

A Different Kind of Blackness:

Using successful journeys to examine students' experiences of secondary schooling

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Arts in Education

By Rowena Linton
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Lorna McLean
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Timothy Stanley
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Dr. Ruth Kane
Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

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ABSTRACT

Black females achieve high standards of success, yet their lived experiences are frequently absent from educational literature in Canada. Using narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this thesis documents the navigational strategies adopted by four Black female students to achieve academic success in learning environments that often predicted their failure. The narratives highlight the factors the girls believed contributed to their academic success, how they conceptualized their identity and the role(s) their identity played in their schooling experiences and academic success. Contrary to deficiencies that are often highlighted in studies on the schooling experiences of Black students, using feminist theory, critical race theory and antiracism, coupled with resistance theory shed light on the positive aspects of these Black females' schooling experiences in Ontario. Such an approach disrupts negative views of Black students as lagging behind in education in Canada. Disseminating the narratives of successful students provides real life examples for other students to imitate in pursuit of academic success amidst educational and societal barriers. On a macro level, these narratives provide education policy makers with different perspectives on how students struggled to achieve academic success within a system that promised to be accessible to all students.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.10 Introduction

This thesis investigates and documents the narratives of four successful high school, self-identified Black female students on how they thrived in an urban school learning environment that frequently predicts their failure. To provide context for this thesis, the term Black is used to describe people of African ancestry, especially Jamaican, including Canadian born, immigrants, etc., and success is being defined as academic excellence, or attaining 80% average or higher in high school and having university education aspirations. This definition was used as the criteria for recruiting participants. The study specifically explores and examines how these four girls conceptualised their schooling experiences; the factors that contributed to their academic success and the role(s) that their identity played in their success. Using mainly a critical lens, namely, feminism, critical race theory and antiracism to inform my research, I analysed four girls' stories drawing on a resistance filter to shed light on the positive aspects of Black females' experiences of urban schooling in Ontario. The main goal of the research was an attempt to distort, interfere, and/or disrupt the negative views of Black females, and Black students as lagging behind in education and schooling affairs. Drawing from the lived experiences of these female students not only holds the potential to benefit other students in conceptualising their identity and creating their own stories, but also these strategies can inform education policies that will impact minority students generally.

1.11 Background

In 2010, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Achievement Gap Task Force special education report revealed that Black students are overrepresented among students labelled with behavioural issues, and mild intellectual and developmental disabilities. Such diagnoses can have a significant impact on the education and future success for most Black students. In this instance, in Ontario, Black students have one of the highest high school dropout rates in the province (TDSB Task Force report, 2010; Toronto Star news, 2013)¹. In particular, the data from Toronto shows that in proportion to their numbers, Black students are amongst those with the lowest test scores (EQAO), the lowest rates of credit accumulation through secondary school, the lowest rates of school attendance and the highest suspension rates. The Board acknowledged that these longstanding educational disadvantages for Black students have existed since the 1980's (TDSB 2010 Achievement Gap Task Force report). Decades of research have documented and analysed the factors leading to academic disengagement among Black youth (Dei et al, 1997; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Ogbu, 1978). Some research has focused primarily on Black males, for example, James (2012) study on the schooling of Black boys. However, what is less studied, and especially in the Canadian context, are the experiences of Black Canadian high school females who managed to achieve academic success in the midst of a system that predicts their failure. Therefore, the goal of this research was to document and examine the stories of four young Black women who have achieved academic success in their high schools. In doing so, I explore the ways that these successful females conceptualised their identity, success and the relationship

¹ The achievement task force report states that students of Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, Middle Eastern background have the highest rates of school failure in the TDSB in terms of EQAO scores, credit accumulation at Grades 9 and 10, and the highest dropout rates. For the complete coverage http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/03/22/toronto_school_suspension_rates_highest_for_black_and_aboriginal_students.html

between the two perspectives. As well, I explore the primary factors (sociological, cultural and psychological) that these successful females assert contributed to their academic success, and the sources of their motivation.

1.12 Personal Location

I remember attending a family gathering just a few months after moving to Canada. I was still in high school, and an older cousin was telling us (myself and other relatives who were still in school), that if we ever want to be successful in Canada, we will have to work twice as hard as every other student – only, she used more words, words that I later realised were more tarnishing than encouraging. Among the many things she said, the words that stood out the most were:

If you're black, stay back;

If you're brown, stick around;

If you're yellow, you're mellow;

If you're white, you're 'all right'/'alright'

I later found out that this refrain was one of the commonly used clichés that Black folks use to not only encourage their children to work hard in school, but also to position themselves in society. I could have possibly misinterpreted her words, but I went through high school and university trying to disprove what she said. In this stanza, I did not like that Black had to stay back.

I migrated to Canada during my high school years to live with my mother and older siblings. Growing up in Jamaica, education was always held in high esteem. It is a widely accepted norm that only those with education would thrive in society; as a result, my grandmother tried her utmost best to ensure that my brother and I not just attended school

regularly but that we also stay academically engaged. With this foundation, I decided that it did not matter where I was studying, which school I was attending, which country I was living in, I was going to invest all my time in doing well in school, just as my grandmother taught me. The population in Jamaica is marginally diverse with more colorism than racism, but everyone who was financially capable went to school. So then, there were mainly two groups in Jamaican schools, “bright” and “dumb” There was a rigid line between the two, and so to avoid public humiliation, and constant mimic from peers, most students strived to be in the “bright” group. Today I still take issue with the way the education system visibly divides and categorises students, however such discussion is beyond the scope of my thesis. I left Jamaica thinking I was “bright” and already ahead, only to hear the words from my cousin that because I am Black I will now have to stay back. My sole intention was to stay ahead, and to achieve whatever goals I had already established for myself.

My main goal is to be an educator. In Jamaica, I wanted to be an educator and work with education policies so that one day I could help to eliminate the rigid line that divides and categories students who do well in school ‘bright” students who did not do so well – and possibly add more groups, for example, for students who are trying. However, upon moving to Canada, still interested in education, I found new and interesting issues within the education system that caught my attention. Ranging from media coverage, early observations in my urban high school, to the way the Black community in Canada talked about education, I learned this new, academic identity that I was assigned; specifically, that I would be viewed as not so smart, or that I would be viewed as “acting white”², assuming the social expectations of White society

² John Ogbu explains “acting white” as a coping strategy for Black youth. Ogbu (2003) proposed that one significant reason for academic underachievement among Black youth is the broad cultural devaluation of educational attainment within African American communities. Black children's general perception that academic

if I tried in school. I grew annoyed with the negative stories in the media, and daily conversations I would engage in, sometimes intense. I knew there were Black students who were annoyed with these stories, Black students, like myself, who have used these negative stories as motivation to succeed. Like my grandmother who did not attend university or such, but took great interest in ensuring that I would attend university someday, I knew that there were other students out there who used their parents' missed opportunity to obtain formal education as motivation to do well in school. I knew that there were more students out there who have beaten all the odds against them and succeeded in school. Although I was interested in hearing all the "how I got over" stories, I became more interested in helping those students who are currently in high school to steer them towards a brighter future. I thought, what better way to get to this vulnerable age group than to tell the stories of their peers in the same age bracket who are still experiencing schooling. I was particularly interested in learning about the successful stories and sharing them in hope that they will have an impact on not only Black students, but all students whose future is already designed or predicted by society as leading to failure, and to inform policies that will govern these students' lives.

1.13 Statement of Problem

Stereotypically, Black students are mainly portrayed as high school dropouts. To a great extent, this seemingly fixed and oversimplified image of Black learners appears to undermine any other perceptions of Black youth. Young Black males and their shortcomings are overrepresented in education research (James, 2012). In Ontario only, programs such as Big Brothers, Male mentorship, etc. are all geared to encourage Black males involvement in

pursuit is "acting White" is learned in the Black community. The ideology of the community in regard to the cultural meaning of schooling is, therefore, implicated and needs to be re-examined (p. 203).

education. While most research and programs focused mainly on Black males, the existence of Black girls often gets ignored (Rollock, 2006). Based on the premise that girls perform better than boys; by focusing mostly on Black boys and their achievement, or lack thereof, the achievement of Black girls was omitted from research and other documentation. As a result, the overrepresentation of Black males in education research most times becomes the overall representation of Black students on a whole. Accordingly, it can also be argued that attempts and initiatives to fix the problems can overlook the position of female students.

1.14 Initiatives Addressing the Achievement Gap

In Ontario, there have been various attempts, both generic and specific, by the Ministry of Education, local school boards and the Black community to address the problems of schooling for Black and other minority students. These directives are mostly strategies and initiatives to help promote inclusive and equitable education in the province. Some initiatives are geared more towards all stakeholders responsible for a child's education in Ontario; others speak directly to individual student's learning needs. In fulfilling the latter, in the 2003 to 2004 academic year, the Ontario Ministry of Education also launched the "Student Success/Learning to 18" initiative in response to the increasing high school dropout rate in the province. As previously mentioned, African-Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals and Portuguese students are at the forefront of student disengagement from school; studies show that Blacks and Portuguese students have between 42 percent and 40 percent dropout rates compared to 30 percent for the general population (Dei 1997; TDSB Task Force report, 2010). As such, the initiative has a primary goal to work with communities, employers, colleges, universities and training centres to prepare students for graduation and beyond. In doing so, it sought to accommodate the unique interests,

goals and learning strength of each student, and at the same time give each student the same opportunity to succeed, and graduate from high school. In attempting to tailor each student's learning needs, this initiative offered more expanded programs and courses in areas of cooperative education, which basically provided an opportunity for students to combine classroom and workplace learning and apprenticeships with a dual credit program that allows students to earn credits that count towards both their high school diploma and a college diploma or apprenticeship certification (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

In 2009, the Ministry launched the policy initiative, "Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy" with a primary goal to assist the education community identify and address systemic barriers and discriminatory practices within the school system. One of its core priorities was to reduce the gap in student achievement. This strategy was mainly concerned with ensuring that all students within Ontario public schools feel welcomed and respected (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 10). This strategy aimed to embrace the differences and diversity that exist in Ontario classrooms and attempts to respond to students' individual needs by providing the conditions and interventions needed to help students succeed, thus contributing to every student's sense of well-being. The initiative also mandated that equity and inclusive education be demonstrated throughout Ontario education system. The Ministry, school boards, and schools are required to incorporate principles of equity and inclusive education throughout their policies, programs, and practices.

In response to the demands for an equity and inclusive strategy, in 2013 a new course on equity, diversity and social justice was included in the Grade 11 and 12 Social Science and Humanities curriculum. Overall, the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum's main goal was to assist students in developing a critical lens to build their awareness on critical issues as they

emerge in our increasingly complex, multifaceted, and diverse society. The curriculum offers courses in the related disciplines that focus on promoting inclusive education, identifying and eliminating discrimination biases, systemic barriers and power dynamics that limit the ability of students to learn, to grow and to contribute to society. With respect to addressing the high school dropout rate that exists in the Black community, courses on equity that seek to promote antidiscrimination education aligns with an antiracism framework that offers students an understanding of the systemic barriers that may be present in the schools and classrooms and provides them with analytical and problem solving skills to deconstruct and deal with the issues they face (Dei, 1999).

In Toronto, local school boards and community groups tried to implement ways to curb the dropout rate. School board such as the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) implemented strategies to cater to the growing diversity within the student population in Toronto public classrooms as a means to encourage a sense of belonging. Local community groups also created communal opportunities to support Black students. In the early 1990s, in response to the high dropout rates among Black youth, Ontario's Royal Commission on Learning suggested black-focused schools as a viable solution. After years of rallying, lobbying, and long debates, the Board opened its first alternative black-focused elementary school in September 2009. The school was established based on the premise that the Eurocentric curriculum and learning environment remain one of the primary reasons for Black students' disengagement in Ontario public schools. Essentially, the school's curriculum imitates the Ontario curriculum; however, lessons and teaching pedagogy stress more of the contributions, and lived experiences of Blacks in society (Dei, 1997; Agyepong, 2010; Gordon and Zinga, 2012; Dragnea and Erling, 2008).

In addition, the TDSB also developed the urban diversity strategy (UDS) that focuses on increasing the education outcomes for low achieving students, and increasing graduation rates especially for specific groups of students who were lagging behind. The UDS involved numerous partnerships with different groups including Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at University of Toronto, Faculty of Education at York University, and the Ontario Ministry of Education. As a major component of this strategy, the Board identified 25 of the most underperforming intermediate and secondary schools in Toronto, schools with the largest populations of high-poverty, racialized and linguistic groups, and provided strategic interventions to increase students' achievement. Strategic interventions included using additional funding from the Ministry to enhance teachers' professional development and to increase support staff such as social workers, counselors, and educational assistants. As well, funds were allocated to 15 secondary schools to enable schools and their community partners to augment programs for nutrition, transit tickets, after school tutoring, mentoring programs, parent outreach and many other support programs. Some of these high schools are identified as urban priority high school (UPHS). The Board continues to roll out different programs and strategies to address the achievement gap that exists among students (TDSB Urban Diversity Strategy (UDS) briefing notes, 2010).

The Black community also tried to introduce strategies and allocate resources to help Black students achieve success. With financial barriers being one of the main hurdles for families in urban communities, some organizations offers scholarships to students who do well in school, for example, the Harry Jerome Award. Although it caters mainly to students who are pursuing higher education, this award provides an example of funding that is available for high achieving Black students. Also, through mentorship programs, community centres, local churches,

scholarships, etc., Black students have access to alternative sources of motivation to inspire them to engage in school activities³ (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p. 13).

Although some of these initiatives have garnered positive outcomes, the common denominator with most, if not all of these initiatives, is that generally they tend to reinforce the idea that Black students need support in order to succeed in school or that Black students have learning differences and schools fail to acknowledge and cater to these differences. Rhamie & Hallam (2002) argue that emphasising the problems that Black students faced in schools was once necessary in advocating for changes within the education system for Black and other minority students. However, this approach subsequently led to an overemphasis or overrepresentation of Black youth as underachievers or a disproportionate number of Black youth dropping out of school. Subsequently, this also becomes the main perception that the general public shares about Black students. Such representations not only have a negative impact on the way Black students understand and create their own identity, they can also influence the way students perform in school. Although these and other institutional problems still exist, some Black students have moved beyond the negative views and predictions of failure and have accomplished academic success amidst systems of oppression in schools and society (Atkins, 2012). Moreover, young Black females' voices are often silenced in the media and elsewhere (Rollock, 2007). It is important to understand how these students achieve success.

1.15 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and examine the strategies used by successful Black female secondary school students to achieve academic success in an urban school learning

³ A list of programs, including peer mentoring and tutoring and the black group/associations responsible are listed here: http://www.cesc.ca/pceradocs/2000/00DOyley_etal_e.pdf

environment, and to examine how these strategies can inform education policies and benefit other students.

1.16 Research Questions

My central research questions are:

1. What are the strategies used by successful Black female secondary school students to achieve academic success in an urban school learning environment?
2. How might these strategies help to inform educational policies and benefit other Black students?

From the main research questions, I framed a series of sub questions that break down the topic.

These sub-questions include;

1. What does success mean for high achieving Black students?
2. What are the primary factors (sociological, cultural and psychological) that enable high achieving Black students to succeed in school?
3. How or where do students acquire the skills that enable them to maneuver their way in a learning environment that predicts their failure?
4. What role does racial identity play in achieving academic success?
5. What policies are in place to help foster academic success for Black students?
 - a. How do students understand these policies?
 - b. To what extent are these policies helping students?

1.17 Significance of Study

The experience of Black students in schools and society is explored in educational and social science research. Preliminary studies have also addressed Black students academic resilience (Venzant Chamber, 2012), yet, little is known about how these characteristics may generalize to benefit students of different ages, socioeconomic status (SES) and learning capability. Therefore, by recognizing the importance of youth voice in educational decisions, my study will add value to the existing literature by expanding our understanding of the educational experience of Black students, focusing on the successful strategies and levels of support that they negotiated through daily schooling to combat systemic, institutional racism and other societal barriers. Furthermore, my study informs this ongoing dialogue about Black students' schooling experiences. As mentioned previously, most of the literature on Black youth and education in Canada highlight the negative experiences by focusing mostly on students' disengagement and identifying the education system as a barrier. By employing a different approach that understands students' achievement and experience through resistance, this departure fills a gap in the literature and prompts readers to look at the issue from a resistive angle. Focusing on what high achievers are doing to achieve success not only gives students a voice, but the narratives of these female students demonstrate, and confirm for other students, that success among Black students is possible. Moreover, they provide real life examples of coping strategies that female students used to perform well in schools. Disseminating their stories can help to influence other students to adopt similar techniques. In addition, a long term goal is that these girls' stories will inform policies to implement better strategies for addressing the problems in schooling for young Black youth in Canada and, hopefully, provide more substantial opportunities for success among Black students.

1.18 Organization of the Thesis

In **Chapter 1**, I give a brief introduction to my thesis and an overview of the research problem. I give a brief description about my personal location as it relates to the research problem, highlighting reasons as to why I choose this topic. In the latter section, I provide a rationale for why my study is significant, and where it fits in with other research in the field. I also provide a definition for specific, yet idiosyncratic, terms that I have used throughout the thesis.

Chapter 2 is an overview of all the theories and philosophical paradigms that guide the research. Namely, I build on critical theories such as critical race theory (CRT), antiracism and black feminism. Following the introduction of each theory, I explain how the theory informed my study. I then make connection with all three theories, and explain how their interconnectedness can benefit the study.

Chapter 3 is a review of the literature that covers topics such as Blacks and their experiences in Canada, and North America. I explore areas and issues that can affect Black students' schooling experience, for example, identity, urbanization, etc. To contextualise academic success among Black youth, I explore scholarship on both achievement and underachievement not just among Black youth, but minority youth overall in both Canada and the United States of America. A unique feature of this thesis lies in the approach that also results from a gap in the literature -- my goal is to understand female students' success stories as resistance, thus, I discuss resistance and different ways minority students demonstrated resistance.

Chapter 4 is the methodology that details how the research was carried out and provides information on recruiting participants. As well, in this section, I explain and justify the methodologies employed in my study, including methods of collecting data, and analysing and interpreting the data. Finally, I discuss ethics, reliability, validity, generalizability and limitations of the methods.

Chapter 5 presents keys findings and results in the form of participants' narratives in thematic sequence. Granted that I looked for collective stories in the analysis, I also provide five major themes extracted from the participants' collectives stories. These themes are, *Awareness, Suffer in Silence, Creating Resistive Identities, Self-motivated and Utilising Resources Available*. I conclude the chapter with a synopsis on the overall thematic collectives in the participants' narratives.

Chapter 6 interprets and discusses the findings in the research. In the discussion, I linked my findings to the research topics and situate the findings in the existing literature.

Chapter 7 provides a critical conclusion on the overall research, methods, findings, and implications. This section also suggests implications for further research as well as offering practical suggestions on how the narratives can benefit other students and help to influence education policies and the future of Ontario education. The chapter ends with a brief statement on how this thesis contributes to research.

Chapter 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Orientation

Given the focus of my study, which is to highlight the success stories of high achieving Black female students as a way of addressing issues of racial inequalities and social justice issues in Canadian secondary schools, I approached this study using resistance and social justice theories, specifically, critical race theory and an antiracism framework. Social justice theories, also known as advocacy or participatory theories, seek to address social justice issues in society. I cover a feminist analysis focused mainly on Black feminism and Canadian Black feminism.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a movement that seeks to uncover how race “neutral” social policies can, and do recreate systemic racial oppression. Originally developed in the legal field and later applied in education, CRT begins with the notion that racism is normal, and society accepts it as natural or ordinary because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order and culture (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001). Further to this, CRT also operates from a standpoint that racism is not always overt nor does it always operate in crude explicit forms but it plays out in more subtle ways (Gillborn 2005; Ladson-Billings 1999). Asserting that racism can be evidenced in the outcome of processes and relations irrespective of intent, CRT seeks to understand the subtle and unintentional ways that racism plays out in society. CRT is not so much a theory as it is a perspective (Gillborn, 2005). That is, CRT does not offer a finished set of propositions that claim to explain current situations and predict what will occur under a certain set of conditions; rather, it is a set of interrelated beliefs about the significance of race and racism and how it operates in contemporary Western societies. Further,

CRT offers a challenge to educational studies by insisting that racism be placed at the centre of analysis and that scholarly work engage in the process of rejecting and deconstructing current patterns of exclusion and oppression.

In education, CRT is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods and pedagogy that seek to identify, analyse and transform structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and around the classroom (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 132). Based on the premise that race differences are made through social processes, rather than natural or biological ones, Stanley (2011) asserts that these processes, referred to as racialization are historical and institutionalised. To add, CRT sees the official school curriculum as the tool, or cultural artifact designed to maintain white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 29; Stanley, 2011, p.112). Therefore, as part of its mandate, a critical race approach tries to make sense of racial inequalities that may exist within the curriculum and the schooling experiences among students of colour. In doing so, it tries to deconstruct and challenge racial inequalities and offers possible solutions. Critical race theorist, Edward Taylor (2009) states that racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the educational barriers for people of colour as well as exploring how these barriers are resisted and overcome.

Concerned with highlighting the value of experiential knowledge and the voice of minority people, CRT outlines storytelling or counter storytelling as a critical race methodology. CRT recognises that the experiential knowledge of minorities is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education. Thus, storytelling and narratives serve as pedagogical tools that allow educators to better understand the experiences of their students of color. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling simply as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences

are not often told (p. 26). Ladson-Billing et al (2012) asserts that CRT uses storytelling to weave legal truths in fanciful and oppositional ways drawing explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color to expose, analyze, as well as challenge deeply-entrenched narratives and characterizations of racial privilege, sex, etc. This approach helps to promote social justice by putting a human face to the experiences of often-marginalized groups while promoting their sense of social, political and cultural cohesion and teaches others about their social realities. Adopting this methodology in education holds the promise to inform educational strategies and renew efforts of resistance (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p.33-34).

Antiracism

Similar to CRT, an antiracism discursive framework is an action-oriented strategy intended to address all forms of racisms and the intersections of social differences by challenging the status quo to incorporate everyone in education; mainly those excluded on the basis of race. George Dei (1995) agrees that anti-racist research places the experiences and perspectives of minorities at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences and the simultaneity of their oppressions. This framework has been adopted by Black education scholars to understand the schooling experiences of Black students and to address issues of racialization within the school system. Although critics argue that this approach is not systematic, lacks theory, concepts, and a clear plan on how to implement, Dei (1995) argues that antiracist education promotes positive outcomes for Black students. However, in order to accomplish such an outcome, educators need to work with and from an anti-hegemonic stance to challenge the stated order of things and the taken-for-granted ways of producing and validating knowledge about selves, others and society. In particular, critical anti-racism education must question the “truth” that

society operates on an open and level playing field, in which meritocratic principles exhibit fairness and social justice.

Anti-racism research is not about becoming located or situated in another person's lived experiences, but rather, it represents an opportunity for the researcher to critically engage his or her own experience as part of the knowledge search (Dei, 1995, p. 2). Being primarily concerned about power relations, antiracism discourse moves away from discussions of tolerating diversity to the pointed ideals of difference and power. It sees race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy, and defend spaces. Therefore, the task of antiracism discourse is to identify, challenge and change the values, structure, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression. Antiracism highlights persistent inequities in communities, focusing on relations of domination and subordination. With Canadian urban classrooms being more culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse,⁴ antiracism relies on teachers taking active initiatives to become aware of the multiplicities that exist within their classroom. Although an antiracist framework seems to put more onus on the teachers' willingness to transform classroom space to one that is equitable, one of the critical aspects of such an approach is that it focuses on alternative ways of knowing. Therefore, similar to CRT, anti-racism values the lived realities of students of color and stresses that such knowledge should be incorporated and valued as knowledge that both teachers and other students should know.

⁴ Diversity in Canadian classrooms extends beyond race, gender, language and class; however, one can make the argument that antiracism is largely concerned with correcting discriminations based on race, culture and ethnicity.

