The Role of Black Collectives in Canadian Academic Spaces

by
Malissa Bryan

A thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Sociology

Guelph, Ontario, Canada
© Malissa Bryan, October, 2015
ABSTRACT

The Role of Black Collectives in Canadian Academic Spaces

Malissa Bryan
University of Guelph, 2015

Advisor: Dr. Vivian Shalla

This thesis adopts a critical race theory framework to explore the lived experiences of fourteen Black students who are members of the C. J. Munford Centre for People of Colour at the University of Guelph. This thesis examines the role of Black collectives in the lives of Black students attending a predominantly white institution by focusing on student's experiences of minority status, racial micro-aggressions, student peer relationships, as well as the modes of support and coping strategies they gain from having membership in a Black collective. The results suggest that Black students face varying levels of racial micro-aggressions from student peers in various university settings. These students utilize Black collectives as safe spaces to mitigate the effects of racial micro-aggressions, gain support from peers, celebrate Black culture and identity, and form informal peer networks.
This thesis is dedicated to the fourteen students who participated in this study -
without you, I would not have been able to conduct this research...

....to my mom Maureen, my grandmother Karen, and my sister Tanisha, thank you all for always
encouraging my academic goals.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Vivian Shalla for your constant encouragement and words of support. It was the last year of my undergraduate studies that I met you during the Engage conference 2013. I remember you smiling and telling me "Well done" right after my presentation. It was after this conference that I decided that I wanted to continue in academia. Thank you for your ongoing and unwavering support. Your faith in my capabilities and encouraging words has helped me make it to the completion of this thesis project. I will forever be grateful for your kindness and guidance.

I would also like to acknowledge my committee member, Dr. Belinda Leach, for offering me guidance and encouragement throughout my time in the graduate program. You have played an important role in my graduate program and I greatly appreciate your support. I would also like to thank our grad secretary, Shelagh Daly. You have always been grad mom supreme, offered words of support, and helped with navigating the university system, and for this I thank you.

Next, I would like to acknowledge my nieces and nephew, Tayshia, Mya and Xavier, who spent the summer constantly asking me "Are you done yet?" and "How much longer?" You guys inspire me to stay focused and do my best. Thank you, Mya, for keeping me company while I worked away and congratulations on mastering the ABC's. Thank you, Xavier, for always checking to see how I was doing and drawing me pictures to brighten up my days. Thank you, Tayshia, for the constant phone calls checking in on my progress.

Lastly, I would like to thank my baby nephew, Gabriel. Although you cried throughout the writing process, you definitely brought me joy and happiness. Your smile, laughter and yes, even your high pitch cries, made the writing process that much more exciting.
## Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Dedications ....................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ iv

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................... v

Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 1

  Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 3

  The C. J. Munford Centre at the University of Guelph ................................................................. 3

  Research Goals .............................................................................................................................. 5

  Organization of this Thesis .......................................................................................................... 8

Chapter 2: Theoretical Approach and Literature Review ................................................................. 11

  Critical Race Theory .................................................................................................................... 11

  Defining Race ................................................................................................................................ 17

  Racial Micro-Aggressions ............................................................................................................. 22

    Definition and History of Racial Micro-Aggressions ................................................................ 22

    What Are the Effects of Micro-Aggressions? ........................................................................... 25

    How Are Racial Micro-Aggressions Researched in Educational Settings? ....................... 28

    Counter-Viewpoints on Racial Micro-Aggressions .................................................................. 29

Race and Education ......................................................................................................................... 30

    Racial Inequity in Education ..................................................................................................... 30

    Strength through Visibility: Black Success Highlighted .................................................... 33

    Afro-Centric Focused Learning ............................................................................................... 36
Collectives: Providing Refuge and Strength.................................................................37

Formation and Formal Organization...............................................................................40

Formation and Informal Organization...............................................................................42

Chapter 3: Methodology........................................................................................................44

Background and Positionality..........................................................................................44

Participants and Recruitment...........................................................................................48

Interview Process...............................................................................................................51

Ethical Concerns................................................................................................................53

Chapter 4: Results................................................................................................................55

Participation in the C. J. Munford Centre.........................................................................57

Minority Status....................................................................................................................62

Racial Micro-Aggressions....................................................................................................68

Micro-Invalidations............................................................................................................69

Micro-Insults.......................................................................................................................72

Micro-Assaults.....................................................................................................................75

Educational Workshops and Information Sessions.........................................................77

Informal Educational Exchange.........................................................................................86

Participants' Final Thoughts...............................................................................................88

Chapter 5: Conclusion...........................................................................................................91

Black Collectives...............................................................................................................91

Diversity in Practice............................................................................................................93

Critical Race Theory...........................................................................................................94
The Academic Literature on Race and Education.................................................................95
Limitations of My Research..............................................................................................97
Possible Future Research...............................................................................................98
Possible Solutions to Improve the Learning Environment for Diverse Students........100
References.....................................................................................................................103
Chapter 1: Introduction

Black students have historically been unfairly painted in a negative light with characteristics such as lazy, intellectually inferior, culturally incompetent, violent, and simply uninterested in education. It is no secret that Black students in Canada lag behind all other racial groups (except for Aboriginal peoples) in academic accomplishments when measured against standardized testing. Academic institutions have not always been seen as accommodating spaces for students of African descent. Black students face numerous obstacles, with the central issue being subtle forms of racism, also known as racial micro-aggressions. The three types of racial micro-aggressions that racialized students face are micro-insults, micro-invalidation and micro-assaults. In addition to the experiences of racial micro-aggressions, Black students lack representation and visibility within the curriculum. In other words, Black literature, history, and experiences are for the most part rendered invisible within the school system or are segregated to discussions during Black history month. Aside from devaluing Blackness, the Canadian school system rewards whiteness by utilizing a Euro-centric standpoint to organize and guide the way education is administered. Black students are often left behind and misunderstood in an educational system that was never set up with their success in mind (Codjoe 2001; Grier-Reed 2010; Codjoe 2006; Solórzano 2001).

The shift in Canadian society towards greater acceptance and the idea of diversity did not come along with equity. Visible diversity can be seen in the sheer number of racialized students in Canadian classrooms. The racialized and cultural diversity that can be seen in the student population is missing in textbooks, lectures, literature, teaching methods, and Canadian history lessons more generally. Black teachers, principals, and professors are largely missing from the Canadian school system, leaving Black students without the opportunity to see themselves
represented at the higher levels in the education system. The shortcomings of Black students within the Canadian education system have often been blamed on internal factors (as mentioned above) related to the Black community itself. Systemic racism and barriers have far too often within mainstream literature been painted as a minor contributing factor instead of the leading cause of Black failure.

Navigating the world of academia can often turn into a complex process for Black students attending predominantly white institutions (Codjoe 2001; Grier-Reed 2010). According to Codjoe "... to the extent that teachers harbour negative racial stereotypes, the Black student's race alone is probably sufficient to place him or her at risk for negative school outcomes. Yet, despite attempts to address the issue, persistent racism in the lives of Black learners in North America endures." Codjoe further notes that in Canada racism as a social issue has continued to thrive but is often denied by mainstream society. The denial of racism pushes Black individuals into a tight situation where speaking out against racial injustices becomes uncomfortable and even dangerous. As a result, Black students attending predominantly white institutions often find themselves in need of counter-spaces to nurture a healthy racial identity and build up the Black student population in ways that the larger academic system has failed to do. Black collectives have filled such a role on predominantly white campuses. For the purpose of this thesis, the term Black collective is adopted to represent the specific type of Black student network at the University of Guelph, where this research was conducted. The term Black collective is the one used because the C. J. Munford Centre members and its leadership self-identify as such. These collectives serve as a safe space for racialized students, provide refuge from racial micro-aggressions, nurture Afro-centric culture, and center the experiences of Black students. Black collectives can be formal or informal in nature and are a direct response to an unhealthy
academic environment. For some Black students, these collectives are the only places where they can share racially diverse experiences, participate in intellectual exchange with peers, and network in ways that promote success. Some collectives are formed as a direct result of a lack of cultural, academic, and socially racial diverse community within an institution.

It is the lack of support Black students receive from mainstream school systems and the devaluing of Black culture in the literature and experiences within schools that have led me to pursue this research. This research will allow me to share the stories of Black students as they experience academia and create counter-spaces to fulfill the needs that are not being met in mainstream spaces.

**Research Questions**

My research is guided by the following research questions:

How do Black collectives on campus empower Black students within majority non-Black university populations to achieve academic success?

(a) What culturally specific resources do Black collectives provide students?

(b) How do these resources shape Black students’ academic experiences as racialized students?

(c) How do collectives encourage Black students to engage the wider university population on academic issues concerning race and ethnicity?

**The C. J. Munford Centre at the University of Guelph**

This study will focus on the C. J. Munford Centre (hereinafter referred to as the Munford Centre), a Black collective at the University of Guelph. The Munford Centre was founded in 1994 by Dr. Clarence J. Munford. An African-American with dual Canadian–U.S. citizenship, Dr. Munford was born in Ohio (U.S.) in 1935, became a member of the University of Guelph faculty in 1966, and taught the first Black history course in an Ontario University in 1969. The
mandate and mission of the Munford Centre is to serve as “a resource center for racialized students at the University of Guelph. The Centre is committed to establishing educational programming and cultural events and promoting ethnic diversity in the University of Guelph community (Munford 2014).\footnote{1} Its five objectives are:

- To provide space for individuals who have been racially harassed and discriminated against and are the victims of systemic racism;
- To operate as a resource centre for the University of Guelph community, providing referrals and materials on anti-racism;
- To operate as a place of support and to provide the ways of sustaining strength for people of diverse backgrounds;
- To be a place where individuals can dialogue freely without the threat of invalidation;
- To provide programming that celebrates cultural and ethnic diversity (Munford 2014).

The Munford Centre holds weekly discussions on various topics such as academic success, race, marginalization, financial success, and migrant workers. These discussions provide members with a safe space to discuss various topics from a culturally relevant perspective, and to bring forward issues that may be controversial within the larger university setting. The Centre also holds many events throughout the academic year such as poetry night, games night, bowling, Fiesta (a celebration of cultural artistic talent) and Munford formal. The Munford Centre collective includes the following positions: central coordinator, communications and promotions coordinator, first year representative, social events coordinators, women’s safety coordinator, and education and programming coordinator (Munford 2014).

\footnote{1}{The C. J. Munford Centre objectives were taken directly unaltered from the University of Guelph website in October 2015.}
Research Goals

The Munford Centre's main objectives will help identify some of the themes of my thesis. The main objective is to provide a safe space for victims of racism (including against micro-aggressions). As such, a discussion of race, racism and racialization will be important in introducing the power dynamics of race and will highlight why there is a need for racialized collectives. This research will provide insight into the impact of Black collectives on Black students’ experiences of empowerment and their experiences of academic success, and will focus more specifically on students who participate in the Munford Centre at the University of Guelph. Furthermore, this research will explore how Black collectives create an Afro-centric environment to encourage Black students’ participation and success within a larger Euro-centric university system. Issues surrounding race, ethnicity, education, collective identities and empowerment will be explored in a Canadian context.

When reading the academic literature, I have found that Black students face multiple barriers within the educational system that start as early as elementary school and continue at the university level. This literature further showed how dire the situation is for Black students. Mainstream research has historically failed to include the voices and perspectives of Black students themselves. In other words, white supremacy and the centering of whiteness in academia are rarely challenged in a meaningful way, especially when the conversation is centered on Black students’ failure. I therefore found it necessary to study and share the racialized reality of Black students as they experience and navigate the academic system in Canada, thereby adding to the counter-narrative.

Many Black students have faced racialized barriers in the form of racial micro-aggressions. One of the main coping mechanisms that Black students utilize to counteract their
racial and cultural invisibility on campus is joining Black collectives. These collectives provide a 'home away from home' and an Afro-centric environment in contrast to the predominantly Euro-centric environment found in predominantly white institutions. Black collectives are places where Black students can celebrate Black culture, learn about Black history both in North America and overseas, find academic peer support, discuss racism and discrimination on campus and in the wider community, network with others who may share similar academic challenges and experiences.

For the purpose of this research project, I recruited fourteen students who identified as Black from the C. J. Munford Centre for People of Colour located at the University of Guelph to speak to me about their experiences as Black students at a predominantly white institution who are also members of a Black collective. The focus of this research was to uncover the reasons behind the necessity for Black collectives, the role they serve in Black academic spaces, the individual ways in which students utilized the collectives and what initially drove students to join and participate in the collective. I chose the C. J. Munford Centre located at the University of Guelph based on my own personal experiences with the collective and because it is the main Black collective on campus for all students who identify as Black and not just for those from a specific region or ethnic group. Throughout my personal time at the Munford Centre, I was surrounded by an overwhelming supportive space which helped me to adjust to a predominantly white learning environment. I also witnessed the racialized struggles that many students face during their time at the University of Guelph alongside the cultural acceptance, fulfillment and informal education that many have received within the Munford Centre. One of the main findings of my research is that participants utilized the C. J. Munford Centre to escape racial micro-aggressions, to find people who have a similar culture and hold similar values, and to
discuss racism and Black issues locally and worldwide. For other participants, the Munford Centre was simply a space to socialize freely in culturally acceptable ways. My curiosity about Black collectives further was sparked by my interest in the high failure rates of Black students across Canada and my desire to further understand the causes and solutions to this widespread problem. When I was reading literature that dealt with intersectionality, I noticed that Black collectives kept resurfacing as a viable act of resistance to educational systems that have failed to integrate Black cultural values. I have utilized my own personal experiences as a Black student along with my past connections to the C. J. Munford Centre, as well as the literature on Black collectives, racial micro-aggressions, and Black education in Canada to bring attention to some of the specific needs of Black students that far too often remain overlooked or unacknowledged. My goal with this research is not only to highlight the needs of Black students, but to also provide recommendations to bring about positive changes to the Canadian academic system more generally.

This research contributes to our understanding of the process of racialization, Black students’ experience in predominantly white institutions, Black student collectives, and Black education in Canada. This research touches on the barriers that Black students face in Canada's academic system, focusing on classrooms, teacher-student interactions, student peer interactions, campus social settings and, most importantly, Black student collectives. Rather than only focusing on Black students as victims of an educational system that deems them invisible, this project focuses on the active resistance that Black collectives provide racialized students. This research rejects mainstream literature that refers to Black culture as inferior and to Black students as lacking the necessary motivation needed to be successful in an academic setting. This thesis offers an alternative approach to the subject of Black students in Canada by not only
focusing on the systemic social and academic barriers facing the Black community, but by also centering the narratives of Black students’ resiliency and coping methods through the use of collectives and other creative methods. By doing so, I hope to change the negative perceptions that often are associated with Black students. Firstly, I hope to influence the way that mainstream scholars discuss Black students and their success and failures within academia so that the focus is on centering the experiences of racialized students without relying on negative stereotypes. Secondly, my research will make an important contribution to the Canadian literature on Black students and racial micro-aggressions on campus. Lastly, this project will demonstrate the tools that Black students utilize to find success in predominantly white institutions. I aim to show that a multicultural learning environment that is inclusive of Black perspectives would better accommodate the Black student population.

**Organization of this Thesis**

I will use a critical race framework in this research, which centers race in the research on, and discussion of, the experiences of people of colour while also recognizing other characteristics such as class, gender, and ethnicity as contributing factors in the way that individuals experience the world. Critical race theory (hereafter referred to as CRT) will allow me to examine Black collectives from the perspectives and experiences of Black students by first examining the academic system in relation to racialized students and then by specifically examining the role of the C. J. Munford Centre in the lives of Black students at the University of Guelph. This theoretical approach will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis. I will discuss the framework more generally and how it has been applied to the study of race and education. In this chapter, I will also spend time exploring how the concepts of race, racialization and whiteness have been discussed in the literature. As importantly, the chapter will review the
literature on racial micro-aggressions, with a particular focus on its subcategories of micro-invalidations, micro-insults and micro-assaults. The chapter will then highlight literature that deals with race and education, focusing on racial inequity, access to education, and Afro-centric schooling. In the final section of the chapter, I will discuss both informal and formal Black collectives, paying attention to the role they play in the lives of Black students on predominantly white campuses. By focusing on these themes in the literature, I point out the gaps in the literature and locate my own project within the literature.

In Chapter 3, I present my methodological approach. I provide a general background of my positionality in relation to this topic. I then discuss my methods of recruitment, the interview process, and ethical concerns.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion and analysis of the findings of my research. I begin by relating the reasons as to why Black students choose to join a Black collective. I then discuss participants’ sense of their personal minority status on campus. Much of the chapter is devoted to exploring students’ racialized experiences in the university setting. Racial micro-aggressions and its sub-categories of micro-invalidations, micro-insults, and micro-assaults are the concepts that structure my analysis. The next two sections of the chapter deal with the personal coping methods and strategies that Black students have developed for studying in predominantly white institutions. I explore resources that are available to students through the Munford Center, with a focus on both formal and informal programs, activities and support networks that Black students access.

