Understanding “Black” Identities, Youth, and Education in Toronto: A Post-structural Ethnographic Approach

by

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A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

Guelph, Ontario, Canada
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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING “BLACK” IDENTITIES, YOUTH, AND EDUCATION IN TORONTO: A POST-STRUCTURAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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University of Guelph, 2019

In North America, research has demonstrated that, on average, students racialized as Black lag behind their White counterparts in standardized test scores and high school graduation rates. Researchers have suggested that structural barriers in the North American education system are to blame for these disparities. Racial and ethnic identities and cultures have also been identified as both contributing to, and impeding Black students’ success. In Canada, provincial government and school board inclusive education policies have been introduced over the last decade to address achievement disparities for “diverse” student populations. Despite the wealth of research and some policy interventions, the academic achievement gap persists in Toronto.

This study examines underlying academic and social policy discourse on Black students and academic achievement, and investigates how these broader discourses shape local talk and practice in one metropolitan secondary school in Toronto, Ontario. The aim of this study was to determine how school processes, understood discursively may prevent, or reinforce disparate outcomes for Black students.

Using a post-structuralist ethnographic approach, participant observation and qualitative interviews were conducted over a four-month period with 12 self-identified Black students (ages 14-18 years). Observations, formal interviews, and informal conversations were also conducted
with 14 staff members. Study results suggest that there are multiple competing discourses on Blackness and academic achievement that are historically grounded, and reproduced through academic research and policies, and which were available to students and staff in the specific school environment. This included a dominant discourse of Blackness as damaged/deficit and neoliberal discourses surrounding the market value of diversity and education. White staff members reproduced, and constructed discourse related to culture and Black students, which reinforced marginalizing discourses for Black students. Black students displayed fluid understandings of Blackness, but in describing their academic experiences, also drew on damage/deficit discourses. Students also navigated responsibilized subject positions. In-depth examination of a single student narrative reveals the complexity of competing discourses that shape student subjectivities, and calls attention to the continued need for differentiated gender analyses in attending to Black students’ experiences.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that in-depth attention to schools’ overall discursive practice, student agency and complex subjectivities is needed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of students racialized as Black in Ontario, and to design interventions that support education equity.
DEDICATION

For my Matriarchs

Grandma (Aunt May, Miss May, Grannie May, Zether Bernice Heslop McBean).

January 1, 1926 – October 17, 2018

and

Grandma (Mama, Miss Hya, Hyacinth Rubel Martin Litchmore)

July 1, 1925 - Infinity
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Saba Safdar for her support and supervision throughout the course of my Masters’ and Doctoral programs. I am grateful for her guidance and for the opportunities that she provided to me over the past nine years, as these have given me the skills and networks to advance my career and academic reputation. I am also thankful for the freedom that she allowed me to pursue my own research interests and goals, which enabled me to complete this project. I am also extremely grateful to my advisory committee members, Dr. Jeffrey Yen and Dr. Cecil Foster. Thanks to Dr. Yen for his detailed and steady feedback on my dissertation, as well as his mentorship which allowed me to refine my understanding and use of my theoretical framework. Thanks to Dr. Foster for his guidance, feedback and support, and for encouraging me to consider my positionality as a Black woman researching Blackness in the field of psychology.

I am also grateful to my examination committee members, Dr. Lance McCready, Dr. Andrea Breen, and Dr. Kieran O’Doherty. Thanks to Dr. McCready for his critical insights and perspective on my work and its usefulness in considerations of Black Canadian youth identities. Thanks to Dr. Breen for her challenging and thoughtful questions, and to Dr. O’Doherty for his role as a long-term mentor, and for introducing me to a theoretical perspective and epistemology that has ultimately altered my relationship with the discipline of psychology.

I would like to thank my support system, my family and friends for their ongoing support and tolerance of my extended absences as I pursued my degree. Thank you to my parents, Varma and Desrick, for grounding me, and instilling in me a steady work ethic that has brought me to where I am today. Thank you for your sacrifices and love. A special thanks to my only sibling Othniel and his growing family, for your existence, and your motivating words and instrumental
support. Thank you to my extended family, my aunts, uncles and cousins, for cheering me on and never losing faith in my ultimate success.

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues at the various institutions at which I had the great fortune of working as I completed my writing. Specifically, I would like to thank those who have supported me at the University of Toronto Scarborough Campus, the University of Toronto Transitional Year Programme and Academic Bridging Program, the Anti-Racism Directorate, and Taibu Community Health Centre. Without your support, patience and flexibility, I would not have been able to complete this project.

I owe a depth of gratitude to my “day ones”, my friends who have become family; those who have been there for me from the very beginning of my journey in Canada. I love you all so very much.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my participants, the individuals who allowed me into their school, and entrusted me with their stories. To the staff and students at Lilyfield high school, your narratives have not only contributed to the scholarly work on Black Canadian identities, but, have, and will continue to contribute to the work of creating equitable schooling for Black students in Ontario.
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1 Black Identities, Youth and Education

1.1 Introduction

Academic and popular discourse on the experiences of individuals categorized as Black in Canada have been on the rise over the last few decades (e.g. Mensah, 2010; Rankin, Duncanson, Quinn, Shephard, & Simmie, 2002). More specifically, adolescent academic “achievement gaps” that exist between young people categorized as, or who self-identify as, “Black” and young people of other backgrounds have been of particular concern to researchers and the general public (Dei, 2006; Hammer, 2012; James & Braithwaite, 1996). The term “achievement gap” has been used in the United States to refer to the findings that Black students consistently underperform on standardized testing and in grade point average, and have higher high school dropout rates than White students (Whaley & Noel, 2011). Recent reviews by Whaley and Noel (2011; 2012) discuss the over 30 years of research on African American students and academic achievement gaps. They note that this research has been largely concerned with sociocultural theories that implicate aspects of African American culture and identity into student attitudes and beliefs about academic achievement.

The “academic achievement gap” for Black students has also been identified in Canada (James & Braithwaite, 1996; TDSB, 2008). Consequently, there has been a fair amount of research, beginning as early as the 1970s (James & Braithwaite, 1996), that attends to the experiences of young people racialized as Black in Canadian schools. While most researchers have pointed to systemic issues in the Canadian education system that result in the marginalization of Black and other racialized youth (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2010; Hoo Kong, 1996), researchers have also looked specifically at how the identities and cultures of the young people
themselves relate to their educational experiences (Caldas, Bernier, & Marceau, 2009; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Codjoe, 2006; James, 2003; Smith & Lalonde, 2003). The controversial (see CTV, 2008) establishment of an Afrocentric school in Toronto that, among other practices, seeks to explicitly integrate the histories and experiences of peoples of African descent into the school curriculum (Dei, 2006; TDSB, n.d) demonstrates the extent of public concern over the effectiveness of the mainstream school system for these young people. It also demonstrates the level of importance placed by advocates for these types of schools on the relationship between racial/ethnic/cultural identities and experiences and the school performance of Black adolescents.

This project seeks to contribute to this discussion by taking a post-structuralist ethnographic approach to the study of Black youth identities and experiences in an educational context. I will examine how current discourses on Black identity and education, as embedded in broader historical and policy contexts, intersect with educators’ and students’ narratives on identity and schooling. The research findings will also facilitate concrete recommendations to the research setting, a Toronto high school, for creating an inclusive environment for their diverse student body.

1.2 Aim of the dissertation

The aim of this dissertation is to challenge discussions of linear, causal relationships between Black identity, or Black culture, and academic outcomes. This is not to deny that such a relationship exists, particularly in considering the value of understanding Black histories and cultures for students who have been otherwise excluded from mainstream schooling. However, research that takes a highly contextualized approach to understanding the diverse contributing
factors to academic achievement can in turn contribute to interventions that account for these complexities. A post-structuralist analysis is therefore one such way to simultaneously consider how historical context, local practices, and individual experiences shape particular actions and outcomes. Attention to student subjectivities from a post-structuralist perspective allows us to open up the discussion beyond race and culture essentialisms, giving adequate attention to the institutional arrangements and societal discourses that shape and structure students’ experiences, while also accounting for student agency and power.

Consequently, my research questions are as follows: 1) What rhetorical resources related to identity, race, culture, education, and otherwise intersect with the subjectivities of youth who self-identify as or who are categorized as Black? 2) Are these rhetorical resources available in the local school environment? How do staff members draw on these and other resources in their talk and actions as related to Black student experiences? 3) How (if at all) do youth who self-identify as Black negotiate the multiple subject positions that are made available to them through these resources? Do they exercise agency – as defined under post-structuralism – in doing so? 4) How can our understanding of how students and staff contend with the multiple competing resources in talking about their experiences help create a school environment that is more inclusive of diverse student populations?

1.3 Chapter overview

In the discussion that follows in section 1.4, I will present the features of post-structuralism that I used to frame my research, i.e., discourse and subjectivity (Davies, Brown, Gannon, Hopkins, McCann, & Wihlborg, 2006; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). I will consider the usefulness of studying Black identities with through this approach, by understanding how
specific discourses may make available particular subject positions that individuals take up or reject in a particular setting. Within this discussion, I will also consider the concepts of power (Weedon, 1987; Williams, 2005) and agency (Davies, 1991) as understood within post-structuralist approaches, as these are of particular concern for framing the narratives of the individuals who participated in the study. I will then discuss the concept of identity as reimagined under post-structuralist approaches (Hall, 2000), to present an alternative perspective on the term that resists essentialist constructions of social categories.

Following that review, I briefly discuss the general context of Black identity in Canada, outlining the heterogeneity of this population and considerations of the use of the label “Black” to categorize these individuals. I will follow this with a discussion of the most recent statistics that document the “academic achievement gap” for “Black” Canadian students.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 is aimed at answering my first research question: to outline the how “Black” identities and the academic achievement gap have been theorized and addressed in Canadian academic and policy discourse. I will begin my discussion with a brief overview of research from the United States, which has heavily informed the work that has been done in Canada. In discussing this work, I argue that a discursive understanding of extant research allows us to consider academic research as constructive, rather than simply reflective, of reality. In concluding this discussion, I identify one dominant underlying discourse that this work contends with, i.e., a damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness. I then go on to briefly outline the historical grounding and features of this discourse in establishing its relevance to the present study. I also discuss the features of neoliberal
governmentality, as this framework is relevant to the policy context and education practice of the province of Ontario and the school board in which I conducted my ethnography.

Following this discussion, I describe the main theoretical approaches to the study of Blackness and education that I have identified in the Canadian academic literature. These are, 1) social-cognitive approaches; 2) post-modern approaches; 3) Afrocentric approaches; 4) anti-racist approaches, and 5) multiculturalist approaches. I will discuss the main features of each theoretical perspective, as well as the main critiques that have been levelled against each approach. I will then consider how these theoretical approaches function discursively, by examining the rhetorical resources that are made available through empirical research and education policy that draw on these approaches. In examining this research I argue that there have been three main constructions of Blackness through this work: a) Blackness as damaged/deficit; b) Blackness as therapy/protective; and c) Blackness as resistance.

My exploration of the academic literature and policies falls within my overarching theoretical framework of post-structuralism. In discussing how Blackness has been constructed through the academic literature and relevant polices, my aim is not to determine which approaches to the topic at hand are correct, or the best, but to consider the social actions, and the staff and student subjectivities, that are made possible and those that are constrained through particular approaches to the work. The discussion therefore lays the groundwork for examining the ethnographic data that were collected in this study in order to examine whether, and how, identified rhetorical resources are taken up in the school environment and to understand the subjectivities of the individuals with whom I interacted.
In chapter 3, I discuss my ethnographic method, as well as describe the process of data collection and analysis. I will describe how I ensured the quality and rigour of the project, as well as challenges that were encountered and resolved throughout data collection and analysis. I will also discuss my relationship with the data, through a consideration of reflexivity.

Each of my analysis chapters is composed of an analysis of the data collected through the ethnography, and a discussion of the implications of these findings. Chapter 4 will outline my major findings in relation to the school environment, based on my formal and informal discussions with staff members. This chapter is divided into three sections: 1) staff member constructions of culture as a product; 2) staff member constructions of Blackness; and 3) staff member constructions of Whiteness as a barrier to working with Black and “diverse” students. In this chapter I argue that there were multiple competing discourses in the school environment, which informed staff members’ self-positionings, and worked to reinforce potentially marginalizing discourses despite staff members best intentions in working with Black and other “diverse” students.

In chapter 5, I turn to students’ narratives and experiences as related to race, culture, and their academics. First I discuss my ethnographic observations of the Black History Month activities that occurred at Lilyfield, where I argue that Blackness was constructed primarily as therapy by staff members and by myself as a participant observer. I describe students’ resistance to this construction, and their agency in making meaning of Blackness on their own terms. I then discuss students’ navigation of damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness, as they worked to position themselves as empowered in relation to this disempowering discourse. Finally, I
demonstrate how neoliberal discourses shaped student academic subjectivities, positioning them as responsibilized subjects, and outline how students manage this positioning.

In chapter 6, my final analysis chapter, I give a close reading of the narrative of a single student to demonstrate how competing discourses in the Lilyfield environment constitute one student’s subjectivity. In this chapter I demonstrate how these multiple competing discourses create subject positions for a single raced, gendered, and aged being. I draw on my ethnographic observations, informal conversations, and formal interviews with this student, her teacher, and her peers to demonstrate how she resisted potentially disempowering damaged deficit discourses, i.e., discourses of being “at risk,” and claimed space for herself as an empowered and engaged student. I also discuss the specific implications of sexualized discourses for Black girls, which are often over-looked in broader academic achievement discussions, which have tended to focus on the experiences of Black boys.

In the final chapter, I present a general discussion of my overall findings by repeating my research questions and discussing how I have answered them. In this chapter, I also discuss implications for policy and practice, and provide my overall conclusions. Taken together, the dissertation emphasizes a need for detailed examination of the competing messages that both educators and students contend with. Rather than focusing primarily on students’ racial and ethnic identities, it urges a consideration of how to support educators in navigating discursive and material constraints in educating Black students. The dissertation also challenges researchers to treat Black identity as discursive; to see students as simultaneously acted upon by, and constructing a range of discourses inclusive of race and culture. This approach allows for more nuanced understandings of student experiences. It avoids the tendency to take a static and
purportedly objective cause and effect relationships between racial identity and academic achievement. It also encourages a continued examination of a range of outcomes and educational realities for these students.

1.4 Theoretical framework

1.4.1 Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism, though lacking a clear definition, is generally understood to be a theory of knowledge and language (Agger, 1991). In a general sense, post-structuralist psychological work involves “deconstruction” (Derrida, 1976), which emphasizes the ineffectiveness of attempts to pin down absolute meanings in language, as such meanings are likely to shift in accordance with the social context (St. Pierre, 2000). By extension, post-structuralism critiques positivism in psychological science and emphasizes the constructive and constitutive role of language in social life (Gavey; 1989; Gergen, 2001).

In this project, I rely on the features of post-structuralism most emphasized by feminist researchers (Davies, 1991; Davies et al., 2006; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987), i.e., discourse and subjectivity. These concepts are used in this dissertation to examine how the academic and popular discourses surrounding identity, culture, youth, and education shape the day-to-day experiences of my participants. I also use the concept of identity as reconceptualized under post-structuralist thought (Hall, 2000) to understand how my participants negotiate labels that imply commonalities with other individuals on “racial” or “cultural” attributes.

1.4.1.1 Discourse

Post-structuralist work that involves investigations of discourse have largely relied on the work of Michel Foucault. Scott (1998), for example, defines discourse as a “historically, socially,
and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories and beliefs” (p. 35). Foucault (2004) uses the term “discursive practice” to refer to the relations between and organization of statements, categories, beliefs, practices, institutions, etc. (which can collectively be referred to as “objects”) that constitute, and are constitutive of, particular discourses. In this sense, social actions are effected through discourse, and language is not treated as merely reflective of an objective reality (Gavey, 1989). Wetherell (2003) adds further clarity to this claim in her discussion of racist discourse. She argues that

[r]acism is not first a state of mind and then a mode of description of others. It is a psychology (internal monologue/dialogues and modes of representing) that emerges in relation to public discourse and widely shared cultural resources. Similarly, inequality is not first a fact of nature and then a topic of talk. Discourse is intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of inequality. Inequality is constructed and maintained when enough discursive resources can be mobilized to make colonial practices of land acquisition, for instance, legal, natural, normal, and “the way we do things.”(p. 13)

In other words, discourse both constructs, and is constructed through, the interrelation of histories, social practice, institutions, material resources, language, etc.

Weedon (1987) refers to Foucault’s term “discursive field” to describe the diverse and oftentimes competing discourses that may exist in a particular setting or in relation to a particular object, and the power dynamics associated with them. She notes that although some discourses may support the status quo, others will provide means through which to challenge more dominant ways of thinking and acting. By extension, power in post-structuralist thought can no longer be thought of in absolute terms. It cannot be thought of as extending, top down, from one
particular source, but as relational (Hall, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000). As power lies in the heterogeneous and contradictory discourses that shape the values, norms, and practices that can be performed in a certain setting (Williams, 2005; Weedon, 1987), resistance can be found within these same structures and discourses (St. Pierre, 2000). This means that all individuals can experience instances of power and powerlessness according to the social and relational context. Therefore, for the youth in this study, it is conceivable that, whereas the discourses surrounding Blackness or other identity categories may be disempowering in one context (e.g., when communicating with a teacher), in another setting these same discourses may be a source of strength (e.g., when communicating with peers). These ideas go against humanist and modern conceptions of power that fuelled social movements like the civil rights and women’s movements in the US, which were driven by the idea of an overarching and uniformly powerful authority enacting oppressive practices against the uniformly less powerful in society.

With regard to academic discourse, discursive psychologists argue that for much of traditional psychological work, researchers treat their objects of study, such as “attitudes” or “motivations,” as “things” and seek in their research to uncover the underlying structures of these concepts (Parker, 1992). They argue that psychological constructs instead be treated as objects of discourse, and that discourse analysis is therefore concerned with the ways in which psychological objects are constituted in language, and their purposes in social interaction (Parker, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Academic discourse is therefore treated as no more authoritative than lay discourse, and discourse analysis in this setting becomes concerned with deciphering the processes by which some discourses are established as more valid than others (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).
In addition to the post-structuralist theoretical framework, the work of discursive psychologists also draws attention to the processes through which discourses are constructed in talk. The term “interpretative repertoires” is used in discursive psychology to bring attention to the potential for the reification of discourses under post-structuralist approaches, where coherent discourses may be treated as existing independently of the contexts within which they are identified. Discursive psychologists therefore emphasize the contextually determined function of discourse as social practice (Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Wetherell and Potter (1992) define interpretative repertoires as “broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images…systems of signification and…the building blocks used for manufacturing versions of actions, self, and social structures in talk” (p. 90). In this approach, attention is given to the content of discourse, the organization of this content, and contextual construction and action orientation of discourse in talk, text, and action. My use of the term “discourse” throughout the dissertation will therefore account for post-structuralist and discursive psychology approaches.

1.4.1.2 Subjectivity

As the social world can be organized into multiple competing discourses, conceptualizations of the individual become “decentered” (Hall, 2000, p. 16). For post-structuralists, there is no internal essence of an individual that is “unique, fixed, and coherent and which makes her what she is” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32; italics in original). Henriques, Hollway, Urwin and Walkerdine (1998) define subjectivity as “…individuality and self awareness—the condition of being a subject…”. They go on to say that “subjects are dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and practices and produced by these…” (p.
3). In other words, rather than treating an individual as a singular unit of autonomous and self-directed behaviour, focus is given to the multiple and contradictory discourses that exist in a given society, and individuals are posited as being subjected to these discourses. Individuals therefore have the ability to take up or resist various “subject positions” that are available in their social worlds through the multiple and competing discourses to which they are subjected (St. Pierre, 2000).

While the source of an individual’s ability to take up or resist subject positions is an ongoing discussion for post-structuralist researchers, Hollway (1998) posits that paying attention to the history of individuals and their repeated positioning in particular discourses helps us understand these processes. Hollway employs the term “investment” to refer to the emotional satisfaction or reward in taking up a particular subject position over another. She argues that, although broad dimensions of social difference, such as race, gender, and social class, play a role in determining the subject positions that are available to, and taken up by, individuals, the person’s individual history must also be examined to understand why particular positions are occupied over others. She argues that power is infused in the processes by which individuals occupy some positions over others. Certain positions are imbued with more power under particular discourses than others, and an individual’s investment in particular positions, i.e., their repeated taking up of these positions over time, is married to the power that those positions hold for them. By extension, the positions that an individual may avoid taking up signifies the lack of power that this position holds for them.

The question of agency arises at this point. Agency is customarily regarded in humanist discourse as a form of “free will.” Many post-structuralists, however, see this as an illusion
For some post-structuralists, a form of agency may exist in an individual’s understanding of how she/he has been constituted by particular discourses, and her/his deliberate taking up of some available discourses and practices over others. However, since an individual is also always subject to particular discourses, agency resides in the negotiation of these discourses (Davies, 1991; Butler, 1992).

1.4.1.3 Identity

Where does the concept of identity fit into this discussion? Some writers (e.g., Davies, 1991) have distinguished the concept of subjectivity from that of identity by arguing that identity represents the essentialized autonomous individual as traditionally conceived of in Western thought and research. However, Stuart Hall has actively sought to redeploy the term in a manner consistent with the idea of the decentred individual as subjected to broader social discourses. He proposes that identity be treated as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 2000, p. 6). He argues that “identification” involves the “recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (p. 2). Identity is therefore seen as the temporary adoption of particular subject positions or discourses, which are also recognized as shared with other individuals. However, Hall argues that identities find meaning not in commonalities but in differences, i.e., distinctions from other identities and forms of identity (Hall, 1991).

1.4.1.4 Culture, race, and associated identities

In the context of a post-structuralist perspective, how race, culture, and their associated ideas are conceptualized needs to be considered. The standard psychological definition of race in
psychology is “a characterization of a group of people believed to share certain physical characteristics such as skin colour and facial features” (Cokley, 2007, p. 225). In contrast, race, as conceptualized under more constructionist theoretical viewpoints is explicitly treated as a social construct, rather than as grounded in any biological or genetic features, which has been thoroughly disproven (see Templeton, 2013). Gillborn (1995) states that “[f]ar from being a fixed, natural system of genetic difference, ‘race’ operates as a system of socially constructed and enforced categories, constantly recreated and modified through human interaction” (p. 3).

Relatedly, cross-cultural psychologists have suggested that more traditional definitions of culture that frame it as a psychological construct, residing inside the minds of individuals, are being replaced with definitions that acknowledge that culture is external to the individual, and comprises the contexts in which they live (Schwartz, 2014). Specifically Schwartz (2014) argues that societal culture “underlies and is expressed in the functioning of societal institutions, in their organization, practices, and policies…these institutions mediate the effects of culture on individuals,” (p. 2). In defining culture, Gjerde (2004) states that

[c]ulture is not an objective reality “out there” to be revealed/discovered…Rather it is something that is invented, reinvented and sustained by people in personally meaningful ways within the political terrain that frames their lives; it is dynamic, fluid and emergent. This process takes, to some extent, place through discursive practices. (p. 153)

The concept of a cultural identity in a post-structuralist, deconstructed sense therefore flows directly from these understandings of identity, race, and culture. Hall defines cultural identity as,

a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”. It belongs to the future as much as to the
past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and

culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything

which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed

in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture

and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to

be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity,

identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position

ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”(Hall, 1990, p. 225, emphasis added)

This understanding of identities, specifically those treated as “racial,” “cultural,” or

“ethnic” identities, will be used to understand the narratives of the youth in my study. Taken

together, the conceptualizations of discourse, subjectivity, and identity as outlined above are

used to frame my analysis of the experiences of the individuals recruited in my study.

The theoretical framework outlined here, in addition to guiding the analysis of my

ethnographic data, also guides the remainder of my review of the literature. In the section that

follows, I will discuss the social identity of “Black” in Canada. Following that discussion, I will

outline the problem of the “academic achievement gap” for students racialized as “Black” in

Canada.

1.5 Context

1.5.1 Black identity in Canada

Use of the term “Black” as a positive group descriptor was first advocated in the social

movements of the 1960s in the United States and other parts of the world to signify racial pride

and to fight racism (Hall, 1991; Philogene, 1994). The term “Black” was not restricted to people
of African descent, however. In the UK, the label has also been used to categorize all non-White or non-European populations for political purposes in the late 20th century, but this use is less popular today (Bhopal, 2004). In the US, the term “African American” was subsequently introduced by community leaders in the 1980s to advocate for more cultural representations of this group in American society (Philogene, 1994).

In Canada, the history of the use of the term is more difficult to ascertain; however, there is a clear connection between its use in the US and its use in Canada. For example, Sealy (2000) discusses a 1969 newspaper article in which the writer suggested that the terms “Negro” or “Afro-American” were preferred by Toronto populations at the time, as the term “Black” was regarded as too militant for Black Canadians as compared with their US counterparts. This impression was based on the view of Canada as being distinctly anti-American and as not having levels of racism comparable with the US.

Currently, the demographic group labelled as “Black” in Statistics Canada’s demographic surveys accounts for 3.5% of the Canadian population, the majority of whom are designated as first or second generation (Statistics Canada, 2016). Mensah (2010) describes the Black Canadian population as being composed of individuals who are descendants of those who came from the US during the period of slavery and the American Civil War, as well as more recent immigrants from the Caribbean, the continent of Africa, and other countries. However, there is also academic disagreement on use of this label. Some scholars (e.g., Anderson, 1993) have resisted its use, arguing that it opens the door for racist treatment associated with the homogenization of a diverse group. Others have used it freely to signify common historically shaped experiences associated with race (Mensah, 2010), while calling for continuous and
critical examination of the heterogeneity – cultural, geographic, and otherwise – of persons categorized as Black (Walcott, 1996).

Empirical studies have also demonstrated the slipperiness of the label of Black to signify a homogeneous group of people (Gosine, 2008; Ibrahim, 1999). For example, in my previous work I demonstrate the rhetorical strategies that young people of African and Caribbean background employed to construct and identify with particular social categories related to understandings of race and culture. Here, constructions of Black identity and “Blackness” fluctuated according to the context of the conversation and the social actions being performed (Litchmore, Safdar, & O’Doherty, 2016).

The label is therefore treated in the present study as a construction, significant to the social and historical context outlined above but simultaneously malleable to immediate social and rhetorical contexts such as those that will be discussed in the remainder of this dissertation. It is used here to signify individuals who may be subjected to, or take up broader historically situated discourses associated with, Blackness.

1.5.2 Academic achievement gap for Black students in Canada

The term “achievement gap” has been used in the United States to refer to the findings that Black or African American students consistently underperform on standardized testing and in grade point average and have higher high school dropout rates than White students (Whaley & Noel, 2011). This “achievement gap” has also been identified in Canadian populations (James & Braithwaite, 1996; TDSB, 2008). Current statistics from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) demonstrates that, despite the reported elimination of strict academic streams from Ontario schools in the 1990s, Black students are still disproportionately placed in lower
academic tracks (Rushowy, 2015). Ontario schools currently have three main course tracks for grades 9 through grade 12. The first is Academic (grades 9 and 10) or University Preparation courses (grades 11 and 12), advertised by the TDSB as emphasizing more theoretical and conceptual learning, which prepares students for entry into universities. The second is Applied courses (grades 9 and 10) or College preparation courses (grades 11 and 12), advertised as emphasizing more concrete or practical learning, preparing students for entry into community college (TDSB, 2014a). The third is Locally Developed courses in grades 9 through 12 (previously referred to as Essentials), which are vaguely defined by the TDSB (TDSB, 2014a) but are generally understood to be tailored to students categorized as not having the academic ability to gain direct entry into a post-secondary institution. Until recently, the TDSB did not formally recognize these tracks as streams, because placement in these tracks are advertised as based on student choices (People for Education, 2014). However, research has demonstrated that students rarely ever transfer from lower-level courses (e.g., Essentials or Applied/College levels) to higher-level courses in subsequent grades, and students tend to take the majority of their courses at one academic level (People for Education, 2014).

Recent TDSB statistics demonstrate that approximately 50% of students who self-identify as Black are found in Applied or Essentials tracks, with less than 10% in Academic track, whereas White students are evenly distributed across all streams (Galabuzi, 2014; TDSB, 2013a). Additionally, although similar proportions of Black students and East Asian students are registered in the TDSB (14.4% and 14.8% respectively), Black students represent only 2.7% of students in Gifted streams as compared to 26.5% East Asian students (Clandfield, 2014). Provincial data demonstrate that students in Applied math are about half as likely to meet
provincial standards on tests compared with their academic counterparts (EQAO, 2016). There is also a decreased likelihood that students in Applied courses graduate high school at all (People for Education, 2014). TDSB statistics confirm that, even though Black students’ graduation rates have increased by 16% since the 2006-2007 academic year, they still have the second lowest graduation rate (59%) of the ethnoracial groups surveyed. Additionally, the majority of Black students (55%) did not apply for a post-secondary program in the 2011-2012 academic year, second only to Latin American students (60%) (TDSB, 2013a).

There are also marked differences in “achievement” as measured by standardized testing, as well as differences in how Black students are disciplined as compared with other ethnoracial groups in the TDSB. Black students, particularly those with Canadian- and Caribbean-born parents, had lower scores than other students in the TDSB in the grade 6 and grade 10 EQAO test, a standardized test that assesses student literacy and math skills. Black students also had lower scores than other student groups on the OSSLT (Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test) achievement test, which is taken at the end of grade 9 (TDSB, 2008). It was also found that, despite Black students’ accounting for approximately only 12% of the overall student population in 2011, they represented 8.6% of suspensions in the TDSB from 2011-2012, the highest of any other ethnoracial group. This included White students who made up 29% of the student population but accounted for only 2.9% of suspensions, and East Asian students who made up 15% of students but accounted for 0.7% of suspensions for that academic year (TDSB, 2014b).

Researchers have generally understood these statistics to indicate that Black students are, in general, fairing worse in public education in Canada, and specifically Toronto, than other ethnoracial groups. Understanding these statistics in this manner is critical, as there is ample
historical evidence that demonstrates the processes that have led to the exclusion of Black communities from mainstream schooling. Additionally, the material implications of not graduating high school, or of having more limited post-secondary options, are significant.

In the following section, I give a brief and general overview of the historical context that has shaped the present conditions outlined above. I will also outline notable policy interventions to address the academic achievement gap in Ontario. Although most of these interventions have been directed at students as a whole, it will become apparent that policy decisions over the past few decades have been prompted, whether directly or indirectly, by Black community activism.

1.5.3 Historical and policy context for the academic achievement gap

1.5.3.1 Historical context

Calliste (1996) notes that Black communities across Canada have been fighting for education equity since as early as the late 1800s. At that point, these communities consisted mainly of formerly enslaved Africans in Canada and from the US, who lived in segregated communities in Canada. Segregated schools for Black students were common practice across Canadian provinces at this time, with many provinces, including Ontario and Nova Scotia, mandating this segregation through legislation. This practice often worked in tandem with official and unofficial segregation policies and practices across the country (Chan, 2007). Segregated schools were often legally allocated as inferior, as in the case of the amendment to the Education Act of Nova Scotia in 1884, which allowed for only less qualified teachers to teach in schools for Black pupils. Similarly, in Ontario, the Separate School Act of 1850 legislated separate schools for Ontario students on the basis of race and religion. These schools often employed under-qualified teachers and lacked library facilities. Black students were not the
only group affected by segregation practices at this time; Chinese and Japanese students also faced varying levels of exclusion from Canadian “common” schools. The last separate school in Ontario closed in 1965 (Chan, 2007).

The 1960s and onwards saw increased immigration from Caribbean, and to a lesser extent, African countries, following the removal of explicitly racist immigration policies in 1967, and the introduction of the points system by which immigrants are accepted based on their potential contribution to the Canadian economy (Anderson, 1993). Multicultural education policies were also established in the 1970s with the introduction of the federal Multiculturalism policies in 1971 (Chan, 2007; James & Braithwaite, 1996). These multicultural education policies were aimed at integrating the increasingly diverse student body and took shape as mainly heritage language programs and general heritage programs that taught students about the contributions of various cultural groups to Canada and the world.

However, research from the 1970s and 1980s in Toronto, Ontario, indicated an academic achievement gap for Black students, as seen in their disproportionate placement in lower-level or vocational classes in the Toronto School Board¹ (James & Braithwaite, 1996). James and Braithwaite note that multicultural education policies and programs were therefore a source of frustration for Black community members, who argued that the focus on multiculturalism did not address the systemic racism that was inherent in the education system. In response to these criticisms, some Ontario boards of education implemented race relations policies and programs (Chan, 2007). Here, too, these policies were criticized as not addressing the systemic realities of

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¹ The Toronto School Board existed prior to the amalgamation of seven school boards to create the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 1998 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), in what is now known as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).
racism. Instead, racism was treated as “a consequence of ignorance; and racial minority students’ lack of success was seen to be the result or racial tension and lack of role models in the society generally, and in school and learning materials in particular” (James & Braithwaite, 1996, p. 24).

In 1993, the provincial New Democratic Party government introduced the Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993). This policy was developed in the context of the 1992 Yonge Street Riots, in which members of Toronto’s Black communities protested policing practices that unfairly targeted Black populations, as well as the subsequent 1992 Stephen Lewis report on Race Relations in Ontario (Pascal, 2016.). Additionally, the Ontario Advisory Committee on Race Relations, established in 1985, contributed to the development of the policy (Chan, 2007). The policy aimed to make changes to institutional policies, procedures, and individual behaviours, and explicitly acknowledged the role of power differentials in creating inequity, as opposed to simply focusing on cultural differences, as did previous legislation. The Deputy Minister of Education at the time, Charles Pascal, notes that the initial focus of the policy was to address the educational barriers that existed for Black students in particular (Pascal, 2016). However, despite the initial focus on Black students, explicit mention of procedures aimed at addressing the disadvantage of this population was missing from the final document.

The mid-1990s saw the election of a Conservative provincial government. In line with their overall policy objectives, this government dissolved the established education policies aimed at increasing equity (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003). Although the Anti-Racism and Ethnocultural Equity policy was not officially repealed at this time, it was not utilized by the new government (Joshee, 2007). Instead, the year 2000 marked the introduction of perhaps one of the
most controversial education policies to be implemented in Ontario, the Safe Schools Act. This Act was not a policy aimed at diversity, equity, or race relations but at student behaviour and discipline. The Act was framed as an effort to “increase respect and responsibility, to set standards for safe learning and safe teaching in schools” (Education Act, 2000, c. 12, p.1), and in response to public concerns of violence, bullying, and weapons in schools (Kovalenko, 2011). The mid-1990s consequently saw an increase in individual school boards’ adoption of policies towards school safety, specifically focused on weapons and violence (Bhattacharjee, 2003). This trend mirrored overall trends in the United States, with the implementation of “zero tolerance” policies that borrowed from juvenile justice strategies of implementing standardized discipline guidelines rather than relying on the judgment of school authorities (Hirschfield, 2008). These policies have been criticized for being consistently disproportionate to the actual threat of violence that existed in schools (Hirschfield, 2008).

In Ontario, public reception of the Safe Schools Act was negative almost from the very beginning (Puxley, 2007). There was also an exponential rise in general suspension and expulsion rates on account of the Act (Brent, 2007). Members of the Black community in the GTA voiced complaints that this rise in suspensions and expulsions disproportionately affected Black students (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Evidence from other cities where so-called zero tolerance policies had previously been implemented indicated a tendency for racialized students, and students with special needs, to be disproportionately affected by such policies. However, as systematic disaggregated race-based data not collected by Ontario school boards at the time, and researchers had limited access to statistics on students with disabilities, concrete evidence to verify these concerns was limited. Considerable anecdotal reports from community workers,
school trustees, lawyers and parents on the other hand, concluded that Black students were disproportionately affected by the Safe Schools Act (Bhattacherjee, 2003).

Following a November 2005 settlement with the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), the TDSB was required to begin collecting statistics on suspensions that accounted for the race of students (Rankin, Rushowy, & Brown 2013). TDSB statistics from more recent academic years reveal that Black students are indeed suspended at higher rates than other groups, second only to Aboriginal students (Rankin et al., 2013; TDSB, 2013a), therefore corroborating the prior anecdotal evidence.

In light of these controversies, the Ontario government conducted a review of the Safe Schools Act in 2005. Recommendations for changes were made, and in 2012, the “Accepting Schools Act” was approved by the provincial liberal government (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012; Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Interestingly, despite widespread criticism of the Safe Schools Act regarding the disproportionate impact on racialized, and specifically Black students, revisions to the Act included no specific mention of these groups. The ministry does, however, instruct school boards to consult entities outside the schools, including board Special Education advisory committees, social service and mental health agencies, First nations, Métis and Inuit communities and other community groups (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012).

1.5.3.2 Current policy context

Joshee (2007) notes that policies in one domain are usually formulated inside a web of other interrelated policies that have been developed over time. It will become apparent in the discussion that follows that the current policy environment pertaining to equity and inclusive education is both explicitly and implicitly informed by the policies introduced in previous years.
and decades. At the provincial level, the 2009 *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* with subsequent guidelines introduced in 2014 (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009; 2014), and the 2013 *Bias-free Progressive Discipline* policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a) are the most immediately relevant to this study. The TDSB Equity Foundation statement and accompanying documents represent the policies most relevant at the municipal level.

In 2009, the province introduced the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, the goal of which is to cultivate inclusive school climates. The strategy promotes student achievement through acknowledging that particular groups of students, may face systemic barriers on account of various “dimensions of diversity,” that is “ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical ability, intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and others” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009, p. 11). Facing systemic barriers on account of these dimensions of diversity in turn limits students’ opportunities and chances for success. The policy cites the 1993 Anti-racism and ethnocultural equity policy as a predecessor. Through the strategy, the ministry has directed school boards to implement equity and inclusive education policies, to identify systemic barriers that may affect students and staff members alike, to increase communication with parents and community partners, and to make changes to curriculum to reflect students and staff members’ “diverse histories, cultures and perspectives” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 5), among other changes. This policy was in play at the time of my data collection in 2015.

As a specific part of the inclusive education strategy, the Ontario Ministry of Education draws on the work of researchers in the United States regarding Culturally Responsive, or Relevant Pedagogy (CRP; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). CRP
delineates the role that educators, and teachers in particular, play in shaping the schooling experiences of students from diverse cultural and other socio-demographic backgrounds. CRP is aimed at treating student diversity as strengths for, as opposed to challenges to, learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). The strategy also calls for administrators and teachers to integrate students’ cultures and identities into the school culture and curriculum – which is noted to be largely Eurocentric and exclusionary – in a meaningful manner (Centre for Urban Schooling, n.d). This approach is contrasted with the treatment of cultural “minority” cultures as “cultural celebrations” under traditional conceptions of multiculturalism (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b, p. 2). It places culture at the centre of education pedagogy, and notes that members of ethnic groups “share some core cultural characteristics” (Gay, 2010, p. 10).

In Culturally responsive pedagogy: Towards equity and inclusivity in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b), teachers are called on to recognize their social identities and how these may affect their “attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs” (p. 4) in working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The work of Canadian researcher George Dei is referenced to emphasize that White middle-class individuals live with more privilege in society and that individuals who do not fall into these categories will experience difficulties. The document therefore calls on White middle-class educators – and presumably educators in general – to be mindful of how their backgrounds may influence their teaching practice and to engage in self-reflection to identify their biases.

In addition to policy aimed specifically at addressing student cultural diversity and systemic barriers, the provincial government has provided directives to Ontario school boards on implementing a “whole-school approach” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 2) to
promoting positive student behaviours. This includes cultivating caring relationships between staff and students, promoting a positive and inclusive school climate through programs and activities for students, including student-led organizations, and using “progressive discipline” techniques. The guidelines document “Supporting bias-free progressive discipline in schools: A resource guide for school and system leaders” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a) draws an explicit connection between the inclusive education strategy and the “whole schools” approach to promote a safe and inclusive school environment. The ministry defines progressive discipline as “an approach that utilizes a continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build up strategies that promote and foster positive behaviours” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 3). The ministry document explicitly outlines long-term suspension and expulsion as a last resort and emphasizes that school boards should focus on developing early intervention and prevention strategies for students before behaviours become unmanageable. They recommend communication with parents, reflection exercises, and verbal reminders as examples of early intervention strategies.

Bias-free progressive discipline takes into account Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) policies that bar differential treatment of individuals on the basis of social group membership or identification (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.). This approach instructs school personnel not only to consider the mitigating factors that may influence a student’s behaviour but also to determine whether staff members may hold conscious or unconscious biases when choosing to implement particular disciplinary measures. The guidelines therefore account for the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates that occurred under the previous
zero tolerance policy environments, and associates this, at least in part, with potential biases of educators.

*Toronto School Board Policies.* The TDSB adopted an Equity Foundation statement in 1999 (TDSB, 1999). Prior to this time, Toronto schools fell under seven different school boards, which were amalgamated in 1998 (Joshee, 2009). The adoption of this statement therefore appears to be more related to the state of affairs at the board as opposed to the changes that were occurring on the provincial level. The Equity Foundation statement is embedded in the idea of diversity across a number of social identities, including race, ethnicity gender and religion, and the need for schools to ensure that school curriculum and practices are reflective of this diversity, and that students have “equitable” access to opportunities and supports that result in the success of all students. The board subsequently adopted three other statements that, alongside the equity foundation statement, represents their guidelines and policies on equity and inclusion. The statement on Human Rights (TDSB, 2004), outlines the school board’s commitment to prevent harassment and discrimination as mandated by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human rights code. The Guidelines and Procedures for Religious Accommodations (TDSB, 2011) also references the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in stating freedom of religion as a fundamental right. It outlines that schools cannot indoctrinate students into particular faiths but that school must provide accommodations for students’ religious requirements. Finally, the Know Your Rights and Responsibilities (TDSB, n. d.b) pamphlet outlines for students' specific examples of harassment and discrimination, the grounds under which discrimination and harassment are prohibited, and outlines what students can do if they are victims of harassment and discrimination or are witness to someone else’s victimization.
The preceding discussion represents major developments in ministry policies that were either directly or tangentially related to the experiences of racialized, and particularly Black students in Ontario School boards. This was not a comprehensive review, as several other policy and procedure guidelines were released in the 10-year period between the revisions to the Safe Schools Act and the time of my data collection, that were aimed at inclusion and equity among Ontario’s diverse student population. These included, but are not limited to, the “English Language Learners, ESLA and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a); the “Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b); and “Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). However, the policies that have been discussed were determined to be most pertinent for the topic of this dissertation.

Taken together, this discussion described current statistics that have empirically documented an academic achievement gap for Black students in the Toronto District School Board. It also outlined the historical context for Black educational exclusion in Canada, and the current policy context aimed at increasing education equity for all marginalized students. In the following chapter, I examine the academic literature that has sought to make sense of this historical context and present day findings, and outline the discursive underpinnings of this work.
2  Black Identity and Academic Achievement

2.1  Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the North American social science research on the relationships between Black identity, Black cultures, and academic achievement. I will examine how social science researchers in the United States and Canada have established and explored relationships between Black identity and academic achievement. I will also outline the major theoretical contributions to the field, as well as examine how these theoretical approaches have been informed by, and inform a complex discursive field in relation to Black identity and academic achievement in Canada. This discussion therefore outlines the range of rhetorical resources that may be available to students and staff members in educational institutions.

I begin my discussion in section 2.2, with a targeted review of research in the United States, which has heavily informed much of the research on Black identities and school performance in Canada. I begin this section by outlining the seminal research of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) on the “oppositional culture” of African American adolescents. This research has sparked much controversy in academic and popular discourse, where subsequent studies have been conducted with the goal of supporting, or discrediting Fordham and Ogbu’s work. My discussion of this work and the ensuing research gives context for the Canadian literature and also introduces a dominant underlying discourse of this research, i.e., the treatment of Blackness as damaged or deficit, which is discussed in detail in section 2.3.

In section 2.3 I describe the features of the damaged deficit discourse of Blackness to provide an understanding of its relevance to the present study. This is followed by a discussion
of neoliberal governmentality, as this is relevant to the education policies that were in play at the
time of my data collection – i.e., the commodification of education and cultural diversity and the
potential impacts on experiences of staff and students in schools. Finally, I discuss five
theoretical perspectives or approaches from which the majority of Canadian academic work has
been conducted: 1) social-cognitive, 2) post-modern, 3) Afrocentric, 4) anti-racist, and 5)
multicultural. These discussions outline the historical and social features of the research, and lay
the groundwork for an examination of the academic literature and policies that will be presented
in section 2.4.

In the final section of this chapter, I examine the discursive effects of the Canadian
literature and policies on conceptualizations of the relationship between Black identity and
academic achievement. Here, I demonstrate how the broader dominant discourse of Blackness as
damaged/deficit, emerging neoliberal discourses, and the five theoretical approaches that are
explicated in section 2.3, inform multiple and competing ways of addressing the “academic
achievement gap” for Black students in Canada. This discussion lays the groundwork for the
remainder of the dissertation, as it outlines the rhetorical resources that students and staff
members alike may draw on in an educational context in discussions of their experiences. It also
outlines potential social actions that may be performed when drawing on these resources, as well
as the potential for conflict and congruence between perspectives that are customarily framed
otherwise.

2.2 A brief consideration of the United States literature

Recent reviews by Whaley and Noel (2011; 2012) discuss the over 30 years of research
on African American students and academic achievement gaps. They note that this research has
been largely concerned with sociocultural theories that implicate aspects of African American culture and identity into student attitudes and beliefs about academic achievement. The work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) on “Oppositional Culture” in the United States has sparked a large volume of research in that country (Ogbu, 2004) and has also been integral to the development of work in Canada (e.g., Codjoe, 2006; Dei et al., 1997; Smith & Lalonde, 2003). I will therefore present a discussion of the study and the subsequent debates regarding its findings, to provide context for how the relationship between Black identity and culture and academic achievement has been constructed in the research literature in both the US and Canada.

