations and the subsequent treatment resulting from these expectations are crucial in identifying and understanding student disengagement and the idea of being 'pushed-out' of school.

Ms. Moore engages in a discourse about low teacher expectations for Black students and how that contributes to disengagement amongst Black students.

> I think a lot of times at least when I'm in this school, teachers will rather focus on behaviour as opposed to academics. I also think some teachers have low expectations of our students. Low expectations of their families and low expectations of their communities-that the students come from. And I think that plays a factor in it. I believe the kids can see when we're not genuine when we don't truly believe in them and I think that impacts how they act both academically and both socially in our classrooms. I'm seeing it all the time and outside of the classroom I mean we're here in [the inner city]. There's a lot of outside factors that play into it (personal communication, November 12, 2013).

A teacher's perception has the power to influence a student's perception and behaviour, whether positively or negatively, as observed by Ms. Moore in her school. Low expectations for students are often produced through a racist lens resulting in stereotyping, labeling and streaming (Dei, 2007, p. 350). These factors can have a large impact on how a student is "perceived by others and how they began to perceive themselves" (Dei et. al, 1997, p. 115). Ms. Moore points to the fact that her school is geographically located in the inner city and how teachers project stereotypes on the students as well as their families and communities. This is a damaging cycle as students living in these areas are faced with negative stereotypes by society, police, schools, etc. and are unable to escape the negative gaze that overshadows their lives and experiences. Dei et al. (1997) describe the effects that low expectations have on Black youth, they note: "These low expectations on the part of teachers, all of whom may not be consciously aware of them, translate into diminished opportunities for Black students, who are socially bound to these

stigmas" (p. 122). This is such a powerful statement as the damaging cycle of oppression is perpetuated through perception. If there is a constant reinforcement that Black youth are criminals, violent, troublemakers, etc. (Dei et. al, 1997, p. 116), then it is difficult to escape that cycle and see greater possibilities.

Unfortunately the stigmatization and low expectations do not end with schooling; they can also be a product of a student's daily existence. Here Mr. Koss recounts his observations and experiences with parents:

> What I find with a lot of our black student is they're being told, just recently within 4, 5 weeks I've heard parents tell their kids, "you will amount to nothing". You will do nothing.'And as a black person who really is listening to that and seeing that on a regular basis in terms of some of your peers…I have to change that perception. That 'No, you can do something' (personal communication, December 5, 2013).

Low parental perceptions can also contribute to the damaging cyclical trajectory of Black students. Both teachers and parents have the power to shape and inform the lives of students in negative and/ or positive ways. In these instances, when students are constantly being told or treated in a way that perpetuate negative stereotypes, it can limit opportunities for Black students to thrive beyond their circumstance, leading to disengagement in schools and possibly dropping out.

4.7. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that there are multiple and interconnected issues that shape and inform our understanding of disengagement amongst Black students. Through a close read of supporting literature and a thorough analysis of the participants' responses it is evident

that this issue of disengagement is complicated by the interceding lines or race, systemic racism, power, equality and discrimination. Disengagement amongst Black students is informed by a myriad of issues specifically in this context disengagement is impacted by: the lack mentorship; lack of care; lack of diversity amongst staff; culturally irrelevant teaching and curriculum; and low expectations for students. Through intensive research the findings of this study have been examined against an academic backdrop, which further supports these claims.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

This study has examined the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators regarding the issue of disengagement amongst Black students. Through phenomenological interviews with six Black educators in the Toronto and Peel District School Boards, salient themes emerged which shed light on the pervasiveness of disengagement amongst Black students, as well as suggest strategies for tackling it. This study sought to provide research-based insight to educators and policy makers on the tangible and real issues affecting Black student disengagement, and some proposed initiatives and solutions from those on the front lines.

This chapter will recapitulate the findings of this study by re-examining the thematic problem statement and research questions. A look at future research that is warranted and new research questions that the present study has produced will also be reviewed.

5.2. Research Review

As a result of the disproportionate number of Black students who are disengaged from the process of schooling – defined here as "…the physical presence of Black bodies in schools but an absence in mind and soul" (Dei, 2008, p. 349) -- and a 40% drop-out rate amongst Black students (Brown, Popplewell, 2008, p. 1), this research became a necessary tool in investigating the possible causes for this phenomenon. This study was structured to provide a space for the voices of Black educators to engage in a discourse about the issues of disengagement amongst Black students. This selection was purposeful and intentional, as previous research suggests: "Politically conscious Black educators feel compelled to take action to protect and support Black

children and to provide them with a framework to understand their experiences" (Howard, 2013, p. 16). In addition, research also suggests that students have a level of comfort and familiarity with Black educators compared to non-Black educators. A Toronto-based research project investigating dropout rates amongst Black students finds: "Often Black teachers were referred to in familial terms, revealing the affinity Black students felt towards them (Dei et al., 1997, p. 175). In attempting to capitalize on this conscious and/ or subconscious affinity Black students feel towards Black educator and vice versa, this research study looks to Black educators for insight.