In Chapter 5, I will begin by summarizing my findings on Black collectives and the role they play in the lives of Black students. I then briefly discuss diversity on campuses in light of my research findings. Next I will discuss how critical race was utilized in my research and
analysis. This will be followed by a general discussion of the academic literature as it relates to my findings. I then suggest possible future research areas on Black education in Canada. In the following section, I discuss the limitations of my research. In the final section of my conclusion, I revisit and expand upon possible solutions to promote Black excellence in academia.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Approach and Literature Review

The first section of this chapter will focus on critical race theory (CRT). I will provide a brief overview of its beginnings. I will then introduce Berry's (2009) general interpretation of CRT that can be applied to all areas of study, which will be followed by an examination of Solórzano's (2000) interpretation of CRT, which he specifically applies to the educational setting. I have included both interpretations in this thesis because I utilize principles from both authors to guide my analysis. Although, there is overlap between the two interpretations, together they provide a stronger framework for my analysis. In the second section, I will discuss ways in which race, racialization and whiteness have been dealt with in the literature. The concept of racial micro-aggressions will be introduced in the third section, and I will elaborate on its three subcategories: micro-invalidations, micro-insults and micro-assaults, which will help us better understand the various ways in which micro-aggressions are experienced. The next section will focus on race and education, with particular attention being paid to racial inequity, access to education, and Afro-centric schooling. In the fifth section, I will discuss both informal and formal Black collectives, focusing on their relevance to the lives of Black students on predominantly white campuses.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is the approach that I adopt to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black students attending predominantly white institutions and to analyze their experiences of empowerment within a Black collective. CRT was developed in the 1970's and was born out of the need to challenge mainstream perspectives in the legal field that deemed the law objective and neutral. CRT, in contrast to the idea that the law is colour blind, highlights the racialized advantages and hierarchies present within the legal system that favor white individuals over people of colour. Born after the civil rights era, CRT critiqued legal outcomes
and the notion that racial equality exists under the law (Price, 2010:150). In other words, CRT acknowledges the effects of a legal system based on white supremacy.

Two overlapping understandings of CRT will guide my analysis. These are the frameworks put forth by Berry (2009) and by Solórzano et al. (2000) respectively. Scholars who adopt CRT tend to rely on some or most of the characteristics and guiding points that are laid out by these authors. The first understanding of CRT follows Berry (2009:747) who breaks CRT into five main guiding points. The first point is that racism is an ordinary and fundamental part of society. As a result, racism is embedded in all systems of society and must be considered when discussing issues in society. This point, therefore, focuses on acknowledging the existence of systemic racism in society. According to Duncan, "It is fashionable nowadays to downplay and even dismiss race as a factor shaping the quality of life in the United States and instead to favor class-based and gender-based approaches of understanding social oppression" (2002:93). The role of race in the lives of people of colour is often acknowledged, but in a way that minimizes race as playing a central role. This is not meant to diminish the importance of class or gender in the lives of individuals, but rather to highlight that race is fundamental to the experiences of people of colour. CRT places race at the center of its analysis, while also acknowledging class and gender as contributing factors that influence the experiences of people.

The second guiding point recognizes race as a social construction. According to Duncan, "race is best understood as power relationships that define dominant and subjugated positions in society" (2002: 85). In other words, race has been defined historically and socially, and, though it is strongly embedded in the structures of societies, how race is defined and why it matters are produced by human thought and interaction and change over time. There have always been clear anti-Black attitudes and behaviours in North America, which can be seen with the history of
slavery, lynching, Jim Crow laws, segregation, anti-black immigration and refugee policies as well as with the current issues of police brutality against the Black community (Jett 2012:21).

The third guiding point is storytelling as a methodology, which is an important characteristic of CRT because it centers the experiences of Black people who have historically been silenced. Jett explains this as "the study or theory of the knowledge generated out of the African-American existential condition, that is of the knowledge and cultural artifacts produced by African-Americans based on African-American cultural, social, economic, historical, and political experience" (2012:22). In other words, the stories and experiences of both Black researchers and Black research participants are emphasized. This methodology allows theorist to speak against and challenge ideologies that deem Europeans as superior to peoples of colour. Therefore, it is important to hear racialized voices and seek out communities of colour to include their stories and narratives when investigating inequalities.

The fourth guiding point is that CRT is founded on a multidisciplinary approach to scholarship, where ideas and knowledge from different disciplines are used to understand race. As stated earlier, CRT was originally created to promote racial equality in the legal system, but soon after its birth, various scholars and theorists began using and developing the framework to understand and critique racial injustices throughout society.

The fifth guiding point is the importance of adopting a critical race praxis that centers race in the study of society and challenges structural racism. According to Price, "Dominant groups tell stories that construct, naturalize, and reproduce the status quo, while subalterns tell counter stories that can serve as correctives or even frontal attacks on the world-view circulated by those in power" (2010:158).
Solórzano et al.’s (2000) understanding of CRT overlaps, in many ways, with the understanding developed by Berry. They lay out general characteristic of the framework, but they also applied it directly to the investigation of race and education and influenced other scholars in this field. They discuss five key characteristics, each of which I will expand upon. The first characteristic is "the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination" Solórzano et al. (2000:63). Embedded in the core of CRT theory is the idea that race is the central characteristic that affects the experiences of individuals in society. When centralizing race, various aspects are considered, such as the racialization process, racial discrimination, white privilege, white supremacy, racial hierarchy, and racism. Intersectionality provides the opportunity to focus on different dimensions that interact to influence an individual's experience. For example, when using an intersectional approach, a researcher may take into account how gender, race, class and ability intersect to shape one’s life experiences. Focusing on intersectionality will enhance my analysis by allowing me to also take into account intersecting factors of my participants’ experiences, for example, international student status, ethnicity, culture and accents (Sonn & Qualye 2013). In applying CRT to the educational context, Solórzano and Yosso (2001:2) explain that the framework recognizes that the basic structure of schools, academic curriculums and overall school practices are entrenched with racism, which may intersect with other forms of discrimination such as sexism, ableism and classism. Standardized tests, student discipline, teachers’ expectations or lack therefore, and individual teacher behavior along with systemic discriminatory policies have all historically disadvantaged students of colour.

The second characteristic identified by Solórzano et al. (2000:63) is that a key goal of CRT is to challenge the dominant ideology. This theme is particularly useful in areas of study
where the experiences of racialized people go unacknowledged or where the intellectual contributions of Black theorists are invalidated or ignored by mainstream theorists. In discussing the educational system, Codjoe (2006:34) provides clear examples of the need for counter-perspectives that challenge mainstream ideas, noting that

Black educational theory and practice have not been made a priority in mainstream Canadian education. For example, it has been observed that the theoretical knowledge about the education of African-Canadian children advanced in Ontario by such Black theorists as Carl James (1990), Enid Lee (1992) and Patrick Solomon (1992), to name a few, are rarely read or cited by Euro/Anglo-Canadian scholars in critical ways that challenges the status quo.

It is important to have counter-perspectives to combat stereotypes and also to challenge readers with new ways of understanding an issue that may not be currently present in mainstream literature. In other words, there is a strong push within CRT to challenge literature that fails to recognize race as a major factor that influences the way individuals experience the world. CRT can be seen as an extension of the critique of the broader inequality in society, as it challenges ideologies that fail to challenge racism. CRT argues that mainstream references of neutrality are false and in reality are centered in self-interest to maintain dominant groups’ power and privilege in society (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001:2). CRT provides space for racialized people to use their language and culture, and to describe the world as they see it without being drowned out by dominant non-inclusive theory, methods or terminology.

The third characteristic put forth by Solórzano et al. (2006:63) is "the commitment to social justice". This is a key theme that strongly differentiates CRT from other theories that are more intellectual and less activist in nature. CRT is not only about themes, theories, and
practices, but instead is focused on the dynamic nature of racial power and how it is contextualized and expressed in the aftermath of the civil rights era (Krenshaw 2011:1261). In other words, race and the racialization process are dynamic, and are forever changing, and because CRT is a fluid rather than a static framework, it adjusts to transformations of race and racialization in society. CRT will only be needed as a framework for as long as there is racial differentiation, hierarchies, stratification and inequities present in society. CRT is used as a tool for resistance across many disciplines in academia to bring attention to specific social injustices by highlighting racial inequity and challenging mainstream thinkers to think intersectionally (Solórzano and Yosso 2001:2). Price states, "Critical race theory thus necessitates a social commitment to activism within the academy; nothing less will change our racialized past" (210:148).

The fourth characteristic identified by Solórzano et al. (2006:63) is "the centrality of experiential knowledge". In the field of education, CRT recognizes that the experiences of students of colour have historically been marginalized, silenced and disregarded in mainstream literature. CRT provides a platform to create research that is centered on the experiences of students of colour, provides a space for a counter-narrative, and recognizes students’ racialized experiences as legitimate and valuable. Under this framework, methods that emphasize storytelling, the sharing of family backgrounds and culture, using parables to draw similarities between their lived experiences and other scenarios in society are encouraged. CRT recognizes that racialized students as more than capable of accurately sharing their daily experiences within the educational system and centers racialized voices within its research.

Finally, the fifth characteristic identified by Solórzano et al. (2006:63) is the centrality of "interdisciplinary perspectives". CRT recognizes the importance of analyzing race and racism
from both a contemporary and historical context. By so doing, CRT acknowledges how past racial attitudes and societal structures influence contemporary notions of race and racialization.

In using a critical race theory framework, it is my hope that the voices and stories of Black students will be told from a perspective that acknowledges participants' lived experiences and realities as members of a Black collective in a predominantly white institution. It is important that the stories of Black students are heard and acknowledged as valuable truths whether or not their experiences fall in line with mainstream literature that utilize cultural deficit theories. Lastly, it is important to recognize throughout this project that no one Black student can speak on behalf of all Black students' experiences because, although patterns may arise within the Black student population, the diversity within the Black community is much greater than can be captured in this project given its more limited scope.

Defining Race

In the second section of this chapter, I will briefly introduce the concepts of race, racialization, and whiteness. These concepts will be further explored and discussed throughout this thesis. Questions of race can be quite complex and therefore it is important to clearly identify what an individual means when the term is used. I will be adopting a definition of race with the realization that race is a socially constructed term that creates and justifies hierarchical statuses between groups in society. Canadian society is not race neutral as many people would like to believe. According to Fleras, "Instead it is so profoundly racialized and Eurocentric in its foundational principles, constitutional order, and governance structures that dominant interests and agendas are invariably secured and advanced sometimes deliberately, sometimes systemically" (2011:35). Canada's legacy is built upon centuries of racial exclusion and
discrimination; this legacy of racism infects all layers of Canadian society, including institutions and legal frameworks.

For Duncan, race can be described in two ways, on one hand, race is an ideological construct or imaginary force that denies the reality of a racialized society and its impact on 'raced' people in their everyday lives. On the other hand, race is an objective condition, a set of self-evident and rigid categories that fail to account for the problematic issues of social classification and genetic and cultural hybridity (2002:94).

In other words, although race is a social construct, it simultaneously has a potentially real negative effect on people who are labeled racialized. The concept of race is problematic, however, in that it fails to take into account people who hail from multi-ethnic and cultural backgrounds and ignores the diverse experiences of people of colour. According to Jett, "The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association endorsed a statement on race that seeks to deconstruct race as a social construct that inequitably categorizes different racial groups. The Executive Board argued that racial inequities exist not because of biological (scientific) reasoning but due to historical and modernized institutionalized "racial" practices" (2012:21).

Creese further elaborates on these points when she states "racialization refers to the social significance attached to perceived phenotypical and/or cultural differences among groups of people. It is an ongoing and fluid process that changes across time and space within specific material contexts, power relations and cultural imaginations, creating different conceptions of race in different historical and national contexts" (2007:193). Although race is a social construct and an imaginative term, it is very real in its lived consequences. Racialization is the process in which all individuals participate; this includes members from the dominant group who are often
described as 'white individuals' and are frequently treated as the neutral non-racialized group. Other members of society are frequently classified as the racial 'other' and are placed in the racialized category. The consequence of these categories plays out in the power dynamics in society where 'whiteness' represents normality and privilege and in turn is often the standard to which 'others' are compared (Creese 2001:1993).

'Whiteness' is a concept that represents a base or a neutral starting point, with all other racial categories falling below. From this perspective, members of racialized groups are seen as being flawed, and unequal treatment can further be justified by these imaginary deficits that people of colour are wrongly considered to possess. Ahmed states, "Whiteness could be described as an ongoing an un-finished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (2007: 149). In other words, racialization dictates which groups are deemed worthy and which are considered unworthy or undeserving of various privileges that the neutral or white group may have access to. Ahmed expands on her argument as follows, "Whiteness gets reproduced by being seen as a form of positive residence: as if it were a property of persons, cultures and places. Whiteness becomes, you could even say, 'like itself,' as a form of family resemblance" (2007:154). In likening whiteness, and more generally race, to a family, we see race as something that socially creates alliances, and as protected privileges, legacy, and shared attributes. The bodies of people begin to be seen as alike; phenotypical characteristics are seen as belonging to specific racial groups. According to Saperstein et al. "While Americans rely on physical features such as skin tone, nose shape, and hair type, in classifying faces by race we also use other contextual cues such as emotion or social status" (2014: 106).
Once these ideas and hierarchies are ingrained in society, it is then easy to justify inequality and preferential treatment among various racial groups. To reiterate, racialization is by no means a biological process, but is instead socially constructed to create and maintain hierarchies among various groups of people; race is therefore a categorical tool used to justify the racialization of people. Solórzano et al. (2000: 61) state, "One can argue that dominant groups often attempt to legitimate their position via ideological means or a set of beliefs that explains or justifies some actual or potential social arrangement." In other words, the racialization process only works when society accepts the false logic behind racial superiority and inferiority. Domke et al. (2003) suggest that elites in society in conjunction with the media are able to convey, perpetuate and reinforce the false existence of inherently racial differences between people, which in turn promotes the reproduction of a hierarchical system based on race. This normalization of racial hierarchy can be used to justify differential treatment of people based on race in areas pertaining to incarceration, surveillance, violence, academic inequality including educational funding and programs in high racialized neighborhoods (608).

Conceptualizing race as a tool allows us to further dissect the role it plays in the everyday lives of individuals. Knowles states,

In place of race, then, we can think about alterity, mobility, and home as three significant themes which have a bearing on race. These themes are simultaneously a part of the lived interior of racialized identities and part of the racialized social processes in which those identities are inscribed: processes described earlier and which work in a dialogical fashion (1999:124).

The term alterity can be used to help describe the experience of 'otherness' that minorities may have when analyzing perceived differential experiences between themselves and the dominant
group. The idea of otherness gives a sense of not completely belonging to society, lacking importance or priority, and can essentially render individuals invisible. Mobility can be contextualized in various ways such as in a physical sense of one's ability to navigate freely through space. Some examples include: moving within an academic or work environment without the validity of one's presence being questioned, to be free of over-policing of everyday actions, and having access to all resources that are available to others of the same rank. Social mobility expresses the act of moving between socio-economic statuses and often has a strong correlation with opportunities available to various groups in society.

The interactions with others that a person experiences in society may be heavily influenced by their socially constructed racialized status. To understand this, I look at race through two racialized lenses: the insider lens and the outsider lens. The outsider lens encourages others to see people through broad social racial categories and assigns characteristics to those within the category. Through this lens, the individual differences are removed from the equation and the socially constructed ideas surrounding race are utilized to conceptualize the individual. Stereotypes, biases, and pre-constructed ideas may be utilized to influence one's interaction with others. In contrast, the internal lens takes an internal perspective as to how individuals conceptualize their own identity, which may be based on their gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, but may also include content that is invisible to an outsider such as their goals, past achievements, personality traits, talents, interest, and general beliefs. Individuals are capable of utilizing both lenses as well as switching between lenses as their environments and space change throughout time. For example, an individual may use the insider lens while in a homogenous community to which they belong, for example, family members and friends, but switch to using an outsider lens when in a heterogeneous space, at work, or with strangers. These lenses are not
always polarized and the line between the two often becomes blurred as individuals navigate the social constructs of race and its consequences.

**Racial Micro-Aggressions**

In the third section of this chapter, I will introduce the concept of racial micro-aggressions, showing how it was developed to describe subtle forms of racism that include racial insults, racial assaults, invisibility, sensitivity, marginalization and research methods. Next, I will review literature that discusses the effects of racial micro-aggressions on Black students. I will then briefly present two of the ways that racial micro-aggressions have been studied within educational settings. This will be followed by a brief discussion and critique of counter-perspectives on racial micro-aggressions.

**Definition and History of Racial Micro-Aggressions**

The term racial micro-aggression was first used by a psychiatrist named Chester M. Pierce in the 1970's. Since then, the concept has been used and expanded upon to clearly identify and document the potential impact on, and experiences of, racial minorities when faced with such aggressions (DeAngelis 2009:2). The term racial micro-aggressions refers to subtle forms of racism that may appear to be innocuous to others, but have a negative impact on the mental health of victims. These forms of micro-aggressions can appear to be minor slights when analyzed individually, yet when analyzed cumulatively, the effects on mental health can be devastating. When describing racial micro-aggressions, Houshmand et al. (2014:377) note that they involve racial bias, discrimination, and differential treatment based on one’s race or association with a racial group. Micro-aggressions often occur in brief encounters and specifically include racial insults. This form of racism is commonplace and could be found in various forms including 'jokes', the use of racial stereotypes, purposely excluding a person due to
their race, and purposely targeting an individual because of their racialized status (Nadal et al., 2014: 461).

The nature of micro-aggressions as minor slights creates potential problems for racialized people as they may not speak up due to the fear of being viewed as overly-sensitive or nitpicking. Wang et al. state,

These situations do not involve obvious negative treatment but rather differential treatment that is often viewed by perpetrators of these behaviors to be relatively harmless or negligible. In turn, targets are faced with the additional burden of not overreacting to the seemingly innocuous situation because the perpetrator likely had no awareness that the behavior was hurtful (2011:1666).