CRT and Antiracism

Together CRT and an antiracist framework provide a foundation for understanding the schooling experiences of Black students in Canadian diverse classrooms. With racism as central, both CRT and antiracism frameworks accept racism as product of social thought and power relations and that it is present everywhere. Both schools of thought share a concern not merely to document how these thoughts and power relations are acted out in schools, but to bring about change. In fulfilling this common commitment, they stress using the lived experiences of minorities to recreate a space where new knowledge is shared and learned. Dei (1995) reminds us that the school problems experienced by the youth cannot be understood in isolation from the material and ideological circumstances in which the students find themselves (p. 35). Therefore, while an anti-racist perspective provides an effective way of looking at Black students' academic contexts; CRT theorists endeavour to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable. Working together, both frameworks offer a way for Black students to understand, conceptualize and communicate their position and identity in a broader social school context. Thus, in this research, my goal is to explore and understand the way Black female students talk about their schooling and academic experiences, and to examine the context in which they conceptualise it, using the lens of CRT and antiracist frameworks.

Feminist Analysis

Similar to the aforementioned social justice oriented theories, feminism is dedicated to examining the world through a critical feminist lens. Although there are different forms, and waves of feminism, broadly speaking, feminism is concerned with correcting the social, political

and economic wrongs that women experienced in the past, and continue to experience today. Pearl Cleage (1993) defines feminism as the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic. Further, Estelle Freedman (2013), states that feminism is a belief that although women and men are inherently of equal worth, most societies privilege men as a group. As a result of these imbalances, social movements are necessary to achieve political equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies. Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and oppression (hooks, 2000). The main motive behind the feminist movement was to expose that historically women have received unequal opportunities, socially, politically, legally and economically in relation to men. Essentially, the movement's mission is to highlight the experiences of women, and to empower and bring about gender parity and equality. Constantly evolving, different waves of feminism are devoted to offering equal opportunities for all women -- women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women --as well as White, economically privileged, heterosexual women.

Black Feminist Thought

Feminism is continuously being challenged and criticised as merely representing White women's values. Namely, Black women criticise the feminist movement as failing to incorporate and accommodate the diversity, experiences and social locations of minority women. This critique of mainstream feminism gave birth to Black feminism. Black feminism or "womanism" (as it is sometimes called) emerged in the 1970s, through the works of prominent African American women such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis and others

whose main goal was to break silence on the exclusion of Black women in the fight for gender equality (Collins, 2001, p.9). Building on the work of these pioneers, Black females, in solidarity, developed a “voice” to vocalise the perspective of Black women’s experiences and concerns. The term “Black feminism” in itself disrupts the inherent racial assumption that feminism is a “White only” ideology and political movement (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989).

Alice Walker (1983) explains that the term “womanism” is rooted in Black women’s concrete history in racial and gender oppression. The term “womanism” stems from Southern Black people’s expression, “you acting womanish” which mothers use when their daughters acted in outrageous, courageous, and wilful ways. Walker (1983) suggests that “womanism” refers to or represents exclusively Black women who were responsible, in charge and serious. Adopting the basic principles of feminism, womanism, or Black feminism is concerned with the struggles against sexism and racism by Black women who are themselves part of the Black community’s efforts to achieve equity and liberty (Omolade 1994). In her discussion on intersecting oppressions, Collins (2000) discusses the matrix of social domination, which is essentially the interlocking of various forms of social inequalities, race, class and gender oppression. Such intersectionality is deeply woven in social structures that subsequently help to shape Black women’s experiences. Black feminism gives Black women the opportunity to articulate these experiences to produce knowledge.

Equally important, Black feminism is activism that is grounded in Black women’s common histories, such as slavery, imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism and their identity (Collins, 2000; hooks 1989). Black feminism argues that sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably linked together, and subsequently Black feminists mostly fight against the intersectionality of oppression from a feminist, political standpoint. Black feminism

encompasses both experiences and ideas. Collins (2001) states that womanism seemingly supplies a way for Black women to address gender oppression without attacking Black men because Black women are in the predicament where, if necessary, they hierarchize oppression, so that racial oppression appears to trump gender oppression. In attempting to avoid exclusion, Black feminism adopts an ethical obligation to represent all women. Collins (2001) states that womanism is not a closed fixed system of ideas but one that is continuously evolving through its rejection of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice (p. 11). With an intrinsic obligation to transformation and change, Black feminism is concerned with engaging in the difficult task of working through diverse ways that Black women have been affected by interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 2001, p.16).

Canadian Black Feminist Thought

Similar to the Black feminism in the United States that emerged in response to the exclusion of Black women in the feminist movement, Canadian Black feminism also responded to the limitations of Black feminism. Black Canadian women claim that although Black feminism attempts to shed light on the exclusion and experiences of Black women, it mainly accounts for African American women thus excluding the experiences of Canadian Black women. Canadian Black feminism seems like a continuation of Black feminism to include the perspectives of Canadian Black women. Canadian feminist and activist Njoki Wane (2004) states that contemporary Black Canadian feminist thought is a creation of historical and contemporary forces that interweave with the lives of women of African ancestry. Black Canadian feminism operates on the premise that although Black women may share common ancestry and history, Black women are not a homogenous group. Thus, in aligning with the heralded diversity within

Canada, Black Canadian feminism attempts to accommodate the range and multiplicity in Canadian Black women's identity, culture, location, language, and ethnicity. Perhaps the most inimitable distinction of Black Canadian feminism is the autonomy it gives Black women in defining themselves, especially from the standpoint of producing diverse knowledge based on their own experiences (Wane, 2004).

To successfully analyse the schooling experiences of Black female girls in Canada, it is useful to apply a Black feminist lens to analyse their experiences alongside the intersections of race, class and gender. As one of the only lens present in Social Sciences and Education research that focuses solely on the experiences of Black women, the various principles of Black feminism and its methodological analysis of the interaction of race, class and gender depicts the very essence of many Black girls' experiences. Black feminist thought is an example of oppositional knowledge formed at the margins and is a singular theory or approach that focuses primarily on the experiences of Black women by decentralising hierarchical power relations and by claiming the margins and the devalued space of Black womanhood as spaces of creativity and power (Collins, 1998, p.128). Furthermore, Venus Evans-Winters (2011) in her work on Black girls and resistance argues that because White women have visibly dominated the women's movement, feminist research has predominantly be done by White women on White girls. Therefore, the results from this research tend to assume that Black women and White women share a similar socialization process when, in fact, there are fundamental cultural and historical differences (p.13). As a result, the unique experiences of Black girls have been overlooked in studies on girls' experiences in high school.

Connecting all three

Working together from a social justice standpoint, CRT, antiracism and Black feminism provide a framework, based primarily on intersectionality, to explore, understand and document the schooling experiences of Black girls in an Ontario urban school. Oppression (i.e. racism, sexism, classism, etc.) and its components are complex and fast-changing and therefore, it is important that any perspective or attempt to understand and address it is equally dynamic. A key element in all three critical theories mentioned above is the commitment to expose and correct social oppressions, social inequalities, racial oppression and sexual discrimination by centralising the lived experiences of the oppressed in hopes to accomplish equality and raise awareness. Critical Race Theory and Black feminism are useful frameworks for representing and speaking to the experiences of Black girls in educational spaces (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Both frameworks share a similar methodology, however, Black feminism narrows its target to represent the perspectives of Black women. Merged together, both can benefit Black girls by supporting anti-essentialist standards of identity and encouraging practices that simultaneously analyze and combat gender and racial oppression (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Likewise, Black feminism works well with antiracism because both have a purview that is concerned with alternative ways of knowing and the emphasis on collective knowledge to benefit the Black community. Collins (2001) states that a Black feminism approach promises to benefit the Black community as a collective because it models sensitivity to the heterogeneity concerning not only gender, but class, nationality, sexuality, and age currently operating within the Black community (p.16). Black feminism provides an opportunity to model a process of building community via heterogeneity. Dei (1999) also endorses community building through collective knowledge for Black students.

Philosophical Paradigm

I approached this study from a transformative standpoint. The transformative paradigm represents a worldview that reality is socially constructed and knowledge reflects power and social relationships within society. It also places central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized groups such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, members of the gay and lesbian communities, people with disabilities, poor, etc. Put differently, a transformative paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender and (dis)abilities. Transformative scholars have as their central mission the accurate and credible representation of marginalized groups in and through the process of systematic inquiry towards the goal of bringing society to a point of greater equity and justice (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2005). In an attempt to understand the social worlds of high achieving Black female students, my goal is not only to give voice to the participants, but also to expose their successful journeys in the hope that other students will benefit from the shared narratives. More importantly, I hope these stories will inform policies to bring about a more equitable education for minority students.

Conclusion

Like the social justice theories, a transformative paradigm aims at social change. In conjunction, the transformative paradigm and the aforementioned theories work together to provide a framework for addressing inequality and injustice in society and bringing about change. Mertens (2007) asserts that working within a transformative paradigm involves thinking critically about how realities are shaped. She further states that the epistemological assumption leads to a cyclical model of research that includes the establishment of partnerships between

researchers and community members, including the recognition of power differences and building trust through the use of culturally competent practices to capture their realities and to link them with social action. As a researcher, I used the storytelling methodology outlined in the CRT framework to capture the lived realities of Black girls while being cognizant of the cultural diversity, the matrix of social inequalities and the impact of power and privilege – or the lack thereof – that may exist between my participants and me.

Chapter 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

“EDUCATION is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization, and the advancement and glory of their own race.”

Marcus Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*

3.1 Introduction

This literature review provides an overview of the relevant scholarship surrounding high achieving Black students in Canada. Although my primary focus is on female Black students in Canada, I mainly used contemporary research on Black high school students and academic achievement both in Canada and the United States. To provide context, I provide a brief historical overview of Black people's settlement patterns in Canada. Following that, I examine: a) the case of Black students and their education experiences in Canada; b) the relationship between Black identity and success; and, c) the factors that contributed to Black students' academic success. Most research on academic achievement among Black students focuses mainly on the deficiencies in their schooling experience. This review is important as I attempt to analyse and highlight the positive aspects of Black students' schooling experiences.

3.2 Blacks in Canada

Blacks' existence or communities of Black Canadians developed gradually overtime. Canada was considered the Promised Land for a vast majority of Blacks who were escaping the institution of Slavery and confinement in the American South and were in search of freedom up north. Following the influx of Blacks who fled the United States, a second wave of Black newcomers arrived in Canada during the American Revolution. Blacks were promised to receive land from the British government as payback for fighting on Britain's side during the war. After the war, however, Blacks received meagre plots of land in remote areas that were largely infertile

and difficult for farming. There were also fugitives who came from the Caribbean to settle in Canada; namely the arrival of Jamaican Maroons who were deported to Canada under Spanish and later British colonial authorities. Upon settling in Canada, Blacks experienced many adversities and continued to live in severe, harsh conditions. They were denied access to land, were isolated from basic amenities, and mass migration from Europe and Asia increased competition in job opportunities. Under these conditions, extreme poverty became a reality for many Blacks (Winks, 2000). Although living conditions were unfavourable, there was always the widely accepted assumption that Blacks were better off in Canada than in the United States or elsewhere where they would be subject to overt racism and discrimination. Blacks continued to experience inequality and subtly pernicious forms of discrimination. Not only were they considered second class citizens, but the majority of established Black communities were situated in small, remote communities on the outskirts of White neighbourhoods (Winks, 2000). Inequality lingered in all aspects of Canadian society for Blacks -- they were barred from gaining employment and having access to proper education (Dei et al, 1997; Glean, 2012; Winks, 2000).

3.3 Jamaican-Canadian Experience

The Jamaican community in Canada is growing rapidly with more than half of the Jamaican population born in Jamaica. Between 2002 and 2011, Citizenship and Immigration Canada statistics (CIC) showed that over 20, 000 Jamaicans traded their Jamaican citizenship for Canadian status. In 2001, Jamaicans living in Canada represented almost 1% of the total Canadian population, which makes them one of the largest non-European ethnic groups in Canada. The majority of Jamaican-Canadians live in Ontario --mainly Toronto, Ontario. Interestingly, women make up the majority of the Jamaican community in Canada. In 2001, 54.3

% of the Jamaican community were female compared with 50.9 % of the overall Canadian female population. Religion is an important cultural feature of the Jamaican-Canadian community. A large majority belong to the Christian religious denominations of Roman Catholicism and Protestant. In terms of family arrangements, a significant number of families consist of lone parents; twenty-five percent of all Jamaican- Canadian women reported being single parents (Statistics Canada, 2007). In general, Jamaican-born Canadians are less likely than the overall population to have a university education. Thirty-three percent of Jamaican men, and 26% of Jamaican women did not complete high school (Statistics Canada, 2007). Nevertheless, Jamaican Canadians have a higher rate of employment than the general population of Canadians, but mostly among lower incomes jobs within the health-related field and manufacturing sector.

3.4 Black Students' Education in Canada

3.4.1 An Overview of Black Students' Schooling Experiences

Academic disengagement has been a pervasive issue within Black communities in Canada and the United States (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Henry, 1993; Ogbu, 1978). Black students continue to experience an array of racial disadvantages including racial profiling, stereotyping, discrimination, injustices, and prejudices that subsequently affect their schooling experiences. Decades of research has documented numerous theoretical explanations for the dropout crisis that continues to affect Black communities. Some of these theories include the cultural deficit model, oppositional theory, and social capital theory, which are explained in detail later in this chapter. Likewise, other research studies explored and suggested ways of curbing the dropout rate (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2004; Hart, 2011). Some of these studies

include improving teaching pedagogy or discursive frameworks such as antiracist education, transformative and/or social justice education.

Much of the literature on Black students' academic underachievement that has examined the Black community including scholars, parents, advocates and reformers situates the school system at the centre of the problem. The main claim of this research is that the Canadian public school curriculum is predominantly Eurocentric and instructional strategies and teaching styles are incompatible with Black students' cultural identity (Dei et al, 1997). Likewise, in her textbook analysis, Glean (2011) analyses two Canadian History textbooks to understand the representation of African Canadians in Canada's grand narrative. She concludes that there is a gross exclusion and misrepresentation of the experiences of African Canadians in the textbooks and that the grand historical narrative has constructed African Canadians largely as recent newcomers into Canada. Furthermore, in her research on Black parents' views on the Black-focused school in Toronto, Rosina Agyepong (2010) asserts that all her parent participants acknowledged that there are problems within the mainstream public school system that contribute to their children's failure or underperformance. Other institutional factors that the Black community identifies as causative factors for the low academic performance among Black youth include, missing Black representation in the public school system (including school authorities, teachers), teachers having little or no expectations for Black students, and institutional or systemic racism (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Henry, 1993).

Based on the cultural deficit model, students' lack of educational achievement is framed as a result of their own (in)abilities, aspirations and families. With this perspective, some schools, teachers, administrators and other education officials locate the problem of students' underachievement within the students, their families and communities (Irizzary, 2009). James,

(2002) in conversations with new teachers who taught in inner city high schools downtown Toronto, reported that Black students in urban classrooms have been labelled as at risk, low achievers, learning disabled, dropouts, disruptive, troublemakers, problem students, rebellious and individuals who are likely to get involved in illegal criminal activities (p. 13). In addition to other factors such as impoverished backgrounds, perceived bad neighbourhoods, low-income families, lacking parental support and guidance, the above mentioned factors, realities, and life experiences prevent students from performing well academically. As a result, Black students are generally framed by society and by school institutions as failures in very explicit and demonstrable ways (James, 2002). Studies also show that Black students experience the school system as oppressive, specifically, because school officials and teachers tend to display stereotypical behaviors towards them. For example, Henry Codjoe (2001) in his study on Black students' achievement in Alberta public schools demonstrates that teachers' low expectations of students were revealed in two ways: 1) some teachers were not 'sympathetic' and often did not encourage Black students to develop their full potential; and, 2) some teachers were surprised when they handed in papers or assignments where they had excelled (p. 358).

To a great extent, this 'blame-game' between the Black community and the education system exposes the complexity of understanding the problems regarding schooling within Black communities; it shows that there is not a single cause, but multiple factors at play. As a result, not only is there not a finite solution to the problem, but such complexity offers different ways of addressing the problem and ways of encompassing all the different factors that have significant bearings. Education researchers are still trying to understand the problems with schooling for Black youth and there are a preponderance of studies that approach it from a deficit standpoint. With such an approach, most of these studies constantly highlight the unacceptable

underachievement of Black youth and, in some cases, repeatedly recycle the factors that created or maintain the problem. In contrast, there are an increasing number of studies focusing on the academic achievements of Blacks and other minority students. Mostly done in the United States, these studies explored the different factors that contributed to the academic success of Black youth in spite of being socially disadvantaged. For example, parental support, positive peer influences, a supportive and safe learning environment, or personal motivation are factors that influence disadvantaged students to work hard in school. With these supportive factors, more Black youth, especially Black females are determined to rise above stereotypical assumptions and excel in school (Henry, 1998).

3.5 The Black Female

Due to the double bind of living in a racist and sexist society, Black women are among the most disadvantaged groups in society. Based on the Black feminist scholarship, this predicament places Black women in a very interesting position in society. Black women are often perceived or understood as matriarchal within their families and other private settings, or even the backbone in their families, but in public domains they are fighting oppressions and are less recognised for their abilities. Black American feminist, author and social activist, bell hooks (1993) argued that Black females in school are challenged each day to be visible or to be viewed positively by the dominant culture. Canadian educator, Annette Henry (1999) furthers this point in her argument that the lived experiences of Black females are muted, or curiously absent from educational literature in Canada. This omission includes discussions on the tensions in Black women's struggles for their children's academic achievement, social and economic empowerment, and also the schooling experiences of Black female students.

Although the academic performances of Black students are well documented, the majority of these discussions mainly focus on Black male students with Black girls occupying an invisible or absent presence on both academic failure and success (Rollock, 2007). The concept “absent presence” was first introduced by feminist bell hooks to describe the (mis)representation of Black women in film and media. Essentially, it speaks to the gradual physical presence of Black women in films and movies, yet they remain voiceless. Interestingly, Black females (for example, in the United States) in the education systems are achieving at higher rates than Black males; young women continue to attain higher standard of success than their male counterparts (Rollock, 2007; Nash, 2009). Henry (1998) in her work on how Black girls negotiate their lives in an African- centered school asserts that Black girls are taught by their mothers to strive for academic excellence. With such achievement, various factors including psychological, social, socio-economic status, racial and gender obstacles, which are inextricably linked, have influenced the experiences of girls in their urban school education. Considering this position of Black females, it is worth exploring and examining their stories and their attempts to resist, or endure societal oppressions and their journeys to academic success.

3.6 Urban Education and the Canadian Context

In order to explain urban education, it is important to first explain “urban” in context. Urban is a fairly complex concept, however, according to the Oxford dictionary, urban is described as ‘relating to, or characteristics of city or town designations. Traditionally, and geographically, urban describes spatial concentrations of people whose lives are not organised around agricultural activities. These spaces involve more economic and social activities and are densely populated. In a contemporary sense, and especially in the Canadian context, urban areas,

or metropolitan cities are not just characterised by public policy, infrastructure, housing, job opportunities and transport; but these areas are also homes for a significant number of immigrants, multiple ethnicities, cultures, languages and identities (Bourne, 2007). Due to the growth in population in urban cities, urban living is also linked to poverty, high rates of unemployment, crime and violence. The elements that characterise urban environments inevitably affect social services, including education, which are being offered by the community. Schooling that takes place in urban environments can be considered 'urban education' (Daniel, 2010).

According to Beverly Jean Daniel (2010) in "Reimagining the Urban: A Canadian Perspective", the imagery that is attached to urban schools (i.e., schools located within the areas marked as the inner city rings) continues to be mired in deficit constructs and the pathologizing of students, parents, and communities. The very nature of the physical structures in urban settings and schools are designed in ways that serve to create and replicate this experience of deficit. Schools in urban communities are highly diversified serving students who represent many ethnic minorities with multiple languages. Furthermore, these schools are characterised by large enrolments and may have a high concentration of poor students. Milner (2012) in his quest to unravel the concept of urban education in America asserts that urban education has become synonymous with schools characterised by "race" and low socioeconomic status, which are often times schools with a large population of minority students. However, in Canada, scholars in urban education studies have reintroduced the concept of urban education as a strategy or response to deal with the purported issues that are present in urban schools and communities. Therefore, although urban education in the United States is primarily concerned with the physical space, in the Canadian context, urban education speaks to addressing and providing

solutions for the conditions that exist in urban schools. As a consequence, urban education schools in Canada are supplied with resources, and programs are implemented to meet the challenges within these schools.

Carl James (2010) explained that the goal of urban education is to provide a framework to improve the quality of education in urban settings. A major component this educational objective is to get teachers to explore, analyse and come to understand the various factors and issues that influence a student's schooling experiences within urban settings. In his description of an urban education course that he co-teaches at York University in Toronto, Ontario, James (2010) explains that the main goal of the course is to explore issues related to schooling students who live in an urban setting [such as the Westview or Jane-and-Finch area] that tend to be characterized by low socio-economic status, high population density, and a diversity of ethnic, racial and linguistic minority groups, many of whom are recent immigrants and refugees. Essentially, in this course, James's main goal is to engage teacher-candidates in a process of critical reflections through which they come to recognize the significance of their own experiences, to interrogate their ideas, prejudices, assumptions, actions and privileges and to understand the implications that these occurrences have on the lives of the 'urban' students. In response, teachers will develop equitable approaches to educating their students (James, 2010, p. 18).

Urban education can have a significant impact on students' achievement where in many cases the educational outcome for students attending urban schools is predicted as failure (Daniel, 2010; James, 2010). Limited funding, scarcity of teaching and learning resources and lack of professional development for teachers limit the deliverance of good education and the quality of education that students receive. Overcrowding and the high rate of diversity within

urban classroom coupled with the backgrounds of students also limit effective teaching strategies and techniques. In some cases, teachers in urban classrooms may not be fully equipped to cater to the multiplicities that exist within the classroom. As a result, most urban classrooms are faced with challenges including truancy, lack of motivation and/or difficulties in adapting to new situations. This disposition of students that might be largely present in urban schools becomes the main descriptor or image available for urban school students (Daniel, 2010; James, 2010). However, Butler et al (2015) explored how student create their own safe space in their urban school in Ontario. They argued that students shared the dominant negative place image of their school, prior to joining the school, but once they joined the school they gradually shared a very positive experience of the school. They concluded that students are able to “internally generate” their own perception of their schools. Moreover, Milner (2012) asserts there is a rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments; more so, there exists human capital that has the potential to make meaningful contributions in society. Schools officials seem to curtail such intelligence and talents, and overlook these assets that are available in urban schools, and instead, classify schools as urban because of their perceived shortcomings (Milner, 2012, p. 558). Despite the negligence and discounted strength of students in urban schools, some students challenge predictions of failure and resist the limitations of their surroundings to achieve academic success and engage in a process of reconceptualising their identity.

3.7 Identity and Success

Paula Moya (2009), who is a scholar in race and ethnicity, feminist theory, and Latina/o and Chicana/o literature and identity, defines identity as the non-essential and evolving products that emerge from the dialectic between how individuals or subjects of consciousness identify themselves and how they are identified by others (p.46). She further explains that the notion of identity can be divided into two subcategories, ascriptive and subjective identities. Ascriptive identities are social categories or those that are imposed on individuals. In his discussion on cultural identity, Stuart Hall (2000) explains that the artificial or superficial imposed “selves” is that which individuals with a shared history and ancestry hold in common and stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging oneness or cultural belonging that underlies all the other superficial differences (p.17). Ascriptive or imposed identities operate through the logic of visibility (Moya, 2000) and these generally include examples of racial categories such as “black” or gender such as “male or female”. It is noteworthy that the imposition of such an identity happens outside the self, and it is society that constructs these identities; this process of infliction can be considered historical. To add, ascriptive identities carry significant bearings insofar as they are determinant factors for how individuals are treated in society. For example, historically, the institution of Slavery was predominantly based on racial classification; and “Black” as a racial identity was assigned to individuals from Africa or of African descent. Similarly, the women’s rights movement was born out of inequalities against individuals socially classified as female. These identities emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion than they are the sign of an identical, naturally, constituted unity (Hall, 2000, p.17).

