STUDENTS’ HETEROGENEITY AND MULTIPLE WORLDS:
REVISITING THE CHANGING STUDENT POPULATIONS IN ONTARIO

by

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This qualitative study is designed to examine how the 8 university students (from 8 different secondary schools) define their high school experiences. The study focuses on how the 8 study participants’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling. The three paradigms, students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identity conceptually framed the study. Through the focus group interactions and two sets of individual interviews, each student’s unique identity and agency were revealed; both individual-social-collective entities that were developed in relations to others. The other sources of data were school websites, relevant media reports on schools and their communities, and policy documents on academic and international baccalaureate programs; finally, field notes were also taken. In so doing, the research critically explores participants’ voices on heterogeneity, multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, peers, cultural and multicultural identities. Finally, the 8 young people also reflect on their 8 schools, their academic programs, overall educational experience, and particularly, how young people articulate their belonging in high schools. Findings of the study suggest that participants’ identities of who they were often echoed their class, race, and ethnicity, and in turn, affected their academic engagement and identity. Despite the public invitation of all schools on their websites for students to participate in the school communities, the participants painted an altogether different picture; not all adolescents had equal access to schooling. The study makes recommendations for policy-makers, schools, and their districts which address the issues of
inequity raised in this study. Specifically, schools need to be aware of the cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic issues and the challenges that are in the way of minority adolescents’ progress so that secondary schools can extend their support to low income and immigrant students.
Acknowledgements

We have to live with the choices we make in life; although it took me years to finish this work, I do not regret my decision to embark on a difficult journey to develop a viable research study. Designing a research to capture students’ voices is widely considered by scholars to be problematic (Kelly, 1993a). As a graduate student researcher, I had to face an onslaught of difficult questions and a very tight and lengthy ethical review process because of my research focus on secondary school students.

12 young people initially participated in the focus groups. Later the 8 of them participated in interviews. These students were extremely busy with their new academic lives, part-time jobs, and personal commitments. Yet they all graciously participated in the research which needed their time and enthusiasm. Although, according to the university research protocol, I am not allowed to thank them by their real names, I could not have gone anywhere with this study without those students’ enthusiastic participation in the focus groups and interviews. Not one of them withdrew from the study; nor did any of them decline to answer any question. I thank these 12 young people for their cooperation, good wishes (one of them even addressed me as Dr. Raksit in advance), and candour from the bottom of my heart. I thank them for trusting me enough to share with me their innermost private feelings. Young people are not often willing to open up their lives to a virtual stranger. Yet I was lucky; all the participants shared with me stories of their school, peers, family, and neighbourhood without reservation. And the result is five thickly descriptive data analysis chapters. Without their generous participation, this dissertation would not have been possible.

I was fortunate to find the 8 extremely intelligent participants. They showed sensitivity, thoughtfulness, kindness to others, and a sense of purpose. During the focus groups and
interviews, their voices sparkled as they spoke about their future plans; no matter how brief they were, as a researcher I cherished those moments. The teacher in me hopes that they succeed in life and remain outstanding citizens of this nation.

I also like to thank the professors and the principal of the university undergraduate program for their support. I cannot identify you, but those of you opened your classrooms to me, answered my emails, and encouraged me to pursue the study, I sincerely like to thank you. I also conducted the focus groups and interviews at the undergraduate program building without any interruption and I am grateful that the administrators extended the premises to me. The physical location of the student lounge where I conducted interviews came in my favour; for the 8 participants shared their views without any inhibition.

Researchers do not act alone, especially student researchers. Luker (2008) compared the topsy-turvy world of qualitative research with salsa dancing. Although I never wavered from the topic of students’ identities, I found out that conundrums were unavoidable in a qualitative research such as this study, because of its dependence on multiple voices and situation-specificities created from unique research problems. I underwent several changes in writing the chapters due to the very nature of doctoral research processes and methodologies to explore students’ views.

I benefited greatly from the help and guidance I received from the following professors: Steve Anderson, Nina Bascia, Joe Flessa, Ben Levin, David Livingstone, Blair Maskall, and Susan Padro, and Jim Ryan. Thanks to Nina and my supervisor Reva Joshee’s frequent warnings that the ethical review of my research would be long and difficult, I was able to manage and cope with a challenging research development process.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Experience can be said, it demands to be said. To bring it to language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself. (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 115)

Nowhere is heterogeneity more clearly reflected, in terms of students’ ethnicities, diverse languages, and socioeconomic statuses, than in public schools in Canada and the United States. This heterogeneity comes with a price though, as it sparks debate on students’ integration into or exclusion from the mainstream of school life (Ryan, 2006). This study contributes to that ongoing discussion by investigating how the 8 study participants’ unique identities shape their high school experiences.

In a globalized era, the traditional role of education has often been challenged by the politics of culture and identity (Appadurai, 1996; Riffel, Levin, & Young, 1996). Yet literature about cultural differences among students was still in the developing stage even in the 1990s (Murrell, 1990). Recently, however, scholars, especially in multicultural nations such as Canada, are paying close attention to the contentious issue of students’ identities in terms of their socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds, difficulty in mastering the English language, and the far-reaching consequences of students’ failure or success in retaining their native language (Duff, 2002; Marks, 2005; Yon, 2000). In some “complex, often incongruous, and unexpected ways,” we now know that race, class, ethnicity, immigration status, discrimination, privileges, and acculturation “can complicate” high school students’ sense of identity or “who they are” (Portes & Rambaut, 2001, p. 190; see also Phillips Swanson, Chaka Edwards, & Beale Spencer, 2010).
Despite an abundance of studies on secondary schools in the US, Great Britain, and, to some extent, Canada, we still know relatively little about how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Hammack, 2004; Kelly, 1996; Peshkin, 2001). This study addresses that gap by engaging in a deeper analysis of how young people articulate their sense of belonging in high school; in particular, how their unique identities “embedded in the social fabric of their real social worlds” (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae 2000, p. 57) shape their experiences of secondary schooling. Lived experience, as described by Ricoeur above, is the subject matter of a philosophy of interpretation, especially when it involves wrestling with the issue of difference as it emerges from the larger sociopolitical contexts and social locations: “youths’ perceptions of their contexts and interactions within them have implications for how they make sense of their lives” (Phillips Swanson et al., 2010, p. 6).

By analysing the study participants’ different experiences, I also raise the issues of correspondence between knowledge and experience, the cultural and economic injustice, and their influences on high school students’ learning experiences. A sociopolitical context also includes the power issues and “discussions of structural inequality based on stratification” because of social class, race, ethnicity, and other differences (Nieto, 1998, p. 422).

**Research Problem**

In the US, in 1992, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development recommended that the public and private sectors pay close attention to the “out-of-school experiences of young people” (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 4). Paying attention to students multiple worlds (see Phelan, Davison, & Cao, 1991, 1998), for example, to students’ ethnic identities, neighbourhoods, families, and peers, is broader in scope than paying attention only to students’ academic engagement (see Ball et al., 2000). This broader scope forces researchers to look into
the relationships between schools and the wider community in which they are situated. It also forces us to look into adolescents’ schooling experience in a holistic way to “enrich our understanding of identity, relationships and opportunity structures” (Cooper, Jackson, & Azmitia, 1998a, p. 117). Using a structural-cultural model, I pay attention to students’ multiple worlds and multiple identities.

Mass scale migration and changes in global demography challenge the assumption of homogeneity of what are now multicultural nations. The sociopolitical geography and cultural differences receive prominence in this study because so many immigrants raise their children in one of the so-called global cities such as the one where the research took place; differences are viewed critically in this study because of the intensity and perplexity of social, economic, and spatial divisions in terms of urban people’s socioeconomic status, ownership of properties, and living conditions (Massey, 2005; Scott, 2001).

A microcosm of city life, the stratified world of urban schools make matters worse for adolescents; critics claim that the usual structural, cultural, and programmatic realities (Sarason, 1996) of large secondary schools simply fail to meet the needs of the broad range of students who they are supposed to educate (Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Haque, 2000). Educators seem to be ill-prepared to face diverse communities of students (Cohen, Kepner, & Swanson 1995; Lopez, 2004, 2002). Diversity in classrooms is often viewed by educators as a negative force. A blaming-the-victim process has been underway to find a way out of taking responsibility for educational inequality. The process is expanded by focusing on deficiencies in some children's home, language, culture, and neighbourhood. Children from poor and immigrant families are labelled unmotivated, not very competitive, and devoid of cultural capital (Oakes, 1985; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). No wonder “dealing with diversity is one of the central
challenges of twenty-first-century education” (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. ix). North American scholars, however, consider schools to be the “front line for meeting newcomers” (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 123). They expect educational institutions to play a significant role in providing a meaningful experience for heterogeneous student populations. Yet some are vocal in their criticism of schools’ “slow and piecemeal” responses to the increasing pressure from a growing multicultural and low-income student population (Rong & Brown, 2002, p. 123). Furthermore, students’ difficulties with “curriculum or classroom life” hardly ever receive serious attention and “the dissonance that exists between their lives and the culture of schooling is often ignored and dismissed” (Darder, 2005, p. 847).

Many scholars in the 21st century are, therefore, concerned about how public high schools can serve all students equitably: “The problem of providing a meaningful secondary education for all adolescents remains a vexing one” (Hammack, 2004, p. 21). Despite the lofty ideals of community (see Conant, 1959), critics have found systemic polarized and balkanized sub-cultures within large high schools; where students’ academic and social lives are often segmented by class, race, ethnicity, and culture (Hammack, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994; Howard, 2003; Lopez, 2011; Olsen, 1997).

Very little research, however, has explored how students’ schooling experience can be different in terms of their class, race, ethnicity, culture, and multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, and peers (see Cooper, 2011; Conchas, 2001; Phelan et al., 1991, 1998; ). All of the above studies suggest the fluid nature and the contextual dependence of adolescents’ identities. The multiple perspectives on cultural practices, therefore, have far reaching implications than that of Marxists’ single-dimensional economic approach to class (Bourdieu, 1984). “Subtle differences in fine grained matters of daily life constitute self-identities far more
than do abstract, broad-sweeping assumptions of label—ethnic or otherwise” (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 9).

As stated before, some adolescents have unequal access to schooling because of their class, parental SES, race, and ethnicity that impact schooling opportunities in a supposedly meritocratic society, and access to schooling, as Bowles and Gintis (1976) note, impacts class positions. The impact of social capital or the strength of networking and social support of middle class families and connections that help their younger members or children to set foot in educational and later occupational worlds is of significance (Coleman, 1988; Conchas, 2002; Kao & Rutherford, 2007). Compared to adolescents from “native-born families”, adolescents from immigrant families may experience the interaction of a very different “structural opportunities and cultural preferences” (Kao & Turney, 2010, p. 184). For example, all minority respondents in Portes & Rambaut’s study (2001, p. 189) “had significantly endured” experiences of discrimination “by an early age”. Therefore, even if students belong to the same academic program, their schooling experiences cannot be generalized; some students’ academic success may be a result of their sociocultural contexts (Cooper, 2011). Although all adolescents face challenges (Phelan et al., 1991, 1998), the nature of their challenges and the strategies they use to cope with those challenges differ.

**Research Questions**

The main research question addressed by the study is:

How do academic stream students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling?

The subquestions are:
1. Who are secondary schools’ academic stream students? How do they interpret their social identities?

2. How do academic stream students understand their relationships with their chosen programs, including the international baccalaureate (IB) program?

3. What do academic stream students’ narratives tell us about adolescents’ secondary schooling experiences?

Exploring the Key Concepts

Heterogeneity

Mass scale migration to North America, Europe, and other economically developed societies has changed the global demography, particularly, the homogeneity of the above nations. For example, before World War II, the populations of Toronto and surrounding area were dominated by people of British origin, their attitudes, and language. Postwar Toronto is an altogether different place. Today’s diverse Toronto represents immigrants of many origins; it also “reflects shifts in postwar immigration policy” (Ray, 1994, p. 262). As stated before, the effect of this heterogeneity on the education system is enormous (Holdway, Crul, & Roberts., 2009). More than half of the students in many urban schools in the Western world were born overseas or born to immigrant families. However, “the impact of immigration on the experiences” of immigrant students “continues to be overlooked in much of the scholarship” (Yang, 2009, p. 158). The significance of this shifting demography, nevertheless, is gaining attention from scholars, since it poses “new challenges to [education] systems as they seek to prepare young people for employment and citizenship” (Holdway et al., 2009, p. 1381; see also
Feuerverger & Richards, 2007; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Immigration is a significant issue in this study because 5 out of the 8 participants came from immigrant families.

Another challenge is to address the issue of inequality while researching the vast, heterogeneous array of children and adolescents. The focus of critical theory on socioeconomic differences overlooks the ethnic facet of inequality; therefore, adopted in this study is a combined cultural approach with a critical gaze on both ethnic and socioeconomic hegemony. Blau’s (1977) deterministic structural model of inequality guides the study’s analysis of who the students are in terms of their race, ethnicity, religion, and parents’ education and occupation; and how their stories inform us about social similarities and differences in the educational arena.

*The Metaphor of Students’ Multiple Worlds (see Conceptual Framework)*

**Identities**

My research design stems from Phelan et al.’s (1991, 1998) model, which describes the “boundaries” that exist between the different worlds of students’ lives and the coping tactics to move from one world to another. However, to this I add another dimension: students’ collective/individual identities that they use to negotiate with teachers and peers (Ball et al., 2000; Erikson, 1968; Peshkin, 1991). Identity is critically viewed in this study as a phenomenon that is constructed by the everyday social experiences of teenagers. While the work of Phelan et al. (1991, 1998) explores the individual attributes of students’ boundary crossing skills, as Canadians, we need a fresh look at the politics of culture, social justice, and identity aspects of students’ multiple worlds. Unlike the melting pot perspective of the US, in Canada, there is an explicit recognition of Canadians’ multiple cultural identities and their cultural practices are part of a mosaic. Unlike our individualist neighbour south of the border, Canada has somehow
managed to respect both the rights of the individual and the rights of the group (Ungerleider, 2007).

Multiculturalism, to a great extent, defines Canadian identity (Joshee, 2004). Yet there are opinions galore about how successful multiculturalism is, especially among non-White immigrants, which is reflected in their “identity of anger” (Gwyn, 1995, p. 6). “Others argue that it is working for Asians and East Indians, but not for African Canadians” (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 9). Amid this debate, a new social movement in Canada is emerging; today’s ethnic groups view themselves as “instances of cultural and political praxis though which new identities are formed, new ways of life are tested, and new forms of community are prefigured” (Carroll, 1992, as cited in Kymlicka, 1998, p. 92). In this study, I recognize that secondary schools can be places where these new identities are shaped for a heterogeneous group of adolescents. Scholars emphasize the importance of students’ “sense of tradition, shared experiences,” (Gaskell, 1995, p. xi) and belonging in a school community (Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, & Todd, 2006; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Ontario’s multicultural schools often celebrate difference (Harper, 1997) with a “popular approach to cultural diversity” such as “multicultural days” (Joshee, 2004, p. 143); parading of minority cultures, therefore, is commonplace during social events in Ontario’s schools. However, beneath the surface of song-and-dance multiculturalism which Phoenix (1992) describes as the three Ss of multiculturalism: saris, samosas, and steel bands; there needs to be a concerted effort to investigate how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling. Analyzing the historical discourse of difference in Canada, both Harper and Joshee suggest changing courses of action. Joshee argues for an unconventional approach: education for peace as an alternative to “social cohesion discourse” (2004, p. 150). Both Harper (1997) and Lee
(2009) are critical of the additive nature of multicultural education in Canada with its emphasis on food, festivals, and folklore from many cultures around the world; Citing Tator and Henry (1991), Harper claims that, instead, multicultural education should be an integrative process: “Most importantly, the celebration of diversity tends to make all differences relative” (1997, p. 200). She advocates that the questions about difference should take into account the relation between and among identities of students’ social identities as well as their national identities.