In other words, when exploring the intentions of those who perpetuate racial micro-aggressions against visible minorities, it is often found that there are frequently no intentions of racism and instead the slights are motivated by unconscious bias. Speaking out against micro-aggressions can further lead to the target being accused of over-reacting and bringing up race or even pulling the 'race card'. When exploring racial micro-aggressions against minorities, it is important to understand that the perpetrators can be well-meaning white individuals, while others have the intent to harm.

The sub-categories of micro-aggressions include: micro invalidations, such as facing exclusion and having one’s feelings or experiences negated; micro-insults, where contributions of racialized students are unacknowledged or marginalized in a racialized way; and, micro-assaults, which include demeaning behavior (Grier-Reed 2010: 182). These sub-categories are crucial at clearly identifying forms of racism and holding accountable those who perpetuate the
aggressions. Sue et al. (2007:274-275), further provide detailed descriptions for each category of racial micro-aggressions:

(1) A micro-assault is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions;

(2) A micro-insult is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity;

(3) Micro-invalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

These terms help understand the societal shift from open blunt bigotry to a more hidden subconscious form of racism. According to Sue et al., racial micro-aggressions highlight that contemporary racism:

(a) is more likely than ever to be disguised and covert and

(b) has evolved from the “old fashioned” form, in which overt racial hatred and bigotry is consciously and publicly displayed, to a more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge (2007:272).

The concept of racial micro-aggressions provides a working framework from which one can truly begin to conceptualize modern-day racism by evaluating micro-interactions between groups in society. Since many of the encounters that racialized individuals experience are subtle and brief, they can mistakenly be seen as causing minimal harm. In contrast, by exploring racial micro-aggressions, we are able to focus on everyday acts of subtle racism, which helps paint a clearer picture of the everyday realities of people of colour. In comparison to blatant racism, the invisible nature of micro-aggressions becomes problematic because, as Sue et al. (2007:275)
explain, most white Americans view themselves as good moral people who do not discriminate or treat people differently based on their race. Further, it is difficult for them to believe that they have racial biases or participate in any discriminatory or deferential behaviors. Without mainstream acknowledgment that differential treatment based on race is a common occurrence, even when done so unintentionally, the burden of such interactions are left on the back of minorities to deal with.

**What Are the Effects of Micro-Aggressions?**

When evaluating the effects of micro-aggressions, it must be viewed through a lens that considers the cumulative effects of small occurrences of racism over a long period of time. According to Franklin et al. "The consequences of prejudice become apparent only in exposing patterns of discrimination, which constitute another important facet of racism" (2006:11). Therefore, examining incidents of racial micro-aggressions as isolated becomes dangerous as this may serve to minimize the true consequences for those who experience these aggressions on a daily basis. Individually, an incident may seem to cause minimal harm, but consistent and ongoing micro-aggressions at the hands of multiple individuals can have a cumulative harmful effect. Nadal et al. (2014:463-464), found a direct correlation between discrimination and self-esteem. The more discrimination faced by people of colour, the greater the risk of lowered self-esteem. The risk to an individual's self-esteem may increase when micro-aggressions occur within an academic or work environment. Their research found that both Latino and African American students faced increased levels of self-doubt and lowered levels of confidence when faced with micro-aggressions in academic spaces. Interestingly, Wang et al. (2011:1667) found that a person's emotional reaction to the perception of being a target of racial micro-aggression was highly dependent on the specific scenario in which it occurred. They further explored what
would happen when the treatment towards the minority target was not negative, but instead
differential such as having an empty seat next to them on an almost full bus and watching people
avoid sitting beside them. When the minority target had such interactions with strangers, they
were more likely to attribute the reason to their race, and were less likely to externalize and
vocalize their anger, but instead internalized emotional pain and frustration. In other words, these
types of innocuous social behaviors can reinforce minorities’ lower status in society and cause
emotional harm.

According to Solórzano et al. (2001:62), within a classroom setting, the effects of racial
micro-aggression can profess themselves in a number of forms, such as lowered expectations for
Black students and both non-verbal and verbal assumptions. Their research further found that
many Black students described having feelings of invisibility, being viewed as a numerical token
minority, being ignored, having their ideas undervalued, and being stereotyped within the course
curriculum. The impact of micro-aggressions in the classroom is clear here as students who are
not given adequate attention from teachers and who do not feel included or valued are not
learning in an environment that is conducive to learning. Solórzano et al. state,

We argue specifically that stereotype threat can affect the high-stakes game of college
academic achievement in particular. The prospect of conforming to a negative stereotype
about African Americans might be enough to undermine an African American college
student's performance and achievement and thereby negatively contribute to the
collegiate racial climate at his or her institution of higher learning. Our study thus
explores the linkages between racial stereotypes, cumulative racial micro-aggressions and
In other words, the potential harm that can be caused by racial micro-aggressions is not just limited to emotional and psychological, but can also manifest itself in tangible life outcomes such as academic achievement and employment. Therefore, further studies may want to look at the link between racial micro-aggressions and how the academic learning environment differs among ethnic groups.

Black students also face the possibility of dealing with the consequences of negative racial stereotypes that criminalize and question their everyday movements and right to exist on a campus space. Negative racial stereotypes can reinforce the idea that Black people do not have a place in higher education. De Angelis (2009:3-4) describes a scenario where Black students participating in a focus group talked about their experiences of being in their department’s computer lab and having white students call security to make sure they would not cause trouble. Security would then proceed to check the Black students’ school ID and sometimes request a second ID to confirm that they had a right to be in the lab. Another participant recalled an event where he found himself and friends surrounded by police vehicles as someone had called the authorities due to their suspicions of gang activity. The micro-aggressions are compounded in the above examples when an individual chooses to further act on negative stereotypes by calling in systemic reinforcement (police/security) to investigate the validity of the Black person’s presence. The actions of the perpetrator and the micro-aggressions are given validity because they were concerned for their safety. The burden of the harm therefore lies with the Black individuals who must then process feelings of being criminalized and isolated, and having a sense of not being accepted. Furthermore, Black male students can experience two extremes as described by McCabe (2009: 140): hyper vigilance when they are being monitored and their movements over-policed by campus and local authorities, and invisibility when they are seeking
assistance from authority figures on campus. The perception of Black males as threats from which the rest of society must be protected leaves them at risk of being over-policed, excluded, and treated as a tangible threat. The Black female students who participated in McCabe's research were more likely to have reported that it was difficult speaking in classes where they were the only Black student because they felt that white students would not consider their ideas or words to be valid. There was also the fear of being considered the spokesperson for the entire Black race and of having the burden of holding the 'black perspective'. Overall, McCabe's study showed that minority students often experience intense racialization on campuses and this has a strong influence on their social interactions, classroom participation, and self perception.

**How Are Racial Micro-Aggressions Researched in Educational Settings?**

Quantitative methods have successfully been used to research racial micro-aggressions in educational settings, with surveys typically used as the main source of data collection. Using quantitative methods, Ong et al. (2013) explored the relationship between racial micro-aggressions and daily well-being among Asian Americans. They recruited 155 students to complete a 14-day online diary on a secure internet website. Participants first completed background questionnaires, were sent a daily reminder email to fill out their diary entry, which recorded the effects of daily events and physical health. After completing their content analysis and breaking down their findings into eight major themes on racial micro-aggression, they measured the frequency of occurrences and both positive and negative effects experienced by participants. The limitations of this study include the fact that participants self-reported levels of physical and emotional well-being without any medical oversight, which may not accurately portray their full condition. Also, the online diaries were completed between 7pm and 12am, so essentially many hours could have passed in between the micro-aggressive act and the time of
actual recording in the diary. Quantitative methods are useful in the research of racial micro-aggressions because they can provide statistical measures for a large population through the mass distribution of surveys online.

Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of micro-aggressions with greater participant feedback during discussions. Using qualitative research methods, Houshmand et al. (2014) looked at international Asian students in Canada who faced exclusion and avoidance. Twelve individual 30-minute unstructured interviews were conducted and major themes or micro-aggression categories were created and further explored during analysis. The limitations of this study are that it was conducted at only one university, participants had only lived in Canada for six months, and the majority of participants hailed from China, which makes it impossible to verify if these findings are transferable to other populations. Regardless, this study is valuable as it adds to the limited body of literature on racial micro-aggressions on Canadian campuses.

**Counter-Viewpoints on Racial Micro-Aggressions**

Counter-perspectives on racial micro-aggressions typically question and minimize the degree of harm faced by people of colour. Schacht (2008:273) looks at the broader concept of micro-interactions, which he emphasizes characterizes all relationships and not only interracial relationships. Schacht’s minimization of the effects of racial micro-aggressions is in itself an example of micro-invalidation as he is ignoring the role that racialization plays within daily interactions as well as the power dynamics that create the racial hierarchies within society. By not acknowledging how racial power dynamics, racial stereotypes, and minority status intersect during interracial interactions, Schacht is essentially suggesting that the concept of micro-interactions can be used interchangeably with that of racial micro-aggressions, thereby erasing the racialized experience of minorities. According to Sue et al. "Whereas micro interactions may
refer to “general forms of interpersonal phenomena,” micro-aggressions are in fact racially related. Our studies support race-specific interactions, with micro-aggressive themes of criminality and incompetence directed toward African Americans and themes of perpetual foreignness and invisibility directed toward Asian Americans," (2008:277). By ignoring the role that race plays within micro-interactions, Schacht's perspective is fundamentally flawed and has no place in a society that is still very much organized by distinct racial hierarchies.

**Race and Education**

In the first part of this section, I will discuss racial inequity within the educational system. Here, I will introduce topics such as social mobility, privilege and general inequity in the educational system. Next, I will highlight the potential effects of a Euro-centric focused educational system on Black students. In the following part, I will discuss the benefits of making Black students visible within the educational system through positive reinforcement and focusing on the success of Black students' instead of their shortcomings. Finally, the last part of this section will briefly deal with the potential benefits of an afro-centric learning environment.

**Racial Inequity in Education**

Although access to higher education can be used as a tool to ensure social upward mobility, inequity in access to education in western countries has been well documented. This can mostly be attributed to the fact that social privilege is often passed on from parent to child. Students from affluent families are more likely to take the academic track while students from lower income families are more likely to attend vocational or trade schools (Werfhorst and Luijx 2010:695; Jerlando and James 2006:202). In Canada, race has played a historical role in the academic outcomes of students and, although the legal barriers that have denied some racialized groups equal educational access in the past have been replaced with affirmative action
initiatives, the latter have failed to eradicate systemic barriers (Creese 2007: 192; Cummins 1997:421; Dei 1997:169). More specifically, Black students, both currently and historically, generally have academically underperformed in comparison to their peers (Codjoe 2006:35; Cummins 1997:412; Smith et al. 2005:347; Ogbu 1992: 288; Levine-Rasky 2014:203).

According to Harper et al. (2009:389), African-Americans have less access to the advantages that are commonly associated with post-secondary education. More generally, in the American experience, programs and policies encouraging racial equity have not yet been able to close the gap between Black students and their white counterparts. According to Smith et al.

The academic underachievement of Black students has been well documented: Numerous American studies show that African American children do not perform as well as other children on various indicators of school performance, including achievement test scores, grade point average, grade retention, school dropout rate, reports of disciplinary action, years of schooling completed, and rate of high school graduation (2005:347).

School systems across North America have repeatedly failed students of African descent and have yet to fully acknowledge or take the necessary steps to rectify the situation (Ogbu 1992:288; Maylor 2009:2; Codjoe 2006:343). The extent to which racism, biases, and a Eurocentric-based system have had a negative effect on Black Canadians has yet to be fully acknowledged as the leading factor of Black students’ failure to thrive. Instead, the technique of blaming Black Canadians for their lack of academic success has been used to silence Black reality and halt any true efforts to bring about real change. Henry (1993:208) explains that, in the dominant literature, the cultural values and attitudes of Black people are given as explanations for their failure to thrive in academic settings. The concerns expressed by Black parents of racism are not taken seriously, but instead are treated as imaginary false perceptions. This creates
barriers for Black students and parents whose legitimate concerns about racism are being dismissed. If the concerns are not acknowledged, then discriminatory policies will continue and the underachievement of Black students cannot be fully addressed (Henry 1993:208; Codjoe 2006:35; Smith et al. 2005:348).

This 'blame the victim' approach shifts the blame partially and in some cases fully away from the perpetrator, which in this case is a Euro-centric academic system that favors 'whiteness' at the expense of Black students yet refuses to acknowledge or take responsibility for the shortcoming of a system that was not built to facilitate Black students’ success. Blaming the Black community for 'imaginary' shortcomings places the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of a group that does not currently hold the necessary systemic power to bring about change that is necessary at the school board level where major decisions are made (Solórzano et al 2001:4; Smith et al. 2005:348; Codjoe 2006:35). This lack of accountability on the part of school boards allows the cycle to continue of generation after generation of Black parents voicing their concerns, but being silenced and having their concerns invalidated by administrators not willing to adapt to the needs of diverse populations. This is a clear example of 'whiteness' at work, whereby white is far too often considered neutral and the societal norm, while anything outside of this is labeled diverse and considered 'other'. This perception of neutrality that is given to whiteness may allow educators to believe that a Euro-centric method of teaching is equally beneficially to all students (Sleeter 2001:95; Ogbu 1992:8; Maylor 2009:3; Levine-Rasky 2014: 205; Charbeneau 2015: 655).

This thesis rejects cultural values or genetic deficit explanations for the racial gap in academic outcomes, and instead will focus on the cultural-social context in which Black students must function and thrive. Black Canadians have faced multiple roadblocks including racial
discrimination, prejudice and a lack of economic opportunities. All of these factors influence the
everyday experiences of Black students and have a tremendous impact on their academic
success, which, in turn, influences their future economic prospects and reality (Smith et al.
looking at the factors that encourage inequitable and at times hostile learning conditions for
African-Canadians, we can begin to unravel the systemic roadblocks that increase the risk of
Black failure while decreasing the occurrences of Black excellence. Such an analysis will allow
us to gain a full picture of the potential factors that intersect to create a non-conducive learning
environment for Black students.

**Strength through Visibility: Black Success Highlighted**

The majority of literature on Blacks in academia focuses on the shortcomings of Black
students and the failure of the educational system with regards to Black students. Researchers
like Codjoe (2006, 2001), Mayor (2009), Jerlando and James (2006), and Rhamie and Hallman
(2001) take a different approach by focusing on the factors that are present when Black Canadian
students are academically successful. By highlighting the success stories of Black students, these
researchers are simultaneously releasing some of the stigma and false stereotypes connected with
Black students' learning capabilities and providing new insight into potential strategies to
increase Black students' success rate.

According to Codjoe, the major and most significant contribution to the academic success
of Black students has been "knowledge and pride/affirmation in black cultural and racial
identity...the one on the role played by a supportive environment that reinforces knowledge and
pride in black cultural identity was the most gratifying and significant for the students"
(2006:39). This finding confirms the need to reaffirm Black cultural identity, success and history
within the mainstream school systems. The importance for Black students to develop a strong and healthy Black cultural identity is crucial to a healthy academic learning experience. Witnessing, experiencing and learning about the past and current successes of Black people can serve as a means of providing courage, strength and vision to students who far too often are bombarded with information about white excellence while simultaneously being bombarded with the painful reminder of Black invisibility (Codjoe 2006:40; Maylor 2009:3; Henry 1993:212; Ogbu 1992:6). Therefore, school learning environments must be made more relevant and reflective of their student population, providing information on Black history, culture, and pride, and racial micro-aggressions must be monitored and reduced. For example, it is important for Black literature, theorists, visionaries, and historians to be integrated into the curriculum throughout the school year and not be restricted to just 'Black History Month'. Students must feel a sense of belonging in the fabric of society, and Black issues must be seen as Canadian issues and not segregated or rendered invisible (Gay 2004:33). Codjoe's research shows that Black students who were academically successful learned to balance the effects of being in a Euro-centric environment. They were provided with information on Black history and successful Black individuals from parents and friends, and also engaged with independent learning methods to truly understand and find pride in the Black experience. Learning about various Black figures such as Paul Robeson, W.E.B Dubois, Sojourner Truth, Mary Ann Shadd, John Ware and George Washington Carver, helped to strengthen their Black identity (2006:43). Further Codjoe's research suggest that, when Black students are introduced to academic curriculums that include Black literature by authors such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, they can feel empowered and connected to the literature in a way that inspires them to achieve (Codjoe 2006:44). Codjoe's research highlights the importance of Black student's being shown
positive images of Black individuals from diverse careers and social backgrounds. This potentially can infuse Black students with hope, vision, self-esteem, strength and the courage needed to survive in predominantly white institutions.

When discussing Black students’ success, the questions that must be asked are how are we representing our population in the curriculum and course materials in general? Why is literature written by Europeans given precedence in a society that is considered multicultural? Are Black people visible within the educational system? Are teachers themselves even educated about Black excellence well enough to pass on that knowledge to pupils? These are the questions that must be asked in order to even begin to unravel the reasons behind Black students’ struggle to find academic success in Canadian schools. Other questions that also need to be asked are: Why is our Canadian educational system upholding a way of being that values Whiteness while simultaneously disadvantaging Blackness? How does a Euro-centric schooling system disadvantage racialized students? These questions cannot be answered in the scope of this thesis, but are potential future research topics.