Oppositional culture theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004) takes a cultural-ecological approach to the study of Black identities and academic achievement. This approach examines the historical, structural, and cultural forces that shape the schooling experiences of African American youth (Fordham & Ogbu). Using ethnographic methods, Fordham and Ogbu theorized that due to the ongoing systemic oppression of African Americans in US society, they developed a belief that, despite their hard work, they would not be treated in manner equal to that of White Americans. The documented lower academic achievement of Black students is therefore attributed to a combination of three main factors that occur in the racially stratified US society: a) substandard schooling for African Americans; b) general lack of opportunities for African Americans to obtain employment that match their educational achievements; and c) the development of coping strategies that contribute to attitudes that impede academic success. These strategies are posited to be part of a collective identity that African Americans have developed over the course of centuries in response to their continued exclusion from US society, which is in opposition to what is seen as White social identity. African American students, it is
argued, possess an oppositional frame of reference because of their community socialization. They learn this oppositional culture and frame of reference through the collectivist cultural networks or “fictive kinship” of African American communities, which developed through ongoing historical processes of exclusion from mainstream US society (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that because US society is dominated by White Americans, mainstream schooling is an extension of White American culture, into which students are socialized. Black students are therefore forced to choose between the collectivist orientations of the African American community and the individualistic culture of mainstream schooling. Strong racial/ethnic identity for African Americans is also treated with disapproval in mainstream settings (Fordham, 1988). Consequently, the oppositional frame of reference for Black students involves boundary work in which Black American individuals police particular behaviours, events, symbols, etc., that are deemed to be appropriate or inappropriate for their group and in relation to White Americans (Ogbu, 2004). Because high academic performance is regarded as a part of the White social identity, African American students who excel academically are deemed to be exercising “Racelessness” or “acting White” (Fordham, 1988). Whether consciously or unconsciously, these students may choose to disassociate themselves from African American culture. They are also regarded by community members as rejecting African American culture to attain success in domains where African Americans are regarded as not typically successful.

Fordham and Ogbu also argue that the oppositional culture of Black American students does not preclude students from achieving good grades (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Instead, students who do succeed in school may downplay their academic achievement by avoiding what
are typically regarded as “White” attitudes and behaviours that are associated with good grades. Students may still be high achievers but avoid particular “White” behaviours to fit in with their Black peers. They may also find other social groups or support systems that buffer them from negative peer sanctions (Ogbu, 2004). These researchers note that these phenomena are not experienced, nor practiced, by all African Americans and are based in part on the social location—including socioeconomic status, neighbourhood composition, and school culture—of the individuals in question (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

As previously noted, the Oppositional Culture Theory has garnered great notoriety in the area of Black students and academic achievement (Ogbu, 2004). There has been some empirical evidence in support of the theory (e.g., Farkas, Lleras, & Maczuga, 2002; Fryer & Torelli, 2010; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). Farkas et al. argue that their findings support the portion of Fordham and Ogbu’s theory that states that African American students perform boundary work by criticizing their high achieving peers for “acting White.” By analysing large-scale secondary quantitative data, they found that African American students who were high achievers reported being “put down” by their peers at higher rates in “high minority” schools than in schools with greater proportions of White students (26% or greater White).

There has also been serious criticism of the theory’s original postulations (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1996; Harris & Robinson, 2007; Tyson, Darity Jr., & Castellino, 2005). Prior to the study by Farkas et al., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) used the same data set used by these researchers to study the phenomena. In contrast to Farkas et al., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey assessed boundary work by looking at the relationship between student reports that others viewed them as popular, and student reports that others viewed them
as good students. These researchers found a stronger relationship between reports of popularity and reports of being a good student for African American students than for White students, which they concluded did not support Fordham and Ogbu’s theory of boundary work among African American students. As another example, using a “racelessness scale” designed by the researchers, Arroyo & Zigler (1995) found that both high achieving African American and European American students displayed attitudes such as not sharing their high achievement with peers. They conclude that such behaviours are common to high achieving students in general and not limited to African American students. In other words, evidence of behaviours predicted under the theory was found in the study, but was not found to be attributable simply to race and culture factors. Other studies have used qualitative approaches such as interviews and ethnography (e.g., Harper, 2006; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004), and have yielded similarly mixed findings.

A large body of current literature contradicts Fordham and Ogbu’s theory, arguing that Black identity and culture, and specifically a strong, positive identity and culture, facilitate higher academic achievement among Black American students (see Whaley & Noel, 2012). For example, in a quantitative longitudinal study, Chavous et al. (2003) demonstrated that students who had high racial centrality and positive regard for African Americans, and who regarded society as having negative views of African Americans (i.e., a strong positive Black identity), had higher high school attendance at time 1 and higher college attendance at time 2 than youth with lower racial centrality and less positive views about African Americans. Kerpelman, Eryigit, and Stephens (2008) also found a positive relationship between ethnic identity – a term often used interchangeably with the term “racial identity” – and African American adolescents’
positive outlook on their future educational pursuits. Along with racial-ethnic identity, these studies often consider the role of other factors such as gender and social class (Oyserman, Grant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003).

Taken together, this body of research appears to provide compelling evidence of some relationship between Black identity/culture and schooling experiences or educational performance. While some researchers continue to investigate whether Black culture has a negative effect on academic achievement, many researchers have argued that the wealth of evidence supports the conclusion that a strong, positive Black identity is related to better academic performance, and that Black students do not treat high academic performance as antithetical to Black culture (Whaley & Noel, 2011; 2012; Zirkel & Johnson, 2016).

Researchers also point out that Fordham and Ogbu’s original work has been widely received despite a lack of evidence to support its major components (Tyson et al., 2005). They have argued that the authors misinterpreted or incompletely interpreted the original interviews with students, given that some students did not attribute their academic underachievement to peer sanctions against acting White (Whaley & Noel, 2011). Critics also note that they appear to have generalized their findings without taking into full consideration notable race and class antagonisms in the students’ environments (Tyson et al. 2005; Whaley & Noel, 2011). In other words, this work has often been cited as contributing to constructions of Blackness as damaged or deficit (to be discussed in greater detail in section 2.3), as it appears to suggest that it is the state of Blackness itself that is detrimental or counter to high academic achievement. On the other hand, Ogbu (2004) has argued that much of the criticism levelled against the theory has focused on just one feature of the overall cultural-ecological theory, i.e., oppositional culture, at
the expense of accounting for the other socio-historical processes.

Ultimately, the ongoing debate in relation to Fordham and Ogbu’s work demonstrates continued academic efforts to manage how Blackness is constructed in relation to understandings of academic achievement. Zirkel and Johnson (2016) contend that, despite the wealth of evidence to suggest that Black identity and culture have a positive impact on academic performance, theories and perspectives that posit that Black culture is damaged and negatively related to academic performance persist. Researchers argue that these theories continue to be proliferated in an overall US culture of anti-Blackness that guides researcher and lay audience interests in continuing this narrative (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016). Alternatively, I would argue that it may be an oversimplification to assert that there is a deliberate and orchestrated attempt by researchers and lay audiences to extend narratives that construct Black cultures and psychologies as damaged. I posit instead that academic spaces are part and parcel of a broader discursive environment that historically has been and currently still is anti-Black. As a consequence, this leaves researchers susceptible to reinforcing anti-Black discourse, even when making attempts to deconstruct these discourses. Accordingly, key to further discussion is the general understanding that underlying discourses and rhetorical practices should be considered when attempting to understand existing research. The difficulties with this literature further necessitate an investigation of the underlying discourses and values that drive the research, just as it is necessary to look at the research in and of itself (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001).

In the following section, I discuss the damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness in greater detail, tracing its historical influences and present-day manifestations as relevant to social science research and social policy debates. Secondly, I provide a general discussion of neoliberal
governmentality, as this is relevant to current Ontario education policy.

2.3 Discourses and theories on Blackness and academic achievement

2.3.1 Damage/deficit discourses of Blackness

Damaged/deficit discourses of Blackness are grounded in the histories of colonization of the African continent and enslavement of African peoples in North and South America and the Caribbean. This enslavement was in part justified on the basis that Africans were intellectually inferior and was supported over the centuries by “scientific” practices of phrenology, eugenics, and IQ testing (Love, 2004). As a consequence, continued oppression of African Americans in the US (Scott, 1997) and the underprivileged social status of peoples of African descent around the world have been fuelled by, and in turn continue to uphold, a discourse of Black people as inherently inferior and as psychologically and/or culturally damaged (Scott, 1997). Blackness is treated as inferior, pathological, or deviant as compared with an undamaged, normalized Whiteness, and this damage is blamed for Black people’s status in society. Although the source of this pathology has changed over the decades, the underlying construction of Blackness as inferior has been maintained (Scott, 1997).

Scott (1997) argues that the “imagery” as he refers to it, or discourse of damage, constituted both conservative and liberal ideology in the United States. He writes that social science experts and politicians of the late 1800s and early 1900s depicted recently emancipated African Americans as genetically inferior in intellect and morality to their White counterparts, and thus unable to participate in and contribute to mainstream modern society. This imagery continued off and on through the 1900s, and supported segregation and disenfranchisement of these peoples. Pathology among African Americans in schooling was attributed to lower IQs and
cultural deficiencies. For example, the “culture of poverty” hypothesis that became popular in the late 1950s and 1960s initially depicted working class White Americans as apathetic, indifferent, and withdrawn. This depiction was quickly transformed to represent African American culture, and social actors who subscribed to this belief argued that structural changes to improve African American life circumstances would inevitably be ineffective, given that the source of their precarious social status lay in the psychological deficits of the individuals and social deficits of the culture.

Liberal politicians and social scientists who were purportedly supportive of African American progress continued this discourse of damage in the post-WWII years. These actors attributed Black psychological damage to racial oppression and ongoing discrimination in US society. In other words, in contrast to more conservative viewpoints that depicted Blackness as inherently damaged, liberals blamed racism and exclusion as leading to Black psychological damage. Emphasis on the harm caused by discrimination worked to support desegregation and consequent affirmative action programs intended to level the playing field for African Americans. However, it also fuelled the imagery of Black peoples as fundamentally damaged and in need of aid, and therefore promoted them as an object of pity from White Americans (Scott, 1997).

Similarly, Valencia (2010) discusses general deficit discourses for racialized and working-class populations in the United States, specifically in relation to education and academic achievement. Valencia argues that deficit discourses – similar to damage discourse – are highly malleable, and over time have been attributed to genetic sources, culture, and class, and family structure and socialization. In all cases, the source of disadvantage or deficit is centred on the
individual or group, with little attention given to the role of societal and historical structures and events. Valencia includes in his analysis a specific look at the “at-risk” discourse. He argues that the use of the label “at risk” invokes a deficit discourse by linking the source of student academic challenges to the individual student, the family, and/or community, while taking attention away from institutional and systemic arrangements such as systemic racism and class.

Consequently, in examining or conducting research that draws comparisons between the outcomes of Black North Americans and other populations, awareness of this historical context, and the role that these discourses may play in the conceptualization, reporting, and interpretation of research must always be taken into account.

2.3.2 Neoliberal governmentality

Neoliberal governmentality is evident in Ontario’s public education system and therefore is highly relevant to this discussion. Neoliberalism refers to a general economic and political shift away from more bureaucratic forms of government in which the state was treated as responsible for social welfare, to one in which power is situated in private, capitalist corporations. The term “neoliberal governmentality” is used to signal not simply the range of policies and ideological bearings that accompany this shift but also the processes through which neoliberal discourses operate as a disciplining power whereby individuals are encouraged to conform to market norms (Nairn & Higgins, 2007). Neoliberal discourses are always referred to in the plural, to indicate the multitude of discursive and non-discursive practices that work together across various domains and to situate social life inside economic or market-driven relations (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Kascak & Pupala, 2011).
Blackmore (2006) explains that for businesses, diversity within neoliberal discourse emphasizes the fostering of a more creative workforce through the recruitment of workers from “diverse” backgrounds, as well as the quality of services that diversity can deliver, including meeting the individual needs of clients. For education, this translates into a service delivery model that treats students as clients and in which evidence of the quality of services is gathered through performance measures (e.g., standardized testing). Schools are therefore placed in competition with one another, and students and their parents are seen as consumers of education with the ability to “choose” the options best suited to their preferences (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Tienken, 2013). This is in contrast to more traditional treatments of public education, in which state support was given on the premise that an educated citizenry served the greater good of society.

Neoliberal governmentality therefore has implications for subjectivity. For example, the subject position of the “entrepreneurial self,” which emphasizes the individual as autonomous and free to make choices based primarily in their self-interest, economic or otherwise (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Kascak & Pupala, 2011) is produced through this discourse. This has the outcome of placing students as individually responsible for their own learning, and teachers as classroom managers who must employ strategies that are responsive to this individualized learning.

Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2012) argue that Ontario’s public education system has been undergoing a neoliberal shift since the 1990s. This includes the implementation of greater control over curriculum design and content, budget cuts, and amalgamation of school boards. It also includes the establishment of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which develops and administers standardized testing across the province. Evidence of neoliberal
governmentality can also be found in school board course selection and education planning technologies such as www.myblueprint.ca, where students as young as elementary aged are provided with tools that “introduce them to the world of work” (MyBlueprint, 2018). The practice of streaming, which in the 1990s allowed students to only select courses from a single track, thereby having the effect of purported ability grouping, is now advertised to students as a process of choice. Students are told that they may select a combination of courses from different streams based on their interests and preferences, but the process effectively works in the same manner as it did in the 1990s and is consequently quite limiting for students (People for Education, 2014).

In relation to education equity and diversity, we see neoliberal discourse interwoven into the province’s inclusive education strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) in which diversity is promoted as an asset to Ontario’s economy and future prosperity. For example, consider the following excerpt:

We believe that Ontario’s diversity can be one of its greatest assets. To realize the promise of diversity, we must ensure that we respect and value the full range of our differences. Equitable, inclusive education is also central to creating a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario’s future prosperity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5).

Here, diversity is framed as an “asset” for the province Ontario. Equity and inclusive education is treated as a strategy that can be used to leverage diversity to provide the best output of the education project, i.e., a “cohesive society,” “strong economy” and “future prosperity.” The implications of neoliberal governmentality for staff and students in the research setting are therefore in need of consideration.
2.3.3 **Theoretical perspectives in the Canadian literature**

I will now turn to a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of Canadian work in this area. I have identified five main approaches to the treatment of racial and cultural identities in the Canadian academic literature and policy relevant to Black youth and schooling: These are 1) social-cognitive, 2) post-modern, 3) Afrocentric, 4) anti-racist, and 5) multiculturalist. In outlining the main features and challenges of these approaches, I seek to establish a general understanding of underlying perspectives that inform the relevant academic literature and policies. This discussion will serve as a basis for exploring how Black identity and academic achievement that are constructed through the research and policies that have been developed in this area. It is also important to note that these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In other words, although, post-modern and social-cognitive approaches are usually framed in opposition to one another, Afrocentric and Anti-racist perspectives often overlap, and can be inclusive of social cognitive and post-modern approaches. Similarly, multicultural approaches are often inclusive of social cognitive approaches, but often situated in opposition to anti-racist work in Canada. This propensity for overlap will also be demonstrated in section 2.4.

**2.3.3.1 Social-cognitive approaches**

At their basis, social cognitive approaches are grounded in cognitive psychology, which posit that human behavior can be understood in the terms of information-processing. Whereas cognitive psychology investigates phenomena such as reasoning, vision and audition, social cognition approaches aim to explicate social phenomena, including stereotypes and intergroup relations (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2014).
Social cognitive approaches work from the position that “reality” can be perceived directly through our senses, which are then acted on by internal processes in the mind. These processes in turn produce mental representations that are stored as models or prototypes that can be drawn on in future situations to aid the individual in understanding their environment. These mental representations include “categories,” “attitudes,” “stereotypes” etc. They work to organize our experiences and expectations, which enables us to expend less cognitive effort in new situations. Social cognitive approaches also posit that many of these processes occur unconsciously and automatically; however, there are also many instances in which humans may devote considerable attention and energy to thinking and problem solving (Augoustinos, et al., 2014).

Specific to the study of race and culture, this work positions individuals as perceiving social categories as natural aspects of their environment (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The act of grouping individuals into categories is done on account of human beings’ limited information processing resources. Categorization is therefore a cognitive act that is easier and more efficient than analysing individual persons (Hopkins, Reicher & Levine, 1997). Additionally, in this approach, the individual is positioned as the lone observer who is separate from the external environment, and who perceives, processes, and creates mental representations of this environment (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Consequently, culture is treated as something separate and apart from the individual (Hermans, 2001), but that can be internalized to varying degrees. This conception of identity and culture stems from “Cartesian dualism” in which human beings are presumed to have universal psychological characteristics that exist outside the external world and cultural socialization (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hermans, 2001).
Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1981) which stems, in part, from broader social-cognitive approaches, underlies much of the work on racial and ethnic identity in adolescents. In SIT, social identity is defined as “that part of the individual’s self concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership,” (Tajfel, 1982, p. 2, emphasis in original). Stemming from this definition, an individual’s racial or ethnic identity is treated, in traditional social psychology research as being formed from their sense of self that stems from their membership in the groups that they perceive in the social environment, i.e., their sense of belonging to, or their self-identification, with a particular racial or ethnic group (see Phinney, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Attention is consequently given to the strength or weakness of racial and ethnic identities and their relation to other psychological processes and social outcomes (Phinney, 1992). Black identity and culture is consistently posited as being distinct from a “White” or American/Canadian identity and culture. This approach is also customarily utilized in a prescriptive manner, i.e., as a cause of or solution for an identifiable problem – such as academic underachievement – in which the problem is diagnosed at the level of the individual.

Critics of the social cognitive approach argue that this perspective frames categorization as a natural part of human information processing, which is accompanied by a claim that categorization by race is inevitable because individuals’ physical features are obvious and easily identifiable to the perceiver (Hopkins et al., 1997). The focus on internal cognitive processes therefore takes attention away from power and social processes in acts of categorization and racialization (Hopkins et al., 1997). Treating categorizations by race as a natural part of human
information processing can therefore trivialize racism by presenting it as simply an extension of imperfect human cognitions (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). With regard to identity, critics also argue that the focus on internal processes ignores the argumentative aspects of self-categorization (Ullah, 1990). Here it is argued that self-categorization, i.e., the act of identifying with a particular social group, is not necessarily a straightforward or passive activity that occurs in isolation from an objective social reality, and that is directly reflective of that reality. Rather, it involves active argumentation and the negotiation of meanings that one associates with particular categories in particular contexts, at the immediate social level and within broader historical context as well (Reicher, 2004).

2.3.3.2 Postmodern approaches

In contrast to social-cognitive approaches, post-modern approaches account for the fluidity of identities and social categories. The term “post-modern” is customarily used to refer both to the changing conditions of economic, political, and cultural processes of society as well as, broadly speaking, a general approach to social science research and social thought (McLennan, 1996). Both usages are significant to the study of race, culture, and identity. With regard to changing societal conditions, the idea of cohesive, stable, and homogeneous social groups are called into question when considering the forces of globalization and the international exchange of ideas. Identities are therefore regarded as hybridized, with individuals having access to many more sources of identification than in previous points in history (Hall, 1996). With regard to social thought, how researchers have traditionally treated the concepts of race, ethnicity, and identities is called into question.
Similar to my overarching theoretical perspective of post-structuralism, in general terms post-modernism attempts to deconstruct ideas of racial and ethnic categories as objective and stable entities that exist “out there” in the real world. In turning attention away from objective or essentialized social groups, post-modern approaches focus on the role of language and discourse in constructing particular representations of groups and identities within social and historical contexts (Gergen, 2001; Hall, 1996). Individual group identities associated with race and culture are not treated as mental phenomena that are extracted from the social world but as being constructed in interaction and as drawing meaning from both the immediate and broader social context. As Reicher (2004) argues, culture does not simply exist “out there”; rather, individuals …invoke, interpret and apply culture in a continuous process of appropriation and change…Equally, when it comes to our identity, our understanding of who we are may well draw upon cultural resources, but these set the terms of debate rather than exclude acts of construction. Indeed, everywhere we look the meaning of identity forms a focus of furious controversies. (p. 937)

Therefore, under this approach, attention is given to the processes of identity and group construction and argumentation, and an examination of the power relations that constitute the construction or argumentation of these groups and identities (Howard, 2000). Attention is also given to the social actions that can be accomplished through these processes of construction and argumentation. Once it is recognized that identities and racial/ethnic groups are not pre-given in nature or self-evident, an examination of the deliberate processes of identity formation can be done, as well as an examination of how these processes lead to, for example, collective social action (Reicher, 2004).

Critics of post-modern approaches caution against the viewpoint that the inner world does not exist, or that stable internal identities of individuals do not exist, and that individuals are
solely constituted in the range of competing discourses that exist in the social world (Burman, 1991; Vollmer, 2000). Vollmer argues that, although this may be partially true, “concrete utterances are also determined by the intentions and plans of the individual speaker” (2000, p. 506). Therefore, under this perspective, an individual’s expression of identity in a particular context is, at least in part, determined by their own intentions to identify with a particular social group. On a similar point, Burman (1991) argues that attention to the role of discourses in constituting subjectivity leaves little room for considering individual agency in their identifications. The focus on intersecting discourses presents human lives as predetermined and mechanical and therefore aligns with the positivist approaches to identity that seek to establish cause and effect relationships between mental processes and social/psychological outcomes, and which post-modern approaches often seek to critique.

Specific to discourse analysis, a method of analysis employed under post-modern approaches, Burman (1991) also argues that, although many social scientists utilize discourse analysis for political or activist purposes, the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the approach can work to undermine the political goals of a particular project. For example, the focus on difference in discourse analysis can render difficult any collective political action embedded in identification with a particular identity category, in this case race or Blackness. This attention to difference can also mask how power is exercised by focusing on the mere presence of difference as opposed to the oppressive societal relations, along the lines of race, for example, that are embedded in these differences.
2.3.3.3 Afrocentric approaches

This approach is positioned as a counter to Western or European epistemology. It asserts that European dominance through histories of conquest and colonization has decentred non-European peoples, locating them as non-agentic and peripheral to mainstream academic and cultural discourse (Asante, 2003). The term “Westernity” is used to describe European dominance over intellectual ideas from the 16th to the 20th centuries (Asante, 2011), which has distorted understandings of African and Asian worldviews and established a racial hierarchy that positions Europeans as superior to all others (Asante, 2011). This work therefore seeks to place “the African” at the centre, rather than the periphery, of academic and cultural discourse, to understand African history, culture, “codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs and myths” on their own terms rather than through a Eurocentric lens (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014, p. 2). Ancient African civilizations are treated as the source or foundation of contemporary African identity (Asante, 2011; Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014).

Some “Afrocentrists,” as researchers and practitioners who operate from an Afrocentric perspective are called, assert that human beings cannot live outside culture, and that they are either participating in their own historical culture or in the culture of another group (Asante, 2003). In this version of Afrocentric discourse, an African cultural identity is framed as the only legitimate identification that a person of African descent can have. Therefore, historical and social context are treated as static, with identities tied to concrete, internally homogeneous groups. This therefore evokes essentialist conceptions of identity and self, in which, in the case of African identity, the universal psychological characteristics that exist separate from social context are shared not by human beings in general but by Africans in particular (Gilroy, 1993).
Similarly, Dei (1994) asserts that “[a]ll Black people of African descent share a common experience, struggle, and origin,” and that “there exists an emotional, cultural, intellectual and psychological connection between all Africans, wherever they may be” (p. 4). However, he cautions against the romanticization and “overmythicization” of African peoples and their pre-colonial histories that can occur in Afrocentric approaches, as well as a dogmatism that glosses over class, ethnic, and gender differences among African peoples. Dei nonetheless argues that cultural commonalities between continental and diasporic African peoples have extended from pre-colonial times until today. For example, he argues that Black students currently feel estranged from the Eurocentric curriculum and structure of North American schooling, and that this is evidenced by higher than average drop-out rates for these students. Consequently, the explicit acknowledgment of cultural ties that these students have one another, and to African ancestries, as well as the inclusion of African contributions to modern society in the extant curriculum, can contribute to young Black students’ sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Dei, 1994).

Although many researchers in the United States, and some in Canada, have conducted research studies and advocated for policy change on the grounds of Afrocentric approaches, there has also been much critique of the perspective. As previously discussed, Hall (1990), in a general commentary about African diasporic cultural identities, argues that cultural identities are constantly undergoing transformation. He argues that, although these identities do have histories, they cannot simply be recovered, unchanged, from a distant, essentialized past. He therefore argues for these identities to be treated as positionings rather than essences; as points of
identification shaped within particular discourses of history and culture, and as therefore contingent not permanent (Hall, 1990; 1992a).

Similarly, Gilroy (1993) argues that Afrocentricity may be useful in cultivating individual self-worth and ideas of an unbroken, unchanging and traceable African tradition may be a useful counter-discourse to racist discourses that deny the historical and cultural legitimacy of Black artistic expressions. However, he notes that Afrocentrists often seek to overlook the occurrence of the enslavement of African peoples through the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Black history, preferring to point to unchanging traditions that managed to survive in spite of this occurrence. In so doing, these theorists treat this historical period as an obstacle to the recovery of tradition, a tradition that is located in an idealized, most often positive, and homogenized African past. He argues that this approach minimizes the complexities involved in recovering traditions, and ignores the processes of historically and geographically contingent cultural fusions and fissures that have occurred between the range of Black diasporic populations, as well as with other cultural communities worldwide.

2.3.3.4 Anti-racist approaches

As with Afrocentric approaches, anti-racism is an approach that is quite often utilized in the area of Black identity and education. As previously discussed, anti-racism became an official policy position for the Ontario government in the early 1990s, with the introduction of the Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993). Lentin (2004) notes that there are multiple strands of anti-racism. The perspective most commonly used in the academic literature on Black Canadian youth and education is one that developed through the efforts of the Black Power and anti-colonial political movements in the
United States and Europe, and the European colonies in the 1950s through to the 1980s (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Lentin, 2004). Here, racism is treated as “state-centred,” i.e., as integral to the development of nation states. In other words, racism is not treated as simply an inevitable outcome of the existence of diversity as in “culturalist approaches” (Lentin, 2004), or as an outcome of innate psychological processes of categorization as in social-cognitive theories (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Instead, a direct link is made between colonialism and capitalism and therefore historically exploitative relationships between European countries and their colonies (Lentin, 2004). Racism is therefore understood to be embedded in European hegemony. Consequently, the Black liberation and anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s called for a rejection of the values and the social, political, and economic order established by European states around the world. Black liberation movements also called for an alternate mode of operation and values that would promote better life outcomes for African peoples (Lentin, 2004).

Anti-racism therefore shares a similar grounding as Afrocentrism by historicizing racism and European cultural and political dominance worldwide. The point of departure for this approach is that Anti-racism does not focus on African culture per se but instead maintains a focus on the system of European hegemony that disenfranchises non-White peoples. An Afrocentric orientation may therefore be one strategy by which to employ an anti-racist action, for example, by attempting to break up dominant Eurocentric narratives through advocacy for the legitimacy of African cultural perspectives. Additionally, whereas Afrocentric approaches take the categories of African and Black as givens, the category of Black is deployed in anti-racism efforts as a political category, one that is deliberately cultivated to promote solidarity among Black peoples in an attempt to resist the history of disadvantages experienced by individuals of

Anti-racism discourse has been criticized for being at times associated with an essentialized treatment of racial and ethnic categories (Gosine, 2002; Niemonen, 2007). It is argued that the approach reifies racial categories by drawing sharp distinctions between White and non-White groups particularly when making the argument that certain privileges have been bestowed on or denied to individuals on account of historical race relations (Niemonen). Additionally, Gosine criticizes what he terms “defensively situated essentialisms” in which collective racial identities are called on to combat broader negative societal constructions of these individuals. He argues that while such a strategy can be useful in offering psychological protection from negative depictions, it glosses over the diversity and complexity of subjectivities within the defensively situated group. He recommends providing students with tools to critically apprehend concepts of race and culture as preferable method to implement anti-racist practice.

Finally, anti-racist approaches to education have been criticized for not consistently outlining what would be considered evidence of less racism (Kehoe & Mansfield, 1993). Here researchers note that, although anti-racist discourse is concerned with institutional practices, academic research on the approach has focused on psychosocial changes at the individual level, such as changes in ethnocentrism or authoritarianism of participants, as opposed to changes in institutional practices and society at large (Kehoe & Mansfield, 1993).

2.3.3.5 Multiculturalist approaches

The ideal of multiculturalism is that all ethnocultural groups are regarded as equal in a society, and that individuals may identify with their culture of choice while being full
participants in the economic fabric and national identity of the country (Fleras & Elliot, 1992). An underlying principle here is that of cultural relativism, in which all cultures are regarded as equally valuable. This necessitates the promotion of sharing and understanding between cultures. Multiculturalism has to be explicitly managed to decrease the chances of tensions and conflicts between groups that arise on account of the differences between them. This management includes public attempts to remove discriminatory barriers that limit the opportunities of particular individuals and groups (Fleras & Elliot, 1992).

Multiculturalism approaches have been treated in the academic literature both as a theoretical perspective and as a discourse. Specific to education in the Canadian context, principles of multiculturalism were linked to liberal education policy through the establishment of the official federal multiculturalism policy in 1971, the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Kirova, 2008). However, given that official multiculturalism was implemented at the federal level, and education is managed provincially, the exercise of multicultural education has been inconsistent across provinces (Kirova, 2008). Kehoe and Mansfield (1997) outline that, despite these differences, the main goals of multiculturalism education policies were a) equivalent achievement outcomes across cultural groups; b) positive intergroup relations; and c) development of ethnic pride. Rios and Stanton (2011) also identify addressing the “cultural gap” between the diverse student body and majority White teaching staff as a goal of multicultural education. Therefore, practices associated with multicultural education include a) teaching students in a manner that is congruent with their cultural backgrounds, and encouraging participation from student communities; b) teaching students about similarities and differences between cultures; and c) integrating into the school
cultural celebrations that reflect students’ backgrounds outside mainstream Canadian practices (Kehoe & Mansfield). Scholars such as James Banks also emphasize a need for addressing systemic issues such as streaming practices as a part of his theoretical perspective (Banks, 2002). However, other approaches, such as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), place more emphasis on the role of individual teachers in creating a culture of caring for students (Gay, 2010), without directly addressing broader systemic and institutional issues that may affect the cultivation of such cultures.

Kirova (2008) outlines the main criticisms of multiculturalism education in the decade of 1996 to 2006. Among these is the charge that, in focusing on knowable “other” cultures, multicultural education emphasizes pre-given cultures and oversimplifies them in attempting to familiarize students with them. It also draws sharp distinctions between a dominant mainstream Canadian culture and “other” foreign cultures that are inevitably exoticized and presented as abnormal in comparison with the Canadian norm. This in turn leads to the belief that non-White and non-Western cultures cannot be a part of the overall Canadian identity due to the reified differences thus emphasized in multicultural education.

Along these lines, anti-racist scholars argue that multicultural discourses do not address the power relations that existed in plural societies and that worked to disadvantage racialized populations (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). For example, Simpson, James & Mack (2011) argue that, in defining relationships between groups in Canada within the confines of culture, the roles of race and power are ignored. The result here is that race relations are treated as largely positive and equal, with the existence of racism framed as occurring in the past. Any instances of present-day racism are treated as isolated and individualized rather than grounded in institutions and
systemic processes (Joshee, 2009; Simpson et al.). Specific to multicultural education approaches, a common critique is that emphasizing multiculturalism devalues Western civilization because it emphasizes the contributions of non-Western cultures to North American society, which, theorists argue, will bring about disunity in these countries, given, again, the emphasis on diversity (see Banks, 1995).

Hoffman (1996), in an analysis of multicultural discourse, argues that cultures not only are essentialized in these discourses but they are also presented as categories under which universal human qualities exist but are simply expressed differently in different cultural environments. This universalist perspective does not challenge students, specifically North American or Western students, to question their own cultural frames of reference because other “cultures” are presented simply as different versions of their own. In utilizing westernized conceptions of identity as a starting point, Hoffman argues that multicultural discourse constructs identity as something that an individual possesses. He argues that this aligns with American capitalist notions of property rights, with culture and ethnicity being seen as entities that can be owned within the dominant economic structure.

Finally, one of the main goals of multicultural education is to foster the self-esteem of “minority” students. Here, the notion of self-esteem is tied directly to the notion of individual uniqueness, which may be a particularly Western or American conception of the self, precluding other conceptions of the self, such as being embedded in social relations (Hoffman, 1996). In this perspective, individual abilities, traits, and achievements – including academic achievement – are prioritized. This inevitably undermines other ways of understanding school success. Additionally, implicit assumptions that non-White, or non-Western, students require self-esteem
development works to pathologize these students and further privileges mainstream Western culture. Teachers’ attempts to boost students’ self-esteem may therefore be regarded disingenuous and patronizing by students who do not share a similar viewpoint on what high self-esteem looks like and the strategies by which it may be achieved (Hoffman, 1996).

2.3.3.6 Section summary

The preceding section summarizes the major theoretical approaches to understanding or addressing the “academic achievement gap” for Black students in the research literature. In presenting the features of each position, as well as major critiques, my goal was to demonstrate that each perspective represents an argument for how Black identities, cultures, and social outcomes can be defined, analysed, and challenged in research, policy, and day-to-day social relations. The coexistence of these multiple approaches means that there is opportunity for congruence and conflict among them. These approaches therefore form part of a broader discursive field that informs how the issue of the “academic achievement gap” is managed in both research and practice. In the section that follows, I will expand on this discussion by examining key Canadian studies and current education policy to determine how the confluence of discourses and approaches outlined above are effected through empirical research and social policies.

2.4 Constructions of Blackness

As I argued in the previous discussion, there have been multiple theoretical approaches to establishing and explaining a link between “Black identity” and “academic achievement.” In this section, I argue that these approaches, in combination with a broader historical context of the subordination of Black peoples in North America, have produced specific constructions of
Blackness in Canadian academic literature and policy work. My review here of the research literature and policies is meant to identify common framings of Black academic achievement in these works, and the potential resources that were available to staff members and students in the school environment when discussing Blackness, culture, and education. In naming these constructions, my goal is not to establish static framings of Blackness that may arise regardless of context but instead to demonstrate how the rhetorical resources available in these specific academic and policy texts facilitate the construction of Blackness in particular ways. Therefore, any reference in subsequent chapters to the constructions of Blackness identified in this section will be done with close attention to how they are deployed in specific interactional contexts, and the action orientation of the talk or action.

I have identified three main constructions in the literature and education policy relevant to Blackness and schooling in Canada. These are a) Blackness as damaged/deficit; b) Blackness/Black “culture” as therapy/protective; and c) Blackness as resistance. Across these different perspectives, the concept of “Blackness” can be understood in several ways. It can be treated as embodiment, focusing on the physical characteristics associated with, or perceived to be associated with, being Black. Blackness can also be treated as perceived culture or Afrocentricity, i.e., part of perceived practices or viewpoints that are seen as directly associated with an African cultural lineage and/or Black embodiment. In many instances, Blackness is treated in both ways simultaneously. That is, physical characteristics are treading as associated with possession of a loosely defined but distinguishable Black culture.

2.4.1 Blackness as damaged/deficit

In section 2.3.1, I described a broader, highly malleable societal discourse that constructs
Blackness as damaged/deficit. I outlined that this discourse is grounded in histories of colonization and enslavement of African peoples around the world. In the context of the Canadian research literature and education policy related to the “academic achievement gap” for Black students, I have identified ways in which Blackness has been constructed as psychologically damaged or academically deficient and the actions that can result. Specifically, Black students have been positioned as psychologically harmed by systemic racism. In other words, researchers not only identify structures and processes that work to reinforce racial stratification in societies and the consequence of subordination of Black people in particular but they also discuss Black students as internalizing this societal racism. In the academic literature, these framings argue that the broader processes of racism not only are harmful in a general sense but they also, on an individual level, shape Black students’ own self-destructive behaviour, whether academic or otherwise. It is the “self-destructive” aspects of these arguments that I wish to call attention to in this section, as these arguments, decontextualized, can inadvertently reinforce long-standing images of Black peoples as psychologically, culturally, or genetically inferior.

In a seminal study in the Canadian literature, George Dei and colleagues conducted a three-year-long, multi-site study of Black Canadian youth in the Ontario education system (Dei, 1997; Dei et al., 1997). The researchers used an ethnographic method to look at the social processes implicated in Black students’ disengagement from public education. Blackness is constructed as damaged/deficit in this work. Researchers argue that Black students internalize negative societal stereotypes that lead to their disengagement and eventual drop out from school. For example, the researchers refer to the narratives of students who had dropped out, stating that
“Drop outs were able to reach back into their early memories of schooling to locate experiences that related to the beginning of their own process of disengagement” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 54). They go on to argue that “[t]his shows how low expectations, negative reinforcement and alienation associated with dropping out are internalized and can place limits on self-esteem and ultimately life chances” (p. 54). The authors make these arguments in the context of an overall anti-racist theoretical orientation, bringing to public attention the challenges that Black students face in a racist school structure, thereby attempting to shift the blame of underachievement from the students themselves to the school system. However, in making the psychological, social-cognitive argument that systemic racism has been internalized by Black students, the researchers make the Black students, rather than the school system, the object of discourse, which works to reinforce imagery of Black students as psychologically damaged. In practice, such arguments have led to a focus and resourcing of interventions at the individual student level (for example, the most recent Ontario Black Youth Action Plan, 2017), leaving systemic racism in the school system inadequately unaddressed.

Blackness as damaged/deficit is worked up somewhat differently in a focus group study on Black Canadian secondary school athletes (James, 2003). Here, culture, rather than psychological damage, is framed as central to Black students’ detachment from academic pursuits. James (2003), like Dei et al. (1997), seeks to refute claims of inherent Black academic deficits by critiquing broader societal processes that marginalize Black youth. James (2003) constructs his arguments inside what appears to be an anti-racist or Critical Race Theory theoretical framework. He points to a hegemonic discourse of multiculturalism that constructs Blackness, and Black masculinity in particular, as “other,” and as synonymous with athleticism.
and antithetical to academic competency. However, James (2003) also discusses a “working-class Black suburban Toronto male subculture” (p. 140), in which Black male students invest copious amounts of time and energy pursuing professional basketball careers despite limited odds of winning athletic scholarships to play at the post-secondary level in the United States. James (2003) argues that the young men develop this subculture in response to marginalization from broader Canadian society; however, much of the focus of the publication is on how the young men navigate their athletic opportunities, and the fruitlessness of their actions in the face of the limited possibility of achieving a professional basketball career. Consequently, although these young men were positioned as agentic and skillful in seeking and obtaining resources to pursue their athletic goals, they were also positioned as being limited by the narrow athletic aspirations that were fostered by the subculture that they had developed. Blackness – or a Black male working-class subculture – was therefore constructed as damaging to these young men’s futures.

Similarly, Solomon (1992) argues that for the participants in his study, a group of Black male West Indian immigrant students in a Toronto high school, “[t]he primary cultural behaviors brought from their country of origin may not, in the long run, impede academic functioning. It is their secondary culture, developed to resist dominant-group subordination, that is most incongruent with striving for academic success” (p. 118). Therefore, in the same vein as Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Dei et al. (1997), and James (2003), Solomon (1992) argues that the external marginalizing culture in the school and in broader Canadian society has led Black students to adopt ways of being that are maladaptive to achieving academic success. Attention is not given solely to exclusionary school practices that may, by themselves, result in Black student
academic challenges – for example, through unfair grading practices, streaming, etc. – but to individual feelings and cultural behaviours that Black students may develop.

Constructions of Blackness as damaged/deficit are also invoked in the work of Codjoe (2006) and Smith and Lalonde (2003), which were designed either in whole or in part with the explicit intention of refuting such constructions. Codjoe makes reference to the continued presence of research focused on the “innate stupidity of [B]lacks,” and seeks to challenge this work with his own qualitative study of high-achieving Black students in Alberta. Similarly, Smith and Lalonde (2003) take a social-cognitive, quantitative approach to examining a relationship between Black identity and academic performance. These researchers draw on Fordham and Ogbu’s work, defining “racelessness,” i.e., behaviours that Black students adopt that are deemed to be more aligned with “White” culture than with “Black” culture, as an internal psychological attribute. This is in contrast to how this concept is introduced by Fordham and Ogbu, where it was treated as a performative and contextualized strategy that students adopt in response to Eurocentric society and schooling experiences. They operationalize racelessness as low or weak racial identity, which they hypothesize would be detrimental to students’ academic success. The construction of Blackness as damaged/deficit was therefore reinforced in Smith and Lalonde’s work, through their proposal of a direct causal relationship between Blackness and low academic outcomes. Although this hypothesis was unsupported by their data, this study was one of the first quantitative studies in Canada to propose such a link, which therefore lent credibility to conceptualizing Blackness as potentially damaging in quantitative social science work in Canada.

Finally, with regard to Ontario education policy, we see a subtle construction negative
outcomes attributed to membership in particular groups. Although the policies in play at the time of my data collection do not name Black students in particular, students who are members of groups identified as protected in under the Ontario Human Rights Code are named. In the Ministry’s policy document on bias-free progressive discipline (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a), responsibility for student disadvantage is attributed to group membership. Educators are asked to interpret students’ behaviours in the context of considering whether these students are members of a protected group under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The guidelines state that “the group may have been disadvantaged by barriers over a long period of time and that the group’s history may be a factor contributing to the student’s behaviour” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a, p 15). Here, emphasis is placed on a “group’s” history, as a contributor to individual students’ behaviour, rather than on, for example, processes of exclusion that would contribute to the systemic barriers that these groups may face. Such framings position these students as vulnerable on account of membership in particular groups and these groups as damaged by their histories.

Taken together, these studies and policy, in the process of making arguments that attributed, or potentially attributed Black students’ academic challenges to Black culture or psychology, had the effect of reinforcing constructions of Blackness as damaged/deficit.

2.4.2 Blackness/culture as therapy/protective

Wetherell and Potter (1992) identified a “culture as therapy” interpretative repertoire (IR) in their research on racist discourse in New Zealand in the early 1990s. They describe this IR as a focus on “identity, values, roots and pride” (p. 131). In the talk of Pakeha New Zealanders (descendants of European colonizers), culture, for the colonized Maori people of New Zealand,
was constructed as a means by which to heal and by which to reclaim identities that were lost through the process of colonization in order to hold status as whole human beings. Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue that in this talk, “[c]ulture becomes offered as a form of treatment for delinquent and dispossessed individuals and communities” (p. 131). For my review of Canadian work on Black academic achievement, I have borrowed from these researchers’ framing, having identified similar themes in academic, policy, and lay discourse. Here, Blackness, or Black cultures, are treated as a source of strength for young people, as protective against academic and social exclusion if possessed prior to and during exposure to marginalizing school and societal structures. “Black culture” is also treated as a potential source of healing that will produce academic success if administered as an intervention to Black students when they engage in schooling.

Many of the works in which Blackness is (inadvertently) constructed as damaged/deficit also produce a construction of Blackness/culture as therapy/protective in offering solutions to the academic achievement gap. For example, the work of Dei et al. (1997) was written from an Afrocentric theoretical perspective, in which the authors argued that both current students and students who had dropped out of school stated that “their experiences were not validated by an essentially Eurocentric curriculum” (p. 234). The researchers argue:

Finn’s (1989) ‘participation-identification’ model holds that students who are engaged within school activities feel less marginalized and alienated and therefore are more likely to stay in school. Many of the drop-outs in this study did not have access to Black heritage clubs and felt that where these programs exist, Black students would have greater chance for effectual support, and consequently less struggle negotiating the system (p. 248)

In this excerpt, activities that are structured around Black heritage are framed as the most valuable or effective option for Black students, and their presence is posited as capable of
preventing students from leaving school. The researchers also state that students felt a natural connection to other Black students, and that activities such as heritage clubs allowed students to forge bonds with other Black students. As a solution to the cultural exclusion reported by the participants and the researchers, “Black-focused schools,” also known as Afrocentric or Afrocentric schools, are recommended. Dei et al. (1997) argue that these schools represent an opportunity to “break down the rigid power barriers between home, school, and community” (p. 247). In making these arguments, the researchers’ observations and recommendations constructed Black culture as therapeutic for Black students.

Similarly, Codjoe (2006), from an Afrocentric perspective, and Smith and Lalonde (2003), from a social-cognitive perspective, approached Black culture as protective against academic underachievement. In his interview study with Black adolescents, Codjoe (2006) states:

Of all the themes discussed by students in the study on why they achieved academic success against all odds…the role played by a supportive environment that reinforces knowledge and pride in [B]lack cultural identity was the most gratifying and significant for the students. In fact, it appears to be the most critical factor of all the factors identified as contributing to academic success. (p. 40)

In this work, both Canadian-born and immigrant students from Africa and the Caribbean described processes of socialization, in which they sought out, or were deliberately exposed to artefacts of “Black” culture. Based on these findings, Codjoe argues that Black students are capable of making choices that lead to success despite being educated in a racist school system. He also recommends the integration of African history and culture into school curriculum, to create an “African-centred” learning environment. Afrocentrism is central to Codjoe’s argument, and Blackness is constructed as both protective, in that students were able to excel despite
Eurocentrism at school, and therapeutic, in that the integration of African perspectives into curricula would be beneficial to Black students.

Smith and Lalonde (2003), in addition to the hypothesis previously discussed, also hypothesized that Black (university) students with stronger affinity to their racial group would perform at higher academic levels than those with a weaker affinity. They also hypothesized that those with closer affinity to other Blacks would be psychologically healthier. Although these researchers did not find support for their hypothesis on the relationship between Black identity and GPA, their hypotheses work to construct Blackness/culture as therapy/protective, based on the expectation of a positive relationship between Black identity as a psychological construct and academic achievement.