**Overall Purpose and Organization of the Thesis**

The overall purpose of this work is to emphasize that diverse students’ educational experiences are not monolithic. Although the 8 study participants are pursuing higher education at the same university, their high school experiences were far from being identical, and, in fact, they were class, race, ethnicity, and the multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, and peers specific.

The data are analysed and divided in five chapters, in addition to introduction, mapping of the literature and conceptual framework, methods, and conclusion. The introduction chapter sets the stage for what is coming later in the six chapters, including the research problem and research questions.

In chapter 2, the literature review introduces various authors’ research work in the area; it also explains how these studies are different from the current study. The same chapter, later explains how the three paradigms students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds (Phelan et al., 1991, 1998), and identity conceptually focus the research.

Chapter 3 explains the research process as multiple case studies and examines how the 8 participants’ identities shape their secondary schooling experiences (Merriam, 1998); as I
critically explore the (1) subjective experiences of students, and the (2) contexts influencing the experiences of students.

In Chapter 4, the study participants are introduced as 8 individual cases; their backgrounds are described to highlight their similarities and differences. As well, descriptions of the neighbourhoods of the 8 university students are provided. The 8 participants particularly focus on the amenities available, patterns of migration (the catchphrase often used was “multicultural”), and brief histories and the values and attitudes of the neighbourhoods as understood and negotiated by participants. Only in this Chapter the study participants are introduced as single cases. In the chapters following I analyze the uniqueness, complexities, and common patterns of the participants’ responses, ultimately creating abstractions across cases.

In Chapters 5 and 6, the 8 young people’s multiple worlds of family and peers and how adolescents travel, negotiate, and cross the boundaries of their multiple worlds are presented in detail. In Chapter 5, the young people’s families and support structures are discussed in detail. The chapter is designed to show families’ roles in students’ lives, and ultimately their significance on students’ educational experiences, and to show the similarities and differences in the students’ experiences based on the intersection of their class, race, and ethnicity.

In Chapter 6, the 8 participants’ high school peers resurface; examined in this chapter are participants’ narrations about their peers’ influence on their academic lives. The participants’ different views on their similarity to their peers, in terms of their academic orientation, class, ethnicity, and social capital, are also examined.
In Chapter 7, participants’ identities are discussed in three parts: their cultural identities, their view on Canada’s multiculturalism, and their Canadian identity. While cultural identities deal with participants’ core cultural identities or what they are, the second and third part on Canada’s multiculturalism, and Canadian identity shed light on what participants “have become”.

In Chapter 8, schools and their structural and cultural practices receive prominence as participants explore their schooling experiences, including class size, quality of the programs offered, academic engagement, extracurricular activities, group work with peers, student culture of the school, and participants’ relationships with teachers. Participants also describe how their identities in relation to their multiple worlds, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, intersect with their academic identities.

And finally, in Chapter 9, the concluding section of the study, the research questions are examined again in the context of the study findings, along with the policy, educational implications of the study, and the challenges ahead.

Limitations of the Study

First, because the study is based on 8 cases, specific findings of the study may not be generalized to other school settings.

Second, I am quite aware of the vulnerability of young minds, and the ethical discipline needed when dealing with adolescents. The trust factor, moreover, between the researcher and the participating students is of utmost importance. So is finding a private space within a busy university where students can candidly share their views.
Third, it is difficult to follow the paths of highly transient secondary school and even university students.

Fourth, a long-term ethnographic research method with multiple stakeholders would be ideal for investigating how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling and how their identities are shaped and reshaped in different contexts. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints, I did not have the luxury to embark on an ethnographic study; rather, this study provides snapshots of the 8 secondary school students’ lives.

Finally, it is fair to say that the study will be a partial account of the 8 high school students’ unique experiences seen from the lenses of this researcher.

**Significance of the Study**

The study is significant several ways for its attempt to draw the attention to new research grounds. First, the study will help academics, policy-makers, practitioners, community members, and students themselves to understand schools’ close ties with students’ multiple worlds. It opens the door for contested discussions on factors deeply embedded in educational contexts, such as the economic, educational, and ethnic differences of students’ and their families and their implications for the school community.

Second, the study will initiate dialogue between students and their teachers in the frequently avoided areas of students’ heterogeneity and multiple worlds.

Third, an understanding of not only teachers’ perspectives, but also of students’ is of crucial importance (Nieto, 1994; Phelan et al., 1991). My goal is to listen to students intently; listening to students’ voices is necessary not only to address the shortcomings of the existing
educational practices, but also to include a unique voice to the educational agenda that is different from educational policy-makers, parents, and teachers (Pomeroy, 1999).

Fourth, being a person of colour and a critical researcher, I bring credibility to the research on diversity of school organization. Furthermore, studies have shown that minority research participants are more open to minority than non-minority researchers (McLoyd, 1998).

Fifth, the study can be used as a point of reference for similar studies. As Pomeroy (1999, p. 467) argues that research findings on students’ views should be applied more extensively and research “must move beyond case-specific descriptions in order to increase its relevance and utility.”
Chapter 2  
Mapping of the Literature and the Conceptual Framework

Mapping of the Literature

The proposed study is built on the following two premises: (a) the intersection of the young people’s diverse lives (family, neighbourhood, and peers) and identities with the school community; and (b) the former high school students’ understanding of their academic identity (which involves students’ identification of the program/stream, and their sense of belonging in the school community). The literature review thus sheds light on (1) changing student populations: approaches to students’ multiple heterogeneity; and (2) students and the context of the school environment.

The literature that brings students and their meaning making process in the mainstream arena of educational scholarship pays attention to either the school environment (Phelan et al., 1991, 1998) or mainly to the outside world where schools are embedded (Apple, 1996; Artiles, 1996; Ball et al., 2000; Kozol, 1991; Natriello, Pallas & McDill, 1990). These researchers also scrutinize conditions that are giving meaning to students’ voices while they cross boundaries between schools and outside worlds. Other scholars concentrate on students’ identities, specifically, shaped by their race, ethnicity, and class—that intervene when students interact with teachers as well as peers (Cooper, 2011; Fuligni, 2007; Gibson & Bhachu, 1991; MacLeod, 1987; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Olsen, 1997; Willis, 1977). However, in this study, a comprehensive approach is adopted, as both the schools and their cultural contexts embedded in students’ multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, and peers are considered.
In the following section, studies on changing student populations and students within the context of the school environment are explored.

**Changing Student Populations:**

**Approaches to Students’ Multiform Heterogeneity**

Every day in their secondary school lives, young people move from one social locale to another. Unlike their middle class and affluent peers, students from poor and minority backgrounds often experience difficulty crossing borders from their worlds to schools, whether it is because of structural (Anyon, 2007) or cultural constraints (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Olsen, 1997; Phelan et al., 1998, 1991).

Cooper’s (2011) capital, alienation, and challenge models become useful to understand students’ social and cultural capital (Arriaza, 2003; Coleman, 1990, 1988; Conchas, 2002) needed to understand their academic identities (Jackson, 2003). Cooper (2011) argues that the alienation with their academic identities model is particularly useful for recognizing the “development of immigrant, working class, and ethnic minority students who do not have other capitals to foster their sense of belonging and academic success” (pp. 117–118). Cooper’s challenge model is useful for the study as a way to understand the academic success of students who lack the social capital or the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) of native English speakers.

The term culture originally "came from farming, and meant the cultivation or development of the land." The broad sociological definition of culture dictates how a group of people share their way of life “handed down from generation to generation via language, and all other modes of communicating, including gesture, painting, writing, architecture, music, fashion, food, and so on” (Osborne & Van Loon, 1996, p. 142). Cultural life, therefore, reflects cultural
structures (Levi-Strauss, 1967). Then again, some scholars pay their attention to the constant shifting nature of culture (Steinberg, 1981).

Bourdieu (1984) considers the power of dominant groups because of their cultural capital. He relates social class to lifestyles and cultural consumption patterns and shows how habitus accounts for class differences across a broad range of aesthetic tastes and lifestyles. A central objective of Bourdieu’s work is to show how culture and social class correlate. For him, cultural capital comes in three forms: (a) dispositions of the mind and body; (b) possession of cultural objects; and (c) educational credentials. This study sheds light on some of the challenges high school students from marginal backgrounds face in order to arrive at the threshold of a prestigious university.

Studies find the concentration of poor and visible minorities within urban enclaves as a significant trend (Anyon, 1997; Artilles, 1996; Gaskell, 1995; Massey & Fischer, 2000; Stone, 1998). These studies, however, do not specifically deal with the complexities arising from immigration and the contradictory pluralistic notions (Bradford, 2002; Gertler, 2001; Goonewardena, Rankin, & Weinstock, 2004; Myles & Hou, 2004; Lee, 2000), which Apple (1996, p. x) defines as “the focus on identity politics, on multiple and contradictory relations of power, on nonreductive analysis, and on the local as an important site of struggle.”

Class, Race, and Ethnicity:
The Disputed Issues of Social Mobility in Canada

Summarizing research on social mobility in Canada, Wanner (2004, p. 144) argues that Canada is basically a “stratified society characterized by a considerable amount of inheritance of privilege.” According to Wanner (2004, p. 132), “social mobility has been broadly defined as the upward or downward movement of individuals or groups into different positions in a social
hierarchy based on wealth, income, occupation, education, power, or any other scarce social resource.” Describing Canada’s social structure, Satzewich and Liodakis (2007, p. 89) point out that while some Canadians live more than comfortably, others depend on food banks; some are homeless and live in “grinding poverty.” Even many so-called middle class Canadians with two incomes are “struggling to make ends meet.” Discussed frequently in this study, however, is that class disparity exists even within ethnic groups.

When dealing with students’ voices, MacLeod (1987) and Willis (1977) concentrate on class; in both of these studies it is reported that students who come from lower class backgrounds find their social construction of reality persistently ignored in schools’ hegemonic pedagogy and culture. Students in both studies find that upward social mobility for them is close to impossible. So they defend their class culture with subversive behaviours. For example, Willis’s (1977) British “lads” consciously choose working class jobs and reject the upper class world deliberately and with disgust. While students in these studies show their agency by adopting subversive behaviours, in the current study, both immigrant and working class students demonstrated their loyalty to the so-called dream of a meritocratic society and opted for upward social mobility by continuing their education.

In MacLeod’s (1987, pp. 2-9) research on a low-income neighbourhood in the US, the so-called ‘American Dream’ becomes hallucination” for adolescent students. He asks: “why is there a strong tendency for working-class children to end up in working-class jobs?” Missing, however, from both Willis’s and MacLeod’s accounts are “other” social phenomena, such as race and ethnicity, that affect the experience of schooling. Olsen (1997), on the other hand, builds her study only on race and ethnicity. Class and its impact are implicit in Olsen’s analysis. Although the neighbourhood and the school she selects are working class, immigrants are the
foci of her study. Olsen passionately captures America’s perplexity to deal with diversity and she narrates the stories of high school immigrant students as they learn “America” in school. Unlike MacLeod, Olsen, and Willis, I pay close attention to students’ class, race, and ethnicity as well as their agency. Despite many of the adverse conditions they face because of class, race, and ethnicity, the students in the present study succeed in being accepted at a prestigious university. Unlike the above studies, this study is a success story of the resilience among heterogeneous students. Structure receives a deserved attention in this study; resilience of some young people to overcome all the obstacles is also acknowledged (see Ashwin, 2008) by the author.

Students’ identities, which is their sense of self, are formed by their social class, ethnicity, and race and can make students feel like an “outsider and a foreigner” in the world of rule-making (Ghosh, 1996; Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 272). Class is defined by Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff (2000), first, as a social ranking device, and second, as a defining mechanism of economic relations between different classes, such as between workers and capitalists. Gaine and George (1999, p. 97) have Weber’s class status and Bourdieu’s habitus in mind when they maintain that social class is a “fertile ground for expectations. There are signals of clothing, speech and ‘style’ as well as teachers’ knowledge of research that working class pupils on average do less well.” Other scholars suggest that there is very little recognition that some learners are adversely affected by social and economic marginalization, poverty, language barrier, and hunger. Instead, specific therapeutic measures are glossed over, which has a strong ideological effect “on public perception and policy intervention” (Fine, 1991; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 329). Using students’ voices, the present study directly represents the challenges or privileges stemming from the diverse participants’ multiple worlds.
Poverty in Canada

While Bourdieu (1984) calls it exclusion, other scholars call invisibility of the poor students that often remains a huge unscrutinized problem in the western educational hemisphere, frequently “under the shadow of privilege and affluence”. In OECD nations, child poverty is linked to structural inequality in distribution of wealth and opportunities (Books, 2007). Furthermore, chronic poverty and ghetto-like neighbourhoods have devastating long-term effects on children’s psychological and intellectual makeup (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLoyd, 1998). Ball et al. (2000, p. 5) blame “recent policy making and its inadequacy to address equity issues,” for the increase in child poverty and economic polarization in urban settings. For some adolescents, poverty and lack of security are an important part of the backdrop that influences their choices, identities and “horizons for action” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 5; Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson 1996). Lack of money indeed influences some students’ decision to select a local university or to begin university after spending some time in the workforce, one of the findings of this study.

About 47 million children in affluent nations live below their national poverty line (UNICEF, 2000). According to UNICEF, one out of six Canadian children lives in poverty. And that number has remained constant for quite some time (AFP, 2007). In the same vein, Kozol (1991) describes the “savage inequalities” among poor students in the US. Using the structural model, the study sheds light on students’ multiple worlds and their “cultural differences that are not politically neutral” (Phelan et al., 1998, p. 10). In Canada, scholars have also raised the social exclusion marked by poverty in low-income, ethnic neighbourhoods and the increasing gap between the rich and poor in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. For example Kazemipur and Halli (2000) find a correspondence between institutionalized poverty and immigrants.
concentrated in Canada’s larger cities, such as, Montreal, Winnipeg, Quebec City, Toronto, Saskatoon, Regina, and Vancouver. Ethnic neighbourhoods in these cities are plagued by 40 percent, and sometimes even higher, institutionalized poverty. Agreeing with this study, my study goes further linking “the neediest school in the district” with an urban and impoverished neighbourhood.

**Race**

Race is a significant component of opportunity in Western societies that affects the daily lives of people. Racism is all pervasive; its effects can be seen on the opportunities and the privileges people receive in life. Since people’s life chances are directly related to their race, there is a strong and direct connection between race and social class (Sleeter & Grant, 1988). Compared to the US, in Canada there is not enough empirical data available on racial attitudes (Reitz & Breton, 2004).