To further deconstruct the problem that frequently arises when Black students are educated within a predominantly Euro-centric system, we must refer back to whiteness and its meaning and further connect it to the meanings, symbols, messages, and educational outcomes of Black students. According to Levine-Rasky,

Whiteness has been understood pluralistically. Frankenberg (1993) famously describes it a structural advantage, a standpoint, and a set of practices. It also understood as a power dynamic that is practiced structurally through social systems and institutions and culturally through ideas and popular meanings of the everyday. Whiteness is normalized, exercised without self-consciousness; among its outcomes are control of the terms of
engagement between people racialized as white and those who are racialized as something other than white. (2009: 206).

Whiteness represents a system of power, which is set up to prioritize individuals who fall under the category 'white' while racialized others are far too often simply tolerated. We can see that Whiteness is at play within Canada's mainstream educational system when we take into consideration that Euro-centric values are normalized while Afro-centric values are othered and deemed invisible (Sleeter 2001:95; Levine-Rasky 2014:205; Charbeneau 2015:656).

In arguing that a Euro-centric focused education is interchangeable with a white focused system, we are left asking how Black students as a community can thrive in an academic system that was not built for their success. It is important to highlight Codjoe's work because the lack of research on Black academic success within the Canadian educational system is quite disturbing. Instead, the literature has a tendency to focus on Black failure and perceived inadequacy without sufficiently highlighting the harrowing effects of the lack of effort put forth to truly educate Black students in Canada. Codjoe's research provides great insight into how we, as a society, can begin to start building up our Black students so that they can enjoy visibility and start being included academically and thrive as a community.

**Afro-Centric Focused Learning**

Due to the school system’s failure to provide a proper learning environment, Black students are struggling to find success. According to Levine-Rasky (2014:202), Aboriginal and Black students in Canada are the least likely to report enjoying school or feeling that they are being treated fairly in school. These students feel that learning about their race or culture would help to keep them interested in school or make the learning process a positive experience (Levine-Rasky 2014: 202). Not surprisingly, this failure of the mainstream school system has
influenced Black parents to push and speak up for an alternative learning environment that prioritizes Black success in a similar way that mainstream Euro-centric schools promote 'white student's success' (Dei 1997:171; Codjoe 2006:39; Maylor 2009:3; Levine-Rasky 2014:204; Henry 1993:210). Further research acknowledges this phenomenon as Dei states, Problems of representation, whether with respect to the absence of the role models or in the abstract production of knowledge, and issues of identity are closely tied to the process of disengagement, and as such require closer analysis. As students, parents, and educators reflect on questions of identity and issues of Euro-centrism within schools, they explore alternative visions for delivery of education (1997:169).

Discussions on alternative measures to curb the problem of low academic achievement within the Black student population have included the establishment of Black-focused schools. According to Dragnea and Erling,

African-centered education is committed to cultural as well as academic and social goals. Inside African-centered schools, teachers teach Black students about their culture, about life, and about their role in society and the world while maintaining high expectations and demanding excellence (2008:3).

Though there have been debates about such schools, many have argued that this culturally relevant approach to education creates an environment where Black students are made visible and capable, and seen as valuable members in their learning environments.

**Collectives: Providing Refuge and Strength**

Black students still face significant challenges in representation in higher education, and graduation levels still tend to lag behind those of white students. The lack of diversity in classroom environments including course curriculums, professors and teaching assistants along
with everyday racial micro-aggressions have far too often left Black-identifying students isolated and without a sense of belonging in predominantly white institutions (Codjoe 2006:34; Dei 1997:176; Cummins 1997:412). As a response to this crisis across Canada and the United States, some universities have carved out Black enclaves within widely white institutions (PWIs) to create safe spaces intended specifically to nurture, support and develop Black excellence. Black collectives represent such an enclave (Carter 2007 and Grier-Reed et al. 2008). Groups of people join together to create collectives for various reasons including: to organize resistance against oppression, create a family or community environment with others who share similar lived experiences, and to encourage and support members of the group (Desouza 2012:374; Brown 2006:733). According to Witteborn, "Collective identity refers to alignment between people who express and enact themselves as members of a group," (2007: 559). In other words, collective identities are socially constructed by members of a group and are formally or informally agreed upon by members. Brown (2006:734) suggests that, collectives participate in socializing and networking, and are constantly in the process of negotiating between the shared and unique experiences of members. Although shared narratives are important in the formation and maintenance of collective identities, the stories of subgroups within the main organization will most likely be varied. Collectives can serve as a safe space for individuals who feel they have commonalities that bind them together.

According to Grier-Reed (2010:181), Black collectives can be described as counter-spaces and sanctuaries that offer a means to cope with racial micro-aggressions that are often evident in higher education. Grier-Reed's study found that Black collectives provide students with the ability to be their authentic cultural selves, and can serve as spaces where individuals can receive validation of their racialized social and academic knowledge. Black collectives allow
for the development of afro-centric communities within larger primarily white institutions, thereby creating environments where the needs of Black students are prioritized. According to Carter (2007:542),

formal and informal same-race peer networks for Black students in a predominantly white independent school not only facilitated their adjustment to an environment where they were often seen as outsiders, but also supported these students' academic success and created opportunities for them to affirm their racial identities.

Collectives can serve a variety of purposes such as: a space to vent racial frustrations, tutoring centers, academic advising, cultural hubs and general support centers.

The goal of Black collectives on campuses is typically to foster a healthy environment where Black students can thrive and reach their full educational and social potential. They are meant to fill the gaps of support and experiences of full inclusiveness and participation for racialized students in PWIs. According to Grier-Reed et al.

facilitating intact social support systems and psychological well-being for Black college students is imperative, particularly on predominantly White campuses. AFAM [African American Student Network] is designed to attend to the challenges by providing space for Black students to address, understand and cope with stressors (2008:477).

Here, we see that Black collectives provide a space for students to cope with the stressors related to their racialized minority status in PWIs. These stressors can include anything from lack of knowledge or guidance about the institution’s structure or processes, family and personal problems, economic stressors, social and emotional isolation, poor health and institutional racism (Nadal et al.2014:462; Houshmand et al. 2014:377; Solórzano et al. 2000:61). Carter explains,
There is considerable evidence that predominantly White learning environments are perceived as hostile to many Black students; however when faced with such hostility some Black achievers cope by creating and using formal and informal, social and academic-affirming counter-spaces as a resistance strategy to buffer experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination (2007:543).

Overall, Black collectives work towards providing Black students with a healthy learning environment.

Black collectives in academic spaces can consist of both formal and informal organizational groups, but the goal of both groups is to nurture and reaffirm a positive Black identity in students. In the next two sub-sections, I will briefly discuss two American studies; the first focuses on the dynamics of a formal African American Student Network (hereinafter referred to as AFAM) at a predominantly white campus, and the second examines an informal African-American student network of students that hangout in the staircase of their campus during the lunch hour. I will be focusing on these two studies because the academic literature on collectives based on race is scarce and these studies have similar traits as the Munford Centre at the University of Guelph.

**Formation and Formal Organization**

The African American Student Network (AFAM) is a Black collective at a predominantly white institution that operates under the main philosophy of "within each student is the ability to reduce the gap between the real and ideal self" (Grier-Reed et al. 2008:477). In other words, AFAM encourages Black students to move their thoughts beyond the statistics that show that Black students consistently underachieve academically and instead to push to close the gap and succeed academically. Faculty members who run this program see their role as creating
an environment where the collective knowledge of the group can be used to facilitate the closing of any gaps that may be present within the group. The AFAM is open to all Black students on the particular campus, both undergraduate and graduate, and is led by two faculty members who facilitate two weekly meetings. Food is provided during AFAM meetings as a tool to produce a sense of home, cultural community and to provide a sense of family. Eating together helps foster relationships among members of the group and to strengthen connections. To better understand the gaps that the AFAM is trying to fill, we can see that Black students in PWIs are generally missing a sense of belonging, community and general connections to the wider campus populations. These relationships are made through building trust among participants while distrust is associated with a lack of connection to the wider university community. AFAM looks for ways to connect to students’ lived experiences by encouraging them to discuss their own experiences, and share ideas and concerns in an environment that is safe. The concept 'safe' does not only refer to a sense of physical security, but also to a sense of psychological safety from micro-invalidation. In other words, the ideas and experiences of Black students can be spoken and their experiences validated and discussed with people who most likely have knowledge of social scenarios that members of the Black community frequently face (Grier-Reed et al. 2008:478). AFAM's meetings typically begin with students sharing both personal positive and negative experiences since their last meeting, and provide space for students to share their opinions on various social issues. Students frequently discuss topics that have a direct effect on the Black community and further deconstruct and conceptualize what it means for them to be African-Americans. In Grier-Reed et al.s' study, a student participant stated, "It was just a chill out place for us African Americans to come to and just take a rest from classes from whatever stress we have regarding classes or outside of classes. It just provided some type of an oxygen
where we could just breathe and just relax... We talk about so many issues... we talk about relationships, everything. Everybody spills their guts... and it was away from White people too so we could say whatever we wanted to say without fear of being stigmatized.... or defensive" (2008:480). This quote demonstrates the need for Black students to have spaces that tend to their specific experiences. Overall, this section demonstrates both the operation of formal Black collectives (officially recognized by their campus) as well the specifics purposes and important role they hold in supporting a healthy learning environment for Black students.

**Formation and Informal Organization**

Carter's study looked at Black students in a predominantly white high school, who created and used Black peer networks in their school to counteract their experiences of racism and to affirm a positive racial identity (2007: 542). Black students can establish these spaces anywhere in the school environment such as: the cafeteria, library, stair ways, or empty classrooms. These counter-spaces allow students to vent and share some of their racial frustrations with one another, develop coping strategies to work towards academic success as well as to redefine racial identities. In other words, similarly to formal organizations, the formation of informal Black collectives is motivated by Black students’ exclusion in the social and academic structures on campuses (Minikel-Lacocque 2012: 432). Unlike formal Black collectives which include faculty participation and guidance, informal organizations are often stereotyped and viewed negatively. According to Carter, the image of a group of Black students sitting together in a predominantly white institution often will draw a negative response from administrators who want to know why this is happening and how it can prevent it. This response is mostly influenced by faculties’ desire to visibly see Black students integrated and socializing with the mainstream and majority population. Negative stereotypes that conceptualize a group of
Black students as 'trouble' also influenced faculties’ desire to prevent such group formation (2007:543).

Overall, formal Black collectives that were sanctioned by the institution in which they existed were generally accepted in a positive way while informal Black collectives were often viewed with suspicion. Formal organizations have structure, organized activity, and can be easily tracked and controlled by faculty while informal organizations are spontaneous and, although they may show patterns, they do not follow a formal process that faculty can easily monitor.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I will present the methodological approach that guided this study. The first section will open with information on my background and positionality in society. Here, I share information on my gender, class, ethnicity and race. The following section will discuss information about participants and detail the recruitment process. Participants’ age, gender, length of time involved with the Munford Centre, and immigration status will be found here. I also will discuss how I gained access to participants. In the next section, I will provide details on the interview process. This chapter will end with a discussion on ethical concerns and how I addressed them.

Background and Positionality

All researchers have certain assumptions concerning the topic they are investigating, the participants, and the situations being observed. The more characteristics that the researcher shares with participants in terms of ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and socio-economic status, the greater the likelihood of access being granted, and the greater the likelihood of understanding of cultural symbols and the overall validity of the findings (Merriamet al. 2001:406). Those who hold dominant social positions in the terms of class, gender, and race may conceptualize their research in a way that reinforces dominant perspectives and invalidates narratives of marginalized groups (McCorkel and Myers 2003:200). Overall, it is important for researchers to be aware of their positionality and how it may affect their relationship with research participants and their analysis of the data. Therefore, it is important to constantly reflect on one's positionality and check for bias, which can occur regardless of whether one holds insider or outsider status (Deutsch 2004:898).
My background as a Canadian born, Black, cis-gendered identifying queer women who is ethnically predominantly Jamaican and Scottish with a family background that ranges from low-income to middle-class status has greatly influenced my understanding of society. My experiences and understanding always come from an intersectional perspective, with race being central to my critical thinking. My interest in Black students’ educational experiences began at a young age; growing up in Ontario as a Black female Canadian student and attending both predominantly white academic institutions and highly racially diverse academic institutions has led me to have great interest in the experiences of Black students. Being raised in Ontario has come with many conflicting experiences. I have witnessed incidents of racial discrimination, but I have felt that they were ambiguous, which has left me confused and wanting to gain a deeper understanding. To further explain this contradiction, I personally have never actually met a teacher or professor who treated me in ways that would lead me to label them as racist. However, some teachers who showed me strong support and encouragement simultaneously were the same individuals who would make generally racially charged comments about Black students. I will share two of my earliest memories of racially focused exchanges between myself and teachers.

The first scenario occurred when I was seven years old. A white female teacher, who seemed to be quite fond of me, stopped me in the hallway and asked me if I thought it was fair that we had to celebrate Black history month when there was no white history month. I did not know what to say so I replied "no, it's not fair". I spent some time thinking about this question when I was alone and kept coming up with the fact that all the pictures in our history books were about 'white people' with only a few pages about other racialized Canadians, and wondered how much more white history could possibly be taught. For the next three years during the school’s yearly speech competition, I chose the topic of the civil rights movement, perhaps as an act of
resistance. The second scenario that I will share relates to a discussion that a white male teacher had with me and a small group of Black male students in the 6th grade. The teacher stated that no Black president had ever successfully run a country in the world and that it just was not possible for this to occur. He then proceeded to list African nations that have struggled to thrive. I was not privy to the beginning of the conversation and did not know how the discussion was first started, but I remember thinking "well, what's the point, why am I even trying in school if failure is inevitable". Direct racially charged comments were few and far between, and both of these teachers praised my reading skills, encouraged me to improve my math skills, and nominated me for awards questions such as: how could a teacher simultaneously make what I deemed as racist comments, yet still show me support and want me to strive? Now, I realize that I may have been considered 'one of the good Black students' and 'different from the average Black student', which may have led teachers to perceive that it was acceptable to make certain comments in my presence that may not be seen as acceptable around everyone. Nonetheless, these scenarios and other similar ones left me wanting to understand racism, and especially in a way that was not yet available to me.

Prior to starting my undergraduate degree, I understood from my experiences that there were times when Black students received differential treatment from mainstream students. Throughout my university career at a predominantly white university, my experiences with faculty have been really positive. I was able to find mentors and have the support of many professors who guided me along the way, and I would therefore consider my academic environment to be quite healthy. Further, my earlier experiences with racial micro-aggressions had prepared me and provided me with the tools needed to cope with micro-aggressions from peers by the time I arrived at the university. Despite my realities, I recognize the diversity in
Black students’ experiences within the Canadian academic system and hope to highlight these experiences and encourage positive changes.

After reading about micro-aggressions and the seemingly innocuous racially charged comments that underpin these aggressions, I felt empowered to explore race and racism in the education system. Though I began my undergraduate degree wanting to obtain a history major, I quickly switched to sociology after spending a semester studying Canadian history that was void of Black Canadian history. I felt that sociology would be more inclusive. Although race is not sufficiently integrated into the academic literature, I have been able to take courses that integrated not only the realities of white individuals, but also the realities of various racialized groups. My first experience with a strong racially diverse course where I felt satisfied that I was actually learning from a fully intersectional and racially diverse perspective was during the first year of my Master’s studies in Dr. Vivian Shalla's course, which discussed various themes concerning gender, work and change in a global context; it is in this course that I was first introduced to the full benefits of inclusivity within my learning environment.

My specific interest in the C. J. Munford Centre began during my first year of undergraduate studies when I first arrived on campus and was overwhelmed by being in a predominantly white institution (PWI). This was the first time in my life that I was both attending a predominantly white institution and was far away from my diverse home community. It was during this time that I truly felt like a minority and foreign, and felt out of place. During orientation week, a few other Black students approached me and eventually we stumbled onto the C. J. Munford Centre. I quickly made Munford my home center and found a cultural enclave, a support system, and a place to socialize with others who shared my cultural background. Over the years, I adjusted to the wider campus and slowly broke away from my relationship with the
Munford Centre, moving from a full member to eventually spending so much time away that I no longer was familiar with current members. The Munford Centre played a crucial role in my integration into the wider university community and helped me adjust at my own pace and, as a result, I did not consider transferring to a different institution.

Accordingly, I felt that it was important for me to highlight the experiences of Black students who may face isolation, racial aggression, loneliness and a lack of support, and to demonstrate their resilience and the strength that they gain through setting up a mini-cultural enclave where students have control over the Afro-centric space. Once we have provided a fuller and more detailed narrative of the diverse experiences of Black students on campuses, it will become easier for schools to develop programs that are targeted to greater inclusivity of racialized minorities on PWIs. My study aims to contribute to this broader project.

Participants and Recruitment

The participants in this study were fourteen students who identified as Black, African, Afro-Canadian and Afro-Caribbean Canadian; eight of the participants were men and six were women. All participants were in the process of completing their undergraduate degree and ranged from ages 18 to 26. Four of the participants were in their first year of study, two were in their second year of study, five were in their third year of study, and three were in their fourth year of study or beyond. Seven of the participants were international students: two were from the Caribbean and five were from various countries across Africa. Six of the participants were born in Canada while their parents were born outside of the country. The final participant immigrated to Canada within the last five years. Participants had been involved in various capacities at the Munford Centre for between four months and five years. The majority of participants noted that they had initially been introduced to the Munford Centre by friends or acquaintances who invited
them to visit the Centre and check it out. Many participants were attracted to the Centre because they felt isolated, lonely or yearned to be around others who shared a similar culture and who would understand culturally relevant speech. All of the participants self-identified as belonging to the wider Black community at the University of Guelph and were current active members of the Munford Centre. Only two participants identified Guelph as their hometown. I specifically chose Guelph to conduct my study because of the connections, experiences and general insights that I had made during my past participation in the Munford Centre. These connections provided me with background knowledge of the Center that proved to be quite valuable when working on gaining enough trust in order to conduct the interviews.