A more general construction of culture as therapy/protective is also found fairly frequently Ontario educational policy intended to address equity in education. The Equity and Inclusive Education strategy states that “[o]ur schools should be places where students not only learn about diversity but also experience it. We know that when students see themselves reflected in their studies, they are more likely to stay engaged and find school relevant” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 15). Additionally, the Policy Program memorandum put forward by the Ministry of Education in relation to its equity and inclusive education strategy states, under the heading of “inclusive curriculum and assessment practices,” that “[s]chools must provide students and staff with authentic and relevant opportunities to learn about diverse histories, cultures, and perspectives. Students should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum, programs, and culture of the school” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2013c; p. 6.)

Similarly, relationships are established in the Ministry’s publication on Culturally Responsive
Pedagogy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). Across all three documents, a link is drawn between cultural content of curricula and students’ academic outcomes and sense of belonging in schools.

In contrast to the work discussed thus far, Blackness/culture is constructed as therapy/protective in James (2003), in his critique of educators’ approach to Black students. James argues that, under multiculturalism discourse in Canada, educators regard athleticism as a part of Black culture and encourage Black students to direct their attention towards athletics as a means by which to promote their engagement in school and as a “route to educational and occupational success” (p. 127). James (2003) argues that this approach to addressing Black student achievement is detrimental when educators draw on the what he characterizes as the wrong aspects of Black culture in an attempt to support these students. This approach, James (2003) argues, is shaped by a broader context of educators’ uncritical understandings of race and racism, in which they treat these concepts as culturally grounded, as opposed to grounded in structural or systemic issues. The consequence of this is that culturalist approaches are turned to in order to address differential and unequal educational outcomes. The contrast between how Black culture is constructed here, and how is it treated in the previously discussed work as largely beneficial to students, demonstrates how flexible and context-dependent constructions of Blackness can be and, the contrasting argumentative effects of these constructions.

Finally, Ibrahim (1999) conducted his work from a post-modernist perspective. His participants were a group of French-African immigrant youth, many of whom practiced the religion of Islam, who attended an Anglophone Ontario secondary school and were enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Ibrahim argues that this group of adolescents, in
immigrating to Canada, are subjected to hegemonic negative representations of Blackness. In searching for belonging in their new home, they turn to African American representations of Blackness, often apprehended through engagement with rap and hip-hop culture, as “sites for positive identity formation and identification” (p. 360). Ibrahim (1999) consequently recommends “rap and hip-hop curriculum as sites in this context to legitimize otherwise illegitimate forms of knowledge” (p. 366). Ibrahim (1999), unlike Dei et al. (1997), Codjoe (2006), and Smith and Lalonde (2003), does not treat Blackness or Black culture as pre-given states to be apprehended and delivered to students. Rather Blackness is treated as a process of “becoming” in this work, but with a similar potential to be psychologically and educationally beneficial – or therapeutic – to students who identify as Black.

These studies demonstrate the various ways in which Blackness and culture can be constructed as therapeutic and/or protective for Black and other “marginalized” students. While the majority of studies have discussed the integration of students’ broadly defined cultures into curricula and school practices as inevitably beneficial for student outcomes, the work of James and Ibrahim highlight the complexity of cultures and the limitations of cultural essentialisms. James’ work in particular argues that uncritical treatment of culture as therapeutic can potentially harm the students that it is intended to help.

2.4.3 Blackness as resistance

When Blackness is constructed as resistance, researchers argue that Black students adopt particular behaviours, modes of dress, and modes of speech to challenge dominant school structures that position them as “other” and that deny them the freedom to express their cultural identities. Take, for example, the following excerpts:
Choosing the margin, I emphasize, is simultaneously an act of investment, an expression of desire, and a deliberate counter hegemonic undertaking. The choice of rap especially must be read as an act of resistance. (Ibrahim, 1999, pp. 365-366)

Other students spoke about how their identity was stifled by a school system which demands conformity to the dominant culture… The unwillingness to conform to the normative standards, codes, or conventions of the culture within schools or society at large can be seen as an act of resistance. This resistance is not simply teenage rebellion; it is a response to the oppressive conditions which constrain cultural identity and sense of self. (Dei et al., 1997, p. 153)

As an act of resistance against the institutional rules and routines that restrict their freedom, the Jocks respond with ethnospecific forms of behavior, often disguising subcultural activities as legitimate primary cultural behavior. Such acts of defiance include a language of resistance that extends beyond dialect to include doubletalk and profanity… (Solomon, 1992, p. 97)

Choosing not to submit to the gaze can be seen as a form of resistance to mainstream assimilation. Rather than submitting to the gaze, some Black students accentuate their visibility, thus providing a “glare” to interrupt the gaze. This glare can be achieved by a combination of dress, walk and attitude that is reinforced by moving as a group. (Kelly, 1998, p. 103)

A common trope of resistance against a broader marginalizing school culture is present in all of the preceding excerpts. However, there are subtle differences in how this resistance is constructed. For Ibrahim (1999), resistance is framed as students’ engagement in an external rap and hip-hop culture. Students reach out to, and subsequently perform an independently existing expression of, Blackness or Black culture, as a means of empowerment and self-preservation. Dei et al. (1997), by contrast, construct resistance as behaviours in which students engage, which could include dropping out of school, with the intent to preserve an internalized Blackness. Finally, Solomon (1992) and Kelly (1998) construct resistance as the performance of “ethnospecific” behaviours or “subcultural” activities.

The researchers also differ when discussing implications of resistance for the students in their studies. Ibrahim treats the form of resistance that he has identified as empowering for his
participants. Their adaptation of rap and hip-hop culture, a music genre whose genesis was to bring “voice to the voiceless” (Ibrahim, 1999 p. 366), allows these students a means of self-expression that is otherwise denied to them in mainstream schooling. Similarly, Dei et al. (1997) argue that students’ resistance to “normative standards, codes or conventions” is a strategy that they employ to preserve their self-esteem and cultural identity. However, they go on to argue that, in some cases, dropping out of school may be seen as the ultimate form of resistance, with students leaving the oppressive school environment to preserve their racial or ethnic identities. Resistance is therefore framed as having potential negative consequences for students, i.e., early school leaving and the consequent likely limitation of educational and employment opportunities, as well possibly causing those who remain in school to be labelled as a troublemakers (p. 153).

Solomon (1992) also focuses on negative outcomes that may be associated with students’ resistance. Solomon identifies student “subcultural” behaviours, such as use of profanity and “slamming down dominoes” (p. 98), as eliciting staff member authoritarian reactions to such expressions. Solomon describes a cyclical process in which students react to an inhospitable school environment, which in turn renders the environment more inhospitable for these students, which has negative consequences for their educational opportunities. Similarly, Kelly (1998) posits resistance as having potentially negative consequences for Black students in accordance with how the “glare” is interpreted by non-Black society. This author argues that the glare can be innocuous, where it is interpreted by educators as an “innocent aspect of youth culture” or as intimidating and even threatening.
Constructions of Blackness as resistance consistently position Black students as outsiders in a Eurocentric school system. In this discourse, students’ internalized Black identities, and/or performance of what are noted to be Black behaviours and modes of being, are treated as existing in opposition to mainstream schooling and as possibly having positive outcomes for students – e.g., a sense of belonging and community among Black students and belonging to Black culture – or negative ones – e.g., estrangement from schooling and negative treatment by school personnel. In the latter case, Black students are likely to be positioned as troublemakers in the school environment. Such constructions also attend to student agency, in which Black students are positioned as active in their educational experiences as opposed to being helpless victims of a marginalizing, Eurocentric school system.

The preceding discussion outlined three main constructions of Blackness found in Canadian academic literature and education policy relevant to the “academic achievement gap” for Black students. Coupled with the previous outline of major theoretical approaches, the discussion provides an overview of the various linguistic/rhetorical resources that may be available to students and staff members in my chosen research context. The review brings together the multiple perspectives from which this topic has been approached – for example, treating Blackness as damaged versus Blackness and therapy – and lays the groundwork for understanding how these perspectives can be contradictory, or complementary, within particular interactional contexts.

2.4.4 Additional themes in Canadian work

In addition to the work already described, several other studies have been conducted that highlight different themes in the research on Black identities and education, but in which discrete
constructions of Blackness are not as clearly identifiable. The first is in relation to gendered analyses of Black identity and schooling. Much of the work described above (e.g., Codjoe, 2006; Gosine, 2008; Litchmore et al., 2016; Smith & Lalonde, 2003) include both male-identified and female-identified young people, but with little detailed analyses of distinctions between their experiences. Otherwise, much of that research gives primary attention to the experiences of Black boys (James; 2003; 2012; Sibblis, 2014; Solomon, 1992). Dei et. al. (1997) do highlight some differences in the experiences between Black girls and Black boys, and bring attention to sexism within Black peer groups towards Black girls. However the researchers argue that the racism experienced by Black boys similarly shaped the experiences of Black girls. Ibrahim (1999), on the other hand, gives explicit attention to the cultural forms that differentially shaped boys’ versus girls’ relationships with Blackness. It is therefore apparent that there is little research available to date that has focused primarily and exclusively on the experiences of Black girls in Canadian schools.

A second theme is that of diverse Blackness. For example, Dei et al. (1997) note that “[r]eligion, clothing, dance and values were all cited as sources of difference between groups of Black students” (pp. 156-157). Whereas Dei goes on to frames these diversities as detrimental for Black solidarity, Gosine (2002) argues that diversity and complexity of Black identifications must always be taken into consideration. He states that “defensively situated collective identities” (p. 82) are constructed by marginalized group members – through anti-racist traditions – to challenge dominant narratives of these groups. However, such identities should not be taken for granted, as they also create essentialist representations of these groups, masking the diversity and multiplicity of subjectivities that exist within them, and the consistent process of negotiation
that group members employ in defining what it means to be a member of said groups. Gosine (2002) argues that focus on these essentialisms may perpetuate racist discourse, strip agency from young people in their processes of self-definition, and undermine opportunities to challenge racism from more complex, multifaceted perspectives. Similar themes of diversity were raised in the work of Ibrahim (1999), Litchmore et al. (2016), and others.

Other research has been conducted from a primarily demographic and exploratory perspective, seeking to establish correlational or causal relationships between Blackness and academic achievement, while also accounting – from a quantitative positivist perspective – for other contributing factors. For example, Smith, Schneider and Ruck (2005) explored several variables including socioeconomic status, family influences, peer influences and student attitudes, in addition to identification with Blackness, and their relationships to academic outcomes. Caldas et al. (2009) conducted a demographic multivariate study to determine whether an academic achievement gap for Black students existed in Montreal. These researchers confirmed their hypothesis but also determined that the achievement gap was more highly related to factors more frequently occurring in neighbourhoods in which higher concentrations of Black families resided. These factors included low-income status, single parenthood, and young family status, and could not be singularly attributed to Blackness in and of itself.

These works outline additional themes in the Canadian literature on the academic achievement gap for Black adolescents. While constructions of Blackness are less distinct in these works, they represent other ways of approaching the research that contribute to the discursive field through which the Black academic achievement gap is understood.
2.5 General conclusion

Despite the research and policy interventions that have been introduced over the past few decades, the Black “academic achievement gap” persists. This chapter outlined the relevant theoretical and discursive context of research and policy on this topic, including three main constructions of Blackness produced through Canadian work conducted in this field. This dissertation, as previously stated, is consequently concerned with four research questions. 1) What rhetorical resources related to identity, race, culture, education, and otherwise intersect with the subjectivities of youth who self-identify as or who are categorized as, Black? The preceding discussion begins to answer this question, by outlining academic and policy discourse on the subject as situated within the social and historical context of Canada and Ontario. My remaining questions are: 2) Are these rhetorical resources available in the local school environment? How do staff members draw on these and other resources in their talk and actions as related to Black student experiences? 3) How (if at all) do youth who self-identify as Black negotiate the multiple subject positions that are made available to them through these resources? Do they exercise agency – as defined under post-structuralism – in doing so? 4) How can our understanding of how students and staff contend with the multiple competing resources in talking about their experiences help create a school environment that is more inclusive of diverse student populations?

This project takes into account the current historical context where careful examination of the achievement gap has already been undertaken, and where interventions to address this gap – such as the Afrocentric School in the TDSB – have already been attempted. In taking a discursive approach, as opposed to focusing on policy or program interventions, I will be able to
consider potential contradictions in, and unexpected outcomes of given strategies. In so doing, it is my goal to further conversations that consider contextually bound strategies in examining race and culture in school environments, as opposed to strategies that claim universal applicability, which may serve to limit the options that students and educators may access in addressing inclusivity and academic success.
3 Methods

3.1 Ethnography

Ethnography was my chosen method of data collection, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of a single school environment and the experiences of individuals in this environment. Ethnography is a multi-method approach to social science research (Taylor, 1995). It usually involves observations of people in everyday contexts over a period of time; studying documents; and having formal and informal conversations and interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Taylor, 1995). Ethnography in the social sciences originated in the fields of anthropology and through cross-cultural – colonial – research (Jones, 2010), and later spread to other areas. Traditionally, psychological research has had a heavy emphasis on quantitative methods guided by a positivist theoretical framework. Ethnographic methods, which do not seek to establish cause and effect relations in social phenomena, have consequently been under-utilized in this area (Watt, 2010).

When taking on ethnographic research, psychological researchers must give careful consideration to how they represent their findings. In the positivist theoretical tradition, a realist interpretation of my findings would be fitting. However, scholars have largely rejected the idea of presenting ethnographic findings as direct and objective representations of “the field” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Additionally, as I have adapted a post-structuralist framework for this project, my task in presenting my findings will be to lay bare the constructed nature of the knowledge that I am presenting. Therefore my social positioning and role in the data-collection process itself will be given explicit attention in the presentation of my results, rather than treating them as separate from my findings. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that
recognizing that the knowledge produced through ethnographic research is constructed does not undermine the method’s ability to represent the social phenomena in question. Rather, it explicitly attends to the role of the researcher in knowledge production, in a similar manner to how individuals construct their understandings of the social world in their own day-to-day lives.

There were three main components to my data collection: a) participant-observation, which included observations in the school, specific classrooms, and during activities, and informal conversations with staff persons and students; b) formal interviews with staff persons; and c) two formal interviews with each student participant. The first interview with each student was a traditional semi-structured interview. The second interview involved the use of photographs that I had asked each student to capture after our first interview – a process called “photoelicitation” (Harper, 2002) – to facilitate conversations that were led by the students rather than by me as the researcher; and d) analysis of necessary media, government, and academic documents. Before describing these components, I will describe my study site, Lilyfield high school.

3.1.1 Study site and gaining access

Lilyfield High School (a pseudonym) in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was selected as the site of study on the recommendation of a colleague who had previously volunteered as a mentor to a Black student who attended the school. An administrator\(^2\) at the school had expressed to my colleague an interest in developing programming at Lilyfield to promote a more inclusive atmosphere, particularly for Black students. In our initial meeting, before I began my

\(^2\) I will use the term “administrator” throughout the dissertation when referring to the principal and vice principals at the school. I will not specify specific positions in order to protect the identities of the participants.
data collection, the administrator indicated to me that the Black or African Canadian students in the school did not have a strong sense of belonging to the school, and that my presence and research there might send a message to the students that the school cares about them. The administrator shared this sentiment with me once again during my interview with him towards the end of the study period. Given that my intention for this research was to produce recommendations to the school on inclusivity, I was initially enthusiastic about the frankness of the administrator’s observations. However, through the process of my data collection and analysis, it also became clear to me that staff member interactions with me were likely informed by an impression that I could have some influence on or say in school processes not only as related to my research questions but also for issues beyond the parameters of my research. This positioning also meant that any attempts at neutrality and objectivity that I may have been tempted to take on would have been fruitless.

The administrator and I met twice in person during the summer of 2014. During this time, we also communicated via email, by which I explained my research plan, obtained his input, and attempted to determine how my findings might be of more immediate use to the school once the research was completed. With his endorsement, I obtained ethics approval from the University of Guelph (see Appendix 1) and from the local school board, and was granted access to the school starting in February 2015. I was present in the school for a total of 18 weeks, a little longer than four months, from February to June 2015, and was on site one day per week for the first three weeks and two to three days per week for the remainder of the data-collection period. I prepared an institutional information letter (Appendix 2), which the administrator circulated to the
school’s staff\textsuperscript{3} shortly before my arrival. This letter informed the school personnel of my presence and purpose in the school for the semester.

\textbf{3.1.2 Description of Lilyfield high school and general ethnographic observations}

Lilyfield High School is a large secondary school located in an urban area in the city of Toronto. According to recent demographic surveys,\textsuperscript{4} the average yearly income of neighbourhood residents is less than the city average; however, the neighbourhood is not one of the city’s designated Neighbourhood Improvement Areas\textsuperscript{5}. Nonetheless, the area has had a history of poor access to services and other demographic challenges. It has a very high immigrant population, with the largest ethnic groups being of Eastern European and Southeast Asian origin. Specific demographic statistics of the school itself were unavailable; however, based on my conversations with staff members and my own observations, the ethnic composition of the school itself appeared to reflect these demographics, as the largest numbers of students appeared to be mainly White (i.e., of European background) and Southeast Asian (i.e., of Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian, Filipino, etc., background).\textsuperscript{6} Staff members also noted that there was a sizable population of international students from China, and that the populations of students from other backgrounds, including Middle Eastern and Black students, were growing. On the other
hand, the majority of the teaching and administrative staff were White, and as a number of the staff members commented, female.

The area immediately surrounding the school is composed of a mixture of single family houses and apartment buildings, as well as small shopping areas. There was therefore an urban feel to the mainly suburban area, and students often left the school during their breaks to purchase food from the privately owned restaurants, fast food chains, and coffee shops located close by.

On the first day of my data collection, I was introduced to two members of staff, Miss A and Miss B (all names are pseudonyms), who were situated in a work area that I have named “the Support Room.” This space was previously an in-school suspension room but was now designated as an area where students could receive extra academic and social support if they were facing difficulties in the regular classroom setting. It consisted of a large outer room in which students could gather at a large table, or work independently in study carrels and at four computer stations. Attached to this room were four offices, two for Miss A and Miss B, and one that was used by the School Based Safety Monitors – informally known as hall monitors – if they needed private space to conduct their work. The last office was designated for the School Resource Officer (SRO), a police officer who was designated to a group of schools in the area, and was at Lilyfield for approximately two days each week. I was allowed to use this office when the SRO was not on the school grounds.

When I first entered the school, I was skeptical that I would need office space. My intention was to be fully immersed in the day-to-day operations of the school each day that I was on site. However, I quickly learned that the structured class environment of a high school was
not conducive to my plans to simply wander the hallways throughout the school day. The office space therefore became quite useful to me during the periods that I was not engaged in specific school activities or classroom observations. I used the office during these times to write my field notes and as a good place where the students with whom I eventually established relationships could find me. For my first few weeks on site, before I was able to gain access to specific classrooms, I spent much of my time in the Support Room interacting with the staff and students who frequented the space.

The school itself was quite large, with several different wings and entrances that took me weeks to get accustomed to. It was in these first few weeks of spending time at the school that I became aware of the various learning activities and amenities that were available at Lilyfield. The school offered a number Ministry of Education approved programs that fell under the title of Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM; TDSB, 2014d). Through these programs, students are able to obtain training in a specific major, such as Health and Wellness or Information Technology. Lilyfield was therefore equipped with specialized facilities to train students in these fields. Specialized academic and sports programs for students who were highly talented in these areas were also offered. Several staff members also commented that there were strong supports available for students who had Special Education needs. For example, every morning, two or three students with a Special Education designation came to the Support Room to pick up laptop computers with assistive technology software for use in their coursework. Support was also provided in the form of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students who were designated as

7 As the number of schools that offers these programs are relatively small (approximately 35 out of 116 secondary schools in the TDSB) I have opted not to name the specific facilities to protect the identity of the school.
having particular challenges in specific courses, but who may not have been formally assessed or
diagnosed with a learning disability. One of my participants, Chantal (a pseudonym), noted that
her mother chose Lilyfield for her to attend in order for her to have access to these supports on
account of her diagnosed learning disability.

The physical appearance of the school also appeared to be well-kept as I did not observe
any obvious signs of physical damage or unkempt spaces. Several display cases located on the
first floor of the school showed students’ artwork and other significant projects and information.
For example, shortly after I began my time at the school, the large display case located in the
front foyer displayed the names of students who had made the honour role in the previous
semester. The school also appeared to be technologically up to date. For example, WiFi was
available throughout the school, although students complained that the strength of the signal
varied depending on their location. Modern overhead projectors were also available; I witnessed
some teachers using the video version of these projectors as opposed to traditional
transparencies. The computer hardware (PCs) available in the library and in computer rooms was
also relatively up to date, and spaces for art and design were equipped with large screen Apple
Macintosh computers.

On the other hand, the televisions and school furniture appeared to have been in the
school for decades. I was also struck by the fact that the recording of the national anthem that
was played over the school intercom at the start of each school day was the same version played
when I attended secondary school in Toronto 15 years earlier. The school therefore appeared to
be simultaneously up to date and out-dated.
The previously mentioned display of honour roll students, as accompanied by the array of learning facilities and specialized programs in the school, gave me the impression that a culture of high achievement was entrenched in the school. This is something that both students and staff members also commented on. As a number of my participants had chosen to come to this school rather than attending schools that they had been assigned to based on the neighbourhoods in which they lived, one contrast that they drew between Lilyfield and their home schools was that Lilyfield had higher expectations and higher standards of achievement. One teacher commented that Lilyfield’s status acted as a type of selection bias: the students who were more likely to leave their neighbourhoods in which the schools were determined to be of worse quality were high-performing students in search of better options. While at the school I also had the opportunity to meet three retired teachers who had previously taught at Lilyfield and had returned as supply teachers. These individuals commented that they were pleased with their time at Lilyfield. My conversations with them gave me the impression that they had been quite invested in the academic performance of their students while they were full-time teachers. The organization of the school newsletter also relayed an achievement orientation. The newsletter was divided into sections that corresponded with the specific curricular departments (e.g., science, arts, sports). Updates of special events in each department or on the achievements of specific students in those departments, were given in each section.

The social atmosphere of the school also appeared to be relatively orderly. By my observations, very few students remained in the hallways after classes had begun. This was likely due in part to the presence of the three male “hall monitors” – i.e., School Based Safety Monitors – who patrolled the hallways during classes. Their role was to monitor and control student traffic
in the hallways during classes. This included ensuring that students returned to their classes as quickly as possible after breaks, and directing students to the front office if they were found in the halls during class without a legitimate reason to be there. My interactions with the hall monitors, as well as my observations of their interactions with students, gave me the impression that students were not enthusiastic about their presence but also generally respected their authority in the school. One hall monitor, Mr. Z, appeared to be friendly with the students and knew some of my participants by first name.

Teacher-student relations also appeared to be quite friendly. My presence in the Support Room gave me many opportunities to witness teachers interacting with students who were having trouble in their regular classrooms. Staff members were generally kind but stern with these students, ensuring that they completed their coursework, but also showed respect for the space. The staff members in the Support Room also expressed frustration that other teachers at Lilyfield still treated the space as an in-school suspension room, which, as previously mentioned, was its designation years before to my research. On the other hand, staff members in general also appeared to be concerned that student behaviour was no longer being well managed at the school.

Finally, the overall student culture appeared to me to be “mainstream.” That is, students appeared to be up-to-date on general popular North American culture as apprehended primarily through social media. With regard to fashion, the students, regardless of ethnoracial background, appeared to be current with contemporary fashion trends. This became more noticeable as the weather got warmer later in the semester. “Crop tops” and high waisted jeans, reminiscent of 1990s style, appeared to be the uniform of choice for female students. Boys generally followed
contemporary hip-hop trends, with tapered leg jeans and t-shirts, or stylish sweatsuits in colder weather. I also noticed that, at one point, the majority of the Black girls with whom I interacted wore their hair in long braided hair extensions.

School-wide activities also suggested that the school and its students were well abreast of contemporary popular culture trends. I will share two salient examples that contributed to my understanding that this was the case. First, during the Toronto Hot Docs documentary festival that occurs in April of each year, the school screened a documentary in the auditorium that was made available through the festival. Classes of students were invited ahead of the documentary date and rotated through the multiple screenings that occurred throughout the day. I found the school’s decision to bring the documentary festival into the walls of the school to be indicative of its interest in being connected to events across the city. Second, as the school year drew to a close, I witnessed on more than one occasion young men performing “prom-posals” for female counterparts. These prom-posals were trending on the Internet, and involved elaborate displays of young men asking girls to attend prom with them, in a manner similar to extravagant marriage proposals. These observations collectively led me to assess a dominant culture in the school as one that aligned with contemporary trends and activities reflective of capitalist, consumerist North American culture.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Participant observation

This aspect of ethnography involves the observation of people in a naturally occurring setting (Watt & Jones, 2010). My goal in undertaking participant observation was to obtain an understanding of the school environment from the perspective of those who were fully integrated
into the environment, i.e., students and staff members. However, as a researcher, my observations were also coupled with immediate interpretations, and what is reported in this dissertation reflects a representation of what I observed at Lilyfield, rather than an objective report on what occurred during my time there.

My observations at the school largely took place in three main settings: the Support Room and the two classes that I had the opportunity to attend throughout the course of the semester. I also made a point of attending school-wide events such as assemblies and the talent show, and made notes on anything that I witnessed or experienced during those events and as I physically navigated my way through the school each day. For this study, I took on a “participant-as-observer” role, in which my presence as a researcher was explicitly established but my goal was to build friendly relationships and to be relatively well integrated with the group and setting that I aimed to observe (Angrosino, 2007). I took detailed field notes on everything that I witnessed and participated in, and in the process of building relationships with staff members and students. These notes therefore consisted of descriptions of the contexts and people, descriptions of the actions of these people, my interpretations of the situations, as well as my feelings about the situations (Bannister, 1995). As it was difficult to write notes while participating in classes and activities, I wrote notes of my observations during the periods throughout the school day when I was not immediately occupied by an activity, and at the end of the school day. For observations and reflections that I was unable to hand write during the course of the day, I made voice recordings of these notes at the end of the day, and then typed them at a later date.
3.2.1.1 Classroom observations

Two of the teachers with whom I initially connected, Miss C and Miss D, allowed me to sit in on their classes for the semester. Miss C’s class was a College stream credit recovery class, where students worked individually on course materials for classes that they had previously failed, but with Miss C’s guidance. Miss D’s class was an Applied track Special Education grade 10 English class. I chose to approach these teachers to attend their classes for two main reasons. First, the dynamics in these classrooms were less formal than in the traditional academic/university stream classrooms, and I anticipated that the less formal settings would allow me to build relationships with individual students more smoothly. Secondly, during my initial informal conversations with these teachers, they both indicated that there were students in their classrooms who might be interested in participating in my research. I consequently asked them to allow me to attend their classes as a researcher, and as a volunteer tutor.

In previous in-school ethnographic work, researchers have often taken on volunteer roles in school environments either before or during the process of their data collection (e.g., Ibrahim, 1999; Yon, 1999). Given this precedent, and my desire to establish relationships with students to gather more context for my observations of them, and before asking them to participate in one-on-one interviews, I determined that volunteering would be an appropriate step towards relationship building. Both Miss C and Miss D initially expressed appreciation and enthusiasm about my offer, but as time went on it became apparent to me that I was far more useful in Miss D’s than in Miss C’s classroom. Miss D appeared to maintain her enthusiasm for my presence throughout the semester. In contrast, in the last few weeks of my data collection, Miss C informed me that she preferred to conduct the remaining classes without my presence, because of
the approaching exam period and her intent to be more instructional with the students, rather than
playing a role of facilitator as she had done for the majority of the time that I was in attendance. I
found this request to be entirely reasonable. However, I also had feelings of guilt regarding the
request, because I was unsure of whether it was entirely related to her pedagogical goals or
because my presence might have served as somewhat of a distraction for the students. Before
departing from Miss C’s classroom for the semester, I offered to conduct a time-management
workshop for the students. Miss C enthusiastically agreed, and expressed appreciation for the
workshop after it had been completed.

I attended Miss C’s class once per week for eight weeks. It was a small class of under 10
students; however, attendance fluctuated from week to week. The majority of students were
completing coursework in math, Miss C’s subject area, but a few students were doing work on
other subjects. My primary role was therefore to assist students with their math practice –
something that proved to be difficult for me at times – and to assist where needed otherwise at
Miss C’s request. In this class, I worked primarily with Joshua and Kyle, who would eventually
become interview participants in my study. Miss C explained that students were assigned to the
class partly on the basis of their personalities. She explained that this was done to ensure that the
students would get along, or at least not negatively affect one another. She informed me that the
first few weeks of the class involved personal development sessions, in which students took turns
speaking about how they felt about themselves as students. These activities therefore required
students to be vulnerable with Miss C and with one another. I did not participate in these initial
classes because they took place in January and I did not have access to the school until February.
However, I did have the opportunity to sit in on a few group discussions that Miss C facilitated at
the beginning of each class. This allowed me to gain some insight into the backgrounds and experiences of the students in the class, and specifically the students I was interested in interviewing.

I attended Miss D’s class once per week for four weeks, and then twice per week for the remaining eight weeks. Also small in size, with 15 students registered but with approximately 10 in attendance each week, this class followed a more traditional classroom dynamic. Miss D had a lesson plan for all of the students, and they worked individually or in groups to complete assignments. However, classroom management was a challenge as the students were quite often distracted by one another and by their smart phones. As it was a Special Education class, an Educational Assistant, Miss X, was present in the room to assist with classroom management and coursework. I also became involved in classroom management, often working one-on-one with students who were particularly disruptive, while also spending much of my time with Chantal and Simone, two students who eventually agreed to be interviewed for my research. It became apparent to me during my time in the classroom that the abilities of the students in the class were quite diverse. Chantal and Simone expressed frustration with this dynamic from time to time.

My choice to attend these less formal classroom settings, with students, who, by virtue of their tenuous academic performance and presence in special classrooms, would be identified as “at risk,” could be viewed as a limitation to my study. However, my choices were also appropriate to the type of work that I was attempting to conduct. The less formal class structures allowed me to build natural relationships with students and establish a presence in the school that was in line with its functions (i.e., as a volunteer tutor), rather than being primarily an outside observer. I also had the opportunity to visit four academic and mixed tracked classrooms on one
occasion each to get a sense of the operations of these more traditionally structured classrooms. These visits were fairly unobtrusive, and I did not participate in any classroom activities in these settings. The formality of these classrooms confirmed for me that I had made appropriate choices in selecting Miss C and Miss D’s classrooms for closer observation and relationship building with students. Additionally, two of the more traditionally structured classes that I visited were also taught by Miss C and Miss D, which gave me the opportunity to witness their teaching styles in these different settings.

Regarding the potential designation of the students in these classrooms as “at risk” and how this might have impacted my data, I found that the narratives of all of my student participants were rich and complex. There were therefore no identifiable systematic differences between the narratives of the students who attended these classes and the stories of their peers who were enrolled in more academic/university track courses.

3.2.2 Recruitment of participants: Staff members

Miss A and Miss B were the first staff members with whom I interacted at Lilyfield, aside from the administrator who had endorsed my research. I had several conversations with them throughout the course of my time in the school, which assisted me in making sense of the environment. They were also instrumental in helping me establish relationships with additional staff members as well as with students, some of whom would become formal participants in my study. Both of these staff members declined formal, voice-recorded interviews.

I made connections with additional staff members through three main strategies. First, on my request, Miss A prepared a list of individuals that she believed would be able to give me insight into the history and culture of the school. She initially prepared a list of individuals who
she believed would be receptive to my research. I therefore also asked her for names of individuals who she believed would be neutral or even resistant to my work. On my request, she emailed my study information to all of the staff members to whom she referred me, and over the next few weeks, I approached them during their breaks throughout each school day. These staff members then referred me to others, which facilitated a snowball sampling method of staff member recruitment. My second strategy was to initiate conversations with staff members whom I saw relatively consistently. These included staff members who often visited the Support Room and staff whom I encountered in the hallways and staff cafeteria. Finally, if during interviews students mentioned particular teachers with whom they had good or strained relationships, I made an effort to approach these individuals for informal conversations and formal interviews.

Overall, I had formal and informal conversations with fourteen staff members (i.e., teachers, support staff members, and administrators) throughout the course of the study. All staff members with whom I had meaningful interactions (i.e., I spoke to them on more than one occasion and not simply in passing) were made aware of my purpose in the school and my research topic. I interacted with six of these individuals at least once per week (most often more), and had ongoing informal interactions with other staff members who were not interviewed for the study. Of the 14 staff members, formal interviews were conducted with eight individuals, three of whom declined to be audio-recorded. Handwritten notes were taken in the informal and formal conversations that were not audio-recorded. Ten of the fourteen staff members were women, and the majority, 11 of the 14, were identifiable as, or self-identified as, Caucasian or White. The average length of time in the school for the 14 individuals interviewed was 9.6 years, with the shortest length of time being two years and the longest being 20 years. For the sake of the
privacy of these individuals, specific characteristics, such as subject area taught, ethnoracial background (if non-White), or position in the school (i.e., administrator, teacher, support staff), will only be discussed where absolutely necessary. (See Table 3.1 for demographic details.)

Table 3.1: Staff information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of employment at Lilyfiled</th>
<th>Audio recorded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss A</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss B</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss C</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss D</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss E</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss L</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss X</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Y</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Staff**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of employment at Lilyfiled</th>
<th>Audio recorded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss J</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss N</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. A</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Z</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**3.2.2.1 Interviews with staff members**

As previously mentioned, I conducted both formal and informal conversations with 14 staff members throughout my data collection. I conducted formal interviews with eight staff members, five of which were audio-recorded. Formal interviews were discussed ahead of time and staff members were given an informed consent form to review before we had the interview. In accordance with my ethics protocol, I explained to staff members that I could not guarantee anonymity in these interviews. Therefore, several staff members, although they were willing to answer my questions, opted to forgo the audio recording. Sample questions from these formal
interviews included: a) How long have you been a member of staff here? b) Has the school changed much within your time here? If yes, in what way? c) Do you consider the student body to be diverse? If yes, do you believe it is important for the school to accommodate diversity? and d) Do you think any special activities, accommodations need to be done for students of African/Caribbean heritage/Black students? Follow-up questions were asked where necessary (see Appendix 3) Informal conversations consisted of general questions about the school, its history, and the staff member’s role in it. Although these conversations were informal, the questions were guided by my research interests and applied to the specific context of the interaction.

3.2.3 Recruitment of participants: Students

When I began data collection, at the beginning of February 2015, I immediately sought out students who would possibly be interested in doing interviews for my study. My selection criteria for students included visible identifiability or self-identification as Black. I use the term “visible identifiability” here to refer to my role as researcher in selecting participants based on my judgment of physical Blackness, which included skin colour and hair texture. However, in all interviews I asked students explicitly whether they identified as Black and to explain their understanding of Blackness. I therefore did not rely solely on my own definitions. I targeted an equal number of male and female students, and students from grades 9 to 12 in both Academic/University and Applied/College streams of study.

For the first four weeks, I worked mainly at establishing relationships with students who frequented the Support Room. This comprised students who were assigned to the space to complete classwork, as well as students who visited the space on their own time to speak with
Miss A or Miss B. Michaela became the first student with whom I had ongoing meaningful interaction in the Support Room, as she frequently ate lunch in this room alone or with staff members. She eventually agreed to be interviewed for my research. In addition, Miss B had relationships with a number of Black female students, as she had been running a multiethnic girls discussion group throughout her time in the school and maintained relationships with some of these students outside group meetings. Because I began my data collection during the month of February, Black History Month, I had the opportunity to spend time with some of these girls at a potluck that Miss B and I organized, and I subsequently approached five of them for interviews. Three girls, after initially expressing interest in participating, eventually declined to participate. The remaining two girls, Malia and Stephanie, agreed to participate. Through these two girls, I was introduced to one more student, Patrice, who agreed to be formally interviewed.

As previously mentioned, in the second month of my data collection, I was granted the opportunity to sit in on Miss C’s and Miss D’s classes. Through these classes I met four more students – Kyle, Joshua, Chantal, and Simone – who would eventually agree to be interviewed. The remainder of my participants, Anthony, Louis, Stephen and Trina, were introduced to me through teachers with whom I had established relationships during my time at the school.

Overall, twelve students, five male, seven female, were interviewed formally for this study. Nine of these students participated in follow up interviews after completing the photography activity. These students ranged from grades 9 to 12. Five students were in Applied/College stream courses, five in academic/university courses, and two in an honours math science and technology program. The average age of participants was 15.8 years. Up to nine additional students were interacted with on a regular basis throughout the course of data
collection, but were not asked to participate or declined to participate in formal interviews.

Eleven of the twelve students self-identified as Black; however, specific identifications will be discussed further in the results and discussion sections. One participant, Trina, was of Indo-Caribbean background, and self-identified as “Brown” (i.e., a term that students used to indicate Southeast Asian ancestry). Ten of the 12 students were born in Canada, with one student arriving at age two, and the other between the ages of four and six. (See Table 3.2 for demographic details).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Academic Track</th>
<th>Ethnic origins</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Anthony Male 17 12 College Ghana Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Joshua Male 17 11 College Ghana Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Table 3.2: Student participant demographic information.

3.2.3.1 Interviews and photography activity with students

Twelve students participated in one one-on-one interview, and nine of these students completed the photography activity and participated in a second one-on-one interview with photo-elicitation. Parental consent was obtained for both one-on-one interviews ahead of the first
interview. I obtained permission from teachers to formally excuse students from class for them to participate in interview number one. Students were interviewed during their lunch period for the second interview.

Students were also offered a $25 gift card to a store of their choice for completing both interviews, or a $10 gift card for completing only the first interview. This incentive was not an original part of my research plan. The pace of obtaining student participants was initially quite slow, which, at the time, I interpreted to be because of a lack of interest in my research. I therefore made the decision that an incentive would potentially make participation more appealing to the students. In retrospect, I recognized that students’ initial lack of interest was more likely due to the fact that they were unfamiliar with me. As time went on, students appeared to be quite excited to participate in interviews and discussions with me, and several students asked to participate towards the end of my time at Lilyfield when it was too close to the end of the semester for a second interview to take place. I was therefore unable to interview these students one on one.

In interview one, students were asked general demographic questions, including age, grade level, academic stream, and how they self-identified (culturally, racially, or otherwise). They were also asked about their in-school experiences, e.g., their thoughts about the school, whether they felt they fit in, their favourite courses and activities in school, and what their friendships were like (e.g., the ethnic composition of main friendship groups, future aspirations, etc.). Sample questions included a) What is your favourite course right now? b) How would you describe yourself? Do you think your culture is an important part of your identity? Why or why not? c) Do you think your race is an important part of your identity? Why or why not? d) Are
you a member of any cultural clubs in school? Do you participate in any cultural activities outside of school? (See Appendix 4 for full list of interview questions). The purpose of this interview was to get a general understanding of the students, their identities, and their school experiences. These interviews lasted approximately 30 to 55 minutes.

At the end of the first interview, the photography activity was explained to each student. They were given one disposable camera with 27 exposures and asked to take photographs of objects and people that they believed were important to their identities. They were asked to take photographs of whatever they believed to be significant to them both inside and outside the school context. They were also instructed to ask permission of individuals whom they included in their photographs before taking their picture. Students were asked to return their cameras to me when they were finished taking photos, and I had the photos developed. Most of the participants took at least four weeks to return their cameras. I developed two sets of photographs for each student so they could keep copies of the photos they liked. I did not look at any of the photographs without the participant being present (see Meo, 2010).

Nine of the 12 students who participated in interview one returned their cameras. One student was interviewed for the first time in the last few weeks of the study and there was therefore not enough time for her to complete the photography activity in time for a second interview. One student lost her camera. Although I suggested alternatives, such as taking photographs with her smart phone, she was experiencing family issues towards the end of my time in the school and did not follow through on this activity. The third participant who did not take photographs had initially declined to use the disposable camera and wanted to use her phone instead. Later on in the semester she sustained a sports injury and was absent from school for a
number of weeks and was therefore unable to complete the activity. The students took an average of 12 photos each, although some students took more than this average, and some took substantially fewer.

Interview 2 involved a technique called photo-elicitation, in which photographs are inserted into an interview and questions are structured around those photographs (Harper, 2002). The method was first used by a Canadian mental health researcher in the 1950s who sought to understand how families adopted to diverse neighbourhoods and urban work settings. However, it is still a fairly marginal technique in psychological research (Harper, 2002). In this approach, participant photographs are used to gain deeper understandings of the participants’ self-constructions (Croghan, Griffi, Hunter & Phoenix, 2008; Harper, 2002). Elicitation interviews can also aid in connecting participants’ self-constructions to the broader society, culture, and history (Harper, 2002), and allows individuals to present more “complex, ambiguous and contradictory versions of the self” (Croghan et al., p. 355). Photo-elicitation techniques have been used to study youth experiences of gendered socialization in physical education (Azzarito & Katzew, 2010), women's experiences of chemotherapy (Frith & Harcourt, 2007), and the lifestyles, identities, and schooling experiences of youth in Buenos Aires (Meo, 2010).

The value of photo-elicitation interviews lies in their potential to facilitate discussion of topics that may not be easily accessible during a traditional verbal interview (Harper, 2002). This was my primary motivation for using this technique. I chose this method to allow students the opportunity to lead the direction of the conversation, rather than relying only on my pre-developed questions. Through taking their own photographs, students had the opportunity to choose aspects of their lives that they desired to share with me and that may not have come up
spontaneously in our formal conversations. I was therefore able to obtain insights into students’ lives outside the school context and outside my individual observations.

On the other hand, Meo (2010) notes that the effectiveness of the technique is dependent on the participant and the nature of the images. I also found to be the case in my study. The majority of the photo-elicitation interviews confirmed for me that my impressions of the students based on my interactions with them in the first interview, and informally throughout my data-collection period, were mostly congruent with how the students presented themselves in the second interview. However, for at least one student, Joshua, the photo-elicitation exercise was used as a means by which to reflect on his life as it existed and also on what he ideally wanted it to be. For example, he included a photograph of a laptop computer to express his desire to own one, and a picture of a piano to represent not only his love of music but also his desire to learn to play the piano.

To begin interview two, I asked students to review their developed photographs and to choose the ones that they wanted to speak to. I then asked each participant general demographic questions, and then encouraged them to speak freely about each photograph that they had chosen by describing why they were significant. I also asked the students follow-up questions and questions for clarification to get them to elaborate on information that was not immediately clear from the photograph or from their initial explanations (see Appendix 5). The photographs therefore served as facilitators for further conversation rather than as objects to discuss in and of themselves. The length of these interviews fluctuated with the number of photographs that each student took as well as how willing they were to elaborate on each picture.
3.2.4 Analysis of media, policy and academic documents

This stage of data collection was ongoing through the proposal, data-collection, and data-analysis stages of my study. I examined academic literature and some policy and media documents, in preparation for and prior to data collection. After spending some time at Lilyfield and gaining increased knowledge of the discursive climate of the school, I revisited the literature and collected more academic literature and policies that I found to be immediately relevant to the school context. I also collected documents at Lilyfield that I believed would help me understand the overall culture of the school. These included the school newsletter, student agenda, the TDSB course selection calendar, and other handouts that were available in office waiting areas. Finally, after conducting an initial analysis of my interviews and field notes, I returned to the literature to make further sense of my findings. This literature included government and school board notices, legislation, news articles, and academic papers related to the themes that were present in the data set.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis in ethnography typically takes place in two phases: 1) ordering, collating, and managing the data to facilitate analysis, and 2) actual data analysis (Jones & Watt, 2010). In phase one, I transcribed all of the interviews – i.e., interviews one and two for students and the audio-recorded interviews with teachers. I also typed the handwritten notes that I had made during conversations with staff members, as well as transcribed the audio-recorded field notes that I had made. Using NVIVO software, I first coded the student interviews, with interviews one
and two for each student combined as one file. I then coded all of the staff interviews, which included both the transcriptions from audio recordings as well as the typed handwritten notes. Separate sets of codes were used for the teacher and student data. During the coding process, I wrote annotations of specific codes as well as overall notes on analytical points that arose during the coding process. Following the coding of each set of data, I reviewed the codes to determine whether certain sets of codes appeared congruent and then began the process of organizing these codes into overall themes. I organized these themes into separate Excel sheets for the student data set and the teacher data set. Here, I also made note of any common themes that arose in both the teacher and student data.

Following the coding of the interviews, I turned to the organization of my field notes. I read the notes closely and created spreadsheets for each month of data collection. In these tables I recorded the date, the page number of the observation as recorded in my handwritten or typed notes, the theme of the observation, and short explanatory notes about the observation. I paid specific attention to any occurrences that involved the teachers and students whom I interviewed, and any occurrences that related to my research questions and general observations about the culture of the school. The field notes assisted in contextualizing the interviews and in providing general background information for the data set as a whole.

I relied on a combination of two forms of discourse analysis to makes sense of my data in phase two of the analysis: post-structuralist discourse analysis (Parker, 1992; 1995) and the brand of discourse analysis developed by Jonathon Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987). These two approaches have been noted to be both incompatible and complementary (see Parker, 1990; Potter, Wetherell, Gill, & Edwards, 1990). I have chosen to rely on the complementary aspects,
i.e., Parker’s emphasis on historicized discourses and embedded power relations, and the focus on the action orientation of talk, in Potter and colleagues’ work.

Ian Parker calls for a brand of post-structuralist discourse analysis that works as a form of action research. Here, through unpacking and questioning the discourses that exist in a particular environment, the researcher creates the potential to change how a discourse is used in this setting and to open up new ways of speaking and acting. Parker argues that the identification of discourse allows us to understand the multiple ways in which a particular phenomenon may be talked about, and the value of one way of talking about these phenomena over others. In so doing, researchers are able to systematize the various ways in which particular objects are spoken about in a particular environment, in order to understand how manners of speaking can either reproduce, challenge, or effectively change the social world. Discourse analysts therefore recognize the existence of multiple and competing discourses within any particular environment.