Identity is inescapably relational. In contrast to ascriptive identity, Hall (2000) describes subjective identity as referring to an individual's understanding or own sense of self, and how she or he may relate to others. Self-identification is constructed within discourses (Hall, 2000, p.18), and this aspect of identity formation is shaped or influenced by other external factors such as, class, religion, social networks, geographical location, etc., or lived experiences and to an extent, the imposed identity explained in the previous paragraph. This definition explains why identity is not a totality, but is rather a conditional process that is always emerging (Hall, 2000). Hall (2000) further explains that subjective identities are points of temporary attachment which discursive practises construct for us. In other words, subjective identities speak to how we define or understand ourselves in relation to our social locations.

Given the variability of identity and the fact that it is shaped by multiple factors, and sometimes inextricably linked, it is fair to assert that there is not a homogenous identity. Broadly speaking, individuals may share common experiences, or may adopt the same process of forming their own identity, but each person ends with their own unique product. Therefore, though marginalised groups may share the overarching experience of oppressions or systems of oppression, each individual, or subgroup of individuals will have distinctive experiences based on their social location and the way they personalised or conceptualise their own identity. Specific to this study, there is not a homogenous Black population in Canada (Gosine, 2002; Dei et al, 1997). Especially in Ontario, the Black population itself is rather diverse with Blacks from different geographical locations, religious affiliations, cultural practices and customs. So, while there may be commonalities or centrality in the overall Black experience, there are also distinctive and fundamental differences within the different intra cultural groups. Gosine (2002) argues that this multidimensionality is not well documented or represented in the Ontario high

school curriculum, nor is it fully addressed in research on Black students and schooling. However, based on the distinction explained above, Black students' experiences in Canadian classrooms will differ within specific contexts and or settings because their experiences will be influenced by different factors.

3.8 Academic Success among Black Youth

3.8.1 What is Academic Success?

The term success is highly subjective. Borrowing from the field of business, success generally means completing an objective or reaching a goal. Success can be personal and usually has a measurement component to it. Generally, success can be measured by riches, property and or assets or other materialistic returns. Within contemporary Black communities especially in North America success has often been defined by the acquisition of status symbols (Hart, 2011) and stereotypically, successful Blacks can be found in sports and the entertainment industry (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Henry, 1993). In academia, success is still a multifaceted concept, but research tends to focus on grades, achievement test scores, learning key concepts and strategies of planned programs of study, such as a literacy program and successfully teaching students how to de-code texts (Hanley & Noblit, 2009). Among early studies, schools educate urban youth through a pedagogical approach of a banking- concept model. In his highly celebrated *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian education, Paulo Freire (1930) argued that this approach to education mainly prepares students to memorise rather than to critically read the world and understand the social realities that powerfully affect their lives. Subsequently, academic success is based on how much information students can retain through this banking model. In his discussion on public school Larry Cuban asserts that public schools in America

have adopted a business model and education and learning opportunities become products for parents to purchase. Most public schools in America and Canada mandated standardised testing as part of the curriculum, and this presents an example of how the goal of schools has shifted to a more market-driven model. The market-driven model, where a huge chunk of success is dependent on how much is invested, and retained for withdrawal. Marita Moll (2004) in discussing the drawbacks of standardised testing noted that there are numerous indicators that these tests have no significant impact on students learning and development; and, in fact, test score are for sorting and ranking children with serious adverse impact on some-particularly low income and minority (Moll, 2004). In opposition to this banking concept of education, academic success should be measured both on engaging in academic activities and knowledge acquisitions as well as being able to apply such knowledge inside and outside the classroom. Along with high grade point average (GPA), and acquisition of writing skills and competencies, success should also be measured by the acquirement and accumulation of socialization skills, having the ability to solve problems, and being able to survive in a complex society. However, this knowledge and skill acquisition may not be as smooth a process for some students within the public school setting. These students not only have to learn these skills but, they also have to deal with psychological resistance stemming from racism and sexism in society.

Thus, it is important to examine the factors that drive students in urban schools to want to achieve academic success -- especially among students from impoverished backgrounds; success is sometimes measured through struggles.⁵ Based on the existing research, some of the key factors that promote academic success amongst minority youth include; positive school environments with engaging pedagogy and supportive teachers, parental involvement, local

⁵ In the words of Booker T. Washington "success is to be measured not so much by the positions that he has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has to overcome while trying to succeed" in *Up From Slavery*.

community networks, peer support, and individual characteristics (Yosso, 2000; Solórzano and Delgado, 2001; Russell & Atwater, 2004; Finn & Rock, 1997). In a study on the academic success among poor and minority students in America, Borman and Rachuba (2001) examined the case of academic resiliency among students not just within racialized groups, but also taking into account, socioeconomic status (SES). They contrasted the outcome for African American, Latino and White students. They reported that a “safe, orderly and supportive” school environment with positive teacher-students relationship were the primary characteristics that mattered the most, especially to African American students (Borman and Rachuba, 2001, p. 20). However, within this study, racial identity trumped SES, because White students with low-SES attended schools with a safer and more orderly environment than the school attended by African American and Latino students with the same SES.

3.8.2 Black Identity and Academic Success

In highlighting the factors that lead to Black students' disengagement in Canadian schools, Dei (1995) acknowledged that Black identity in Canada is complex and that such complexity can have a significant impact on the students' experiences and concerns regarding school. In her dissertation on the academic achievements of Black Canadian high school students and their conceptualizations of their racial identity, Atkins' (2012) reports that students recognized that their racial identity is “confusing and complex.” Nonetheless, these students still linked their intricate identity to their academic achievement. Other related studies have shown that Black students in America reported that they had to construct socially a positive racial Black identity as an important strategy for surviving the devastating effects of school exclusion. Constructing resilient identities motivate young people to renegotiate assigned labels, disavow

official expectations of themselves and seek to create their own dignified aspirations (Wright, Standen, & Patel, 2010, p. 42).

Approaches used in addressing or understanding the schooling experiences of Black students tend to ignore or minimise this multiplicity of identities and their impact on schooling experiences. For example, in his critique of antiracism and multicultural education⁶ Gosine (2002) argues that research tends to oversimplify the dynamics of cultural diversity and racism because both approaches fail to adequately consider the plural, fragmented, and contradictory nature of identity. He asserts that investigators need to examine the ways in which social status interlocks at particular moments and social locations to shape the production of essentialist identity. Put differently, it is important to account for the unique ways that differences in social status intersect to complicate collective strivings for coherent racial identities. Moreover, given that identity formation plays such an important role in students' success (Atkins, 2012), it is important to explore the process in which Black girls reform or conceptualise their Black, female identity and how such conceptualization impact their success. In some ways, this process of identity formation can be understood through resistance, whether it is resistance that benefits the students or further marginalises them.

3.9 Resistance

3.9.1 On Resistance

The Oxford dictionary defines resistance as the refusal to accept or comply with something. Dorothy Bottrell, who is a senior research scholar in Child and Youth Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney, states that resistance is generally defined as

⁶ Antiracism and multicultural education both seek to promote diversity, equality and equity for all student from different cultural, social, economic and political background in their learning experiences.

practices which express opposition to rules and norms in specific context and it includes critiques of social relations from lived experience of marginalization (Bottrell, 2007, p. 599). Resistance is sometimes interconnected to resilience. While resistance describes the act of opposing, resilience speaks to the ability to recover from adversity. Resilience, then, is defined as coping and competence despite adversity in which identity work and cultural management are central processes (Bottrell, 2009, p. 323). Bottrell (2009) argues that social identities and collective experiences are significant to resilience. She further states that resilience describes young people's engagement in processes that accrue positive outcomes, not only as normatively defined but also on their own terms, which in specific contexts of adversity may include and require resistance. Together, both resilience and resistance generate theories and debates to help understand how young people cope against odds in society, especially marginalised young people and their schooling experiences.

Resistance theory proposes that students actively or passively resist learning as a way of responding to the oppressive school system. Solórzano and Delgado (2001) state that resistance theories demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions. Although there are different types of resistance, resistance research generally focuses on opposition to the dominant culture. For the purpose of this study, I examined two forms of resistance: self-defeating and transformative resistance. First, self-defeating resistance occurs when individuals are aware of the injustices or oppression within the dominant culture and therefore refuse to adhere to such the values, principles and practices of the dominant culture. However, this form of resistance behavior only worsens the oppressive state for marginalized individuals. For example, in the 1970s, Paul Willis (1977) examined the subculture of working class lads in England. He reported how these youth rebelled against school

culture and formed their own oppositional subculture in which they willingly settled for mediocrity, low grades, industry career and low aspirations in response to mainstream education. As a result, they occupied working class jobs. Self-defeating resistance is also manifested through students acting out in class without taking into consideration the social conditions and consequences (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). This form of resistance in school can lead to poor performance, suspensions, and even dropping out, which can have detrimental effect on career choices. Self-defeating resistance offers one explanation for Black students' underachievement in school.

3.9.2 Oppositional Culture Theory - John Ogbu

Oppositional culture theory is a framework or explanation proposed by Nigerian anthropologist, John Ogbu (1978) and is used to explain differences in academic performance among youth. Specifically, it describes the difference in minority youth academic performance in the United States. In brief, Ogbu (1978) argued that there are two distinct minority groups in America; voluntary and involuntary minorities and that each status has a significant influence on students' academic performance. Voluntary minority students are individuals who migrate to the United States by their own freewill. These individuals generally excel academically because they hold optimistic views on education. In contrast, involuntary minority students are individuals from historically oppressed groups, such as Blacks and Hispanics. Involuntary minority students display their antagonism towards the dominant group by resisting educational goals.

Blacks have a history rooted in slavery and coercion and thus developed a "justifiable" oppositional cultural identity towards the dominant, mainstream culture. Ogbu (2003) suggests that for Blacks, engaging in academic activities and achieving academic success were perceived

as supporting the dominant culture and the intended oppression. Ogbu further dissected the Black community in America and explained how education has evolved using a caste-like system.

According to the Oxford Learners dictionary, caste refers to social class or a social category to which a person belongs involuntarily. Historically, caste systems existed in India and are now used to describe a social structure whereby people belong to social categories. Within a caste system, usually an individual's social status is ascribed and there is not much crossing over.

Ogbu (2003) argues that American society operates like a caste system, and Black American are ascribed a pariah status and this system is a root cause for Blacks' low academic performance in school. He explained that the school system essentially socializes both Whites and Blacks for their respective roles within a caste society and Blacks, far from showing "pathological" behavior, merely try to make the best of such a bad bargain. Further to this, Ogbu (2003) argues that the lower caste-like status of Blacks, the inferior education they have been given for generations, the subtle mechanisms used in the school to differentiate the schooling of Blacks from that of Whites, and the differential return for equal efforts as reflected in job ceilings and unequal pay for similar work explain the lower achievement of Blacks in the United States. In the Canadian context, Dei (1995) asserts that the failure of Canadian school systems to interrogate issues around the teaching, learning and administration of education has contributed to situations where some students felt "pushed out" of schools. He further explained that being "pushed out" was not merely the exercise of physical threat or exclusion, but resulted from the subtle messages that are sent when a school refuses to address questions of inclusivity, or that the histories, knowledge and experiences of diverse youth are taken into account in schooling, or that the teaching staff is representative of the diverse groups in the classroom.⁷ Furthermore, Ogbu

⁷ Being "pushed out" can speak to physical, direct threats and exclusions as well as the subtle path that Dei (1995) discussed. Carl James (2010) documents that Black students have a higher suspension and expulsion rate in Ontario

explained that in America largely middle-class African American students excelled in school while those from more impoverished backgrounds rebelled and failed. As a result, high achieving middle-class Black students were labeled as “acting white” by their Black peers. In some instances, some student instigated refined techniques to avoid such label at all cost. For example, Brown (2003) in his study on minority students in science classes asserted that these achieving minority students avoided using scientific terms during class as a way of opposing the standard curriculum. In sum, oppositional culture proposes that Black students’ academic disengagement is a reaction to the belief that academic achievement is an element of the dominant culture, and such perspective is deeply entrenched in the way education is designed and delivered.

3.9.4 Critique of Oppositional Culture

Oppositional culture suggests that minority students assign academic success to the dominant culture. Nevertheless, there are students from minority groups who excel academically and this confirms assumptions that minority students do have education aspirations. Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) critique Ogbu’s oppositional culture theory as a self-defeating form of resistance. This form of resistance, they argue, merely indicates that high school minority students may have a compelling critique of the schooling system yet drop out as a result. However, engaging in this form of oppositional behavior does not help to transform students’ oppressive status, but instead only helps to re-create such conditions. To add to this debate, Dei et al (1997) echo this critique in their study on the dynamics of Black students’ disengagement in Canadian schools. They concluded that Black students dropping out of school created a double impediment, that is, racial discrimination compounded by a lack of education. Furthermore,

public schools.

dropping out only pushed Black students further to the margins within society (Dei et al, 1997, p. 51). One form of resistance that moves towards positive changes is transformational resistance.

3.9.5 Transformative Resistance

Transformative resistance is a reaction to the overemphasis on the self-defeating form of resistance among working-class students in social science research (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, it is an attempt to acknowledge and study the positive forms of school resistance that Chicana and Chicano students engage in, in the USA. Critical race theorists Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) coined this framework of transformative resistance using the tenets of a critical race theory (CRT)⁸ and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit)⁹ to examine resistance among students of color that is political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001, p. 320). Put differently, transformative resistance is another form of student oppositional behavior in school; however, such behavior illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice. Essentially, it allows for transformation and may involve marginalised individuals strategically conforming, or taking risk as a way to gain respect from members of the dominant culture or even other marginalised individuals. Arguably, transformative resistance is closely linked to resilience insofar as resilience also means successful adaptation to life tasks in the face of social disadvantages (Hanley & Noblit, 2009); resilient students are considered to perform well in school in the face of oppression.

⁸ Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a line of academic inquiry which seeks to uncover how superficially race-neutral social policies can and do recreate systemic racial oppression. CRT challenges the objectivity of social science research while concurrently highlighting the value of experiential knowledge from communities of colour. It was originally developed within the legal field, and has been applied in education (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

⁹ Extending on CRT, LatCrit theory challenge the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how education theory and practice are used to subordinate and marginalize Chicana and Chicano students” (Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal 2001, p. 312).

To an extent, transformative resistance mirrors Friere's (1970) notion of transformative education as a vital tool to liberate the oppressed. Freire (1930) views education as a means to improve the human condition. As such, transformative education aims to help learners develop the ability to analyse, pose questions and take actions on the social, cultural, political and economic context that influence and shape their lives. Friere (1970) believed that the oppressed must liberate themselves with education. Similarly, hooks (1990) implied that marginalised groups should not just view the "margins" as spaces of deprivation and domination, but as sites where transformative resistance can take place (p. 153).

Transformative resistance can be initiated in different forms. For example, Robinson and Ward (1991) identify resistance for liberation in their work with African American females. Resistance for liberation refers to resistance in which Black girls and women are encouraged to acknowledge the problems and demand change in the environments that oppress them (p. 89). Here transformative resistance is driven by encouragement from external sources. Tara Yosso (2000) also offers another illustration of transformational resistance that was manifested by Chicana/o students in their school settings. These students asserted that their resistance was influenced by the need to "prove others wrong." Proving others wrong involved a process whereby students used the negative images and ideas associated with their cultural groups as motivation to navigate through the educational system for themselves and others (p. 109). Ultimately, with transformative resistance, marginalised students find different ways to respond to the negative perceptions that society or the school may have of them in a positive way by engaging in academic activities.

3.9.6 Resistance among Black Females (Resilient Black Females)

Dei (1995) identified resistance as one of the central ways in which people of African descent (or Blacks) responded to oppression. Black women were also resisting. History confirmed that enslaved Africans engaged in both active and passive forms of resistance in rebelling against the Slavery and their state of oppression. For example, Harriet Tubman, who was named the “Black Moses,” rebelled against slavery and assisted in freeing other enslaved African Americans who wanted to access the secret trail leading from the American South to Canada.¹⁰ As well, Black women who worked in the house, (often referred to as ‘house slaves’) engaged in day to day domestic-related resistance such as accidentally burning their master and his family’s clothes while ironing or purposefully putting wrong ingredients in the food while cooking.

Black women continue to employ ways to resist oppression in American society in the post-slavery era. Namely, the Civil Rights Era in America holds many stories of resistance and the constant attempts by Blacks to have the government correct laws and policies deemed oppressive and racially discriminatory. In Canada, there were Blacks who resisted policies and laws that upheld racial oppression. As a case in point, Canadian hairdresser, Viola Desmond became one of the first Civil Rights activists in Canadian Black history.¹¹ Desmond engaged in a more active form of resistance by refusing to give up her seat in a movie theatre in Halifax that had segregated seating for Blacks and Whites. Blacks continued to assert themselves, whether in solidarity, or independently to speak out against injustices and fight oppressive conditions that

¹⁰ Harriet Tubman was one of the main conductors on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a secret path transporting African Slaves in the American South to Canada, which was considered the promise land and where Blacks were free.

¹¹ Viola Desmond was a black female activist in Halifax, Nova Scotia who was charged and held overnight in jail for occupying a seat in the “Whites only” section as a movie theatre in New Glasgow. Her story was one of the most publicized incidents of racial discrimination in Canadian history and raised awareness about the reality of Canadian segregation. See <http://www.blackhistorycanada.ca/profiles.php?themeid=20&id=13>

directly or indirectly affected the Black community. Although, Black people engaged in resistance to bring about changes in their lives, some forms of resistance pushed them further to the margins, while others brought them closer to attaining social justice.

Commonly, female stereotypic personality traits include loving, compassionate, caring, nurturing, sympathetic, passive and submissive. Interestingly, the stereotypes for Black women personality types are the opposite. Black women are usually perceived as outspoken, loud, “sassy”, and overly aggressive. Black girls who display this form of behavior may be judged negatively, and/or misjudged. In highlighting the lived experiences of African American adolescents and their speech practice, Koonce (2012) explores the concept of ‘talking with an attitude (TWA) which is the speech practice of most African American women. She sees TWA as an African American women’s speech practice that is used to show confidence or resistance in oppressive situations even though it often has negative connotations (p. 28). Especially in the classroom, Black girls speaking up or engaging in TWA may carry risks or result in negative feedback from teachers and school officials. In her article "Those Loud Black Girls" Signithia Fordham (1993) reinforces this notion implying that African-American young women often show resistance to accepting the Anglo norm of femininity by being loud or by asserting themselves through their voices. This practice then becomes a common resistance for survival strategy. Robinson and Ward (1991) stress that this type of behavior must be adapted to truly benefit young women, in that, the loud nature of these girls should be developed as a tool for resistance to teach them how to become more effective and organized in ways of engaging in the same behavior, such as forming an advocacy group for change within the school.

While being vocally aggressive may be deemed as resistance for liberation (Robinson and Ward, 1991), the other extreme, being quiet in class, is also perceived as a positive and accepted

behavior for Black girls. In fact, it is generally the assumption in parts of society that it is the quiet Black girls who performed well in the school (Henry, 1998; Fordham, 1993). This observation is somewhat parallel to the notion of “acting white” insofar as suggesting that subtle and more passive behavior in Black girls may also be referred to as "passing for white" and adopting this submissive behavior as necessary to become successful in the classroom.

Robinson and Ward (1991) referred to performance as cultural disassociation and they see it as a survival strategy rather than a tool for liberation. Whether it is resistance for liberation, or for survival, Black girls adapted different resistance strategies to achieve good grades in school.

To further understand the coping strategies that Black girls and other young people from minority backgrounds employed to achieve success, it is important to understand their sources of motivation. Some researchers distinguish successful students coming from impoverished settings as resilient students. While some students may have an inherent drive for academic success, others may be dependent on external forces to boost their confidence. Studies suggest that minority students from low-SES or racial backgrounds are usually exposed to greater risks and fewer resilience promoting conditions. Furthermore, minority students are also assumed to have poorer levels of internal locus of control and less academic self-efficacy (Borman and Rachuba, 2001). Therefore, resilience-promoting factors such as effective schools system, positive peer group relations, parental influences, community or religious affiliations, etc., might be considered great sources of motivation, or alternative sources for equipping Black girls with the tools, social capital or skills they need in order to excel in school. Below, I further explore some of these factors in the literature and show how each factor contributes to minority students' academic success.

3.10 Social Capital

From an economic standpoint, social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society, but it is also the glue that holds them together (The World Bank, 1999). Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. The economic function of social capital is to reduce the transaction costs associated with formal coordination mechanisms like contracts, hierarchies, bureaucratic rules, and the like (The World Bank, 1999). Pierre Bourdieu (1983) describes social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu 1983, p. 249). Put differently, social capital simply refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Bourdieu's definition of social capital stresses social inequality and human interactions and relationships which are the intangibles yet imperative features in understanding the ways in which power is retained by the dominant class. Therefore, the possession of social capital does not necessarily run alongside that of economic capital, but the use of cultural knowledge to retain and maintain hierarchical positions and status is a valid aspect of the social capital discussion.

Attaining a good education is often times dependent on economic possession and status because education and schooling increasingly model the way businesses operate. Drawing on the principles of business, networks and positive business relationships enable companies to function effectively. In the same way, effective social interaction, networks, and the relationships between schools and families can enable students to function effectively and to enhance their academic performance. Generally, it is families with financial security who develop relationship with

schools. Thus, students from families that have wide networks, involvement and connections with schools, they are most likely to excel academically. Not only do they have access to financial resources, but they may also inherently know the language and how to socially interact, and maintain relationship and networks with school officials (Stanton- Salazar, 1997). To add, Bourdieu (1973) argues that cultural capital is acquired primarily at an early age within the family, where children develop specific linguistic and cultural competencies and familiarity with culture (Bourdieu 1973, p. 494). He further explains that schools reflect the culture of the dominant class in society, therefore, students who belong to such class absorb the right cultural codes at home and come to school prepared, and are able to adapt faster to school environment. Students with little or no social capital may experience school culture differently.

Financial cost remains a prime factor that contributes to the poor academic performances of students in urban schools; but it is not the only vital factor that has an impact on students' success. In fact, in Ontario, secondary public school, students escape the impediment of having to pay high tuition fees because public school education is offered at no cost, yet high schools still experience significant dropout rates. To some degree, this occurs because social capital carries great weight on students' success, perhaps over financial cost. Therefore, a valid reason for students' low academic performance is underestimating the impact that student's home culture has on their learning experiences (Stanton- Salazar, 1997; Briscoe, 2014). As established above, learning can be a smooth process for some students, while for others there are more challenges. While schools hold a primary function of facilitating the process of skills acquisition and development, for students coming from urban neighbourhoods, this transition can sometimes be difficult because students are in conflict finding a way to balance their home culture with that of the school. As a result, some schools may spend more time with this transmission process and

decoding school culture becomes a delayed process that in the end is interpreted as poor academic performance. In some instances, schools may even ignore this as a real struggle that students are faced with and as a result, these students fall through the cracks. However, for some students, learning the process of decoding the education system is in itself a measureable success (Borman and Rachuba, 2001; Bottrell, 2007).

Stanton- Salazar (1997) claims that in order for minority students to acquire success, including academic success, they first have to acquire social capital. To accomplish this, they must adopt a “bicultural, network orientation” that will help them negotiate between the dominant culture and their local culture. Such orientation allows them to decode the system and participate in power. Studies have shown that students from minority groups have to give up something, usually their identity to acquire success (Dei et al, 1997; Ogbu, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This idea was further distinguished in a study on the navigation strategies employed by Latino and African American students. Using a lens of racial opportunity cost, Venzant-Chambers (2012) explores two navigational techniques, “merger” and “weaver” used by high achieving students of color to facilitate academic success amidst the oppressions within their academic institutions. In responding to the dominant culture, mergers aligned and mirrored their lifestyle; weavers on the other hand navigated the same norm but did not align with them in terms of their expressed culture. Weavers schemed a way of going back and forth, navigating their way with their culture and that of the dominant culture, and shifting back and forth when necessary. Therefore, even though minority students may not have inherited social capital, some still manage to devise ways to obtain access to success whether it is with the support from others or a personal drive for self-development.