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Guelph's Research Ethics Board (REB), I proceeded to contact the current leaders of the collective of the Munford Centre, and was able to book a meeting with one of them. I was greeted with both skepticism and interest, and prepared myself to answer some difficult questions. During the initial meeting with this leader, I was asked about my intentions, particularly why I wanted to conduct the study as well as who had sent me. The skepticism stemmed from a fear on the part of the collective that my research may be used to dismantle the Munford Centre. I was informed that there had been previous attempts to have the Centre shut down or to cut necessary funding. I explained that I had previously been a member of the Munford Centre and that I personally found it a valuable space, but that the purpose of my study was to develop knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of Black students and to explain the role that Black collectives play in the academic and social realities of Black students. Although I hold partial insider status as a past Black member of the Munford Centre, I simultaneously hold outsider status as a graduate student conducting research on the experiences of Black students who are members of the Centre. Once
the collective’s leader felt reassured that there was no ill intent on my part, I was invited to present the information concerning my research to the collective’s leadership and general participants. The collective’s leadership refers to members who hold an official position within the Munford Centre, for example, the president, vice president, secretary, or public relations officer. Members who are a part of the collective, but do not hold any official titles are referred to as general participants.

I followed up with a second presentation and introduced my project to the general Munford population, emphasizing that participation was completely voluntary and that I could be contacted via email for those interested in being interviewed. The presentation was held in the lounge area of the Munford Centre and lasted 30 minutes. There were approximately 35 students present, and the presentation was informal in nature. I explained in detail the purpose of my project, what would be required of participants, as well as participants’ rights. The majority of questions I received revolved around my intentions for the study. Potential participants wanted reassurance that I was not conducting the study to look for reasons in support of closing the Centre. This is where my insider-outsider status can be seen. Although, I am a student of colour, my status as graduate student and researcher simultaneously made me an outsider. After reassuring those present that above all my priority was to do no harm, they began considering the possibility of participating. The presentation went well and I started to receive emails fairly soon after, and proceeded to schedule interviews for the following week. The collective’s leaders also sent out a mass email to their full mailing list along with my contact information to help me reach a wider audience. To ensure that I was not leaving any potential participants out of the recruitment pool, I set up posters in the University Centre, library, various cafeterias, and outside numerous classrooms.
Participants all made initial contact with me via email and I met face to face with each of them in the quiet room of the Munford Centre. I discussed with them the consent form and background information concerning my research. If they agreed to participate, we set up a time and date to meet and conduct the official interview. Three of the participants who had agreed to be interviewed did not show up for the scheduled interview. I decided not to contact these individuals as I figured that this may possibly be their method of withdrawing from the study and I did not want to pressure anyone to participate. I did not provide any type of incentive in exchange for the students’ participation, but I did inform them that sharing their narratives would be quite valuable and add to the literature on Black students in Canada and on the role that Black collectives play in the process of sustaining Black students while pursuing their university studies.

**Interview Process**

Qualitative, in-depth interviews were my method of choice for my research. As Rosetto states,

Qualitative research interviews (QRIs) involve gathering information and facts eliciting stories, and learning about meanings, emotions, experiences, and relationships that cannot easily be observed. Interviewers engage in active, supportive listening that involves paraphrasing and probing to develop rapport and encourage in-depth discussion. These qualities are similar to clinical interviews and therapy sessions that also highlight rapport building, openness, and shared understanding (2014:483).

Therefore, by utilizing in-depth qualitative interviews, my goal was to amplify the voices of Black students and to allow for their perspectives, realities and ideas to be highlighted throughout my research. I considered my position as the researcher to be more of an active
listener and allowed the conversation to move in the direction that the participants deemed most important. This method encouraged participants to wander further into their lived experiences within a safe environment and within boundaries over which they had much control. I further utilized reflexivity throughout my research to reflect on my role and positionality, and to check any biases that may arise. As Finlay states, "The process of engaging in reflexivity is full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure" (2002:209). Therefore, constant reflection and evaluation of my thoughts and of my overall interpretation of participants’ responses were critical throughout the research process.

To facilitate the in-depth interviewing process, I created an interview guide that featured open-ended questions. This served as a basic guideline, and I often veered off topic as discussions developed of interest to participants. New questions were raised and additional issues were discussed that helped to gain greater insight into the individual experiences of participants. The length of interviews varied greatly, from 20 to 45 minutes depending on how much time participants were willing to give along with how much information they were willing to share with me. All of the interviews took place on campus, with twelve of the interviews conducted in the Munford Centre and the remaining two interviews conducted in empty classrooms on campus. Before the beginning of each interview, I read the consent form, had a discussion about the study, and answered any questions or concerns raised by the participant. Each participant was then asked to sign the consent form if they were comfortable with moving forward with the interview. All interviews were audio recorded, which allowed me to maintain eye contact with participants and focus on the conversation. This ensured greater accuracy of the data. After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed each one verbatim within 72 hours, which allowed me
to precisely capture the interviews in written format. I used NVivo software to organize and code my data, and developed a thematic analysis. I was able to identify common themes pertaining to Black students’ experiences of empowerment and academic success on a predominantly white university campus through their participation in a Black collective.

**Ethical Concerns**

The main potential ethical concern of this research had to do with the potential emotional and psychological harm to participants as a result of discussing sensitive topics, including racism, discrimination, loneliness, isolation, racial micro-aggressions, racilized status, and leaving one's home and community. My greatest concern was that in discussing the participants’ personal experiences, feelings of anger, pain, sadness, and/or frustration may arise, which might cause them distress. To minimize this risk, I emphasized with participants their right to skip any questions that they did not feel comfortable responding to or to expand only as much as they felt comfortable doing. I also reassured participants that they were steering the ship and they were in control of their narratives and the way they wished to discuss their experiences. To help create an environment that was open and comfortable for participants, I conducted interviews at the Munford Centre in the quiet room where there was complete privacy. I also spoke to participants about myself, my interests and my general educational background. This helped to make participants more comfortable and created a sense of trust and established a rapport from the outset.

Another major concern was that participants could possibly be identified if they disclosed certain scenarios or incidents, and could be recognized by their descriptive narratives. If these narratives included professors or other students and specifically involved racism or some other forms of conflict, inadvertent identification could potentially be devastating to the participants’
social and academic life on campus. Fortunately, interviews did not produce any narratives with identifying factors.

There was also another significant concern that I personally had, but that did not seem to be of any concern to participants. This concern was that participants may identify what they thought to be flaws with the Munford Centre, and that this would lead to internal conflict within the organization and leave participants isolated within their group. To minimize this risk, I made it clear to participants that their narratives and responses would be included in my thesis and that they should be aware that a thesis is a public document. I reassured participants that I would make every effort to minimize the risk of any of the information they shared being directly identified, but that it was possible that a particular response or narrative could be attributed to them by other members of the Munford Centre. Therefore, I emphasized that it was important for them to only share what they felt comfortable sharing.

My main goal was to inform participants of their rights in this study and that protecting their identity was a priority. I made sure to remind participants of their right to withdraw at any time and their right to decline to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering. I gave participants 10 days from the date of their interview to contact me if they wanted to withdraw from the project. None of the ethical concerns became a reality during my research, and all the participants who consented to the interviews remained in the project. There were a few occasions when participants chose not to answer or expand on specific questions that they found triggered negative memories. In these instances, I immediately moved to the next question in my interview guide.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study is to examine how Black collectives on campus empower Black students within majority non-Black university populations. My goal is to explore the lived realities of Black students attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) and find out why they join and utilize Black collectives to cope with racial micro-aggressions and overcome barriers that prevent an ideal learning environment. There is little Canadian literature on the topic of Black student collectives, but the American literature provided some background to help fill the gaps. Literature on Black students in Canada is also limited, but the available literature showed that Black students fall behind every other racial group in standardized testing and that the current educational system is not an ideal learning environment for Black students. For many Black students, schools are a place that have frequently rendered them invisible and have failed to provide an inclusive curriculum in which Black students can learn. It is important to note that it is not my intent to shed a negative light on the Canadian academic system, but instead to highlight the ways that students of African descent experience the school system from their standpoint.

My intention is not to discount what universities in Canada have done in working towards an inclusive and safe diverse environment. I hope, instead, to disclose the gaps and areas that need improvement based on the narratives of the Black students in my study. Black students are not a monolithic group and therefore their needs vary considerably as is the case with other populations. The participants in this study all hold one characteristic in common in that they self-identify as Black undergraduate students studying at a predominantly white Canadian university. Besides identifying as Black students, some participants were international students, some were Canadian born and raised, while others migrated to Canada either recently or as young children.
With that being said, although there are some experiences that are common to all of the participants, I also found diversity in their responses and experiences.

In speaking with the fourteen participants, I was able to explore the ways in which Black students from diverse backgrounds experience education in PWIs. The participants who spoke with me did so with confidence and strength. They recounted happy, encouraging, painful, sad and uplifting narratives that they accepted as their own, but also as belonging to others who share similar experiences. I left these interviews with a great sense of appreciation for Black students and a new understanding of the ways in which the intersections of our characteristics truly work together to shape our experiences in the world. I will forever be grateful to the participants who volunteered their time and were more than willing to share with me their stories even when at times it appeared hard to do so.

This chapter explores in detail key themes and patterns that emerged during interviews with participants. The first section of this chapter discusses participation in the C. J. Munford Centre. Participants talked about the factors that influenced their decisions to join a Black collective. The next section deals with how participants felt about and viewed their personal minority status within the academic community. Participants shared their own personal experiences and the way they felt that the wider university community viewed them. The following section discusses students’ experiences of racial micro-aggressions, with a focus on three subtopics: micro-invalidations, micro-insults, and micro-assaults. The next section explores the various educational workshops and information sessions that take place at the Munford Centre. Here, participants talked about programs that have piqued their interest and have been beneficial to them in different ways. In the following section, informal educational exchanges that occur at the Munford Centre are discussed. In the final section of this chapter, I share
participants’ final thoughts on a variety of issues concerning the Munford Centre, the University of Guelph, or themselves. I added this section to allow participants to end their narratives in a way that was most significant to them.

**Participation in the C. J. Munford Centre**

The first question that I asked participants after the ice breaker questions was "Why did you join the Munford Centre?" Initially the answers that I had received were what I would call ‘textbook’ and tended to reflect the mission statement of the Centre rather than personal opinions as to why the participants decided to join the Centre. After some probing, I received multi-layered answers from the different groups in my study. In other words, there were distinct answers based on whether the students were international, Canadian-born, or recently landed immigrants to Canada (within the past five years). It is important to note that I did not originally plan to analyze my interviews by students' status and have not done this for all the themes that will be discussed, but it was clear in some instances that there were patterns in the responses of these groups. This may be of interest for future studies on this topic when trying to determine the experiences of Black students within a specific population.

The responses to this question were quite similar for all international students who felt isolated and were not yet fully adapting to the transition from being in a predominantly Black community to a university that is primarily white. These students felt that, without the existence of a Black collective on campus, they would be lost and have no sense of belonging. One participant pointed this out by stating that,

If the Munford Centre did not exist, where we would go. There is no other spaces on campus for Black students. We would feel, like, lost... just if we, if we didn't have the Munford Centre, then we would just be wandering around with no place to go. Here is a
good place to be. I am surrounded by people of the same culture and they share my beliefs, they laugh at my jokes…(P8).

Like other international students, this participant equated having a shared culture and sense of belonging as the main reasons that motivated his use of the Munford Centre, and promoted the space as having a great importance. One participant went as far as to call it culture shock to move into a community that is primarily white and having the urge to be around other people of colour with whom he felt he could better identify. This participant stated,

I feel at ease because if you’re coming from a place that is not predominantly white, then it’s sort of a culture shock when you first come here. So you sort of want to be around people of similar, that looks similar and sort of have similar ideas. So if you're a person of colour, Munford Centre would be a great place because you can identify with a lot of people instead of feeling, like, alienated on campus. (P1).

This perspective was echoed by other international students who came from predominantly Black countries and had not yet fully internalized their new status as a visible minority. The importance placed on racial and cultural belonging was evident for participants who often felt out of place in the wider university community. Another participant shared her experiences of isolation and loneliness, which was difficult for her to cope with as she had higher hopes for her social life when coming to Canada. This participant resided on campus in the student residences and had strived to make friends within the general student population, but had faced roadblocks when people realized that she was an African international student. She shared that her reasoning to join the Munford Centre was to avoid isolation, to make new friends and to generally gain a sense of acceptance that she had been missing. This participant first started speaking in a soft voice which grew more confident as the interview went on,
Well as a person just being in your room having nobody to identify with coming from a different background in general. I mean, you come to the Munford and people talk to you. I enjoy the Munford Centre and people understand your jokes, they appreciate you, and you understand their jokes and they don't judge you're speech like... a wide range of things. (P2).

This participant’s sentiments were similar to those of other international students who felt that the Munford Centre provided a place where they were able to form instant friendships and get to know people who shared their culture along with experiences of loneliness and isolation.

Hearing about the loneliness felt by international students led me to realize that a large number of students at the Munford Centre are there to recreate a community environment that is similar to their home country, one in which characteristics that may come across as foreign to people born in Canada now become the norm within the collective space. The Munford Centre provides a space where hearing an African dialect is the norm, where hearing a Jamaican accent does not warrant a second glance, where the smell of ethnic African foods brings smiles and conversations about favorite dishes and memories of home instead of the awkward glances from students who may not be familiar with these foods. It seems that familiarity and being viewed as belonging to the community is important to some Black students and can be a driving force in their desire to join a Black collective.

Some participants who were born and raised in Canada offered different reasons for wanting to participate in the Munford Centre. One participant spoke of the need to have a space that is dedicated to Black students on a campus with a predominantly non-white population. As one participant noted,
Well the C. J. Munford Centre is basically a space for diverse students on campus, it is basically a safe space where they can speak more freely without having a white dominant presence or person in the room. So that, umm, they can just speak freely and interact with other people of diversity that may be going through the same things as them. (P8).

Participants at the Munford Centre often utilize the word "safe" to describe a space where they have the freedom to speak about racial issues without being invalidated and to practice their cultures without facing discrimination, and a space that is generally free from oppression. For example, during discussions that concerned race, participants frequently reported experiences of white students becoming defensive rather than supportive, which can push Black students to retreat or avoid discussions on race altogether.

Students born and raised in Canada also chose to utilize the Munford Centre for other reasons. For example, some became involved almost strictly for its academic and cultural benefits. As one stated, "The Munford Centre gives us a place to talk about race and to celebrate our culture. The Munford Centre has a library, we provide workshops on black girls and etc, and various topics that people do not want to speak out on." (P11). Some participants who were born or raised in Canada and have spent their childhoods in predominantly white communities were clear that they wanted to join the Munford Centre to reconnect with their culture. One participant specified that her desire to join a Black collective stemmed from her wish to celebrate Black culture both on a local and international level. For some participants, the Munford Centre is a place for education through workshops, for the use of Munford's library, which houses Black literature and history, and for intellectual exchange on racialized issues. For these participants, having minority status on a predominantly white campus was not a great concern as they had been socialized in communities where this has been their lived reality and is thus their norm. One
participant stated, "I am originally from a predominantly white area, so I was upset when I came to Guelph and there was not more Black students. I wanted to know more about my culture and just kind of like switch up my friend group just because most of them have been white." (P12). This particular participant was adamant that I make note of the fact that she had very close relationships with her white peers with whom she had grown up. She simply felt that there were some cultural connections that she missed out on while attending PWIs and that she was hoping that making friends within the Munford Centre would fill that gap for her. Some of the issues that she mentioned were concerning her hair (which had an afro texture), her mother's parenting style, and skin care. This particular participant did not seem to have any strong negative feelings about having grown up with mostly white peers, and actually expressed positive feelings of being included and accepted by her white peers. Her main motivation for joining the Munford Centre was to gain a deeper cultural connection with her racial group, something that she felt she had missed out on.

Other participants who were born in Canada and raised in predominantly white communities seemed to share this sentiment. These participants appeared to have the ability to move between both predominantly white and Black spaces with ease. This is in strong contrast to the experiences of international students who tended to feel more comfortable with other Black students and seemingly uncomfortable in predominantly white spaces on campus.

This section explored the reasons that motivated Black students’ participation in a Black collective, which I have noted are diverse and seem to be influenced by one's immigration status and prior experience in a predominantly white institutions. Black participants born in Canada and raised in predominantly white communities primarily participated in the Munford Centre to get closer to their roots. Black international participants who had only lived in predominantly Black
communities were more likely to experience feelings of isolation within a PWI which influenced their decision to become involved in the Munford Centre. All participants were in search of a safe space where they could freely speak on issues concerning race and unapologetically practice and celebrate Black culture in various forms.

**Minority Status**

In this section, I explore the ways that participants conceptualize their racialized minority status on campus. I found this question to be an important one because it helped me to gauge how participants viewed the status of being a minority. I was curious as to whether they looked down upon it or accepted it, and how in general they were coping. All participants had a great awareness of their minority status. For some, it was simply a matter of desensitizing themselves to the minority experience while, for others, the experience caused them varying levels of emotional and psychological stress. It was mostly those originating from primarily Black communities overseas who had more difficulties in adjusting to their minority status.