Potter et al. (1990) note that there is a potential for discourses to be reified under Parker’s approach. They argue that treating discourse as existing coherently outside the contexts in which they are enacted, as being merely identifiable, rather than focusing on processes of construction, is problematic. This may lead to analysts relying on “common sense” to identify discourses, which may in turn lead to a loss of critical insight into the creative deployment, construction, and negotiation of discourses, and the social actions performed in these uses of discourse, across different contexts. I therefore chose to combine these two approaches to strike a balance between locating broader, historically determined discourses in the talk of my participants, while also attending to how these particular discourses were constructed, transformed, and negotiated in specific conversational contexts.
I used Parker’s ten criteria for distinguishing discourses (Parker, 1992) to guide my initial data analyses. I used the themes that I had identified from coding the staff and student data and explored each theme as a potential object of discourse. For example, one theme that arose from the staff data set was “power dynamics.” Under this theme I arranged codes that documented the relationships between staff members, administrators, and students where there were notable power imbalances or struggles. I then reread the texts that fell under these codes, making note of recurrent manners of speaking within the data. I also revisited the overall text from which each excerpt was taken to ensure that I took into account the overall context of the talk. I then explored further, by comparing the talk across participants and by referring to the analytical notes that I made during the coding of the data. At this stage, I noted my thoughts on the types of constructions that I detected, as well as contrasting ways of describing the objects of discourse. I also attempted to identify potential counter discourses in the text and made note of these as well.

Parker recommends referring to other texts to further elaborate on how objects of discourse are constructed in the data. Particularly due to the relatively small number of staff members who provided formal and recorded interviews in my study, this step helped me to make sense of the arguments that were made by these individuals. Here, reference to policy, media, and academic documents allowed me to further unpack what I found in my data and to further explore manners of speaking that created vivid images or relied on particular metaphors to describe objects and scenarios. In this step of my analyses, I also attended to the action orientations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of the speaker; i.e., I paid attention to what was achieved in the context of the conversation. This level of analysis allowed me to understand not only whether and what broader societal discourses were reproduced and negotiated in the context of
the school but also how such particular objects of discourse were constructed in specific interactions and towards specific actions. Examples of social actions included justification, identity claims, accusations, and others. My analysis therefore also required that I give attention to my own role in constructing particular versions and discourses. As an active participant in the school during my data collection, as well as in the conversations and interviews that I had with staff members and students, my own role as a co-creator of what I am now treating as “data” required equal attention to my own speech and actions as to the speech and actions of the research participants. This will be explored further in the next section, as well as in the analysis chapters.

3.4 Ethnographer reflections – reflexivity

Treating the role of the researcher as integral to all stages of the research, from conceptualization to data collection and analysis to reporting, is important not only for ethnographic research but also for research methods that utilize discourse analysis. Given the level of discomfort that I experienced in all stages of this project, I found Pillow’s exploration of “uncomfortable reflexivity” to be particularly pertinent to understanding my role in this overall study (Pillow, 2003). Pillow calls into question exercises in reflexivity on several fronts. First, she questions researcher attempts to accurately represent themselves as self-aware of their biases, blind-spots, and similarities and differences with research participants. This exercise in self-awareness, or “confessional tales,” as Pillow names it, is intended to lend validity to the research findings. She argues that such attempts at reflexivity are slippery as there is an assumption that the researcher truly has an ability to know and accurately represent herself and her research participants. Similarly, Pillow challenges researcher attempts to accurately represent their
participants, by demonstrating, for example, their attempts at co-analysing data or co-creating research questions and approaches with participants. In these cases, it is still incumbent on the researcher to give or share power with their participants, which ultimately means that the power of representation resides in the researchers’ hands, regardless of the measures taken to introduce equity into the researcher-participant relationship. Pillow therefore defines uncomfortable reflexivity as “a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (p. 188). Uncomfortable reflexivity calls for a continued challenging of “the representations that we come to, while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning” (p. 192).

It is from this perspective that I report my findings herein. My initial motivation for this research stemmed, first and foremost, from my own experiences in a Toronto secondary school as a Black immigrant student from Jamaica, and my subsequent work in community and post-secondary settings with Black students. Witnessing the systematic sorting of Black students into lower academic tracks, and experiencing first hand discriminatory treatment at the hands of my own secondary teachers, served as motivation for me, prior to attending graduate school, to attempt to help Black secondary school students navigate their educational experiences through mentoring and tutoring programs. It was, however, my growing understanding of the research and policy landscape of the issue that was the precipitating catalyst for this project. I sought to understand why it was, despite consistent research attention for several decades, and official attempts at intervention through, for example, the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy introduced by the Ontario government in 2009, that statistics continued to reflect an academic achievement gap for Black students. My initial motivations were therefore grounded in a social
justice orientation; i.e., I intended to be somewhat of an advocate for Black students while attempting to account for the complexity of these issues. At this point, I am unclear as to the extent to which this work can be used for advocacy in a traditional sense but am hopeful that it will provide further insight into how to manage the experiences of Black students.

With regard to data collection, in obtaining access to Lilyfield High School, I experienced a great deal of discomfort throughout the entire data-collection period in negotiating my relationships with the participants and other members of the school community. My social locations as a relatively young (looking) Black identified/identifiable woman and Jamaican immigrant, who had extensive experience working with children and youth prior to data collection, and who was present in the school for the purposes of conducting research to obtain my PhD, placed me in multiple conflicting roles and subject positions throughout my data collection. My formal and informal interactions with members of the school community, from the administrator, to teachers, support staff, and students, forced me to reflect on the various ways in which my presence in the school may have been interpreted by each individual with whom I interacted.

Throughout my data collection, I felt quite powerless for several reasons. I initially experienced trouble in building relationships with students and subsequently securing their agreement to be interviewed. I was admittedly surprised by this difficulty given my prior experience working with youth and my confidence not only in my relationship-building skills but also in what I assumed would be the inherent appeal of my research to the students. Instead, it appeared to me that, although students seemed to accept my presence in the school, they were not overly curious about my research and what it might mean for them. Additionally, given the
relatively few Black staff members at Lilyfield, I assumed that my presence as a Black adult would have inspired an immediate connection with the students. Instead, students remained neutral to my presence until I had been present at Lilyfield for some time and genuine relationships had begun to be fostered.

On the other hand, I was equally surprised at the relative ease with which I built relationships with staff members in the school, and their willingness to converse with and be interviewed by me. These unexpected relations therefore called into question my own “knowledge” of myself and how I perceived myself in the school environment. The staff members’ tendency to treat me as a colleague on some occasions and as a student who could be guided and educated on other occasions, also forced me to consider the highly contextualized interactions that I had with individuals in the school and how readily power relations may transform in accordance with these changing interactional contexts.

I now recognize that the discomfort that I experienced throughout this research process stemmed from having to negotiate these multiple social locations, while taking on the responsibility of representing the voices and experiences of individuals who did not ask me to represent them. In agreeing to participate in my research, staff members and students alike turned over their own power of self-representation to me, the researcher, who regardless of how interactive the data-collection process may have been, and regardless of how powerless I may have felt in the research setting itself, possessed the final authority in how their stories would be told.

There are therefore two main acknowledgments that I would like to explicitly name as the reader moves on to examine the findings that I present in the remaining chapters. First, I
recognize that in conversing with me through formal and informal conversations, the participants in my study were representing themselves to me as the researcher, a stranger in the school environment, as well as to any other potential audiences that may subsequently be privy to the information represented in this dissertation. I therefore cannot claim to have any “true” understanding who these individuals really are. My attention to the discourses that were invoked in my participants’ talk therefore serves as a means by which to step away from the participants as individual beings, and to take stock of the work of these discourses, as I interpreted them, in the school environment.

Secondly, I acknowledge that the analysis as presented in the chapters that follow is but one of many interpretations of the data that I have collected. I have also chosen to focus on specific aspects of my data to the exclusion of others in this account to tell a particular version of the experiences that I had and that I observed, which were relevant to my initial research questions. I therefore also acknowledge that my data, analysed differently, could tell many other stories that would achieve a variety of different goals. For example, in initial drafts of this dissertation, my focus was primarily on staff members’ preoccupation with discipline in the school, and on staff-student relations. In another iteration of my analysis, my intent was to focus more closely on the in-depth narratives of more than one of my student participants.

Ultimately, the version presented in this account attends most closely to how dominant discourses as outlined in the academic literature and provincial policies on race, culture, and Black youth academic achievement were invoked in the talk of staff and students at Lilyfield. Attention is given to what was accomplished, as interpreted through their interactions with me the researcher, through this talk. I believe that the presentation of the research in this manner is
valuable in demonstrating an example of the type of work that is being done in school settings to manage the multiple and competing discourses that have been introduced in the Ontario education context over time. This study also works to propose new questions on how the school experiences of students racialized as Black in Ontario can be investigated in the future.
4 Staff Members Talk: Diversity, Whiteness and Black students in Lilyfield

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I attend to the talk and subjectivities of Lilyfield staff members, as well as their constructions of Black students. During my time at Lilyfield, my primary aim was to investigate the experiences of Black students and how these students made sense of their experiences within the policy context of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. My interactions with staff members were conducted with the aim of obtaining an understanding of the history and organizational culture of the school. However, throughout these interactions, and in my analysis of the data, it became apparent to me that the experiences and subjectivities of the majority White teaching and administrative staff were also significant to my understanding of how the current policy context of inclusive education in Ontario affected the experiences of the staff members as well as the students. Consequently, I argue in this chapter that the competing rhetorical resources available to these educators through the extant academic and policy discussions of inclusive education and Black student academic achievement, coupled with long-standing oppressive discourses related to Blackness in Canada, produced conflicting teacher narratives that had the potential to further marginalize Black students.

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, there has been much research and advocacy over the past several decades in relation to the experiences of Black populations within the public education system in Canada and Ontario. This research and advocacy, in highlighting the historically adverse experiences of Black students – for example, experiences in segregated
schools, and more recently, experiences of streaming, exclusion from mainstream curricula, suspensions, and expulsions (Chan, 2007; James & Turner, 2017) – have informed an understanding of the Ontario education system as exclusionary at best, and racist at worst (Dei et al., 1997; James & Turner, 2017). Such advocacy and associated research has also informed various ideological and policy positions to address these students’ exclusion. These include multicultural and anti-racist education, which call for more equitable school arrangements and a redistribution of power among students and teachers, as well as the reorganization of traditional Eurocentric schooling to be inclusive of other worldviews.

In adopting an Equity and Inclusive Education strategy, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as official policy positions starting in 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education has given credibility, even if only in part, to this ongoing advocacy and research. As outlined in chapter 2, these policy documents call on White teachers in particular to examine their social locations, and what are framed as their biases, to ensure that they are creating inclusive schooling experiences for all of their students. Consequently, in the context of critiques of the Ontario education system, and of educators in particular, teachers may be regarded, and may regard themselves, as being “under a microscope” in having to ensure that their behaviour does not, or is not seen as, proliferating the inequities that have been cited in research, popular discourse, and education policies.

In addition to this broader context, my own positioning in relation to the teaching staff at Lilyfield is also significant to this analysis. As previously discussed in chapter 3, as a Black woman, an outsider to the school environment, and a student in my own right, I was variously positioned by the staff members with whom I interacted. In reflecting on my interactions with
staff members, and in analysing the data that I gathered through our interactions, it became apparent to me that in my *outsider* status I was positioned as someone who may have had the power to evaluate the school and the staff members’ work within the school. This therefore appeared to place staff members in a position of justifying their work to me in our interactions.

As an example, staff members regularly discussed with me their discomforts with the practices that the current administration employed to enforce student discipline. These discussions were unprompted by my research questions, but generally arose in the context of my asking each staff member about whether any changes had occurred in the school during their tenure at the school. In these discussions, it appeared to me that the teaching staff were building a case to delegitimize the power of the administrator. Teachers and support staff consistently spoke of preferring the previous administration’s approach to discipline, which involved more “top-down” strategies and appeared to reproduce “zero-tolerance” approaches to discipline. By contrast, the current administration appeared to endorse the more recently introduced “bias-free progressive discipline” techniques.

Although the content of the staff members’ talk in relation to the issue of discipline was of great interest to me, particularly in the context of the impact of zero tolerance discourses on the educational experiences of Black students, the rhetorical effect of their narratives — i.e., the delegitimization of the administrator’s authority, and the manner in which staff members positioned me as a potential intervener or evaluator — is more significant to the current analysis. I argue that my presence as an outsider, and as a Black woman researching Black students in the current context of critical attention to the Ontario education system, placed staff members, and particularly White staff members, in a position of having to justify their teaching practices with
these students. Therefore, in examining the narratives of staff members, my aim in this chapter is to both account for their experiences while also making two claims: a) that the competing rhetorical resources that staff members negotiated resulted, in some instances, in staff members’ undermining their own good work with Black and other non-White students, and b) that the negotiation of these resources also worked, in some instances, to further marginalize Black students.

The remainder of the chapter is divided into four sections. In section 4.2, I will outline how culture was constructed as a “product” in staff members’ discussions of demographic changes in the school. I argue that this construction worked to place undue pressure on staff members to be individually responsible for student learning. The rhetorical resources that staff members drew on in these discussions stemmed from broader discourse on the value of multicultural and anti-racist education and the importance of inclusive approaches, as well as liberal and neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual responsibility and the value of attending to diversity in customer service as good business practice. In these discussions, students were positioned as consumers to which the product was delivered, and staff members were positioned as service providers who may or may not possess the skills and dispositions to deliver the appropriate services.

Constructions of culture as a product may be regarded as similar to constructions of “Blackness/culture as therapy/protective” in that both treatments of culture espouse purported benefits for groups who must engage with culture for their own healing. However in constructing culture as a product, emphasis is given to what the provider of culture, in this case the staff member, does or does not do, rather than on the purported benefits that culture may have for the
students. I argue that the effect of staff members’ discourse was an emphasis on the individual responsibility of teachers in managing culture for their students, placing undue pressure on these individuals to comprehend and translate culture in their classrooms. Staff members’ discourse also resulted in essentialist constructions of culture that foreclosed opportunities for exploration of students’ fluid and diverse cultural experiences that could in turn facilitate genuinely inclusive classroom practices.

In section 4.3, I attend to how Blackness was constructed in staff members’ discussions of their work with Black students. These discussions arose primarily in the context of my direct questioning regarding whether Lilyfield needed to implement special activities or accommodations for these students. Here, Blackness was constructed through several discourses, which worked to position Black students as either victims/vulnerable or as troublemakers. These discussions had the effect of potentially marginalizing Black students, even in discussions in which staff members outlined their efforts at more inclusive schooling practices.

In section 4.4, I turn to staff members’ discussions of their roles as White educators. Whiteness, in staff members’ narratives, was constructed as a barrier when working with Black and other non-White students. Consequently, Whiteness, and experiences described as associated with Whiteness, were essentialized as separate and distinct from Blackness. In staff members’ narratives, this functioned as a barrier that either prevented White staff members from being effective in their teaching and relationship building with Black students, or it became something that both White teachers and Black students were positioned as having to work to transcend in order for positive interactions and learning experiences to occur.
I argue that, in addition to broader damage/deficit discourses of Blackness, Whiteness was constructed in this manner through staff members’ access to the rhetorical resources that were made available through anti-racist and Afrocentric approaches to understanding the experiences of Black youth in school. Anti-racist approaches problematize Eurocentric school structures and call on White educators to examine how their biases may contribute to the exclusion of Black students. Afrocentric approaches see African worldviews as the most appropriate ones for Black students and see Eurocentric worldviews as harmful. Additionally, social cognitive framings of prejudice and discrimination are also significant to the construction of Whiteness as a barrier. In focusing on unconscious bias, such framings call for individuals to engage in self-reflection to uncover their biases and ensure that their actions towards all students are fair and equitable. Staff members’ discussions of Whiteness worked to position them as informed educators who were aware of the workings of power and White privilege. However, these staff members’ narratives also had the effect of undermining Black students’ claims of discrimination.

Taken together, the talk and actions of Lilyfield staff members painted a picture of a staff collective struggling to navigate the various competing discourses that informed their current teaching environment. Consequently, my analysis of the narratives of the majority White teaching staff at Lilyfield demonstrates how contemporary attempts at inclusive education may be undermined by long-standing oppressive discourses that maintain the marginalization of Black students in schools. The implications of these findings will be discussed in section 4.5.

4.2 Culture as a product

As previously discussed in chapter 3, Lilyfield High School, like most secondary schools in the GTA, was composed of students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Given my
interest in the racial and ethnic composition of the school – i.e., student diversity – I asked staff members about current demographics and about any demographic shifts that had occurred during their time at Lilyfield. The majority of staff members commented that demographic changes in the school included a shift over the last few decades from a student population that consisted mainly of students of Eastern-European background to students mainly of Southeast Asian background. Staff members also estimated that the proportion of Black students in the school was relatively low compared with other student groups, at between 7% to 15%, but that this percentage had also steadily increased over the years. The following excerpts are taken from my discussions with White staff members regarding these demographic changes, and more specifically, in response to my questions about whether the school was responsible for “accommodating” this diversity.

In excerpt 1 below, Miss E comments on how staff members should respond to the changing demographics of the school in relation to ethnic background. My formal interview with Miss E occurred after I had already been present at Lilyfield for almost 12 weeks. She and I had interacted on several occasions prior to our formal interview, and she had previously introduced me to Anthony, a Black male grade 12 student, as a potential participant for my study. She therefore had a level of familiarity with me and my research focus on diversity, inclusive school environments, and students of African and Caribbean background. Approximately a week before our interview, Miss E and I had an informal conversation in which she briefly described her observations of the changes that had occurred in the overall school culture as related to discipline

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8 These statistics are based on estimates provided by different staff members as school level demographic profiles were not available at the time of data collection

116
and students’ ethnic backgrounds. In our formal interview, she elaborated on her previous descriptions.

My initial question to Miss E, which prompted the response below, was, “Have you seen many changes in the school since you’ve been here?” Miss E proceeded to first describe her early experience of simply “trying to survive” as a new teacher, initially only focusing on her individual classroom and then slowly becoming more involved in the broader school environment. After some discussion on changes in disciplinary practices and school safety, Miss E abruptly shifted to a discussion of the demographics of the school as related to ethnic background, and her responsibility in responding to these changes:

Excerpt 1

221 Miss E: … when I walk through the halls, I never, fe-do I-I never feel nervous? So like, you know that's, I-I never actually did feel nervous [RL laughs], but, um, I do think that that's changed, to a degree. Um, I
224 think that, you know, schools, school change. Clientele changes [RL: Ok] right?
225 Um, when I started, we didn't have as large of a Filipino population [RL: Right] as we do. Now we have, a lot of Filipinos. We had more Russians I- more Russians and Georgians and sort of thing [RL: mm hmm] when-when I started. Um, that, every time a school, population changes, that changes a variety of things
229 [RL: ok]. You know, you have to look out of a, um, you know core values from their cultures, change, how we're interacting in schools [RL: mm hmm] etcetera
231 [RL: mm hm] right? And, and then also, as teachers, we need to reflect on, that, right [RL: mm hmm] so-uh-how visi-like how represented are my students feeling, in my [type of] class? [RL: mm hmm]. Do I bring in [material] from, a Filipino author or a Russian author [RL; mm mm mmhmm] right? Like I need to th-have questions about those kinds of things as well so those kinds of changes
236 have happened…

First in referring to students as “clientele” (line 224), imagery of students as customers is invoked, and educators are positioned in this discourse as classroom managers responsible for responding to the changing needs – i.e., the changing cultures and cultural values (lines 229-230) – of their clientele. Cultural essentialisms, e.g., the “core values” (line 229) of student cultures,
are drawn on, which, coupled with imagery of students as customers, works to construct culture as a product that can be packaged and delivered to this clientele.

Miss E’s statement that “every time a school population changes, that changes a variety of things…core values from their cultures, change, how we’re interacting in schools etcetera…” lines 228-230, implies that the mere presence of students from different backgrounds has the ability to automatically change how the school functions. However, this implication is immediately undermined when Miss E turns to reflections on the actions that staff members must perform to ensure that students feel represented. She states, “And then also, as teachers, we need to reflect on that, right? So…how represented are my students feeling in my [type of] class? Do I bring in material from, a Filipino author or a Russian author” (lines 231-234). Here, Miss E describes one of the main tenets of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, i.e., accounting for the diversity of students who are in her classroom, and attempting to be responsive to this diversity by making meaningful inclusions in the curriculum. However, the focus on teachers’ individual efforts implies that it is incumbent on her, and by extension on other staff members, to detect cultural changes in their classrooms and to act on them. It suggests that staff members do, or should, possess the ability to accurately apprehend the fundamental characteristics of students’ cultural backgrounds, and can in turn translate these cultures into educational products and services (e.g., “Do I bring in literature from, a Filipino author or a Russian author,” lines 233-234) that will be beneficial to their students. What such constructions of culture downplay is hybridity and ambiguity of culture and cultural performance. A one-to-one relationship between country of origin (of either the students themselves or of their families) and “culture” is presumed.
Such constructions of culture, and staff members’ roles in managing culture in the classroom, also position staff members as cultural gatekeepers. Emphasis is placed on Miss E’s, and other teachers’, abilities to “reflect” (line 231) on their work and to deliver appropriate education, with less attention given to the experiences and input of the students themselves. Miss E offers an example of how she might respond to the changing cultural composition of her classrooms by bringing in materials by authors from different countries (lines 233-234), and frames this practice as a part of an ongoing process of self-reflection on her teaching practice. This is not to say that attention is not given to the students at all, as the point of reference for evaluating teacher effectiveness is whether students feel “represented” (line 232) in the classroom. The pedagogical value of including diverse teaching materials must also be recognized, as students undoubtedly would find value in reading materials from various cultural perspectives. However, the emphasis remains on the staff members’ abilities to apprehend students’ feelings, rather than on how the students themselves interact with the class materials. Under these circumstances, if staff members do not detect particular cultures – for example, if a student does not express “culture” in a manner that may be widely understood or expected – or if an individual teacher determines that particular cultures are irrelevant or insignificant, they might not be included in curricula, and might not be treated as valuable for student learning.

In excerpt 2, Miss D also discusses curriculum content, but in direct response to my question of “accommodating” diverse students at Lilyfield. Unlike Miss E, her focus was not on the integration of new cultural content. Rather, she discussed explicitly questioning older, “controversial” material:
Excerpt 2

148  RL: Um, and so do you believe that it is important for the school to, ac-accomodate, I
149  don't know if that's the right word but, to, address diversity or to--
150  Miss D: Oh I think so [RL: yea] I think you have to, and I think [my subject matter] is
151  a good place to address it [RL: Ok]. We wanna try and have material that reflects,
152  different populations and backgrounds, um, in [class] we tend to, sometimes we teach
153  older material, which uses, language that's no longer acceptable [RL: Oh yea]. It
154  doesn't mean we don't teach that material but we have to address it head on [RL: yea].
155  Um, the TDSB has a mandate to deal with racism and issues of that nature and to not
156  shy away from controversial issues [RL: yea]. I love taking on controversial issues
157  [RL: yea]. I like making kids aware of, what's in the news, and what's controversial
158  and what might be controversial, what they're reading, and getting into thinking about
159  and question it, themselves [RL: mmm hmm], you know. You'd think that kids are
160  really aware of things in their neighbourhood and they're really, not very often. It's
161  very limited, what they're aware of

My question to Miss D places her in a position of having to affirm or deny the importance of accommodating student diversity. The question is therefore not merely a yes or no question of whether accommodations are needed, but an evaluative question regarding the value of such accommodations. In the context of broader academic, policy, and media discussions on the necessity to attend to student diversity in schools, Miss D is placed in a potential position of appearing insensitive, or even discriminatory, if she denies that accommodations are important.

In responding to my question, Miss D first gives an affirmative response (e.g., “Oh I think so” line 150), and like Miss E, she refers to the curriculum as an ideal place to accommodate student diversity. Similar to Miss E, Miss D emphasizes the need to integrate “material that reflects different populations and backgrounds” (lines 151-152), which assumes a potential one-to-one relationship between students’ ethnic backgrounds and the materials that may be integrated into coursework that “reflects” these students. This works to construct culture as a product that needs to be curated and delivered to students to suit particular purposes.
Miss D’s narrative diverges from Miss E’s in her emphasis on addressing “language that’s no longer acceptable” (line 153), which, in the context of her narrative, is framed not simply as good pedagogy but as a necessity because of the growing presence of “diverse” students. Here, Miss D’s consideration of the level of acceptability of the language appears to be predicated on the presence of these students of “different populations and backgrounds” (line 152). Miss D’s mention of the presence of this older material also leads directly into an explicit discussion of racism. She notes that the school board has “a mandate to deal with racism and issues of that nature” (line 155), directly following her statements regarding addressing material that is “no longer acceptable” (line 153). In this context, racism becomes associated with the existence of older teaching materials that contains currently unacceptable language. In other words, racism is framed as residing inside curricula, which in turn makes it manageable in as an educational product, i.e., as content to be delivered, as compared with, for example, processes in the school and classrooms to be addressed. Similar to constructions of culture as a product, discussions of racism within the classroom allows teachers to curate and manage it in a manner that is amiable their overall teaching practice. Miss D’s statement that she is enthusiastic about discussing “controversial issues” with her students is demonstrative of this manner of curating race and culture. Whereas addressing broader systemic processes that may exclude racialized students is far more complex and not entirely in the control of individual teachers, discussions of racism in the classroom allows teachers a greater ability to manage their, and their students’, interactions with the issue.

However, similar problems arise as when racism, like culture, is constructed as a product. In Miss D’s narrative, the responsibility and the drive to address racism in this manner falls on
individual teachers. Miss D states that she is enthusiastic about “taking on controversial issues” (line 156), which works to redirect attention away from the TDSB mandate to address racism, which she previously mentioned, and onto her own skills, attributes, and disposition in discussing racism and other controversial issues with her students.

Miss D also attends to the students’ potential reception of the materials, e.g., “…and getting into thinking about it and question it themselves…” (lines 158-159). This leaves room for students’ contribution to their own learning. However, the focus is still on the teacher’s capacity to enact this learning. Her statement — “[y]ou’d think that kids are really aware of things in their neighbourhood and they’re really, not very often. It’s very limited what they’re aware of” — positions the students as lacking in their knowledge base, and the teacher as an expert figure capable of bringing about learning for her students (see Freire, 2005). Consequently, similar to Miss E’s narrative, in constructing culture, and in this case, discussions of racism, as products to be delivered to students, staff members are positioned as service providers, and the delivery of said products becomes incumbent on individual teachers’ abilities to detect, and be responsive to, changes in student diversity.

It may be argued that attempts at including diverse materials in curricula, or attempts at addressing racism through curricula, as exemplified in the narratives of Miss E and Miss D, are demonstrative of conscientious, critical, and attentive teaching. Indeed, throughout our ongoing interaction during my time at Lilyfield, it was clear to me that Miss E was heavily invested in the experiences of her students and worked to create meaningful lessons that encouraged critical thinking and a social justice orientation among them. Similarly, although less socially adept with her students than Miss E, Miss D also appeared to be quite committed to their learning.
However, in the context of discussions of culture and race, essentializing constructions restricted the ways in which the concept of culture was managed in these staff members talk, and potentially in the school overall. Combined with liberal and neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual responsibility and economic benefits of being responsive to diverse client bases, culture became essentialized as a product that teachers could deliver to students in the hopes of creating more inclusive spaces for them.

In Miss L’s narrative below, culture is also constructed as a product. However, unlike Miss E and Miss D, Miss L and other Lilyfield teachers are positioned as lacking the skills to manage student diversity in this narrative. Prior to this discussion, I asked Miss L whether she considered the student body to be diverse. In her descriptions, she referred to the changing demographics of the community surrounding the school, and noted that the “influx of new immigrants to the country, tend to be Asian,” and that these students were consequently attending Lilyfield. The discussion continued:

**Excerpt 3**

55  **RL:** Um, so do you think that the school does, everything that they-or does enough to
56  accommodate the diverse student body? And, like I don't even know, what I mean by
57  that, but like however you might interpret it
58  **Miss L:** Um, that the scho--like the school?
59  **RL:** Yea so whether [Miss L: Does enough?] it's admini-admin, teachers, like,
60  curriculum, like..
61  **Miss L:** I think, I think the curric-like, within the curriculum to deliver the curriculum
62  I think that we have a fantastic ESL program, [RL: Ok] like for, second language
63  learners. I think that we have a, uh, everybody attempts, to the best of their ability to
64  deliver their curriculum [RL: yea]. I don't feel that, um, the students may, I don't feel
65  that everybody understands the, cultural backgrounds of, a lot of the different students
66  [RL: oh yea], so, in order to how to approach them [RL: oh ok]. Um, therefore it
67  causes, an imbalance between what they're experiencing outside of the school, with
68  what they're experiencing inside the school

In response to my question, and subsequent clarification, Miss L attends to a specific
aspect of the curriculum that may be identified as “cultural,” i.e., ESL programming. In naming the ESL program, Miss L equates “diversity” with a category of students who require English-language services. This, in the context of Miss L’s discussion of Asian immigrant students, works to construct diversity as non-English speaking and non-Canadian students.

In lines 63-64, she states that “everybody attempts to the best of their ability to deliver their curriculum.” Miss L does not elaborate on this comment nor do I ask her to in the excerpt. However, her use of the terms “attempt” and “best of their ability” relays an image of difficulty. Miss L explains that the challenge for teachers arises because the teachers are not adequately prepared to understand the various cultural backgrounds of the students. She states that she feels that “everybody” does not understand the cultural backgrounds of the students and therefore teachers have difficulties “approach[ing]” them (line 66). Here, culture is constructed as a product in making the argument that service providers, i.e., the teaching staff, have not been adequately equipped with the skills and knowledge to deliver curricula that are appropriate for their diverse clientele. In so doing, staff members are positioned as disadvantaged or put upon by the diversity of the student body. This therefore positions staff members as incapable of managing student diversity.

Miss L concludes that the presence of various student cultures, and staff members’ lack of ability to manage this diversity, creates an “imbalance” between what students experience inside and outside the school. In the following excerpt, I ask Miss L to elaborate on this statement:
Excerpt 4

RL: Can you, do you have [Miss L: so (unintelligible) specific] examples or--?
Miss L: Not specific examples, um, I would, I'll talk from my personal experience, I know, that, um, from, from, my fam, my own family, that, uh, my husband is West Indian, and my husband's family disciplines much differently than my family would have. So to take a child who has been disciplined in a certain way at home [RL: yea] and bring them to a situation where they see that there's no discipline [RL: ok], it's like a free for all

Here, Miss L deploys a familiar argument that certain student home cultures are incompatible with school culture, which therefore causes disruption in the school environment. Specific to students from the Caribbean, and Black students in particular, this argument has historically been made to explain these students’ lack of success in Canadian schools in the 1980s, i.e., their lower graduation rates and higher suspension and expulsion rates (James & Braithwaite, 1996). In Miss L’s narrative, she references her own family, i.e., her “West Indian” husband, in formulating this argument. Miss L does not name the specific island, or the racialized background of her husband, in this excerpt; however, throughout the rest of our conversation it became apparent that her husband was Black of Jamaican background, and that she had bi-racial children. Her reference to her family structure therefore worked to legitimize her argument as it was framed as stemming from her own experience and consequent insider knowledge.

Miss L argues that students of “West Indian” background are disciplined in a different manner than students of White Canadian background, i.e., Miss L’s background. Here, cultural essentialisms are once again relied on, as a sharp boundary is drawn between Black Caribbean culture as exemplified through discipline practices, and White Canadian culture. This boundary is extended to the Canadian context, where Caribbean culture is constructed as being maintained in the homes of Caribbean families, which then becomes incompatible with the school culture.
The outcome of this difference is that Caribbean students’ behaviours in school becomes “a free for all” (lines 74-75). Here, in addition to constructions of culture as a product, we see constructions of culture, and specifically Caribbean Black culture, as therapy/protective. The implication of Miss L’s narrative is that, if students of West Indian background received similar treatment inside the school as they do at home, they would be more easily disciplined and less disruptive to the school context. In other words, if Black students could access a cultural framework inside school that was similar to what they would experience at home, this would be psychologically, and consequently behaviourally, effective in managing students’ behaviour (i.e., Blackness as therapy). Miss E’s argument is that such a cultural framework is currently not provided at Lilyfield, at least in part due to teachers’ lack of ability to provide said framework (i.e., culture as a product). We also see a construction of Blackness as disruptive, i.e., as troublemakers, representing an invocation of the damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness. The overall effect of Miss L’s narrative is that staff members are positioned as incapable or ill-equipped to manage these students inside school walls.

In contrast to the narratives above, Miss C troubles the construction of culture as a product by giving attention to difficulties she experienced in attempting to apprehend students’ cultures and deliver them in the classroom. Miss C’s narrative therefore demonstrates other means by which to discuss culture without essentialization and assigning individual responsibility for service delivery to educators. Miss C’s narrative below is in response to my question regarding her attempts to implement culturally responsive strategies in her classroom:
Excerpt 5

237  **RL:** ...how would you, um, see, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy fitting into like your 
238  practice. Like I know you had said that it's more difficult with like math and stuff 
239  [Miss C: Yea], um, but even then, like, I guess the premise of it, from what I 
240  understand is, trying to integrate students’ cultures in to curriculum [Miss C: right]. 
241  So, how would that work? (laughs) 
242  **Miss C:** Um, well, I've-I've learned very quickly that what I can consider a common 
243  situation, like in math we're always tryna model things [RL: ok], and what I would 
244  consider to be a common situation like throwing a football, um, when I taught a grade 
245  9 ESL math class, none of them had any idea what I was talking about [RL: ok], um, 
246  so, I think in terms of, academics, and cultural diversity, I've realized that you can't 
247  take for granted that they know what you're [RL: ok] talking about or what you mean 
248  when you're talking about a specific application or situation [RL: Yea] that [you've] 
249  seen [RL: yea] and, so much of it ends up, uh, there's a lot of vocabulary in 
250  particularly when it's an English language learner class [RL:mm hmm] but um, you 
251  know there are just some kids that, even, we talk about like the distance between two 
252  cruise ships and, it's just so far out of the realm of their reality [RL: mm hmm], um, 
253  I'm trying to think of the-the, I mean the, one really effective way that, we've dealt 
254  with it is to teach the basic concepts and then have kids themselves come up with 
255  applications [RL: oh ok, yea], 'cause then they can share things based on their own 
256  experience [RL: yea yea yea, yea yea], um, but it, that is some thing that we struggle 
257  with, in math, for sure

In contrast to the excerpts above, in which I questioned Miss D and Miss L about a broad 
category of “accommodations” for students of diverse backgrounds, I asked Miss C to discuss 
her specific work regarding culture and curricula. In referencing a prior discussion in which Miss 
C had elaborated on the difficulties that she experienced in addressing culture in her classroom, 
the framing of my question opened an opportunity for her to frame her own narrative in reference 
to these difficulties.

Miss C’s statement that “you can’t take for granted that they know what you’re talking 
about” (lines 246-247) was said in reference to the actual content of her math lessons. However, 
the statement can also be treated as relevant to discussions of students’ cultures in the classroom
overall. Constructions of culture as a product requires teachers to believe that they can accurately understand who their students are and what their students understand. Miss C’s narrative brings attention to the possibility that attempting to understand and accommodate student cultures is not a straightforward endeavour. Miss C’s construction of culture is consequently more complex. The specific countries that students are from becomes immaterial in the classroom examples that she relates. In other words, there is no one-to-one relationship established between students’ ethnic backgrounds and the “culture” that Miss C would be responsible for detecting and delivering within this construction. Rather, a focus on students’ experiences and frames of reference becomes more important. Miss C relates how she manages student diversity in the classroom, stating, “one really effective way that, we've dealt with it is to teach the basic concepts and then have kids themselves come up with applications, 'cause then they can share things based on their own experience” (lines 253-256). Here, students are positioned as competent enough to make meaning out of Miss C’s lessons for themselves and to apply their own perspectives to the course content. Miss C ends by stating that this is something that teachers “struggle” with in math. This is similar to the observation made by Miss L; however, Miss C does not attend to this difficulty in the process of arguing that student diversity is detrimental to the functioning of the school, but rather in the process of commenting on the thought and labour that a teacher may need to employ to ensure that students learn despite cultural differences.

On the other hand, Miss C does discuss culture in one manner that is similar to Miss L. In attending to diversity, language differences, i.e., Miss C’s “English language learner class” (line 250), becomes the point of reference. Here, cultural diversity is equated to speaking a language
other than English – i.e., as being a non-English speaking Canadian – and consequently having less understanding of the cultural references that may be made in an English-speaking Canadian classroom. Discussing culture in this manner does not account for English-speaking students who have experience with different cultural frames of reference, as well as students learning English as a second language who nevertheless may have been heavily exposed to North American culture, or are, at the very least, highly competent in math despite being less adept at English. The effect of this discourse is that culture and diversity outside framings of being “foreign” are left unaccounted for. This in turn leaves room for a lack of consideration of the experiences of students who are assumed to be, but are not, culturally aligned with the mainstream classroom.

4.2.1 Section Summary

In the narratives of Lilyfield staff members, culture was constructed as a product in the context of my direct questioning regarding the school’s role in “accommodating” diverse students. In constructing culture as a product, staff members were positioned as service providers, as individuals who either possessed the skills and attributes to deliver this product or did not. This rendered culture manageable by educators but also left room for a lack of accounting for classroom practices that did not construct culture, and in one instance, racism, in this manner. By contrast, in Miss C’s narrative, culture was not constructed as a product, which left room for considerations of students’ contributions to their own learning outside the actions of their teachers. Taken together, this section draws attention to how broader discourses that require educators to take individual responsibility for student cultures in the classroom can create circumstances in which culture is narrowly defined, which may have the adverse effect of
excluding particular students.

4.3 Constructions of Blackness

In this section, I give attention to how staff members constructed Blackness in the context of discussing accommodations for Black students in particular. Here I argue that Black students were positioned in two distinct ways, as victims/vulnerable and/or as troublemakers. This positioning of Black students reinforced constructions of Blackness as damaged or deficit.

In the two excerpts to follow, Miss E and then Miss L discuss accommodations for Black students in the school board in general and Lilyfield in particular. In Excerpt 6, Miss E considers needs of Black students in the context of talk about diversity. Here, accommodations for Black students are constructed as necessary, but as being potentially challenged by talk of accommodations for all students who are considered to be “diverse.” Additionally, Black male students are positioned as academically vulnerable:

Excerpt 6

857  RL: Ok. Alright (both laugh). Um, do you think that, uh, there needs to be special
858  activities, or accommodations, like specific to African or Caribbean kids in this
859  school?
860  Miss E: Yes
861  RL: Ok
862  Miss E: Hmm. One of the conversations I had yester- I was presenting at um, or
863  I was part of a PD day yesterday uh, that was for readers who really struggle, and
864  it's, we're trying to impl-implement a grade 1 reading intervention program, with
865  some of our high school students who are reading far below grade level [RL: wow]
866  and it's just been like, it's really been more professional learning but, one of
867  comments that my, that, a colleague made, was, that this needs to be talked about,
868  with leaders of the Afrocentric program [RL: ok], because, sadly, we're finding, a
869  ot of the students we're working with, who are reading far below grade level, are
870  Black males (3 second pause) (RL laughs). And it's true right? And so, do I think
871  that, uh, I mean at-in our school I don't think, compared to a lot of schools in our
872  family of schools, we have a large African-Caribbean [RL: Yea], um, African-
873  Canadian population. Compared to other schools [RL: yea]. We st-of course, I
mean we have a diverse population at [Lilyfield]. And so it w-it would be, I think it would be easy for people to say, "like no, 'cause I think we have all these different cultures, and so, you know, if we did that, we would have to have the Filipino cl-club [RL: yea yea] and the Georgian club [RL: yea] and the duh duh da." Um, and I just think, why not, like why not [RL yes] do all [RL: yea, yea] of those things right? [RL: yea].

My question in lines 857-858 calls on Miss E to first confirm or deny that “special activities or accommodations” are needed for “African or Caribbean kids,” and to offer suggestions as to the types of support these students may require. My questioning therefore contributed to the construction of Black students as a homogeneous group with homogeneous experiences, and as in need of particular activities or accommodations in schools. The question of special accommodations or activities is fairly broad, however, as I did not indicate the quality, necessity, purpose, or desired outcomes of potential activities or accommodations for these students.

In responding to the question, Miss E’s narrative establishes a relationship between Blackness, or Black culture, and academic deficiencies. First, she mentions a Professional Development (PD) (line 863) session that she led, in which she discussed a reading intervention program for students reading below grade level. She states that her colleague suggested to her that these reading supports need to be discussed “with leaders of the Afrocentric program because sadly, we’re finding a lot of the students we’re working with, who are reading far below grade level, are Black males…” (lines 868-870). Lilyfield did not have its own Afrocentric program, therefore these comments were made in relation to students at a different school with an Afrocentric program. As previously discussed, an Afrocentric alternative school for elementary school aged students was established in the TDSB in 2009 amidst much controversy
(CBC News, 2009; Neverson, 2014), and subsequent Afrocentric programs in secondary schools were also introduced. The TDSB website states that the Africentric Alternative school, in addition to setting standards for high academic achievement and high self-pride for its students, also identified a “unique feature” of the school as the “integration of the diverse perspectives, experiences and histories of people of African descent into the provincial mandated curriculum” (TDSB, n.d.a). There is also a widespread understanding that the majority of students who attend Afrocentric schools or programs are Black students.

There are therefore two possible interpretations to Miss E’s statement in this context. First, Miss E appears to be implying that students in the Afrocentric program, by virtue of being Black, will also have reading gaps to which the intervention that she had presented at her PD session could be applied. Second, Miss E states that educators at Lilyfield could benefit from the guidance of leaders in the Afrocentric program in relation to addressing reading gaps for Black students at Lilyfield. In both interpretations, an explicit connection is made between Black students’ reading gaps and “Black culture,” which in this instance is defined in relation to Afrocentrism.

In the first interpretation, Black students are positioned as inherently academically deficient. In the second interpretation, leaders in the Afrocentric program, who are presumably well versed in Afrocentric programming and/or in working with Black students, are positioned as necessary consultants for addressing the reading gaps of Black students at Lilyfield. In this interpretation, there is also an embedded assumption that the Afrocentric program exists to address potential reading gaps or other academic difficulties, in other words that it is in some way a remedial program. Consequently, the work that the teachers at Lilyfield itself can do to
help Black students’ reading gaps within their own areas of expertise is set aside. Systemic factors that may lead to Black students’ reading gaps also go unmentioned. Instead, the mention of the Afrocentric program constructs Blackness as both damaged/deficit and as therapy, by framing the potential reading gaps of Black students at Lilyfield – or in the Afrocentric program – as a Black cultural problem that requires a Black cultural solution.

This interpretation is further supported in the continuation of Miss E’s narrative. She states, “I don’t think, compared to a lot of schools in our family of schools, we have a large African-Caribbean…population” (lines 771-873). This works to bring attention to any potential activities or accommodations that may be implemented at Lilyfield itself for Black students. It also suggests that any interventions for Black students may need to be population-based, i.e., the bigger the population, the greater the need for particular interventions. Miss E then states that other people may argue that, given the diverse student population at Lilyfield, introducing specified programs (e.g., student clubs) for Black students may necessitate the introduction of programs for other cultural groups of students (e.g., Filipino students or Georgian students). In stating that the types of programs that may be introduced would be culture based, Miss E, in the context of the previously introduced discussion regarding reading gaps for Black students, constructs Blackness/culture as therapy/protective. A club for African-Caribbean students would presumably provide a space for students to congregate in relation to shared interests and experiences. Coupled with discussions of students’ reading gaps, the implication is that such a club can be helpful to Black students, either as academic support or more generally.

There is also a construction of culture as a product in this talk. In bringing attention to the diversity of the student population, Miss E frames the introduction of cultural programming
specific to each “group” as responsive service. The presence of multiple cultural groups is initially framed as a potential service burden, as each group would require unique accommodations, i.e., cultural products that are specific to each population. In refuting this argument, “...and I just think, why not, like why not do all of those things...” (lines 878-879), Miss E’s self-positioning is that of a willing and capable staff member who does not shy away from the potential issues that may arise in attempting to accommodate diverse student populations.

Miss E’s hypothetical argument that providing accommodations for Black students creates a slippery slope of having to consider accommodations for all, was presented as a legitimate claim by Miss L below. Miss L drew attention to an incident in the school board that occurred a number of years ago, in which she claimed that Black families attempted to exploit TDSB rules of religious or cultural headdress to suit their own desires of maintaining a fashion trend:
Excerpt 7

Miss L: …I can think of another, another example from another school that happened, after I left the school it was, this was, years ago, that uh, especially with the Black population, that they would, um, the kids, the kids were, out of control, and the parents were, were, um, parents were, in my opinion, out of control as well, like the parents were, upset because the kids were upset because they couldn't wear do-rags and stuff to school [RL: ok] because there was no headgear [RL: yea], so, they were taking it all the way to the superintendent, be-uh superintendent and to the board of education because that was supposed to be cultural. Even though they couldn't find anywhere, that said that this was a cultural headdress like the turban or [RL: oh ok], whatever, they took it, you know, it got, totally blown out of proportion… ((omitted text))

…So, why is the TDSB caving, to people who just wanna talk [RL: yea] right? Um by, allowing, people to influence the, the bigger and broader decisions on such a small level, it's, sending the wrong message [RL yea], right? It's allowing people to say ok well, "you know, what? If they can do it why can't we do it?" Like it's not justified by religion, it's not justified by culture, it's not justified by, anything, other than, they want to do it.