3.11 Internal Drive

Some students are intrinsically motivated to acquire academic success based on the inherent value of education as being personally rewarding. Based on the conception that education leads to a career path, higher salary, job security, and standards of living, some students will use this assumption as motivation or a driving force to excel in school. However, for other students, especially minority students, personal rewards gained from academic achievement may carry different meanings. Overcoming negative societal barriers and disproving stereotypes are additional hurdles that minority students have to jump and the end result can be personally rewarding.

Internal drive also influences the way students deal with setbacks. It is noteworthy that in some cases, societal barriers are double-edged, insofar as in one context they result in students' disengagement, and in another context, students may use these obstacles as motivation to perform better in school. For instance, Canadian researchers report that racism in the school played out through alienation and negligence is one factor that discourages Black students from participating in academic activities (Dei, 1999; Codjoe, 2001, James, 2012). In contrast, Latina/o students in America used this approach as a motivation to prove their teachers, and society wrong (Yosso, 2000). This strategy is closely linked to internal locus of control. Borrowing from psychology, locus of control is a psychological attribute that refers to a people's perceptions of how much control they have over circumstances in life. When an individual perceives the outcome as a result of their own actions, this is referred to as internal locus of control. If the individual perceives the outcome as a result of forces beyond his/her control then it is regarded as external (Gifford, et al, 2006). The two goals sometimes complement each other in that

individuals may use external influences as stimuli for their internal drive. An individual's response to forces around can help to explain internal locus of control.

Internal locus of control is a powerful determinant for African American students' academic achievement (Borman and Rachuba, 2001). In fact, Finn and Rock (1997) in their study on academic success among students at risk for school failure identify a high dose of self-esteem, and internal sense of control to engage in behaviors that will facilitate learning as the underlying factors that distinguish resilient students. Having positive self-regard allows students to engage in activities such as attending classes regularly and on time, being prepared for and participate in class activities, avoiding being disruptive in class which taken together have positive impact on their academic outcomes (p. 231). Dei (1995) implies that Canadian Black students who exhibit these forms of behavior, stay in school and complete their education, may be giving the "false impression" that there are no systemic barriers within the school system (p. 61). Alternatively, academic success among these students can simply be understood as using drawbacks that exist within the school system to create academically resilient character.

In some cases, the recommendations proposed to curb the high dropout rate and to encourage academic engagement point to support or motivation from external forces (Dei, 1999; Codjoe, 2001, James, 2012). For example, anti-racist framework in education pushes for changes in institutionalised structures, teaching practices and pedagogy in order to increase student engagement; however this approach tends to put the onus on educators. In her dissertation on the sociological factors that encourage the academic success of Black students in Ontario, Lisa Hart (2011) stresses that academic success can be promoted by educators who are willing to think outside the box and interrogate current teaching practices in order to allow all students to connect with the material being taught. For Stanton-Salazar (1997), external support is imperative for

students' success in school. Yet, minority students may have little or no access to institutional agents¹², or supportive relations to acquire success. Although individuals are shaped by their environment, the way a person responds to her or his environment speaks volumes to the power of internal locus of control. Thus, internal locus control should be considered in conjunction with external influence when discussing options to improve education for minority students.

3.12 Parental Involvement

The family is the first social and educational environment that children are exposed to, and remains a fundamental factor that contributes to child development (Jeynes, 2007). To a great extent, familial or parents' involvement in their child's education is undeniably the main vehicle for success. In documenting the factors that Black students cited as contributing to their academic success, Atkins (2012) reports that high achievers credited their parents as their main source of motivation. Parents contribute to their children education directly, and indirectly. For the sake of this discussion, parental involvement is any activity, interaction, or experience that may have an impact on their children' education and academic success. Parents offer visible and direct support to their children by providing the physical resources (finance, learning materials, healthy meal, clothing, etc.) to enhance their learning. Parents also participate in their children' learning, by assisting with homework, attending parent-teachers meeting, volunteering at school events, serving school councils or committees, etc. however, indirectly, some students may also use their family's position and status in society as motivation for success. In that, students' drive for success is based on the need to have a better life, free of struggles, than their parents.

¹² Individuals who have the capacity to transmit institutional resources or opportunities to students and youth; these can include resources such as academic tutoring and mentoring, adequate information about school programs, career advice, college admission advice, or *influential* individuals such as social workers, counselors, clergyman, mature peers, etc. (Stanton- Salazar, 1997).

Family background factors such as household setting and parental education play an important role in explaining a student's achievement. As evident in Bourdieu's (1973) discussion on cultural capital, parents' education may also have implications for students' academic performance. That is, students with highly educated parents may have an advantage over those with parents with lower educational attainments. Although the Ontario Ministry of Education states that parents' responsibility is primarily to ensure that their children attend school, society and educators tend to overstretch this role. Schools and educators often blame families for their children's underperformance in school today (Jeynes, 2007). Moreover, according to Jeynes ethnic minority students and their parents have been pathologized as being irresponsible which was a prime reason for the low academic achievement amongst minority students. Parents offer an insurmountable amount of support to their children academic success often times social science researches downplay their contribution as insignificant (Jeynes, 2005).

3.13 Black Parents 'Unusual' Support

Especially in urban areas, parental involvement in their child's education can be unusual. As mentioned earlier, family structure, socioeconomic status, parents' schedule, and level of education are all familial factors that have an impact on students' education. In urban communities, these family elements are often portrayed as dysfunctional. Urban families are largely portrayed as disoriented, lone-parent household, high level of unemployment or poverty, and little or no education and often detached from their child's education. It is widely accepted that parental involvement is a viable solution to closing the achievement gap especially for minority students. In most cases, Black parents may not be as actively or directly involved in their children's education yet they still offer support which is as important for students' success.

Black and other minority parents have high aspirations for their children. Smith (2000) states that Black parents typically encouraged their children to work hard in school as these parents also believed that hard work and perseverance would lead to success even in the face of racism. Some parents work multiple jobs and make nearly impossible sacrifices to ensure that their children could obtain an education; sometimes they themselves did not receive education.

Furthermore, Black parents display their value for education and have worked tirelessly over the years for changes to a system that they believe have not treated their children equitably. Recently in Ontario, the Afrocentric School opened, partially due to Black parents lobbying for the equitable education for their children. In her study on Black parents reaction to the Black-focused school, Agyepong (2010) observed that the majority of parents in her study rallied for a Black focused school as they believe that having their children attending such school will prevent them from dealing with the oppression that Black youth face in mainstream public schools. Subsequently, this will also enhance their children's academic achievement and chances of success in life more broadly (Agyepong, 2010, p.213). More interestingly, the majority of those parents who challenged the idea of a Black-focused school were mainly concerned about school funding and whether academic credentials obtained from Black or African-centered schools would be seen as legitimate in mainstream society as those obtained from the traditional schools.

Black parents are usually blamed for the academic failure of their students (Agyepong, 2010; Dei, et al, 2007; Robinson & Werblow, 2013). However, the sad reality is that many Black and other minority parents may not have access to economic rewards like those in the dominant society. Most of these parents acquire low paying jobs, sometimes working two or more jobs, and very long hours just to make ends meet. This effort results in families living

along the poverty line and parents spend less time with their children, less time ensuring that their homework is completed, and less time to check in with teachers and principals as to how their children are doing in school. In addition to not being physically involved in their children's lives, disadvantaged parents with little or no education may also feel incapable of linguistically expressing themselves and communicating with teachers, principals and school authorities. This perceived limitation may eventually lead them to being less visibly involved in their children's education. Although Black parents and especially single- parents are faced with many economic and societal challenges, in their study on the power of single mom, Robinson and Werblow (2013) report how influential single mothers were in their sons' educational success. The males in the study described their mothers as the sole inspiration in their academic journey. They further stated that their mother held high expectations which included visions of attending college and they were consistently motivating them to do well in school and encouraging their academic effort. Interestingly, in the absence of their fathers, mothers also offered frequent meaningful conversations and acted as strong authority figures in their lives (p. 207). Specific to the Canadian context, Black parents largely immigrated to Canada to provide their children with a better life. Hart (2011) asserts that Canadian students think that the pessimistic encouragement from their parents on the hardships and racism in Canada helped them to work harder in school. Parental support and involvement is a central meter in gauging children's success directly or indirectly.

3.14 The Church

There is a famous ancient African proverb which states "it takes a village to raise a child". In essence, in most Black families, the church plays a major role in young people's

upbringing (Irvin et al, 2010). W.E.B. DuBois wrote in the 1890s on the power and influences of the Black church, he declared that low-income Black kids will not achieve academic success without strong families and the church. In fulfilling its role as an agent of socialization, the church assists in the way young people conceptualize their identity which may ultimately have an impact on their level of academic engagement. As a religious institution, the church has its own rules and regulations which members are expected to follow. Some of these rules help to instill good morals and encourage young people to practise good ethics. Especially for young Black girls, the rules of the church also teach them how to behave and govern themselves, which is largely in opposition to the stereotypical attitude of young Black girls described above. In her study on the churches serving as positive social capital in children' academic Success, Briscoe (2013) shows that young people's involvement in church activities has led to increase in achievement. For example, the impact from the church include enhancing other forms of participation (e.g., attendance), interpersonal competence, educational and occupational aspirations, academic efficacy and motivation via the provision of various factors including safety, structure, supportive relationships, sense of belonging, positive social norms, skill building (Irvin et al, 2010; Briscoe, 2013) . Thus, the church as an influential institution helps young people, especially young girls, to stay grounded and to adopt principles which may assist them in making better life decisions.

In fulfilling its charitable role, the church also provides physical support to young people in need or those living in poverty. Some churches provide basic needs such as, food and clothing, which make it possible for students to attend school and learn. Furthermore, some churches offer scholarships to students, which help to cover their schooling expenses. Therefore, especially for youth living in poverty, or inner city youth, the church or rather, involvement in

church activities offers security and a sense of belonging to these young people. Also, the church also reinforces the importance of education. Stanton- Salazar (1997) places the church among the most important social sphere for children and youth in their development years. As such, clergy, youth leaders, and church ministers are influential institutional agents who serve as mentors and external stimuli in students' success. Involvement in church activities not only increases achievement, but participation may reduce anxiety and facilitate coping with adverse experiences such as poverty, racism, bullying, etc.

In "Faith in the Inner City: The Urban Black Church and Students' Educational Outcomes," Dr. Brian Barrett, an education professor at the State University of New York College at Cortland, describes the unique contributions Black churches play in cultivating successful students in the inner-cities. He observed that religious socialization reinforces attitudes, outlooks, behaviors, and practices and particularly through individuals' commitment to, and adoption of the goals and expectations of the group that are conducive to positive educational outcomes. Furthermore, Barrett (2010) adds that one of the most important advantages of inner-city churches is that they provide a community where Black students are valued, both for their academic success and, more broadly, as human beings and members of society from whom success is expected. This attitude adopted by some inner city churches overrides the low expectations communicated at school, or in society. He also highlights that because Black churches are largely equipped to deal with families they are more effective at sustaining and encouraging parental educational involvement. Not only that, but through regular contact with other adults and peers, the church become a site where young people gain access to emotional support through role-modeling and mentoring. Overall, the church remains a source of support readily accessible to, and frequently utilized by Black youth.

3.15 Peer Relations

It is widely accepted that peer relationships form an important developmental context for children because, and as psychologists and researchers would probably argue, children and young people tend to interact openly and spontaneously with their peers than with parents, teachers or any other adult in general. Partially, this is based on the facts that young people spend more time with peers than with adults and peer to peer interaction tends to be less authoritative or controlling. As such, peer interaction remains one of the most influential factors on young adolescents and their decision making. Although, peer influence it is usually viewed as negative, in some cases peer influence can also be positive. Similar to the negative implication that peer pressure fosters, there are also positive outcomes from peer influence. The extensive literature shows that peers have a significant influence on the motivation, engagement, and subsequent achievement of their counterparts (Blake & Darensbourg, 2014; Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Atkins, 2012). Positive peer relations allow for communication and provide help and guidance which may support teens in their efforts to excel in the classroom and with their homework. Furthermore, peer relationship influences attendance, and help to encourage a more positive school environment, subsequently, this will help to improve grades and academic performance.

Peer relations can also have significant impact on Black students' academic performance. On the one hand, Black students can imitate and listen to their peers and boycott school and disengage from academic activities, and on the other hand try to support their peers in their academic journey. Ogbu's (2003) explains that some minority youth refuse to participate in academic activities out of fear of being categorized as "acting white" by peers. In opposition to Ogbu's conclusion, in Canada, within the Black community Black youth usually support their

peers who have academic aspiration even when they themselves may not share the same education aspiration or goals. In her dissertation on the influences of parents, peers, demographic, and cultural factors on Black Canadian students' academic performance and attitudes toward school, Smith (2000) demonstrates how Black peer groups relations, especially within the Canadian context, can be a source of academic support as such association can assist in encouraging high academic effort and motivation.

As an agent of socialization, peer group relations provide a sense of stability for young people from unstable homes. In the absence of parents, or other adult role models, some young people look to their peers for emotional support and motivation. In contrast to offering direct support to their peers, peer influence on students' success can also be manifested indirectly. High achieving students with positive attitudes can affect their peers through knowledge spillovers. More often within the Black community, these high achieving students become “trailblazers” or the “model student” that all parents encourage their children to imitate. In some cases, high achieving students also actively engage in mentoring or coaching their peers to work toward achieving academic success. It is also worth mentioning, that on average, female students tend to benefit more from peer support than males (Smith, 2000). Smith further explains that this peer support reported by female students may be related to their general orientation toward education, friendship or social activities.

3.16 Teachers and School Principal

Similar to the peer group support, the school including teachers, principals and administration is one of the main agents of socialization for young people. As an established academic institution, one of the main roles of the school is to polish the behaviour of students

and equip them for occupational socialization. School is in essence a second home to students, and teachers are like substitute parents, figuratively. In a typical academic year, students spend more time at school, with teachers, and their peers than they do with parents and relatives. A supportive school environment creates a sense of belonging and inclusivity. It is a space where students feel free to be themselves and not be afraid of being judged. It is an environment where educators support the success of all students, while working with students through difficulties. It holds accountable all stakeholders in promoting the success of all students in the building.

Although the school plays such a vital role in students' development and academic success, Hart (2011) mentions that many Black Canadian students enter their schools each day feeling as though they do not belong. They feel ostracized by the educational system, their peers, their teachers and administrators. She further states that it is an environment that speaks against who students are and their cultural upbringing. Such negative school environment can foster a sense of hostility, alienation and hopelessness. Furthermore, the lack of support and expectation from school teachers (predominantly white teachers), and conflict in interaction and misunderstandings of Black students in Canada have been cited as one of the main factors leading to students dropout. More recent studies concludes that an increase in Black teachers and a more supportive school environment would garner more positive academic outcome for Black students (States (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Henry, 1993). Dei (1999) posits that when Black students feel invested in their school community, they are likely to achieve higher academic success. Through various extra-curricular activities, students can develop a sense of belonging and pride, not only in their academics but in the school climate.

3.17 Conclusion

Based on the literature, the schooling experiences of minority and Black students in Canada and the United States can be understood through resistance. Studies have explored the institutionalised and systemic barriers that push these students out of school or allow for them to engage in self-defeating form of resistance. More interestingly, there is an increasing amount of research that examines the factors that influence students to engage in transformative resistance or to stay in school despite the barriers they face. Specific to Black students' academic resilience, there is limited research on resilient students' unique experiences and very little is known on how their experiences may apply to students of different ages, gender, socioeconomic status and learning capability in Canada. Oppositional culture theory and the explanation of assigning success to "acting white" (Ogbu, 1978) does not account for all Black students because studies have shown otherwise. Black students have positive views on education, along with educational goals and aspirations. Nonetheless, Ogbu's approach initiates conversation and debates on the notion of resistance among minority youth and opposing the dominant culture. Most studies in Canada have focused on this form of resistance that overemphasizes academic disengagement.

In contrast, the concept of transformational resistance is useful in studying and understanding the schooling experiences and motivations of Black students and how they navigate their way to success. Despite its great emphasis on desire for social change, transformative resistance also focuses on bringing about more positive results for minority students. Thus, it is useful to use transformative resistance to examine the navigating techniques employed by high achieving Black female students in Canadian urban schools.

Chapter 4: METHODOLOGY

“If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?”
Albert Einstein

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore and examine the strategies used by successful secondary school Black female students to achieve academic success in an urban school learning environment and to examine how these strategies can inform education policies and benefit other students. The main purposes of this chapter are: (1) to describe the research paradigm that underpins this research; (2) explain the sample selection; (3) describe the procedures, the instruments used to collect the data and the data analysis technique; and, (4) discuss the ethical concerns of the research.

4.1.1 Justification for Qualitative Research

I have three main reasons for choosing a qualitative research approach. First, I wanted the research to be based on students' perspectives. I discovered the notion of child-centered learning in Paulo Friere's work and was inspired to apply this approach to my own research. Instead of speculating the reasons and explanations as to why and how students coped in unfavourable learning environments, and offering suggestions on how to curb the dropout rate, with this research, I was interested in students' perspectives; I was curious to know how they overcame academic and systemic barriers, how they felt about their academic success, what contributed to their success, and what made them stand out. With the use of effective data collection methods such as demographic survey, interviews and discussion group, qualitative research allowed me to capture the perspectives and lived experiences of students. Qualitative research involves gathering in-depth understanding of a subject matter, in this case, Black girls academic success

in urban school environments. To add, such an approach also allowed me to answer my research question through giving students a voice.

The second reason I chose qualitative research lies in its benefit to me as a researcher. Employing this method allowed me to learn and connect with the four girls who participated in the research. The process was very intimate. I recall at the end of one of the interviews, the participant hugged me and told me I was cool, surprisingly. For the first time she had the opportunity to talk about herself and her experiences, and she appreciated this activity and process. As a researcher, I had to be an active listener as these girls shared their stories and experiences regarding their school, teachers, identities, goals and aspirations. I gained a sense of accomplishment knowing that my research gave four young girls the opportunity to share their stories and we were able to connect in some way with these stories.

The third, and possibly the main reason for choosing this approach is the flexibility it offered in writing up the findings and results. In writing up the final report, I was able to include the voices of participants as well as my own reflexivity to compile a complex description and interpretation of the problem, while indicating my contribution to the literature or a call for action (Creswell 2013). In the end, although vastly time and resource consuming, I chose a qualitative approach because such an approach allowed me to explore and to develop an in-depth understanding of the techniques and strategies that successful female students used to achieve academic success in schools. Further, with qualitative research, I become an "active learner" who grasped participants' views and empowered individuals to share their stories.

4.1.2 Philosophy and Research Paradigm

Qualitative research acknowledges that there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). The nature of qualitative research is perspectival insofar as it embraces the notion that reality is subjective and culturally determined. As discussed in Chapter 2, the transformative paradigm that underpins this research influenced the methods used to collect, interpret and present the data. First, the transformative interpretive framework emphasized marginalised groups, and this position was apparent in selecting the sample of Black girls from a working class neighbourhood, for the study. This framework is frequently seen as emancipatory and participatory. This point of view also reflects one goal of this research, which is to give voice to the participants. Coupled with a narrative research design, which acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher, the transformative research paradigm holds a methodological belief that reality is created through a collaborative process between researcher and participants. Based on this premise, my participants and I were able to co-create the findings and their narratives.

4.1.3 Research Approach and Design

This qualitative research, drawn from a narrative inquiry approach, analyses the schooling experiences of four successful female Black students in Ontario public schools. Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach that investigates narratives and uses narratives to present research findings and results. Such an approach gathers data through a collection of detailed stories ultimately seeking to understand the human experiences within a contemporary context or setting (Clandinin, 2006). By adopting this approach, I probed the lived experiences and interactions of high achieving Black female students and presented narratives on the navigating techniques employed by these students to acquire academic success. I gathered the

participants' stories through multiple sources, including interviews, and then collaborated with participants to construct and assign meaning to their narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While some forms of qualitative analysis have a standard set of procedures, narrative research and procedures tend to be more subjective and are often difficult to quantify in an objective manner. Nonetheless, the subjective nature added meaning to the research.

4.2 Data Collection Method

4.2.1 Selecting and Recruiting Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Specifically, I recruited four successful female students who self-identify as Black. Participants were mainly recruited from a local youth group in Ontario through personal conversation, in person or via telephone. First, I approached high school girls who were members of a local youth group in Ontario and family members who met the inclusion criteria for my study and asked them if they would be interested in participating. A total of 10 girls responded and agreed that they would participate. However, three of the girls were travelling for the summer break, and thus were not available to meet for the semi-structured, face to face interviews. Another two girls had very busy schedules and were also not available to meet. This process narrowed down my sample to five girls to participate in the study. One participant who agreed to participate initially did not provide her availability or replied to my requests until later in the research stage, when I had already decided to proceed with the study. Although there were scheduling problems, four of the girls managed to clear their busy schedule to meet with me.

4.2.1 Justification for Participant Sample (Why High School)

I selected high school students for my study because of their “perceived” innocence and forthrightness in their opinions. This perspective was based on my assumption that high school students can give answers, in their own words, with less influence from course knowledge or any other external sources. In other words, they are expressing their feelings and responses.

Furthermore, while some studies on academic achievement tend to focus on post-secondary students (Gosine, 2008; Robinson & Werblow, 2013), most students drop out of high school and hence never make it to college or university. In Canada, the high school dropout rate amongst Black youth sits at 40 percent (*Toronto Star*, March, 2013). Arguably, it is usually students who are highly motivated and have education goals who proceed to post-secondary education. Therefore, in post-secondary they are merely working on accomplishing these goals, and thus their mindset is to try to excel against all odds. In this study, I am interested in how this drive to succeed first developed, and the related question as to how students develop this attitude in high school and during their adolescent years. Finally, I chose to focus on high school students because secondary education is publicly funded in Canada and therefore de-emphasises economic barriers as the main reason for students leaving school prematurely, or not continuing on to higher education.

4.2.3 Participants

As previously mentioned, the target population for this study were successful female Black students who were enrolled in urban schools in Ontario. For the purpose of the study, successful Black students were defined as individuals coming from urban neighbourhoods, and/or working class family settings and were enrolled in academic or advanced streams in all or

most of their courses. As well, these individuals must be passing with an 80% average or higher, and anticipate university enrolment. My rationale for including students with university aspirations is linked to the assumption that Black students are more suitable for applied learning and are usually steered into college program preparation courses by guidance counsellors in high school (Dei et al, 1997; Brathwaite & James, 1996). I relied solely on the word of my participants regarding their average in school and enrolment history. It was optional for participants to show me a copy of their report card as proof of their grades, but none of the participants showed me physical copies. However, frequently, the participants would refer to grades they were getting in some subjects. For example, one participant while sharing how she strategized in preparing for her university application stated that her French grade dropped from 90 to 81 because she was focusing more on the other courses that would count towards her university application. Another participant mentioned that she was not worried about meeting the 80% average requirement in her six 4U¹³ courses for university application.

Except for one participant, the girls and I have a close relationship. One participant is a family member. Despite these relationships, participants were assured that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they would not be penalized should they refuse to participate, or withdraw from the study. More importantly, they were also advised that their decision to participate or refuse would not affect the nature of our relationship. This perspective was verbally communicated to participants during the recruitment process; I repeated it prior to the start of the interview, and it was written in the consent forms. All of the participants attended different urban high schools in Ontario; three of the schools are identified as urban and priority high schools by the Ministry of Ontario. This diversity added variation to the study given that

¹³ In Ontario, 4Us are grade 12 university level courses that are needed for university applications. More information on Ontario courses is available in Ontario curricula documents.

each school had differing impacts on the students' experience. Usually, the sample size in a narrative research design is one or two individuals (Creswell, 2013); however, I recruited four (4) participants to develop a collective story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Further, having an appropriate number of participants presents the possibility of drawing meaningful conclusions from the data.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments

To build an in-depth case on the academic journeys among these four high achieving Black female students, I used multiple forms of instruments to collect the data. The main data collection tools included: an analysis of initiatives implemented with a goal to curb the dropout rate among disadvantaged youth; demographic questionnaires; semi-structured interviews; a group discussion; and, journaling. First, I familiarized myself with, and analysed a few initiatives (discussed in the Introduction) that were implemented in Ontario to improve urban school education, especially for disadvantaged youth. I analysed the documents prior to the initial meeting with the students. This way I could discuss the materials with the students should they have referenced them. I did not ask the students about any of the other initiatives that I analysed, I wanted the students to speak about them voluntarily; that way, I could measure how effective they were, and how they were received by students.