Regardless of how they coped, for all participants, being a minority meant difference; some saw this as beneficial while others preferred to blend in. A few participants, primarily those who were raised in predominantly white communities, asserted that they have adapted to being in a predominantly white environment. All participants seemed to give slightly conflicting accounts of the way they conceptualize their minority status on campus. It is important to note that I encouraged participants to answer the questions in the way that they were most comfortable even if that meant steering a bit off topic to get an answer. One participant explained her feelings on being a racialized minority on campus by talking about her general experiences and interactions with others. She stated,
My experiences have not been that horrible because I have always been around white people and I kind of understand and have been desensitized. I've gotten some crude smirks and there are some people that are ignorant in this area but we can't blame them because that is how they were raised. I can only hope they will change one day. I have a strong enough personality that I do not pay attention to it. (P12).

This participant emphasized the importance for her of not blaming white individuals who displayed racism for racist behaviors because she felt that they could not help the way they were socialized. However, she seemed to be conflicted when discussing her experiences of being a racialized minority with loving and being part of a predominantly white community that has, for the most part, accepted her Blackness. She dismissed the racially charged comments and behaviors, which she attributed to circumstances outside of their control, such as their upbringing. This participant talked about often feeling the need to defend the existence of racism and deflect the conversation whenever she brought up racism. I did not probe further on this topic as I realized that the participant was shifting in her seat and seemed to become uncomfortable when expanding on race. I also reminded the participant that this was her narrative and that she could share as much or as little as she found to be acceptable and that the interview could end at any time.

Another participant’s response also highlighted conflicting feelings. Indeed, she describe what appeared to be a predominantly positive sense of her racialized minority status, but also talked about experiencing racial micro-aggressions in the form of stereotypes, which sometimes made her feel uncomfortable,

I grew up in Cambridge and there was only, like, ten Black people in my high school, so I was, like, used to being the minority. My high school was very integrated and I wasn't
treated really that different from everyone. It is more, like, just small things now, like, stereotypes that I am expected to be aggressive, be able to dance, have an accent or etc.

People would pin stereotypes on me like, 'don't touch her or she will fight you' or assume I'm good at basketball. (P13).

This participant spoke proudly of her experiences at a Cambridge high school and, although this school was primarily white, it did have a large number of racialized students. However, she also shared her experiences of people using racial stereotypes when they interacted with her, both in her high school days and since she began attending university. She discussed how these experiences have been quite painful as she had to prove that she did not actually fit stereotypes that were associated with her. It is also important to note here that her coping mechanisms included minimizing the stereotypes and focusing on the more positive non-racialized interactions. I will further explore micro-aggressions and stereotypes later in this chapter.

Another participant who migrated to Guelph over five years ago said that her minority status made her feel marginalized due to the way some individuals treated her and that there have been times when people have looked at her differently or simply ignored her. This participant stated, "My minority status well, it makes me feel marginalized. I feel like that would be the right word." (P5). Upon reflecting on her minority status, this participant became very fidgety, stopped making eye contact, and lowered her voice. I paused the recorder and asked if she wanted to continue or if she would prefer to stop the interview. She decided to continue, but did not want to further discuss the issue of minority status.

The experiences of some of the international students pertaining to their minority status were often quite disturbing. One international student made it clear that his minority status meant that he felt a need to connect with others of similar backgrounds. As he noted,
Like we connect on the feelings that other people who are Canadian can make you feel that you are not worth it, that your point is not valid. It's, like, don't even talk because whatever you come up with, it's not valued because of where we are coming from. Which I felt that I actually had a lot of people that have had a lot of the same experiences as me. I know I'm not alone in that boat, I have other people in the boat with me travelling. (P3).

This participant explained that having minority status meant that he had difficulties connecting with white Canadians on campus and that he was not valued as much as he would be if he was not considered different. He further wished that he did not have to carry the burden of negative stereotypes associated with Black males and Africans in general. As the following quote shows, he clearly benefitted from his association with the Munford Centre,

I would say that the most of it was social and also mental because when you are in a place where you feel that people understand you and people value you. It is not like a deliberate thing that you go into a state of shock or sadness or depression, it just comes, it's just a natural thing when you are faced with a situation where you are isolated and excluded. The Munford Centre allows you to move away from that and have a support system with a group of people that actually know you and understand you. It is fulfilling and good for your mental health. (P3).

A participant who was originally from Toronto was finding it hard to adjust to his minority status and also stated that he had experienced culture shock on numerous occasions despite having been attending the University of Guelph for years. He stated,

It’s, ah, how do I put this? It's predominantly white students that come from small towns. So, like, forget international students, I came from Toronto and I had, like, a huge culture shock. I have, like, a culture shock, like, every semester when I come back. It's not only
first year, it's, like, every time I come back. Ah, I get used to being around different people and when I come back here, umm. You stand out. Umm, hmm, I wouldn't say it's a good feeling, it's definitely a bad feeling. Umm, I don't know how to describe the feeling, but imagine it could be you. If you’re around 100 people and you are the only one that looks different, then you’re going to feel a certain way. (P1).

This participant was very aware of his minority status, often felt different from his peers, and did not necessarily feel that he fit in with mainstream. He did not adjust to having minority status and instead coped with it by spending the majority of his free time at the Munford Centre. Interestingly, he also reported that he did not necessarily feel that other students treated him negatively because of his race, they just treated him differently.

Many participants noted that minority status in a predominantly white institution could contribute to mental health issues when the student is unable to integrate into the mainstream society and feels rejection. One participant primarily focused on her status as it intersected with her Blackness and international status, as shown in the following quote, "Definitely I'm a Black student, African student, yeah and international because I came here in 2012 and, umm, I came straight from my country to the university. So, umm, experiences. First year was tough especially the first semester was really tough for me, I mean, the culture shock, and I felt, like, first year, first semester especially, in my residence and classes that I took was really hard because I wanted to see more people like me, like, more black people or yeah. ‘Cause where I am from, we all are Africans and all Black in the country, so coming from that kind of environment, when you literally enter a class of 500 students, like, one out of four black people in the 500 population, that sample size. I wouldn't say that it is a bad thing because, I mean, I like everybody, but it's kind of like a very huge factor, like a shocking factor to me. But as time went by, I tried to adjust
to it. But the hard part was learning with people whom I would say didn't understand you and didn't understand your value, culture and all those things, because that's really hard." (P3).

Some participants made it clear that their racialized minority status made them feel like outsiders, which could lead to mental health issues and negative academic outcomes. These issues come across in the quote from the following participant, "Like, you come to a place predominantly white, they do not identify with you... no friends. Like, a lot of people have poor social skills. So you could just be depressed and you have to be mentally healthy to want to study. So depression, anxiety and all those things. But when you come here to relax, it entirely sets your mood for the entire day knowing that even if you have four classes in a day and you don't get to talk to nobody, you can come here and have a laugh or two and just talk to everybody. Socially as well, like, I'm sure not everyone can be involved in the same activities, like what people do, but we have bowling and the first 20 people get in free, and we go to basketball games together and support each other, yeah things like that." (P2).

One issue that came up regularly was the importance for minorities to take time away from white-dominated spaces by spending a short time every day in spaces that are majority non-white to refuel and gain strength from people who share a similar racialized status or a minority racialized status. As participant emphasized, the Munford Centre is about promoting diversity and not closing itself off from other racialized groups. As one commented,

They try to showcase all of the different cultures in all of their events and they hand out flyers. Whenever they do anything, they try to bring people that that are minorities and you see, like, performances from Chinese background and Indian background at all of our events. So Munford tries to promote diversity. So to get back to the last question. You just need, like, a couple hours in a day with people that you can identify with and when
you go back to your classrooms or whatever, you feel more open and you’re able to concentrate more on your studies and it’s not a problem. ‘Cause you have that one or two hours that you can spend at Munford Centre and you can talk about your problems and people understand. (P1).

Some participants noted that having racial minority status brought feelings of difference and that, even when others did not point out their racial identity, feelings of difference were always present and led them to be aware of their race even when others did not overtly demonstrate this. Lastly, some participants reported having neutral feelings about their racial identity and not necessarily having a feeling towards their minority status unless an incident occurred to highlight their race. Overall, all participants were self-conscious of their racialized minority status. For many, particularly international students, this difference was perceived negatively. For Canadian born and raised participants, having racialized minority status was usually not seen as negative unless they had experienced culture shock. The more a participant felt that their race was a contributing factor in the way that others interacted with them, the more their minority status was reinforced.

**Racial Micro-Aggressions**

During interviews, all participants related various experiences of subtle racial discrimination, and it became clear that these experiences were central to their experiences as they navigated the educational system. This section focuses on the specific racial micro-aggressions that Black students face on campus. It is organized into the subcategories of racial micro-invalidations, micro-insults and micro-assaults. The participants’ responses show that racial micro-invalidations are the most common forms of racial micro-aggressions experienced by Black students. This is followed by micro-insults and, lastly, micro-assaults. While micro-
assaults did occur, only three incidences were reported by participants. This reinforces the notion that society is moving away from blatant and intentional forms of racism, towards more subtle forms of discrimination.

Micro-Invalidations

Micro-invalidations are minor slights that are often innocuous in nature and usually lack the intent to cause harm, but nonetheless do cause the victim harm. Participants often felt that their beliefs and academic opinions were not regarded with the same level of respect or interest as those of their white peers. One participant stated,

They know how the media portrays Africa, as it is they kind of like bring it to you and tell you. They kind of visualize you. Like, I had this group work and I was supposed to post our work and everything. So we met together to analyze everything, and this girl read my work and she just exclaimed saying, "Oh my God, your work is so good. I didn't know, like, you guys from Africa are so good". It was, like, don't tell me that! Because I didn't open my mouth and say, “Oh your work is so good. Like, Canada you guys are so good". It made me feel really bad, but it didn't make me feel too bad. I wouldn't say it was self-esteem, but it made me feel like I need to prove myself. That I need to prove myself so people know that the fact that I am from Africa doesn't mean I'm uneducated or that I'm illiterate, so that I need to prove myself beyond what other students have to prove themselves. It's hard to excel despite all those stereotypes. It's not good for your academia. It's not good because academics was the utmost priority for coming to Canada because I was trying to study and I had to also fight all these stereotypes, and it was just not healthy for me or anyone.(P3).
This type of experience was common for the participants. The emotional and mental toll of fighting off stereotypes often led to increased stress and more likely that participants would suffer academically.

One issue that was brought up by participants is that mainstream students often gave back-handed compliments. To deconstruct this a bit more, we can take a closer look at the compliment and what it implies. Sounding surprised and stating that they did not realize that Africans were so good implied that the mainstream student expected Black students to be incapable of producing quality work due to their continent of origin. It further implies that the mainstream student did not personally hold high expectations of Black students. This creates a situation where Black students feel the need to dedicate extra time to their studies in order to break down stereotypes so that academic peers will take them seriously.

One international participant made it clear that she felt that there are double standards when it comes to how Black international students are stereotyped as ignorant and given less credit by their peers during academic group work. She also worried about the double burden of having to break down stereotypes before even producing academic work that will appear acceptable to group members. This creates a problematic situation for those participating in group work in that the quality work of Black students may be questioned by peers who may assume that Black students are not as intelligent as other students. This can be time-consuming as Black students may exert energy into breaking down stereotypes and policing their own personal behavior instead of focusing on the academic group work at hand. One participant demonstrates this problem clearly by stating,

Freshman year, first semester, I had these different and annoying girls in my group making all these annoying remarks. Like, I was sad, like, really really sad, I felt like I was
actually like an outsider, that's the thing. You feel like you're trying to get into work academically with these people. This should not be the case because we pay tuition, I even paid more tuition than domestic students. So I feel like we all need to coexist. It affected me negatively for just like a week. ‘Cause when it got to a time I spoke to my dad and he let me know. "You don't believe them, you make them know your worth", and that's when I thought to myself, okay, if you think that the fact that I am from Africa makes me illegitimate, then I'm going to prove that I am smarter than you. So, I feel that even though it's like a two-sided effect, firstly I was sad and after talking to my dad and a couple of people, I found that I need to show them. Realistically, it should not be the case, you should not have to be in a group of people working in a group, and because of where you are from, you need to show who you are rather than the content of your character, yeah. (P7).

The students that I spoke to for this study talked about similar experiences that they had to endure and that Black students faced a common struggle of having to overcome micro-aggressions. As one participant stated, "Like, this is what happens when you are a Black student. You have to just deal with it. This is Canada, not Africa" (P6).

For many of the participants, having access to a community that understood and often experienced the same types of racism was empowering because it showed them that the problem was not of an individual nature, and they were able to have their ideas validated by peers who encouraged them to push on, speak up, and continue working towards their goals. One participant expressed this by saying,

Yeah, that's what Munford Centre is all about. You come here, you meet people who like you. You know, initially, before I came to Munford, I felt like I was the only person
going through this. Let me tell you, I called my mom once and I was crying on the phone, I was like, “so you brought me to Canada to suffer before these people? Do you know the kind of things I'm being asked. I was, like, stupid questions”. And, I was crying and then I came here [to the Munford Centre] and felt like, oh no, I came here, and you're not the only one dealing and going through this shame. (P14).

The common theme here is that, for Black students, and especially for those who are also international students, their experiences on a majority white campus can be filled with highly racialized scenarios that create feelings of rejection and potentially lower self-esteem.

**Micro-Insults**

Micro-insults are intentional insults meant to racially degrade a person. They generally are verbal, but can also be physical signs of dismissiveness. One participant spoke quite passionately of her experiences on campus residences where she ended up with a roommate who was clearly very uncomfortable sharing a room with a Black person. The roommate quite frequently degraded her verbally and showed racial biases and discomfort around her. The roommate would make racialized comments and create negative stories about the participant. The tension got to a point where there was almost a physical altercation between the two of them. Here is how the participant spoke about the situation,

Yeah, yeah... it didn't exactly make me sad because I was ready to just fight, but she ran to her room and locked herself in and then she reported me. She reported me to an RA [Residence Assistant] and that I had to speak to an RA in which I told her exactly what happened, and she asked me if I wanted to meet with my roommate, and I told her no we can just be civil. After, it didn't really work because I mean, for example, one time she came to the house and my friends were over and she just looked at them like okay, and
she just went into her room. You know, when we have to, like, leave residence after exams, yeah, she left me like 30 condoms in the bathroom sink and left a note that said “you look like you might need these.” I didn't know why she would think this. Yeah, I would have understood the note if I used to have lots of men over, but nooo, I didn't! I was mostly in my room alone the first semester. (P.3).

In this case, the roommate was actively trying to cause the participant harm by shaming her sexually and by giving the false impression that she was promiscuous. The participant in this case strongly felt that she was treated in such a manner because of her race and culture. The participant then began to question herself by policing her prior activities to see if she had done anything to fuel this negative image. She further explained that, initially, this experience had a negative impact on her academic performance, but eventually she was able to go to the Munford Centre and gain support. It is important to highlight here, as it is often the case, that even though the situation was shared with the Residence Assistant (RA), the participant did not receive any immediate relief from the circumstances and the situation subsequently escalated. The lack of intervention when students face micro-insults can leave them feeling isolated and depressed, which can have a huge effect on their ability to properly focus on their studies. When asking the participant how she was able to pull through and continue to focus on her studies, she immediately pointed to the Munford Centre as a place where she could find refuge and support as well as develop strategies for dealing with racism. As she noted,

Well, at first, it really bothered me and I was unable to study and focus on school stuff, I just felt stressed. But then, I was able to come in and speak to others at the Munford Center, and then it didn't bother me as much. This happens to other
people as well, so there is nothing wrong with me. Some people are just ignorant” (P2).

At this stage, the participant moved from internalizing the negative stereotypes that had been pushed on her, to externalizing them and associating them with the ignorance of her roommate who lacked respect for her as a person of colour, possibly due to the roommate’s own upbringing. This particular incident was one of the more extreme cases shared with me during my research. The intentional hostility that this participant experienced was an outlier in this study. It is important to note, however, that this experience happened on campus in living quarters, which may explain the intimate nature of the racial micro-aggression. To truly see if this is an anomaly or a common experience among Black students, research would need to be conducted on interactions between first-year interracial students who become roommates on predominantly white campus residences.

Black students are more often than not left to their own devices when dealing with racism, and support is often hard to find in mainstream areas of campus. One participant recalled an incident in which he strongly felt that he had been racially profiled near campus, "It would've been a Friday evening and I was with my friends, one is white and one was born here and is brown, and we were getting off of the bus around 7 pm at the intersection before campus. So, we got off the bus and were crossing the street and a female officer in her squad car drove a bit passed us and then she yelled something that I couldn't hear. My friend told me that she yelled “pour it out”, and she just kept yelling, 

pour it out, pour it out”, and I was holding a pair of black headphones and I honestly just didn't know what she was talking about. After that, she kept yelling, “pour it, pour it”,


and I had to approach her car to show her that it was just headphones. She thought I was carrying alcohol. That hurt me a lot. I felt fearful and stressed out that she would categorize me like that. It makes me feel that people have negative assumptions about me and it’s distressful. (P9).

This participant reported experiencing difficulties after the incident and needing support. He also noted that he was able to discuss this incident with his friends for a few minutes, but did not feel that they completely understood how he felt. For his friends, the incident was more humorous and something to laugh at since nobody was hurt, injured or arrested. The participant found it difficult to focus on his academic work and found himself feeling edgy and losing trust in authority. He was later able to utilize the Munford Centre to discuss his concerns and to vent frequently on the situation until he was able to regain confidence, find coping strategies, and refocus on academic work.