Starting in the year 2000, Ontario school boards and individual schools introduced dress codes, as required under the Safe Schools Act which was established in that year (Short, 2011). These dress codes included rules for head gear, or “hat” policies. As an example, the current Lilyfield code of conduct lists “non-religious headwear (ball caps, headbands, do-rags, bandanas, scarves, etc.)” as examples of “inappropriate clothing” (Lilyfield high school, 2015, p. 38)⁹. However, the policy does not outline why these items are inappropriate. Common understanding of these policies when they were introduced, was that students were required to take their hats

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⁹ This information is taken from the school’s student agenda. However as the name “Lilyfield” is a pseudonym, this reference is not in the reference list.
off in school buildings to enable security cameras and personnel to readily identify them or strangers (see Short, 2011).

As previously noted, public criticism of the Safe Schools Act and associated school policies included specific critiques and subsequent evidence that the policies led to disproportionate rates of exclusions of Black students from schools. In the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s investigation into the potential discriminatory impacts of the Safe Schools Act in 2003, which eventually led to a settlement with the Ministry of Education and TDSB, head gear policies were identified as seeming to target Black students in particular (Bhattacherjee, 2003). Individual schools, in addition to having broader headgear policies, implemented rules pertaining to having combs in one’s hair, wearing du-rags and other products that were more likely to be worn by Black students on account of the particularities of their hair (Bhattacherjee, 2003; Short, 2011). Specific sanctions against items like basketball caps and bandanas, items largely popularized in hip-hop culture and worn by students of various ethnic backgrounds were also made. Miss L’s comments therefore appeared to be in reference to Black community members’ public objections to these policies at the time of their initial implementation.

Miss L first presents “the Black population” (line 94) as a unified group of people who spoke with one voice to appeal the school board’s head gear rule. In describing the students and the parents as “out of control,” Black families are positioned as disruptive and unruly, i.e., as troublemakers. In so doing a construction of Blackness as damaged/deficit is made. Specifically, Miss L’s description of the Black families’ failure to comply with the school rules positions them as unable to logically determine that their classification of their preferred headgear as “cultural”
was inappropriate and illegitimate. This imagery of unruly and illogical parents paints a picture of psychologically deficit community members. In making her argument, Miss L points to a lack of historical documentation that would classify the particular headdress, i.e., “do-rags” (line 97) as having cultural significance. She draws on a comparison with another type of headdress that is recognizable in popular discourse as having religious or cultural significance, i.e., the Sikh turban (line 101) to further buttress her claim. In so doing, certain cultural artefacts as constructed as more legitimate than others, which works to undermine the legitimacy of the claims these community members are presented as making. She further minimizes the requests of the Black parents and community members by positioning it as just “talk” (line 109), and as “on a small level” (line 111).

Miss L’s comments therefore reproduced historical narratives that worked to undermine Black families concerns that their children were being unfairly targeted and disciplined in schools. Miss L’s use of cultural criteria to assess the validity of the Black families’ advocacy works to exclude other potential criterion for advocacy, such as racial discrimination. As du-rags cannot be understood as an obviously “cultural” practice on face value, i.e., has having historical and ceremonial significance in the manner that a Sikh turban does, Black families’ claims are delegitimized.

In the following excerpt, Miss D refers to the “streaming” of Black students as something that the school will have to address:
Excerpt 8

297 **RL:** Um, ok so, specifically reg- with, um, with, with regards to kids of African
298 and Caribbean background [**Miss D:** yes], black students, do you think that, any
299 special activities or accommodations need to-uh need to be made for them or...?
300 **Miss D:** I don't know I think we need to be careful about how we stream them into
301 what classes
302 **RL:** Oh ok
303 **Miss D:** We do seem- seem to see higher numbers of them in applied and college
304 level courses [**RL:** yea] I mean, they come here going to those courses, but still, um—
305 **RL:** So it's happening at their elementary school
306 **Miss D:** Yea
307 **RL:** yea
308 **Miss D:** Yea. for, well I don't know what the reasons are [**RL:** yea], I don't know, um,
309 I think we try and be aware of, not, judging them as behavioural problems just on the
310 basis of behaviour, I think you would see kids tell you that they think they're
311 judged more for behavioural problems than White kids are [**RL:** mm hmm] that
312 there's an assumption, um, and uh, I think, just we have to be really conscious of
313 that [**RL:** yea], you know I try to be.

Rather than suggesting specific activities or accommodations as Miss E had done, Miss D discusses more systemic issues. She states that Black students are disproportionately found in “applied and college level courses” (lines 303-304), and that this is a result of streaming. As discussed in chapter 1, streaming has been named as a major concern for Black students, and the practice has been identified as stemming from systemic racism, including racial bias on the part of individual educators. In stating “we need to be careful about how we stream them into what classes” (lines 300-301) and then stating “I mean, they come here going into those courses” (line 304), Miss D first appears to attribute responsibility for streaming to teachers at Lilyfield, or teachers in general, and then revises this attribution. The statement “they come here going into those courses” makes the placement of responsibility less direct. My follow-up question in line 305 then allows for the removal of responsibility from Lilyfield teachers all together, and places it on unnamed elementary school processes of classification. Given the scrutiny that has been
afforded to the issue of streaming, and particularly, the explicit placement of responsibility, and by extension blame, on educators (Dei, et al., 1997; James & Turner, 2017; Solomon, 1992), Miss D’s naming of the issue, and consequent shifting of responsibility, has the effect of positioning her as knowledgable about the issues, but tempers the potential to attribute full responsibility, blame, or accusations of bias or racism that may be placed on her or other educators at Lilyfield.

In line 308, Miss D goes on to further speculate on the reasons behind streaming. In line 309, she names teachers’ judgments of Black students as “behavioural problems” as a potential reason behind these students being placed into lower academic streams. However, Miss D’s narrative once again subtly shifts responsibility away from the teachers, and this time, places it onto the students themselves. In lines 310-313, Miss D discusses what she frames as Black students’ interpretations of how they are judged in comparison to White students. This framing of the issue places Black students’ interpretations under scrutiny, which works to construct Blackness as damaged/deficit, in that Black students’ ability to be rational is undermined. Black students are said to be making “an assumption” (line 312) that they are being treated unfairly. The potential veracity of their interpretations is not explicitly considered. Similar to Miss L’s account, Miss D’s framings has the potential to position these students as troublemakers, i.e., as not accurately interpreting disciplinary situations and therefore unjustifiably challenging otherwise just processes.

Finally, in the following excerpt, although Miss C states that while she does believe that accommodations should be made for Black students, and perhaps other groups of students, she is
unable to name specific accommodations. Instead, Miss C turns attention to her attributes as an educator:

**Excerpt 9**

333  **RL:** So do you think that there's like there're an-do you think that there’s any
334  accommodations, like specific to youth of African and Carib-back, Caribbean
335  background that, needs to be implemented, or, or even, so, that, b-also any other l-
336  specific group, however they might be defined?
337  **Miss C:** I do, I don't really know, what they are [RL: ok (laughs)] Honestly, I don't
338  think, I think, um, I think, my s-I know my strength personally, as a teacher, is um, I
339  can make things very clear, in an academic class. In a class like my recovery class, I
340  can make a student feel, um, valued [RL: mm hmm] that's my strength [RL: mm
341  hmm], that's my strength, is making kids feel like there's somebody who's excited to
342  see them everyday [RL: yea], and who wants them to succeed. And uh, that's enough,
343  for some of them [RL: ok]. Um, when I think about the kids that I haven't been able
344  to, crack, the ones that I really get through to are the ones that are just feeling really
345  lost [RL: yea] and they need, a place to belong, those are the ones I do well with. Um,
346  I see kids who are still feeling that way [RL: mm hmm], but there's also, um, just
347  thinking particularly the ones I haven't, haven't really connected with, there's maybe
348  some anger there [RL: yea], um, yo-you know they’ve been through things, that I'll
349  never understand [RL: yea], or that I'll never experience [RL: ok] and some, so
350  sometimes they write me off, because of that

My question to Miss C leaves room for her to comment not only on students of African and Caribbean background, i.e., Black students, but also on “any other specific group”. Miss C’s affirmative answer indicates that she believes that accommodations should be in place, apparently for Black students, and potentially more broadly for other groups. However, Miss C does not endeavour to propose specific accommodations, and instead focuses on her own work and individual relationships with students. She focuses on her emotional investment in students, positioning herself as a caring, intuitive, and skillful teacher. In so doing, Miss C appears to be implying that such attributes are ideal for teachers to have, to enable them to reach students who may otherwise be hard to reach. Therefore despite Miss Cs statement that she is unaware of the
specific accommodations that may be made for students, she offers up opinions on general actions that can be taken by teachers to assist specific groups of students.

In turning attention to her own attributes, Miss C avoids explicit constructions of Black students. However, her constructions of a broad category of “kids” that are made in relation to the question indirectly conjures up images of Black students that are similar to those constructed by the other staff members under the Blackness as damaged/deficit discourse. In naming student attributes such as difficult to “crack”, “lost” and as having some “anger” students are positioned as challenging and vulnerable. These constructions echo those of Miss E, who as I argued, positioned Black students with “reading gaps” as vulnerable; Miss L, who positioned Black students and families who challenged the school board as troublemakers; and Miss D who positioned Black students as feeling unfairly judged. Therefore, although Miss C does not provide direct constructions of Black students, the congruence between her descriptions and those of the other staff members gives the impression that at the very least, Black students are included in broader category of “kids” that she describes.

What then does Miss C accomplish in avoiding explicit constructions of Black students? Given broader discussions of the mistreatment of Black students in schools, Miss C’s focus on her own attributes allows her to position herself as a part of the solution to helping these students. Her focus on the individual attributes of students in general rather than Black students as a particular group, allows her to avoid making group-based claims that may be interpreted as promoting stereotypes. Her narrative can be interpreted as taking a “colour blind” approach to assisting students, in that she focuses on her personal attributes, which may work to assist all vulnerable students, rather than attending to Black students in particular. However, her initial
statement that Black students do need specific accommodations also allows her to position herself as understanding that these students’ experiences may also be unique.

4.3.1 Section Summary

On my prompting, staff members discussed potential accommodations that could be made for Black students at Lilyfield. Accommodations were framed as both necessary and unnecessary, and through the process of these considerations, Black students were positioned as either victims/vulnerable or trouble makers. Through these arguments Blackness was also constructed as damaged/deficit, and as therapy/protective Taken together, these narratives demonstrate the ways in which teachers who express genuine care and knowledge about the experiences of Black students can contribute to positioning them within discourses that can be harmful to these students. In the next section, I will explore this further in relation to staff members considerations of their own racial identities.

4.4 Whiteness as a barrier

In this final section, I discuss staff members’ explicit considerations of Whiteness, and the contexts within which Whiteness was constructed as a barrier to working with Black students. As discussed in chapter 3, the majority of teaching personnel at Lilyfield were White, and as many observed, female. In our conversations, both Black and White staff members reflected on the majority White and female teaching staff at the school, as well as on what staff members’ self-identification as White meant for their interactions with students. Whiteness was consistently constructed as a barrier in staff members’ discourse, one that prevented White staff members from being truly capable of understanding and managing their “diverse”, and specifically Black students. I argue that this construction of Whiteness was made through
drawing on similar rhetorical resources that allowed for the discourse outlined in the previous two sections. Therefore while White staff members were able to discuss their understandings of practices that worked to marginalize Black students, their discussions also had the effect of contributing to marginalizing discourses. I will first provide analyses of my conversations with, and observations of both Black and White staff members. I will then present a closer analysis of my interactions with two staff members and their considerations of the role of race in their interactions with Black students.

4.4.1 Black and White staff members

Two of the three Black staff members\textsubscript{10} with whom I interacted expressed strong opinions regarding the relationships between White teachers and Black students. These staff members expressed opinions that the White staff members were not working in the best interests of Black students, in comparison to their own work, as Black staff members, with these students. Miss X, for example, stated that ‘Caucasian’ teachers chose to ‘pick their battles’ with Black male students. She stated that these teachers appeared to be afraid of the students, or were under-motivated to become involved with students on the assumption that students’ perceived disruptive behaviour or disengagement were inevitable on account of their Blackness. Similarly, Mr Z, another Black staff member, commented that White teachers’ treatment of Black students appeared to be amiable on the surface, but that teachers were likely to suspect that Black students were at fault whenever an incident that required disciplinary action occurred. He also stated that

\textsuperscript{10} I did not get permission from the Black staff members to audio record our discussions. All quotations provided are taken verbatim from my hand written notes.
teachers had a tendency to ‘baby’ Black students, i.e., teachers tended to be overly and inappropriately permissive with these students.

By contrast, they described their own work with Black students as more involved and structured. For example, in discussing her work with Black boys Miss X described them as “my boys”. Whereas she described White teachers as habitually lax on discipline with Black students, she stated that she would want to see more consistency with discipline and described the students as lacking accountability. She stated that she was “concerned that there will be a generation of Black boys who will be in trouble for society based on the slackness of the school and what they’re experiencing here”. Miss X therefore positioned herself as more responsible in her relationships with Black students, as being willing to enforce discipline in comparison to White teachers who she described as fearful of Black boys. Similarly, Mr. Z stated that “our kids need goals” and a push towards those goals. He stated that he tried “to tell the kids that they need to work harder because the teachers expect disruption and bad behaviour”.

The effect of these staff members’ discourse was a construction of Whiteness as a Barrier to working with Black students. Both staff members singled out White teachers – without my prompting – and their work with Black students at Lilyfield, and argued that these teachers did not treat Black students in a manner that was conducive to them having the best educational experiences. Also significant in these staff members narratives was the invocation of the damage deficit discourse. Staff members’ discussions of Black students was consistently in relation to behaviour, which was constructed as “bad” and academics, which they emphasized Black students as needing support in. These staff members therefore invoked damaged/deficit
discourses in the process of justifying their effective work with Black students and while positioning White staff members as ineffective.

4.4.2 White teachers and Black students

In this section, I discuss my interactions with staff members who self-identified as, or presented as White in relation to discussions about Black students. Here I demonstrate how staff members were able to draw on rhetorical resources made available through discussions of the academic achievement gap for Black students, inclusive education and systemic racism in discussing their work with Black students. While discussing these issues allowed for a positioning of these staff members as knowledgeable and invested in the success of Black students, a contradictory outcome was the construction of their own Whiteness as a barrier to effective work with these students. Additionally, the effect of this talk was that Blackness was constructed inside the damage/deficit discourse that worked to further marginalize these students.

Miss B, as mentioned in chapter 3, was one of the first staff members with whom I interacted when I began my time at Lilyfield. Miss B’s primary role in was in The Support Room, where she provided support for students of all backgrounds who were experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. She explained that these students were labelled as ‘hard to serve’ youth, and noted that their emotional and behavioural difficulties affected their academic performance. Miss B also positioned herself as having a unique relationship with Black students in particular. She was initially one of the key gatekeepers to my gaining access to students with whom I conducted formal interviews.

Miss B’s self-positioning as a White staff person in relation to non-White students was evident in our first conversation. She stated that students initially believed that she was “just
White” but that over time, these students realized that she was “really cool” because she listens to them, whereas other staff members did not. She also discussed being more affectionate with students than other teachers, and as being willing to look past traditional teacher-student relations to build genuine relationships with students. Through Miss B’s discussion of her relationship with non-White students, Whiteness was initially constructed a barrier, one that she was able to overcome when students were able to see her true character underneath her Whiteness. She also positioned herself as an insider with special knowledge of Black students. In subsequent conversations, and in our joint planning of the Black History Month activities, Miss B was very insistent on the activity suggestions that she made, on the grounds that these activities would be preferred by Black students. In the course of our planning (to be discussed further in chapter 5), she also revealed that her partner was Black, and that her children were consequently bi-racial.

However, despite her stated investment in Black students, damage/deficit discourses of Blackness were still invoked through Miss B’s words and actions, particularly in relation to Black male students. In one of our initial interactions, Miss B gave me a tour of the school. During the tour, she pointed to a stairwell that was relatively isolated, and noted that ‘this is where the Black boys hang out’. Given common media depictions of “bad” students congregating in isolated areas in schools, and specifically in stairwells, in the context of our interaction it was clear to me that Miss B was signalling that the ‘Black boys’ that used the stairwell were likely to be viewed as “troublemakers” in the school. Similarly, on a separate occasion, Miss B and I were in the cafeteria together where three Black boys were waiting presumably for their lunches. Miss B suddenly interrupted the conversation that she and I were engaged in to go over to speak with the boys. When she returned to speak with me, she stated
that the young men were “known to steal”.

Miss B, having previously discussed with me her unique position to help Black students, and in describing herself as someone who was recognized by students as more than “just White”, was consequently allowed the ability to make these observations about Black students without seeming as if she is singling them out or treating them unfairly. Her positioning as an invested teacher who has surpassed Whiteness, allowed room for her to exercise the type of surveillance in schools that Black students are typically sensitive to, and which is typically interpreted as racist practice, without appearing, herself, to be racist.

By contrast, rather than focusing on her own teaching practice, Miss D made the case that my presence in the classroom was beneficial to her Black students, which in her narrative, worked to construct Whiteness as a barrier. Miss D’s classroom, a Special Education Applied stream class, consisted of five Black students with whom I worked more closely, and five students of White and other racialized backgrounds. All of the students were somewhat disruptive in her classroom, and she stated to me in one of our first conversations that managing the behaviours of the students in the classroom was a challenge for her. She had an Educational Assistant, Miss X who was herself a Black woman, and who was always present in the class and assisted with students’ behaviours and coursework. I spent the majority of my time in Miss D’s class working with Chantal and Simone, the two Black female students who I would eventually interview, and who were on occasion quite disruptive.

In speaking about accommodations for diversity, Miss D stated to me, “Look at how the kids responded to having you in the classroom. There’s a lot of White women teaching lots of different kids”. Miss D’s statement accomplished two things. First, it worked to demonstrate her knowledge of the potential feelings of exclusion that racialized students may experience when
they do not have individuals that look like them in positions of leadership. Relatedly, Miss D’s statement could also be interpreted as an acknowledgment of White privilege, in that even with ever increasingly diverse classrooms, White women still maintain the majority of the teaching jobs in the present day school system. This therefore worked to position Miss D as knowledgeable and empathetic, as someone who was aware of her limitations and who actively sought to remedy them through encouraging my involvement, as a Black woman, in the classroom. However, Miss D’s statements also worked to undermine any potentially positive contributions that she, and other White teachers, may have been making in these students’ lives, and to potentially absolve them of their responsibilities to create through their own work, inclusive schooling experiences for these students.

The second effect of Miss D’s statement was the suggestion that having a racialized/Black woman in her class facilitated greater engagement from the Black students in particular, and could potentially work in a similar manner for students of other backgrounds. This comment was made despite the fact that Miss X was also a Black woman, and was a far more consistent presence in the classroom than I was over the course of my data collection. Miss D’s reference to the value of Blackness worked to construct Whiteness as so much of a barrier, that her classroom required the presence of two Black women to manage the behaviours and academic engagement of her students. Blackness was also constructed as therapy/protective in this discussion. Miss D’s suggestion that the mere presence of Blackness – i.e., my embodiment as a Black woman which worked as a signifier for presumed ability to related to, and guide the Black students in the room – was enough to assist students who were otherwise disengaged, thereby being of psychological assistance to these students. This essentializing construction of
Blackness also goes hand in hand with the essentializing construction of Whiteness as a barrier. Miss D’s observation that there are a lot of “White women” teaching a lot of “different” kids suggested that possessing Whiteness can impede the learning of these “different” students.

Finally, as discussed in chapter 3, Miss C taught the other class that I had the opportunity to participate in during my time at Lilyfield, a grade 11 credit recovery course. During our interview, in discussing accommodations for diversity, Miss C stated that she was from an “upper middle class, white suburban neighbourhood” and that her “reality as a youth is totally different than theirs”. Similar to Miss D’s comment, this comment worked to position Miss C as knowledgeable and attuned to the barriers that Black students face, as well as her own privileges in the classroom. However, embedded in Miss C’s comment was the assumption that experiences that may be typically associated with being White, middle class, and suburban, are restricted to individuals of that specific social location. The implication is that there is no Black, middle class, suburban experience. Consequently, Miss C endorsed role models for “diverse” students, stating that, “it’s good for all of us to see ourselves in the people that we work with.” Taken together, these statements worked to construct Whiteness as a barrier, as the implication is that the diverse student population would not be able to relate to the majority White teaching staff at Lilyfield.

However, Miss C was also one teacher about whom Black students spoke of in highly positive terms. Specifically, I recruited two of my interviewees, Kyle and Joshua, from her classroom to participate in my study. Both of these young men included photographs of Miss C in their photography activity and described her as a compassionate and involved teacher (discussed further in chapter 5). I also had the opportunity to witness first hand Miss C’s level of investment in these two students. For example, towards the end of the semester, the young men
were working together on a project for a different course during Miss C’s class time. Whereas I had expected Miss C to simply allow the boys to work on the project during her time, and to perhaps offer assistance in the form of ideas or instruction, Miss C became fully involved in the creation of the project. The boys were responsible for putting together a display that required some artwork, as well as a research paper. Miss C provided them with art supplies, and proceeded to search the Internet for images that they could include in the display. She led the creation of the artistic elements, which included drawing, cutting, and gluing parts of the display. The boys in turn focused on the research, with some assistance from me, and joined Miss C in creating the artwork after she had already created the foundational elements.

I was actually quite surprised by Miss C’s actions. I interpreted her efforts as doing the work for Joshua and Kyle rather than as facilitating a process that would enable them to do the work for themselves. Her in-depth assistance of the boys reminded me of Mr Z’s comment that White teachers had a tendency to “baby” Black students. I saw Miss C’s work, while quite helpful to the young men and appreciated by them, as positioning them as vulnerable and as incapable of completing the necessary elements of their schoolwork on their own. The Blackness as damaged/deficit discourse was produced through Miss C’s actions here, as there appeared to be an assumption that the boys did not have the ability to complete their assignment and therefore needed a high level of intervention to do so.

Although I did not have the opportunity to speak with Miss C about this specific incident, she stated, in one of my initial conversations with her, that the boys had mentioned to her on several occasions that they were willing to learn math only with her. She stated that they had had negative experiences with previous math teachers, and that when they got to her class they not
only felt like failures in math but also “failures at life.” She had consequently spent the first month of the semester deliberately working to get these young men “to like her.” Miss C’s efforts were highly compassionate and responsive to the needs that the young men presented, and worked to counter any constructions of Whiteness as a barrier. However, the level of assistance that she provided in the example above also opened up the inverse of treating Whiteness as a barrier, i.e., an overreach into assisting students as embedded in constructions of these students as academically incapable.

In the remainder of this section, I give close examination to the talk of two staff members and their reflections on their work with Black students. This analysis demonstrates how these staff members constructed White identity in the context of policy, academic, and popular discourses that call on White teachers to reflect on their roles in reinforcing inequitable treatment of Black students. Despite their reflections, these staff members’ discourse also worked to undermine the concerns of the Black students with whom they interacted.

The discussion with Miss E below took place in the context of our conversation regarding any accommodations that may be implemented specifically for Black students. She reflected on her attempts to discuss racism with her students and spoke of having been trained in, and as approaching her lessons from an anti-racist perspective. Just prior to the talk presented here, Miss E described a discussion that she had with her students about “carding” or “street checks” in Toronto, which at the time was obtaining heavy media coverage for the disproportionate carding of Black men in the city (Cole, 2015; Rankin, Winsa, Bailey, & Ng, 2014). She stated that she used this example in an attempt to explain systemic racism. However, in this account,
she appeared to struggle with her positioning as a White woman in contrast to the experiences of her Black male students. She continued:

Excerpt 10

916 Miss E: …I think that these conversations are really important, I think we need to talk about them I think they need know their rights, like all of these things, but then I think, that's coming from your White woman perspective [RL: mm hmm]. You don't have to live this everyday [RL: mm hmm], you know like, you don't live right, you don't live, I'm-I'm not, nobod- (exhales), nobody, uh, I'm not, uh, discriminated against everyday, I don't think, or at least if I am it's not in my face or I don't, pick up on it, right? Whereas, I know that there are people who live everyday thinking that they're discriminated against [RL: mm hmm]. I think that, you know, some of our young Black males feel that they, everyday-everyday, every situation to them, is a racialized situation [RL: mm hmm]. Any problems that happen to them, is a racialized situation, right? Which, was highlighted to me a few years ago when, um, I had this amazing amazing Nigerian student in my grade 12 university class and he was so, so smart and we had such a great relationship…

Miss E begins her account by positioning herself as a “White woman” who does not, in reality, experience or perceive discrimination on a day-to-day basis. Whiteness is constructed as a barrier here, as Miss E indicates that her lack of experience of discrimination may potentially impede the success of her attempts to teach her students about racism (e.g., “then I think, that’s coming from your White woman perspective” (line 918). Miss E’s narrative then shifts from her lack of experience of discrimination to her students’ experiences. Whereas her description of her own experience is presented as based in objective reality, i.e., “I’m not uh, discriminated against everyday” (lines 919-920), similar to Miss D in excerpt 8 she places the experiences of her Black male students within the realm of perception. She states that “some of our young Black males feel that they, everyday-everyday, every situation to them, is a racialized situation. Any problems that happen to them, is a racialized situation, right?” (lines 926-928). Here, the object of
discourse is no longer the experience, or lack of experience, of racism, but the students’ interpretations of these experiences. This statement therefore constructs these students as potentially overly sensitive, seeing racial meanings in day-to-day occurrences. The potential for these young men to be positioned as “troublemakers” is opened up here, as their “racialized” interpretations may be regarded as “crying wolf”.

Miss E goes on to give an example of how an everyday situation may be interpreted as a racialized situation by a Black male student, the “Nigerian student” whom she had mentioned in lines 926-927, in the excerpt above. She continued:

**Excerpt 11**

929 Miss E… and I, I said to him, what I had been saying, bragging to one of my teacher friends about him and I was like "he's so smart, like j-let me read you his introduction to his essay," and she said "oh, I'm surprised," not surprised I knew he was smart, but she said "I had a really bad experience with him in the hallway once" and I was like  
930 "that's shocking [RL: chuckles] he was like the quietest kid" [RL: mm hmm]… ((text omitted – description of the incident))
931 …And [the student] said "there was a group of people there," and I was like "yea I'm sh-I'm sure there was," and he was like "can you just tell me who, who she said was part of the group?" And I said well you  
932 [names second student], and he said, “so interesting to me that she only remembers the two, the only two Black people in the group." And this is somebody who I would have never, and I still don't think, at all, is racist [RL: mm hmm]. But  
933 his perception of the situation [RL: right] was a racialized [RL: y-ok] perspective [RL: ok I see] right? You know what I'm saying? Um, and-and, perh- and he also challenged, you know, would I have had the same reaction, would I have only re-  
934 you know? [RL: ohh ok], I don't know [RL: yea]. I think it's important [RL: yea] for me to reflect on on that though [RL: yea] right? And soo, do I think that, I-  
935 beca-you know I don't want to talk about carding to death, with people who f-  
936 like I need to really, be aware of-where my perspective and where I'm coming into things with.
In this continuation of Miss E’s narrative, she recounts her conversation with both her colleague and the student. She describes herself as enthusiastically speaking about her student with her colleague, who in turn casts a shadow on Miss E’s enthusiasm by mentioning an incident in which the colleague had a “really bad experience” (line 932) with the student. As a result of the incident – Miss E’s description of which is not shown here – the student was accused by the colleague of committing an act of minor vandalism. Miss E goes on to recount her conversation with the student in which she described her interaction with the colleague to the student. She describes her student as casting doubt on her colleague’s version of the events by questioning the colleague’s recollections. Miss E quotes the student as stating, “so interesting…that she only remembers…the only two black people in the group” (lines 943-944), which works to position the student as accusing her colleague of racial bias. Miss E affirms this positioning by stating “[a]nd this is somebody who I would have never, and I still don’t think is racist,” (lines 944-945). This statement aligns with Miss E’s prior discussion of students “thinking” that they are discriminated against and viewing “every” situation as a “racialized situation”. Rather than questioning whether the student is justified in his suspicions of her colleague, the students’ perceptions and interpretations are questioned. Once again, this questioning has the potential to position the student as a troublemaker on account of his refusal to concede to what has been otherwise framed as objective reality.

However, Miss E does not end her questioning there; she moves on to question her own interpretations of the exchange. She presents her students’ version of events as driving her to engage in self-reflection with regard to how she may have reacted if she was in her colleague’s role in the scenario. She begins a statement, “I don’t want to talk about carding to death with
people who...” (line 951), but interrupts herself to return to a statement about the importance of self-reflection. In the context of the overall narrative, Miss E’s incomplete comment appears to imply that discussions of carding may be draining for students who have to deal with it as an everyday reality, something that, as she stated in excerpt 10, was not something she experienced. She concludes by reinforcing her initial observations that her perspective as a White female educator may impede her ability to understand her students’ experiences by stating, “I need to really be aware of where my perspective and where I’m coming into things with.” The overall effect of Miss E’s narrative is a simultaneous construction of Whiteness as a barrier in the context of her not having the experiences and insights that her Black male students have, as well as an introduction of the potential for this barrier to be overcome through self-reflection. Miss E also both validates and undermines the experiences of Black students, by first stating her lack of first-hand experience with the types of events that occur in these young men’s lives, and then going on to question her students’ interpretations of his own experience. The excerpt therefore demonstrates the competing resources that White educations have access to in making sense of their own racialization, and the racialization of their students.

In the final excerpt, we see the administrator make a similar argument regarding Whiteness serving as a barrier to his ability to work with Black students. The excerpt begins with the administrator expressing his appreciation for my presence in the school and the research that I was conducting with Black students:
Excerpt 12

Administrator: That's, and that's, that's w-that's why, you know when you come forward and said, like to examine some of these experiences and get a perspective from, from this youth, um, group, I'm all for it because, um, I know you're, you've got a better chance, than me, with, with uh, some of the kids that have built up some of these walls [RL: mm hmm], and even some of the kids that haven't built up these walls. Um, to get a, uh uh, uh, clear perspective. And, um, you know, a-as much as, w- you know, we think, you know we're- we're cool and hip and uh-whatever you, and I even, hip's not even the right word anymore but, um, we're still, old folks to the kids [RL: mm hmm], right? We're still phy, um you know, physically different from them when we're talking about, our uh, African Canadian youth [RL: mm hmm]. Um, I know, if there is a negative experience, uh, with a, white male figure of authority, whenever I come across as a figure of authority, it's not my face they're seeing [RL: yea] it's that negative experience they've had in the past [RL: mm hmm] and, what they've come to expect is that, they're gonna be treated a certain way, um, by, uh, by people in-in positions of authority, um, and as much as I try to, uh, not be that type of person, I can't control how I'm perceived by others. And [RL: yea] Other than by continuing to, uh in my opinion, try to act, as you know, um, um, bias free as possible. [RL: mm hmm mm hmm]

Administrator: um, but it-you know it-it- it's tough, when-when when some of those um, some of those histories are present, and um, you know, I wasn't, unfortunately I wasn't the one or mayb-uh you know, uh the-uh, from the past pieces uh, I wasn't the one who's directly responsible for it but I know I have to overcome a lot of that type of, um, bad publicity, to [RL: mm hmm] to make those breakthroughs.

This discussion took place in the context of the administrator’s comments on his attempts at discipline, although he does not explicitly use this term. However, the content of the talk and his position in the school provide enough context for us to understand the topic at hand. The administrator expressed discomfort at being judged as unfair by “African Canadian” students when he attempted to make decisions from a “bias-free” perspective. Given the broader context of the introduction of “bias-free progressive discipline” policies by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013a), the administrator appeared to focus on his relationship-building efforts with students and the role that these relationships should play in facilitating effective attempts at
discipline. When faced with resistance from students, the administrator appeared to struggle between expressing an understanding of students’ potential prior experiences, and reflecting on the judgment that he states he experiences from these students.

Whiteness is constructed as a barrier in this narrative, when the administrator states that “you’ve got a better chance than me…” both with students who have “built up some of these walls” and students who have not (lines 78-81). On further elaboration it becomes clear that the administrator is talking about Black students in particular (i.e., “African Canadian youth”), and that I was expected to have a greater ability to obtain an understanding of the students’ experiences on account of my “physical” similarity to them, i.e., my embodiment as a Black woman.

The administrator not only constructs Whiteness as fundamentally different from Blackness in this narrative but also focuses on his specific role in the school, that of a “white male figure of authority” (lines 86-87). This positioning extends the idea of Whiteness beyond the notion of difference and introduces the concept of power. The administrator states “whenever I come across as a figure of authority, it’s not my face they’re seeing, it’s the negative experience they’ve had in the past…” A White male figure of authority is constructed as an inevitably disliked figure, as someone with whom students have invariably had negative encounters, which now influence how they perceive and treat this particular administrator. However, the power exists in the combination of being a White male authority figure, not simply in Whiteness on its own. Students are consequently placed in a victim subject position because of these prior negative encounters that they are presumed to have experienced. They are positioned as being unable to look past these situations to see when they are being treated fairly.
The positioning of students as unable to look past previous negative experiences also works to construct them as unnecessarily suspicious, as misreading situations and people. Little room is left in the administrator’s narrative to consider that students may not have had previous negative encounters, and that any perceived suspicion from students could be based entirely on present-day interactions with the administrator. The administrator’s self-positioning is also that of not being truly seen by students on account of his Whiteness, and his position as disciplinarian in the school. He states that “as much as I try to, uh, not be that type of person, I can’t control how I’m perceived by others. And other than by continuing to, uh in my opinion, try to act, as you know, um, um, bias free as possible” (lines 90-93). This statement suggests that his true character, one that is caring and unbiased, is hidden underneath his race and his role in the school. Whereas the administrator’s overall argument is that he attempts to operate from an unbiased perspective, he positions students as exercising a great deal of bias in prejudging him based on their prior experiences. The construction of these students therefore shifts from victimized position to a troublemaker subject position, in refusing to comply with disciplinary attempts on the basis of their prejudgments of the administrator.

4.4.3 Section summary

Whiteness was constructed as a barrier in the narratives of both Black and White staff members. In these narratives, White staff members were positioned as lacking the experiences and ability to support and understand Black students because of their Whiteness. However, staff members negotiated this construction in diverse ways. Black staff members positioned White teachers and staff as disingenuous with Black students. My embodiment as a Black woman in the school environment likely contributed to this framing, as I presumed a shared Black racial
identity with these staff members. On the other hand, White staff members positioned themselves in three ways: 1) as uniquely capable of understanding Black student experiences despite their Whiteness; 2) as incapable of understanding, relating to, and consequently educating Black students because of their Whiteness; and 3) as having to justify and reflect on their work as White educators in relation to Black students. In this process, staff members also positioned Black students as victims/vulnerable, and as troublemakers. Once again, my role as a Black researcher in this environment was integral to these interactions and the framings that staff members produced.

### 4.5 Discussion

#### 4.5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argued that the broader discursive and material environments, as well as the immediate interactional contexts between myself, a Black woman, and the majority White staff at Lilyfield, shaped the manner in which staff members discussed their work with Black and other “diverse” students. I presented staff members’ narratives in relation to three main themes: 1) constructions of culture as a product; 2) constructions of Blackness; and 3) constructions of Whiteness as a barrier to effective work with Black and other “diverse” students. First I demonstrated that culture was constructed as a product in the narratives of staff members, which rendered them individually responsible for delivering this product to students. Staff members’ narratives demonstrated either an acceptance or rejection of this responsibility, in relation to self-professed possession, or lack thereof, of specified skills and abilities. This construction therefore left room for potentially non-inclusive practices in which cultural inclusion was predicated on staff members’ abilities to detect and translate culture for their students.
Secondly I argued that despite demonstrated levels of investment with Black students, staff members’ narratives reproduced damage/deficit discourses of Blackness, both when describing an awareness of the challenges that these students may face and when expressing a lack of support for Black students’ advocacy to address the challenges. Specifically, Black students were positioned as academic victims in need of specialized cultural supports, which worked to undermine other types of supports that could assist the students in need. Students were also positioned as troublemakers who challenged the day-to-day functioning of the school.

In the final section, I attended both to staff members’ constructions of Whiteness and their constructions of Black students. Here I argued that Whiteness was constructed as a barrier, in the process of explaining why their work with Black students might be ineffective. However, these staff members also discussed, and demonstrated, instances in which Whiteness did not appear to impede their work.

I will first discuss the implications of constructions of culture as a product and Whiteness as a barrier in the narratives and work of Lilyfield staff members, and more broadly. I will then discuss the implications of positioning Black students as victims and troublemakers even in relation to work that is meant to assist students in academic success.

### 4.5.2 White teachers responsibilities: Culture as a product and Whiteness as a barrier

I argued that the culture was constructed as a product in a material and discursive environment shaped by liberal and neoliberal discourses, which emphasize individual responsibility and the ability to masterfully deliver goods and services to a specified client base (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Lilyfield, as an optional attendance school, also employed a “school choice” model in which students who typically would not have access to the specialized
programming of the school could apply to attend. In the more immediate situational context, my physical presence, and my research aims of understanding how Lilyfield managed its diverse student population, called on staff members to account for how any practices regarding student diversity were being undertaken. My presence and research questions could therefore have been regarded as an evaluative process, prompting staff members to see their task as demonstrating that they had the competencies, that is the knowledge and the skills, to work with a diverse student population.

The construction of culture as a product through staff members’ narratives can therefore be interpreted as having the effect of validating White staff members’ role in teaching non-White students. Researchers in the United States have identified the existence of a “demographic divide” or “cultural gap” between an increasingly White and female teaching staff and a public-school student population that is becoming increasingly composed of students of colour (Laughter, 2011; Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 2001). Similar trends have been identified in the Greater Toronto Area (Falconer, Edwards, & Mackinnon, 2008). Researchers have also argued that White teachers are, by default, ill-equipped to work with non-White students before entering the classroom. For example, Sheets (2000) argues that White teachers are “culturally disadvantaged, experientially limited, and often linguistically deficient, both in preparing and teaching,” (p. 19) non-White racialized students. Similarly, through a review of the multicultural education literature on teacher preparation, Sleeter (2008) argues that White pre-service teachers are generally unprepared to work with “students of colour” for four reasons: a) lack of understanding that racism in schools and societies are embedded in institutional practices; b) lowered expectations of students of colour; c) ignorance of communities of colour and fear of discussions
of race and racism; and d) an assumption that their worldviews and understandings are the norm, which leads to a lack of understanding of themselves as cultural beings. Additionally, as previously discussed, the Ontario, Ministry of Education has championed the use of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, which calls on White teachers to examine their pre-existing biases, biases that exist on account of their social location as more powerful members of society, by engaging in self-reflection (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b).

In treating culture as a product, White staff members at Lilyfield were able to argue that they were equipped to deal with the increasingly diverse student population. Constructing culture as something that can be apprehended, translated, packaged, and returned to students in a manner that was beneficial to them, allowed staff members to express mastery in their teaching practice, and to appear unaffected by the increasing presence of student cultures that they may not have been familiar with otherwise. On the other hand, the potential to be overwhelmed by increasing cultural diversity in schools was demonstrated through Miss L’s narrative. Her statement that staff members did not understand the various cultural backgrounds of students in the school, and her more specific argument that staff members could not discipline “West Indian” students in the manner that they would have been disciplined at home, illustrated a potential for lack of mastery over culture as a product. Similarly Miss C’s reflections on staff members’ lack of ability to accurately perceive, package, and deliver culture to students who spoke English as a second language, also affirmed the potential for difficulties in working with a culturally diverse student population.

Importantly, my argument here is not that staff members consciously and deliberately constructed culture as a product or positioned themselves as capable – or incapable – educators.
Rather, my analysis brings attention to the competing rhetorical resources, resources that are historically grounded, and policy and practice driven, that existed for staff members at Lilyfield. The Ontario public education system has been under scrutiny for decades regarding the role of teachers in shaping the experiences of racialized, and in particular, Black students. The implication of my research in this context is that having an understanding of the varying ways in which teachers may treat the concept of culture, and their individual roles in creating educational experiences for culturally diverse students, can provide insights into the types of preparation and ongoing support that these educators may need in this area. Specific to the treatment of culture as a product, explicit dialogue on the complexities of cultures, and the benefits of dialogical, as opposed to top-down modes of teaching, may help to circumvent some of the essentializing and utilitarian constructions that were present in the talk of these teachers.

Constructions of Whiteness as a barrier can be regarded as an extension of constructing culture as a product. As the “majority” or “mainstream” identity in North America, Whiteness is typically regarded as “normal”, as a “universal identity” as opposed to other racial or ethnic groups that are treated as the holders of culture (Sue, 2004). White staff members are therefore faced with the task of providing a sense of cultural belonging to their non-White students, that, on account of their “lack” of culture, under this rationale, they could not naturally provide. I argued that constructions of Whiteness as a barrier occurred in the context of broader discourses regarding anti-racist and Afrocentric education which centre Eurocentric approaches as the norm, and calls on White educators to examine their social location in society and how this shapes their teaching practice. Whiteness was therefore constructed as a barrier under
circumstances where staff members are placed in a position of having to treat an identity that is customarily treated as invisible, as hyper-visible.

Whiteness was constructed a barrier in staff members’ narratives in two ways: First, in framing White racial identity as essentially different and non-cultural, possessing this identity automatically disqualifies White teachers from being appropriate “role models” or any other type of mentor to non-White students. As noted in my analysis, staff members on more than one occasion stated that my presence in the school acted as a conduit for better communication with Black students, a type of communication that they could not have achieved on their own. Staff members made this argument despite evidence to the contrary, as in the example of Miss C’s work with Joshua and Kyle. A potential consequence of this narrative is that White staff members may not invest appropriate time and resources into providing meaningful educational opportunities for all of their students, on the assumption that they are not well equipped to do so. This position was exemplified by Miss L’s argument, when she described the difficulties that staff members had in understanding the increasingly diverse student population. Such arguments also take attention away from staff efforts that may be effective for Black and other non-White students, but are not regarded as effective practices, on account of not being categorized as racial or cultural supports.

Secondly, Whiteness was treated as a barrier not simply on account of its purported neutrality, or difference from non-Whiteness, but it was also framed in staff members’ talk as a position of privilege. For example, Miss E’s comments that she did not experience discrimination on a day-to-day basis, and the administrator’s comments that Black students may have had prior negative experiences with “white male figures of authority” was evidence of this.
Staff members both discussed a need to reflect, and also expressed what can be understood as reflections in their talk, on Whiteness as a privileged position, and the potential impacts that this may have on their relationships with Black students. In discussing Whiteness in this manner, staff members presented themselves as having some mastery over present day concerns regarding race-relations, as opposed taking a colour-blind approach which treats White teacher identities as inconsequential to relationships with Black students. However, as demonstrated in my analysis, these reflections also had the potential to further marginalize Black students. In framing Whiteness as a privileged identity, staff members positioned themselves as being knowledgeable of their own privilege, and placed responsibility on students to not interpret their experiences as discriminatory, given that staff members did not have discriminatory intent. In the talk of Miss B and the administrator, for example, students were charged with placing unfair judgments on staff members on account of their Whiteness. For Miss E, despite demonstrating through her narrative that staff members could reasonably take stock of the role that Whiteness may play in interactions with Black students, and continue to challenge their understandings of Whiteness in future interactions, also called on students to avoid seeing every situation as a “racialized situation”. Consequently, staff members’ naming of Whiteness, while having the legitimate potential of serving as a starting point for deeper reflection and behavioural change, as is called for under anti-racist perspectives, also appeared to uphold a colour-blind approach, where it became incumbent on students to look past staff members’ race.

Consequently, the confluence of linguistic resources as drawn from anti-racist and Afrocentric approaches, as well as social cognitive traditions that explain “unconscious bias”, created a discursive environment in which individuals racialized as White had access to a
language of self-reflection and acknowledgment of White privilege, but which also had the
potential to further marginalize Black and other non-White or non-Canadian students. This again
has implications for the types of preparations that all teachers undergo in the context of working
with students from groups that have been historically marginalized, and specifically Black
students. Preparing teachers to understand how extant approaches to understanding academic
achievement gaps can be both congruent and conflicting, may assist them in pinpointing
discourses that may be ultimately harmful to the educational opportunities of these students.
Such understandings can also assist teachers in determining a broad range of strategies to support
their students that are, first and foremost, appropriate for their students and for which they can
develop the appropriate skills and abilities to implement. These strategies can replace those that
are narrowly defined as relating to race or culture that may, when not adequately examined,
leave teachers and students alike feeling disempowered.

4.5.3 Constructing Blackness

I will now turn to a discussion of how Blackness was constructed in staff members’ narratives.
Under my questioning, staff members were placed in a position of having to demonstrate their
skills and knowledge not only in a broader liberal and neoliberal discursive environment but also
in an environment in which copious attention has been given to Black academic
underachievement and the systemic barriers and discrimination that Black students face in
Toronto schools. Staff members were, to varying degrees, familiar with Afrocentric schooling
and anti-racist practices, as well as with more general discussions of inclusive education and
equitable schooling. However, it was evident that there was no formal operationalization of any
of these frameworks at Lilyfield, and it was left to individual staff members to determine the
extent, and manner in which they would integrate them into their practice. Additionally, it was evident that more deep-seated discourses on Blackness as damaged or deficit continued to inform the narratives of staff members, despite their awareness of systemic issues and the need for inclusive education.