The historical implication of racism has often silenced the voices of Black peoples in Canada, excluding them from participating freely in all aspects of society. These racial implications affected the education system in perpetuating the silence of racialized peoples. Based on this, a thematic problem statement was developed: *Canadian school curriculum is a direct reflection of the ideological hegemonic norms, values and beliefs upheld in society. The education system serves as a means of reproducing a certain type of knowledge, while continuously excluding aspects of knowledge in order to perpetuate the current social structure*. Three accompanying research questions served to narrow and focus the research: *What are the philosophies and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement? And how to best combat it amongst Black students in the Ontario education system? How are these philosophies and perspectives related to their experiences as students and educators?* These questions assisted in guiding the research and created a framework for participants.

Chapter 4 closely examined the responses of participants and developed categories for prominent themes and discussions. The findings indicated that there were five themes that were

most consistent amongst responses: mentorship/ role modelling, care, low expectations for students, culturally relevant teaching and curriculum, and diversity amongst staff.

5.3. Some Conclusions

What are some conclusions that can be drawn from the findings?

Firstly, educators are not solely teachers of curriculum; rather they are instructors of life. Krishnamurti (1953) states "The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole" (p. 24). The sentiment of this excerpt echoes through the discussions on mentorship and care in the classroom. Participants found that mentorship and role modelling were crucial aspects in the retaining of Black students in schools. They discussed at length the significance and benefits of school-wide mentorship initiatives as a means of engaging and re-engaging students, and creating a positive space for students to thrive both academically and socially. Care in the classroom was also another area that was explored at length through the interviews. Participants noted that when students feel that you care about them as individuals, they will in turn begin to care about what occurs in the classroom academically. In being a mentor/ role model and by showing care, educators are responsible for more than just curriculum; they are educating the whole child. Nel Noddings (1992) argues, "The main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving and lovable people" (p. 8). Noddings' theory in education is consistent with the philosophies of the participants of this study. They too believe that education goes beyond books and can be a transformative process in shaping the lives of young people.

Secondly, Black educators matter. The representation, voice and influence of Black educators are crucial to the success and achievement of Black students. Howard (2013) argues

"Black students in Canada are not only miseducated with respect to reading the world outside the school [as a result of a colour-blind discourse], but since the school is part and parcel of that world, they are also ill-prepared with respect to understanding their own experiences within schools" (p. 3). This colour-blind discourse and denial of racism in and outside of schools further perpetuates a disconnection between lived experiences and the upheld ideals within society. However in order to rectify this disconnect Ladson-Billings (2009) and Howard (2013) turn in part to Black educators. Literature on successful educators of Black students points to the need for increased representation in schools of Black educators who understand the current racial climate in schools; empathize with the experiences that Black students are facing in schools; and provide guidance and support for these students. The participants of this study confirmed the existing research, which expressed the significance and implications of Black educators as crucial to the success of Black students. The information that was gathered from the interviews point to the awareness and inherent responsibility that some Black educators have in regards to understanding and helping work through the experiences of Black students in their respective schools.

The need for Black educators is evident, however there exist barriers that limit and prohibit racialized educators from entering and remaining in the education system. Ryan, Pollock, Antonelli (2007) identify three features of this dilemma, "leaky pipelines, bottlenecks and glass ceilings" (p. 17). The pipeline metaphor refers to the way pipes are used to transport oil and other objects from one place to another (p.16); in education, Black and other racialized students are prevented from pursuing post secondary studies leading to professional jobs as a result of "leaks" in the pipeline such as streaming and disengagement which can lead to dropping out (p.16). The bottleneck metaphor describes how racialized professionals are often stuck in the

lower end of professional jobs and advancing is often a very slow process, if it happens at all (p. 17). Finally, the glass ceiling metaphor "accounts more completely for the intractability of employment dynamics in the education system. Ceilings are barriers; they limit how far one can proceed in a particular direction" (p. 17). This glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that minority and racialized professionals face in the workforce, prohibiting them from reaching positions of power and influence. These three identified challenges pose a significant barrier to the recruitment and maintenance of Black educators in the teaching profession, which in turn has dire effects on the representation of Black educators in schools; and the success of Black students as previously discussed.