Incidents such as those described above had a huge effect on the self-esteem of participants and the way they approached their academic studies. The greatest risk to participants was withdrawing from the wider academic community and attributing their racialized experiences to negative personal qualities. For participants, the Munford Centre provided a type of informal group therapy where members were able to express their frustrations and also reassert a positive racial identity. For these students, there seems to be a lack of support and no other specific place where they can go outside of the Munford Centre when problems arise directly related to race on campus.

**Micro-Assaults**

Micro-assaults are by far the most violent and blatant form of racial micro-aggressions, and often involve a direct intent to cause harm to another person due to their racialized status.
Racial micro-assaults were rarely reported by participants, but the incidents that they did report were often harsh, extreme, and appear to be quite deliberate. The types of micro-assaults that participants faced included two cases of verbal assault, and one case of both verbal and physical assault. These incidences were highly racialized and had a lasting negative effect on the mental health of participants. One participant experienced an extreme case of racial micro-assault when the Guelph city buses were on a temporary strike. He described his experiences of walking to school as dangerous and hurtful. In particular, he recalled that, on numerous occasions, cars had slowed down and he thought that they were going to ask for directions, but instead the driver or passenger would scream out the N-word and drive away quickly. This participant noted that he had never experienced this type of racism before, but during the bus strike, he had to walk 45 minutes to campus and these micro-assaults occurred on three different occasions. This participant was deeply angered by these incidents and felt unsafe and frustrated that the drivers pulled away laughing instead of facing him directly. He recalled always feeling different because of his appearance, but never being targeted in such a direct way. More than anything else, this experience led him to withdraw from the predominantly white community both off and on campus, and also to feel unsure about himself. Carrying the weight of this incident affected his interest in school as he simply did not feel welcomed on campus and began to lose motivation.

Often Black students felt that, due to the stereotypes of Black males as violent and inherently criminal, their actions were policed both formally and informally more frequently and aggressively than those of their peers. For participants in this study, this sense of being judged and stereotyped often led to feelings of anger and frustration. Some participants went as far as to describe feelings of self-policing.
Educational Workshops and Information Sessions

Black collectives are spaces where educational and intellectual exchanges can constantly be observed. The education provided can be both formal and informal in nature, but in general, it takes an Afro-centric lens. For Black students studying within a predominantly white institution, having access to an environment where their needs, concerns and perspectives are the key focus can be crucial in creating a balanced learning environment. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which participants have had educational experiences and opportunities through participation in the Munford Centre.

Most participants highlighted the Munford Centre's weekly discussions held on Wednesday evenings as a place to share narratives and lived realities, and to gain strength from the wider Munford community. One participant in particular described one Wednesday discussion that focused on students sharing their racialized experiences on campus and discussing strategies to cope and overcome barriers that they may potentially face. She expressed relief in knowing that other students have had similar experiences to hers and had to overcome obstacles. She stated,

Umm, we have, like, all these weekly discussions on different topics, and just last week, we had a chance to share all of our experiences, and I got to share mine. I really got, like, good feedback. Actually, the Munford Centre is a good place to come to meet people like you that go through, like, the same things that you go through. So, like, it makes you know that I'm not the only one going through this situation. Like, I met like six people who are going through similar things. (P8).

The weekly discussions served other purposes as well, one of which was to educate students about racial current events and broader issues on campus and beyond that may affect them in a
variety of ways. A few of the participants talked about the weekly discussions that focused on current issues within the wider international Black community. Some mentioned that the weekly Munford Centre discussions provided education on social movements across Canada and the United States, which gave them better insight to critically analyze the unfolding Black Lives Matter movement in both Canada and the United States and to better formulate ideas and responses to racial strife. For one participant, the Mike Brown case in Ferguson was an important topic that had been discussed at the Munford Center, as he noted,

The Mike Brown case was triggering for all of us students, but there was nowhere for us to go to talk about it. It's like everything was happening, so intense... yet nobody on campus was talking to us Black students about how we were feeling about it. The Black Lives Matter movement was birthed from Mike Brown’s killing. So many of us deal with racial discrimination and fears of profiling, or just the thought of being treated unfairly. Many of us have family or friends living in the states. The stress builds up yet being in a white school means that we are isolated in our fears and that we are left to deal with everything on our own. The Munford center is a place where we could actually discuss racial tension freely. We had a formal discussion on it. I was able to receive some education on the history of racial strife both in Canada and the States. I was glad to hear that I was not alone in my anger and frustration. (P8).

Another participant mostly focused on the major role that weekly discussions played in helping her form a strong Black identity, as she explained,

Race has never really been a huge issue for me. Coming from an African nation, everyone is Black like me. We don't need to think about racial things and white and Black. We only think in terms, or I should say mostly, think in terms of ethnic identity
instead, which makes it easier. After coming to Canada, I didn't really understand the whole racial differences and negative treatment that me as a Black person would face. The discussions open my mind and helped me to understand the struggles of Black people in Canada. I knew it was going to be hard in this country, but at least I know now what to expect from other Black students' experiences. I also received ideas of how to face the personal things that I have faced. (P13).

In another participant’s case, being introduced to academic articles on race and Black history at a weekly discussion was particularly important. This provided him with a new area of academic interest that he normally would not have been exposed to under regular circumstances. According to the participant, "Some of the discussions have turned me on to some of the academic literature I wasn't aware of. They have done a lot of events for Black history month and there has been quite a few lectures and workshops that have turned me on to connections to that literature." (P7).

For many participants, the weekly sessions that centered on race gave them what could be termed a crash course on potential challenges that Black students face both on campus and in the wider community. For example, four of the women I interviewed focused on the Munford educational discussions concerning gender issues and sexuality. They explained that the Munford Centre offers workshops and brings in various guest speakers to present on topics of interest. Formal discussions that focus on gender are valuable to women international students who may not have received sexual health education in their home country. One participant demonstrated her eagerness to further learn about gender issues, when she stated,

They offer lots of workshops. For me, hearing about the inequalities that females face and the rights that we have here versus back home. It's like, wow. Things like abortion, sexual
health, and just being tested and where to go, and what to ask the nurses for. All those things are important because we need to know the resources that are available to us as women. If we don't have to worry about pregnancy and have access to birth control and those things, then we can spend more time just focusing on our courses because it's hard sometimes when you have too much on your mind at once, you know what I mean right? (P2).

This participant expressed a keen interest in participating in workshops that directly focused on women's physical health. She mentioned that the Munford Centre is a safe space to discuss these issues openly among familiar people without having to worry about being judged for your activity. In a similar vein, another participant spoke about her first experience in the Centre learning about violence against women,

Some female students are being abused while they study and are in school. It's bad if you don't know where to go for help. There are different types of abuse... some things can be red flags. As students, abuse causes you not to want to be around others. It can come from your family, friends, boyfriend or even girlfriends. I think schools ignore abuse that could be happening with students, people want to keep it a secret. At least the Munford Centre offers discussions to sit and work it out, you know, really talk about it and not just all about school. (P10).

The responses from women participants demonstrate the wider outreach that the Munford Centre has in the lives of Black students. Receiving culturally relevant education on women's issues is vital in ensuring that a proper connection is made in understanding the intersections of abuse and culture. It is important for topics of shame, cultures of silence, and acceptability to be presented in a way that racialized students can relate to.
The weekly discussions were not the only educational venue for students who participated in the Munford Centre. One participant spoke about gaining knowledge of the realities of other racialized people through activities of the Munford Centre. As he noted, A speaker came in and spoke about the temporary foreign workers program that primarily affected Latino and Caribbean peoples. I was really surprised because you would never think that Canada would have a program like that. It taught me about the struggles of other racialized groups in Canada. It's really just not Black people who face discrimination here. I think these discussions have opened my eyes to the privilege that I have as a person that has my papers and allowed me to reevaluate the way I view race in Canada. People of colour need to stand together and educate each other on what is going on in our communities so that we can work together. Signing a petition, writing a letter, or bringing this to the attention of the community or local politicians can help. It's important that these stories do not remain invisible and that we get the word out as much as possible so people know that we care and we are here (P5).

Having access to a diverse group of speakers introduced narratives that Black students can relate to or sympathize with, which opens up the lines of communication and intellectual exchange. The guest speakers also offered avenues for Black students to branch out and meet other students of diverse backgrounds with whom they can alongside for a common social cause. In these settings, participants can safely meet other students who are like-minded, culturally diverse, and have a strong awareness of equity and social responsibility.

Being involved with the Munford Centre also helped students think about broader social issues and become involved in the wider community. Indeed, some participants spoke quite proudly of developing a community-engaged focus and, when presented with the opportunity to
volunteer with groups outside of the Munford Centre, they were quite willing to do so. Such activities included attending rallies, volunteering with the elderly, and attending vigils aimed at stopping violence against women. Such involvement is an important step for participants who felt that they were isolated from the wider Guelph community. Joining community outreach programs and activities can serve as the bridge needed to begin to counter the isolation and rejection that these students face.

All but one of the participants spoke about being able to learn about academic resources that they did not know existed through workshops and guest speakers hosted by the Munford Centre, and they all found these to be most valuable. The Centre hosts a wide range of professional speakers from both inside and outside of the University of Guelph. Every few years, the Centre invites a person who works at Student Accessibility Services (formerly known as the Centre for Students with Disabilities) and from Counseling Services to speak to students, not only to encourage them to use the services, but also to have an exchange with students and find out what specific needs the Black community on campus in general may have that are not being met by the accessibility and counseling centres. One participant recalled,

I don't come to discussions much anymore. I'm just busy with work and school and things like that, but I remember when the guy from disability and counseling came in to speak to us, he was very clear on his intent to first speak and explain what they had to offer and then to listen to our feedback and what we believed we wanted. I was annoyed at first because what were they going to counsel us on, they don't understand our culture – I mean, they never had African parents, they are very different – or anything really about us. So how can they help? I was listening, but not really. It all sounds good, but the services there were really for white people. He actually told us about different types of
experiences and problems that undiagnosed students with disabilities may face and the signs that we may need to come in and be evaluated. A few people who had difficulties could relate and asked questions. He gave information on counseling. The clinic had hired a Black African women counselor. Some people had seen her around, but weren't sure. She had an accent, I think she was Sudanese, but I'm not sure, but she also had braids. It was nice to see someone like us there. It was a good thing, a good thing he came and shared with us the information because some people need to talk, get help and just talk. (P3).

The connection students were able to make with the Centre for Students with Disabilities along with Counseling Services is crucial in ensuring that participants who need assistance were able to connect with a resource that is outside of the expertise of the Munford Centre. By inviting a representative from disability and counseling services, the Munford Centre took the first steps in destigmatizing the act of seeking help from mainstream sources and counseling. The participants were able to gain access to information and discuss their concerns within a safe space knowing that they would have support with any culturally relevant concerns and could freely speak in an environment with like-minded individuals. The experience of having the voices of Black students and their concerns be central could potentially be empowering for racialized students and help break down cultural barriers. Having access to counseling and disability services is crucial for all students regardless of background and can be the difference between academic failure and success. There are times when students face circumstances that are simply out of their control and they will need outside individuals and organizations to help them cope and provide support. This is a perfect example of how the Munford Centre has the potential to be a solid
avenue through which the wider university community services can work in order to connect to Black students in ways that may otherwise not be possible.

Information sessions on other academic resources on campus, for example, on library services, scholarships and work opportunities, have also been helpful to students who participate in the Munford Centre. Although these resources are available and marketed to the wider student population, many participants made it clear that much of the information concerning resources available to them have been shared through the Munford Centre. This may be for a variety of reasons, such as participants choosing not to engage with the wider university community when information sessions are posted concerning services. It could also be the case that students are just not receiving the proper notifications and are not involved in the social circles where the information is being shared. A majority of participants felt that they would not have known about the academic services if it was not for the discussions and guest speakers at the Munford Centre.

One participant stated,

In my first year here at the University of Guelph, I didn't really know that there were so many resources here at campus. I kind of just did everything by myself and, if things became hard, I just did my best to work through the thing by myself. My TA's complained about my writing, so I kept editing and asking friends to edit and I tried that way. After, in second year, I started coming to the Munford Centre and there was a full discussion along with people that came in, and when they explained about writing services and research help at the library, that is all I needed to hear, I didn't care about anything else. And they said it was free, included in tuition! I just used the services all the time and my writing is better now. I actually still use it because if we are paying for it, then we should use it. I knew that they had writing options at the library, but nobody
explained that it was free and we can go as much as we want. I did not really know before even though I kind of knew (P8).

Access to such services was a common theme during my interviews. Participants would mention that they were aware that the university library offered various services, but were unsure of where to go and the procedures necessary to access them. Most shared that, when going to the library, they felt that they would not be given clear directions of what they had to do and instead felt intimidated to admit to staff that they were not sure how or what they needed to access in order to get help. Some chose not to ask for help for fear of being stereotyped or looked down upon, and others did not want to look unintelligent or incompetent. This is clearly evident in the quote from the following participant,

You don't want people to think, yeah she's from Africa, she's Black, you know, she needs help to read and write and basic things. That doesn't look good. Like, why did I get all that education back home to bring my family shame and go to a place to learn to read and write. But after, you realize that everyone uses the help. Even if you are really educated or ignorant, it can help anyone improve. And if you pay tuition, and international fees are even more than what the Canadians pay. Yes, you have to use what you can to get the better grades and to get the most out of your education in Canada. It's private and they do not store your name or report your information to anyone. You don't have to worry about anything like that coming back to hurt you. You can just go in, sit down, get the help you need. And it does help your grades and I would advise anyone that has a writing course to actually use the library writing help. It's a good thing, a really good, and you don't have to be ashamed or tell anyone (P10).
The idea of shame related to getting academic tutoring often came up during interviews along with fears of being ridiculed by peers for using learning services. It was clear that these concerns created barriers for the students who participated in my study. Participating in discussions and gaining information through the efforts of the Munford Centre about academic learning services and tools available helped students to work through and discuss their concerns and, as a result, utilize the services provided. Students who associated the learning commons with negative perceptions were able to gain new insight on the uses and purposes of this service, and also gain an understanding that students of all levels, regardless of their grades, access the writing and researching services for different purposes.

Overall, participants felt that the education they received at the Munford Centre was varied and valuable, they were able to connect on issues pertaining to race, multiculturalism, gender, sexuality (including LGBT) and they were provided with valuable and relevant academic information and resources that they may otherwise not have known about or used.

**Informal Educational Exchange**

In this section, I will discuss informal educational exchanges that occur in the Munford Centre, further highlighting the ways in which students who participate in the Centre utilize peer networks to exchange academic knowledge and resources. Nine participants reported that they had gained informal academic mentors through meeting students who were upper year in their programs of study. One interviewee spoke of the frequency with which participants in the Centre take on mentorship roles with one another,

Everybody is a mentor to, like, each other in one way or another. For example, I am really bad at French and I happen to meet someone who happens to speak fluently in French, and then he helped me a lot in preparing for French tests and assignments. In
general, there is a lot of exchange of knowledge, like I told you earlier, like learning about gender and feminism and racism and all that (P2).

Another participant expressed her luck in meeting an upper-year student in her program who was willing to meet her at the Munford Centre for tutoring sessions and help with assignments on a regular basis. As she noted, without this student's help, she would have struggled to succeed in her course,

There was one girl who is really good at genetics, and she would meet me here at the Munford Centre and help me work on it until I got it. Honestly, I think I passed genetics because of her." (P12). This participant mentioned that her mentor was willing to also help her friends who were in her class and often spent a few hours a week encouraging them and working with them through difficult material. Another participant reiterated the informal, yet beneficial, nature of peer mentoring, stating, "Yeah, I met a lot of people in Munford that happened to be in my program as well, and we do talk and we do discuss what happened in the program and stuff. Also, lucky for me, there are some people that are, like, a year ahead of me in the program, and I can talk to them and get feedback and advice. (P6).

Being part of the Munford Centre also provided opportunities for students to build relationships that led to the formation of academic work groups. One participant talked about being able to form connections with other students within his degree program and collaborate with these individuals when they were required to do group work. Others mentioned that they planned to choose the same courses as their peers so that they could work together during group projects as well as form study groups, One participant stated, "Yes, I am actually taking a course with a few
people from here, and I am in a marketing class with three other people and we have been working together on a major project, the three of us, throughout the semester." (P5).

One participant spoke about mentorship at the Munford Centre by comparing it to a family connection that you would make with an older sibling. She noted,

Yeah, I think they are pretty informal though. When you come to Munford, there is going to pretty much be people that are in the same program so they sort of act like your older brother sort of thing. Umm, they just sort of help you with whatever you need help with. So if you have questions with classes or textbooks or whatever, they kind of help you (P7).

Overall, participants in this study who are involved with the Munford Centre have formed informal academic support systems by pooling together academic knowledge and by having regular intellectual exchanges. In addition, by networking with members of the Munford Centre who are in the same degree program, participants were able to overcome some of the barriers they faced when trying to be included within mainstream academic circles.