**Ethnicity**

“The term ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual” (Hall, 1992, p. 257). The trails of ethnicity include languages, families, childhood memories, and the “senses and smells” of people’s past as well as present (Nieto, as cited in Trueba, Takaki, Munoz, & Nieto, 1997, pp. 176–177).

According to Porter (1965, as cited in Satzewich and Liodakis, 2007), Canada’s social structure is basically a vertical mosaic; social inequality is a reality in Canada; visible minorities are at the bottom of the income and occupational structure in Canada. Analyzing Porter’s contribution to Canadian sociology, Satzewich and Liodakis (2007, p. 89) stop short of calling Canada a racialized or “colour-coded vertical mosaic.” In that hierarchical structure, people from
Jewish and British ancestry belong to the top rank of the income and professional categories. English-speaking people are considered more powerful than the French as the former dominate Canada’s economic life and are overrepresented in elite positions.

Many researchers, however, overlook the variability within particular ethnic groups and the danger of lumping particular ethnic groups into one category. The schooling experiences of students from the same culture and background are not always the same (Hayano, 1981; Kibria, 1998). For example, against all the odds, such as, a non-English home culture, discriminatory treatment from fellow students and teachers, and having working class parents who have very little contact with their schools, academically competent Punjabi high school students from rural California have better schooling experiences than their White peers (Gibson & Bhachu, 1991). Gibson and Bhachu’s study speaks directly against cultural discontinuity theory. The voices of the 3 young people in this study from Muslim backgrounds support the authors’ contention about variability; the three voices are as distinct as possible.

Cultural mismatch theory (Cazden, 1988; Cooper, 2011; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Heath, 1983) explains the incompatibility between the schools and some home cultures and the cultural crash it can create in students’ academic lives. According to Nieto and Bode (2008, p. 277), cultural mismatch theory is more optimistic than “deterministic explanations such as generic inferiority or economic reproduction theories because it assumes that teachers can learn to create environments in which all students can be successful learners.” However, despite authors’ optimism, this study shows that cultural mismatch has remained problematic during one student’s entire high school life.
Immigrants in Toronto:
A Critical Analysis

Immigration became an important issue for this research because 5 out of the 8 participants came from immigrant families. Immigration is nothing new to Canada; what is new however, is the darker skin colour of recent immigrants coming mostly, not from Europe, but from Third World countries. Fifty-eight percent of Canada’s new immigrants end up in Ontario (CBC News Online, 2003, Statistics Canada, 2001, 2002), once Canada’s wealthiest province. Those who settle in Toronto, one of the most multiethnic cities in North America, are mostly from China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Korea (CBC News Online, 2003).

Many immigrant students and their parents leave behind a life full of obstacles: “They carry with them hidden but enduring scars that influence all aspects of their educational experiences” (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007, p. 555). The “construction of desire and dreams” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 6), job opportunities, demographic influences, and immigration patterns have clearly left minorities and immigrants no choice but to dwell in urban areas. Furthermore, Ball et al. (2000, p. 6) indicate that: “The density and diversity of the modern ‘global city’ provides a place where new identities can be forged, where new economies and new cultural formations flourish.” Canada and United States have always been branded as nations of immigrants. Historically, immigrants in the US (and Canada) have been able to improve their material conditions once they obtain access to and experience in the job market. However, recent immigrants face bleak job prospects since they encounter problems that were not experienced by earlier immigrants. First, as indicated before, the majority of today’s immigrants have darker skin compared to early settlers who were predominantly White and of European descent. Second, recent immigrants face grimmer job prospects in their adopted land due to the current sluggish
economy (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994). In the absence of a decent lifestyle and an opportunity to climb the social ladder, many immigrants’ hopes and dreams turn into nightmares (Apple, 1996).

Immigrants represent “more than half of Canada’s total population growth, and 70% of the net growth in the labour market” (Wayland, 2006, as cited in Hathiyani, 2007). Explaining income inequality in Canada, Satzewich and Liodakis (2007, p. 88) write that “immigrants’ educational credentials are devalued in Canada.” Immigrants’ educational and job experiences are not recognized here. Most immigrants in Canada face an uphill battle to find a suitable job consistent with their educational background and professional skills. Seventy-three percent of Canadians agree that immigrants have more difficulty in finding the employment in their field of expertise (see Focus Canada Survey, 2004). And they face the following catch-22 situation in the Canadian job market: Employers often complain about newly arrived immigrants’ lack of Canadian job experience, but the irony is that immigrants need to find work in order to gain Canadian work experience. Access to a decent job is important for immigrants’ and their families’ smooth integration into their adopted homeland (Pennix, 2003). Increasingly, recent Canadian immigrants are highly skilled professionals from comfortable and middle class homes. Contrary to the myth, they are neither the dirt poor; nor are they strangers to modern amenities. However, their arrival in Canada is met with disillusionment and downward mobility as they are unable to find meaningful employment and are compelled to work as cab drivers, cooks, security guards, and other blue collar jobs (Qadeer, 2004). Hathiyani’s (2007) research pinpoints the barriers highly skilled university-educated immigrants face in Toronto trying to obtain jobs in their fields and finds that doctors and engineers with foreign credentials end up driving taxis in the city. Unlike Kymlicka (1995), who takes a philosophical view of the influx of immigrants in response to Canada’s open-door policy, Hathiyani highlights the realities behind this policy. Due
to its aging population with the baby boomers on the verge of retirement, “Canada needs young and well-educated skilled people to sustain its economic growth” (p. 128). Although the Canadian government seeks highly qualified immigrants using a point system, very little is done to acknowledge their credentials once they arrive in Canada, “leaving many new immigrants disappointed and frustrated” (Hathiyani, 2007, p. 128). Hathiyani (2007) argues that racism is the “greatest barrier to entering the job market” (p. 130). He cites Esses et al. (2007), who report that visible minorities are discriminated against by employers because of their visible minority status. A taxi driver in his study raised the proverbial chicken-or-egg argument and is quoted saying that “Canadians use Canadian experience . . . as a ploy to block work from immigrants.”

Satzewich and Liodakis (2007, p. 89) also ponder whether immigrants and visible minorities are kept to the bottom pit of the Canadian social hierarchy: “Do they do the ‘dirty work’ of Canadian society, characterized by low pay, poor, and unsafe working conditions?” White Canadians, on the other hand, are perceived to be at the middle and upper strata of society: “Do they have the good jobs, characterized by status, prestige, and high income?” Especially, the people of British origin who have traditionally occupied a prominent position in Canadian society. Hathiyani (2007) reflects on this persistent structural inequality in Canada that leads to a neglect of the vast skills and knowledge immigrants bring with them. While the nation somehow still attracts “the most accomplished immigrants, it essentially squanders them by creating barriers to their integration and participation into the labour market” (Hathiyani, 2007, p. 132). Poverty rates among immigrants who arrived in Canada after 1989 are alarmingly high (see Galabuzi, 2005). Jobs are important issues for the present study because of the harsh impact of parental unemployment on 4 participants’ lives.
**Students’ Family and Neighbourhood**

The word “family” has evolved through multiple meaning-making processes and currently indicates “different types of relationships and conveys multiple meanings of kinship, co-residence, and emotional intimacy.” Parents are needed to provide for their children’s “material support and emotional nurturing.” Therefore, “family relations are among the most fundamental emotional and social relations” within which interpersonal relationships develop. As a result, individuals’ selves are constructed in relation to their families. And family norms and values are deeply instilled in all of us (Miller, 1984, as cited in Baker, p. 32). According to Ball et al. (2000, p. 144), adolescents’ lives revolve around their families’ support: “The family remains here a key source of belonging.”

There is a need to consider the significance of “growing up in families in which the parents were themselves raised in a different society” (Fuligni, 1998, p. 127). In this context, I find Desai and Subramanian’s (2003) research intriguing. Their qualitative work in the Greater Toronto Area reveals how immigrants, especially South Asian students, are constrained by their parents’ strict rules and the “intergenerational gap in the South Asian community” (p. 144). In this study, family occupies an important space in the 8 study participants’ lives. However, the 8 university students labelled their families as affluent, middle class, and lower middle class. And consequently the financial situation of their families either limited some of their options or opened the doors of opportunity for some others.

In addition, studies show that parental and family supports come in different forms and shapes (Fuligni, 1998; Lareau, 1989; Nieto & Bode, 2007; Noguera, 2004; Peshkin, 2001). These studies clearly indicate the difference between the support adolescents receive from middle class and from poor parents. Unlike middle class parents, working class and immigrant parents may
lack English language fluency and other cultural capital, such as possessing books, art objects, and, above all, educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1984), that can provide support for their children’s homework and extracurricular activities.

Many scholars also claim that how well parents and students relate to their schools often begins with the students’ neighbourhoods (Apple, 1996; Noguera, 2004; Olsen, 1997). In this study, however, except for the parents of an affluent student from a gated community, other participants reported that their parents decided to stay away from their teenagers’ schools.

**Students’ Peers**

Peer influence is also a major aspect of adolescence (MacLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977). Peers shape “how individual students will respond to...their parents and teachers” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 24). Also significant, however, is what factors influence students’ friendship choices (Kelly, 1996; Olsen, 1997; Rosenbaum, 1976) and how their peers influence their educational experiences.

To summarize, in this section, diversity and the massive immigration from the Third World countries and their implications for Ontario’s education system were discussed. As well, scholars’ work on students’ class, race, and ethnicity was explored along with the concept of cultural capital, and studies on students' family, neighbourhood, and peers.

**Students and the Context of the School Environment**

**Program Differentiation:**

**Streaming**

The public high school’s comprehensive structure allows placing all adolescents from the same community in one school. Still, critics maintain that the same comprehensive nature can
cause the dilemma of difference (Kelly, 1996) and conflicting priorities (Ball, 1981), owed to the incompatible and contradictory nature of heterogeneity (Blau, 1975). Access pinpoints the opportunity structure available to all students (see Cooper, Jackson, and Azmitia, 1998). Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller (1992), Oakes (1985), and Rosenbaum (1976), suggest that tracking is an extension of social class within the school walls. Rosenbaum’s (1976) study examines tracking’s effects on students’ social attitudes and behaviours. He differs with Coleman (1961, as cited in Rosenbaum, 1976) arguing that students’ friendship choices, leadership, and extracurricular activities, such as running the student council or the school newspaper, are not only the product of their individual decision making but also of the schools’ decision to place different students in different programs. Higher-track students tend to participate more in extracurricular and leadership activities than that of lower-track students. Although model academic students are branded by their teachers as “programmed for success,” these students are under tremendous pressures; they are anxious “about the future, living up to the expectations of those around them, maintaining high grades” (Phelan et al., p. 244; see also Metz, 1993; Oakes, 1985; Peshkin, 2001). Therefore, in the current study there is a conscious effort to explore the views of international baccalaureate and academic stream students.

Many low-income students’ parents are virtually invisible to teachers and administrators (Lareau, 1989; Putnam, 1995), and conspicuously absent from school bake sales or P.T.O. membership (Nieto, 1994). Gibson and Bhachu (1991) write about Sikh parents from rural Punjab, India, who have no formal education and Western exposure, and reveal that they hardly ever visit their children’s schools in rural California.
Different Programs:
The Issues of Belonging and Identities

Although many studies concentrate on the different characteristics of the high school programs (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Oakes & Stuart Wells, 2004; Searle, 2001), we know very little about students’ views on how these programs carve out student identity and create a sense of belonging. So in this research, the 8 participants are asked whether they belonged in their programs, how they worked in class, whether they took part in extracurricular activities, and how they felt about their academic work and teachers.

Cooper’s (2011) metaphor of the academic pipeline helped me to address difficulties adolescents face in constructing their academic identity (Jackson, 2003).

To summarize, in the final section of literature review, students and the context of the school environment, specifically, streaming and academic programs, are discussed with a focus on academic students’ sense of belonging in their academic program.

Conceptual Framework

The three paradigms (Kuhn, 1996), students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identity conceptually focused the research. I used Phelan et al’s (1998, 1991) emic cultural research work, as well as a youth study. I visualized the three paradigms in a diagram (see Figure 1, p. 37) as a confluence of structural and cultural analysis.

The study expands on Marx’s materialistic interpretation of history, which argues that individuals make history but not in conditions of their own choosing. Since the dynamic nature of students’ identities in this study created a space for their social and political relations as well as for their historical agency (see Chapter 8). Although not specific to a certain ethnic group, in
this study, I critically deconstruct the phenomena of students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds (family, neighbourhood, and peers), and identities. Deconstruction, according to Rosenau (1992, p. xi), is a postmodern tool used as a “method of analysis.” Deconstruction tears a text apart, reveals its contradictions and assumptions.” Despite the fact that I borrowed the framework from an author of centred position, my own position on the margins as an immigrant and minority citizen in Canada, my own ethnicity, gender, situated knowledge in the new land where I am settled now, and my critical orientation forces me to consider the relational nature of identities in terms of hegemony, discrimination, and the study participants’ agency and voice of negotiations. Therefore, I chose to speak up against all forms of domination and consciously decided to deal with the related intense discomfort associated with critical research (see Ball et al., 2000). And I admit that these were conscious political acts (see Adam & Van Loon, 2000). Although 7 out of the 8 study participants were female, I did not include gender in my analysis; I agree with Phelan et al. (1991, pp. 227–228) that “the Multiple Worlds model is generic. It is neither ethnic, achievement, nor gender specific but transcends these categories to consider multiple worlds, boundary crossing, and adaptation for all students.” Similar to Phelan et al.’s (1998, p. 2) work, this study looks into students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in an effort “to provide a generic and holistic view of adolescents’ lives and contexts.” I tried to recruit diverse students in terms of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, immigration history, and academic streams; however, I had to limit my study to academic stream students not because of my lack of interest in less academically successful students, but because I did not hear from other students (see Chapter 3).

The cultural and qualitative approach of Phelan et al. (1991, 1998) does not spell out the structural dimension of students’ heterogeneity (see Blau, 1977). The way I set up this study (see
Appendix B and Chapter 4), however, reflects both structural and cultural approaches. In this study, the content of heterogeneity is reflected in the form of students’ multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, and peers. This is particularly evident in the finding that some students’ worlds of neighbourhood, family, and peers were not congruent with their school’s worlds and could sustain inequality.

Phelan et al. (1998) recognize that factors outside the school (for example, students’ negative socioeconomic, including immigrant status, teenage pregnancy, and parents’ divorce) affect students’ academic lives. However, these authors pay more attention to what happens inside the schools. I, on the other hand, consciously distance myself from Phelan and her colleagues’ sole concentration on schools. Instead, I pay attention to the macro social structural changes in Toronto, the city “within which these young people are constructing their lives and forging identities” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 20). Consequently, considered in the study are parents’ income, ethnic background, education, and lifestyles; in particular, class and its implications for social mobility receive consideration in the study. Although student identity is at the core of the current study, the eight schools the participants attended and postmodern structuralism also receive attention in the current research. The analysis does not “neglect either the inside or the outside of schools” (Moll & Diaz, 1993, p. 78). I look at the 8 participants’ identities as who they are and are not, fragmented, and the inner core of the heterogeneity phenomenon.