It is within this context that staff members positioned Black students as vulnerable or as victims, and as troublemakers. For example, Miss E, as previously noted, had received training in anti-racist education, and as demonstrated in the analysis, attempted to integrate components of this into her teaching. In responding to my question of whether specific accommodations were needed for Black students, she described Black male students as most likely to be reading below their grade level, and was supportive of interventions designed specifically for this group. Given that there has been copious attention the academic literature and media given to the challenges that Black male students face in Ontario schools, Miss E’s naming this issue as combined with her background in anti-racist education positioned her as knowledgeable and skilled. However, her generalization of this observation to apply to students in the Afrocentric program, or alternatively, her implication that Afrocentric leaders had to be consulted on working with Black students in Lilyfield, positioned students academic challenges as a “Black” cultural problem, rather than as one that the mainstream school system could address. Similarly, the administrator’s attention to Black students’ potential prior experiences with White male authority figures demonstrated an awareness of the potential discrimination that these students may have faced. However, the construction of these experiences as dictating students’ present-day interactions with him created an image of these students as permanently and invariably scarred by past experiences.
On the other hand, students were explicitly positioned as troublemakers by staff members, as with Miss B’s indication that the boys in the cafeteria were known to steal, or Miss L, in describing Black families as challenging the ideal functioning of the school and school board. Staff members also positioned students as potential troublemakers more subtly, in indicating that they perceived discrimination where none existed. This method of accusing Black people of “playing the race card” (Lewis, 2001) has been a consistent method used to undermine claims of discrimination and oppression and to reinforce the status quo. In the context of Lilyfield, such arguments not only worked to undermine the potential legitimacy of students’ perceptions but also opened the door for students to be treated as being unnecessarily disruptive when they bring attention to what they viewed as unfair treatment, but where teachers’ perceptions did not align.

Therefore, despite broader narratives that call for critical attention to school systems, the conflicting discursive and material context at Lilyfield resulted in Black students remaining the focus of attention in staff members’ discourse in a manner that contributed to these students’ marginalization. This once again reinforces the necessity of unpacking the histories of these discourses with educators, and critically examining their implications and how they may be supported by practices that may be otherwise intended to assist these students.

4.6 Conclusion

Taken together, this chapter illustrated the complex discursive field that can exist within a single school environment. Staff members drew on multiple and competing discourses to explain their work with “diverse” and specifically Black students. In so doing, they positioned themselves as both capable and incapable educators, while constructing Black students in ways
that are consistent with broader societal narratives of Black students academic vulnerability and in school disruptiveness. This work is consistent with extant research in demonstrating the challenges that White staff members encounter in working with non-White students. It also demonstrates the difficulties that may occur when there is a public expectation that policies such as the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education strategy* and *Bias-Free Progressive Discipline* are implemented, but in school environments with existing material and discursive complexities that can work to undermine the intent of such policies.

A limitation to this discussion is my small sample size of staff member participants, and even smaller sample size of recorded interviews. The specific findings can therefore not be taken as representative of Lilyfield as a whole, or representative of other secondary schools. Nonetheless, the findings do point to questions that may guide future research and intervention efforts. For example, what are the competing demands that staff members have to manage to carry out their duties? What existing policies, both current and historical, may formally and informally inform the practices of educators? What are staff members’ own self-expectations in working with their students? Gathering evidence in response to these and other questions is imperative for gaining more comprehensive understanding of the barriers that teachers face, and create, that may impact Black student experiences, and potential opportunities for addressing these barriers.
5 Black Student Subjectivities: Striving for Empowerment

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss Black student subjectivities in relation to their schooling experiences. More specifically, I discuss how these students positioned themselves in relation to discourses on culture and on Blackness, as well as in relation to neoliberal discourses that emphasize learners as autonomous and free to make educational choices in their own self-interest.

In 5.2, I discuss the Black History Month (BHM) activities that were executed at Lilyfield during the month of February, with my help and involvement. Here I argue that, through these activities, Blackness was constructed as culture/therapy by staff members and myself as a participant-observer, and the activities were intended to help students but with little input from them. I will demonstrate how these attempts were challenged by the students both directly and indirectly in the context of the BHM activities.

In section 5.3, I give a closer examination of participants’ subjectivities and school experiences in relation to the category of “Black”. Here I argue that these experiences were described most commonly through the damage/deficit discourse in which students constructed Blackness as something that was mainly negative. Students resisted this characterization of Blackness, while drawing on various strategies to position themselves as empowered students.

In section 5.4 I discuss how students described their academic identities and preferences by invoking neoliberal discourses, where they took up the subject position of the “responsibilized” or “entrepreneurial” subject. Here I argue that students both accepted and resisted primary responsibility for their academic success. When responsibility was taken up,
students applauded their own efforts for their successes and blamed themselves for their failures. When they resisted this subject position, they shifted responsibility for their successes and failures onto their teachers. In exploring students’ narratives, I will also bring attention to the structural forces that restrained their “choices” in their educational experiences.

I will provide a discussion of the implications of the findings of this chapter in section 5.5. Taken together, this chapter demonstrates how dominant discourses regarding culture, Blackness, and education constrained the ways in which my student participants made sense of their academic experiences. Although based on a small sample of participants, my analysis also provides potential points of entry for expanding the manner in which Black student experiences have been conceptualized in the academic literature, while accounting for more contemporary trends and the multitude of student identities and academic orientations among Black Canadian students.

### 5.2 Black History Month at Lilyfield: Blackness/culture as therapy/protective

In the discussion that follows I draw on my field notes to describe the Black History Month activities in which I participated at Lilyfield. I describe the planning and execution of Black History Month events and my role in these events. I will argue that, in the context of provincial inclusive education policies that emphasize multiculturalism and diversity in schools, Blackness, and more specifically Black “culture,” was constructed as therapy/protective through the planning and execution of the Black History Month events.

As discussed in chapter 2, when Blackness/culture is constructed as therapy/protective, Black “culture,” broadly defined, is treated as psychologically protective for Black students in
relation to educational attainment. In this section, I argue that these constructions of Blackness as therapy were shaped and were produced through a series of complex interactions between myself and the staff members in our planning of the Black History Month activities. I also argue that, as one of the only Black women present in the school at the time of my data collection, and whose purpose in the school was to research the experiences of Black students, I was positioned as particularly suited to address or provide for the needs of these students.

Constructions of Blackness as damaged/deficit were also invoked through these activities, which resulted in the inclusion of only girls in one of the BHM activities. Through these activities, Black girls were positioned as vulnerable at the hands of their male counterparts, which resulted in Black boys being excluded in activities, by virtue of their being positioned as troublemakers. By contrast, the Black students with whom I interacted in relation to the Black History Month activities did not passively take up the “therapy” that was provided to them. Instead, they critiqued and/or performed Blackness centred on their own subjectivities and positionalities.

Taken together I argue that constructions of Blackness or Black “culture” as therapeutic foreclosed students’ ability to express/perform/celebrate Blackness on their own terms. Here, the adults responsible for Black History Month – myself included – had the power to provide, withhold, and define Blackness and Black culture for the students, and the parameters within which it was relevant in the schools. By contrast, students’ own definitions and performances of Blackness worked to subvert these constructions of Blackness. By examining the Black History Month events in which I participated at Lilyfield, this section demonstrates how discourses and practices intended to be helpful and positive for Black students, can contribute to the continued
“othering” of Blackness in schools, and the marginalization of these students. It also highlights how students’ own agentic interactions with self-defined Blackness and Black “culture” can work to create meaningful and inclusive experiences.

5.2.1 Black History Month in Ontario schools

Official recognition of Black History Month originated from the initial celebration of “Negro History Week” in the United States, which was initiated by African American historian Carter G. Woodson in 1926 (Government of Canada, 2019). It was meant to recognize the accomplishments of African Americans and their contributions to the US. In 1976 it was expanded to the full of month of February, and in 1995 Black History Month was officially recognized by the Canadian federal government (Government of Canada, 2019). African Heritage Month was officially established by the TDSB over 10 years later, in 2007. The TDSB states that the term “African Heritage” is “more representative of the African Diaspora” (TDSB, 2012). However, the term “Black History Month” had been informally used in the TDSB for years prior, and all of the students with whom I interacted at Lilyfield referred to it in this way.

There is significance in the use of different names to refer to the month. As previously discussed, the term “Black” was initially coined as a political term to describe peoples of African descent and arose at a time in history of Black political action against racism and oppression around the world. The TDSB rationale that “African Heritage” is more representative of the African Diaspora is therefore a distinction without a difference, given that the term “Black” was never used to refer to a single geographical context. However, as “Black” is generally understood to be a racial term, and “African” can be interpreted as an ethnic or cultural term, the deployment of the term “African Heritage” can be regarded as an attempt to couch BHM within the broader
Canadian context of multiculturalism and cultural celebrations, as compared to more political connotations of the term “Black history”.

5.2.2  Blackness as culture/protective: Black History Month at Lilyfield

The events described below took place during the first four weeks of my time at Lilyfield in the month of February. Prior to beginning my research, I was told that staff members were responsible for planning a BHM assembly – a school-wide event that would take place in the school auditorium, and which would include performances and speakers. I had decided to volunteer to assist with the planning of this assembly in order to build relationships with students and teachers. However, during my first week in the school, while receiving a tour from Miss B – one of the staff members who worked primarily in the Support Room – we were told by the administrator and the staff member who was responsible for planning the assembly that it had been cancelled. The staff member reported that she was feeling overwhelmed with other responsibilities and had decided to forgo the planning of the assembly. I was quite disappointed by this news, partly because I believed that it would have been my best opportunity to become acquainted with students on an informal basis, and also because students at Lilyfield would not have the opportunity to participate in Black History Month events. In response, Miss B offered that she would be willing to organize an assembly for the students with my help, and I agreed that I would be happy to be of assistance. Based on this exchange, my interpretation of how Black History Month was treated in the school was that it was something tangential, as something that could be easily added or taken away at the will of staff members.

Upon returning to the Support Room, Miss B appeared to be quite frustrated with the cancellation news. She lamented that the school board was generally not inclusive, stating that
they provided “lip service” to inclusive education but did not exercise this in practice. She used an example of her own physical disability and the trouble that she described herself as having in attempting to access accommodations, to demonstrate an overall lack of inclusive practice in the board.

This discussion led into planning the assembly. Although I had only been present in the school for less than a day, I felt as though I was being positioned as a collaborator, as someone who had equal say in how the assembly would be executed. For example, whereas I was expecting Miss B to take the lead in the planning, given her stated frustration with the cancellation, she instead asked me what I wanted to do and what I believed was appropriate for the students. When I had very few suggestions to offer, Miss B stated that, through her husband, she had connections with two prominent Black Canadian rappers, one who gained popularity in the 1990s and one who gained popularity in the 2000s, and intended to book these performers for the assembly. Although she did not state this outright, there appeared to be a belief that the students would enjoy having these celebrities present and would identify with them as Black Canadian entertainers, and perhaps as potential role models. Miss B’s emphasis on obtaining these entertainers therefore worked to construct Blackness as therapy, on the assumption that students would find some commonality between themselves and these individuals and would find this to be a positive experience in the context of Black History Month.

I was surprised by, and a little skeptical of, Miss B’s offer because I was not convinced that we would be able to book the individuals that she mentioned on such short notice. I was also not sure that the students would find these particular celebrities relevant, given that they obtained popularity when I myself was in high school. I was also concerned by Miss B’s emphasis,
through her suggestions, on pop culture and celebrity status, whereas I was more interested in bringing activities forward that would educate all of Lilyfield’s students on Black Canadian History. I did not, however, state any of these concerns. Instead, as a result of this initial planning discussion, I became further inclined to accept Miss B’s positioning of me as a collaborator in arranging the Black History Month events and was prepared to co-sign her suggestions. My prior experience as a mentor and advocate for Black students informed my investment in this planning, as well as my interpretation that the original assembly had been too easily cancelled. However, before returning to Lilyfield the following week, I reflected on the extent to which I had become invested in advocating for the students, and how this might affect my role as a researcher in the school. I consequently decided to take a step back from the planning responsibilities to maintain my distance and “objectivity” as a researcher.

When I returned to Lilyfield in the following week, my intention was to immediately inform Miss B of my change in perspective. However, when I arrived at the front office to sign in for the day, the office secretary, having never previously met me, noted my name on the sign in sheet and stated, “Oh, you’re the volunteer planning Black History Month!” I was very surprised at being referred to as a “volunteer” but before I could respond, she proceeded to hand me two Black History Month posters that were issued by the school board. She asked me if I had any opinions on where I would like to hang them in the school. Rather than protesting the label and role that I had, in reality, accepted in the previous week, I confirmed that I was responsible for the planning and suggested that it would be ideal to hang the posters in one of the school’s display cases.
My experience in the front office further affirmed my decision to actively step away from any leadership role that I had taken on in planning Black History Month. My encounter with the office secretary heightened my concern that my role in the school had become blurred not only for me but potentially for staff members whom I had not yet had the opportunity to engage in my capacity as a researcher in the school. After leaving the front office, I immediately went to the Support Room and sought out Miss B. I stated to her that I was reluctant to continue my role as a lead in the planning of the activities but was happy to assist in a supportive role. Miss B’s response surprised me. She asked me why I wanted to step back from taking a lead role, to which I responded that my primary role in the school was as a researcher. She appeared to be unconvinced by my explanation and was unwilling to let me step away. I stood my ground in the discussion, and Miss B eventually relented. Miss B then went on to suggest that we do a potluck with the students, instead of the school-wide assembly to which we had initially committed. She offered no explanation for shifting away from planning an assembly that would be open to all Lilyfield students, to a potluck that could only be attended by a smaller group of mainly Black students. Given my decision to minimize my role in the planning, I did not question this shift.

My interpretation of these experiences – i.e., the willingness of the administrator and Miss B to allow me to take a lead role in the planning, the secretary’s labelling of me as a volunteer, and Miss B’s resistance to my decision to step away from leading the planning of the events – was that I was positioned not as a researcher but as someone capable of helping or serving the Black students of the school. That is, my embodiment as a Black woman and, undoubtedly, my own willingness to take on these responsibilities, positioned me as somehow
capable of serving a therapeutic role for Black students through administering culturally defined Black History Month activities.

The planning of the activities unfolded over the next two weeks. Having received the two BHM posters that were issued by the school board, I decided to pull together additional items that Miss B and I would eventually place in a display case on the first floor of the school. In attempting to determine what would be most appropriate for the display, I consulted Miss B, who suggested a focus on Black celebrities. Her stated rationale, in this instance, was that students could easily recognize and therefore identify with celebrities. I accepted Miss B’s rationale, given that she had an ongoing relationship with the students and was therefore presumably more attuned to what would appeal them. This rationale was also in keeping with her initial suggestion to invite celebrity rappers to perform at the assembly. I consequently gathered photographs and biographical information about Black figures in present-day pop culture who were of Canadian, Caribbean, and African background. I also included books from the school library on Black history in Canada, and Miss B solicited artifacts that represented different Caribbean islands from students’ parents. I assembled these items in the Support Room over the course of two weeks and put them all together in the display case towards the end of the month.

On the day that I placed the items in the display case, several teachers, students, and support staff stopped by and engaged me in conversation to determine what I was doing. While some students and staff members were happy and even impressed with what I had put together, for other students the display case came to represent a point of contention. One student, upon realizing that the display was for Black History Month, commented that “our people” were finally getting recognition in the school. By contrast, this student’s male companion asked why
“the King” was not included, referring to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and other icons of the African American civil rights movement. My interpretation of this exchange was that the presumed connection that students would have with celebrities was not entirely effective for this student, and that he desired to see more classic and even politicized figures of Black History.

Additionally, during an informal discussion with a group of four young women during my final few weeks at Lilyfield, these girls revealed explicit displeasure with the display. They commented that they were unimpressed with the figures who were included – including Beyoncé, who they stated was “mix up” (i.e., of mixed racial ancestry) and Drake, who they stated was “half-white”. They also expressed displeasure at the lack of inclusion of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the exclusion of Harriet Tubman and Bob Marley. In contrasting these individuals with Beyoncé and Drake, these young women were making an overall comment on what they determined to be appropriate representations of Blackness. Given that Beyoncé and Drake were of mixed racial background, the young women appeared to argue that they did not represent authentic Blackness. By contrast, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, and Bob Marley, all individuals known to have political and/or cultural influence in Black liberation movements, were presented as more legitimate representations. However, one young woman furthered this argument by questioning the potential inclusion of Bob Marley. She stated that many people’s association of the singer was in the context of “smoking weed”, and that many non-Black students were interested in taking on “Black culture” without having a full understanding of it. This student appeared to be arguing that the inclusion of Marley would serve to undermine any potential political statement that the display case could have made, as the student body at large may not have understood the full significance of Marley as a political
figure and instead associate him with a narrow aspect of Rastafari — i.e., “smoking weed” — which is largely viewed as a recreational activity in mainstream culture. This contrast served to reinforce an emphasis on political, as opposed to a-political, cultural representations.

These students also expressed displeasure at the location of the display case, i.e., as not being in the front foyer of the school, as, they pointed out, had been the case for a display for Chinese New Year. One of the students also stated that the display was “basic” — that it was not a sufficient representation of Black History. At the time of these comments, these students were unaware that I had put the display together, and were quite embarrassed when I revealed that I was responsible. However, their comments were significant in highlighting the gap between the intentions of the responsible adults, Miss B and I, and how the display may have been received by the students. In taking on a role, I had inadvertently promoted a “cultural representation” version of Black History, which fell short of these students’ political expectations. My version was well aligned with multiculturalism perspectives, by which I attempted to appeal to students’ identities in order for them to feel represented, i.e., to foster a sense of belonging for them in the school. These students appeared to prefer an approach that would construct Blackness – through Black History Month – as resistance to the mainstream functioning and culture of the school. Students showed a preference for civil rights icons, a centralized location in the school for the display case, and an avoidance of promoting celebrities who were not deemed to be “fully” Black. This resistance was not registered through behaviours, as highlighted in the research discussed in chapter 2. Instead, these students made an argument for symbolic resistance through the promotion of Black political figures and identities in opposition to the cultural representations that the display case relayed.
The potluck that was organized for the students also worked to construct Blackness/culture as therapy. As previously mentioned, Miss B had also suggested that rather than doing an assembly for BHM – which was intended to replace the cancelled assembly that would have been planned by a different teacher – we should plan a potluck. Here, invited students would contribute foods from their ethnic backgrounds to share with their schoolmates. I was happy with this idea and volunteered to bring a dish to contribute. The construction of Black culture as therapeutic for students through these activities was apparent in three ways. First, Miss B’s initial commentary at the beginning stages of our planning that the school board was not inclusive implied that any activities that we would go on to plan were intended to counteract to this lack of inclusivity. For the potluck, Miss B made the decision that it would be restricted to the young women who participated in her girls’ discussion group. Her rationale was that she wanted students to feel comfortable to dance, celebrate, and express themselves without fear of judgment. She consequently initially did not invite other teachers and only attempted to do so after I inquired why they would be excluded.

Secondly, Miss B also did not invite boys. She stated that the young women would not feel comfortable having teachers and boys around, and that the boys in particular “liked” many of the girls and were not mature. Here Miss B prioritized the young women, while implying that the boys would create an uncomfortable situation for the young women invited to the potluck, thereby impinging on the potential therapeutic value of the activities. In making these claims, Miss B also invoked damage/deficit discourses of Blackness. Black boys were positioned as potential troublemakers who would be disruptive to the potluck, and Black girls were positioned as potential victims, and specifically sexualized victims, because of the gaze of these young men.
Although Miss B’s claims were likely grounded in a realistic reading of the relations between boys and girls in the school – my interviews with participants confirmed a certain level of harmful sexualized interactions among the students in general – the solution of restricting the event to the young women circumvented any potential of creating a safe space for both groups of students to share in the experience of the BHM activities. For example, an explicit discussion could have been facilitated to emphasize healthy interactions between boys and girls in the context of learning about Black histories. By restricting the potluck to girls, it was framed as potentially therapeutic for Black girls in particular and reinforced imagery of Black boys as damaged.

Thirdly, Miss B’s stated plan for the potluck was the she wanted the students to discuss their cultural backgrounds and experiences, and to have the opportunity to dance and listen to music. On the day of the event, students described the foods that they contributed to the potluck and how they were connected to their cultural backgrounds. The girls also performed hip hop, Jamaican dancehall, and other dances that originated in Ghana and Nigeria, as well as some singing. Miss B’s, framing, as well as the actual execution of the event, worked to construct culture as therapeutic. She appeared to structure the activity as a means by which to provide the young women with a “safe space” to be “themselves” i.e., to perform culture – as defined by Miss B – among themselves and away from the observation of the wider student body. Coupled with the restriction of the event to Black girls, the Blackness was constructed as therapeutic through these activities. Additionally, the BHM activities were constructed as something that was done for Black students, in that the framework and expectations were pre-established and the only requirement of students was that they conform to these expectations.
The final element of the potluck that constructed it as therapeutic was a surprise video conference call that was set up by the school librarian for the group of young women. This call was set up through a conference calling service available through the school board, which provided Lilyfield with a large LCD screen as well as the conference calling technology. While the call was being set up, we learned that we were in queue to speak with a group of young people in Ghana. When we were patched in, there was already a call underway between the Ghanaian group and a group of students in a high school class in the state of Missouri in the United States. We were therefore able to see and listen to the exchange, but it was apparent that neither the Ghanaian nor Missourian students could see or hear us, so we did not participate. The conference call appeared to be set up as a “cultural exchange” exercise. This was clearly evident to me in the call between the students in Missouri and the Ghanaians, as the questions being asked of the Ghanaians positioned these students as cultural experts. All of the Ghanaian students were physically identifiable as Black, whereas the majority of the Missouri students were physically identifiable as White. My interpretation of their conversation was that this call was likely set up for the students in Missouri as a part of their Black History Month activities, as they attempted to relate the points that the Ghanaians made to African American history. It appeared to be similarly intended for the Lilyfield students, where they were given the opportunity to learn from other Black students from across the world about different aspects of Black culture as a part of their exclusive Black History Month activities.

With the Ghanaian students appearing to be positioned as “African” cultural experts, the Lilyfield students – as compared with the White students from Missouri – were positioned in a more complex way. Rather than simply being “Canadian” students who were in a position to
learn about African culture from “authentic” Africans, the Lilyfield students were positioned simultaneously as Black and Canadian in relation to the Ghanaians. This worked to open up the potential for more fluid and complex interactions between the two groups. For example, Malia, a grade 9 Canadian-born student of Ghanaian heritage – who would eventually become one of my participants – took on a role of cultural translator. Although the Ghanaian students were fluent in English, she spoke with them in Twi, a Ghanaian language in which she was fluent, and translated their responses for the rest of us in the room. For example, she explained Ghanaians’ child-naming practices to us as a group after the Ghanaian students noted the meaning of her own name. Malia’s knowledge of Ghanaian language emphasized the Lilyfield students’ ability – and by extension that of second-generation young people in Canada – to straddle multiple cultures on their own terms, rather than through the confines of teacher-planned activities. Similarly, the students performed songs and dances for one another that did not fall along strict cultural lines. When asked by the Lilyfield students, the Ghanaian students chose to sing a song that was popularized through the 1993 Hollywood film “Sister Act 2”, which portrays the lives of a multi-ethnic group of inner city teenagers in the United States. Similarly, the Lilyfield students responded with a song by Adele, a White English pop star whose music is heavily influenced by African American jazz and blues genres and singers.

Both groups of students’ access to these cultural products demonstrated not only the globalization of popular culture but also the ability of young people to define and perform culture in their own terms. The Lilyfield and Ghanaian students drew on these cultural products in the process of creating what I interpreted to be an authentic and meaningful exchange. Rather than relying on the adults in the room to curate culture and manage it in a manner that we
deemed to be appropriate – read, therapeutic – for the students, the students emphasized their own knowledges and positionalities to interact with us and with their Ghanaian counterparts. These students’ cultural performance therefore worked to push back against the intentions of the adults in the room.

5.2.3 Section summary

Overall, these three activities and events, i.e., the display case, the potluck, and the video conference call, were all attempts by the adults at Lilyfield, including myself as a volunteer/participant-observer, to provide Black culture to the students involved. These activities worked to construct culture as therapy, in having the goal of providing Black students with a sense of belonging (i.e., identifying with the celebrities in the display case) and safety (i.e., the girls-only potluck). I was also positioned, because of my embodiment as a Black adult in the building and my stated interest in working with Black students, as a potential source of therapy for these students. Additionally, treating culture as therapy resulted in the exclusion of Black boys from the cultural activities, as they were positioned as harmful to the girls, for which the potluck activity was intended.

However, students did not passively accept this “therapy”. Rather, some voiced their displeasure at the type of “culture” that was provided to them through the display case, requesting instead more politicized representations of Blackness. In relation to the potluck and video conference call, students engaged in and performed their own versions of Blackness, beyond the boundaries that were established through the work of the adults in the room. Taken together, this section demonstrates the challenges that can arise when culture is treated as something that can be given or taken to elicit a particular outcome. Through the students’
agency, we saw instead the ways in which students create their own experiences of Blackness. This encourages us to consider potential opportunities for adults and caregivers to facilitate students’ ongoing engagement with the diverse meanings of Blackness, as opposed to taking prescriptive approaches as were demonstrated in this section.

5.3 Striving for empowerment: Navigating damage/deficit discourses of Blackness

In the discussion that follows, I examine student narratives on their academic performance as related to Blackness. While some of these discussions arose spontaneously, most unfolded in response to my questions about whether students would identify as Black, and why. I argue that, in asking students to discuss Black identity, I called on them to treat Blackness as an object of discourse, i.e., to explicitly consider their identification with the category and the meanings associated with it. In so doing, Blackness was most often constructed as damaged/deficit in students’ discussions of their academic work. Specifically, students discussed Blackness as being most often associated with unruly behaviour and academic underachievement. This discourse therefore had the potential to place students in a disempowered subject position, a subject position that they most often navigated by distancing themselves from the category of Black, or from the meanings and subject positions associated with the category that contributed to its construction as damaged or deficit.

Taken together, this section calls attention to the continued prevalence of damage/deficit discourses of Blackness in the social contexts not only of staff members but also of Black youths themselves. By taking a discursive psychology approach, linear or causal relationships between Blackness or Black identity and academic achievement that have been established in the
literature and popular discourse are challenged. Attention is instead given to the complex array of experiences that young people have in navigating their racialization as Black and the strategies that they employ to in avoiding – agentically or otherwise – the disempowered subject positions that are associated with the category. It consequently allows for further consideration of how to address Blackness as a construct, while avoiding static, psychologized understandings of the category that may work to either pathologize students or, conversely, to treat Black identity as therapeutic, i.e., as capable of offering students a wholesale positive self-esteem.

In excerpt 1, Stephanie, a grade 9 student in Academic track courses, discusses her identification with Blackness. In our discussion just before the exchange represented below, I asked Stephanie about her cultural background. She identified herself as “Canadian, Jamaican and Chinese,” and explained that her father was of Chinese-Jamaican ancestry and was born in Canada, and her mother was “fully Jamaican”. As a follow-up, I asked Stephanie if she identified as Black. She said that she did, but she also identified as “mixed” because of the cultural backgrounds that she had mentioned. Shortly after this exchange, I attempted to continue the conversation related to Stephanie’s initial identification as Black. In this part of the conversation, Stephanie’s descriptions work to construct Blackness as damage/deficit, and she attempts to distance herself from the category:
Excerpt 1

162  **RL:** Okay, so umm so you said you would identify as Black [Mmhm] umm why?
163  **Stephanie:** Cause of my skin colour [RL: Okay] and yeah [RL: That's it?] that's pretty much it.
165  **RL:** So nothing else like, is there?
166  **Stephanie:** Like I don't know people don't like actually I don't think I'm Black because I'm not like, maybe I'm being racist to my own kind (Laughter) but I'm not like that ghetto type of Black person [RL: Okay] that everyone else would say "Ok yeah she's Black"[RL: Okay, okay]. So I just think it's my colour--my skin colour.

In response to my question in line 162, Stephanie attributes Black identification to skin colour, a common rhetorical strategy used by many of the student participants. However, whereas other participants presented this form of identification as neutral or self-evident, here Stephanie speaks of skin colour in a manner that allows her to argue that there is no further significance of the identity for her. She states “’cause of my skin colour, and yea” (line 163), implying that there is no deeper meaning to identifying as Black. She solidifies this claim in response to my explicit seeking of further justification – “that’s it?” (line 163) – her response being “that’s pretty much it” (line 163).

In line 165, I continue to question Stephanie about her identification by asking her, “So nothing else like, is there?” In response, she revises her previous identification, stating that she “actually” does not identify as Black, thereby distancing herself from the category. However, in stating that she may be “being racist” to her “own kind,” she indirectly continues to claim membership in the category. In this statement, she also states that she is not a specific type of Black person, that is a “ghetto” Black person. In deploying the term “ghetto”, Blackness is constructed as damaged/deficit, in that societal images associated with being “ghetto,” such as poverty and unruliness are implicated in Blackness itself. In claiming that using this label may be
“racist,” Stephanie implies that choosing to distance herself from Black identity on account of the existence of “ghetto” Black people (line 167) may be, to some extent, socially unacceptable.

In the continuation of our discussion, I ask Stephanie where the idea of a “ghetto type of Black person” came from. In the following excerpt, she explains that she was put in this category by her classmates in a school that she had attended prior to coming to Lilyfield, one that was composed mainly of White students:

**Excerpt 2**

179  **RL:** So you think that--so you said that your impression of this ghetto, that came from
180  like being--
181  **Stephanie:** In the White schools, they always think that Black people have like--this
182  type of behaviour like you know?
183  **RL:** Really? But where they get that impression from if they don't have Black people
184  in their school?
185  **Stephanie:** Right? I have no clue. I was stereotyped a lot in my first school that had
186  like a lot of White people. They thought like I was like mean [RL: Oh yeah?], I
187  wouldn't talk to them, I had this type of slang and all that stuff [RL: Oh yeah?]. It was
188  kinda--at first it was like insulting, but then [RL: Yeah] I got used to it so it’s whatever
189  (Laughter)
190  **RL:** You got used to it [Stephanie: Uh-huh]? Like it didn't upset you? It didn't make
191  you like not wanna be at that school?
192  **Stephanie:** Yeah I actually wanted to change my school for so long, but--that school
193  actually helped me in umm like getting my grades up [RL: Yeah] cause it's a really
194  high [RL: Yeah] like in teachers so...yeah. Then after I got to know some of the people
195  there and they changed their like--they're like "Okay you're--like you're different"
196  Y'know? I guess, but they still--I'm pretty sure they still have that stereotype of Black
197  people.

In line 181, Stephanie shifts her characterization of Black people as “ghetto” away from a observation that she has made herself, to one that was made by her White peers. Here the potential for disempowerment is introduced, as she is no longer in control of the category description, it is; instead, one that was placed on her. In the remainder of the excerpt she
elaborates that her White peers assumed that she spoke with “slang” and assumed that she was “mean.” She describes these as stereotypes, which works to establish such descriptors as not based in objective reality, and also as not applicable to her as an individual. Similarly, her use of the phrase “they thought” to describe her peers’ impressions of her, and her comment that these impressions were “insulting,” establishes the descriptors that she names as not attributes that she accepts for herself. These statements distance Stephanie not only from the category of “ghetto” Black person but also from the disempowerment associated with it. Upon my further questioning, Stephanie states that, although she was motivated to leave the school on account of the treatment she received at the hands of her peers, she remained because it was beneficial to her academic performance (line 193). In stating, “I actually wanted to change my school for so long” (line 192), Stephanie’s self-positioning is that of disempowerment. However, in describing the school as helping her academically, Stephanie shifts from a disempowered subject position to an empowered one.

Stephanie closes her descriptions in lines 193-195 by describing being singled out as “different” by her peers, as not fitting into the broader Black stereotype, and as therefore being acceptable for their friendship. In making this statement, Stephanie is again able to move away from a socially disempowered subject position that is made available through the damage/deficit discourse of Blackness to a more empowered one. There is, however, also an air of ambivalence in Stephanie’s description, where she speculates that the White students at her former school likely still maintain their “stereotypes” about Black people. In so doing, Stephanie frames her transcendence of the category in the eyes of her peers as not necessarily influencing their overall
impressions of Black people. This therefore leaves the negative and disempowering descriptions of Blackness intact, while Stephanie as an individual is able to navigate herself away from it.

Michaela, a grade 11 student also in Academic (or University) track courses, framed Black identity in a manner similar to Stephanie by referencing her skin colour as significant to how she identifies. However, unlike Stephanie, she did not mention her skin tone in an attempt to distance herself from the category:

**Excerpt 3**

517  **RL:** Okay. So would you say like—would you describe yourself as Black?
518  **Michaela:** Yeah
519  **RL:** Okay. Umm...why?
520  **Michaela:** My skin tone is black (laughs). I am—yeah I am a black little girl
521  umm...like even if I was lightskin I'd still say I'm Black. [RL: Okay] What do you want
522  me to say? [Laughter] I'm Black.

Here, my question of whether Michaela identifies as Black, and why, places her in a position of having to justify this identification. In response, Michaela states that she would still identify as Black even if her skin was of a lighter shade. This distinction has two potential implications: 1) that there is something more essential and internalized to Blackness, and 2) that Blackness is not only associated with a particular shade of skin, specifically darker skin tones. Michaela also does not attribute explicit positive or negative evaluations to being Black. Her final question and answer — “What do you want me to say? I’m Black” — reinforces her identity as simply self-evident while also bringing attention to the work of justification that I asked her to do by requiring an explanation for her identification.

In an earlier part of our conversation, Michaela also discussed Blackness as it related to her schooling experiences. Currently a grade 11 student, Michaela compared her experiences in
the middle school that she had attended in the neighbourhood in which she lives to her experiences at Lilyfield. Michaela had chosen to attend Lilyfield for one of its specialized programs, a program to which she had to apply and meet particular academic requirements to be accepted. After her first year in the program, she made the decision to transfer into mainstream Academic track courses because, as she described it, the program was not what she had expected and was not her “area of expertise”. Given that her “home school” was in her residential area, she could have returned to that school, but she instead chose to remain at Lilyfield. In the excerpt below, Michaela explains the reasoning behind her decision to remain at Lilyfield. Here, her descriptions work to construct Blackness, i.e., the students and student culture in her neighbourhood, as damage/deficit. She also positions herself outside this construction:

Excerpt 4

359 Michaela: …the thing was I didn’t want to go back to my home school, because I know the kids in that area and how the—like classes will end up looking, like with [Lily]— okay, so the classes would like if there's a fight— (lowers her voice) it's Black people [RL laughs] they're gonna run out the classrooms quicker than you can look.

363 RL: To see the fights?

364 Michaela: Yup [RL: Alright]. It's more distractions in that area. You don't get work done and like—I don't--I'm not saying it's easier there, but like the kids here you see how the average would be mostly 80s [RL: Oh okay]. Over there like most of the students is 60s or 70s [RL: Oh yeah?] and then that one student will have like the beautiful mark and that was me throughout like [middle school] because I--I didn't see--like they didn't work at all. Like one time I remember this kid; really short, funny, cute, and whatever. So I remember getting my report card and he was like "Wow. You know how much Jordans I could get with your report card? But I won't--I don't have it" and I looked at him and I was like "This is a regular thing I don't get rewards for [RL: Yeah]; it's just doing it for the sake of doing it and knowing where you're at or where you stand so, that's me.

Blackness is constructed damaged and deficit when Michaela describes Black students as more prone to disruption, and more easily distracted (i.e., psychologically and culturally deviant). She relates an experience where she describes Black students as being eager to leave their school
work behind to participate in activities that were disruptive to their academics. In stating “it’s more distractions in that area. You don’t get work done…” (line 365), Michaela appears to be commenting both on herself and on the other students in the school. For the other students, not getting work done and being distracted is framed as the norm whereas for her, in the context of the remainder of her narrative, not getting work done and being distracted is presented as a negative situation. In making this argument, these students are positioned as troublemakers, both in the context of their choosing to disrupt class and in serving as a distraction for her as a student, who, as she describes it, was far more serious about her school work. She therefore distances herself from this category of Black students despite her general identification as Black.

In the remainder of the excerpt, Michaela’s descriptions continue to position the Black students in her neighbourhood as academically deficit. She first draws a comparison between the average grades of students in her home school, and the grades of students at Lilyfield, which she states is approximately 10 percentage points higher than the grades of students in her neighbourhood. She then uses the example of a student who claimed that he would be rewarded for his good grades with a pair of Michael Jordan basketball shoes. In this example, Michaela is positioned as intrinsically motivated and other students in her middle school as more extrinsically motivated. Not only is Michaela positioned as a more responsible student, in stating, “This is a regular thing, I don’t get rewards for it…” (lines 372 to 373), but she also implies that her responsibility is normal, and by extension, the other students’ purported lack of drive is abnormal. Overall, in describing herself as making a choice to remain at a school outside her neighbourhood, and making a comparison between her work ethic and the work ethic of students at her home school, Michaela positions herself outside negative constructions of Blackness. She
is therefore able to occupy an empowered subject position by demonstrating how her individual choices to distance herself from the scenarios that she described have led to her academic success.

In our discussion prior to the excerpt presented below, Kyle, also a grade 11 student who was enrolled in Applied (or College) courses, describes Black identity as important to him due to the experiences of his ancestors. He states that it was important for him to work “twice as hard” because he is Black, and because society has impressions of Black people as not being “good or anything”. Whereas it was Stephanie and Michaela who positioned other Black students inside the damage/deficit discourse, in the excerpt below, Kyle invokes this discourse when making an argument that it is society at large that positions Black people as inferior. However, Kyle also describes Black people as having the potential to resist this positioning, which works to construct Blackness as resistance. In so doing, Kyle does not attempt to distance himself from the category but also positions himself as disempowered by narratives of deficit Blackness:
Excerpt 5

201  **RL:** So do you feel like you've been like, personally affected by people who treat you like that? The idea that you have--like you know where you get this idea that you have to work harder?
204  **Kyle:** That I have to work harder?
205  **RL:** Yeah.
206  **Kyle:** My parents [RL: Okay] cause they say, they say: “this world, like people--
207  people don't always believe in Black people so, you gotta be the one to always focus and show them that Black people can do it” [RL: Yeah] That not--just not only Asians, White people you know? So [RL: Yeah] yeah.
210  **RL:** So has anybody ever assumed that you--you're not good enough?
211  **Kyle:** Yeah all the t--people used to tell I have--I wasn't gonna make it in like elementary school. [RL: Really?] Yeah they actual--I don't know why they used to--
213  they actually used to say like 'No you're not gonna go anywhere' like--like--
214  **RL:** Like teachers?
215  **Kyle:** Yeah teachers they told me that, and I remember I was like 'Wow'. It made me cry and stuff like that. [RL: Really?] Yeah I felt really bad. I don't know why. I don't know why they told me that. Well like I'd probably do like one thing wrong and they would just tell me that. I was like 'Wow'.

In line 206, Kyle states, in response to my question, that it was his parents who taught him about the negative impressions that society holds of Black people. In line 208, he makes a comparison between Black people and “Asians” and “White people,” who are positioned as groups that are known to be able to “do it” (line 209). In relating his parents’ instruction that Kyle “has to be the one to always focus and show them that Black people can do it” (lines 207-208), Blackness is constructed as resistance. Here, Kyle describes his parents as encouraging him to resist negative and oppressive perceptions of Blackness by demonstrating to the world that he can be a successful Black person.

However, Kyle’s self positioning is not inside this construction of resistance. My request that Kyle share any experiences of being underestimated appears to orient him away from this
image of resistance. However, Kyle’s ability to name instances of negative treatment demonstrates that it was not simply my questioning but his own experiences that guided the remainder of his narrative. On my prompting, Kyle goes on to relate in-school experiences, stating that teachers would tell him that he would not “go anywhere” (line 214). In stating that he does not know why his teachers would make these types of claims about him, Kyle occupies a disempowered subject position. However, Kyle does not attempt to distance himself from the category of Black nor from the experience of disempowerment. Instead he describes himself as confused and hurt by these characterizations.

In lines 217-218, Kyle occupies a troublemaker subject position by saying, “Well like I’d probably do like one thing wrong and they would just tell me that.” Here he suggests that his former teachers were unforgiving and drew erroneous conclusions about him based on isolated instances of misbehaviour. Kyle’s positioning as a troublemaker is therefore constructed as temporary and fleeting, whereas he describes his teachers as situating him in this position more permanently. Ultimately, although Kyle’s general construction of Blackness is one of a group of people who are capable of excelling despite societal obstacles, he describes himself as falling victim to teachers’ negative assumptions about his abilities. His overall positioning is therefore one of disempowerment. Additionally, Kyle embraces a more fluid category construction in which he is able to occupy many different subject positions – i.e., disempowered, potentially empowered, and troublemaker – rather than being permanently fixed to any single one.

By contrast, in the following excerpt, Anthony, a grade 12 student, maintains a more empowered subject position when discussing Black identity and his academic work. Like Kyle, he too invokes a damage/deficit discourse of Blackness and constructs Blackness as resistance.
Anthony also does not distance himself from the category of Black. Instead, he situates himself in alternative meanings associated with Blackness, thereby effectively distancing himself from the discourse of damage:

**Excerpt 6**

291 **RL:** Okay. umm...so do you think that there's any, umm...like is there--do you think that like the idea of being Black is important to your identity?
293 **Anthony:** Is important? [RL: Yeah] Yeah I would say so. It's important because...Bl--
294 Black people are not like the most highly regarded race in the world [RL: Mmhm]. You know and like we--we are looked at a different way in society so I--I embrace that.
296 **RL:** Okay. How?
297 **Anthony:** Cause there's like stereotypes on Black--like Blacks like they don't--they're not as successful as others [RL: Mmhm], as a White person or whatever so--and like, and I feel good having like a 90 average [RL: Mmhm] and being a Black student [RL: Mmhm, mmmhm] and so I embrace that and--like and other--you know other races are not doing as well as me so it shows that their view is just ridiculous [RL: Mmhm] and yeah
299 **RL:** What do you think about that? Like you--when you say other races, you mean in the school are not doing...?
305 **Anthony:** Just--just over--overall in society.

Anthony begins by providing a description of Black people that he characterizes as a widely held belief “in the world” (line 294). In stating that Black people are “not like the most highly regarded race” (line 294) and are “looked at a different way” (line 295), Anthony echoes Kyle’s as well as other participants’ arguments that it is not Blackness itself that is damaged, but broader societal views of this group are to blame. The use of the term “stereotype” in line 297 also supports the argument that the negative perceptions that people have of Blackness are false generalizations as opposed to being based in reality. Anthony offers himself as proof that these perceptions are inaccurate. He describes himself as a student with a 90% average (line 299), suggesting that he is a factual representation of Blackness, a good student, whereas the previously mentioned representations are treated as false. He then draws a comparison between
himself and “other races,” which works to position him as a prototypical example of authentic and empowered Blackness. In so doing, Anthony positions himself within a Blackness as resistance discourse. Unlike Kyle’s narrative, there is no sense of vulnerability or disempowerment presented in his constructions. Instead, Anthony characterizes himself as self-directed and agentic in achieving high grades while standing firm in a Black identity.

5.3.1 Section summary

Taken together, these excerpts demonstrate that students’ invocation and navigation of damaged/deficit discourses of Blackness were centred primarily on avoiding a disempowered subject position within this discourse. Students constructed Blackness as damaged/deficit both when describing themselves as empowered and proficient students and in describing experiences of disempowerment. Additionally, although one student – Stephanie – attempted to distance herself from Blackness altogether, which worked to place her outside a disempowered subject position, others maintained identification with Blackness while also positioning themselves as empowered – Michaela and Anthony – or disempowered – Kyle. My treatment of Blackness as a construction, rather than as an identity, allowed me to demonstrate how students navigated negative constructions of Blackness without myself positioning these students as damaged or conversely, as resilient. Instead the focus of the analysis is on the circumstances that the students are subjected to, their reproduction damage/deficit discourses, and the strategies that they employ to navigate these discourses. Such an analysis can facilitate opportunities to examine the processes by which these potentially disempowering discourses are maintained within a particular schooling environment, providing insight into how to equip students to challenge them.
5.4 Striving for empowerment: Navigating responsibilization

In section 5.3, I argued that Black students negotiate discourses that position them as academic failures, i.e., discourses of Blackness as damaged or deficit. The participants in my study employed various strategies in attempts to avoid the disempowering effects of this discourse. In this section, I further this argument by taking a closer look at how neoliberal governmentality in the Ontario public education system has reinforced meritocratic discourse, thereby promoting responsibilized subjectivities among my participants.

As discussed in chapter 2, neoliberal governmentality refers to societal arrangements that treat social relations as existing primarily in relation to economic or market-driven interests (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Varman, Saha, & Skalen, 2011). I argued that neoliberal governmentality is evident in the Ontario public education system through four primary policies and practices: 1) the province’s Equity and Inclusive education strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) and its promotion of diversity as an asset to Ontario’s economy and future prosperity; 2) the increasing reliance on standardized testing as a measure not only of the value of the public education system but also of achievement gaps among ascribed groups (Martino & Rezai-Rhasti, 2012); 3) streaming in Ontario school boards, which, while framed as done in accordance with students’ abilities prior to the 1990s was transformed as based on students’ career aspirations and consequent choices regarding the type of post-secondary education and resultant careers that they would or would not pursue (Hamlin & Cameron, 2015; People for Education, 2014); and 4) more specific practices within the Toronto District School boards that encourage students to plan their educational paths in accordance with career goals and personal marketability (MyBlueprint, n.d.; TDSB, 2014d).
In this section, I argue that, in the context of neoliberal governmentality and discourses that position these students as academic failures on account of their Blackness, students were interpellated as “responsibilized” or entrepreneurial subjects (Davies & Bansel, 2007). The responsibilized subject under neoliberal discourse is one who has been tasked with taking responsibility for their own self-care. Here, individuals are positioned as highly individualized, thereby possessing ultimate freedom to make choices and acting primarily out of their own self-interest (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Kascak & Pupala, 2011). In the context of education, schooling is treated as a commodity and students and their parents are treated as purchasers or users. Students are therefore expected to be “autonomous, flexible and sociable” and to be able to, “select appropriate learning opportunities and opportunities for continuous self-development…” (Kascak & Pupala, 2011, p. 151). However, as purchasers/users, the exercise of choice is ultimately superficial, as the consumer has little say in the quality of schooling or participation in decision-making processes (Tienken, 2013).