Secondly, I asked each participant to complete a student profile questionnaire to collect biographical information. The questionnaire requested information such as students' name, age, education level (completed), country of birth, ethnic identity, mother tongue and other language(s) spoken, household setting, family background (education, marital status and occupation), religious and/or cultural affiliations and any other extracurricular activities or

involvements. Students were given the questionnaire via email prior to meeting for the semi-structured interviews. This way they could familiarise themselves with the questions, and were also given the option to complete and email it back to me. The consent and assent forms were also emailed to all participants in advance of the data collection. One female filled out her questionnaire electronically. For the other three students who did not want to complete the survey electronically, I printed hard copies and brought them to each interview for each student to complete. At the interview, the questionnaires were completed, and consent forms were signed before I started the interviews. For two participants under 18 years old, although parental consent was given to me verbally, parents signed consent forms and they returned them to me at a later date. One parent signed the form same day as the interview. As well, an optional instrument was journal writing. Each participant was given a small notepad at our first meeting, which served as a journal for participants to record information that they deemed relevant but may not want to share with me verbally. The journals were to be collected four days after the discussion group. The goal was to give participants time to add any final comments or reflections arising from the discussion group, or the overall research. However, participants did not record any additional information in the journals and therefore were not returned to me.

4.3.1 Interview Procedure

The main tool used to collect the data was the semi-structured interviews. Interviews remain one of the most valuable and useful ways for thoroughly investigating certain issues (Creswell, 2013). As an effective data collection method, interviews are useful for gaining meaningful insight and context, and more importantly, they allow for participants to describe their experiences in full details. For this thesis, I conducted four individual face-to-face, semi-

structured interviews with each female student. These interviews were particularly useful in getting the detailed stories behind the girls' schooling experiences. I used an interview guide (*Appendix B*) that I created in advance of the meeting. The guide was comprised of mostly open-ended questions linking to the main research questions. The main purpose of the interview guide was to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions, and that the same general information was being collected from all participants. It also allowed flexibility and fluidity in the topics that were covered. With a goal to carry out a thematic analysis, using mostly open-ended questions not only garnered more detailed responses, but also prompted the participants to provide unrestrained responses and an opportunity to expound on their experiences. The questions included in the guide requested information on values and opinions, or feelings, behavior, perspectives and recollection of experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded, and time ranged from the shortest lasting for 20 minutes to the longest as one hour. Though extremely time consuming, as a researcher, one of the things I value the most from the interviews was the opportunity to probe participants to further explain, and clarify points that were unclear. Moreover, the participants and I worked together to create these stories and it was not just participants emptying their memory of the information they stored of the experiences they have in their secondary schools. Though susceptible to my own biases, the interviews garnered a high response rate and the participants provided valid information with comfort and ease.

4.3.2 Discussion Group Procedure

The final tool used for collecting data was an online discussion group. Like the interview, the group discussion achieved a high response rate. The main purpose for the group discussion was to assemble the four female participants so that they could reflect on some of the common

experiences they talked about during their one-on-one interview and also to comment on their reactions to being a part of this study. It also helped to carve out some of the students' shared experiences. Initially, the goal was to have this discussion face-to-face. However, with all the conflicts that scheduling the individual interviews posed, the discussion was done virtually. The virtual discussion board had a privacy setting where only the four girls and myself could post comments, and view the information. We were the only ones who had access to the discussion. The board was made available to all participants upon completion of all the semi-structured individual interviews and was up for one week for participants to post comments at any time. Finally, I kept a reflective journal during the study to record impressions, reactions, and other significant events that occur during the data collection phase of the research that I used as supplementary information.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

I analysed the data using problem solution narrative analysis approach (*see Appendix D*). Based on Yussen and Ozcan's theoretical perspectives of narrative thought, which suggests that narrative thought involves any cognitive action or activity in which the individual contemplates one or more people engaged in some activity or activities in a specific setting for a purpose, I analysed the data using this frame as reference to engage in the process of restorying (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Creswell and Ollerenshaw (2002) refer to this process as a problem solution narrative analysis approach. The problem solution narrative analysis approach essentially allows researchers to take the raw data in the form of the transcription and analyse it for the following five elements of plot structure; character, setting, problem, actions, and resolution. The analysis involves organising the elements into attempts and then sequencing

them. Thus, with this analytical approach, I used the raw data; Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to them as field text, to rewrite the participant's personal experience. Notably, the process of *restorying* essentially involves gathering stories, analysing them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot), and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological or thematic sequence.

Upon collecting the data, I first organised each interview, followed by gathering the comments from the discussion group. Organising the interviews involved uploading files unto my laptop computer, and properly filing them. I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews, word for word text version of the content of each interview; I also made notes on the non-verbal expressions that occurred during the interview. I translated where necessary, labeled and structured each interview. For the first analysis, I conducted a preliminary read through of the database with research questions in mind to familiarise myself with the data or the participant's stories. To add, I focused the analysis on how all the participants responded to the question. I organized the data by question to look across all respondents and their answers to identify consistencies and differences. I jotted down thoughts or ideas creating margin notes as I read through the data (Creswell, 2013). I then reread through the data thoroughly to make sense of it. In locating the elements of plots (characters, setting, problem, action and resolution), I color-coded specific elements in the narratives. These included information that spoke to the participants' character, the place, environment or grade throughout their public school education that served as the setting, the question they wrestled with that also led to their change in attitude towards school and consequently improvement in their grades and the specific action that they took to arrive at their individual resolution. In extracting common themes, I read through the re-stories and looked for issues that recurred in the data. Again, I had the research questions in mind

as I read through the data and developed the similarities and differences in the participants' stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). This approach allowed for themes to emerge from the data, rather than having preset themes. I continued this process until I categorized all of the data. Following that, I aggregated and linked codes into broader units of information, patterns or themes to form common ideas on the navigating techniques identified by participants to achieve academic success (Appendix D, table 1 and 2 illustrate this process). The females' experiences do not happen in a vacuum, but there are arrays of powerful social, historical, discourses that influenced their experiences. I completed the process by making connection to the discourses that may have influenced their stories and filling in gaps with assumptions of what omission or silences may be.

4.5 Ethical Consideration

Although my research posed no potential harm to participants, ethical issues are major concerns with all qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Based on the fact that I recruited human participants for this research, I anticipated ethical issues especially during the data collection, analysis and writing up of the final report. As a result, there were certain ethical concerns that I considered. During the data collection, and mainly with the interviews and discussion group, my primary role as the researcher was to “emphatically listen to participants” without being judgemental and being respectful of their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006). There were instances during the personal interviews where participants' responses sounded like they were venting about their school and experiences. They voiced their concerns and fears on the uncertainty that they anticipate of university life, their families, identities, their feelings towards

society and more. I listened to their stories attentively, noted their expressions and hoped that my presence and research interest assured them that someone cared.

Privacy concerns are important considerations in research. To protect the privacy, and anonymity of the participants, on the demographic questionnaire, I asked participants to provide a “cool” alias name they would like to be referred to throughout the study. This allowed me to fictionalize their character when writing up the final report. Also, in the final write-up, school names, locations, or communities are not disclosed. I did not provide specific biographical information on participants; instead, I presented a composite picture of the student populations. The discussion group posed a condition where the protection of the participants’ identity is not fully guaranteed. However, to ensure privacy, participants were asked to use their aliases when leaving comments on the discussion board. Moreover, in ensuring that the information shared during the discussion group remains between the participants and myself, I asked all participants who agreed to participate in the discussion group and by signing the consent form to agree to commit to keeping the group’s discussion confidential. To physically safeguard the data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure, the files were locked away in a storage drawer in my home away from the public. Technically, information stored on my laptop was also safeguarded, as I am the only user of my laptop, which is also password protected. Upon successfully defense of MA thesis, files will be conserved for four years. During this conservation period, the data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of my thesis supervisor at the University of Ottawa. The data, files and all written documents will be shredded after the conservation period to ensure proper disposal. All electronic files will be securely deleted in accordance with the University of Ottawa’s ethical requirements.

As the co-researcher in writing up these girls' narrative, I have a moral responsibility to report their stories accurately. Though it was entirely up to me to determine the fragments of their narratives that I included in the final report, it was also a moral and ethical stance for me in choosing and compiling these narratives. This responsibility includes ensuring that only stories that hold no potential to offend participants were disclosed. Also, though to some degree I do identify with my participants, insofar as self-identifying as a Black female, one of my main concerns were the power dynamics and how that may have played out in my research. With almost any qualitative research, researchers always have to be aware of their own position of power when conducting research, especially with research with a goal to give a voice to the voiceless, or which involve marginalised, human participants. My ethical dilemma in terms of power lay in the fact that I am a graduate student asking minors and one young adolescent to share their stories about school and society. For some of the girls, this was their first time ever been questioned by an adult about their school experiences and issues relating to identity and living in Canadian society. Although the participants asked me questions about school, education and career goals, my position as a mature student may have been intimidating to some degree.

4.6 Limitations and Delimitations

An obvious delimitation to my study is that I chose to use a small yet focused sample of high school students from urban areas in Ontario, and not elsewhere in the province or Canada. I made this choice because I had access to secondary school students in this part of the country who were willing to participate in my study. Undoubtedly, the sample influences the result significantly; definitely, more variation in the sample might produce different results. There were individuals and a few referrals who shared an interest in my study and wanted to

participate, however, they were not able to because of the specific eligibility criteria that I had. Restricted by narrative research design which generally suggests a small sample, and due to time constraints and limited resources, I only focused on specific aspects of the participants' narratives and experiences. While the narrative research design is useful in gathering in-depth stories of a small sample size, in the same vein, the nature also limits my ability to gather as much rich, descriptive data.

4.7 Trustworthiness of Findings

There were particular steps taken to ensure practical and ethical credibility of my study. First, I provided each participant with a copy of their narrative for their validation. This process is similar to member checking which is when data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of the group from whom the data were originally obtained (Creswell, 2013). This is an effective technique for establishing validity and credibility to the research. Being cognizant of the fact that participants may disagree with my interpretation on their narratives, or that there would have been elements of their narratives that they would want to recant, I was more concerned about presenting the most accurate versions of how these girls navigated their way in high school and this technique grants participants the opportunity to correct errors and challenge what may have been perceived as wrong interpretations. Moreover, the narrative inquiry approach inevitably leads to questions about the validity of the narratives told by the participants, including the question of whether or not they represent memory reconstruction versus facts (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000), which also remained ambiguous in this approach.

Secondly, the intrusion of my biases is inevitable. Research is influenced by my personal biases and idiosyncrasies due to the designs of the research, the type of questions I asked, the participants selected, etc. In particular, with the selection of sample, I recruited participants that were more likely to generate the desired results for my research. Furthermore, the participants and I had a close relationship and their participation and engagement in the research could be the result of their vested interest in my success and therefore may have provided responses they felt I wanted to hear or what would be deemed as an appropriate response to enhance the study. Providing detailed descriptions of the evidence and methodology contributes to the reliability of the study.

4.8 Significance and Contribution

This study informs the ongoing dialogue on Black students' schooling experiences in Canada. With the plethora of studies focusing on Black students' academic disengagement and emphasising the deficiencies among Black youth and their education in Canada, my study focuses on students who are disapproving these claims. Such an approach disrupts negative views of Black students as lagging behind in education in Canada. Furthermore, by employing this approach, this thesis fills a gap in the literature while contributing to the ongoing dialogue on Black students' schooling experiences in Canada. More importantly, approaching this issue using resistance theory and focusing on success stories offers a new perspective which prompts readers to look at the issue in a different, yet positive way. Finally, disseminating the narratives of successful students and what they are doing to achieve success provide real life examples for other students to imitate on how to excel amidst educational barriers. On a macro level, these narratives provide education policy makers with different perspectives on how students struggle

to achieve academic success in a system that promised to be accessible to all students. These narratives hold potential to inform policy reforms to implement better strategies for addressing the problem.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the participants' narratives re-storied using the problem solution narrative data analysis approach (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). Each narrative models a problem oriented sequence to explain the participant's experiences. The short narratives include character, setting, problem, actions taken and resolution. The character refers to my participants, and the setting is their urban high school. The problem, actions and resolution provide the basis for this thesis and these are primarily based on techniques and strategies these girls used to navigate their way in high school to achieve academic success. As well, five major themes were extracted from the participants' collective stories. These themes are, *Awareness, Suffer in Silence, Creating Resistive Identities, Self-motivated and Utilising Resources Available*. The chapter ends with a synopsis on the overall thematic collectives in the participants' narratives.

5.2 Shay Julius' Narrative

"What's the difference between me and these people other than they are putting in the effort to do what they needed to do and I realised, 'you know what, I can do that too, I should be doing that, why can't I do that', I was like, you know what, if my friend is getting 90 then I'm going to get 91." Shay Julius, Participant.

Shay Julius: I am kinda like a *joke stepper* person.

Rowena: What's a joke stepper?

Shay Julius: Joker [laughing]...but I always felt like I needed to be outspoken too, I feel like that stereotype that Black people are not involved in school, or that they do not care about academic, I think that would be confirmed, and I felt that because I was Jamaican, I think it helps me, it makes me present. I am not like a random person in the class who's like oh, that person

was there and actually, I feel more like I can actually be there, because I think for some people, if they were in that type of situation where I'm the only kind of person in that class, they might shy away from, by present I mean like involved, I think they might shy away from that, but for me I think it gives me a reason to try even harder. So yeah!

Shay Julius is very outspoken, funny and polite. She loves to play basketball and is very active in her community church. She lives with both of her Jamaican parents. Though she was born in Canada, Shay identifies more with the Jamaican culture. Throughout the interview she shared a lot about the Jamaican people and culture, her likes, dislikes and at one point even ranted about how easygoing Jamaicans are yet overbearing at the same time. Shay has a passion for law and the criminal justice system; she hopes to pursue a career in Law. Now an honor roll student, Shay is completing her senior year in high school and hopes to start university immediately after graduation. She is the first in her immediate family to apply to university, and is very confident that she will earn a university degree. During her interview, she shared that her mother loves education, but was never able to obtain higher education, and this also influences her desire to want to pursue university education. Although she is doing well in all of her classes, and seems like a positive outgoing student, with very optimistic views on life, education and her future, Shay was once a slacker in school. Leading up to final semester in Grade 7, she recalled that school for her was almost like a playground. She described that she did not care about school and as a result was not doing well.

"I really don't literally remember anything I did in class, I don't remember anything at all, and I saw that in my grades. I was getting C's, when I got my report card, I showed my parents and we had that conversation."

Shay later explained that the conversation between she and her parents was about her poor performance in school. Through it all, Shay explained that she knew herself and knew that if she tried harder, she could get As instead of Cs. Shay compared herself to other students who were doing well and grappled with the question about the difference between herself and other students who were participating and excelling in school. Using the performance and excellence of her peers as motivation, Shay surrounded herself with other students who were achieving academic success and pushed herself to do better in all of her classes.

Shay dislikes that her school is not as diverse as she would have liked. She also complained about the use of drugs by her peers and that the teachers have little or low standards for Black students. Shay explained that she was best friends with the Black boys because they were always in the principal's office together, sometimes for things she had no clue she had done, or trouble she had no idea she had committed. As well, she feels that some of the teachers at her school are not approachable or supportive. Despite all her dislikes, she realised that in order to pursue a Law degree she would first have to graduate high school and that requires getting good grades and meeting the systems' standards.

5.3 Annaya Brown's Narrative

"Students are successful when they want to do the work cuz, well like, parents can push you, and it's like good too, but then if they are pushing you into something that you don't want to do, at least for me, I dont know how far that can get me, but umm, when you find out like what you actually want to do, it's better, it's easier to excel in that." **Annaya Brown, Participant**

Annaya is quiet and very reserved. She loves to play the piano. Annaya lives with both of her Jamaican parents—being the only child, she is very close to both her parents. She is in Grade 12, and attends the secondary school located less than five minutes away from

her house. Her parents are very involved in her education, it almost seems as though her success in school is a harmonic collaboration between her and her parents. Her parents did not attend university. Annaya hopes to pursue an undergrad degree in English. With her love for technology and passion for design, she hopes to pursue a career in technical design and will complete an advanced degree in technical writing following her Bachelor's degree. Her parents, especially her mom, wants her to study medicine; however, she believes that success and academic success are when students get good marks in the classes that they care about and want to succeed at accomplishing. Furthermore, in her opinion, success is purely dependent on when the 'self' is satisfied and not based on external orders or validations. To get her parents to accept her career choice, Annaya had to work hard to get good grades in the subjects her mother wanted her to take and at the same time work even harder in the ones that she liked and wanted to continue pursuing in higher education.

Annaya felt that her school was a chaotic place and often felt unsafe due to countless incidents involving drugs use and students bringing knives and other weapons to school. Matters including bullying were often left unresolved at her school. As well, she believes that her Black peers are the ones mostly in trouble at her school and that the only difference between Black boys and girls is that Black boys are seen as trouble makers and threatening, "they are usually sent to the office for the simplest things, not any other group of boys". Annaya felt like she did not belong, yet she pushed herself to focus on completing the last year so she can get admission to the university of her choice to pursue higher education.

5.4 Jessica Charlton's Narrative

“So half the students were like artsy, and I dont want to be racist, but it was mainly kids from a certain race who were doing well, they were intense. But that school, when I look back, what I like about it the most is that it really did push me, and like pushed me to another level, it made me realise I wasn't that smart, but you gotta work for stuff. When I got to high school I just sat back, you know went to class, listen you know like I usually do, but you know I didn't work as hard, I didn't really push myself. At the new school, I go home, look at my work, do my homework, and look at my notes, every single day, because I had to do that in order to actually get decent grades there.” Jessica Charlton, Participant

Jessica Charlton is very determined to pursue her degree in Social Work. Charlton has already started university, yet she provided very detailed descriptions of her high school experiences. She attended two high schools, which she described as ‘night and day’. The first high school, “night”, she described as ‘ghetto’ and very close knit and the teachers had little or no expectations for students, and students pretty much did as they pleased. At this school, life was simple, or at least so Jessica thought until her mom moved her to a different school. At her new school, everything was different, she described it as a “culture shock”; students worked hard, were engaged in academic activities, and most shocking, she said that the teachers actually expected students to do well. To survive in this new school, Jessica had to push harder, spend extra time teaching herself and seeking help from this one teacher who saw that she was trying. This experience not only prepared Jessica for transition to university, but also shaped her definition of success. “Success is earned, though the system will define it as A+, for me, success is when I am truly happy with my grade and feel like I have work the hardest I possibly could and my grade reflects how hard I worked, but if I don't work for it, then I didn't earn anything.”

With her exposure to the new school environment and university life, Jessica was very concerned for her juniors, especially those at the first school. She is concerned that high school

students are not getting the preparation needed for university, which also impacts their grades. She thinks that the teachers need to start pushing students to work harder.

Jessica lives with her younger brother who is in high school, and her mother who is currently pursuing further studies. She shared that her mother is her inspiration, especially her courage to pursue higher education later in life. A devout Christian and choir member, Jessica mentioned that her church family plays a huge role in her life and success, indicating that members from her church often encourage and expect her to do well in school. She is very aware of the social injustices around her and believes that it is harder for Black men than Black women to achieve success in society, or at least for the men in her life. This she regarded as an irony. She also has an interesting insight on the distinction between Black men and women in society.

It's ironic, granted the historical oppressions against women, and in mainstream society, there is still sexism, men are more advanced, but I think it is harder for Black men to find their place in society. Career options for Black women are more celebrated than for male, Black women dominated social work, youth and care-givers and that is acknowledge, this is their place and everybody knows it, but there is no clear stream for Black men...Black men learn trades in college, and society values a university degree over college diploma – their places and spaces are just different.

Jessica voiced her concerns for her brother who may experience harsh treatment and unfair judgements simply because he is a Black man, but she is dedicated to educating herself so that she can assist her brother when he starts university.

5.5. Vanessa Spence's Narrative

"My view is this, go to school, do my work and get out" **Vanessa Spence Participant**

Vanessa lives in one of Ontario's urban neighbourhoods, which has one of the highest proportions of youth, sole-supported families, refugees and immigrants, low-income earners and public housing tenants. She attended the high school just a few blocks away from her house. Vanessa disliked her high school and even mentioned that she did not enjoy her high school experience. She believes that a teacher's job is essentially to coach students in learning and excelling and that is it only a handful of teachers at her school who are actually doing their job. In fact, she stated that teachers at her school expected her to fail because she is Black. She also stated that the school can do more to support students. Vanessa decided to stay back an extra year in high school to boost her GPA for university admission. She hopes to pursue a career in education. Despite her feelings towards school, she is very determined to achieve academic success, which she also defines of setting personal goals and achieving them no matter what circumstances life throws at you. Vanessa indicated that she faces her own personal hurdles everyday but she pushes herself to attend school, pay attention and stay engaged in learning. She even described the small steps such as setting her alarms clock to wake her up daily as an accomplishment, because it is difficult for her to get out of bed to go to school. She understands fully why students drop out of high school, but she almost has no pity for dropouts, as she stated that she could have dropped out too, yet she stayed and fights every day to give herself that extra push to make it through the day.

Vanessa lives with her mother and two brothers. She stated that her mother, who does not hold a university degree, is her source of motivation as she is always encouraging her and her

older brother, who is now completing his sophomore year in university, to do well in school, so that they can escape the hardships she faced. Vanessa is determined to make her mother proud of her.

Vanessa loves children and enjoys volunteering with the children's program at her local community church.

5. 6. The Collective Ideas

The second part of the analysis carves out the collective ideas and point of views in the participants narratives on their overall schooling experiences as it relates to employing strategies to navigate their way through high school. The five major themes, *Awareness*, *Suffer in Silence*, *Creating Resistive Identities*, *Self-motivated and Utilising Resources Available*, are common to all four of the participants' narratives. I first introduce the theme, and then use examples from the narratives to support the categorization.

5.6.1. Awareness

The narratives or the field notes illustrate that students are very aware of the school environment, the events that are happening, what is present, what is lacking, what needs improvement, and how these observations fit into personal obstacles that they faced in school. From this awareness, these female students were able to form their analysis or understanding about their school; they had no hesitation in sharing their likes and dislikes about their school. Although the few teachers who showed some degree of care were the sole dimension or influence that made schools a worthwhile place for some students, the most common response regarding their dislike for school was negligence by teachers. They all indicated that in many

instances, teachers had little or no expectation of them, or that they do not receive adequate support from their teachers, school administration, support staff, etc., and at some point during their high school education, this omission influenced their decision not to put in their best effort in a class or classes. Shay explained why it is harder for many students in her age group to do better in school,

Maybe it is the school system, in this school system they don't really push you to do better, there are people in my school who don't even know their time table, they say as long as you're getting provincial standards then that's fine, 60% they don't really push you for that 80, you have to push yourself, there is no one who will say that's not good enough, you have to do it yourself. **From Shay's Narrative**

However, with an awareness of their schools environments, these girls had to make decisions on how to deal with the fact that their schools and teachers do not push them to maximise their full potential. As a result, trying to achieve academic success became the only way to be noticed by teachers, i.e. get teacher's attention. For example, Jessica explained her encounter at the new school when she went unnoticed because she was not performing academically well at first.

There was a teacher who saw that I was trying to learn, and even though I didn't do well at first she gave me the chance, she would help me with my essay, did edits for me. She helped me to improve my writing. She cared, she helped me after school, and would direct me as to whom to go to and where I could get help; she helped me to pass my class.