**Exploring the Paradigm of Students’ Multiple Worlds**

In their two trend-setting ethnographic studies on youths, Phelan et al. (1991, 1998) explain high school students’ negotiations, boundary crossing, and adaptation patterns within their multiple worlds, such as families, peers, and schools. Every day in their secondary school lives, youngsters travel from one social locale to another and “negotiate and construct their
realities,” which ultimately affects their learning experiences. However, the authors claim that students receive very little recognition and help from schools in order “to cope with these difficult and yet important processes of transitions” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 224).

In addition, Phelan et al. (1991) wanted to understand students’ views about the “boundaries between worlds and adaptation strategies they employ as they move from one context to another” (p. 225). They define the term world as “cultural knowledge and behavior found within the boundaries of students’ families, peer groups, and schools . . . . The terms boundaries and borders refer to real or perceived lines or barriers between worlds” (p. 225).

The authors suggest that research prior to this concentrated on families, peer, and schools “as distinct entities” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 225):

In other words, we know a great deal about how aspects of peer groups, families, and schools, and teachers affect educational outcomes. But we know very little about how these worlds combine in the day-to-day lives of adolescents to affect their engagement with school and classroom contexts. Thus far, there has been almost no attempt to understand how students’ multiple worlds interact with one another. (pp. 225–226)

Phelan and her team, in their 2-year longitudinal study, looked at 54 youngsters in four high schools in Northern California. The students represented diverse demographic patterns in terms of gender, ethnicity, immigration history, and academic achievement. The research methods of the study included: classroom observations of students, open-ended interviews and informal conversations with the 54 students and their teachers, and use of students’ academic records.

Four types of students are presented in Phelan et al.’s two works (1991 and 1998). Most of the students who describe “congruent worlds and smooth transitions” (type I) are from two-
parent families. The type I students’ worlds of friends, families, and teachers are in sync with each other. The type II students, whose worlds are different in terms of their family culture, socioeconomic status, religion or ethnicity, somehow manage to successfully cross the boundaries of their multiple worlds. Similar to type I students, they are not considered problem students by teachers and are in compliance with “classroom and school norms” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 245). Type III students come from different worlds and find crossing from one world to another difficult. The authors suggest that these students need teachers’ close attention and care in order to be academically successful. Type IV students are most at risk because they experience “borders as impenetrable and boundary crossing as insurmountable” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 246).

In 1998, Phelan et al. published their advanced findings in case studies of 7 students with diverse backgrounds, different worlds, levels of success in negotiating those worlds, and adaptations.

The Framework in Chapters

In this section I describe how the three concepts of students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identities are reflected in the study chapters. The following three themes of students’ (a) relationships with the programs; (b) multiple worlds; and (c) identity/agency are used to explore some of the commonalities and differences between the young people’s experiences. Throughout the study, participants’ individual accounts or the subjective data are often weighed through sociological, anthropological or macro perspectives from the existing literature and viewed as the products of interplay between social contexts, culture (family, schools, neighbourhood, peers, and students’ identity-agency), and institutional norms (the eight schools attended by the participants and their academic programs).

First, in Chapter 4, where the 8 participants are introduced, I consider the heterogeneity of urban student populations (Blau, 1977) and their influence on secondary schools in order to
understand the diverse student body in Ontario, and analyze who the students are and how their stories inform us about social similarities and differences in the educational arena. Therefore, I examine who the participating academic stream students are, their backgrounds, and the implications of these for the school system. Unlike Marx’s one-dimensional analysis of class (Marx, 1959), a heterogeneity model was ideal for the study, for it included other social cleavages such as, race and ethnicity, religion, and education. The interview guide for the study was designed to elicit an introduction to the dynamics of the students’ diverse backgrounds in terms of their race, ethnicity, language use at home, years in the city, and class. Chapter 4 is framed on the data collected during the first of the two interviews with the 8 university students. The students were asked about their background information: for example, their family background, age, living situation, gender, current year at the university, parents'/guardians’ occupation, race/ethnicity, years in the city, neighbourhoods, parents'/guardians’ educational background, language spoken at home, if immigrant, country of origin, and future plans after secondary school. Data from the first interview transcripts, along with any relevant data from the focus group discussions, second interviews, and field notes (for example, if the participants talked about part-time jobs, romantic interests, the clothes they wore in high school days or field notes on students and their unstated fashion statements) are also looked over and incorporated in this chapter.

Second, while heterogeneity dominate the background information about the participating students and the school community, in chapter 5 and 6, I use the students’ multiple worlds of families, and peers to frame questions about the participants’ families, peers, and parents’ influence on their lives in order to explore how their identities shaped their experiences of secondary schooling, especially when expectations, values, and beliefs of one world collided
with the other. Although Chapters 5 and 6 are influenced by Phelan et al.'s research model (1991, 1998), there are significant additions to those chapters that are different from that model. Unlike Phelan and her colleagues, I abstain from presenting students' multiple worlds of family and peers together; nor do I view models of family versus peers or family versus school as fixed oppositional notions. I also add the neighbourhoods described in Chapter 4 in order to signify students' representations of their multiple worlds riddled with class, race, and ethnic differences.

In Ontario, the drastic decrease in upward mobility and the increasing gap between the rich and poor (Livingstone & Managan, 1996) have created affluent gated communities side by side with working class and mixed-income neighbourhoods. The wide spectrum of students in secondary schools in the province often mirrors these differences of their communities. Furthermore, the focus of Phelan et al.'s work is on multiple worlds, my focus is on students' identities and their dynamic and situated relationships with families, peers, neighbourhoods, and schools.

Third, I do not want to ignore what happens in school classrooms and programs; neither do I overlook the existing inequalities in the larger society in which the schools are situated. Therefore, I have to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that allows me to broaden the horizon of my data reading, analysis, and interpretation. The main research question, how secondary school students' educational experiences are shaped by their unique identities, is raised to understand how diverse students function and negotiate their identities in their school worlds.

The microstructure of schools' programs influences students' lives and is influenced by them. For example, according to Hubbard (1995, p. 48), school culture is comprised of "arrangements that make up students' everyday life experiences." Students in this study are not seen as passive entities but actors whose agency left strong footprints on their schools' structure and culture (see Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan 2002). Here I am invested in Giddens’ (1991, p. 2)
principle of the change-seeking actors and the shaping and shaped phenomena: “no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications.” Students’ agency has received importance in the current work; for example, 2 of the participating students came to Canada from non-English speaking countries when they were in Grade 9. In addition to language issues, others had to deal with economic constraints. Students build relationships with the school community by relating to others, negotiating meaningfully with adults and peers in schools, and participating in schools’ programs and extracurricular activities (Barber, Eccles, & Stone 2001; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen 1985; Rosenbaum, 1976). In an effort to understand the extent of students’ relationship with the school community, I ask about students’ identification with the IB and academic programs and ponder whether their relationships with their academic programs have influenced their identities. Much has been written on how tracking or streaming as a policy (Curtis et al., 1992; Eccles, 2004; Oakes, 1985; Swanson et al., 2003) discriminates against students. Students’ views are not formed on a blank slate; students and teachers connect within specific contexts during the process of their daily interactions (Choy, 2001; Conchas, 2002; Peshkin, 2001; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2009). The study expands this horizon and relies on students’ narratives on how these programs affect their identities and sense of belonging. So the 8 university students were asked if they felt they belonged in their programs, how they worked in class, whether they took part in extracurricular activities, and whether teachers made a difference in their lives (see Chapter 8).

Fourth, examined also in this study is how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling (Ball et al., 2000; Gosine, 2002; Olsen, 1997; Peshkin, 2001; Phoenix, 1998). The identity chapter (Chapter 7) has three layers; the first part, students’ cultural
identities, is influenced by Ball et al. (2000). The other two layers, students’ multicultural and national identities, have distinct Canadian aspects. I did not anticipate the other two layers when I designed the study. However, during the focus group discussions and interviews, students talked about their cultural identities and how they were related to multicultural Canada; I let them talk and later asked everyone another question, as some were loudly saying they were Canadians, “What does it mean to be a Canadian to you?”

I also had to consider sociocultural matters such as students’ lifestyles and home culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Giddens (1991, p. 5) explains why lifestyle is an important aspect of people in diaspora in today’s changing world and shifting identities of global citizens:

The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options.

Finally, I look at the three worlds of (a) students’ heterogeneity including, immigration status, class, race, and ethnicity; (b) students’ multiple worlds of their families, neighbourhoods, peers, and schools; and (c) students’ identities, including their agency; and the interplay between these three worlds with one another (see Figure 1). As I delve more into students’ cultural politics of difference and the reliance of their identities on others, I recognize that there is a complex interaction between the three paradigms. The three paradigms, students’ heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identity, cannot easily be separated from each other, nor can they be easily integrated. The three paradigms are conceived as “circular, iterative, and spiral” (Usher, 1996, p. 19).
Figure 1. The three conceptual foci: Heterogeneity, multiple worlds, and identity.
Chapter 3
Research Methods

Case study method has been described as a research methodology designed to produce “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” within a real-life context (Merriam, 1998, p. 21; see also Goetz & Le Compte, 1984; Yin, 1994). This study is all about an in-depth understanding of the 8 diverse university students’ multiple worlds and identities, and their influence on their experience of secondary schooling. I approached the research process as multiple case studies to examine how the 8 study participants’ unique identities shaped their secondary schooling experiences (Merriam, 1998) through a critical exploration of (a) the subjective experiences of students, and (b) the contexts influencing those experiences. Throughout the research, I worked to produce a rigorous and thick description of the participants and their meaning-making processes about their identities as these were shaped and reshaped by different macro, meso, and micro contexts (family, neighbourhood, peers, and school), their daily activities, educational experiences, and cultural beliefs.

This study fitted with Yin’s (1994) delineation of research variables and contexts; since I was struggling to separate the research variables from their contexts; as I was unravelling the students’ class, race, ethnicity and, above all, their identities. This educational research was notably informed by research in anthropology and sociocultural studies.

Why Case Studies?

I chose multiple case studies over students’ life stories as a method because I did not think the data I had was extensive enough; multiple case studies were ideal because I just managed to catch a glimpse of the students’ lives during the focus groups and the individual
interviews. The schooling experience of young people is just one of the chapters of their lives: “their lives are about much more than this” (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 145).

I also opted for case studies because I considered that the reality of students’ identities and high school experiences were constantly shifting, and that I wanted to understand former high school students’ world views in terms of their identities and schooling experiences. I chose a multiple case studies qualitative research design because the study’s focus was primarily on a deeply context-embedded research problem (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1998): How students’ unique identities shaped their experiences of secondary schooling. Therefore, I was investigating students’ identities as dynamic phenomena, holistically described within the “real-life” contexts (Yin, 1989, p. 23) of students’ families, neighbourhoods, peers (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6), and schools and their academic programs (see Chapter 8). In so doing, I not only examined students’ class, race, and ethnicity and cultural identities, but also their multicultural and national identities (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, I created from the above descriptions the interrelationships between students’ unique identities and students’ high school experiences that affected their behaviour and the construction of their identities. Answering the research question whether students’ unique identities shaped their secondary school experiences was completely dependent on the participating students’ world views. My research goal was to examine students’ families, peers, and neighbourhoods within the larger context of the heterogeneity brought about by massive immigration and students’ multiple worlds. Although the 8 students came from eight different schools, they were at the same university in Ontario; so they were a “naturally bounded, geographically located” group (Goetz & Le Compte, 1984, p. 85). Finally, the units of analysis in this study were the 8 students’ unique identities, as my primary sources of data developed in different contexts, such as family, neighbourhood, peers, and schools. The units of analysis of
the 8 students’ identities, therefore, came up at every data analysis chapter (Goetz and Le Compte, 1984). Later, I compared students’ responses and found similarities and differences in their accounts of identity.

The eight cases in the study reflected what Books (2007, p. xviii) identifies as “foundational reporting”; like a good reporter, I was determined to find out the realities of the 8 young people’s educational experiences. I looked at those cases as a quilt-building exercise that would have the local fervor with thick descriptions capturing students’ use of space and the contexts of their narratives.

In recent years, case studies have gained currency in social science research and have been widely used by scholars such as Ball et al. (2000), Phelan et al. (1998), and Nieto and Bode (2007). Some use cases because of the “sense of empathy they promote” (Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 27); others speak glowingly for the case study approach because it makes teachers and students engage in conversation (Phelan et al., 1998).

**Research Participants and the Setting**

The study took place in Toronto – a city viewed as the microcosm of the larger community – a mixed urban and multicultural community in Ontario that is home to many social classes and ethnicities. Obviously ethnic manifestation was the characteristic of student body of its neighbouring schools (7 public schools, among them 2 were Catholic schools, 1 alternate school, and 1 private school). This city’s influence on Canada is often compared to New York’s reign over the US. In fact, the city is not that far from the Big Apple. Some even credit this proximity for Ontario’s long-standing prosperity in Canada. While the US economic engine depends on the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street; Canada’s economy seldom shifts its gaze from Bay Street in Toronto. No wonder Toronto is the first preference for immigrants in
Canada. The Statistics Canada Report for 2001 states that 42% of the Greater Toronto Area (Toronto and the regional municipalities of Durham, York, Halton, and Peel) residents were immigrants. The same report also indicates that more than one in every three GTA residents belongs to a visible minority group. The other two cities in Canada that attract many immigrants are Montreal and Vancouver. Toronto may be a city of immigrants, but it also represents the distinct cultural heritage of English Canada. English dominance is taken for granted in Canadian society; however, that dominance is especially prominent in Toronto, a stronghold of English Canada. Porter’s (1965, as cited in Satzewich & Liodakis, 2007) assertion that British people are more powerful than the French in Canada still holds true; they still are the ruling elite with a strong hold on Canada’s economy.

The university the 8 participants were attending at the time of the study is considered one of North America’s top research-based universities.

**Recruitment**

In consultation with the principal of the undergraduate program, I identified potential contacts who could assist me in recruiting the participants. The contacts were needed to access the undergraduate program residence and classrooms. The residence director, nevertheless, turned down my request to snowball and access residential students on the ground of protecting their privacy. However, I was given the permission to post a recruitment poster on the walls of the undergraduate program building. Unfortunately, I did not hear from a single student from the multiple postings made during the fall of 2009. The written introduction to the principal (see Appendix D) was designed to seek permission to visit classrooms of 3–4 undergraduate program instructors to invite their first and second year students to participate in a focus group and possible interviews later (both were conducted at the undergraduate program building), briefly
explain the purpose of the study, and describe the study’s informed consent process (see Appendix C). I was successful in securing this permission. The class visits took about 15 minutes during which I personally invited students to participate in the study. I encouraged students to read the “Participate and have your voices heard” information sheet (see Appendix C) and make an informed decision to participate in this study. Consent letters to students were sent via email once they expressed interest in participating in the study.

Purposive sampling criteria were used to select the volunteer and interested participants or a “smaller chunk of a large universe” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 38) for the study who (a) had had diverse life experiences in terms of class, race, and ethnicity, and (b) had been high school students in Ontario. The 8 students were selected from an initial pool of students from the focus group participants designed from the university’s larger student population (see Appendix A).