For my student participants, responsibilization manifested in discussions of their approaches to schooling and in their assessments of their teachers. Students took up responsibilized subject positions by focusing primarily on how their own behaviours contributed to their academic success or failure. In accepting responsibilization, students were able to maintain more empowered subject positions, as compared with the disempowered subject positions that are available to them through broader discourses of Black academic failure. Conversely, some students resisted this responsibilization by shifting responsibility for their learning away from themselves and onto their teachers. I argue that in resisting responsibilized subject positions, students risked disempowerment and academic exclusion. The discussion
therefore calls attention to contemporary challenges that Black students face in relation to the marketization of Canadian public education, and the additional demands that it places on these students for them to achieve academic success.

In excerpt 7 below, Anthony, who in the previous section described himself as a good student with a 90% average, explains the process by which he shifted from being initially enrolled in Academic (or “University”) track courses when he began secondary education at Lilyfield to primarily Applied (or “College”) track courses at the end of grade 9. He argues that it was his own “apathy” as a student that resulted in his transfer. As discussed in chapter 1, Academic and Applied course tracks are presented by the Ministry of Education and the school board as interest-based, i.e., the guidelines for course selection and planning position students as having the ability to choose courses from their desired track based on their interests and career orientations. Students are therefore positioned as independently making choices that are in their individual best interests. However, as also previously discussed, systemic practices shaped by damage/deficit discourse surrounding Black students’ intellectual abilities and behaviour have resulted in disproportionate numbers of Black students being found in Applied or College track courses, which in turn leads them to more narrow post-secondary education and career options. Students who graduate from College track courses are unqualified to pursue university education, and, outside significant upgrading of their qualifications, are generally barred from career and economic opportunities that a university education is more likely to provide. Additionally, College track students are 28% less likely to graduate from high school as compared to their academic track counterparts (People for Education, 2014). This sorting of
students therefore works to divide future labourers into particular segments of the labour market, with Black Canadians being more likely to found in low-wage, less prestigious fields.

In his talk, Anthony takes up accepted responsibilization by taking full responsibility for his underperformance and eventual move into Applied courses, as well as for his eventual redemption:

**Excerpt 7**

124  **RL:** Ok (laughs) Um, So you're mostly college courses or uhh university courses?
125  **Anthony:** Well I'm a college student [RL: Okay] before I didn't--I switched. I was a university student first [RL: Yeah], but then I switched cause I didn't care about school [RL laughs] and then--and now I'm a college student. ((text omitted))
127  **Anthony:** Like it--back then I was kind of a--I don't know I was a apathetic kid [RL: Okay]. I didn't--I didn't really care about--and I like I would succumb to like peer pressure and all that stuff [RL: Yeah] like...so instead of doing homework I would like go out at late at night, play ball whatever [RL: Oh okay], but then I realized grade 11-12ish...yeah like second semester of grade 11--that how important education actually is [RL laughs] so...

Anthony describes his movement from university courses to college courses as an agentic or autonomous action, stating, “I switched ’cause I didn’t care about school” (line 126). Here, Anthony does not argue that he transferred to college courses because he had a greater interest in more concrete or practical course material or that his career goals were more appropriate for College track courses. Rather, he frames his transfer as tied directly to his apathy towards school, which he describes as directly associated with autonomous choices to “succumb to peer pressure” and “go out late at night”. Although he uses the terms “succumb” and “pressure,” which imply powerful external influences over which he had no control, within the context of the overall narrative overall his positioning is that of one who was not strong enough to fend off
these pressures, which works to place blame solely and completely on himself for his academic mis-steps.

What is left undiscussed in Anthony’s narrative is that decisions to transfer from one track to another are not ones that can be executed by students on their own but require adult intervention (teacher, parent, or both) to carry out. Although Anthony does not go into detail regarding who was involved in his initial transfer to college courses, he describes his subsequent transfer back into University-track English (not shown in the excerpt) as involving not only an improvement in his academic performance but also the advocacy of one of his teachers, Miss E. This, coupled with long-standing research on the role of teachers in streaming Black students (Dei et al., 1997; James & Turner, 2017), lends further credence to the argument that Anthony’s initial transfer into College courses was not an independent decision.

Anthony’s characterizations therefore work to invoke meritocratic discourse (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005), in which students are rewarded for hard work and punished for failing to rise to these standards. Following from this, traditional meritocratic discourse and subjectivity is transformed into responsibilization within a neoliberal educational context (Au, 2016), where processes of streaming are shifted away from being done in accordance with students’ demonstrated or presumed “abilities” and are instead promoted as based on students’ choices, but where students do not in fact have true choice in these processes. Additionally, as mentioned, such streaming has material implications for the students’ subsequent career trajectories. Anthony’s responsibilized subjectivity therefore allows a positioning outside discourses of failure and the implications of these discourses. He is instead able to demonstrate a current “chosen” academically successful and empowered subjectivity, as
well as to position himself as an autonomous decision-maker, in comparison with his description of his previously apathetic actions.

Louis, a friend of Anthony’s, shared his own experience of changing academic programs. However, unlike Anthony, Louis did not frame his program change as resulting from irresponsible behaviour but as a strategy employed to gain more control over his academic outcomes. Louis started his education at Lilyfield in a program for highly skilled athletes. This program is offered through several schools in the TDSB for students with the skills and talent to potentially become professional athletes (TDSB, 2014e). The program allows these students to have an alternative class schedule intended to provide them with enough time to practice for and compete in sporting events while managing their academic work. In the following excerpt, Louis describes the choice that he made to leave the program to ensure that his academic work did not suffer:
Excerpt 8

232  RL: So, did you tell me, are you in [the specialized sports program?]
233  Louis: No, I was
234  RL: Oh, and then you-
235  Louis: I had to drop 'cause it's stupid like, you just, it's not stupid, but like, it gives you
time to do your, your sports and stuff and your school work [RL: yea], but I just found
like, when I was in there, I was like, not doing as much as I could. I wouldn't have
enough credits if I-
239  RL: Oh really?
240  Louis: Yea
241  RL: Why, like how is the program structured?
242  Louis: Because like, you get like, like grade 9s like be- in like, when you're not in
these programs, you get like a spare maybe in grade 12 when you've already done all
your credits, but [the program] like, it gives you like, a spare like, like spare when
you're in grade 9 and stuff, all the way like, to like, through grade 12 [RL: Mmhmm],
um, and like you could basically like, always miss a lot of class 'cause you'll just have
an excuse and, that's like, kinda like, my friends that are in [the program] still, they, if-
if they really wanted to do their school work they could still stay on task but like,
since they kinda have an excuse, they'll just keep, start, missing class for like, no
apparent reason [RL: Oh ok], and they could just say it's [the program]

In our interviews, Louis stated that he was on several sports teams and intended to play football
at the professional level. He had already been accepted to two universities in Ontario that had
high-performing football teams and stated that his coach was advocating for him to be accepted
onto the teams. In lines 1242-1245, Louis explains the structure of the athletic program at
Lilyfield, noting the additional time that students in this program had in their schedules. The
TDSB course selection guide describes the program as “accommodat[ing] the special needs of
provincial or national athletes by constructing special time tables and unusual arrangements to
complement the coaching and travel schedules” (TDSB, 2014e, p. 24). Louis argues in his
narrative that these accommodations were not in fact helpful for students like him and instead
appeared to facilitate, or encourage, academic complacency and irresponsibility.
Louis initially describes the program as “stupid” (line 235), then immediately corrects this. However, in his initial claim that the program was “stupid,” he evaluates the structure of the program as the source of the problem he goes on to describe. In so doing, he resists responsibilization by placing blame on the program structure rather than on himself for not being able to achieve as much as he believed he could academically. However, he goes on to take up responsibilization by stating, “I was like, not doing as much as I could”. Louis therefore ultimately holds himself responsible for not excelling in the program academically. Louis’ decision to drop out of the athletics program and to join mainstream programming is further evidence of his occupation of a responsibilized and entrepreneurial subject position. He frames his decision as made to ensure that he had “enough credits”, something that he would not have had to be as cognizant of outside the program. Given that Louis had aspirations to enter professional sports through first playing on a university team in Canada, his credit accumulation and actual grades held as much importance as his athletic skill in dictating his career path.

Louis made the decision to switch despite the fact that it appeared to require a similar if not greater level of self-management than if he had remained in the program. Throughout our interviews, Louis explained that he often relied on his friends to take notes for him during classes that he missed because of his participation in sporting events, and to hand in his assignments. This required Louis to ask for help and to be able to assess which of his peers were most reliable to perform these tasks that he could not do for himself. However, Louis also appeared to be quite at ease with these responsibilities and appeared quite capable of using his cultural capital inside the school to access opportunities that may not have been available to all students.
In the excerpt, Louis also extends the responsibilized subject position to his friends who remained in the athletics program. He notes that these students not only failed to complete their coursework in their designated spare time but also used their placement in the athletics program as an “excuse” to miss even more class. He states that “if they really wanted to do their schoolwork they could still stay on task” (lines 247 to 248), thereby placing responsibility on his peers for not staying on top of their academics. This argument positions students as autonomous and capable of making choices that are best for their self-interest. Overall, Louis’ narrative works to position him as empowered in his decision-making processes and pursuit of his career goals, as compared with losing control over his career trajectory had he remained in the program like his friends.

Similarly, Michaela places primary responsibility for academic success not only on herself but also on students in general. In excerpt 9 below, she argues that her self-management worked to facilitate good working relationships with her teachers, which in turn could lead to academic success. The excerpt took place in our first interview, in which Michaela discussed her thoughts on the value of particular types of friendships. At the beginning of the excerpt, she promptly shifts from a discussion about friendships to one about her teachers. Here she argues that a teacher can become more effective in working with a student when the student shows a willingness to put in the same amount of effort:
Michaela: Yeah, I'd had friendships like that. That's why I'm so cautious with [RL: Okay] who I talk to and who I share my personal business with. With teachers like once they see--like I realize once they see I'm actually interested in working for what I want or working for the mark I--I, I want in their course, they show a higher level of interest.

RL: Oh yeah? So what like--so why is it that that happens w--like why wouldn't they show interest like from the beginning? Like why is it that they have to see that you're serious about your work?

Michaela: Because if--if a student doesn't care, why should the teacher care? [RL: But if the - (laughs); Okay good reason] If a student doesn't care [RL: Yeah] why should the teacher care [RL: Yeah]? Why should teacher run the student down for his or her work and umm... chase them for like every single thing [RL: Mmhm]? That's why they show interest in like people who are interested in the course. 'Cause if you have a student that's failing and they're willing to try, they're willing to go to extra help, they're willing to like get tutoring or whatever they need to do to do better in your course, why wouldn't you not show interest in them [RL: Mmhm]? I'm not saying they- the teachers don't care about you, but like you need to do your part as well if you're a student.

Michaela starts with a personal anecdote, stating that once she demonstrates to teachers that she is willing to work hard in their course, they display a greater level of interest in her. This again may be interpreted as drawing on individualist or meritocratic discourses of achievement, in that Michaela appears to be arguing that the harder a student works, the better the rewards she obtains. However, Michaela does not simply describe how her individual hard work earns her high grades. Instead, she focuses on her demonstration of individual responsibility and argues that her proficiency at showing interest and seeking help earns her better relationships with her teachers. She takes on entrepreneurial characteristics of autonomy and flexibility by arguing that she has a willingness to present herself to her teachers in a particular manner to solicit their help and argues that it is her peers’ responsibility to do the same.
Michaela also states that even students who are failing may be able to solicit more involved support from their teachers by displaying an interest in their coursework. Here again, the emphasis is not on hard work in the course itself to achieve particular grades, but rather hard work at self-presentation, in order to become deserving of support. As Nairn and Higgins (2007) argue, personality, and the expectation that individuals can “adapt perpetually to constantly changing education and work places through the individual qualities of innovation self-reliance and flexibility,” are significant to neoliberal responsibilization. In Michaela’s narrative, students are required to seek out educational supports not simply to help themselves achieve better grades but also as a display of personality characteristics suitable for educational benefits that may be bestowed on them by their teachers.

However, Michaela’s argument also implies that student effort may be objectively perceived by teachers. It implies that all students’ effort can be measured along the same scale, and that teachers’ perceptions of these efforts may not be shaped by other factors, such as damage/deficit discourses of Black students. In this respect, the ability to choose how one presents oneself to teachers to solicit particular behaviours from these teachers is inevitably a false choice. Nonetheless, in emphasizing her ability to attract positive and supportive attention from her teachers, and in comparing herself with students who do not work to attract such attention, Michaela occupies an empowered subject position in relation to her responsibilized subjectivity.

By contrast, several participants rejected responsibilization by emphasizing teacher personality characteristics and behaviours as opposed to their own. Students described “good” teachers as individuals who were not only highly skilled at teaching their specific course material
but also willing to teach to the specific needs of individual students in the class, friendly, comfortable with themselves, able make students laugh, able to manage student behaviour in the classroom with minimal effort, and willing to forge personal relationships with their students. In making these assessments, students criticized teachers who did not display these characteristics. For example, in the following excerpt, Malia places emphasis not on her own ability to attract positive attention from teachers but on a particular teacher’s effectiveness as related to her personality characteristics:

Excerpt 10

41 **RL:** OK. Alright, uhh, so how would, describe yourself. Actually before you answer that, what's your least favourite course right now?
42 **Malia:** Science
43 **RL:** Why?
44 **Malia:** Um, my-I don't really feel like my tea-'cause like-k when I learn stuff, I need you to like, tell me tell me, like "it's this this and this," and I need to ask you, "so it's this this and this?" and you need to say [RL: Ok], "yea ,yea, yea" [RL: Ok] but like my teacher doesn't really do that, and it's like, she kinda like, sh-awkward, and like shyish so like-
45 **RL:** Which teacher is this?
46 **Malia:** [Miss K],
47 **RL:** Ok, I have not met her, [Malia: yea] Ok
48 **Malia:** So it's, yea
49 **RL:** (laughs), so, so when you ask her a question, she doesn't follow up, um, like you , like you don't feel comfortable to ask her to re-
50 **Malia:** Like you, I do, but it's like you don't get a solid answer [RL: Oh] -'cause like she's really awkward, and like shy and to herself, so yea, I dunno how that works with being a teacher [RL laughs], but I guess

In line 42, I begin by asking Malia to tell me about her least favourite course. Rather than describing the details of the course itself, Malia attributes her dislike of Science to her teacher. She criticizes her teacher for not delivering the material in the manner that Malia prefers. She
states that “when I learn stuff I need you to like, tell me, like ‘it’s this this and this’” (line 46). In so doing, Malia resists responsibilization by emphasizing her individual learning style and her desire for her teachers to be responsive to this style.

In claiming that the teacher is not as responsive as Malia would prefer, she makes reference to the teacher’s personality. She describes the teacher as “awkward” and “shyish” (line 48) and suggests that the teacher is uncomfortable in her role and is not attuned to the needs of the students in her classroom. The teacher is therefore positioned as unsuited, or unqualified, for her role. Emphasizing teacher traits, as opposed to teacher skills, or subject matter expertise, works to prioritize the teacher’s self-management in the classroom, invoking neoliberal conceptions of the entrepreneurial subject, which serves to construct effective workers as those who are able to draw on personality characteristics to facilitate greater economic productivity (Nairn & Higgins, 2007). While the argument can be made that relationship management is integral to being an effective teacher, this is not necessarily the case. As noted in section 5.2, by my observations, Miss B appeared to be highly invested in her relationships with her students but this did not necessarily translate into positive outcomes for the students. In the context of Malia’s narrative, she held her teacher responsible for her learning, thus positioning herself outside a responsibilized subject position. However, while this placed Malia in a somewhat more powerful position in our conversational context, it also implied that Malia risked underperforming in the course if the teacher did not adjust to her needs and demands. The implication is that, in the context of their overall learning, a lack of responsibilization could have detrimental effects for students who are not well supported in the classroom.
The detrimental effects of rejecting responsibilization was evidenced by Kyle’s narrative, who, in rejecting responsibilization, was consequently positioned as a “troublemaker” in the classroom. The conversation occurred in the general context of Kyle and my discussion of instances in which he and his friends had been disciplined, and by Kyle’s accounts, unfairly targeted in the school. Just before this excerpt, Kyle stated that he would sometimes “talk back” in class if he believed that the teacher was being unfair either to other students or to him. I asked Kyle to give an example of unfairness. In so doing, he blamed the teacher’s ineffectiveness for his disengagement and eventual removal from the class. His narrative therefore also attributes responsibility for his learning to his teacher:

**Excerpt 11**

545 **Kyle:** Uhh, unfair like—ahh what can I say? Kay so like I’d be in the—I’d be in my 546 class with everyone else—but like I’m the one in the back cause—like say I wouldn’t 547 understand something, but they keep like—they keep saying “Why aren’t you doing 548 your work?” I’m like “I don’t understand.” [RL: Mhm] But I ask for help sometimes 549 and they wouldn’t give me help. Like okay so like I just sit down, do no work, and 550 then they’re like “Why aren’t you doing any work?” again and I’d be like “What are 551 you talking about? Like I ask you for help” and then like—I gave a little bit of attitude 552 [RL: Mhm] cause I’m not getting help [RL: Mhmm], and then they would be like 553 “Alright that it. I’m sending you to the office” or something like that.

In line 546, Kyle points out that in this scenario, and perhaps generally, he sat in the back of the classroom. He does not elaborate on why this is the case, or why he thought it was important to mention. However, common images of students who sit in the back of classrooms include that they are generally disengaged. Kyle’s mention of his position in the class may therefore have been done to signify his belief that teachers may place him in the subject position of “disengaged student” based simply on his seating position in the classroom. Kyle then goes on to build his
case of being treated unfairly by noting that, in this scenario, he would have been more engaged in class if the teacher had offered him the help that he required to do his coursework. Unlike Michaela, Kyle does not describe his own engagement as a precursor for a teacher’s interest in him. Instead, he actively resists meritocratic discourse, and any potential of responsibilization, by positioning the teacher as primarily responsible for his learning, and also as responsible for his disengagement. He frames his disengagement as directly attributable to not receiving the help that he required from his teacher. As a consequence of this resistance, Kyle’s descriptions position him as a “troublemaker” in the eyes of his teacher, and he is sent to the office as a form of discipline. He is therefore ultimately disempowered in his refusal to accept full responsibility for his learning in the classroom.

5.4.1 Section summary

The preceding discussion demonstrates how the student participants in my research accepted or rejected responsibilized subject positions in managing their academic work. Responsibilization allowed for student empowerment, in that they were able to describe their skills and abilities in navigating educational challenges, and in being rewarded for their efforts, in comparison with their friends, or in Anthony’s case, with himself in the past. However, not all excerpts demonstrated student acceptance of responsibilization. Malia and Kyle’s narratives demonstrated how students may refuse responsibilization, instead placing responsibility for their learning on their teachers. These descriptions raise the potential for student disempowerment. In Malia’s case, not receiving help could have led to underperformance in the course. In Kyle’s case, his response to not receiving help, as he described it, resulted in his removal from the classroom.
When considered together, these narratives suggest that attention should be given to how Black students may be subjected to neoliberal discourses that call on them to take responsibility for their learning in a manner that is not equitable. These discourses have the appeal of empowerment, as they allow students to demonstrate their skills and abilities in navigating their own learning. However, these discourses also demand a certain level of student exceptionality and self-management skills in taking on this responsibility, which, if not possessed, can result in educational exclusion.

5.5 Discussion

The preceding discussion was focused on the experiences and narratives of Black Lilyfield students. Overall, this chapter gives attention to the competing discourses to which Black Lilyfield students are subjected, and how students navigate these discourses to assert agentic and empowered subjectivities. In section 5.2, I outlined the activities that I assisted to plan and participate in Black History Month activities at Lilyfield. I argued that through these activities, Blackness or Black culture was constructed as therapy for Black Lilyfield students in two main ways: 1) in the planning of the events in which I, as one of the only Black women in the school took on, to the point of being given a leadership role; 2) in the way that the activities were intended to promote feelings of inclusion and belonging for the students. I argued that, while these were well-intentioned activities that the students generally appeared to enjoy, students’ responses also demonstrated the restrictiveness of treating culture as therapy, as something to be administered to students for their benefit, without consideration of their’ own lived experiences in relation to culture and Blackness.
In section 5.3, I demonstrated the continued prevalence of damage/deficit discourses of Blackness in Black students’ social worlds, and how they navigated these discourses in attempts to avoid disempowerment under this discourse. There I suggested that the treatment of Blackness as a construct, as opposed to an identity, allows for greater consideration of how to address disempowering discourses, as opposed to attempting to empower the young people affected by these discourses.

Finally, in section 5.4, I accounted for the broader context of neoliberal governmentality in Ontario public education, and how this context produced the potential for responsibilized subjectivities for Black students. There I argued that attention to the broader context of the neoliberalization of public education allows us to consider the ways in which such processes shape the experiences of Black students that may be individualistically empowering for the students who embrace responsibilized subjectivities but ultimately disempowering for students who are unable, or unwilling, to take on the required attributes.

In the discussion that follows, I will consider the implications of these findings.

5.5.1 Constructing and subverting Blackness

The construction of culture as therapy requires that it possess knowable, and perhaps static, components. For Black students, it has long been advocated that Black culture be integrated into curricula and overall school functioning to challenge long-established Eurocentric paradigms, and to promote students’ sense of belonging and academic success (Dei et al., 1997; James & Turner, 2017). This work emphasizes the need for educators to recognize not only the diversity of student populations but also the hegemonic manner in which schools operate to reinforce exclusion and oppression for Black students. The Ministry of Education has embraced
aspects of this perspective by stating in the Equity and Inclusive Education strategy that students “should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum, programs, and culture of the school” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013c, p. 6).

However, as argued by James (2003), the manner in which culture is taken up and prioritized by educators can be problematic and downright harmful for students. James (2003) uses the specific example of the tendency for educators to determine that athleticism was a viable part of Black culture and a legitimate means by which to maintain their engagement in school, which led to the foreclosure of other forms of engagement. My work provides additional evidence as to how the processes of adult selection and prioritization of particular aspects of culture as relevant to students may be marginalizing. At Lilyfield, adult emphasis on celebrities and on cultural artifacts of food, dance, and music, attempted to place students within particular cultural confines. An unfortunate outcome of this approach was the exclusion of Black boys from the planned activities, as they were determined to be unsafe for the girls.

My work therefore calls on educators to allow students to define Blackness on their own terms and based on their own experiences. Such an approach would require adults, who are grounded in, and possess deep knowledge about, the histories and experiences of Black Canadians, to provide structure for students, but to allow them to develop and prioritize activities and events that are meaningful for them based on their own social and temporal locations. This allows for both a critical engagement with the historical implications of being racialized as Black in Canada, as well as an approach to culture that treats it as both “becoming” and “being” (Hall, 1990, p. 225).
In sections 5.3 and 5.4 I gave closer attention to students’ narratives and to how they navigated potentially disempowering subject positions in relation to their academic work. Section 5.3 emphasized how students grapple with the racial implications of Blackness, i.e., the construction of Blackness as damaged or deficit in Canadian society. In contrast to section 5.2, where students’ narratives of and actions in relation to Blackness were more fluid and even empowering, discussions of Blackness in these excerpts were more static in relation to negative constructions of Blackness, and consequently had the potential for disempowerment.

Black student participants therefore demonstrated agency in orienting themselves towards more empowered subject positions in relation to damaged/deficit discourse. This orientation towards empowerment was not consistently or predictably associated with an affinity or lack of affinity to Black identity but instead was achieved in the specific conversational context. The question that arises from this analysis, therefore, is how damage/deficit discourses of Blackness can be managed in schools in a manner that allows students to navigate the multiplicity of meanings associated with Blackness without having to distance themselves from the category itself. Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and other anti-racist perspectives explicitly challenge Eurocentric narratives that frame Blackness as deficit; indeed, researchers have long called for the integration of such perspectives into everyday curricula (e.g, Dei et al., 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; James & Braithwaite, 1996; James & Turner, 2017). However, it is clear that many students did not have ready access to this language in our interactions to explain why Black students may have been, or may have been perceived as, the most disruptive or least academically capable. My work therefore affirms calls for the integration into school curricula not simply of Black history or Black cultural perspectives, as would be supported by the
multiculturalism perspectives or the Inclusive education policies in place at the time of my data collection, but of perspectives that deliberately and systematically challenge Eurocentrism.

The combination of ever prevalent damage/deficit discourses of Blackness, with neoliberal governmentality produced conditions where Black students negotiated pursuing high academic outcomes in relation to the group identity of “Black” and discourses that demand personal responsibility in schools. In his study of “upwardly mobile Black North Americans,” Gosine (2012) discusses how, rather than relying on anti-racist strategies to resist racism in their lives, successful middle class Black Canadians drew on neoliberal and individualistic discourses and strategies to pursue their life goals and achieve equality. Such strategies include pursuing educational and work opportunities, mentoring, and building Black support networks. My research demonstrates how neoliberal discourses were taken up by Black students, many of whom lived in low-income areas, and how this positioned them as responsibilized subjects in school. Students described themselves as self-reliant and responsible for their own success and failure, while, conversely, also holding their teachers accountable for their educational experiences. The results demonstrate how students’ subjection to neoliberal discourses in school can serve to help or hinder their academic progress. Gosine’s work focused on individuals who had successfully taken up neoliberal discourses and achieved particular socioeconomic status in the process. My research, however, demonstrates the complexities that arise when students who are ultimately powerless in school, in that their outcomes are determined by individuals and methods outside themselves, take up neoliberal discourses. Although some of my participants were able to demonstrate success, others blamed themselves for their failures, or were rendered
ultimately powerless despite their willingness – or unwillingness – to hold themselves responsible.

Students resisted responsibilized subject positions in attributing their potential for success to the work of their teachers. Nairn and Higgins (2007) demonstrate how young people in New Zealand negotiated and appropriated neoliberal discourses to promote themselves as ideal workers on the job market, or conversely, to create unique spaces and opportunities for themselves when access to the job market was restricted. The researchers demonstrate that participants did not simply passively take up neoliberal discourses but relied on alternative discourses in planning their futures when structural restrictions impeded their abilities to become fully responsibilized entrepreneurial subjects. Similarly, Canadian researchers have previously demonstrated that Black students adhere to meritocratic discourse in school, even in the face of adverse experiences (Dei et al., 1997; Solomon & Palmer, 2004). My findings similarly demonstrate that Black students who, through neoliberal tools of standardized assessments, have been identified as underachievers and wholesale victims of a racist educational system, actually take up neoliberal discourses as one means by which to assert their agency and to demand more from a system by which they are otherwise disadvantaged. Although these self-positionings, which allow room for student agency and by extension, power, may not on their own translate into students’ ultimate abilities to negotiate and obtain academic success as defined by the school, they do open up the possibility for students to draw on an emerging discourse to negotiate educational persistence and success. Nonetheless, students’ taking on of neoliberal discourses remains risky as it reinforces the blame that can be placed on these students if they
fail to succeed in a system that systemically disadvantages Blackness overall (Dei et al., 1997; James & Braithwaite, 1996).

5.6 Conclusion

The preceding discussion outlines the competing discourses to which Black students were subjected in a single school environment, and how they navigated these discourses. In negotiating constructions of culture as therapy, damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness, and responsibilized subjectivities, the narratives of these students bring attention the multiple strategies that Blacks students employ to maintain complex and empowered, racial, cultural and academic subjectivities in school.
6 Student Narrative: Centering the Individual

6.1 Introduction

In chapter 5, I discussed the continued prevalence of damaged/deficit discourses of Blackness in students’ social worlds. In this chapter, I analyze a single student narrative to demonstrate her negotiation of these discourses and the multiple subject positions that were available to her in relation to constructions of Blackness in the school environment. In discussing one student narrative, I aim to outline in a more dynamic manner how students may be subjected to these discourses and how they accept and reject and transform the subject positions that are available to them. I also draw specific attention to gendered discourses of damaged/deficit Blackness by giving close attention to the narratives of one Black female student, Chantal.

In examining a single student narrative, I seek to further emphasize individual agency in negotiating and transforming discourse, thereby arguing against one-dimensional or top-down approaches – what Hollway (1998) argues as treating discourse as ideology – to understanding Black students’ experiences. Nonetheless, I recognize, as Falmagne (2004) argues, that individual agency is constrained by material and discursive processes, and therefore exercised only at the local level – i.e., in individual interpersonal interactions. Recognizing these limitations therefore also allows us to understand that individual action or experience is not sufficient for transforming broader social processes and relations. However, recognition of individual agency does allow researchers, policy makers, and the general public to avoid homogeneous interpretations of the experiences of individuals subjected to the same social discourses. This, in turn, allows for alternative, more complex ways of understanding students’ experiences to take shape.
I present Chantal’s story in relation to three overarching themes: a) academic damage/deficits; b) family damage/deficits; and c) gendered risk. I will first give a brief description of Chantal as I came to know her, including the circumstances under which she became a participant in my research. I will then demonstrate the multiple subject positions that Chantal occupied in relation to discourses that position Black students as damaged/deficit and therefore “at-risk” academically and Black families as damaged/deficit. I will then discuss the gendered risk that Chantal experienced at Lilyfield in relation to sexual harassment, and her navigation of this experience. I argue that, while having an understanding of how broader discourses and processes shape Black students’ experiences is important to avoid placing blame on individual students for their adverse outcomes, or lauding individual hard work for favourable outcomes, attention to individual students’ agency in negotiating these broader discourses and processes allows for a more detailed understanding of their experiences. This level of detail can in turn inform more inclusive schooling practices and prompt further opportunities for the self-determination of Black communities more broadly.

6.2 Chantal’s Story

I met Chantal during my second month at Lilyfield, when I began volunteering in Miss D’s classroom. A 15-year-old grade 10 student, Chantal was registered in Special Education Applied track courses because of her diagnosed learning disability. She gained entry into Lilyfield through its designation as an optional attendance school\(^{11}\) and noted that her mother

\(^{11}\) Schools outside of students’ neighborhood of residence that they can attend if they meet specific criteria. Students may attend these schools to access specialized education programs not available in their neighborhoods, or for other reasons.
sought to have her placed there because Lilyfield had a reputation of offering more sophisticated Special Education supports than Chantal’s home school. However, Chantal was unable to describe the specifics of her learning disability, stating only that she had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and that she attended a special class each morning that enabled her to complete her coursework for other classes in that allotted time.

Chantal presented as a very beautiful young woman. She noticeably put time and effort into her day-to-day physical appearance. She also presented as quite confident and self-aware. She did not hesitate to defend her actions when challenged but was also quite honest about the behaviours and habits that she displayed that were not conducive to her well-being and academic success. She and her best friend Simone, another participant in my study, were almost always together whenever I saw either of them in the school. Consequently I teased them on the few occasions that I encountered one of them without the other. Chantal was also quite close to Stephanie, who was one grade behind her and taking Academic track courses. Chantal described both of these young women as her best friends and spoke at length about her excitement at the fact that Stephanie and another of her friends had recently begun to date. She also spoke at length about her friends in the school and the feelings that she had when she believed that her friendships were not going as smoothly as she would have liked. Additionally, she spoke quite candidly about her dating experiences. She stated that her mother would not be happy to know that she was currently dating someone, as she wanted Chantal to focus on school.

My first encounter with Chantal was on my first day of volunteering in Miss D’s class. I arrived on time for the class, whereas all of the students had not yet arrived. Also present in the class was Miss X, an Educational Assistant who assisted Miss D with classroom management,
and with whom I had had prior conversations about possibly recruiting Chantal and Simone for participation in my research. Miss D waited a few minutes to get started because of the students’ tardiness. After about five minutes, four students, all of whom were physically identifiable as Black, came bounding into the classroom while conversing quite loudly. Chantal and Simone were among these students, as well as two young men that I did not have the opportunity to interview. I was surprised by how loud they all were, and was also surprised that they did not halt their conversation when they entered the classroom. One of the boys sat close to the front of the room, the other at the back, and Chantal and Simone sat beside each other, close to where I was positioned, in the centre of the room. Miss D was visibly frustrated, and I, too, was disturbed by these students’ apparent lack of respect for their teacher and classmates. As the semester progressed, I came to understand that these behaviours were commonplace in Miss D’s class, not only for Chantal and her peers but for all of the students. After two weeks of volunteering in the classroom, I asked Chantal and Simone if they were interested in participating in my research, and, nine weeks later, I conducted my first individual interviews with them.

6.2.1 Academic damage/deficits

As discussed in chapter 1, evidence demonstrates that Black students in the TDSB are disproportionately placed in lower academic tracks, and students in these tracks are far less likely overall to graduate high school (People for Education, 2014; TDSB, 2013a). Statistics also show that Black students are suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates compared with their other ethnoracial peers (TDSB, 2014b). In relation to these present-day and historical findings, James (2012) has argued that multiple competing societal discourses shaped by systemic racism have designated Black students as “at risk” because of academic vulnerability and perceived
behaviours in schools. More specifically, these students are positioned as “underachievers” in relation to academic outcomes and “troublemakers” in relation to behavior in schools and other settings (James, 2012). As a young woman in Special Education Applied track classes, who was on several occasions fairly disruptive in class, Chantal would of course be subjected to this discourse.

However, it was clear during our interactions that Chantal did not accept these potential positionings. The following three excerpts include Chantal’s reflections on her experiences in Miss D’s classroom, as well as my ethnographic observations of a specific classroom interaction in which I was involved. These excerpts demonstrate Chantal’s agentic navigation of the damage/deficit discourse to which she was subjected. In these scenarios, Chantal’s narratives call attention to how her individual experiences and relationships are legitimate starting points through which to interpret her academic involvement, which, as opposed to broader discourses which position her as “at risk” positions her as a capable and invested student.

In the following excerpt, I asked Chantal about her favourite teacher. Here she describes her relationships with Miss D and Mr. W, whom she names as her favourite, and explains why she believes he has been a stronger influence on her academic success:
Excerpt 1

197  **RL:** Ok. Um, so do you have a, favourite, teacher?
198  **Chantal:** Mm- Mr W.
199  **RL:** K what does he teach?
200  **Chantal:** He taught me history last year and civics. Like, ‘cause you know how like
civics and careers are t-two things? So I had civics first and he was civics teacher
202  **RL:** Ok
203  **Chantal:** I like him the best
204  **RL:** Why?
205  **Chantal:** ‘cause he always helps me out, like he believes in me [RL: oh ok]. Like no
other teacher like, really shows that
207  **RL:** Really?
208  **Chantal:** Yea
209  **RL:** I think Miss D believes in you
210  **Chantal:** (3 sec pause) (exhales) [RL laughs]. I dunno like, yea, she believes in every
student but like, you know. I- I could tell when a teacher believes in me
212  **RL:** How?
213  **Chantal:** ‘cause they push me harder
214  **RL:** Ohh ok
215  **Chantal:** Yea
216  **RL:** So Miss D should be giving you more, work, as I’ve been thinking
217  **Chantal:** Yea like, she should, even though I don’t wanna do it, still give it to me, Mr.
W, if I didn’t do it, he’d be like, “ok you’re staying after school” [RL: ohh], like you
know he’s like hard [RL: yea]. And like, I didn’t, like pass the class, but he gave me
another chance and then I passed [RL: Ok]. So he gave me extra work and I did the-
and I did the work good and then I passed the class

In lines 205-206, Chantal describes an aspect of her relationship with Mr. W that she constructs
as integral to her academic success. Mr. W is described as believing in her in a way that other
teachers do not. She describes his investment in her as authentic in comparison with the
treatment that she experiences at the hands of other teachers. On my prompting Chantal also goes
on to describe her relationship with Miss D as disingenuous. By stating “…like yea, she believes
in every student but like, you know, I could tell when a teacher believes in me” (lines 201- 211),
Miss D’s efforts with her are constructed as simply a part of her role as a teacher, rather than as
reflecting a specific and genuine interest in Chantal as an individual. She implies that she has the
ability to detect genuine investment as compared with standard teacher-student relations. Without hesitation, she names teachers who “push” her harder as demonstrating genuine investment, as compared with teachers who allow her to get by on minimal effort.

My statement in line 216 that Miss D should give Chantal “more work” was based on my observations in her classroom. Chantal and her friend Simone would often complete their assignments in class ahead of other students and spent the rest of the time talking to each other or browsing social media on their smart phones. On other occasions, they spent the bulk of the time socializing with each other and left the class with their assignments not completed. Overall, they did not appear to take the class very seriously and consequently repeatedly occupied a “troublemaker” subject position in the classroom.

I was therefore quite surprised by Chantal’s response in line 217, in which she agreed that Miss D should be assigning more coursework to her: “even though I don’t wanna do it, still give it to me”. Until that point in the interview, I had been under the impression that Chantal did not care to do the work in Miss D’s class. Instead, she argued that the lack of pressure from Miss D facilitated her own lack of investment in the class. She returns to her discussion of Mr. W, whom she describes as pushing her to continue working even after she had already failed the class. She describes Mr. W’s practice of pressure as a demonstration of his investment in her. Chantal’s arguments therefore construct a relational aspect to “risk” one in which she is able to identify teaching styles that she has determined are most appropriate for her academic success, and which, when exercised, contribute to this success. Chantal’s self-positioning is therefore as a student who is capable of making context-based decisions that may benefit or harm her. In other words, Chantal establishes herself as agentic, as not taking up an “at-risk” subject position. In
this exchange, similar to my findings outlined in chapter 5, we see the importance of specific student-teacher relationships in interpreting students’ academic experiences.

Throughout the course of the semester, Miss D built a large portion of her teaching around a novel that she had assigned to the class. This novel told the story of a teenaged boy’s volunteer work at a soup kitchen and the relationship that he built with one of the individuals who was a frequent patron. This person was homeless, and as the boy later learned, a former UN peacekeeper who served in Rwanda during the 1991 genocide. Miss D had integrated several creative strategies aimed at keeping the students engaged in the class, including screening the movie “Hotel Rwanda” to showcase the role of UN peacekeepers, and assigning a class project where students were tasked with researching and presenting on community agencies that were of interest to them. Excerpt 2 is taken from my field notes, where I describe Miss D’s attempt to teach about homelessness by playing a number of short videos about homelessness in Canada, which coincided with that year’s “Raise the Roof” public campaign:

**Excerpt 2: Field Notes 04-09-15**

1. The second video that Miss D played was one of the Tim Horton’s manager in Vancouver who poured water and apparently bleach on an area outside of his store where a homeless man and his dog usually slept. We discussed the video as a class. Chantal said something that I thought was really ignorant in response to one of Miss D’s questions. Miss D asked: “What should Tim Horton’s do for this person?.” One student said that Tim Horton’s should give him coffee or money. Another said give him a job. Chantal said, “I wouldn’t want a homeless person working in my Tim Horton’s.” Myself and Miss X (who was the educational assistant in the classroom) had a strong reaction to this. We both asked her how would she know that the person was homeless. She replied that she just wouldn’t like it. The discussion turned into a fairly big debate that lasted until near the end of class concerning whether the students would hire a homeless person. One argument that Miss X and I made, was that you wouldn’t be able to tell that the person is homeless because they would be dressed for work.

There was a second discussion about the fact that there is a lot of youth
homelessness. We discussed factors that lead to young people being homeless, such as being abused at home. Miss D explained that they may run away and then they stay with a friend and then they may overstay their time so they stay with another friend etc until they end up couch surfing. Chantal and Simone could not understand why someone would call their friends to sleep on their couch, rather than calling their family. So Miss X was trying to explain that not everyone has a family like that. I was trying to explain that too, that they have to look at things from other people’s perspectives and not just based on their own experiences. But they didn’t budge on their opinions. They said it was stupid that people would call a friend instead of calling a family member. Chantal said that she would call her aunt, her grandma, and we were explaining that sometimes people don’t have family that live near them or that, if they get in trouble with one family member, nobody else may want to take you in. Miss D pointed out that one of the boys in the class had no family in Toronto, they all lived in another province. This didn’t change the girls’ minds.

Notably, this excerpt demonstrates my level of participation in the classroom as a participant-observer. I was actively involved in the discussion throughout the class and did not hesitate to offer my opinions on the topic at hand. I would first like to attend to how I positioned myself, Miss D, and Miss X, as compared with my positioning of the students in the classroom. My self-positioning and my positioning of Miss D and Miss X in the text of this excerpt is authoritative. For example, in writing about actions or statements that I, Miss D, or Miss X made, I most often used the word “explain,” as in line 16, “Miss D explained…,” lines 19-20, “Miss X was trying to explain…,” and line 20, “I was trying to explain…” These statements positioned the adults in the classroom as possessing a greater knowledge base that we were seeking to impart on the students. By contrast, the verb most often used to describe statements made by the students was “said”. For example, line 4, “Chantal said something that I thought was really ignorant…”; “One student said” (lines 5-6); “They said it was stupid…” (line 22). Framing the students’ statements in this manner positioned them as making off the cuff claims with little evidence or justification.
to support them. I therefore positioned the adults in the classroom as knowledgeable, whereas the students were positioned as lacking knowledge and in need of education.

The excerpt is also arranged to reflect two discrete but related discussions in the class. The first discussion pertained to the potential employment of people who were homeless, and the second to the topic of youth homelessness. Chantal’s statement, “I wouldn’t want a homeless person working in my Tim Hortons” (line 7), was shocking at the time of the interaction. My feelings about this were reflected in the statements “I thought was a really ignorant response” (line 4) and “Miss X and I… had a strong reaction to this” (lines 8-9). Chantal’s statement was situated in broader narratives of homeless people being less than human, as dirty and inconvenient. I therefore positioned Chantal as ignorant and lacking empathy.

The second discussion in the class involved understanding the factors behind youth homelessness. Chantal and Simone, as described in the field notes, produced arguments that were in opposition to the arguments made by the three adults. Their main argument was that young people should rely on family members before turning to friends for support if they find themselves without a place to live. The adults, on the other hand, argued that many young people do not have family that they could rely on in the manner that Chantal and Simone did. My descriptions position Chantal and Simone as stubborn, e.g., line 22, “But they didn’t budge on their opinions,” whereas the adults were once again positioned as reasonably explaining why the young people were incorrect, e.g., lines 24-25, “and we were explaining that sometimes people don’t have family that live near them…” Consequently, through the ethnographic observations recorded here, I reinforced damage/deficit discourses of Blackness by positioning these young women as ignorant (i.e., intellectually damaged) and behaviourally difficult due to their refusal
to agree with the adults’ arguments. Coupled with my earlier interpretation of Chantal’s arguments and behavior as ignorant and lacking empathy, my descriptions positioned her as a “troublemaker”.

Chantal and I had the opportunity to discuss this interaction during our first interview. In this setting, she maintained her argument that family members were the only reliable source of support for a young person. When placed in the context of Chantal’s overall narratives, it became apparent to me that the argument in class was not based on ignorance, or in an attempt to be contrary. Instead, Chantal’s arguments were based in her own experiences of having very close relationships with her extended family, as well as in an insistence that her voice and right to speak were treated as just as valid as the voices of the adults in the room. Below is an excerpt from the conversation that Chantal and I had about the class debate, which begins with her making a general statement about speaking up:
Excerpt 3

Chantal: …like don't be scared of people here like who cares? Don't be scared. Say what you have to say, say what- say it. Don't keep in, keep it in for what?

RL: But what if you get in trouble?

Chantal: Ok, but like, you're doing something to bother me, that's why that day we had a big argument in the class, like I wasn't, processing it, like I was like "what do you mean, be homeless, and then, go to a friend's house?"

RL: Ohh ok

Chantal: Like, that day I was like, what do you, why would you go to your friend's?

Like you have family, you're gonna go to a friend?" [RL: mm hmmm] that's not gonna accept you for the wwoooolle, rest of your, when you could go to a family's house?"

[RL: mm hmmm]. Like that didn't make any sense, I was like "what is she talking about?"

RL: mm hmmm

Chantal: Like those types of things like she tries to think she's right, like you're not right, when you say it

RL: No no no we're right. Remember I was on Miss D's side eh

Chantal: No! you guys weren't right! [RL laughs]. You guys weren't right to me--

RL: No we were right-

Chantal: Like, ok, I guess yea, how you could say it was me and Simone thinking about it from our families [RL: yes], but at the same time, you could have, I could be Simone's best friend in the world, you could call us sisters [RL: mm hmmm], I would never, call her first, if I was homeless, if my mom kicked me out [RL: mm hmmm]. I would never. What is sh-what am I supposed to, "Simone I'm homeless"? [RL laughs]. You think her mom would accept me in her house? [RL: maybe]. Well pro-

maybe but I'm gonna call my grandma first, my dad first, like something [RL: yea]. I wouldn't- of course I'd call a friend, but not the first person, [RL laughs]. That did not make sense to me like what is, like, how-

In line 860, Chantal states “say what you have to say,” which implies that her practice of saying what was on her mind was not context-dependent. This is reinforced when I ask her, in line 861, “but what if you get in trouble?” Chantal responds by bringing up the discussion in Miss D’s class. Therefore, although she does not explicitly state that considerations of potential punishment are not a factor for her, she uses the argument in Miss D’s class to illustrate that she was willing to argue her point regardless of whom she was arguing against and of the potential repercussions. Chantal therefore positions herself as being willing to be labelled as a
troublemaker in the process of standing up for what she believes in.