In Jessica's case, though she was very aware of the school environment, and the general attitude of some teachers, she still decided to try harder to understand the lessons and to acquire good grades and was later noticed by one teacher who assisted her along the way.

5.6.2. Suffer in Silence or “Just go with the flow”

The girls all commented on the absence of their values, beliefs and identity from the secondary school curriculum and specifically, from classroom discussions, teaching and learning resources and instructions. Although, they all conceptualised their identities differently (which I explain in detail below), they all agreed that the so-called “blackness” is missing. While they made reference to the absence of their ancestral history, they had particular observations on how the school systems exclude them. For example, Shay who speaks proudly and patriotically about her Jamaican culture at every opportunity, adds that the school system does not reflect that her Jamaican parents hold high standards for her to excel in school – instead the school has low expectations for her and others to excel (i.e. the school’s standards do not match those of her parents). Furthermore, two participants noted that their schools paid closer attention to particular subjects than others.

Like I hate how they place more emphasis on Math and Science but everything else is like whatever, it doesn’t really matter, as long as [they] are doing well, then no one else really matter, and I think that reflects the attitude of [specific culture], cuz they work hard, because most of my [specific culture] friend that's what they want to do, they want to be a doctor, they want to go into something with the sciences, that not really something I care about.

Another participant had a similar observation.

I dont want to be racist, but it was mainly [specific culture], mostly kids from [specific country] and yeah, Math, and Science classes were intense.

Nevertheless, they all indicated that in dealing with school, they just “go with the flow”. In contrast to the previous position of aligning the curriculum with particular culture groups’ interest, the other two participants viewed the curriculum as standard and the material they needed to know to advance in society. For example, Vanessa explained how she coped with curriculum that she was not satisfied because it did not embrace her cultural identities.

I just deal with it--this is the material that they are teaching us to go on further in life-so whether it benefits me or not I just have to cope with it as it’s the material needed to get into university and maneuver my way in society.

Therefore, these students recognised that the curriculum in their high schools does not fully represent the diversity in the student body; however, they tolerated it insofar as necessary to meet societal standards for success.

5.6.3. Constructing “resistive identity”

With knowledge of the stereotypes present in society about Black people and to some degree, the historical discriminations that influenced these stereotypes, these achieving girls created their own “self” that they adopted as their ‘Black identity’. When asked if they identified as Black, they all responded proudly saying yes, yet they all had strange reactions when I asked them to explain what ‘being Black’ meant to them. The girls explicitly referenced stereotypes in their responses, as in the examples below;

Yes, I do consider myself to be Black, obviously, look at me, but umm, there is a stereotype on Black individuals but I am different. But not like I consider myself to be different from anyone, because I am not, although my skin color is different from others, it doesn’t mean that I am less of anything. **Vanessa’s Narrative**

Another participant explained,

What does being black means to me? [*Laugh long and hard*]...there is a stereotype, I know what people think and it used to be what I thought too, people would say to me, why dont you do bad things, why dont you go out all the time, why are you always trying so hard in school, why are you such a 'goody-too-shoo', and I thought well, that's just me, and they'll like 'no but Black people get to do whatever they want', and I'm like what the heck, but then I kind of looked at it like well, everyone thinks Black people are cool and they're like you know, whatever, personally I see it as just a color, I think that my culture, being Jamaican is more important to me....so there is a stereotype on what people think that being Black means, but, but I have to say I disagree.

However, interestingly, the girls had a completely different reaction to the question of being Black female than the responses provided above. They all talked about the historical struggles and discrimination that women faced in society and to some degree, it also shaped their definition, or how they viewed themselves. For example Annaya described what being a Black female meant;

We are overcomers, and it is pretty empowering, like how back in the days females couldn't like vote or anything, but we got through that, and then Black people were the lowest class, and now we can be like everybody else... **Annaya's Narrative**

Further, Jessica's response reflected the claim that Black women often experience the double binds of oppression.

It means double jeopardies, but I suppose it just means being a woman and being Black, there are interconnected and at the same time they can be completely simple [or separate], like not connected. Umm, in some cases, like being a Black woman can put you down there like they are both separate characteristics, but they just happened to be characteristics that are oppressed in many ways, but I believe put together it can be really hard for someone. **Jessica's Narrative**

Shay has a similar, yet interesting position on identifying as a Black female; she also explained how such perceptions shaped her experiences in school.

It means that, um, this is going to be a weird answer, but it means that you can twerk; it means that you can do bad things because you're Black and that's all you're good for as a girl, it means that you are funny; it means that you are ratchet. That is the societal view. To me, being a Black girl means that umm, it means that I am probably going to have to work harder than some people, just because I think as much as we want to say that racism is over and that we are free now, whatever, I still think that racism is everywhere. I hear it a lot, and even when it's joke, you're like what, I can't believe that you are saying that, that is what it is, but yeah, I think that it also means that I kind of have to be a bit stronger than some other people because there is one thing that people think that Black girls are good at, but well, not gonna be me. **Shay's Narrative**

Accepting that there are stereotypes and historical struggles that both Black people and women faced, and continue to experience, the girls drew from such accounts and used them as a basis to reconceptualise their own resistive identities. Furthermore, this process of identity creation not only impacted their overall schooling experiences, but it was also vital in setting personal academic goals, and in determining how hard they worked towards fulfilling such goals.

5.6.4. Self-Driven/ Motivated

With a motive to work against the perception that Black people are academically disengaged, or academically incapable, these four girls developed resilient characteristics in locating their own space in society; they are all uniquely self-driven. I called them the unique four. It was refreshing to see how knowledgeable these young ladies were of the steps that they had taken and will need to take to accomplish a career goal that they have chosen for themselves. They have all done their research and are aware of the paths to take. More impressively, they all have plan B's and C's, should their first option fail. To add, they all emphasised the subjectivity in their definitions of success. For them, academic success started with setting personal goals and working towards achieving them despite personal hurdles or other obstacles that they faced. Shay's response below captures the importance of being self-motivated.

So whether your teacher is boring, or if she puts up a PowerPoint every day, there is always something you can take away from it, and that's why I love going to school even if it's not like I am learning about history, I am learning something about people. I am learning something about myself, and that's what's important. **Shay's Narrative**

Jessica also explained how important it was for to be a self-starter. She mentioned that her mother has always been educationally driven and that she would encourage her and her brother to work hard and try their best in school but she never imposed her views on them. She explained in her response,

She taught us about working hard, but we never had like a set schedule, like well you have to do it this time, I kinda had to learn it myself, so like, I feel like it took me a while to get my gear started and before my grades weren't amazing, they were just, well, I didn't want to do much, some of them were low average, but I have to kinda train myself

and make my own priorities and it happened to be that one of my main priorities right now is academic. **Jessica's Narrative**

Although two of the girls described being self-driven and motivated as being innate, and another contemplated that they were God-given attitudes, they all admitted that these traits were primarily responsible for their commitment to success.

5.6.5. Utilize the Resources available to them

While these achieving girls firmly believed that achieving success was essentially up to the individual, they also indicated that they make use of the resources available to them as secondary sources of motivation. In other words, they seek help when needed, utilise the experience they encounter, and then make use of the resources available to them. They indicated that a vast majority of teachers did not coach or push students to do their best, however, all four girls mentioned that there was always a teacher, or a few who actually cared and so these students would seek extra help from such teacher(s). They also obtained help and coaching from other avenues such as church or community clubs. Jessica explained,

I was born in a Jamaican family, I grew up in practically a Jamaican church, they encourage you to work hard, I mean, and you just continue living off of that.

Peer group influence also played a role in their schooling experiences and success. Having the ability to do well in school seemed to be a secret, yet important criterion, when choosing friends. The girls also mentioned that sometimes they would seek help from their friends. Also, more indirectly, they used the accomplishments of their friends as motivation to do better for themselves. Shay explained one scenario when she sought help from friends.

I decided that I wanted to get on the honor roll, and I know that, I hadn't remember anything I learned from any year before that, so I know that I was going to have to try extra hard, especially in subjects that I wasn't good at, like, particularly Math, I was going to have to really push myself and I even had to seek help my friends who I knew were doing better, or knew more than I do, so I think success is being able to have a goal but also try to decipher on different ways to fulfil that goal and hitting all those points.

The most referenced resource that these achieving girls used as motivation and navigation to success was their parents. On the one hand, their parents, single-parent mothers in some cases, actively championed for their academic success by checking report cards, monitoring academic achievements, speaking with teachers, and school administration. On the other hand, these girls also used the position of their parents as motivation to try harder in school. Part of their personal goals was not to disappoint their parents.

Ummm, [long pause] [laugh] I think that it is mostly my parents. I don't want to let them down, I don't want them to be disappointed in me because they have high expectations for me, I have high expectations for myself but they've always have high expectations for me, when, like I said, there was a point when I wasn't really concerned with it, but because they believed in me so much and because my mom especially, she didn't get to go to university, and she loves school and she loves education, I kinda want to do it for her in a way because she didn't get to do that, so if she didn't get to and she loves education, and I honestly I love knowledge, and I love learning, and I think I got that from her so I wanna make her proud and I want to make my dad proud and I want to show then that you know I am listening to what you are saying to me and I appreciate

everything that you have done for me and I am going to try and do this, and I am going to try for the best that I can go for. **Shay's Narrative**

It is interesting to see that these girls used their parents' lack of higher education or late start of higher education as motivation in their own pursuit. As with the example above, Shay's parents expected the best from her, but they never used their positions or specified what "the best" was leaving it somewhat up to her own discretion. However, Shay's ambition was to make use of an opportunity that her mother did not have. Vanessa's position is somewhat similar, but her mother asked her explicitly to use her as an example to do better. Vanessa explained,

Well, umm, I think I just have to think about myself and my future, and like because there are time when I'm like oh, I dont want to get up and I dont wanna go to school, but when you actually do some thinking, you think about like your future and also my parents, my parents do motivate me, because sometimes they will say like become something better than I was, go to school and get an education and stuff like that, but I guess you'd just have to realise for yourself that this is something that you want.

Although all four girls stressed the importance of being a self-starter, and perhaps it was the key ingredient to achieving success in secondary school, their internal drive allowed them to outsource and obtain motivation from other external forces which ultimately supplement their mission to achieve the goals they set for themselves.

5.7 Conclusion

Each participant journeyed a unique path to success; the individual narratives captured such journeys. Using the problem solution narrative data analysis approach, each narrative

reveals the moment in a participant's life when her schooling experience was, or is marked by struggles, difficult encounters, and the decision she had to make between achieving academic success or being academically disengaged. The narratives capture the process, or journey in making such decisions. While they all have individual, unique journeys, there were some experiences shared among all girls. These experiences become the common themes that this thesis celebrates as the navigational strategies that successful female students employed to achieve academic success in a school environment that generally predicted their failure.

Chapter 6: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Overview of the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore and examine the strategies used by successful secondary school Black female students to achieve academic success in an urban school learning environment and to further examine how these strategies can inform education policies and benefit other students. Using mainly semi-structured interviews, I gathered the experiences of four high achieving, self-identified Black female students and then I compiled their narratives to demonstrate how they maneuver through high school. Upon collecting the participants' stories, I adopted the problem solution narrative data analysis approach to compile their narratives. This approach allowed me to organize each narrative sequentially based on the structure, character, setting, problem, actions and resolution, to demonstrate how the participants cope in their high school, even when faced with education challenges and adverse circumstances.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the claim that the Ontario school system holds little or no expectations of Black students achieving academic success (Codjoe, 2001), I approached this study from a critical yet resistance standpoint. I drew on critical race theory and antiracism that argues that society does not operate on an equal playing field, and that racism is so enmeshed in the society that it appears almost inherent. As a result, studies that employ these lenses seek mainly to uncover how race neutral social policies can, and do recreate systemic racial oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Dei, 1995). I also used feminist theory as guide to fulfil the aspect of the research that seeks to bring to light the stories of female students whose voices are often omitted from education research. Overall, feminism addresses the status of men and women in society and is

concerned with advocating for social, political and economic equality for women. Specifically, Black Canadian feminism is concerned with incorporating the experiences of Black and other minority women within feminist analysis. Combined together, these critical lenses allowed me to analyse critically the participants' narratives, paying close attention to how their experiences may be linked to other structures in society and to draw conclusions regarding personal experience and a broad sociological imagination.

Resistance theories help to explain how high achieving students respond to the dominant culture (Giroux, 1983; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). To a great extent, the aforementioned critical lenses expose and suggest that there are societal structures that impede on the success of Black youth. Moreover, they confirm that Black students are being taught in an environment that may discriminate against them on the basis of race, resulting in a large proportion of Black students falling through the cracks (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Ladson-Billing (1999) explains that the curriculum still tries to maintain White supremacist through master scripting; especially within the America context, she explained that the process of masterscripting deliberately mutes or erases stories of African Americans. In so doing, the curriculum tends to present Black people as a homogenized group, using a race neutral or color blind perspective to celebrate diversity but erroneously teach students that African Americans hold permanent resident status which can consequently impact students' academic performance and identity (p.20-23). This process of masterscripting and systemically excluding students is also present in the Canadian context. Stanley (2011) shares a similar perspective in his historical analysis of Chinese Canadian students in Canadian classrooms and their interaction with the absence of Chinese – Canadian history. Subtle forms of discrimination in the curriculum can, and has, had detrimental impacts on students' academic performance -- some students still aspire to achieve success and to thrive

in the face of adverse circumstances. This response can be understood as resistance. Therefore, I used resistance theory to examine the narratives of my participants. While most research that focuses on the negative aspects of Black students' schooling experience is essentially portraying resistance as Black students refusing to participate in education contributes to the stereotypical label of Black students as apathetic towards school and education. Furthermore, such forms of resistance are considered more as rebellion than resistance, and generally viewed negatively in society. In addition, this form of resistance also leads to further oppression within the Black community. With this research, I wanted to explore Black girls' attitudes towards education and to present their stories as a more positive form of resistance.

6. 3. Interpretation and Discussion

Using my central research questions as a guide, I divide the discussion into two parts; part one addresses the first research question on the strategies used by successful secondary Black female students to achieve academic success in an urban school learning environment, whereas part two discusses the second research question on how these strategies can inform educational policies and benefit other Black students.

Part I: Strategies used by achieving Black female students to achieve academic success

6.3.2. Suffering in Silence

The data demonstrated that students have their own perceptions of the injustices that are present in their schools, classrooms and society. Participants shared that such injustices have negatively impacted their schooling experiences and could potentially deter them from participating in learning and performing well. Being completely aware of the environment in

which they were studying, they suffered in silence with a determination to accomplish their educational and career goals. The participants' dialogues exposed the absence of cultural relevance in teaching and learning materials in schools confirming findings from previous research that documents the lack of cultural relevancy in school materials as a strong factor that continues to push Black students out of school (Henry, 1993; Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Hart, 2011). As the participants specified, cultural relevancy ranges from little or no interest in teaching and/or learning material content, the absence of Black history, a lack of representation of Blacks in the schools and curriculum, missing Black representation in teachers and school official body, the misrepresentation of Black students learning abilities, and the misrepresentation of expectations that Black parents and Black communities hold for their children. In addition to missing representations, Black students also find the material to be boring, mundane and irrelevant to their lives. In *Drop Out or Push Out*, Dei et al (1995) asserted that when minority cultures are marginalized, minority students become marginalized as well. Marginalization, they explained in this context as being associated with behaviour such as skipping class and acting out (p. 21). Generally, students dealt with the irrelevancy of the curriculum by skipping classes and school because they were bored in school.

In comparing the literature on Black youth and academic disengagement (Henry, 1993; Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Hart, 2011; Ogbu, 1978) with the findings from my study, both achieving and disengaged students shared parallel views of the school system as systemically discriminatory and oppressive. Ogbu (1978) argues that schools encourage the failure of Black students in subtle ways that range from low expectations by teachers to disproportionately placing Black students in special needs classes. In identifying how Black students coped with racism and the impact it had on their academic achievement Codjoe's (2001)

findings show that Canadian students' school experience was characterized by differential treatment based on race, negative stereotypes, low teacher expectations and descriptions of school as a hostile environment; all of which illustrate how schools racialized, categorized and set students up for failure. In my research, although the participants talked about the school system cautiously, it was apparent that they also believed that the school systems set them up to fail. For example, the girls shared a list as reasons why they disliked school; the main reasons included lack of support from teachers and feeling unwelcome at school. The girls stated that they felt obligated to work against notions the school systems may hold regarding their abilities by making themselves present and gaining recognition at their school by being academically engaged. As such, they often used the racial categorizations and lack of support from teachers as motivation for success. Although it is sometimes difficult for these girls to connect with the curriculum content that they feel does not fully represent them, they indicated that they still participated in learning with the conviction that school is preparing them to survive in the world beyond the classroom. Though effective for the students who have adopted this strategy, this subjective approach does not challenge current teaching practices. The students' responses showed that they were aware of how schools operated and were able to assume reasons for the absences in the curriculum, yet they deployed ways to participate in learning. Teaching practices should train students to develop critical thinking skills in dealing with the information they receive in school and to develop skills to challenge what appears to be the status quo.

6.3.2. Utilising Resources Available for Success

Successful girls in this study also took advantage of the sociological, psychological and cultural resources and support available to them as a strategy to achieve academic excellence.

No child exists without social context; individual experiences are shaped by social and institutional factors, familial background, cultural heritage, neighbourhood, environment and the like. Institutions such as family, school, religious groups, community and cultural groups are established to help socialize and support young people. Unlike the females identified in Fordham's (2000) study who disregarded the support from external sources as significant to their success, the participants in my study acknowledged the support and encouragement received from parents, some teachers, local churches, and their community as secondary resources that enable them to succeed in school. For the most part, the participants willingly accepted support and opportunities for success that were granted to them. In other instances, they sought support and assistance when it was not readily accessible. For example, they would seek extra help from teachers when needed or assistance from community members when parents were unable to assist. They also use current familial struggles as motivation for success. The data also revealed the importance of having peer relations in school. Participants used direct and indirect influences from their peers as tools for staying grounded in school; having friends who received good grades and who had clear goals swayed participants to follow a similar path.

Whilst they acknowledged the direct and crucial support from parents, teachers, peers, community members, and even Black churches for their success, successful students concluded that their ultimate success depended on their own effort. They admitted that even though the support they received from others was imperative, how they converted the support they received into success mattered the most to them. Ultimately, they had choices; they could either accept or refuse the support that others extended to them. Similarly, they could respond to harsh schooling conditions differently, and negatively, as have other students, but they chose to create their own positive stories. This conscious attempt to utilise resources and solicit help when needed

highlights one strategy used by successful students to actively engage in their own learning to achieve academic success.

6.3.4. Constructing “Resistive Identity”

In the process of strategizing different ways to accomplish academic success, the participants created their own “resistive identity”. Resistive identity comprises the ways in which the girls defined themselves and how self-identity was an important element that contributed to their success. Further, it speaks to the distinctive yet shared characteristics of the girls that also granted them the ability to withstand hardship in unfavourable conditions. It was the most suitable description I could use to sum up all the stories shared by the girls, how they coped with stresses in school and society and how they juggled their time between school and home culture. It describes the girls’ resilience. Henry Giroux (1983) described resistance as being concerned with “uncovering the degree to which action speaks to a form of refusal that highlights, either implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against the social nexus of domination and submission” (p.109). This definition played an active role in categorising the actions undertaken by these girls as resistance and in explaining how it helped to shape their identity.

All participants in my study demonstrated a high level of inherent self-dependency; however, in sharing their stories it was also evident that such a characteristic can also be developed. In support of the former, two participants explained that their innate stubbornness would not allow them to quit school, as had some of their peers. For the latter, all four participants claimed that their resistive character was developed from socialization and the support they received from both their peers and adults. As well, the assumed historical strength of their Black female ancestors also helped to shape this character. Additionally, the participants

explained that the barriers in the school system and the perceptions of Black students in schools and society also pushed them to form this resistive identity as a defense mechanism. In fact, this approach provided grounds for these students to fight harder and stay determined to achieve academic success by any means necessary. This process ultimately shaped their entire schooling experience.

Although all four participants' narratives confirmed my assumption that achieving students tend to have a strong internal drive and are highly self-motivated, the narratives also underscored that support from external forces played a huge role in their identity formation. Therefore, while these four participants were driven to work hard to achieve academic success, not all Black girls in Ontario urban schools will be innately resilient. By accepting that such attitudes can be developed, institutions can motivate and mentor students on how to build resiliency that will help them to navigate their environment. Participants claimed that their resistive identity helped them to respond to the hardship they faced in positive ways. This identity served as a thick outer core that persisted or was sustained in the learning environment that did not always support these Black female students.

The participants' resistive identity opposed typical and perhaps current images and notions of resilient Black women. These successful Black girls indicated that they often tried to display positive attitudes within their schools and amongst their peers. In addition to being socially aware, they have good morals, a positive outlook on life, and are spiritually grounded. They all admitted that their relationship with God was a vital component of their lives, acknowledging that the strength from God helped them in their struggles. Fordham's study (2000) showed Black female students' resistance as a tenuous and ghostlike, they were viewed as the academically successful Black with a "nice girl" persona. With respect to their status at the

school, they were characterised as rather silent, obedient females who suppressed and denied their physicality and sexuality and to some degree alienated and isolated their Black culture and kinship. The participants in my study tried to detach from the negative stereotypes attached to Black culture.

The participants' effort to detach from all affiliations of Black students as academically incompetent resulted in them being labeled as "other". One participant described in her narrative that her classmates criticised her for not acting Black enough simply because she was getting good grades in her classes. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) noted that Black students who did not fit the category of 'disengaged Black' were then classified as 'acting white'. While this perception often comes from others, both from Black and non-Black communities, these participants indicated that they actively tried to disassociate from the negative perception that being Black meant academically disengaged. Furthermore, they explained that they did experience exclusion to some degree in their schools; nonetheless, by being academically successful they claimed that they were acting as themselves and not as another race. In other words, they denied the claim that academic success is an element of the dominant culture¹⁴. Black feminism offers another perception of Black women as often "responsible, in charge and serious" (Walker, 1983) or political and radical (Davis, hooks and Collins). The four females in this study exhibited differing behavior, though they were not necessarily "loud" and aggressive, they were also not silent and oblivious to what was going on around them. The girls embody Wane's (2004) account of Black Canadian feminism; they used diverse knowledge from different avenues including Black history, feminism, stereotypes, etc., to embrace their own individual experiences. Based on this analysis, it is difficult to claim that successful Black girls have a

¹⁴ Ogbu's oppositional culture highlights the notion of acting white that was then used to describe minority students (e.g. Blacks and Hispanics), attitude toward academic activities, Academic success was perceived to be of the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1978, 2003). See oppositional culture definition.

homogenous identity. Yet, it is still fair to claim that Black girls strategically employed survival strategies and coping mechanisms as ways of resisting school culture and that they exert positive adaptation, despite adversity.

The participants expressed their own personal conceptualization of the “self” as overriding what their schools, teachers and society thought of them. In other words, the participants felt that their subjective identity trumped any perceived ascriptive identity. In coining their self-definition, the girls placed themselves in opposition to any imposed identity, or external categorization that they would normally be assigned. While they embraced some aspects of the artificial or superficial imposed selves that Hall (2000) describes, insofar as they acknowledged the shared history and struggles of their ancestors and women as foundations to their identity, they also rejected other classifications that are based on presumptions, especially negative presumptions. For example, the girls asserted that society generally labels Black youth as high school dropouts, or schools view them as lazy, but these girls affirmed that such a depiction contradicts what they think of themselves. Specifically, one participant stated that as a Black girl in Canada she is expected to be loud, with an attitude, a great dancer, “ratchet” and sexually promiscuous. She chuckled while presenting the fact that she was the complete opposite. Furthermore, she reassessed her loudness as being outspoken and necessary. She explained that because she is Jamaican and is outspoken, it makes her an active member of her class. Elsewhere in her interview, she added that she used every opportunity in her class discussions to share facts about her Jamaican ancestry and culture in hope that she was educating the rest of the class and the teacher, while debunking the myths and negative perceptions associated with being Jamaican. With this example, the student is using the constructed identity assigned to being Jamaican and a Black woman as being stereotypically derogatory, sexually

promiscuous, or intellectually inferior, to redefine her own identity. The girls also claimed that knowing that race and gender are socially constructed helped them to deconstruct and recreate their own identity.