I consciously stayed away from recruiting only immigrant or only native-born Canadian students, because the 8 participants from diverse families symbolically represented multicultural Canada with true global connotations. Furthermore, while I explored the participants’ countries of birth, race, ethnicity, language, and class, I looked at their identities as plural concepts and was keen on finding differences and similarities across students from different ethnic groups. Again, as a researcher, I considered my “pre-eminent commitment” should not be to coloured or White students, “but to the fundamental principles of social justice, equality and participatory democracy” (Gouldner, 1975, p. 208). In spite of my ethnic status as a visible minority, I was never comfortable with the “us-versus-them” approach of some research.
Selection Criteria

Participant selection was based on the following criteria: former academic stream students with (a) diverse life experiences in terms of class, race, and ethnicity; and (b) enrolment in a high school (public, including Catholic, alternate, and private schools) in Ontario.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers of Students</th>
<th>Selection Criteria</th>
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<td>8</td>
<td>(a) diverse life experiences of former academic stream students in terms of class, race, and ethnicity; and (b) high school (public, including Catholic, alternate, and private schools) students in Ontario</td>
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Table 2: Selection of Students

Research Design

Research does not take place in a vacuum. Our life histories have significance in our research design and in shaping the reflexive research questions (Usher, 1996). Therefore, my ontological (the “beliefs about what there is to know about the world,” [Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 11]) and epistemological (“a set of assumptions about knowledge and how it may be validly obtained,” [Carspecken, 1996, p. 23]) positions made me curious to initiate the study and formulate the research questions. As an immigrant settled in the Greater Toronto Area, I was interested in taking a fresh look at the politics of culture, social justice, and identity aspects of students’ multiple worlds. In this socially embedded research, my critical orientation compelled me to stay away from Durkheimian (Durkheim, 1933) law and order philosophy. I refused to look at schools as integrated wholes with slotted structures. Instead, I revisited Marxism (Marx,
1959) and critical theories and looked at students’ identities as who they were and their class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), race, and ethnicity. Schools also have key roles to play in students’ identity formation (Apple, 1995). I looked at students’ identities in terms of their national origin (native-born or from another country), socioeconomic status (class, race, and ethnicity), and, adding a new dimension, I looked specifically at academic stream students and their identities. Oakes (1985, 1995) claims that streaming in the schools is a sorting mechanism to label students as bright, average, or dull and slot them accordingly into different instructional groups. Therefore, it is imperative that we pay attention to program specificity of students’ experiences.

**Data Collection Strategies**

The construction of reality in this case study reflected the changing nature of the participating student body as it aligned multiple sources of evidence to enhance the validity and reliability of the data gathered (Yin, 1989). In order to investigate the subjective realities of the participants and how their unique identities shaped their experiences of secondary schooling, the study employed four data collection methods: focus groups, in-depth interviews, relevant documents, and field notes.

Focus groups were held for students who expressed interest in participating in the study. The focus groups allowed students to articulate their schooling experiences. Four focus group questions were designed to explore students’ schooling experiences in a way that was appropriate for a public forum, and one question about what identity meant to students was used to guide the discussion. The 1-hour focus groups were divided into two sessions. In order to manageably reduce the noise level and administer the focus groups (i.e., moderating, note taking, etc.), I did not take more than 10 students in one focus group session; so that I could meaningfully co-construct the “realities between” students and the “dynamic negotiation of
meaning in context” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 112). I let the focus groups run more as group
discussions and rarely interrupted participants’ reflections. During the focus groups, I basically
took the role of an observer. However, I reminded participants that because the focus group was
only for 1 hour, their comments needed to be succinct and pertinent. Focus groups require “a lot
of footwork to set up.” I was hoping that plenty of pizza and water bottles would make
“participants feel comfortable” and of course, “talkative” (Luker, 2008, p. 185). Indeed, I elicited
a greater variety of responses from the focus groups than the interviews (Merton, Fiske, &
Kendall, 1990), since focus group participants were more in charge with their communication
with one another than the interviewer. Their animated discussions were truly a consciousness
raising experience for all of us; and because of that I was able to gather excellent interactive data
(see Wilkinson, 1998). However, I found that I had more say in the interview process than in the
two focus groups because I had the opportunity to explore 8 participants’ answers, reflections,
and inner conversations (see Archer, 2000). The 8 interviews were in-depth and I was able to
obtain responses that revealed the inner core of students’ multiple identities.

The interviews consisted of two sets of taped interviews with 8 selected students. The
first, which took about 30 minutes, focused on (a) students’ backgrounds and socioeconomic
information. Students’ basic demographic data were collected, such as class, race and ethnicity,
and parents’ income and education (see Appendix B). As of this writing, data on the
socioeconomic status of students in Ontario schools is unavailable (see Fuligni, 1998; Rothon,
Heath, & Laurence, 2009). Thus, it was no surprise that I came empty handed from both
Statistics Canada and Ontario’s Ministry of Education. However, “it is assumed that the class
distribution of the ‘early arrivals’ in the first generation gives an indication of the social origins
of the second generation” (Rothon et al., 2009, p. 1407). Rothon et al. (2009) also suggest that
parents’ income and educational backgrounds can serve as indicators of students’ socioeconomic status. In terms of race and ethnicity, 2 of the participants claimed that they had dual identities. One was a child of an Asian couple (Indian father and Filipino mother). The other was the offspring of an Irish father and Portuguese mother.

The second interviews took approximately 45 minutes (sometimes more, depending on the natural course of the discussion). Questions in this section were structured to tease out the participants’ (b) relationships with the academic program or adolescents’ schooling experience, (c) multiple worlds, or family, neighbourhood, and peers, and (d) identity and agency.

The other sources of data were school websites, relevant media reports on schools and their communities, and policy documents on academic and IB programs. Finally, field notes were also taken during the focus groups and interviews in order to holistically capture the meaning of students’ worlds. The notes described the settings, people around us, any interruption, and any unusual event that would not be picked up by the audiotape. These helped me to recall phenomena besides the words that were spoken. I kept a log from the field notes that was divided into two headings: (a) What happened today? and (b) What have I learned from it?

Before the interview, an emailed letter of invitation informed participants about the ethical procedures of University of Toronto. They also received a letter of consent explaining in detailed the nature of the study: including assurance of confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the choice to have interviews audiotaped. Participants were also informed that I would provide a summary of the complete study to them upon request. Furthermore, participants will also have the opportunity to examine the final thesis.
Each participant in the study had the opportunity to review his or her own transcript and make any amendments necessary. Participants had two weeks to review their transcripts. If I did not hear from them within that timeframe, I assumed that their transcripts were acceptable to them. When I received changes in their comments in time, they were duly incorporated into the revised transcripts. The fieldwork began in September 2009 and ended in April 2010. However, I had to take time off from the research twice for health reasons.

Data Analysis

In the later stage of the study, full-scale data analysis, writing, and editing work were done. Data were recorded, transcribed, coded, reduced, and then analyzed by the author following the procedures described by Miles and Huberman (1984) and Acheson and Gall (1992). After transcription, I filed all participants’ transcripts separately in the computer database paying detailed attention to conceptual coding. Each participant was assigned a number that was used to identify his or her interview and transcription. I coded pre-interview questions, corresponding transcripts, and field notes in order to ensure anonymity and separate participants’ answers as a data reduction mechanism. Once I obtained data from separate sources, such as interviews and secondary documents, I identified emerging themes and patterns for discussion purposes. A new understanding of how the participants lived out their lives emerged later from the study as I built, explored, synthesized, examined, and connected ideas stemming from the students’ world views (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The nature of data analysis was inductive, generative, and constructive. I analyzed the uniqueness, complexities, and common patterns in the students’ responses in order ultimately to create abstractions across cases. Since I was working with only 8 participants, my goal was not to generalize from the study data, but to stimulate discussion, insights, and to shed new light on
the available literature (Merriam, 1998). The relationship between the nine chapters and two variables, students’ identities and their educational experiences were difficult to measure in a precise manner. Therefore, a narrative form of explanation building was adopted to illustrate the data (Yin, 1989). The findings were first offered, in Chapter 4, as 8 individual cases or portraits of the participants. They were then analyzed in Chapters 5 to 8 as cross-cases by looking “at the complex configuration of processes within each case” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 172).

Privacy and Confidentiality

The name of the university, participants’ neighbourhoods, and secondary schools were not disclosed and participants were given pseudonyms. I excluded details of context contained in the data that could potentially identify the participants. Considering the very personal nature of the data the 8 young people were sharing and their impressionable age, this anonymity was crucial so that participants could express their points of view in a risk-free environment.

Credibility

“Multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 1989, p. 23) and the triangulation method (Yin, 1989) were used to increase the credibility of the findings. Triangulation was accomplished through the use of secondary sources, such as school websites, field notes, and relevant documents. These were compared with the 8 young people’s views as collected in the study. The participant’s views taken together in the study produced descriptive data which disclose the world as the participants experienced it (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). As students of the university were from all over Toronto, focus groups served the purpose of capitalizing on as many students’ voices as possible. The 8 study participants along with some others came to two focus groups.
University Administrators and involved faculty members knew in advance about the focus group and interview protocols and approved them.

Moreover, the credibility of the qualitative research analysis was enhanced by the fact that the individual accounts often echoed existing social relations. Students’ narratives in the study systematically and rigorously delineated in several units of analysis had a “concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proved far more convincing to a reader – another researcher, a policymaker, a practitioner – than pages of numbers” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 15). Validity was also reinforced through the weighing of the participants’ discourses and the study findings against the existing literature.

Finally, the participants’ review of transcripts and opportunity to view the final report grounded the research; not to mention, my continuous effort to “work the hyphens” so that I could constantly scrutinize how I was relating to the contexts and participants I investigated – added to the credibility of the study (Fine, 1994).

Researcher Experience and the Roles Taken in This Study

I visited classes and personally invited university students to participate in the study. I also moderated the focus groups, conducted the interviews, audiotaped and transcribed the interview and focus group data.

I am skilled in interviewing, probing, and listening to people carefully. My educational background in communication and journalism has taught me how to make people feel good about themselves so that they can share their worlds with me. My work and educational experience as a journalist in India, Canada, and the US and as a teacher came in handy during the focus groups, interviews, and in general for creating rapport with the study participants. My
master’s thesis was a cultural study (see Raksit, 2006) in which I used participants’ constructs to show how an educational innovation remained a contained entity; the thick description of the case study was built on multiple methods of interview, observation, and document analysis. I identify myself as a critical researcher. The exposure started early when I studied political science that introduced me to Marxism and other critical research traditions. Apart from speaking against all forms of oppression, as a critical researcher, I do not take anything for granted and I frequently deconstruct/decentre assertions.

In terms of my own identity, I came to Canada from a class/caste-based Indian society; because of my upper-caste status, I occupied a very comfortable socioeconomic space in Calcutta, the city where I was born, raised, and educated. In many ways, this research questioned the cosy life that I took for granted.

The Initial Research Plan:

The Reality of what I Actually Accomplished

Originally, I chose Trent-Gardner (a pseudonym) secondary school as the research site, because of its large size (more than 2,000 students and 150 teachers), multiple programs it offers, and its very diverse ethnic, linguistic, and racial composition of students from both high- and low-income families. However, my request to conduct research there was denied by the school district’s institutional review board, which has the ultimate power to block access to a research site, people, and data (Sherman & Van Veet, 1991). Perhaps the decision had to do with the socially sensitive nature of the research and its focus on students. As my proposal did not receive permission from the school district, I changed my research location to a university. However, as the study site changed from a high school to a university, the focus of the interview shifted to how first and second year university students recalled their high school experiences.
Furthermore, instead of one school, then I had to deal with students from the 8 different high schools. Schools and their programs took a backseat and the study focus shifted on students' views about them. The quality of the data elicited from participants was ripe with new meaning as the research venue changed. Since the 8 participants provided excellent descriptive data on their negotiations of identity within the multiple worlds of school, family and Canadian society. Participating young people’s more mature age groups and exposure to university made a world of difference in their looking glasses while they were able to offer a “retrospective viewpoint” of their secondary schooling experiences. The school site I chose has wide range of students in terms of their socioeconomic status. Some students in that school drive Mecedez and BMW while some others are homeless or juvenile delinquent. The school also has wide range of programs: IB, academic, and applied.

In addition, when I was conducting field work, I discovered that as an insider/outsider, I did not need to go to a school; I understood the codified language the participants used to describe their respective schools. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why I had such good rapport with them.

My preliminary plan was to design a single case study that was based on the program-specific experiences of 24 academic, IB, and applied students (8 from each stream). In so doing, I was trying to investigate students’ heterogeneity and multiple worlds in relation to the dynamics of secondary schools’ multiple program offerings. I was planning to recruit IB and academic students from a local university’s undergraduate program, and applied students from the same university’s OPC program (pseudonym) that was populated by mostly non-academic students. I agreed to the demand made by the director that OPC program students must be former students selected by the director of the program. However, during my presentation to the faculty,
I emphasized the importance of having diverse groups of students in terms of (a) race, ethnicity, and class; and (b) programs. By the end of summer 2009, I had obtained permission from the two programs’ administrators to access and conduct the study in their respective sites. How I recruited students was the product of my negotiations with the university administrators and thus reflected their requests. Despite my repeated emails and phone calls, however, I did not receive a single former OPC student. I also failed to get any reply from IB students. Only 1 participant of the study was a former IB student. I received overwhelming responses from female students; only one male student decided to participate in the study. Perhaps my own gender had something to do with this. As well, despite my repeated efforts and invitational pitch on diversity, I was not able to recruit a single Black student. This outcome is not surprising; given the current structural barriers that exist. The lack of Black students’ presence in higher education is an issue that calls for researchers’ attention but is beyond the scope of this study. I have to admit that Black students’ experience-based narration could have enriched the quality of the study data. Given the results of the recruitment efforts, academic stream students became the focus of this study.

At the initial stage of the study, I intended to include parents’ voices in the study to make it more rigorous, and to cross-check the accuracy of the data gathered from their sons and daughters (Fuligni, 1998; Snape & Spencer, 2003). However, due to time constraints and the limited nature of a student research, I decided not to interview parents. Besides, the age group of the participants had shifted to young adults from 18–22, who were no longer in high school and some were living away from their parents’ homes. However, what I don’t regret is that I did not have to go through the complex process of parents signing the consent form and providing feedback for minor high school students, according to my original proposal.
Finally, ethnography as a research method investigates human behaviour, especially cultural patterns experienced by groups of people (Erickson, 1977). Both the researcher and researched channel culture to construct their worlds. Ethnographic research design stipulates “investigatory strategies conducive to cultural reconstruction” (Goetz & Le Compte, 1984, p. 3). Although cultural optics guided my vision through all the chapters of the study, I dare not to call this study an ethnography, because of the realities of a graduate student’s short span of research life and the limited fieldwork and resources available to me. In fact, except for continued email correspondence, there was no scope for “sustained interaction with participants” (Goetz & Le Compte, 1984, p. 18), one of the cornerstones of ethnographic study.
Chapter 4
Portraits of the 8 Research Participants

We do not confront abstract “learners” . . . instead, we see specific classed, raced and gendered subjects, people whose biographies are intimately linked to the economic, political and ideological trajectories of their families and communities, to the political economies of their neighbourhoods. (Apple, 1986, p. 5)

I briefly introduce the 8 study participants and their biographic data in this chapter. Keeping Apple’s contention in mind, I consider the participants’ “social biographies and identities” and look at these young people as “complexly raced, classed, and gendered” individuals; that complexity is reflected in my writing throughout the thesis (see Ball et al., 2000, pp. 9–10). My goal in this chapter is to open up discursive spaces and find out how heterogeneity, specifically, class, race, ethnicity, and culture, is lived and sustained in students’ lives. In other words, research subjects and their subjectivities are explored here to show how “identities are claimed or sought and underpinned by the marking of differences – the objective classification of classifying subjects” (Ball et al., p. 150). The focus of the study is how the students’ unique identities shaped their experiences of secondary schooling. Through the focus group interactions and individual interviews, I explored students’ identity and agency, both individual and social-collective entities that were developed in relations to others.