Thirdly, external factors have internal implications. Participants discussed the role of the media, communities and economic status as factors affecting disengagement amongst Black students. These discussions were imperative in the understanding that students are not disconnected or separated from their lived experiences or their circumstances. Students do not leave their experiences, identities and histories outside the doors of the classroom; instead all of these life circumstances inform the students' outlook and insight in the classroom. Participants found that the aforementioned factors greatly contributed to a student's ability to be present and engaged in class, affecting students as young as grade three.

Lastly, the curriculum being taught holds power and educators need to be aware of how to use this power to engage students. Participants saw the irrelevance and relevance of curriculum as crucial to the engagement of the student. The Canadian education system is historically rooted in Eurocentric curriculum, where dominant ideas and the construction of knowledge have gone unchanged for decades. Thus racism and systematic inequalities have been perpetuated in the education system unchallenged and have silenced of the "other". "Other"

voices, i.e. non-racialized perspectives, were and in some cases still are not included in the education system through the omission of diverse histories, identities and experiences. The findings indicated that by incorporating students' culture into curriculum it assists in creating a sense of cultural pride, text-self associations and overall engaging students in becoming active participants of their learning.

5.4. Future Research

This research study raised questions in regards to the transferability of its findings across school boards and across different marginalized groups. In order to address these concern further research can be conducted with new participants, spanning across a larger geographic area. A future direction of this study could also include examining another marginalized group of students that have a high number of students who dropout of school prematurely – i.e. Aboriginal students (Dei, 2007, p. 351).

To further develop this study another possible direction would be to conduct phenomenological interviews with Black students in order to ascertain their philosophies and perspectives of disengagement amongst Black students. It would be interesting to see the intersections with themes established in this study as well as diverse factors observed from a student's perspective.

The themes that were extracted from the interviews contain rich data that can be used as a substratum for effective change. With this in mind, a possible direction for this study would be to examine the policies and procedures implemented by the Ministry of Education and respective School Boards and examine if the recommendations discussed in this study align with the proposed policy and initiatives applied in classrooms.

Lastly, a future direction of this study could be to examine ways to develop equitable and inclusive education across Toronto and Peel District School Boards. Perhaps interrogating ways in which all students can engage in a critical discussion and understanding of the unequal power relations within society and be educated in a way that challenges the current social order and therefore end the perpetuating cycle of inequality in education and society as a whole.

5.5. Conclusion

This study sought to engage in a dialogue with Black educators on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students as a result of the recent and troubling statistics indicating disproportionate numbers of dropouts amongst Black students. The voices of Black educators were especially crucial for this study as research shows a deeper connection between Black educators and Black students due to cultural commonalities, whereas non-Black educators may experience a lack of cultural synchronization with racialized students (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19). Their voices provided insight into their own personal experiences within education as both student and teacher, as well as the issues they see as plaguing Black students they teach, encounter and interact with. Through thorough interviews and discussions, the participants of this study shed light on the issue of disengagement amongst Black students and propose transformative solutions on how the education system can begin the "journey towards acknowledging and valuing difference" (Ladson-Billing, 2009, p. 34) in order to re-engage Black students in the learning process and end the cycle of disengagement and disenfranchisement with schooling.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Email:

Dear (Name),

I am a Graduate student at McGill University in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, completing my M.A in Education and Society. I am conducting a study under the supervision of Professor Bronwen Low, on the philosophy and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement concerning Black students in the Ontario education system.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study, by partaking in a 30-45 minute interview centered on your personal experiences as a Black educator in the Ontario education system, as well as your philosophies and perspectives on student disengagement amongst Black students.

I appreciate your time and consideration with this request. Please feel free to contact me via email and/or by phone at 416 882-1759. You may also contact Professor Bronwen Low at bronwen.low@mcgill.ca for further information regarding my research.

Best regards,

Natasha Mills

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Appendix B

1. Describe to me your career in education as both student and teacher.

2. As you probably know, there is a 40% drop out rate amongst Black students in Ontario. What might be some of the reasons for this? Does this reflect what you have seen in schools?

3. People talk about disengagement as one of the barriers to Black student success. In your experience, what does disengagement look like? Why do you think it happens?

How have you or your colleagues addressed disengagement amongst your students? What has been most successful?