In further attempts to recreate their own identity, the girls used factors that attributed to their success as key elements that shaped their identity. Initially, they had no real conceptualization, or defined way of describing their identity. For instance, they never explicitly defined what being a Black female student meant, nor did they make any direct connection to their success. However, the experiences they shared, which accumulated from being culturally Black and/or being female, served to inspire their success. Acknowledging that people of African descent and women suffered from historical discrimination, the participants mentioned that as young Black women they felt obliged to work twice as hard to earn success and to gain recognition. Some also believed that the legacy of such discrimination still plagues Black communities and as a result they actively or passively tried to correct the wrongs or negative perceptions. In proclaiming their strength as Black girls, the participants referenced their hereditary from both their ancestors and mothers, but in different ways. Historically, Black women have lived in harsh conditions, yet they worked hard to support themselves and their families (Robinson, 1983; Henry, 1998). Robinson (1983) further affirmed that Black women have been forced by society, oppression, their position and traditions to be responsible for the economic, social and physical survival of their families, and communities regardless of socioeconomic status, age, geographic location or education attainment. The participants valued traditional strength as key to their coping abilities and success. Interestingly, they also defined themselves in comparisons to their mothers. Drawing on the strength of their mothers, almost all participants claimed that they wanted to accomplish academic excellence because their mothers

were deprived of such opportunities. Furthermore, they mentioned that this setback for their mothers served as a driving force behind their aspirations.

The participants were very cautious in their discussions on race and racism. As previously mentioned, some participants indicated that being Black has no direct link to their success. In fact, when asked how being Black shaped their schooling experiences, they all declared that there was no direct impact between being Black and their school achievement because they were doing well in school. However, based on the discussion above and drawing from examples provided elsewhere in their narratives, their identity to some degree influenced their success. Arguably, the participants paid less attention to the relationships between identity and success because their self-perceived identity did not fit the general perceptions of Black youth. They too assigned academic disengagement to Black youth. To further illustrate their goal and to disassociate from the prescribed Black identity, the participants freely discussed issues concerning “Black, race and identity” in relation to disapproving negative stereotypes. Elsewhere when issues of race and identity came up, they all tiptoed around the topics. Perhaps, it is because historically¹⁵, the notion of race and racism is almost taboo in Canadian society, education, schooling and classrooms; hence, the participants felt uncomfortable speaking about it. Except for one participant, who blatantly stated that racism is subtly present in her school and is still present in society, throughout our conversations, the girls tried to assure me that they were

¹⁵ In an analysis of Canadian History textbooks, Ken Montgomery concluded that race and racism are replete in Canadian textbooks. Textbook analysis confirms that curriculum [emphasis added] is deliberately organised to help create an imagined nation and excludes representation of minority groups [emphasis added]. Historically, racism is an isolated event in representations of Canadian history and also an extreme or abnormal manifestation of individualized psychological or moral deficit. Montgomery, K. (2005). Imagining the Antiracist State: Representations of Racism in Canadian History Textbooks. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26 (4), 427-442.

not racist. In many instances, their comments were accompanied with a disclaimer that their intent was not to be racist. Although the participants handled discussions on the issues of race and racism delicately, based on my interactions with the girls, I concluded that tiptoeing around the discussion on race and racial identity stemmed from a need to discuss the issues surrounding race and discrimination differently and also to deconstruct the myth that Black women are unintelligent. Furthermore, it was not an act of denial or an attempt to abandon their cultural identity. Rather, this approach highlights how much these girls silently hoped that the notion of racism and its tenets will disappear from their schools and society and that conversations on such matters are centered on eliminating racism rather than focusing on its negative impacts. Instead of just hoping that racism will be silenced, or pretending that it no longer existed, these girls remained knowledgeable of its existence with a primary goal not to fall into the negative stereotypes. As a result, aspiring for academic success became the main strategy to challenge and defy negative stereotypes and other forms of racisms. In so doing, they also provided a new version of the Black female student and offered an example for other marginalized students to follow.

Part 2: The strategies adopted by students can inform educational policies and benefit other Black students

The students' voices demonstrate that they are aware of their learning environment; furthermore, manipulating strategies to excel academically in the midst of all odds against them indicates that to some degree, these high school students are capable of designing their own way of learning. With policies underway to help foster academic success for Black students, these

four participants' narratives can help to improve such policies. Below I discuss the participants' experiences in connection to current education policies.

6.3.5. Defining Success

The process in which the participants coined their definition for success could be an indication of how antiracist education can be accomplished within the classroom and in schools. In their attempt to define success, they all mentioned societal standard definitions for success first and then explored how they built their own definition. These girls recognized that while society does not fully represent their values and does not take into account struggles and multiple experiences, there is still some significance in adhering to such a standard. That is, although they are unique individuals, they are still members of different groups and institutions, thus the standard criteria for success matters. Overall, their definition for academic success highlighted their subjectivity and the importance of self-satisfaction with academic results. I designed this study using a standard definition for academic success based on high academic averages, and anticipation of university enrolment, however, the participants measured their success based on overcoming personal struggles and obstacles during their academic journey. For these participants, success included being able to attend classes every day, understanding the material, staying focused and at the same time acquiring good grades. Relying on a societal definition as a basis to construct their definition indicates some degree of relevancy, but the fact that their definition also included their own personal perspectives is a clear indication of actively challenging society's definition to create their own. Dei (1995) outlined that in order for antiracist education to work, educators must challenge the status quo and any assumption that society operates on a level playing field. These students engaged in challenging the status quo --

an ability that should be emphasized in antiracist education that seeks to accomplish equitable education for students.

Notably, in constructing their definition of success, the participants also specified that being able to juggle home and school culture daily is an accomplishment in itself. Jessica's description sums up how the relationship between competing values played out in her everyday schooling experience. She concluded that at times it was equivalent to living a double life.

I guess you continue teaching yourself [how to uphold home values] at home. Umm, and you know I was born in a Jamaican family, I grew up practically in a Jamaican church, I mean, you just continue living off of that and it's like you switch gears when you go home and when you go to school, I mean you are still the same person but at the same time I guess it is still different environment.

For Jessica and the other girls, the constant shift between home life and school complicated their schooling experience. While it can be argued that it is normal to switch for most students, the fact that these girls stressed that making it through each day was an achievement indicates that the process of switching back and forth largely contributed to their overall experience.

Nonetheless, this small but important triumph for the participants demonstrates that students are capable of adapting and shifting priorities and identities when necessary. Furthermore, switching back and forth between home culture and school culture emphasized the students' commitment to achieve success and their goal to portray a positive account of Black students' capability. In response, school systems and teachers should modify and/or alternate teaching and learning strategies to assist students as they fulfil this commitment.

The way the participants defined success can be considered a pedagogical approach that can be implemented in the classroom. The students' definition of success demonstrated student-

teacher collaboration in learning; it showed that students want to work with teachers and that they also want the assurance that their input is valued. Students also wanted the opportunity to exercise some degree of autonomy in their learning to prove that they were capable of forming some degree of knowledge on their own. Throughout the study, the participants used the word “push” to describe the support they needed from teachers. “Push” suggests collaboration and indicates that students have an idea of how to achieve the academic goals they hold for themselves, but they also need guidance from their teachers to accomplish their goals. This interpretation aligns with the concept of students as active learners. Paulo Friere embraces the notion of learners being active participants in their learning, thus, within schools, students should be provided with the opportunity to actively participate in their own learning. One way of doing that is through the reassurance that their perspectives, positions, values and beliefs are valued and that there is a place in the classroom for them to freely share their point of view. For example, in dealing with the absences of Black history in the curriculum, one participant mentioned that at every opportunity she tried to share something with the teacher and the rest of the class about her Jamaican culture. “I always find a way to bring it into the discussion”. By doing this, she indicated to the teachers that her Jamaican culture was relevant to her learning and that she was able to make the connection with the material being taught.

6.3.6. Female Students' Understanding of School Environment

The data revealed that all four participants often felt that they were solely responsible for their own education and academic success. To clarify, they indicated that the school system, to a certain degree, ignored them. For example, in examining their education journey up to secondary

school, they each pinpointed only a few teachers who stood out as positively impacting their lives and education experience. In addition, they mentioned that the school system did not represent them fairly, i. e. by assuming that they had no interest in learning. The Ontario Ministry of Education in accordance with the *Education Act*¹⁶, which governs education in Ontario, outlines the duties and responsibilities of the different stakeholders responsible for an Ontario child's education. The different stakeholders include, but are not limited to the Ministry, school boards, trustees, principals, teachers, students and parents. According to this list, the Minister of Education, school boards, principals and teachers have exhaustive, yet crucial roles and responsibilities in ensuring that Ontario children receive proper education. The Ministry is responsible for developing curriculum and setting guidelines to govern local schools. With a primary responsibility of operating the province's publicly-funded schools, Ontario's school boards administer the funding they received from the province to the various schools. The boards have other responsibilities such as, building, equipping and furnishing schools, providing education programs that meet the needs of the school community, including needs for special education, supervising the operation of schools and their teaching programs, hiring teachers and other staff, helping teachers improve their teaching practices, evaluating teacher performance and approving teaching and learning materials.

Principals and vice principals are primarily responsible for the organization and management of individual schools, including any budget assigned to the school by the school board for the quality of instructions at their school and for student discipline. They are also responsible for ensuring parents are aware of the children's performance, i.e. ensuring report

¹⁶ The Ontario Ministry of Education website briefly explains that the Education Act and its regulations set out duties and responsibilities of the Minister of Education and the duties and responsibilities of school boards, school board supervisory officers, principals, teachers, parents and students.
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/whosresp.html>

cards are sent out, assigning teachers to classes and assisting and supervising them. Principals are also responsible for ensuring student supervision, school discipline and collaborating with parents and community to develop a safe school environment for students and others. On the other hand teachers, who have the most direct contact with students, have responsibilities that include, preparing lesson plans and teaching classes, encouraging students in their studies and evaluating student work and progress, supervising students' behaviour and maintaining classroom discipline, demonstrating good citizenship and respect for all groups of people and acting as teacher-advisers for students, e.g. helping students complete their annual education plans and monitoring their school performance and progress toward their career goals. In contrast, students and parents have minor roles and responsibilities in the allocation of duties and responsibilities for a child's education. Parents are listed as solely responsible for ensuring their children attend school; and as per the Ministry, attendance is only compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16. On the other hand, students are expected to attend classes, take examinations, exercise self-discipline and behave courteously toward both their teachers and their fellow students. Students also have a responsibility to learn and engage in learning. Interestingly, with this delegation of roles and responsibilities, the participants' narratives indicated the reverse.

All four females stressed how important their own effort was in achieving academic success in their schools. In fact, there seemed to be a consensus that it was their own effort to push themselves that completed their journey to achieve academic success. The girls indicated that if they did not push themselves, then hardly anyone else within the school system would. Though the Ministry's website indicates that school boards, teachers and principals play very crucial roles in the child's education, the girls' narratives indicated that education officials are neglecting their roles and responsibilities to assist them. Secondly, the girls also credited their

parents for their unconventional or unrecognized support as motivation to success. Collectively, they indicated that though their parents may not be able to assist them with the content of their homework, they often encouraged them to do their best in school. Two participants proclaimed that their parents worked two jobs so that they did not have to work part time and go to school, as did some of their peers. This commitment symbolised a major investment from their parents, as such, they felt obliged to not disappoint their parents. However, the school environment rarely acknowledged this involvement of the parents. Therefore, with students feeling that the education system neglects them, and parents not pedagogically required to engage, the participants were left on their own to fend for themselves and to achieve academic success.

6.3.7. Urban Education Programs and Students

The participants explained that some corrective programs that provided alternative options for students were available at their school or offered at other schools. As stated in the Introduction, the Ontario Ministry of Education and local school boards have implemented various strategies to assist and improve the schooling experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and to encourage success and the well-being of all students in Ontario's school system. The Ministry has a mandate to ensure that every child receives the same opportunities and supports in order to succeed. The Ministry also acknowledges that there are high schools in urban centres across Ontario facing challenges such as poverty, criminal and gang activity, and a lack of community resources, such as recreation centres or libraries (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). Some of these schools have more than 500 students and are in urban centres with populations of at least 200,000 people. As a result, the Ministry provided funding to these high schools to develop programs in partnership with their community to secure

a safe and positive school climate where students will succeed. Initiatives and programs implemented by some of these schools include student leadership training, lunch time and after-school programs, additional student success teachers, social workers, child and youth workers and breakfast, lunch and transportation passes to help all students afford the basics of school life.

In discussing the approaches implemented to assist students whose education is otherwise compromised, the girls' voiced their opinions on what they felt would benefit students. Overall, they acknowledged that initiatives in urban and priority high schools were beneficial-- especially for students in need. However, they made suggestions on the services they deemed as effective and would benefit students more than in the current programs. For example, one participant stated that the cafeteria food was too expensive and suggested lowering cafeteria food prices so that meals were affordable for all students instead of providing breakfast and lunch to some students.

The participants' reaction to some of the programs offered in urban and priority high schools led to questions of how effective these programs were, and whether they were Band-Aid solutions that maintained systems of oppression rather than bringing about solutions. I must stress that while I believe that the initiatives generated success stories for many students, unfortunately, such programs assumed that students were recipients rather than agents. As a result, student perspectives were often absent. To some degree assuming what is best for students holds some value, however, students are able to form thoughts and ideas, and are also able to identify aids that will enhance their education and make their schooling experiences worthwhile. Including students' perspectives helps to ensure that the problems with schooling are not reproduced through programs, initiatives and actions.

The girls shared their views on why Black students were over represented as high school dropouts. They explained that some students often faced daily challenges that forced them to choose between school and other alternatives such as doing drugs, seeking early employment to sustain themselves or even their families, attending school hungry and tired (which can affect their ability to concentrate), involvement in criminal and gang related activities (which caused them to miss classes), or teenage pregnancy which may rob them of their high school experience and prevent them from attending and participating in school regularly. The participants identified with other Black students who have chosen some of these alternatives over school and asserted that they too could have chosen different paths other than school. Some of the participants indicated that they know of peers who have dropped out for some of the aforementioned reasons that are affecting “inner-city” youth or students from poor, working-class families.

Based on the participants' accounts, some students in the classroom were exposed to different challenging life circumstances that either pushed or pulled them out of school. For students who stayed in school, family circumstances may have impacted their ability to concentrate. For example, family stress, depression, etc. can create psychological problems for students. Furthermore, having to deal with personal, familial and communal restraints and difficulties on an ongoing basis made it more difficult for students to concentrate in schools. Although urban education has a commitment to prepare teachers with the relevant skills needed to deal effectively with a diverse student population in urban schools, other related issues dampen the experiences of high school Black students, partly because some teachers are still not fully trained to address the needs of a diverse student body and because some students do not take advantages of new initiatives or programs. The girls' narratives indicated that they often

utilised the resources available to them, but an interesting observation was that these resources are often their parents, peers, community members and teachers who were attentive and supportive. However, it remains rather unclear as to why these girls chose community based resources rather than school resources.

6.4 Conclusion of Discussion

The narratives of these four highly achieving female students confirm that some Black students often faced challenges in and out of the classroom that affected their schooling experiences and hindered their education success. Nevertheless, these students have developed schemes and strategies to acquire academic success in their urban schools. They continued to use challenges as motivations, to seek help when necessary, and to rely on their internal locus of control to achieve success. By doing this, these girls created an identity as resilient individuals. Unlike other findings that suggest that disengagement and behaviour driven reactions symbolize Black youth desires to be validated (Ogbu, 1978), the participants in my study did the opposite by engaging in school activities to validate a cultural presence. In the end, their ultimate goal was to access opportunities as any other student, to gain respect and to meet expectations from their schools and teachers within a learning environment where they were valued as individuals, and not always debunking preconceived myths about their culture, ancestors and race. The next chapter captures significant findings and the recommendations these girls provided on how these aims can be achieved in Ontario schools.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 Introduction

The study has highlighted the positive stories that exist among four achieving Black girls in Ontario public schools. For decades, research on Black youth in Canada and elsewhere largely concentrated on the deficiencies among Black youth and schooling and mainly emphasized common elements such as the high dropouts, academic disengagements, juvenile delinquent, troublemakers, etc. as common to Black students (Dei et al, 1997; James, 2010; Codjoe, 2001; Henry, 1993). My goal was to challenge such notions by presenting another perception of Black youth; I captured and highlighted the narratives of four female students who made decisions every day to combat negative stereotypical claims about Black students. The participants were female students who set goals for themselves and worked towards accomplishing them. Although their stories are often absent from education research and the media, these females formed their own resistive identity based on historical foundations and deployed their own strategies to perform well in school in the face of oppression and discrimination -- mainly in their school.

Based on the girls' observations, it was apparent that schools and the education system have not moved far away from some of the claims made in previous research. While I focused primarily on the narratives of the four achieving students, their success journeys and their schooling experiences in Ontario urban schools, the injustices and inequities that they experienced in the schools became evident as the participants' shared their narratives. The girls expressed the challenge of working harder than other students to prove themselves not just to teachers but also to peers; furthermore, working hard was one way to gain recognition, and

become visible in their classrooms. They also shared stories on the process of maintaining a positive image to avoid risk of falling into the categories that schools originally placed them in.

7.2 Significant Findings

Student and Resistance

To a great extent, resistance explains how these Black girls understood and conceptualised their academic success. Resistance works as a double edged sword. In a school environment that they believe predicted their failure, these girls resisted these negative perceptions with a commitment to achieve success and prove their teachers wrong. The experiences of these girls are noteworthy not only because of their achievement, but also because of their stories as resisters and overcomers. These girls redefined resistance through their success. This reaction was evident in the way the girls conceptualised their identity and defined success. Largely, their success was measured by overcoming struggles, accomplishing personal goals and defying school norms to create a cultural presence. While these achieving students admitted that their attitude toward acquiring academic success was partially inherent, they also credited their faith for meaningfully shaping their resilience. An important aspect of resilience in this study speaks to how the girls successfully utilised the resources and assistance, mainly community resources that were available to them in their pursuit of academic success.

Furthermore, these female students' narratives confirmed prior claims that to some degree, the Ontario school system continues to fail Black students. Schools may lack representation of Black history, culture or even representatives, but providing more overt representations may not erase the problem. The participants elaborated on notions of representation less in terms of physicality or tangibility, but rather as a misrepresentation of their

culture, having little or no expectations of them and assuming that they had no genuine interest in learning.

Student Achievement and Teachers Expectation

This study provides data to suggest that teachers' expectations can greatly influence students' performance. Moreover, differential treatment from teachers in the classroom had a significant impact on the students' engagement, which subsequently affected their learning. The girls' narratives demonstrated two ways in which teacher expectations or lack thereof, influenced students' learning. Participant Shay Julius explicitly mentioned that her teachers and school did not expect Jamaican students to excel in school. Nevertheless, her response to such an assumption was to defy it and to prove both teachers and the school wrong. In this example, lack of expectations influenced the student's engagement and achievement. In another example, participant Jessica Charlton expressed how shocking it was when she learned that teachers at her new school expected students to do well in school. As a result, she tried harder in her classes, and this way she could meet teachers' expectations and gain recognition. Students also shared that teacher low expectancy undermined student learning, where student refuse to engage in learning if they believe that their teachers expect them to fail. In all instances, teachers' high or low expectancy significantly influenced student learning and achievements.

Student Achievement and Parental and Community Involvement

This study also captures interaction between and among schools, parents and community members. Community expectations influenced students' engagement and achievement. In fact, while some schools and teachers held little or no expectations for students, community group, specifically the church served as a great influence. The girls claimed that both their parents and

members in their local church had high expectations for them to perform well in school. This assertion affirms that Black parents and communities shared high expectations, and pushed their children to do well in school. Given that expectations from parents and community were the only form of expectation that some students received, it also had a great impact on the students' success. Students are faced with the challenge of having to juggle the culture at home, which is sometimes significantly different from school culture; this balancing act can generate conflict for students. In the end, whether it was the teachers' push for high student achievement or parents and community members picking up where teachers lacked support, when students were aware that adults shared high expectations for their achievement, it positively influenced their achievements. In other words, positive expectations boosts student performances.

Student Achievement and Peer group Influence

Students' feelings about their peers and classmates have important implications for how they exert themselves to succeed at learning. This study provides an example of how the classroom and school environment served as a social network or niche for the girls, especially participant Shay, who explicitly mentioned that her peers academic performance and engagement was considered when she made her decision to start trying harder and doing better in school than she had previously.

7.3 Recommendations

Stakeholders responsible for a child's education must recognize the importance of expectations for children. Thus, to help Black students achieve academically, they need to know that much is expected of them. In other words, Black students like any other student, need to feel

valued, and that their skills, talents, abilities, efforts and experiences are recognized and appreciated by teachers and school administrations. As such, the key to Black students' success is not merely cultural, but Black students need expectations from their education-caregivers and the assurance that especially teachers want and expect them to succeed.

My research underscores how effective teacher education training and programs hold the potential to prepare teachers to deal with the increasing multiplicity of identities that exist in the classroom. With approaches such as urban diversity programs, critical research theories and urban and antiracism education offsetting the goal to provide more equitable education for all Ontario youth, there should be options available for students to access opportunities for success. While there are concerns that these approaches tend to oversimplify the dynamics of cultural diversity and racism, they introduce teachers to the issues that confront inner city youth and give them the opportunities to debunk the media stereotypes associated with these students. As well, effective teacher training programs can help in developing principles and strategies of generating pedagogies that will contribute to teacher candidates becoming effective teachers who will respond to the needs, concerns, interests and aspirations of the students and parents in urban and other types of communities.

Paulo Friere (1970) emphasised the importance of child-centered education and endorses the notion that the oppressed are the only ones who can free her or himself from oppression. The girls in this study epitomised the latter by redefining their own identity and presenting it for others to see. In attempting to fulfil the student-centred obligation of this research, I recorded the recommendation from the participants on what they deemed as beneficial and vital to improve their schooling experiences. I must stress that my goal was to capture the lived experiences of these achieving high school girls and present their narratives. However, while sharing their

stories and voicing the changes they would like to see in their schools, the participants used the phrase “they must” almost as though I was a messenger assigned to report their suggestions to someone else. To honor my participants’ requests, I presented their direct recommendations. Second, in light of the findings arising out of my research, I offer recommendations to education institutions, parents and most importantly to high school students on how they too can create their own successful journey in the midst of oppression, and in a learning environment whereby stereotypes predict their failure.

7.3.1 Participants Direct Recommendation:

In an attempt to learn from the participants what they deemed as best to enhance their education experience, and to fulfil the student-centred obligations of this research, these are the recommendations from the participants.

1. They [teachers] need to push students more, to work harder and to do better in their classes
2. They [education system] needs to include more diversity in the curriculum
3. They [schools] need to lower the price of cafeteria food
4. They [schools] need more extracurricular activities that cater to the interest of more students
5. They [schools] need to be safer
6. Issues relating to bullying, fights, need to be resolved faster, and the administration needs to show that they care about students
7. School should be more welcoming.

7.3.2 Researcher's Recommendation

This research adds to the dialogue on Black students and their schooling experiences in Canada. With findings from this research indicating that Black girls feel that the school system in Ontario to some degree contributes to Black students failing, the next step involves speculating what needs to be done to bring solutions to the issues, and to the ways in which all stakeholders involved can work together to improve the schooling experiences for Black girls and Black students in Ontario. Below I propose some recommendations for Black students, schools, teachers, and policy makers.