The Study Participants’ Class

The study participants had attended eight different schools, 6 came to the university from public schools; Lee (all names are pseudonyms) spent her last year in a private school, but she talked about her public school experience more than her private school experience; and Sheila spent all her high school years in a private school. Participants were not asked directly about
their family income, but in addition to including their parents’ occupational status, they themselves labelled their families as upper, middle, and lower-middle income families. Salma informed me that her parents lost their restaurant business; I also learned that Mehdi’s father was out of work. Jessica’s father had been working on and off as a chef for quite some time, and Liam’s father had been unemployed for a long period. Apart from Lee, whose parents were apartment dwellers in South Korea, the parents of 7 other participants were single-house-owners in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area.

South Korean Lee (the only international student in this study) and Iranian Noor (who had recently become a Canadian citizen) were newcomers to Canada; they came to Toronto a few years ago and were enrolled in Grade 9 at two local high schools. Both of them said that they came from middle class families. Sheila and Erika’s affluent and middle class identities later opened up discussion about privilege and its association with academic success as both of them had had relatively stable lives; however, Erika’s mother was a cancer-survivor. Coping with her mother’s illness was especially difficult for Erika while she was struggling to manage her academic life in her senior year in high school. Jessica, Liam, Mehdi, and Salma’s inner turmoil about representing the lower middle class was often reflected in their narrations during the interviews (see Chapter 5). They often hesitated to talk about their future and career plans.

Except Noor, whose mother is a homemaker, the students described their mothers as working women (Salma’s mother is “resting now” having lost the restaurant business).

Five of the participants, Mehdi, Salma, Liam, Jessica, and Erika, struggled to balance the time commitment of a demanding academic life in high school and part-time work, especially when the workplace was not that accommodating to high school students. Including Erika, who has had the financial backing of solid middle class parents; they all said that they worked
because they needed the money to support themselves. However, Mehdi and Salma were more heavily invested in part-time work; Mehdi frequently provided financial support to her family. Liam, Jessica, and Erika talked briefly about part-time jobs in grocery and drug stores, movie theatres, a day care, and a garden centre.

**Participants’ Age, Gender, and Academic Status**

The participating students were 18–22 years old; 7 of them were females; while 1, Liam, was the sole male participant.

Other than Jessica, who was a second year student studying life sciences, the participants were first-year university students enrolled in liberal arts programs. Liam and Mehdi took a few years off before going to university; the other 6 went there straight after high school graduation. Erika was the only former IB student in high school; while the 7 other students were academic students.

**Participants’ Religion, Race, Ethnicity, Language, Living Status, and Neighbourhoods**

Participants were not asked about their religion; however, they voluntarily shared that information with me. Erika, Jessica, and Lee’s families were Catholic; Sheila and her mother were also Catholics, however, her father was a Hindu; Liam did not talk about his religious faith; and Mehdi and her family were atheists. While Noor and Salma came from Muslim families, Noor was the only one in this study who described a strong association with the Muslim religion and the local mosque (see Chapter 7).

While Erika, Jessica, and Liam were White; Mehdi, Noor, Salma, and Sheila were racial minorities and came from immigrant families. As mentioned before, Lee was the only international student in the study. Participants also differed in their generational status. Noor,
Salma, and Lee were born overseas; Sheila and Mehdi were second-generation Canadians from immigrant families, and were born and raised in Toronto. Salma’s parents migrated here from Turkey when she was 3; so she grew up in Canada.

Four participants, Erika, Jessica, Liam, and Sheila, spoke English at home (see Table 1, p. 59). All of the participants except Lee and Noor grew up in multicultural communities and were exposed to a vast array of ethnic diversity.

Parents clearly appeared as significant others in all participants’ lives; 5 study participants are still living with their parents; a growing trend world-wide these days, when young people’s living arrangements with their families are lengthened, parental obligation to their offsprings are stretched; therefore, “adolescence is being extended and parental responsibility prolonged” (Brannen, 1996, p. 115). Only 3 of the participants were dwelling outside their parents’ homes. Sheila was living in a university residence; Liam was living with his girlfriend in a rented apartment, and Lee was living a separate life miles away from her parents in South Korea.

As well, the 8 participants in this study came from 8 different neighbourhoods in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. Some students, including Jessica, Salma, and Noor talked about the “mixed nature” of their neighbourhoods, a characteristic that is prevalent in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. Erika’s immediate neighbourhood is upper middle class; although her area is also mixed in nature. Liam’s parents dwell in an affluent suburb of Toronto; while Lee resides in an apartment near the university. Specifically, Mehdi and Sheila’s neighbourhoods belong to the two extreme ends of the city’s division spectrum (see Mehdi and Sheila’s neighbourhood sketches below). Mehdi grew up in an overwhelmingly Black as well as working class neighbourhood; while few years ago, Sheila’s parents moved to a gated community. Social
theorists like as Breton, Isajiw, Kalbach, and Reitz (1990, p. 11) consider “residential mobility” as instrumental to social mobility. Sheila’s parents’ move to a bigger and better home and gated neighbourhood reflected their upward economic mobility, and what the above authors call “aspiration, and achievement.”

The City of Toronto kept coming as the broader milieu for every participant’s frame of reference in this study. However, when they talked about where their homes were; obviously their immediate neighbourhoods occupied their minds.

Other Information

Jessica, Liam, Mehdi, Noor, and Salma mentioned another sibling studying in the same university.

It goes without saying that all of the 8 participants from the “thumb generation” were exposed to technology, particularly, savvy with computer technology; I communicated with them mainly through emails and over the cell phone; Salma even helped me with setting up and configuring my new net book.

In terms of students’ fashion statement and personal appearance, except for Lee (see below), 7 others appeared like countless Canadian university students; fashion did not occupy that much space in their easygoing sans-makeup and jeans-clad lives.

Aside from Salma and Noor (I am not sure where to put Sheila in this category), 5 others are romantically involved. All students described their parents as “couples together.”

I should also mention here that I recruited Lee for this study because as I indicated in the method chapter that my goal was to recruit as many diverse students as possible. Lee’s
background matched both the criteria; she studied in two high schools in Ontario; in her final year, she moved to a private school and in addition to Sheila, she was an Asian student in this study. Lee was also very enthusiastic to participate in the study.

The 8 young people in this research talked about different activities in their free time, including mingling with friends, listening to music, reading, dancing, and playing sports. These activities sometimes took place outside of young people’s homes and sometimes in unstructured fashions, such as, spending time in a relaxing way alone with friends inside of young people’s and their peers’ homes. Apart from Lee and Noor, six other participants in the study called themselves homebodies; however, solid middle class Erika and affluent Sheila talked more about leisure and their social lives. Erika talked about clubbing and Sheila talked about her school’s social gatherings or parties that she frequented with her peers.

Table 1 presents the study participants’ major background information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Living with / in</th>
<th>Race, ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Neighbourhood</th>
<th>Parents’ income status</th>
<th>Years in the city</th>
<th>Year at university</th>
<th>Arrived directly from high school</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Language spoken at home</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erika (F)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>White Irish/Scottish</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Solid middle class</td>
<td>Born and raised 16</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Farsi / English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Family</td>
<td>White Irish/ Portuguese</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic / English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Friend (rented apartment)</td>
<td>non-White South Korean</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Upper middle class (South Korea)</td>
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<td>First</td>
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<td>Korean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liam (M)</td>
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<td>Girl-friend (rented apartment)</td>
<td>White Italian/ Jewish</td>
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<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Born and raised</td>
<td>First</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Public / alternate</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Atheist</td>
<td>Black dominated working class</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Born and raised</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Academic / English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>Farsi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheila (F)</td>
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<td>non-White Indian/ Filipino</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Gated community in GTA</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
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<td>Muslim</td>
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<td>Public</td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic / English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introducing Erika, Jessica, Lee, Liam, Mehdi, Noor, Salma, and Sheila

Erika

This articulate 18-year-old was the first who expressed her interest in participating in this study. The eldest in the family of three children, often times, Erika talked like a natural leader and showed full confidence in her abilities. This former IB and native English speaking student had a smooth transition experience from her middle class family world to her affluent Catholic school world; she often talked about the extracurricular activities in her high school that rewarded her cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). She has a strong sense of who she is and who she is not. “I am very protective of my friends, family, and boyfriend,” she said.

At the time of the interview, Erika was living with her family and in her parents’ “spacious and well-decorated” home. Erika’s father is an elementary school teacher. “He has been teaching in Ontario for 30 odd years.” Her mother works for a crown corporation as a billing specialist. Erika’s father’s undergraduate degree was from the same university where she is currently studying. Her mother went to work full-time after she finished her high school and opted not to go to college or university.

Born and raised in Toronto, Erika was conscious of her mainstream-majority Scottish/Irish group heritage. She later mentioned that these dominant groups have been here for generations in Canada and therefore, have had “ethnic advantage” compared to some of her other ethnic friends, such as Italians. That sense of security was prominent in her articulated recollection of elementary and high school lives, and comments during the focus group discussions. Erika proclaimed her relative closeness to her mother than her father (see Chapter 7); she, however, would be following her father’s footsteps in teaching (in the next chapter that is elaborately described). During the interview, she was quick to add that she was not planning to
teach for a long time and unlike her father, would be teaching in secondary system and for a short period of time, and then move on to school administration.

Erika described her immediate and north end suburban, all-White, middle to affluent, and Italian neighbourhood as “close knit and quiet. You say hi to older people all the time. If your kids played together, you have them over for drinks or pizza.” Erika described the opulent exterior of her Italian neighbourhood as “over pretentious.” Italians in Toronto, particularly, are known to give their neighbourhoods the “new architectural expressions” to reinforce their ethnic identity (Buzelli, 2001, p. 574).

Erika’s father grew up in the same neighbourhood, which used to be an all-White neighbourhood. While Erika’s immediate neighbourhood is White, today her extended neighbourhood is a mixed area “full of Middle Eastern, Indian, and Black people,” she said. Looking at the template I gave her to draw a sketch of her neighbourhood, she added that she could not think of any youth centre, “may be around the rougher pockets, but I am not sure.” According to Erika, “Even on some of the nicer streets, you have not so nice houses or people,” and definitely pockets existed throughout her entire neighbourhood. She explained that the quality of her residential area depended on who just moved in and who had upgraded their property. She added:

My street is like a circle. Five minutes from my house, more you walk down to the East; there are government housing areas and apartment buildings that I wouldn’t walk through at night. Crime happens in the government housing areas.

Jessica

Jessica’s story, on the other hand, highlighted class and ethnicity’s other side. Despite what some non-White participants said, not all White students are born with special privileges.
Among the 3 White students, Jessica, Liam, and Erika, Jessica’s story was influenced by both her class and ethnicity. Jessica, a “middle child of the three girls” in the family, was painfully aware of her dual identity and the perceived inferiority of her mother’s Portuguese side. Her narration often dwelt on her Irish-Portuguese ethnicity and the social disadvantages stemming from her family’s “lower middle class” status. Her father is a chef; “his specialty is in French cuisine.” French cooking specialty is generally associated with glamour, money, and posh dining; according to Jessica, her father, on the other hand “has always been out of jobs. He went through many, many jobs.” Her mother works in acquisition and she has been working for a prestigious legal institution for 15 years. Her father graduated with a diploma from a local college renowned for its chef training program. Jessica’s mother makes more money than her father; she “went to a local university” to earn a certificate in librarianship.

During the two-day interviews, Jessica often touched on her family’s lack of money and its negative influence on her life (see next chapter). Since Jessica’s parents could not afford daycare, she spent a lot of time in her maternal grandparents’ house. They occupied a lot of space in her narration. She described her father’s Irish side of the family as “upper class” and her mother’s Portuguese side of the family as “dirt poor.” Jessica’s father and his family moved to Canada from Ireland 30 years ago. When her mother was three, her maternal grandparents migrated to Toronto from Azores, Portugal; her mother “basically, grew up here.”

Jessica is 19 and the only second year student in this study. She was born in a small town in Northern Ontario and moved to Toronto when she was 4. Although she understands Portuguese, her spoken language at home is English. Money has always been a struggle for Jessica’s family; and that combined with her admission that her generation was the first to experience university life in her family, often coloured what she had said about her single-sex
Catholic school, academic stream, and her current dilemma not to pursue her dream to be a doctor. She told me that her secret dream or plan B was to own a “bake shop.”

So if my original plan doesn’t work, I may go to TB College (not the real name). But my dad warns me that the kitchen isn’t a friendly place; I may not be cut out to be a chef or that it will change me.

This straight A student from high school appeared to experience a culture shock at the university that perhaps came from her lack of cultural capital, very much needed to manage the ever busy and crowded undergraduate life (see McDonough, 1997); Jessica expressed concerns that her “grades are slipping” at the university. She was also candid about her desire to please teachers as authority figures.

Jessica’s parents’ house is in the Lester area (not the real name). Aesthetically, that area has improved significantly and is not considered a bad neighbourhood; “I would say it is a working class neighbourhood; but we also have two-million dollar homes nearby” (Interviewer: “That’s Toronto; we have so many mixed neighbourhoods.”), she chuckled and said:

Yes, it’s a mix group of people. It is dominated by White people, a lot of Ukrainian and Polish people. You could tell from their Canadian accent that a lot of them are in Canada for generations and they are considered middle class.

Lee

Both Lee and Noor (see below) came to Canada from non-English speaking countries when they were in Grade 9. Their stories suggest that beating all the odds as English as Second Language (ESL) learners, they have been pursuing higher studies in a prestigious postsecondary institution. Considering that Lee came to Canada only in 2004, she spoke with a very cultivated Canadian accent. She always appeared well-groomed in designer outfits.
Lee explained that in South Korea her family was considered “upper middle class.” Although her mom and dad are still together, they have a difficult marriage. She is the eldest in the family followed by a younger brother and sister. Like Jessica, she talked about her grandparents, who have been living with her family; in her case, they are from his father’s side. She described her siblings as “good kids”; however, living miles away from her family evidently created a gulf in her relationships with siblings: “Now that I live in Canada, we are not as friendly as we used to be.” Both her parents are working; her mom, a translator, works for a Japanese company in Korea, but she did not go to university. Her dad, who has a Master’s degree in broadcasting, currently works for an accounting company. Lee acknowledged that her future career plan was influenced by her father, “I would like to work in broadcasting as a producer and work behind the camera.” Lee was successful in finding a high school work study program with the city’s largest TV company and recently, a university summer job in media production. However, she said that it would be safer for her to stay behind the scrutiny of the camera.