4. Tell me about your school's commitment to the success of Black and other racialized minority youth. How would you describe the school's success in meeting this commitment?

5. How has being Black shaped your experiences as an educator in the Ontario school system? How do you think your identity as a Black teacher shapes your perspectives on youth disengagement?

6. As a racialized educator, do you feel a moral obligation to support racialized youth?

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

I am a Graduate student at McGill University in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, completing my M.A in Education and Society. I am conducting a study under the supervision of Professor Bronwen Low, on the philosophy and perspectives of Black educators on the issue of student disengagement amongst Black students in the Ontario education system.

We would like to invite you to participate in this study, by partaking in a 30-45 minute interview centered on your perspectives and philosophies as a Black educator as they pertain to student disengagement amongst Black students, as well as looking at your personal experiences working in the Ontario education system. In order for you to participate the university requires that you understand the nature of this study and that you freely agree to participate. After reading this document, please sign below if you agree to participate.

We do not foresee any potential risks or discomfort to participants as a result of participating this this interview, and participation is entirely voluntary. You will always have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. There are no consequences for refusal to participate in this study.

During this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will be audio recorded and transcribed. In order to protect your privacy, the information collected will be kept confidential and all reporting will be anonymous. Professor Bronwen Low and I will have sole access to the identifiable study data. All identifiable data will be assigned pseudonyms. Once the recorded interviews are transcribed, the original tapes will be erased.

I will be happy to share the findings with the participants, and our results will be submitted for peer review and publication in professional journal(s) and/or newsletters. I may also use the results from this study in future studies.

Thank you for considering this request. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. If at any time during the research you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. You may also contact Professor Bronwen Low at bronwen.low@mcgill.ca for further information regarding my research.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the McGill Ethics Manager at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

Sincerely,

Natasha Mills
Graduate Student
Integrated Studies in Education
McGill University
3700 McTavish Street
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Participants, please make sure you read and check the following statements that apply to you before giving consent to participate. If you wish to participate please sign and date below. Return the completed form to me directly. Please sign both copies and keep one for your records.

_____ I agree to be audio recorded during the interview

_____ I do not agree to be audio recorded during the interview

_____ I agree to have my data used in future related studies

_____ I do not agree to have my data used in future related studies

I have read the above and understand all the conditions. I freely give consent and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that my identity will remain confidential and the information collected will be used only for research purposes.

_____ _____
Signature Printed Name

_____
Date

Appendix D

Sample from Transcript

Natasha: Ok Ms. Moore please describe to me your career in education as both student and teacher.

Ms. Moore: So as a student talking from elementary high school?

Natasha: All encompassing.

Ms. Moore: So I'm born raised everything east end Scarborough so I was fortunate enough to go to an elementary school and a high school that was predominately Caribbean. So everybody was West-Indian like me. I was also fortunate to have lived in a community again where all my neighbours were West-Indian; Whether they be Chinese-Jamaican, Chinese-Guyanese, Indian-Jamaican, Indian-Guyanese, Black Guyanese everybody. We were all West-Indian. And I really liked that just because we had the sense of community and trust. We all had keys to each other's houses. If my mom and my dad were in Jamaica that was ok because my neighbours would bring food over so it was all-it was a good time. Then I went to university… for my first degree. Undergraduate degree in history and French Literature. And it was the biggest culture shock ever. Because up until then I was used to being around students that looked like me, ate the same food as me we spoke the same language at home and going to University, that first year was one of the hardest years in my education. Just because it was a culture shock. I did history class where I was the only black person – actually there was another person who was black and we came from the same neighbourhood. That was the biggest shock. And also proving to professors and also fellow students that I deserved to be there. And then I fell in love with African history and Caribbean history classes and my degree is history but mainly history of Africa, the Caribbean East Asia and it was a great place because again I finally got to see people that kinda looked like me in that sea of white students and Chinese students who I couldn't relate to. And that was my first time having my first black teacher. First year and we keep in touch to this day 'cause that was such a big moment in my life. Got through undergraduate I went to France to do my actual French degree. Then I came back to university to do my Masters of Teaching and I-they accepted at that year they only accepted 30 people to this program. And I was the only black person and then again it was so lonely. I made one really good friend, who we keep in touch with to this day. She was the only other non-white person (Pakistani). And we kept in touch and we just got through it. But that was actually my worst time in education. Because people would say things to me, thinking that I got here because of my colour. Which got me very upset. Like I didn't deserve. And my professors for the most part except for one professor who I again keep in touch with and she was my only black professor from Trinidad. My other professors no. We didn't connect.