In lines 866-869 Chantal restates the argument that she initially made in class, while offering an elaboration that someone is more likely to be accepted by a family member than a friend if they no longer have a place in which to live. In line 871, Chantal refers directly to Miss D by stating “…like she tries to think she’s right, like you’re not right, when you say it.” In making this statement, she positions Miss D, not as an authoritative teacher in the classroom, as I had done in my field notes, but as someone on equal footing with her and whose opinion was erroneous. Here, Chantal speaks of Miss D in a manner that suggests that this was not the first time that she has disagreed with her on coursework, and that she perhaps had a general lack of respect for Miss D’s ability to lead the class.

In my response to Chantal, I aligned myself with Miss D by stating “we’re right” (line 873) and explicitly stated that I was on Miss D’s side. Here I attempted to counteract the reversed power relationship that Chantal established in stating that Miss D was “not right,” a position that Chantal continued to maintain in line 874. She then gives a small concession in lines 876-877 when she repeats one of the points that the adults had made in the class, that she and Simone were looking at the situation only from their own individual perspectives. However, she does not concede that her perspective was invalid. At the end of our exchange, after I reiterated the arguments that Miss D, Miss X, and I were attempting to make in class (not shown here), she states, “Like yea I understand it it's just, I still see it on my perspective…But I understand what she said. I understand, like I get it, just I had—I had to make my argument”.

Chantal’s clarification that she understood our perspective, but simply did not agree, allows for a new interpretation of the exchange. Throughout both interviews, Chantal spoke of
the relationships that she had with her immediate and extended family members. She described herself as having a very close relationship with her mother, and aspired to be in the same profession as her. She described her older brother as “protective but bad,” and also stated that she had very close relationships with her brother’s father, and was developing a relationship with her biological father whom she had only recently met in person. She described her grandmother as someone who was “always there” for her, with whom she frequently spoke with on the phone and with whom she had overnight visits. Chantal therefore established herself as having a tightly knit family with multiple individuals on whom she could depend. This provided a different lens through which to interpret her arguments. Here, unlike the adults, she places greater importance on close family ties, which allows her to provide a different perspective on the trajectories of youth homelessness.

It is also important to consider the material circumstances under which Chantal was able to form such strong bonds with her family members. In the class, Miss D pointed to one of the other students, a White Canadian boy, as an example of someone who did not have the option of turning to family members given that his extended family lived quite a distance away in a province on the East Coast of Canada. Chantal’s family, by contrast, were mostly first-generation Canadians. Given immigration patterns that see new immigrants tending to settle in larger Canadian cities where there is more likely to be an established community of people from their home countries to connect with, it is likely that Chantal’s family members followed these patterns and were therefore able to live within relatively close proximity of one another. For Chantal in particular, this material context likely facilitated the relationships that she was able to build with her extended family.
Overall, Chantal was willing to occupy a “troublemaker” subject position in the process of advocating for her voice in the classroom. Whereas the adults in the classroom sought to normalize a lack of family ties as the basis on which to understand the context of youth homelessness, Chantal attempted to normalize close family ties, i.e., her own experience and perhaps the experience of people like her, as a protective factor against homelessness. Previous research has demonstrated that this is often a position that Black students are placed in, in which their attempts to legitimize their experiences in mainstream classrooms are often met with resistance (e.g. Solomon, 2004). This analysis adds further evidence to the subtleties of such interactions, where explicitly racist or prejudice actions are not taken by educators but where the impacts of marginalization are the same. In considerations of inclusive schooling practices, it suggests that detailed attention to such interactions are needed to ensure that students who do not comply with mainstream understandings are not excluded and consequently disadvantaged in their attempts to have their voices heard.

6.2.2 “Damaged” Black family

The societal discourses surrounding Chantal’s immediate family structure also positioned her as “at risk.” Chantal lived in an apartment with her mother and older brother. Although her mother was currently dating one person and therefore partnered, she was unmarried and Chantal described her as being “single”. Consequently, Chantal lived in a “single parent household”. Chantal’s family structure is situated within deficit discourses of Blackness, which pathologize single parent led homes. Documentation of this discourse dates back to as early as the 1930s in the United States (Brown & Donner, 2011), where attention was given to the “absence” of lower-class African American men from the household and the consequent feminization of these
homes. The “Moynihan Report,” published in 1965 by political advisor and professor Daniel Moynihan, is an infamous report that extended this narrative, describing African American households as more frequently led by single mothers – which was treated as inherently problematic – and as feminized spaces that were highly unstable in comparison with White American families (Moynihan, 1965). Black fathers were depicted as deserting their families at least in part due to lack of economic opportunities and consequent inabilities to support these families in the decades following emancipation. Single-mother led families were portrayed as insufficiently capable of raising productive citizens of US society (Moyinhan, 1965).

As James (2012) elaborates, Black males raised in such households, i.e., as “fatherless,” are often stereotyped as lacking appropriate parental guidance that would exist in a nuclear family, and are seen as consequently more susceptible to delinquent behaviours. Dowd (1997) discusses the social and legal definitions of family that normalize two parent heterosexual family units, which in turn works to disadvantage families that do not fall within those definitions.

However, Chantal did not describe her family structure as deficit, and as previously discussed, described close and loving relationships with members of her immediate and extended family. Nor did she lament the absence of a father in her home. To the contrary, she described herself as having two “dads”. She explained that she had recently met her biological father, who resided in Jamaica, and stated that she had spoken with him on the phone every day since meeting him the previous summer. She also described herself as having a strong relationship with her older brother’s father, whom she also described as her “dad” and who had always been present in her life. She also referred to his children as her siblings. Although Chantal did not live with either of these men, she described them both as playing a significant role in her life.
Chantal further subverted discourses of damage/deficit in her descriptions of her emerging relationship with her biological father. Although she expressed a high level of enthusiasm in building this relationship with him, she was also critical of the current parameters of the relationship. Her narrative was therefore not simply one of gratitude at having the opportunity to build a relationship with her father, but one of an agentic teenager willing to negotiate boundaries with him. With regard to her most recent visit to Jamaica, she explained:

**Excerpt 4**

1561 Chantal: 'Cause my dad's down there I'll get what, I'll get what I want, like my dad, especially since it's the first time I met him, so he'll just be like you know, be like, he's not too strict on me [RL: yea] 'Cause even, I don't really feel like-- if you just met someone, you can't be strict on them [RL: ok] Especially if you're the parent like you have to like, think like, you're the one that left, not me [RL: m hmm mm hmm], so you can't be, "oh my God Chantal" this and that, like no [RL: mm hmm]. I'll like look at you and be like, "stop, right now"

Throughout both of our interviews, Chantal expressed no resentment towards her biological father for not being present for most of her life, and her descriptions relayed a certain level of excitement at having finally met him. Nonetheless, in this excerpt she presents her version of what the requirements of a new parent to a teenager may be. She positions herself as deliberately taking advantage of the fact that her father stood to jeopardize their new relationship if he was too “strict” with her. She firmly calls on traditional parent-child power relations, positioning her father as the one who has the responsibility to forge and maintain the relationship with her, given his prior absence. However, she simultaneously subverts this traditional arrangement of power by claiming that she had the power to dictate the terms of the relationship if her father did not treat her in the manner in which she described as appropriate to the current state of their
relationship. In so doing, Chantal not only undermines any potential positioning of being emotionally harmed by the absence of her biological father but she also places herself on equal standing with him by arguing that she could potentially reject him if he does not treat her in a manner that she finds to be ideal.

Overall, Chantal’s narrative allows for attention to a multitude of relations that may exist within broadly defined “single parent families,” and the agency of children within these families to influence their relationships with their parents. Giving closer attention to the experiences and interpretations of children within these families, as opposed to broader narratives that would construct both the families and the children as “damaged,” therefore opens up opportunities for normalizing, as opposed to pathologizing, the social worlds of these young people.

6.2.3 Gendered risk

In this final section of the chapter, I discuss gendered experiences of risk centred on female bodies through an analysis of Chantal’s own experience of victimization. In Canadian research on Black student academic achievement, the majority of the academic discourse has been focused on the experiences of Black boys (James, 2003; 2012) or on an undifferentiated group of Black students, with little attention given to the unique experiences of Black girls (Codjoe, 2006; Dei et al., 1997; Solomon, 1996; see Ibrahim, 1999, for an exception). Statistics in the United States demonstrate that boys, across all ethno-racial groups, underperform academically in comparison with their female counterparts (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008). Evidence from Canada also demonstrates that the academic achievement gap between overarching racial categories is considerably larger than the gap between overarching genders (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012). There is, however, a general unavailability of gendered analysis
within racial/ethnic categories in Canada.

The predominant idea that girls are academically outperforming boys consequently gives the impression that girls in general, and Black girls by extension, are “doing just fine” (San-Vicente, 2010). However, research in Toronto schools demonstrates that some social aspects of school culture are quite harmful for girls. Falconer et al. (2008) demonstrated that a high level of sexual assault and harassment is occurring in Toronto schools, with racialized girls at greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Specific to Black girls, images of enslaved Africans as subhuman and sexually promiscuous have translated into contemporary images of Black women and girls as highly sexual (Donovan, 2007; Townsend, Thomas, Nielands, & Jackson, 2010). Therefore these girls, like all young women, are at risk of being sexually victimized. However, they are also at greater risk because these over-sexualized images position them as willing participants, resulting in less urgency given to their reports of victimization (Donovan; 2007; Falconer et al., 2008)

In relation to how young women manage real and perceived risk, Baker (2010) argues that contemporary understandings of feminism which emphasize women’s sexual freedom, coupled with neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, choice, and agency, have produced a “post-feminist” discourse in which young women avoid positioning as victims when gendered violence does occur. Gill (2007) discusses post-feminism as a “sensibility” (p. 148), as something that should be studied rather than a perspective from which to study. Post-feminism emphasizes “self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline” (p. 149). It is argued that the concept contains both feminist and ant-feminist messaging, in which women’s sexual freedom is emphasized but in which reification of natural sex differences, and traditional sexist notions of
self-protection, are also emphasized (McRobbie, 2009). I argue that, although Chantal initially positioned herself as vulnerable when discussing her experience of victimization, drawing on post-feminist discourse allowed her to position herself as strong and as possessing the appropriate skills and knowledge to avoid further victimization.

Early in our first interview, Chantal stated that rumours were circulating at Lilyfield about her in relation to an incident the previous semester. In this incident, a male student had created an anonymous Twitter account and used it to broadcast claims that certain young women who attended Lilyfield and other schools in the area were known to perform sexual acts with boys in the buildings of these schools. Here we see the introduction of cultural understandings that position young women as sexually promiscuous for participating in consensual – or non-consensual – sexual activities with male peers (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Chantal was one of the girls named in the thread. She stated that the individuals responsible had retrieved a photo of her from her Facebook page and placed it on the Twitter thread, thereby making her easily identifiable. Simone was also named in the thread. Chantal’s mother eventually got involved and the thread was removed.

In elaborating on this incident, Chantal stated that Lilyfield was “mix-up” and that if she had attended a different school, she would not have had this issue. Later on in our interview, she constructed Lilyfield as a “Black school,” and stated that Black students were “mix up” and “drama”. She stated that her previous school, “…was not, mix up, I was never talked about like how I was when I came here…” . Although in this part of the interview she did not reference the specific incident that she had discussed, Chantal appeared to be arguing that there was a culture in the school itself that facilitated the types of rumors that she had been subjected to, and to be
implying that this culture was in part rooted in the presence of more Black students as compared with the school she had previously attended. Chantal therefore drew on a damage/deficit discourse of Blackness to explain her overall experiences at Lilyfield.

In describing her response to the incident itself, Chantal initially positioned herself as feeling quite vulnerable, particularly in the context of being named as participating in sexual activities about which, she stated, she had little knowledge:

**Excerpt 5**

386  **Chantal:** Yea it was really bad, it was real-I, I didn't show that I cared, no one talks about it now [RL: yea] maybe people do but its like very low [RL: Ok] like I don't know [RL: Ok, yea]. Obviously I knew when it happened people were, everyone was talking about me
389  **RL:** Yea
390  **Chantal:** like I knew that. It was weird it was really like hard to come to school, like I didn't even want to

Here, Chantal describes the incident as “really bad” (line 386) but also describes herself as attempting to give the impression that the rumors did not have an effect on her. Therefore, although her descriptions position her as feeling vulnerable, “it was really like hard to come to school” (line 391), she also describes an attempt to appear strong in front of her peers. As previously discussed, this self-policing is a feature of post-feminist discourse, where women avoid viewing themselves as victims, particularly gendered victims, even when having legitimate reasons to do so (Baker, 2010).

Chantal maintains her positioning as strong when she continues her description of the incident:
Excerpt 6

Chantal: …Like it got reported like, it got, took off the internet the night of, it's just the fact that m-like I didn't care what they were saying 'cause I knew it's not true, but like I didn't like that my picture was out there. They went on my Facebook and took my picture. But that's why I deleted my, account, on Facebook [RL: oh yea? wow] I've never been on Facebook ever since, the beginning of this year

Here, Chantal positions herself as strong, when she states “I didn’t care what they were saying ‘cause I knew it was not true” (line 469). She also argues that her main concern was that her picture was taken from her Facebook page and placed on the Twitter thread, thereby making her easily identifiable. She states that she deleted her entire Facebook account in response, but this deletion is also framed as a preventative measure against further victimization. In so doing, Chantal invokes features of post-feminist discourse, i.e., individual responsibility and agency to protect oneself against victimization. However, whereas the deletion of her account may have somewhat mitigated the possibility of her image being shared online outside her control or consent, such an action would not, of course, prevent a similar overall incident from reoccurring.

Throughout our discussion, and in my discussion with other participants, both male and female, it became apparent that what had happened to Chantal was not an isolated incident. Such incidents appeared to be quite common at Lilyfield and in other schools. Chantal was quite critical of the young men who, as she stated, wanted to be sexually active with their female peers but who spread rumours about these young women as being sexually promiscuous after such activities occurred. However, Chantal also argued that young women were primarily responsible for their victimization:
Excerpt 7

419  **Chantal:** Yea. They're so childish 'cause they always tell their friends. And this one
girl, she's in the school, I feel bad for her 'cause, she did it, she did it, and the guy
recorded her
422  **RL:** Are you s-on tape?
423  **Chantal:** Yea, on his phone and sh-the girl doesn't even know and he sent it to all his
friends
425  **RL:** Oh my God
426  **Chantal:** Yea, it's like not easy to come to school knowing you did that, especially
with someone that comes to this school too [RL: Oh wow]. Like if you wanna do it,
do it, who cares, but like, don't do it to someone who comes to the school, then you're
an idiot [RL laughs], like very foolish if you do it to someone who comes to the
430  school. That's my opinion

In line 419, Chantal calls the boys “childish” for engaging in sexual activity with young women
and then telling their friends about it. In line 420 she initially expresses sympathy for the young
woman who was videotaped. She also attaches agency to the young woman’s actions in line 427,
by stating that it was the young woman’s choice to engage in the activity with her male peer —
“Like if you wanna do it, do it, who cares.” Here again Chantal invokes features of post-feminist
discourse (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007), in which a woman is able to freely choose how to conduct
herself sexually with no repercussions. However, the overall context of the incident, i.e., of the
young woman being filmed without her knowledge, demonstrates that other gendered power
dynamics were at play outside the immediate interactional context of the sexual encounter. That
the young woman could have been victimized in such a manner demonstrates that she was
lacking the very agency that Chantal initially attributed to her.

In describing the young woman as “foolish” she is blamed for her victimization, which,
once again, is consistent with post-feminist discourse. Chantal argues that she should have had
the foresight to determine that interacting with someone at the school in this manner would place
her at risk. However this argument also implies that Chantal herself was responsible for her own victimization. The two instances were different in that Chantal was not videotaped, but she was named as promiscuous nonetheless. This indicates a fundamental lack of agency for young women in the school to craft their own sexual narratives.

Chantal’s discussion of the experiences that she and other young women have had brings attention to the intersecting discourses of race and gender that have shaped their subjectivities. Chantal framed the rumors that she experienced as a “Black” problem, as one that manifested in an environment in which she interacted with more Black students than she had prior to attending Lilyfield. However, she also held herself responsible for mitigating the harm that she experienced, and more generally held other young women responsible for protecting themselves from sexual victimization. These incidents were therefore framed not only inside damage/deficit discourses of Blackness but also inside a post-feminist narrative of sexual freedom and individual responsibility to avoid victimization. Chantal’s reflections of these incidents demonstrated an negotiation of potentially damaging raced and gendered discourses and her efforts to position herself outside them. In attending to how students interpret and rationalize these incidents of bullying and sexual violence in schools, educators can be proactive in addressing cultures that foster these events, rather than being reactive to such incidents after they have already occurred.

6.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I analysed the narrative of one of my participants, Chantal, to demonstrate how a Black student negotiates the multiple discourses that work to position her as “at risk”. Chantal managed damaged/deficit discourses of Blackness as related to her academic work, her
family life, and her experience of sexual harassment as a female student at Lilyfield. Through my analysis, I demonstrated how Chantal positioned herself as a critical and motivated student in the face of classroom treatment that would position her as an “underachiever” and “troublemaker”. I also demonstrated Chantal’s agency in negotiating her new relationship with her biological father, rather than accepting a positioning as a disadvantaged “fatherless” young Black woman. Finally, Chantal drew on post-feminist discourse in avoiding positioning as a “victim” of sexual harassment, despite her actual experience of victimization. This analysis emphasizes the value of attending to young people’s individual experiences even as they are shaped by broader discourses. Such a focus leaves room for more creative inclusive schooling practices, informed by local processes and experiences as opposed to broader, decontextualized narratives. The implications of this will be discussed in the following discussion section.

6.4 Discussion

Historical and present-day academic, policy, and lay discourse on Black students has been primarily centred on academic underachievement and “at-risk” status in relation to school performance and behaviours (Brown & Donner, 2011; Carey, 2014; James, 2012). More specifically, primary attention has been given to the experiences of Black boys in schools with less attention given to the unique challenges that Black girls face (James, 2012; San Vicente, 2010). The preceding discussions outline how one Black female student navigated damaged/deficit discourses of Blackness in relation to her academic experiences and family life, and in relation to specific gendered experiences of sexual victimization.
Dominant discourses of Black student underachievement may consequently mask the consistent negotiations and positionings that students take up on a day-to-day basis. While such negotiations do not undo the effects of the broader discourses to which these students are subjected, they do open the door for deeper considerations into how to create more inclusive spaces for these students. Specifically, Chantal’s reflections on her relationships with Miss D and Mr. W, as well as the debate that ensued between Chantal and the adults in the classroom, reinforce, in a detailed manner, the relational aspects of students’ educational experiences. Chantal’s ability to assess her teachers, while also being frank about her own efforts in her academic work, demonstrates that Black students are not simply victims of an unjust Eurocentric school system but actively seek out and evaluate what they determine to be most beneficial for their educational progress. Once again, this does not automatically undo the existence of oppressive discourses and school practices that exclude these students, but it does emphasize students as co-creators and interpreters of their experiences, which can carve a path towards actively breaking down dominant stagnant discourses of academic underachievement.

Similarly, my analysis highlighted how Black student perspectives may be excluded and undermined even among educators who have the best intentions. Miss X and I, both Black women who had a stated interest in seeing Black students succeed, and who had undertaken post-secondary studies towards that end, disregarded Chantal’s arguments in the classroom as they did not align with our expectations of a sound argument. The incident reinforced understandings that it is not simply the content of curricula, but subtle classroom interactions, as well, that can be exclusionary for students. For educators to take on truly equitable and inclusive pedagogy, they must give attention to how such exclusions are subtly enacted, and what classroom practices
can be integrated to ensure that students’ voices and experiences are foregrounded in their educational experiences.

In relating her interactions with her biological father, Chantal’s narrative once again demonstrated how young people make meaning out of their experiences while subverting dominant damage/deficit discourses. Her experiences open space for deeper considerations of non-traditional family structures and how Black adolescents and parents alike manage their roles in these families. Ample research points to the diversity of Black family arrangements worldwide and the various parenting methods that Black men draw on when absent from the home (e.g., Madhavan & Roy, 2012; Richardson, 2009). Nonetheless, as James (2012) discusses, narratives of what are believed to be the harms of single parent homes, and Black Canadian adolescents’ general lack of positive Black male role models, remains a prominent community and media discourse. Chantal’s narrative brings attention not only to the parenting roles of non-residential and non-biological Black fathers but also to the unproblematic manner in which children in these families may regard these parenting relationships. Giving attention to narratives like Chantal’s therefore provides room for more diverse, non-pathological understandings of families to disrupt dominant laments of single parent homes.

My analysis of Chantal’s narrative in relation to her experiences of sexual harassment and bullying draws attention to the unique experiences that Black girls may have in schools and to how they may manage these experiences. Chantal’s explanations for her own victimization, and the victimization of other girls at Lilyfield, worked to construct a post-feminist discourse in which girls are positioned as autonomous and free to make choices about their sexual behaviour, thereby leaving them responsible for their own victimization. Exploration of post-feminist
discourses have been conducted both with regard to general responsibilization, and in considering sexual responsibility in particular. For example, Baker (2010) discusses the ways in which her participants engaged in practices of self-monitoring and development, through self-help media consumption and through emphasizing individual responsibility and enterprise in the face of structural disadvantage that was largely outside their control. In the context of media and sexual responsibilization, Ringrose and Barajas (2011) have demonstrated the complex negotiations that young women make in taking on highly sexualized online personas while, at the same time, having to contend with “slut shaming”. For one participant, a sexualized persona appeared to be acceptable only in the context of her being in a heterosexual romantic relationship. Once this relationship ended, this young woman adjusted her online identity to downplay her sexual identity in the face of potential shaming. In other words, similar to Chantal, this young woman attempted to exercise control over how she was perceived, but within the context of a highly misogynistic school and online environment.

What these studies illustrate is the hyper vigilance required of young women to monitor themselves to avoid actual victimization and/or victimized self-constructions. Consequently, while the TDSB implemented a sexual misconduct policy in 2010 (TDSB, 2010a), as well as guidelines to address cyber-bulling in their Promoting a Positive School Climate policy (TDSB, 2013b), such policies are reactive, intended to respond to incidents after they have occurred rather than addressing general school culture. The 2010 Gender Based Violence policy does speak to educating students and staff on the causes of gender based violence, however it is left up to individual schools to determine how to implement this work (TDSB, 2010b). Chantal’s narrative not only draws attention to the risk that young women like her face; it also sheds a light
on specific ways in which harmful cultures can be maintained by those who are at greatest risk within them. They call on educators to examine and address the dynamic ways in which such cultures are fostered in order to prevent further victimization of students.

6.5 Conclusion

Taken together, Chantal’s narrative brings attention to the complex interplay of broader discourses that shape individual student subjectivities. In negotiating discourses on Blackness, femininity, and educational attainment, Chantal both appropriated and resisted categorizations that placed her in “at-risk” or damaged subject positions. She also demonstrated agency in challenging broader homogenizing category constructions.
7 General Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The academic experiences of Black students have been a line of research of international interest for decades. Much of this research is focused on the finding that Black students in North America generally achieve lower academic standing than their non-Black peers according to measures such as standardized testing and graduation rates. Through this post-structuralist ethnographic study, I have sought a close understanding of the experiences of Black students and their teachers in one secondary school in the Greater Toronto Area. I conducted an ethnographic study at Lilyfield High School over an 18-week period in the spring of 2015. I utilized participant observation, informal conversations, formal interviews, photoelicitation, and document analysis as my data-collection method. This dissertation is consequently based on my interactions with a sample of 14 staff members and 12 students who formally agreed to participate in the study, and numerous other students and school personnel over the course of my time at Lilyfield. This work was conducted during a time in which the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009) was in play.

The questions that guided this project were 1) What rhetorical resources related to identity, race, culture, education, and otherwise intersect with the subjectivities of youth who self-identify as or who are categorized as Black? 2) Are these rhetorical resources available in the local school environment? How do staff members draw on these and other resources in their talk and actions as related to Black student experiences? 3) How (if at all) do youth who self-identify as Black negotiate the multiple subject positions that are made available to them through these resources? Do they exercise agency – as defined under post-structuralism – in doing so? 4)
How can our understanding of how students and staff contend with the multiple competing resources in talking about their experiences help create a school environment that is more inclusive of diverse student populations? In this final chapter I will first summarize how I answered these questions and then will discuss general policy and practice implications of this project.

I addressed my first research question – about the rhetorical resources related to identity, race, culture, education, and otherwise and how they intersect with the subjectivities of youth who self-identify as, or who are categorized as Black – by exploring the academic literature and current policy context related to the educational experiences of Black youth in Canada. In chapter 1, I outlined current statistics on the academic achievement gap of Black Canadian students, and traced the historical and current policy context relevant to education equity in Ontario. In so doing, I laid the foundation for understanding why relationships between Black racial and cultural identity and academic achievement have been part of academic and lay discourse in Canada.

In chapter 2, I discussed literature from the United States that has explored, from a social-cognitive perspective, a causal relationship between Black racial identity and academic outcomes. I argued that, perhaps more important than validating such a relationship are the discursive underpinnings of this work that allow us to understand what arguments and research are supported and what is left unexamined. More specifically, I argued that a dominant discourse underlying this work is that of Blackness as damaged/deficit, with much of the extant research being concerned with deconstructing this discourse. I then outlined the features of the damaged/deficit discourse of Blackness and identified an additional neoliberal discourse as
relevant to the context of my research. I argued that damaged/deficit discourses are grounded in the history of oppression and exclusion of peoples of African descent in North America, which has implications for the lives of Black students today, and that neoliberal governmentality can be traced through the policies and practices of the Ontario Ministry of Education and Toronto District School Board.

In chapter 2, I also examined the theoretical foundations of research on the academic achievement gap in Canada, and outlined three main discursive constructions of Blackness that are produced through academic work and Ontario education policies. I argued that this work, approached primarily from social-cognitive, post-modern, Afrocentric, anti-racist, and multiculturalist perspectives, produced constructions of Blackness as a) damaged/deficit, b) therapy/protective, and c) resistance. Through my data analysis in the remaining chapters, I demonstrated that of these constructions, the most common framings reproduced through the talk and actions of staff members and students were Blackness as damaged/deficit and Blackness as therapy/protective.

My second research question was whether these rhetorical resources were available in the local school environment. I asked how staff members draw on these and other resources in their talk and actions as related to Black student experiences. Chapter 4, my first analysis chapter, was intended to answer this question. I argued that neoliberal governmentality, coupled with the overall context of anti-racist critiques of White teachers in educating racially and ethnically diverse students and Afrocentric perspectives that decentre Eurocentric education as the norm, made available conflicting rhetorical resources on which staff members drew in their discussions related to working with Black and “diverse” student populations. I argued that these conflicting
resources produced constructions of culture as a product and of Whiteness as a barrier to teaching Black and other non-White students in the talk and actions of staff members. I also argued that staff members’ discourse positioned them as both capable and incapable of performing their teaching responsibilities. Finally, I argued that this overall discursive context also facilitated staff members’ constructions of Blackness as damaged/deficit, which worked to position Black students as academic victims and/or as behaviourally challenging. Taken together, I suggest that in the context of this conflicting discursive environment, even informed and well intentioned educators can reproduce marginalizing discourses in schools.

My third research question was how (if at all) youth who self-identify as Black negotiate the multiple subject positions made available to them through these resources, and do they exercise agency – as defined under post-structuralism – in doing so? Chapters 5 and 6 were intended to answer these questions. In chapter 5, I argued that students drew on their own cultural resources to creatively construct meanings of Blackness in the face of adult attempts (including my own) to provide Blackness as therapy to these students. I then outlined the ways in which students attempted to subvert the dominant damage/deficit discourse of Blackness and to position themselves as empowered students, while also highlighting instances where such attempts were not made. I argued that students took up responsibilized subject positions in which they described themselves as self-consciously and expertly navigating their academic experiences for maximum success. By contrast, students also held their teachers responsible for their success, again exercising agency in resisting responsibilized subject positions.

In chapter 6, I focused on the narrative of one student participant, Chantal, and demonstrated how she agentically navigated damage/deficit discourse while taking up multiple
and oftentimes contradictory subject positions. I argued that Chantal’s narrative brings attention to the types of discussions that can be foreclosed when only certain aspects of students’ experiences (for example, racial identity and grades) are deemed relevant to their school and life experiences. Chantal’s narrative brought attention to the dynamic relational aspects of students’ classroom experiences, the agency that she exercised in navigating her family relations, and her resistance of victim subject positions when managing experiences of sexual harassment as a Black girl.

Collectively, these research findings coalesce to answer my final research question: how can our understanding of how students and staff contend with the multiple competing resources in talk about their experiences, assist in creating a school environment that is more inclusive of diverse student populations? I attempted to answer this question through all three analysis chapters. In chapter 4, I argued that staff members, even those grounded in social justice perspectives, need continued support in unpacking the nuances of the discursive fields in which they live and work. Helping staff members to understand that the complexities of achievement gap discourse for Black students will enable them to recognize how some perspectives and practices that may be intended to be helpful for students may have the converse effect. Such support can also help staff members to manage their own identities in teaching students of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In chapter 5 I argued that explicit and deliberate deconstruction of damage/deficit discourses need to be an integral part of education curricula. Africentric programs and schools currently exist in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB 2014c; n.d.a), but such courses remain inaccessible to the entire student body. Making such courses mainstream and mandatory
has been a call of concerned educators and community members for decades. My dissertation reinforces these calls. In addition to this, understanding the relevance of neoliberal governmentality to Black students’ subjectivities will also allow educators to determine how best to support students and students how best to support themselves. While standardized testing and streaming are not soon to disappear, helping students understand how these practices impact their individual experiences and expectations of themselves can in turn help them take reasonable responsibility for their learning while avoiding unwarranted self-blame.

Finally, in chapter 6, I argued that Chantal’s narrative orients us to two specific ways in which inclusive practice can be improved. Chantal’s narrative brought to bear the intersections between students’ individual family and cultural experiences and how these may translate into classroom interactions. The Ontario Ministry of Education calls on educators to integrate three instructional approaches: 1) Universal Design for Learning; 2) differentiated instruction; and 3) the tiered approach to prevention and intervention. The combination of these three approaches emphasizes centering the individual learner and responding effectively to their strengths and needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013d). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as both policy and practice (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b) also emphasizes grounding the individual learners’ cultural worldviews in the classroom to facilitate their learning. Chantal’s narratives reinforce the need for these approaches and the need to be sensitive to the nuances of how classroom interactions may be exclusionary. It also brings attention to how students’ cultural experiences may be unintentionally disregarded when not presented as cultural in a traditional sense (i.e., as associated with documented values or practices). Chantal’s narrative also emphasizes the importance of addressing cultures of
victimization of girls in schools, as opposed to interventions after harmful incidents have already occurred.

7.2 Contributions to academic literature and future research

Taken together, these findings suggest that attention to the academic achievement gap for Black students requires more nuanced investigation. Whereas scholars have studied: factors contributing to dropping out (Dei et al., 1997); societal narratives that negatively shape Black students in school experiences (James, 2003; 2012); and discourses that shape successful outcomes for Black Canadians (Gosine, 2008; 2012), such work can inadvertently contribute to dichotomous success/failure narratives. My own approach to this research, in simultaneously seeking to understand the competing discourses that shape both the lives of Black students and the teaching practice of their educators, opens a space for understanding students’ experiences outside this dichotomy. Research that explicitly questions how damaged/deficit discourses are recycled (e.g., Brown, 2011) or question what has now become the “Achievement Gap discourse” (e.g., Carey, 2014; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012) represent promising directions that can reorient attention to Black students in the literature beyond attention to narrowly defined academic successes and failures. Further investigation is therefore needed among larger and more diverse samples of teachers and students – diversity that accounts for differences in social class, teacher education, school geographic location, etc. – to determine how broader discourses are taken up in specific school environments and what social actions are performed with them. This work can contribute to interventions that are unique to those environments and would have a greater likelihood of being more effective.
My work also adds to the Canadian literature on complex Black student subjectivities. Work by Ibrahim (1999; 2008) on Francophone African immigrant youth and “ethnography of performance” in an Ontario school gives attention to these young people’s appropriation, rejection, and transformation of the societal discourses to which they are subjected in the process of “becoming Black” after immigrating to Canada. James (2012) also brings attention to how young people are socialized in particular narratives of Blackness that shape how they are treated in school settings and society at large. My work adds to this body of work by demonstrating Black students’ appropriation of meritocratic neoliberal discourses in describing their academic motivations. These findings are congruent with the work of Gosine (2008; 2012), who attended to the neoliberal subject positions that economically successful Black Canadian adults occupied while simultaneously claiming a politicized Black identity. In presenting these findings I am suggesting that understanding students as embedded in their broader social contexts allows for more nuanced understandings of their experiences, without taking for granted how race and culture may shape their experiences and, more importantly, without ignoring other factors that play a role in their academic outcomes.

In relation to the traditional social psychological literature on Black racial and ethnic identities and academic performance, my work complements, but also challenges conceptualizations of this relationship. A recent meta-analysis by Miller-Cotto & Brynes (2016), examined the last two decades of research in this area to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between academic success and ethnic-racial identity (ERI). The analysis demonstrated that theories that predicted that the relationship between the two variables as being dependent on various factors, including sampling context (e.g. predominantly white or
predominantly Black institutions), and participant developmental period (i.e. childhood, adolescence or adulthood), received more support than theories that predicted more consistent relationships (i.e. strong positive racial affiliation consistently associated with high academic achievement). This work is important for helping researchers and practitioners to understand general trends in this area of research, but make it difficult to contend with specific processes and activities that inform the predicted relationships.

My work complements this literature by explicating how students’ understanding of race and Blackness may, or may not, in specific contexts contribute to their learning habits and academic success. However my work also challenges this traditional literature, by pulling attention away from the individual cognitive processes that are typically measured in these studies, to the richness and complex discursive fields that exist within schooling contexts and that shape student academic outcomes. My work demonstrated, for example, how broader discourses and schooling structures constrained students’ actions and understandings of achievement and Blackness, while also opening up opportunities for student agency, self-definition and self-advocacy. My work demonstrated how some students simultaneously took up meritocratic, responsibilized subject positions in facilitating their academic success, while also demonstrating how, depending on the interactional context, they took up or resisted dominant deficit discourses of Blackness that risked positioning them as academic failures. Consistent attention to these nuances will allow practitioners to address students’ social contexts, rather than focusing solely on “fixing” students through a fostering of their racial and ethnic social identities. In relation to my findings with Black girls in particular, my work also encourages researchers to extend their focus away from academic outcomes, to a variety of other experiences
that students are exposed to within schools that have a role to play in their overall well-being, but which are also, whether directly or indirectly, related to their academic outcomes.

7.3 Implications for policy and practice

In 2017, the Ontario Ministry of Education established the Education Equity Secretariat and released a new *Education Equity Action Plan* in the fall (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). This action plan commits the Secretariat to working with other provincial ministries to support Black youth and also names anti-Black racism as a potential factor in influencing the in-school experiences of Black students. Although this plan does not outline specific actions that will be taken to address the Achievement gap for Black students, its explicit naming of Black students is a group that may require special attention is a step beyond the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* introduced in 2009. Similarly, the establishment of Ontario’s Anti-Racism Directorate in 2015, the passing of the *Anti-Racism Act, 2017*, and the release of the *Anti-Black Racism Strategy* (Government of Ontario, 2017) in December 2017 all name Black Ontarians as a group that requires specific focus in Ontario to reduce disparities in life outcomes in general and education outcomes for Black youth specifically. While the liberal government that established these initiatives has since transitioned, and a new conservative provincial government is currently in place, these policies and legislation remain, in principle active. The current policy environment in Ontario therefore appears favourable for addressing the education disparities that have been recorded in the Toronto District School Board. The government has also committed to collecting race-based data across all school boards in Ontario to determine if similar disparities exist for Black students across the province, and to implement policies and practices that will address these potential disparities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017).
While these policy changes are welcome and indeed needed, one caution that will need to be considered is the potential for reifying damage/deficit discourses of Blackness in the context of naming and reducing disparities for Black populations. The work to reduce disparities is necessary, and the government recognizes and treats race as a social construct (Government of Ontario, 2016), however the Ontario government must take steps to understand the causes, contexts, and conceptualizations of extant disparities, in the process of attempting to eliminate said disparities.

Additionally, between 2013 and 2017, schools in the Toronto District School Board have undertaken pilot projects to examine the potential effectiveness of “delayed pathways,” or destreaming, of several courses in grade 9 classrooms. Through these initiatives, students who would typically be separated into Academic, Applied, and Essentials track courses in grade 9 all take Academic track courses and are consequently granted more time to determine the most appropriate path for their secondary education (To, Lloyd, Bacchus, & San Vicente, 2017). This is also a promising development, as in these efforts, Black students have been named as a specific group that has been disproportionately affected by streaming. The school board has committed determining the “in school and system processes” that contribute to streaming and to phasing these out with attention to anti-oppressive education theory (To et al., 2017). The attention to systemic processes in these efforts, as opposed to a focus on Black students themselves, represents a promising development, as there is an acknowledgment that it is school structures, and not the innate abilities or lack thereof of students, that largely contribute to their allocation to different program streams.
Collectively, these efforts may represent a shift in the discursive field of Ontario public education as it relates to Black students’ academic outcomes. However, as these initiatives are in their infancy, continued attention to how these they unfold is needed to determine whether, and how, discursive and material educational contexts for Ontarians racialized as Black will be transformed in the years to come.

7.4 Limitations

There are several limitations to this project that inform how the findings can be interpreted. First, the combination of my ethnographic method with discourse analysis was an uneasy marriage. Post-structuralism and ethnography are complementary, in that post-structuralist approaches demands that ethnographic data be treated as constructed, as opposed to as objective representations of a particular social contexts. However, the focus of discourse analysis on examining discourse as opposed to individual participants made it difficult at times to reconcile my data-collection methods (i.e. focus on individual narratives) with my analyses. Additionally, my interviews and observations provided me with rich data that were not limited to interview transcripts. However, the specific brand of discourse analysis that I employed in analyzing my data (i.e. discursive psychology) tends to focus in depth analysis of talk and text, which resulted in the bulk of my analysis being focused on my recorded interviews and written field notes. This led to the exclusion of more in-depth analysis of descriptive data based on my ethnographic observations, as has been done in other post-structuralist ethnographic projects (see for example Laws & Davies, 2000).

A second limitation may be my sample size of participants. A larger sample of both students and staff members would have enabled a greater breath of narratives to trace how
particular constructions of Blackness and other objects of discourse were produce. While this was partially mitigated by reference to extant literature and policy documents, access to more narratives may have allowed for the apprehension of a more diverse range of discourse and subject positions.

A third limitation may be the length of time that I spent in the physical school environment. While I found my time spent to be sufficient, observing the staff and students over the course of two terms, instead of one for example, may have allowed for more comprehensive and conclusive analyses of the overall school environment.

7.5 Conclusions

It is unlikely that research on the “academic achievement gap” will wane at any point in the near future. The continued existence of systemic barriers that shape the academic outcomes of students racialized as Black in Ontario means that many of these students will continue to experience disparate outcomes as related to mainstream definitions of academic achievement. While continued attention to this phenomenon is needed, more nuanced methods of theorizing and study will allow for explorations that move beyond reified discourses of Black student academic failure. This dissertation provides an in-depth account of the societal discourses that shaped the experiences of staff members and Black students at one secondary school in the Greater Toronto Area. The findings outlined in this paper suggest that staff members and students alike contend with complex social contexts that shape how they reflect on themselves and on others in the school environment. The findings provide insights into potential alternative approaches to investigating Black students’ experiences while also reinforcing the need to give equal focus to teacher experiences and practice.
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Research Ethics Boards Certification

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS
Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Human Participants

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<th>APPROVAL PERIOD:</th>
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<td>TITLE OF PROJECT:</td>
<td>Identities and schooling of Canadian youth of African and Caribbean heritage</td>
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The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University’s ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:

- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any modifications before they can be implemented.
- Report any change in the source of funding.
- Report unexpected events or incidental findings to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:

- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit a Status Report to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the EXPIRY DATE, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: November 20, 2014

L. Kuczynski
Chair, Research Ethics Board-General

Page 1 of 1
Appendix 2: Institutional Information Letter

Identities and Schooling of Canadian youth of African and Caribbean heritage

Hello, my name is Rashelle Litchmore and I am a PhD Candidate in the Applied Social Psychology program at the University of Guelph. Principal Paputsis has agreed to allow me to conduct research for my PhD thesis at your school. I completed my Masters research on the multiple and fluid identities of second-generation youth of African and Caribbean background in Canada. I used focus groups to conduct that project, and the research that I would like to do in your school represents an extension of this. The purpose of this research is to learn about the identities and experiences of youth of African/Caribbean heritage in your school. We will be using the information that we gain from this study to help your school to create an even more welcoming environment for students of all backgrounds in line with the guidelines of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. The research will take place over the course of approximately four to five months, between February 2015 and June 2015. It has four main components:

1. **Participant Observation:** Here, I will be at the school and participating in activities (such as clubs and sport activities) with the youth with whom I would like to do my research, outside of class time. This is in order for me to get a sense of the school and its culture. This will also involve me carrying out informal conversations with students and staff in order to learn more about the students and the school. These informal conversations will be kept confidential.

2. **Formal Interviews with staff and teachers:** Here, if you agree to this formal conversation, it will be audio recorded and more detailed information will be collected. These conversations will take place in order for me to get more details on the history of the school and its general social culture from staff persons’ perspectives. You will be asked in confidence to participate in the interview and every attempt will be made to keep all of your information private. You will be provided with a letter that explains in more detail the purpose of the interview that you will sign if you agree to the conversation. This interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

3. **Two formal interviews with students:** Once I have gotten the chance to get to know a few students better, I will ask them to participate in one-on-one interviews with me. Parents will also be asked to give permission for their children to participate in these interviews. Like all other conversations that will occur during my research, these interviews will be strictly confidential and you will therefore not know which students I will speak to. These interviews will take approximately one hour each.

4. **Photograph activity:** Here, students who have volunteered to be interviewed will also be asked to take photographs of things that are significant to them in order to get a better sense of their identities. A second interview will be conducted with each student to discuss these photographs.
At the end of my research, I will not only have the necessary data to complete my PhD thesis, but I will also be able to provide a report with recommendations to the Principal and Senior Administrators on how to further develop an atmosphere of inclusivity for all students in the school.

This research has received approval from the Toronto District School Board and the University of Guelph. Do you agree to participate in this research?

If you have any questions, comments or concerns whatsoever about my research, please feel free to contact me at phone: (416) 845-9670 or email: rlitchmo@psy.uoguelph.ca.

Thank you so much for time and help with this project.

Sincerely,

Rashelle Litchmore, MA
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Appendix 3: Staff and Teacher Interview Questions

Hi (staff’s name). Thanks agreeing to participate in this interview with me. Today I will be asking you a few questions about your role in the school and your opinions on diversity and accommodation of diversity in the school. Remember that everything you say to me will be just between us. When I write up my research, your identity will be protected. Also remember that you can refuse to answer any question at any time, or to end the interview at anytime. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What are your initials
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your position at the school? (e.g. gym teacher, secretary)
4. How long have you been a member of staff here?
5. Has the school changed much within your time here? If yes, in what way?
6. Do you consider the student body to be diverse? If yes, do you believe it’s important for the school to accommodate diversity?
7. Do you think the school is doing all that it can do accommodate the diverse identities of it’s students? If yes, what does it do? If no, what would be some of your suggestions on how to accommodate diversity in the school?
8. Do you think any special activities, accommodations need to be done for students of African/Caribbean heritage/Black students?

These are guideline questions. Follow up questions will be asked where necessary.

Thanks so much for doing this interview with me.
Appendix 4: Student Interview #1 Questions and Introduction of Photography Activity

Hi (student’s name). Thanks for agreeing to participate in this interview with me. As I explained to you when I asked if you would like to do this interview, I will be asking you questions about your culture, identity, and experiences in school. There will also be a photography activity that I would like you to do if you are interested and that your parents have given permission for you to do. In this activity, I will give you a camera that you will use to take pictures of things that are important to you. After this activity, I would ask you to participate in another interview where you will discuss whichever photos you would like to with me. We can talk about this more at the end of the interview. Remember that everything you say to me will be just between us. When I write up my research, your identity will be protected. Also remember that you can refuse to answer any question at any time, or to end the interview at anytime. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What are your initials
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender?
4. What grade are you in?
5. What’s your favourite course right now?
6. How would you describe yourself?
7. Were you born in Canada? If not, where were you born? When did you arrive in Canada?
8. How would you describe your cultural background?
9. Were your parents born in Canada? If no, where were they born?
10. Do you think your culture is an important part of your identity? Why or why not?
11. Do you think your race is an important part of your identity? Why or why not?
12. Are you a member of any cultural clubs in school? Do you participate in any cultural activities outside of school?
13. What would like to do as a career when you grow up? Why?
14. What do you think about your school? Do you like it?
15. Do you think your school has activities that you are interested in? If yes, what are these activities? If no, what kind of activities would you like to see, if any?
16. Do you have any favourite teachers or staff that you interact with?
17. Do you think coming to school is important? Why or why not?

Follow up questions will be asked where appropriate
Appendix 5: Student Interview #2 Questions with Photoelicitation

Hi (student’s name). Thanks for completing the photography exercise and for agreeing to participate in this follow interview with me. Today, we will discuss specific photographs that you have taken. Haven you already chosen them? Ok good. Remember that everything you say to me will be just between us. When I write up my research, your identity will be protected. Also remember that you can refuse to answer any question at any time, or to end the interview at anytime. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What are your initials
2. How old are you?
3. What is your gender?
4. What grade are you in?

These questions are just to match with the previous interview as a back up to coding the information

9. Tell me about this photograph. Who or what is in it? Where was it taken? What is its significance to you?
10. Did you think about what you wanted to talk about as you were taking these?
11. Do you think anything will change?
12. What do you think about this overall project?

These questions will be asked for each photograph. Follow up questions will be asked where necessary.

Thanks so much for doing this interview with me.