19-year-old Lee mentioned that parents in Korea are very eager to send their kids to study in English speaking countries; therefore, Lee’s aunt brought her here from her home country. However, the relationship with her aunt became tense. Eventually, she moved out of her aunt’s house and now she is living in a rented apartment near the university.

Lee portrayed her South Korean neighbourhood as “pretty nice, safe, and mid-high class.” Since her neighbourhood in Seoul has big markets, church, schools, and all the leisure amenities, the apartment price her parents paid was extremely high. “In Korea, an area that has school is considered very upscale,” she recalled.
Liam

20-year-old Liam’s agency was evident when he talked about some of the change issues in high schools that we are grappled with as new researchers. According to Liam, he is from an “average lower middle class family”; both his parents are university educated. As mentioned before, Liam did not go to the university directly from high school; he took some years working and travelling before going to the university.

Liam was becoming disillusioned with his public high school and education, because it was not “intensely academic” and moved to an alternate school; where he gained new respect for the academic life. An avid reader (he had even read the *Communist Manifesto*), he is keenly interested in social issues. He is familiar with Chaucer, Shakespeare, Herman Hesse, and Nietzsche; he read the above authors’ work for his own personal growth.

Liam was very critical about school hierarchy, and said, “There was no communication between students and the principal, unless you were sent to the office. The education we received was very passive in nature.” He moved in with his girlfriend recently and shares the apartment with her. Critically conscious Liam preferred not to talk about his religion but informed that his American father was Italian and his mother was Canadian and her ancestry was Eastern European and Jewish. However, he added, “I consider myself a Canadian.”

Currently Liam’s parents are both employed full-time. His father was unemployed for a long time though; his university-educated father is working as a security guard. His mother is a real-estate agent and she also has a part-time job.
Liam was born in Toronto; His parents moved to the US with new-born Liam and they decided to move back to Toronto when Liam was 6; he was raised in Toronto and in the same neighbourhood where his parents still live.

Liam said that he came from a middle class suburb with virtually no crime rate, all detached homes, big backyards, and with nearby shops and malls. It was important for his mother to be in a good neighbourhood. He was there for all 14 years, until recently; when he moved out to an apartment to live with his girlfriend.

Mehdi

22-two-year-old Mehdi is one of the two second-generation participants from an immigrant family. Her parents were politically active people in Iran and took refuge in Iraq. In Iraq, they were held captive, tortured, and accused of spying. They eventually got free and came here in 1984 as political refugees; when her big sister was 2. Mehdi, however, was born and brought up in one of the city’s overwhelmingly Black as well as working class neighbourhood. Her boyfriend, a young Black man had also been living with her family, since his “family life isn’t that good.” She described her boyfriend, a local college international business student, as a good basketball player and “living proof that Black kids don’t just sell drugs; he raises money for the needy kids, and considers his life worthwhile.”

Mehdi, a first-year student, is majoring in sociology; she explained that she could not come to the university straight from the high school because of her deteriorating marks. Her mother was always pushing her to take science in high school. Yet she never enjoyed science and her marks were dropping. In order to apply to the university, she said that she had to take night school and “academic bridging courses.”
Although Mehdi’s family came from an orthodox Muslim dominated society, she described her family’s religious practice as atheist. Mehdi’s father lost his truck delivery job a year ago, and has been working part-time. Mehdi’s mother, a settlement worker, has been struggling to run their household with her single income. Mehdi is used to helping her parents pay their bills. Although her parents asked her to get a job when she was in high school, Mehdi’s part-time job commitments at a movie theatre often became a source of bitterness between her and her father. She said that she was promoted and became the youngest manager at 18: “Yet my dad was complaining a lot that I was paying more attention to work than my studies.” Both Mehdi and Salma (see below) claimed that they have had been financially independent for a long time.

English is Mehdi’s “primary language.” She can understand Farsi but she and her sister usually speak English with their parents; their parents speak Farsi in return. She wants to be a school teacher; yet she is still unsure of whether to be in secondary or early childhood teaching.

Mehdi did not speak much during the focus group discussions. Yet her emails were always very insightful and she spoke eloquently during the interview. While talking about her parents’ long-standing struggle for survival, she was the only one who touched on how some non-European and non-English speaking immigrants’ wrestled in Canada with low incomes, inadequate housing, and a lack of social and economic well-being; as their educational credentials and working experiences have not been recognized in Canada. Her father took economics at an Iranian university, but dropped out and went into politics. Being conscious that he did not finish his university education; Mehdi’s father always urges her to finish university education. Her mother finished university education and she was a chemistry teacher in Iran.
However, “that wasn’t recognized here. So she had to take a factory job; initially, when they moved to Toronto. She took some college courses to become a social worker.”

It was also apparent that Mehdi’s parents could not move from their working class and Black neighbourhood; although they could finally become homeowners, “critical in defining family status” (Ray, 1994, p. 264), Mehdi talked about the economic hardship they went through:

Right now we own our house and we moved into that house in 2000. But before that we moved from one apartment to another on West Credit Road (not the real name). My parents have come a long way as my mom told me that they had to turn on the oven to make their apartment heated.

Erika did not recall having a youth centre in her immediate neighbourhood, but Mehdi’s sketch included a neighbourhood youth centre and a police station. She described her neighbourhood safe and her neighbours as pretty decent people. It is basically made up of townhouse complexes and single houses. Mehdi then said that “As we approach the other side of West Credit Road (pseudonym), it is not that safe. When I was in high school, my friend was shot a block from our area.”

Following is the sketch of Mehdi’s immediate neighbourhood:
Figure 2. Mehdi’s overwhelmingly Black and working class neighbourhood (some names were hidden to protect the identity of the neighbourhood).
Noor

19-year-old Noor’s parents are immigrants from Iran and moved here 6 years ago with their four children; ever since, they have been living in one of Toronto’s suburbs. In Iran, this first-year university student’s Muslim family belongs to the Shia group and because of the religious norm, she wears hijab. Yet her family had no relationship with the mosque when they were in Iran; “Ever since we came to Canada, we have been going to mosque every Sunday,” but Noor informed me that despite her “very religious background,” she never participated in her school’s Friday prayer.

As mentioned before, Noor’s mother is the only full-time homemaker in this study. Her father never worked in Canada, either, other than “volunteering for a hospital.” This well-to-do pistachio farmer left Iran for his children’s education and future. Noor revealed that basically her parents moved to Canada because of the better educational opportunity for their four children. Noor and her family’s livelihood here in Toronto still depends on the land in Iran that her father inherited from his family; one of her father’s friends takes care of the farm and sends them money. He invested money in Canadian banks as well. Both her parents came from agricultural families.

Noor’s “mother finished high school in Iran and she didn’t go to university.” Her father earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Iran. Noor and her three brothers speak Farsi at home. Family occupies a significant part in Noor’s tale of intergenerational relations in her family; “I love my family and I am proud of my family.” She and her family visit Iran every summer: “It’s like a fixed rule in the family.” Otherwise, her parents become depressed from homesickness. Furthermore, Noor said that her father had been keeping contact with Iran for his
two young sons (who are 9 and 12): “They need to understand their cultural origin and where they came from. He makes sure that they don’t lose the connection with their original family.”

Noor’s older brother is in the same university and the push to study here came from him. According to her, they are close but they fight all the time: “To some extent, he is protective of me.” Noor also informed me that she took a student loan to pursue higher education. Noor is considering either teaching or law as her future career. However, she said that she has had some ethical dilemmas about the legal profession.

Noor described her neighbourhood as “very quiet and peaceful; mostly, we have single houses. It is very safe.” She and her family have had good relationships with neighbours who are very friendly. A newcomer to Canada, Noor said that she had not been to any other neighbourhood “but I am surprised when I hear people say that they live in an area for 20 years and don’t even know who their neighbours are.” Her area is “very multicultural” with many newcomers. Most of the newcomers are from China. Her high school is also in the neighbourhood, just a few blocks away from her home. The neighbourhood also has Canadians who have been there for ages.

Salma

Among the 8 participants, 19-year-old Salma was the most soft-spoken person; sometimes, during the interview, her voice was barely audible. I mistook Salma for an Italian and she later told me that her Italian looks helped her to blend in with the Canadian mainstream society. Introducing herself as single, she said that she did not have “a boyfriend to talk about”; instead she talked a lot about her family as part of the Kurdish minority group (see Chapter 7) in Turkey. Although her family is Muslim, her family members are not “that religious and have nothing to do with the mosque.” Six months ago, her parents lost their restaurant business; so
they have been “resting and staying home”. Her mother finished elementary school in Turkey and her father “went to a Turkish university. He was an elementary school teacher in Turkey.”

Salma described in a matter of fact way that her father’s teaching career was over once he moved in Toronto “he always worked in stores and restaurants ever since he moved to Toronto. Eventually he owned his restaurant.”

Salma explained that she and her two sisters have been experiencing some growing pains while living with their rule-bound family, particularly their parents (see Chapter 5). There was some incongruence between her high school and home lives. The fact that she was born in Turkey but has lived in Toronto since she was 3, created some cultural tension in her life (see next chapter). For example, her story suggests many dualities and cultural tensions in her life and that she uses “Turkish and mixes it with English” daily at home, especially when she communicates with parents. However, she communicates only in English with her sisters.

Despite Salma’s keen interest in equity studies and her active involvement in the city’s Kurdish community centre, she is the only one in the study still unsure about her future career plans.

According to Salma, her residential street is pretty middle class with average houses of mostly Italian and Portuguese families. Salma’s family has been living in that “very safe” neighbourhood for about five years. She also said that the north of “our street is full of big and expensive houses with sprawling yards. The developers are buying the houses in my neighbourhood, especially corner houses and building big houses.”
Sheila

Sheila’s immigrant parents have been in Canada for “more than 30 years.” They are examples of some immigrants’ success stories in Canada. Her parents own a thriving import and export business and live in a gated community in the Greater Toronto Area. Her affluent parents were indeed able to pay for a better secondary and university education for their two daughters. Sheila and her younger sister went to a university-prep private school in one of the wealthiest suburbs in Ontario; Sheila is planning to become a lawyer. As mentioned before, she is the only one in this study who is living in the university residence.

Sheila was born and raised in Toronto. Similar to Jessica, she talked about her dual identity gained from her Filipino mother and Indian father, but never expressed any qualms about this hybridity. Perhaps, Sheila’s affluent class status and stable home life are behind her views of life from a “glass-half-full” attitude.

Sheila and her family have been around the world in Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and Africa. She also went to the school field trips with other students, and explained how international travel has expanded her horizon and tolerance level:

The funny thing is that a lot of kids I was travelling with experienced the culture shock with poverty and stuff; especially in Africa, I guess. Since I have been to India; I have been prepared to face poverty.

At home, the only language she speaks is English. However, she wished she knew and could speak her parents’ native languages, Filipino and Hindi. She portrayed her house as “like an Airport.” It is always filled with people visiting them from so many different countries: “There are always six other people living with the four of us.”
Sheila’s mother came to Canada as a nanny. She finished her high school in the Philippines and then like Mehdi’s mother, continued her education in Canada and took college courses in early childhood education. Later she also worked as a kindergarten teacher; currently, she works for Sheila’s dad: “She is the president of my dad’s company.” Her father has a Bachelor of Commerce degree from India.

This self-proclaimed 18-year-old extrovert is very active in sports, yet raised her eyebrows when I accidentally called her a jock, but said, “Our school was very athletic and I played a lot of sports and spent more time in the gym than in classrooms.” Her parents were also very accommodating when it came to her extracurricular activities; her dad would even cancel meetings to see her play. It is her father who always pushes her to take lessons and new repertoire. This soon to be licensed pilot hated tennis lessons but loves flying.

Sheila’s parents’ live in a gated community, enclosed by walls, fences, covered with bushes and shrubs with a protected entrance. Gated enclaves emerged as a social control mechanism; where wealthy people are shielded from the suburban and urban poor (Low, 2003). Exclusion, therefore, defines gated neighbourhoods (Kenny, 2000). When Sheila mentioned that her parents’ live in M_ Road; a most expensive and woody area in one of Toronto’s suburbs; I laughed and said “expensive”! “You can say that; we moved there in 2000. We live near Orangeview River” (not the real name), she revealed. Her sketch of her neighbourhood also shows that Lake Ontario is not that far from her house. Apparently, Sheila did not respond too well to the fortressing and exclusionary nature of her new locality in which relationships with neighbours have been non-existent; she said that the cultural isolation “was hard for us to move to a new area and community where neighbours are not on talking terms and live like strangers.”

In addition, access to facilities and social services are crucial in high-priced neighbourhoods;
Sheila’s area has a local hospital nearby, a library, shopping centres, and beauty salons, and good schools, but Sheila’s neighbourhood has no nearby restaurant or movie theatre. Needless to say, it is considered a very safe area.

While Sheila’s immediate area has many golf clubs lined with mature trees, fitness centre, and racquet club (see Figure 3, Sheila’s sketch); Mehdi’s area has a youth centre, a community swimming pool, a basketball court, police station, and the neighbourhood’s “neediest” high school in the district with many Black students.

*Figure. 3. Sheila’s sketch of her affluent neighbourhood (some names were hidden to protect the identity of the neighbourhood).*
Summary

In this chapter, a global view of students’ heterogeneity is presented; while the 8 participants are introduced individually. Briefly explored also are students’ class, race, ethnicity, and some other background information. Students’ families are also introduced. In the next three chapters, however, students’ multiple worlds of family and peers and how adolescents travel, negotiate, and cross the boundaries of their multiple worlds are presented in detail. I examined students’ background data in this chapter from their relative similarities as well as differences. Participants’ narration above depicted a segmented global city and its various neighbourhoods divided in mixed, Italian, Portuguese, Black and working class, gated, and middle class categories. Participants’ neighbourhoods also provided an understanding of their biographies in terms of their socioeconomic location and social participation, and the “embeddedness of these young people” in their “communities and within the local political economy” of Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (see Ball et al., 2000, p. 10).

This is the only chapter where each student is presented as an individual case; from the next chapter, students’ data will be analyzed as cross-cases, explaining the 8 participants’ multiple identities and their influences on their high school educational experiences.