Participants’ Final Thoughts

At the end of each interview, I gave participants an opportunity to share anything that they wanted to about the Munford Centre. In this final section, I will present some of their responses. Two participants stressed the importance of the personal connections they made through the Munford Centre along with gaining a strong sense of belonging. One stated, "Just that, umm, it has brought me a lot of new friendships and I'm really appreciative of that, and it presents many lectures and events and things like that, and options that I really wouldn't have been able to find a place to go to." (P1). Another participant said, "People at the Munford Centre have really reached out to me and that makes me feel like I am a part of something, and it's really
important for someone to feel like they are a part of something and accepted in society in some way." (P5).

Emphasis was placed by another participant on the importance of the Munford Centre being a space where personal connections could be made and where people can form connections easily with a large number of people.

Yeah, ahh, Munford Centre is generally just a good place for everyone to just come and be yourself with people who have similar interest and similar views. I mean, there is still the international student organization, but the difference between the Munford Centre and the International Student Centre is that the Munford Centre is more personal. Here, we meet more people and become more involved. So it's definitely a good place for academic and social purposes and mental purposes... everything. (P3).

Another participant focused on the importance of having a Black centered space on campus as well as building healthy social relationships with the wider mainstream community. In addition, he expressed most clearly the value of the Munford Centre to Black students in the following quote,

Well, we are very social and do many things off campus together such as going to the movies, bowling and out to eat. Sometimes Munford members will invite other people who are white into our spaces, and we treat them well and welcome them into our space. The hope is that when we are in their spaces, they will treat us the same. In Guelph, we actually need a Black space because we would have nowhere to go. I feel like a lot of people of colour are lost when they come to Guelph because they cannot see themselves in the identity on campus with a predominantly white population here. It would be a disservice to students of colour if this space didn't exist. (P8).
What perhaps came as the biggest surprise is when a participant contacted me three days after the interview, indicating that she had wanted to tell me during her interview that she “identifies as human” (P12). I responded by saying "yes, above all, we are human". This student found it most important to end her interview by acknowledging that more importantly than her race, gender or ethnicity, she mostly would like to simply be seen as human.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will first start with a summary of the role that Black collectives play in the lives of Black students attending predominantly white institutions, taking into consideration the academic literature as well as my research findings on the benefits, services and activities provided at the Munford Centre. Next, will be a general discussion on diversity on campuses, where I highlight the difference between diversity as a simple policy and diversity that is actually being practiced through actions. It is important to point out this distinction because having racialized students registered at a university is not enough to consider a school diverse. This will be followed by a discussion of the role that critical race theory played in my thesis. The next section will highlight the gaps in the academic literature on race and education, and show how these gaps influenced my study. I will then highlight some of the limitations of my research project, which will be followed by suggestions for future research projects that could help us to better understand Black collectives and minority students’ experiences in general. I end this chapter by providing recommendations that establish ways that universities can improve the learning environment of Black students.

Black Collectives

Black students attending predominantly white campuses often find that the experiences and stories of Black people are excluded from the curriculum. This leaves some Black students with the desire to learn more about their culture, history, and the contributions and successes of Black peoples in Canada. Black students also face varying levels of racial micro-aggressions, which can affect their self-esteem and ability to focus on academia. Black collectives provide a place of refuge for Black students, coping mechanisms to deal with racial micro-aggressions, and education on Black current and historical issues, and also highlight Black excellence. In other
words, the collective helps to fill the gaps in Euro-centric education that often prioritizes Euro-centric values and deems other groups and peoples invisible.

The informal education provided by Black collectives is useful in all areas of student life. For example, group discussions allow for Black students to dive into concerns that may be specific to the Black community that may not be addressed in mainstream campus spaces. In addition, social issues as they intersect with race, such as and health, education, the criminal justice system, and immigration, may not be addressed or discussed in mainstream spaces, but are a heavy focus within a collective environment. Black collectives also provide an avenue in which the wider university community can have direct access to a large population of Black students at once. This is beneficial when sharing information about wider university services or programs with Black students such as library, accessibility, and counseling services. Without the existence of Black collectives, it would be more difficult for programs and services that want to attract Black students to get their message across to the population.

Black students who face high levels of micro-aggressions and isolation are able to find Black peer mentors for their courses when participating in a Black collective. This in turn helps to mitigate the academic effects of exclusion from mainstream academic peer groups. The collective also creates a space for Black students to network and plan to work together in class group assignments. These connections are important because many learning opportunities occur in informal study groups with peers who can exchange knowledge and strengthen the overall academic outcomes of the group.

Overall, Black collectives are able to create a safe and positive environment for Black students. Black collectives are a place where they can centre Afro-centric values, celebrate their
culture through organized activities, meet academic mentors, discuss issues with others through a racilized lens, and connect with wider university networks and services.

**Diversity in Practice**

In an effort to promote diversity, universities often hold events to encourage diverse interactions among students on campus. These experiences are enriching for all students, but create unequal benefits as white students are more likely to have had fewer interactions with non-white individuals than the opposite scenario. Harper states, "Not considered were the possible psychological and emotional costs of such engagement on the few minoritized students who make interactional diversity possible on college campuses that is, how students of color may be affected by cross racial interactions with peers who have comparatively less exposure to non-white people" (Harper 2012:19). These necessary social exchanges are not without their cost; racialized bodies are the 'others' that are needed to create the diverse experience on white majority campuses.

Diversity brings up images of equality, inclusiveness, and overall a warm sense of progress; in contrast, discussions of racism hurt this image and bring it to a halt. In other words, the physical presence of racialized others in higher education may create the perception that equality has been achieved, and convincing individuals that diversity does not always mean equality may prove difficult. Canada on a large scale has made progress in acknowledging and working to eliminate racism from individual actions. However, systemic racial inequities that are ingrained in our institutions and lack the intentional individual racism are still prevalent. What is more, racial diversity cannot be determined by the number of non-white individuals present within a space. Instead, we must look at the level of active participation of minorities in the systemic processes in which decisions are made. One must question if the ideas, opinions and
overall suggestions of racialized individuals are being excluded or devalued in mainstream spaces. If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then there is a strong likelihood that diversity is only being practiced in theory and not in reality.

**Critical Race Theory**

This thesis was heavily guided by the use of critical race theory (CRT). While CRT as a general framework guided my analysis, there were three main principles of CRT that I especially relied on throughout the research and writing processes. The first CRT principle that I prioritized was to examine and critically assess the dominant ideology on race and education (Soloranzo 2001:2). Conducting research on the everyday realities of Black students allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the racial micro-aggressions that occur in various spaces in the wider university community – such as during academic group work conducted outside of the classroom and in students’ residences – and of the impact of these micro-aggressions on Black students’ academic experiences. This provided a solid basis to challenge the dominant discourse on race and education in Canada. The second main CRT principle that I focused on was the centrality of experiential knowledge. This principle assumes that the knowledge that people of colour gain through their experience is valuable and should be treated as such (Soloranzo 2001:3; Jett 2002:96). Integrating academic literature that was inclusive and used research based on the personal narratives of people of colour was an important step in following this principle. In addition, my own research reflected the voices of Black people. Taken together, the existing literature and my findings on the experiences of racialized people help to make less silent those voices that often go unheard. The third main CRT principle that I heavily relied on was the commitment to social justice. From its birth, CRT has been committed to social change, justice and empowerment through academic and professional means (Soloranzo 2001:3). While my goal
was to research, using academic methods, the role that Black collectives play in the academic success and experiences more generally of Black students, an advocacy tone is evident throughout my thesis. I also aim to use my findings to encourage improvement in the academic experiences of racialized people attending Canadian institutions. In other words, in line with the historical goals of CRT, I will be using this research to open discussions with the general community on micro-aggressions in academia and to offer institutions possible suggestions and guidelines to improve the learning experiences of racialized students.

**The Academic Literature on Race and Education**

In undertaking this project, the main roadblock that I faced was the academic literature itself. Canadian literature on Black students and education is heavily focused on specific racialized groups or outdated. The literature has a tendency to focus on Aboriginal students or students of Asian descent. I worked around this problem by utilizing the minimal Canadian literature that is available and filling any gaps with American literature, which is plentiful. Research on the general experiences of Black students is lacking, but authors such as Codjoe (2001, 2006), Cummins (1997), Dei (1997), Hatwood-Futrell (2004), Henry (1993), Houshmand et al. (2014), Jerlando et al. (2006), and Maylor (2009) provided a strong base to discuss Black students’ experiences in educational settings in the United States and Canada. Their findings showed that Black students did not do as well as their white counterparts in all academic areas. Common themes that were found in these articles were that Black students were often viewed based on negative stereotypes that influenced educators and student peers alike to treat them more harshly and have lower academic expectations of them. This is where the literature and my findings from my primary research differ. My findings suggest that racial micro-aggressions at the University of Guelph are occurring in student peer interactions and not in professor-student
interactions. Participants in my study were given the opportunity to discuss any ways that they felt their interactions with professors were influenced by race. All fourteen participants reported that they did not have much contact with their professors and the minimal contact they did have was neutral.

In recent years the concept of racial micro-aggressions has started to gain popularity in the academic world. I found it quite useful when describing subtle forms of racism that occur in our modern society. Although the study of racial micro-aggressions is fairly new, there is a clear trend towards using this concept when describing racism. Authors such as DeAgelis (2009), Houshmand (2014), Maylor (2009), Nadal et al. (2014), Sue et al. (2007), and Wang et al. (2011) offered important background literature on current forms of racism within the school system to help me develop my analysis. Most of these authors utilized primary qualitative data that emphasized the narratives of peoples of color. The authors that I found most interesting and useful to my study are Sue et al. (2007) because they not only produced several articles on the subject that greatly influenced others, but also provided detailed discussions and examples of racial micro-aggressions. Also significant is how they further broke micro-aggressions down into three categories – micro-invalidations, micro-insults and micro-assaults – which were highly useful concepts as I developed the analysis of my findings. As participants shared their narratives with me, I was able to easily categorize their experiences into these three types of racial micro-aggressions.

Literature on Black collectives was also scarce. I found two studies from the United States that I decided to highlight in the section on Black collectives in my literature review as they aligned well with the experiences of participants in my research. Further literature on collectives was also scarce or did not align with the type of collective that my research focused
on. I found this to be most challenging, but some of the authors that I did find useful include Witteborn (2007), Grier-Reed (2008, 2010), DeSouza (2012), Carter (2007), and Brown (2006). Their work provided me with a strong background on the goals, functions and benefits of collectives and was most relatable to my research area. As I conducted my qualitative research, I found that many of the experiences of those who participated in the Munford Centre and its overall operation were similar to what I was reading in the literature. Ideas surrounding safe spaces, cultural enclaves, community, belonging, and self-esteem were common themes that can be found in both my findings and the literature review. The major difference is that participants in my research were more likely to have stronger experiences of isolation and rejection, which I suspect stems from the fact that many of them were international students while the students that the academic literature reported on were born and raised in the United States.

Limitations of My Research

Although careful planning went into conducting this research, I am still aware that there are limitations and shortcomings. First, the research was conducted on a Black collective at the University of Guelph, and there is no way of knowing if the experiences of participants are unique to this university or applicable to other universities in Canada. With southern Ontario being one of the more diverse regions in Canada, it is hard to tell how the results would be different if a similar study was carried out in a different region of the province or in another province or territory.

The second limitation pertains to immigration status. My findings showed that the experiences of international students, students who had recently migrated to Canada, and Canadian born students were quite different. If I were to conduct more research on this topic, I would focus on a specific group of Black students instead of lumping all Black students together.
For example, studying the experiences of Black international students within a collective environment or focusing on the experiences of Canadian-born Black students would help gain a stronger understanding of the experiences of one group and perhaps do more justice to their experiences.

The third limitation is that, given the scope of this research and time constraints, I was only able to interview fourteen participants using qualitative in-depth interviews. Including more participants and conducting focus groups would have allowed me to use triangulation and develop a greater understanding of my research topic. Further, under the time constraints, I was unable to include participant observation which, if done over a four month period of time or longer, would have added strength to my understanding of the inner workings of the Munford Centre.

Possible Future Research

The vast majority of Canadian literature on education fails to take into account the experiences of Black students. Research in this area would contribute to a greater understanding of the problem of low academic achievement in the Black community. Research that also looks at diverse experiences separately within the Black community such as nationality, citizenship status, gender, and Canadian community of origin would also be beneficial as it would provide further insight into the problems that are specific to certain groups within the Black community; this would reduce the risk of making sweeping generalizations when the findings may only apply to a small segment of the Black community. Canadian research on Black education is scarce, making it hard to clearly identify common patterns across provinces and territories.

The key point when beginning to understand the nature of racial micro-aggressions is that such behaviours often do not occur with the intention to cause harm. Research in this area could
lead to a greater understanding of how the white majority conceptualizes such slights and can work to reduce them. Also, the effects of racial micro-aggressions on students in higher education (especially graduate-level students) have largely been ignored. Lastly, there is an understanding that racial micro-aggressions can have long-term negative effects. A longitudinal study that focuses on individuals’ responses and coping methods over a long period of time would be helpful in understanding the different circumstances that allow individuals to cope or result in a decline in their well-being. The study of racial micro-aggressions is still a fairly new area and more research in general is needed, especially within the Canadian context. Although, the American literature has been useful, cultural differences do exist between Canada and the United States, which leads me to believe that the Canadian experience of racial micro-aggressions may have some stark differences that need to be further explored.

Lastly, Canadian literature on Black collectives is non-existent. Research is needed in this area to confirm the necessity of Black collectives in predominantly white institutions. This research could potentially have an influence on the way universities organize resources and space for racialized collectives. Since research on Black collectives has not been conducted in Canada, initial studies would be exploratory in nature and would help universities to understand the experiences of racialized students on their campuses. Universities can then start thinking about strategies that could be introduced and changes that could be made to improve the learning environment for Black students. Future research could also look at other types of collectives for other minority groups such as for LGBT communities. The key point is that universities that are striving to have a more diverse population must develop a strong understanding of how minorities experience university life and must ensure that strategies are put in place to overcome discrimination.
Possible Solutions to Improve the Learning Environment for Diverse Students

My study has led me to conclude that there are many possible solutions to bridge the gap in educational learning experiences between Black and non-Black students in Canada. The first recommendation would be to provide diversity and equity training for all incoming students that includes discussions on racial micro-aggressions so that students can be taught to be more aware of how their micro-interactions with diverse students can negatively affect the learning environment. This training would also be helpful for professors and other staff members who may not be aware of the serious nature of micro-aggressions; greater awareness would help them to identify instances of micro-aggressions and to intervene in the classroom when necessary.

The second recommendation is for departments to invite racialized students from their department bi-yearly to hold discussions and open communication on their experiences within the departments. This would encourage individual departments to develop a strong sense of the everyday micro-experiences of racialized students and thereby gain a sense of where improvement needs to be made. This would allow racialized students to be included in discussions concerning their inclusiveness and visibility within their department. This is important because racialized voices are often marginalized and silenced even when issues are directly related to their well-being.

The third recommendation is for curricula to be more inclusive of diverse experiences, particularly by ensuring that the experiences and positive identities of Black peoples are reflected in courses. When possible, discussions of race and ethnicity should be integrated into the curriculum and not segregated to a separate week or month. Where the curriculum does not allow for discussions on race, faculty can include examples in their teachings that are applicable to non-white people. For example, in Bachelor of Arts programs, professors can include Black
authors and literature in their assigned readings or reference them when providing examples to
students. This will allow Black students to be exposed to positive portrayals of Black identity
and success, and increase their engagement with courses. This inclusivity is also beneficial to
non-Black students since it allows them to see portrayals of Black people that are positive,
intelligent, educated and capable of success. This can potentially reduce negative stereotypes of
Black students and allow others to see them as a population that belongs in academic settings.

The fourth recommendation is to have support available for Black students who
experience racial micro-aggressions. This support should be provided by professors or by a
separate entity on campus, possibly in the human rights office. Having an entity on campus that
is educated on micro-aggressions and available to provide mediation for students would be
hugely beneficial. One of the major problems in combating racial micro-aggressions is that they
are often innocuous in nature. Although the cumulative effects of micro-aggressions can be
devastating, taken as individual occurrences, they may not appear as serious. In circumstances
where the micro-aggressions are having an impact on the well-being of Black students,
professors must be prepared and willing to help address the problem. An example where this
would be applicable is during group work where a Black student may be racially insulted or
made to feel uncomfortable due to their race. In this case, the student should be able to speak to
the professor and have support available to rectify the situation. This intervention potentially can
include mediation, reorganizing the groups, or providing an alternative assignment option.

The fifth and last recommendation is to introduce stricter policies against micro-assaults
and any form of direct intentional discrimination against people of colour. This would be most
applicable in student residences where sharing living quarters can lead to greater opportunities to
commit racial offences. In these cases, residence assistants must be prepared to address racial
micro-aggressions. There must be training on the effects and likelihood of the occurrences of micro-aggressions so that the magnitude of the problem can be easily recognized and reduced. It would be critical to have policies in place for early detection and intervention, which could range from a simple discussion, to students being moved to different living accommodations, or removal from residence for repeat offenders. Implementing this recommendation would ensure that racialized students are offered some safeguards to protect them from racial micro-aggressions.
References


Charbeneau, Jessica.2015. "White faculty transforming whiteness in the classroom through pedagogical practice." Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Education 18 (5):655-674


Codjoe, M. Henry. 2006."The role of an affirmed black cultural identity and heritage in the academic achievement of African-Canadian students. Journal of Intercultural Education 17 (1) 33-5.


*Canadian Journal of Education*. 18(3) 206-222


Jerlando, F.L. Jackson and James, L. Moore III. 2006. "African American Males in Education: Endangered or Ignored?" *Journal of Teachers College Record* 108(2) 201-205.