To students –All four participants surprised me when they each indicated that there was a time in their secondary school journey when they did not care much about doing well. In fact, they all had a transition element in their narrative from not caring about school to now passing all classes and anticipating university enrolment. I started the study with the impression that the girls were all innately brilliant or high achieving students and although they faced challenges, it was their genius-like ability that was responsible for their success. However, it added more volume to my study learning that they had to try extra hard just to get to where they are now. To recall, Jessica explained that she had to do overtime to get good grades and practically teach herself. Similarly, Shay disclosed that she was not always an “A” student, but only started doing well when she saw the accomplishments of her friends and questioned the difference between them and her. She consciously made the decision that she wanted to be on the honor roll, and worked accordingly. Also, Vanessa seemed to have little pity for students who dropped out, disclosing that their situation is not distinguishably different from hers, and that she too could have had the same title, but she made up her mind to do whatever she could not to drop out. These specific examples highlight the ways in which the girls in the study wilfully

and actively decided to take action that would steer them in a positive direction. I reiterated these examples mainly to encourage and demonstrate to other students that success is acquired and like the girls in this study, they can do it too. Providing the details on how these girls transitioned can be useful in motivating others students who want to acquire success. Such real life examples demonstrate how success can be acquired.

To parents and the Black community – The participants credited the contribution and involvement of their mothers as a key ingredient to their success. While there is a common speculation that Black parents are not as involved in their children's education, and sometimes due to their inability to assist with homework or other education and linguistic challenges, the girls shared that there are other ways their mothers were involved in their education. Mothers were their source of strength; they pushed them to do their best, and frequently enquired on how they were doing in schools. Annaya shared that her success came as a result of the collaboration amongst herself, her parents and her teachers. Her parents, though they were not very familiar with the education system in Canada, communicated with her teachers regularly and tried to obtain report on her progress. In the same way, Black parents ought to find ways to stay involved in their children's education. Children viewed their parents as a great source of strength, parents on the other hand need to uphold these expectations of their children, offering physical, mental and spiritual support to their children and encouraging them to do their best not just academically but in all aspects of their lives.

In addition, using negative examples to encourage Black students to work hard in school has negative implications. Above I shared a clichéd idiom¹⁷ that is commonly used in Black communities to encourage students to work hard and to inform them of their place in society. My cousin once used it with me and I went through school with one goal in mind to disprove what she said. The same with the participants in this study – all four felt obliged to disprove the stereotypes about Black girls. Schooling experiences took on a challenge of deconstructing negative distortions associated with being Black in addition to the normal, yet, overwhelming workload of being a student. Parents and other members in the Black communities should refrain from using negative and destructive messages, and start using more positive languages, tone and examples to speak to and encourage their children. This change will not eliminate the fact that there are negative stereotypes regarding Black people, but at home children are being trained and taught something different and positive that will help them to face and deal with negative perceptions in the rest of society. Black girls and students need to be told who they are at home; home should be the first site for identity formation and the basis should be positive and enriching.

To add, some families may not have the resources to fully nurture and equip their children and this is where Black communities have a role to bridge the gap. The Black communities including Black church, mentors, older peers, etc. have to do what schools and parents fail to do – boosting achievement by teaching self-esteem and self-reliance. As evident with the girls in my study, positive self-esteem was a prerequisite for achievement in school and society.

¹⁷ There are a plethora of common sayings that some Black parents use to encourage their children to do well in school. For example, *you must be twice as good to go half as far*, or *don't get the big head; don't blow your own horn*. While the act of encouraging their children is important, we should start using more positive affirmations.

To teachers, schools and education officials –Children are told that the purpose of school and education is to prepare them for workforce, but more importantly to train them how to be informed and active citizens. Teachers play a very important role in training and preparing students for life circumstances, students on the other hand, rely heavily on teachers for academic support, instruction and direction. All four participants shared an experience where a teacher made a difference in their academic journey. One of the claims that continue to plague Black students is the notion that teachers and guidance counsellors underestimate their potential and hold little or no expectation for Black students. As previously mentioned, when students know that someone expects something from them, they stand less a chance of failing. Not only do teachers need to hold high standards for their students, but they also need to be aware of and respect the individuality of each student.

The girls also shared that they sometimes forced themselves to participate in the classroom because sometimes the material was dull or did not reflect their positions, culture, background, values and beliefs. Recognising that teachers are bound by curriculum restrictions, they still have a responsibility to ensure that their students are engaged in learning. As such, teachers have to train students to be critical thinkers and learners, by teaching critically where students can engage in discussions, examine the issues within society and brainstorm ways to deal with them. Furthermore, regarding the absence of Black perspectives in Ontario curriculum, teachers can manipulate curriculum documents and by using different teaching and learning techniques, introduce students to the many perspectives and multiple realities. To add, teachers can assist students in critically using the available materials to learn truths about their history and the lived experiences of Black Canadians. Thus, teachers should continue to boost students'

academic competence and make every effort to close the achievement gap by introducing effective instructional strategies and holding high expectations for their students.

To policy makers – The experiences of these four participants are not independent, but as they described in their individual narratives, their experiences are shaped by the rules and regulations that govern their education. While expert ideas are relevant and necessary in decision making, these students too have concerns and are able to form their own opinion on what would work to address these concerns. In other words, they have viable suggestions on how their learning needs can be met. The girls in this study experienced similar education challenges to their counterparts who dropped out; however, these girls sucked energy from different sources and managed to beat the odds against them. Not all students will have access to supplementary resources, yet all students will be affected by education policies, therefore, policies should start reflecting the input, interest, perspectives, potential to directly address the concerns of the students. At some point students should not just be viewed as recipients, but should also be granted the opportunity to be actively engaged in decision making that will impact the rest of their academic careers. Students' opinions matter, and as the girls on this study have demonstrated, they have practical ideas on what might help them to do better in school. Thus, in order for students, including Black students, to do better in school, officials and policymakers should start soliciting some of these ideas from students to get their opinion on some issues that concern them and try to incorporate them in policies that will affect them.

I realize the recommendations are rather overreaching and idealistic. I must underscore that it was never my intention to examine or zoom in on the role institutions play in the experiences of these Black girls and their success. However, the deeply personal accounts shared

by the participants helped me realize the situation is indeed much greater than I first observed. Further, I realised that to understand the individual experiences we have to look at the challenges from a broad perspective. Subsequently, to improve the schooling experience of Black students in Ontario school system, parents, teachers, principals, administrators, education officials and policy makers all have a role to play, but to bring any real solution, students' active voices must first be heard and their full potential and abilities must be recognised and nurtured. For start, all stakeholders involved can use the recommendations provided by the participants to gain some insights on how successful Black girls experienced the process of schooling in Ontario which is also a clear indication that even students who are performing well have difficulties adjusting, assimilating and coping in Ontario urban schools.

7.4 Implication for Future Research

Some research that attempted to understand the schooling experiences of Black students focused primarily on the challenges they faced using the deficit model to draw conclusions such as; Black students drop out or remain academically disengaged because they find the school system oppressive, or schools continue to fail Black students (Dei et al, 1997; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Ogbu, 1978). This research employed a different approach focusing on the success stories of Black students, but also arrived at similar conclusions. Therefore, both approaches can be understood as resistance even though they garner opposite results. For future research, it would be interesting to examine how the attitude, personality, and drive of both sets of students might differ. That is, how might high achieving students' outlook on school differ from that of disengaged students taking into consideration the various identity factors. In terms of methodological approaches, critical theories such as CRT and feminist theory value storytelling

and experiential knowledge, therefore, more education and social science research in Canada should adopt such models to highlight the experiences of student in the education system. Such an approach would shed light on how students view schools, or how they feel about school, and measure and contrast how different groups of students thrive. As well, the participants in this study credit their internal drive as a vital force that compelled them to stay in school when they felt that the system was pushing them out. These girls have a personal drive that compelled them to stay in school. It would be interesting to see how students who leave school prematurely conceptualise or understand their internal drive as it relates to leaving school. With respect to student centered research, and with measures such as antiracist education, urban education is committed to providing students with more equitable education; it would also be interesting to see how such approaches to education might change to reflect students' input.

During my research, especially during the interviews and analysis, I experienced moments when I felt like I was only hearing one side of the story, or there were times when the participants would share information and I wished I could hear the teachers' version on the same matter. How, for example, would the teacher's view differ or mirror the participants' recollection. This question brings me to another direction for further research. Both teachers and students are the most involved, active players in the problems with schooling, yet, we have the least understanding of their experience or narratives; thus, future research should consider conducting a comparative analysis on the schooling experiences of successful students examining how teachers deal with aspiring students, compared to students who are failing or show no interest. Finally, all four girls singled out a specific teacher who stood out for them, and who made their schooling experience worthwhile; it would be interesting to following these

unique student-teachers relationships, to provide a model for other teachers and students to imitate.

7.4 Thesis Contribution

No one person holds the authority on Black girls' experiences or academic success for thriving students, and this thesis is no exception. However, the first-hand account of Black girls experiences, the discussions, recommendations and suggested directions for future research included in this thesis are valuable resources to begin a dialogue on the education of Black girls in Ontario and what their educational achievement would mean to self-empowerment, nation building and the education of girls globally. Though this research specifically focuses on the experiences of Black girls, to some degree, the findings hold some elements that transcend beyond just this small sample. While each participant shares unique stories, their experiences are shaped by historical and social events and institutions that also affected others. Therefore, these experiences can impact other secondary schools girls, Black and minority students, and students in general who aspire to be academically successful in an education system they may feel is against them.

7.5 Researcher's Reflection

On a final note, I want to reflect on the way participants' conceptualised their identities and particularly their perception of being Black females living in Canada, primarily because it sheds light on the plurality of identity within Black communities. As I described the common predesigned future of Black students to be high school drop outs, in the same way, Black youth also have a seemingly prepackaged identity and images in Canada, if not North America. Shay in her narrative describes the attitudes, behaviors and images that Black girls are expected to display; however, she also rejects such perceptions stating that she often displays the opposite. In fact, all the girls performed a different kind of blackness, and if I were to label such performance, I would say Jamaicanness. As the narratives developed and the themes emerged, I realised that the participants deviated from the stereotypical 'Black' performance and were performing another version, their version of Jamaicanness. The popular version of Blackness is; sassiness, loud, funny, "neck popping', finger snapping', gum popping'", assertive, argumentative and angry. Performing Jamaicanness differs; in fact, it is fair to say that the rejection of the aforementioned stereotypes of Blackness led to the perceived conception of Jamaicanness. In this thesis; Jamaicanness involves trying hard in school to achieve academic success, outspoken, spiritual, acknowledging and crediting faith, parents and community as driving forces behind positive attitudes and outlook on life, very aware, and being proud of Jamaican culture and influences. This performance of Jamaicanness reaffirms the multiplicity of Blackness within Black communities, especially the notion that Blackness is not a homogenous identity; it also celebrates a different Black perspective. What does this mean for schools and educators? It means that school systems have to recognise and understand the different perspectives, and understand that students have a sense of how social locations and positions influence barriers yet students are able to employ different strategies for resistance.

In so doing, these students are essentially unpacking the complexities of racial identities, and reforming their own. Educators and education policy makers should factor in this truth about Blackness and the unique capabilities of Black students when renovating education policies and teaching and learning pedagogy in pursuit of promoting equitable education for not just Black students but all students.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

(Note: You may choose not to answer any of the following questions.)

PERSONAL

Name _____
 Preferred alias name _____
 Age _____
 Gender _____
 What is your ethnicity? _____
 Were you born in Canada? _____
 If not born in Canada, where? _____ How long have you been living in Canada? _____
 What language (s) do you speak at home? _____

FAMILY and SCHOOL

Who do you live with? ____ Both parents ____ Mother ____ Father ____ Guardian ____ other

What is your parents/guardians occupation? (1) _____ (2) _____

What is your parents/ guardians marital status? Single ____ Divorced ____ Separated ____ Widowed ____ Other _____

What is the highest level of education achieved by your parents/guardian? ____ Less than high school ____ high school ____ some college/university ____ college/university or higher

Are you a member of any cultural or religious group? _____
 If yes, please specify _____

List any extracurricular activities that you are involved in _____.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

Name	Age	Grade/Education Level	Country of Birth	Ethnic Identification	Languages	
Shay	17	Grade 12 – High School	Canada	Jamaica-Canadian	English	
Annaya	17	Grade 12- High	Canada	Canadian	English	

		School				
Jessica	18	Year 1 – University	Canada	Canadian	English	
Vanessa	18	Grade 12 – High School	Canada	Canadian	English	

Table 2: Participants' Family and School

Who do you live with? ____ Both parents ____ Mother ____ Father ____ Guardian ____ other	Both parents= 2 Mother only= 2
What is your parents/ guardians marital status?	Married= 2 Separated= 1 I don't know= 1
What is your parents/guardians occupation?	Nurse assistant=1 and Mechanic = 1 Personal Support worker=2 and School bus driver = 1 University student =1 and n/a
What is the highest level of education achieved by your parents/guardian?	High school= 2 Some college=2 College/university = 1
Are you a member of any cultural or religious group?	Yes = 4
List any extracurricular activities that you are involved in	Basketball=1 Dancing and Church choir=1 Piano class=1

Appendix B
Interview Guide/Questions

General on black youths and schooling- their awareness and understanding of the current school system and issues within the black community

1. What do you like most about your school?
2. What do you dislike about your school?
3. Do you voice concerns you have about school? If yes, to whom do you voice these concerns?
4. How do you feel about Black History Month and its celebrations? Do you think BHM is only for black students?
5. To what extent do you think the things you are learning at school reflect your culture, values and beliefs? (how satisfied are you with the current teaching)
6. If the material does not reflect you, how do you cope with it?

Success (Academic) what is their understanding of success

7. What does success (academic) mean to you?
8. What do you think makes students successful in school?

Identity and Gender

9. What does “being black” mean to you?
10. What does being a black male/female mean to you?
11. What role does your identity play in your schooling experiences and achievements
12. In what ways do you think the schooling experience might be different for (black) male than female?

Source of Motivation

1. What motivates you or who do you think is most responsible for your education and success?
2. What are your future aspirations in life?
3. How do you hope to accomplish these goals?

Resistance (do they see themselves as unique individuals, different from other students who drop out or are not doing well in school, do they consider themselves resilient students, do they understand the term resilient...)

4. What do you believe are some of the reasons why students drop out of school or perform poorly?
5. What are some of the obstacles you face in school? How do you overcome these and decide to stay in school?

6. Do you consider yourselves different from students who drop out? Why?
7. Do you feel you receive adequate support from teachers and school (including principals, ancillary and administrative staff, etc.?) In what way do they support you?
8. Would you consider yourself a resilient student?
9. Do you have any critiques of the current school system? Do you think the current school system is oppressive?
10. Do you have any interest in bringing about changes or social justice for yourself and other students?

Appendix C

Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. How do you feel about Black History Month and its celebrations? Do you think BHM is only for black students?
 - a. Why do you think you feel this way?
2. How do you feel about Black females in Canadian society (you can talk about girls at your school, church, in your community, etc.)?
 - a. What are your worries, or concerns about Black girls in Canada, your school, community, etc.?
3. Do you have any female role models? Why do you look to these specific people?
4. How do you feel about schools in Ontario in general?
5. Do you ever feel like you want to help other students succeed?
6. What does this experience (participating in this study) mean to you?
7. Do you think this is an accurate statement “resiliency is the ability to persist in the face of adversity or the ability to bounce back after facing a challenging situation”? In what ways do you think this statement applies to you?

Appendix D

Data Analysis Techniques

Table 1: Organizing the plot elements into the problem –solution narrative structure

Problem -Solution Approach	Characters	Setting	Problem	Actions	Resolution
<i>Analysis process in which researcher takes the raw data in the form of the transcription and analyses the data for five elements of plot structure. The analysis involves organizing the elements into attempts or events and then sequencing the attempts or events</i>	<i>Female participant (personality, behaviors, etc.)</i>	<i>Context, environment, conditions, place, time, year, school, grade, and era</i>	<i>Question to be answered or phenomena to be described or explained</i>	<i>Movements through the story illustrating character's thinking, feelings, intentions, actions and reactions to failed and successful attempts.</i>	<i>Answers the questions and explains what caused the turning point or the character to change</i>

Source: Adapted from Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), I model to fit my research.

Table 2: Application of the participants' stories analysed by the five elements of the problem – solution narrative structure approach

Characters	Setting	Problem	Actions	Resolution
<i>Shay Julius very outspoken, funny and polite.</i>	<i>Grade 7</i>	<i>How can I get my grades up to par like my other peers?</i>	<i>Surrounded herself with positive people, sought help from peers, decided to try harder, competed silently with peers</i>	<i>She's now on the honor roll and hopes to pursue a career in law. Her turning point was asking herself the difference between her peers who were achieving and herself. She realised that that much other than her peers were putting in the effort to do what they needed to do. She aspired to do better than her peers.</i>

Source: Adapted from Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), I model to fit my research.

Appendix E: Primary Factors that enable students to achieve academic success (source of motivation)

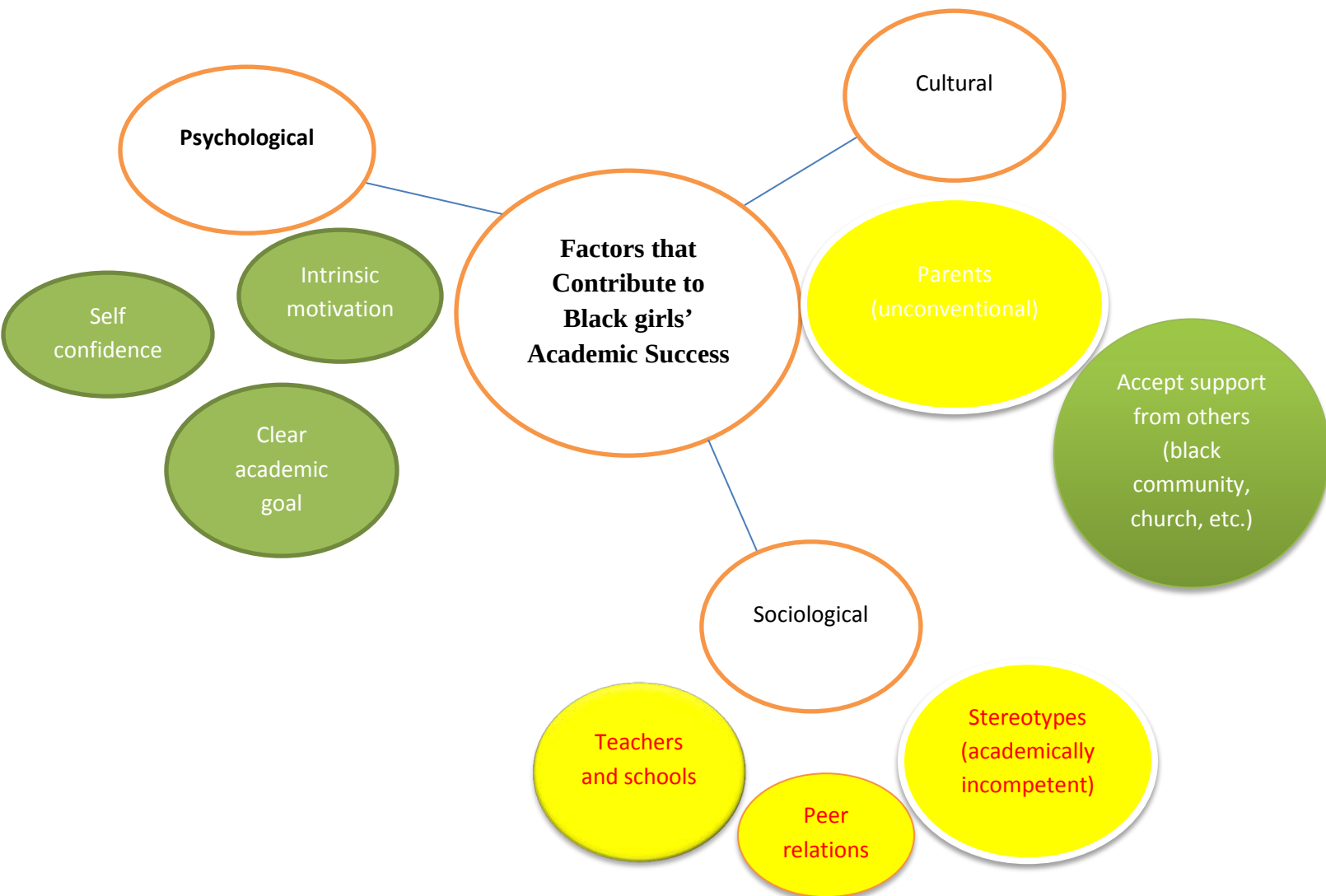


Figure 1: The primary factors that contributed to Black girls' academic success are divided into three main categories; psychological, cultural and social. Factors in the green circle led to academic success—factors in the yellow circle in some cases can lead to academic disengagement, but were also cited a motivation factors.

Appendix F: Other materials consulted

1. The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12 Social Sciences and Humanities (2013)
2. Toronto District School Board Achievement Gap Task Force Report (2010)
3. Urban Diversity Strategy (2008)

Ontario Ministry of Education.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/brochure/whosresp.html#parents>

Appendix G: Definition of Key Terms

Black –I use the term “black” interchangeably with African Canadian in this thesis to refer to people especially of African and Jamaican ancestry, including Canadian born, immigrants, etc.

Success – success is a highly subjective term but generally means the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. In this thesis, success mainly refers or relates to academic achievement.

Academic Success – In this thesis and especially in reference to successful Black female students and in selecting participants for the study, success refers to black girls who are enrolled in academic/advanced streams in all or most courses, have a passing grade of 80% or higher in all subjects and anticipate university enrolment. I also rely on the girls' definition of success that I discuss in details in the body of the thesis.

High School Dropout – In this thesis, high school dropout describes any student who withdraws from all academic activities without graduating or did not acquire an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Urban – urban refers to areas with high concentrations of unemployment, poverty, crime and violence, poverty, and Black people.

Urban Education –Urban education also refers to approach adopted to address, or fix the problems in urban schools. As a part of urban education, the Urban Priority High Schools (UPHS) initiative targets high schools in urban priority areas to reach youth in need. The goal is to help these secondary schools develop the necessary supports and resources to meet the needs of their students and communities. Key results will include creating safe schools, increasing student achievement and building sustainable community partnerships (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008).

Secondary school – secondary school refers to high school which ranges from Grade 9 to Grade 12 in Ontario education system. In this thesis, the sample includes predominantly Grade 12 students who are in the process of preparing their university applications (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

Resistance – using the Oxford Dictionary definition of resistance, which is the refusal to give in, accept or comply with something, in this thesis, resistance refers to rejecting the stereotypical fate of Black students as high school dropouts or underachievers. The navigating techniques that high achieving students use to accomplish success are viewed as resistive measures.

Transformative – With transform meaning to alter or convert from one state to another, transformative describes process, strategies and techniques.

Transformative resistance – In this thesis I adopt Henry Giroux's definition of transformational resistance as a guide. Transformational resistance refers to student behavior that illustrates both a critique of social oppression and a desire or interest in social justice and change (Giroux, 1983)

Oppositional culture –John Ogbu coined this phrase to describe minority students' in America attitudes towards the dominant culture. For many minority students (e.g. Blacks and Hispanics), adopting dominant attitudes or behaviors is perceived as supporting their oppression, so they react by engaging in behaviors that are in opposition to it [dominant culture]. Academic success was perceived to be of the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1978, 2003).

Critical Race theory – Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a lens used to examine how racism might be present in policies, culture, society etc. With respect to education, CRT provides a critical analysis of race and racism and aims to challenge conventional accounts of educational and other institutions and the social processes that occur within them (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Feminism – Feminism is advocacy for women's rights and is based on the belief or principle that women and men should be enjoy the same economic, social, and political rights, and ought to be treated equally in society. Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (hooks, 2000).

Antiracism – Antiracism is a theoretical approach that opposes racism, and attempts to promote racial equality and equity. This thesis uses Dei (2010) notion of anti-racist framework which is about articulating 'difference' and its relational aspects. Further, affirming difference is to acknowledge the relative salience of different social identities, i.e., race, class, gender and sexuality (Dei, 2010).

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