Through the themes and categories developed in the remaining five chapters, I will describe in detail how the similarities and differences across the 8 cases are conceptualized in the study (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984).
Chapter 5
Living Multiple Worlds:
Participants’ Families and Access to Educational Opportunities

It’s impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is in the process of coming to be, for the identities that arise in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school. (Freire, 1998, p. 62)

Introduction

By placing Freire’s reflection in the beginning, I lay the groundwork for what is coming in this chapter. Using the 8 university students’ voices I explore how students define their multiple worlds of families, and later, peers as well as their class, race, and ethnicity (see Chapters 6 and 7). By doing so, I also examine the larger community of high schools, students’ “living conditions,” and “life experiences” talked above by Freire. In this chapter we will see that schools are not self-contained entities (Gaskell, 1995). Participating students in this study came from families of different class, race, and ethnicity, representing very different ethnic communities. This chapter deals with participants’ description of their family world. In addition, a close examination of participants’ accounts of their racial and ethnic identities revealed intersections with class. The discourse of family takes a new turn later in the chapter, when I critically examine whether the 8 participants’ family values, norms, and cultural practices are congruent with schools’ worlds and congruent with the opportunity structures available to the 8 young people.
Participants and their Families

School learning is “fundamentally a social phenomenon” (Wagner, 1998, p. 3). Scholars agree that students’ identities (who they are and are not), and sense of belonging are developed first in their families (Baker, 2005; Ball et al., 2000; Bourdieu, 1984; Phelan et al., 1998). According to Brannen (1996, p. 115), until recently, adolescents’ “transition to adulthood” within their own families has been overlooked. In this study, however, participants’ relationship with the family is considered as a significant emotional and social relation within which intersubjectivity is cultivated. As a result, at the basic level, the “self is formed in relation to family; thus, norms about family are deeply instilled in us all” (Miller, 1984, cited in Baker, 2005, p. 32). Since the publication of Vygotsky's (1978) ground breaking research, we also know that people’s social structures and dynamics play key roles in ascertaining what they believe to be true; culture mediates learning and the constructions of new knowledge; often people are products of their culture. Culture therefore, is an essential part of the process we call learning.

Schools also have key roles to play in students’ identity formation (Apple, 1996). Students who live at the margins of society do not often “find their culture, race, and ethnicity reflected in the center of their school experience” (Dei & Karumanchery, 1999, p. 111). Findings of this chapter pinpoint the difficulty marginal students experienced to cross the boundaries of their cultural worlds to school’s worlds (see Raksit, 2006). Other researchers and their classic studies also argue that urban differences in demography and experiences permeate schools; structural issues of family socioeconomic status, parents' educational background, and access to school resources overwhelmingly influence students’ schooling experience (Anyon, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Davies, 2004; Lareau, 2003, 2000). Access determines the opportunity structure available to all students (see Cooper et al., 1998, Raksit, 2011) or the lack
of it in the presence of racial barriers, substandard schooling, and job ceiling. Indeed, parents’ occupation, exposure to higher education, and income status/social class have relevance; as they exert influence to shape their children’s life chances (Grubb, 2002).

Considering the above groups of authors’ pleas, schools need to be receptive to the communities from which students emerge and are expected to return as adults and citizens; once they graduate from schools. Communities and their shifting nature, be it the changing immigration patterns or housing values, leave their footprints on neighbourhood schools and the make-up of their student bodies (Gaskell, 1995). Embedded in the literature used for this paper is a deep commitment and recognition that schools are moral and political entities, situated at the centre of the larger community they serve (Conchas, 2002; Sarason, 1996). Maintaining communities are distinctive responsibilities, as Starratt (1996, p. 87) reflects, “They are embedded in specific contexts of place and history, made up of unique mix of people with various interests, abilities, talents, and limitations.”

While I explore the family, community and school relationships in this chapter, students and their identities were the foci of the study and seen as the key constructors of the “home/school relationship” (Connell, Ashendon, Kessler, and Dowsett 1982, p. 188; see also Epstein, 2008). Findings of the study reinforce that in order to address various challenges faced by adolescents in high schools, it indeed, required a village to raise adolescents. The lack of a viable social network places too much burden on families alone to raise the future citizens of the Canadian society.
Stories from Privileged Families

Erika

Erika described her family as upper middle class. Her father is an elementary school teacher and mother works as a billing specialist. Speaking of her high school experience, she portrayed her family’s comfortable socioeconomic status and many personal and recreational gadgets and facilities available to her because of her parents’ middle class status:

My family is upper middle class; we go to holidays. Christmas is always big; our birthdays are celebrated; I drive and my parents pay for my insurance. I went to Mexico after I graduated from high school and my parents paid for that. We never have had shortage of anything. Our house is well furnished and we all got to redecorate our rooms when we turned 13; we got brand new everything. I have nothing to complain about. I have my cell phone, IPod, my room, laptop, and TV.

Erika never had problem crossing from her nuclear and solid middle class family world to her affluent Catholic school world, where this very presentable and articulate student’s cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), boldness to speak in public, and use of sophisticated language, was rewarded. Erika informed me that she was planning to follow her father’s occupational footsteps and become a teacher; she admitted that her dad has always had influenced her occupational and schooling choices. Not only did she long to be in her father’s profession, but she also chose her father’s alma mater. She stated:

After I graduate [with a Bachelor of Arts] from here, I plan to go to teachers’ college to earn my B.ED. I plan to teach high school and after 2 years, I want to move on to administration to become a principal.

Erika was also planning to take required administrative qualification courses. Erika’s father’s 30 years of experience as a teacher in Ontario provided institutional resources, insider
knowledge, and networking opportunities for her; that exposure, nonetheless, would not be available to Liam or Mehdi, the other two who wanted to be teachers.

**Sheila:**

**The Second-Generation and Hyphenated Canadian**

Some scholars maintain that immigrant children’s educational lives are not that different from children who were born in Canada. They weigh in children’s class, culture, and locale in this equation (Stromquist, 2002): “second-generation children from wealthier homes may sometimes be better situated to take advantage of educational opportunities than the majority of native-born youth” (Holdway et al., 2009, p. 1385). Sheila can be a case in point; her parents are highly successful entrepreneurs in an export-import business. Satzewich and Liodakis (2007, p. XI) capture the success stories of immigrants in Canada; they “own businesses, run corporations, live in palatial homes, and have lifestyles that many of us would envy.” As stated before in Sheila’s profile, her parents’ affluence opened the door of opportunity for her and her sister to an expensive and private university-prep school. She stated that school “was no transition” for her:

Money was never an issue for me. My dad worked hard and he had done very well. Those of us who went to Trinity (not the real name) were all privileged. I didn’t find it hard to fit in [with mainstream students and teachers]; I guess I was brought up that way.

Although Sheila’s parents were not part of the parents’ council, they were known to teachers: “My parents would donate a lot in our school’s charity programs. My mom would come and help organize and running events.” Sheila’s privileged profile fits with what Peshkin, (2001, p. 93) describes as the blueprint of privilege, “with choice country clubs, secluded vacation sites, and very expensive summer camps, restaurants, law firms, doctors, and of course,
schools.” She talked about her dual identity gained from her Filipino mother and Indian father, but unlike Jessica, saw her dual identity as an opportunity.

She had supportive teachers in her school life and had only good things to say about her school (Raksit, 2010). This well-mannered young woman (she even called me on my cell phone to let me know that she would be a little late for the first interview) seemed to be experiencing tension between high expectation and fulfillment. On more than one occasion, she talked about her “overachieving high school friends” and how she did not measure up to them:

I wasn’t obsessively academic, but I felt like I had to maintain certain standard in order to be accepted. I didn’t want to feel like a dummy. Because my eight girl friends were amazingly smart; yes, especially two of them; they were valedictorian nominees.

Sheila’s parents have high hopes for her, their first-born child, especially, her father. She has had great levels of parental support as well as school support. She is indeed what Peshkin (2001, p. 86) calls “overextended, overworked, and overachieving” (see also Chapter 8). An aspiring lawyer, she was aware of the options available to her even during the early years of high school.

**Low SES Families:**

**The Challenges**

Both Erika and Sheila painted happy accounts of their family lives. However, not all students had that blissful account to portray. “Students, parents, and teachers do not ordinarily speak the language of haves and have nots, though such thinking is inevitably there” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 96). 4 students talked about their fathers’ unemployment and the toll it took on their
lives. Jessica was candid about the chronic job loss of her father, a chef, and the “lower middle class” status of her family:

Although my mom has a steady and well-paid job, my dad has always been out of work. If he had a steady job, we would belong to the middle class. When he lost a job, often times, it took him at least 6 months to find a new job. And his pay has constantly been getting smaller.

Jessica shared with me an important part of her childhood; her mom never let her and her sisters buy things easily, “If we wanted something, we would always wait for Christmas or birthdays. Eventually we would get things, but we had to wait for it.” She did not mention it to complain; in fact, she liked the way her childhood was; it taught her “how to be frugal with money” and also “helped us not to become spoiled (Interviewer: “And not greedy”), yes and not greedy.” Because her parents could not afford daycare, she spent a lot of time with her grandparents.

Jessica’s story is not unique in Ontario’s sluggish economy and the drastic decrease in upward economic mobility (Livingstone & Managan, 1996; Kazemipur & Halli, 2000). For instance, Liam’s American and university-educated father was unemployed for a long time. During the time I was conducting the fieldwork, his father was working full-time as a security guard. That was “a big improvement” for Liam. Even though his parents were always ready to help, he took part-time jobs “at a garden centre, grocery store, and a movie theatre.” The money was helpful to buy lunch or clothes. Yet he confessed that in order to keep up with his grades in high school, he could not carry those workloads beyond November. Like Jessica, he admitted that his father’s unemployment was emotionally very hard for him and his “lower middle class” family. And coincidentally, both of them briefly touched on their strained relationships with their
father. One of the ripple effects of long unemployment is the tense relationships between the family members; as Liam said:

Sometimes, especially with my dad . . . [pause], he felt that I was not listening to him. And that really became problematic.

Interviewer: “In terms of what?”

Well, I kind of wanted to live on my own terms. For example, my parents would ask me to clean the pots and pans that I was responsible for and I might say that I would do them later or next day. Or sometimes when I was reading, they would strike up conversation [that], I wasn’t so interested in. You can be so self-absorbed when you were a teenager or at any stage in your life. So sometimes I would kind of brush them off. With my mom, I was a little bit closer; she usually brought up interesting and relevant issues, like my relationships with friends and family. I kind of respected that. But with my dad, it was kind of nonsense, all about the daily mundane stuff. That kind of created a schism between us.

Jessica’s mom is also her closest confidant; she, however, said that she talked only “superficial things” with her dad:

I don’t think I get along well with my dad . . . [long pause]. There are some things about him that I just don’t understand. I have had a lot of huge fights with my mom, but I still can like her; she is my friend. But if I have a fight with my dad, I kind of linger on it forever.

Mehdi’s father lost his full-time truck delivery job as well and was working part-time during the data-collection stage of the study; it was Mehdi’s mother, a settlement worker who had been struggling to run their household. Mehdi said that she had to find work because:

My parents were having troubles with the cash flow. Yet my dad was complaining a lot that I was paying more attention to work than my studies. At times, I was
confused and asked them, “You want me to work or not? Tell me what to do.”
Once my mom was on EI and I helped them out a lot. Whenever I could, I helped them out paying their bills.

Salma’s parents no longer own their restaurant business. None of these participants complained about their father’s or mother’s lack of access to Ontario’s tightening job/business market. But other immigrant school girls have criticized the lack of government intervention in finding their parents a suitable job (Anti-dote Gurlz Club, 2008). Only Mehdi informed me that her parents’ foreign (Iranian) educational credentials and work experiences were not recognized here. Her mother, a chemistry teacher in Iran, who had university degree, was forced to work as a factory labourer during her initial days in Toronto. Mehdi was candid about her parents’ financial struggle:

The financial hardship of my parents has definitely affected my educational and general life. Had my parents been more financially stable then, I would not have been forced to start working at a young age and could have been more focused on my studies and on myself. During my high school life, I had been paying for everything myself: from my clothing, to transportation, and my lunch money at school; which many kids had gotten from their parents. If I did not work during high school, I probably would have started university sooner with confidence.

As an international student, South Korean Lee, who came here to study in Grade 9, gave me a mixed account of her family. Her family in South Korea is “upper middle class.” During the interview, she talked about her family’s “pretty comfortable” lifestyle, her two working parents, two younger siblings and her grandparents, who have been living with them. According to Lee, however, their lifestyle received a blow when her father became unemployed:
My dad lost his job once. It was very hard for us. As a first child in the family, it was especially very hard on me and I sensed my parents’ marital trouble started from monetary stress. I didn’t want my parents to fight all the time. That crisis made me a mature person overnight.

When I asked who has been paying for her education in a foreign land, she replied, “Of course, my parents, now that my dad is working again. Besides, my grandfather, a retired army officer, gets a lot of benefits from the government; that helps too.”

**Added Responsibilities:**

**Juggling Acts and Unpaid Work**

Researchers claim that adolescents from immigrant families have “the profound sense of duty and obligation . . . toward their families” (Fuligni, 1998, p. 140). Furthermore, Moss (2004) brings in gender in that dimension and pays attention to women’s discordant time; Mehdi and Salma echoed the same sentiment while they touched on women’s unpaid domestic work which unfortunately started for them at an early age.

Salma a middle child in the family is compromising by nature and helped her parents running their restaurant, especially during the weekends. At one point she was working on both Saturdays and Sundays. She explained her weekends of “all work and no fun” in the following fashion:

I was supposed to leave at 5 pm, but since it was my dad’s own restaurant, I stayed whenever they were busy. I would just get up; actually my parents would wake me up [early in the morning] and I made myself ready to go to work immediately. I helped my parents in the kitchen; so I cooked rice, chicken, and pizza. By then customers would start to come in and we will have our lunch rush. I would generally drink a lot of coffee so that I wouldn’t feel hungry.
Salma explained how exasperated she felt after the weekend work; and how she gave up her personal and study time for that domestic responsibility:

That weekend work affected me a lot because while my friends were excited about the prospect of weekends coming up; I was like, another weekend of restaurant work! At night, when I went home, I was dead tired and went to bed immediately. And Sunday night was my homework night.

Salma added that she and her two sisters had to grow up early because of their parents’ long absence from home, as they were too busy running the restaurant:

When my parents came home late at night from their restaurant work; I knew they were my parents. I also learned that I had to decide about the day-to-day stuff all by myself. I only bothered my dad for major stuff. For example, I didn’t even let him know about the courses I was going to take at the university. I learned to be independent and didn’t ask them for too many things.

Mehdi talked about the babysitting responsibility for her sister’s daughter and how it has had been affecting her high school and university life, study time, and even her working life:

I left the movie theatre job because my sister had a baby and she was taking courses. So I had to take care of the baby. It was hard for me to take care of the baby as well as work. I am not the baby’s mom, but I always take care of her.

Those juggling acts of demanding academic work, fulfilling domestic responsibilities, and part-time job (Reay, Ball, & David., 2002) forced her to complain about the unpaid work; when she made the following comment: “We have had argument about it so many times that now I put my foot down and say I have to focus on my studies too; after all, she is not my daughter.” [laughs]
White Identities:  
Three Different Stories

Fine (2000, 1997a) explains Whiteness in terms of one’s cultural capital – so that one can gain access to mainstream opportunities that are not easily available to others. Erika, Jessica, and Liam, all 3 White students acknowledged that they were aware of their White privilege inherited from their parents (see also Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997). Banks (1995) argue that race is a socially constructed phenomenon that often points out the superiority of one race, particularly Whites—over others; from perceived superiority also comes the issue of possessing power. Decentring Whiteness, Fine, Weiss, and Powell (1997a) are critical when differences are whitened out and the privileges of a powerful section remain unexamined.

Furthermore, whiteness did not turn out to be a fixed entity (see Fine et al., 1997) for the 3 white participants. Erika talked about her privileged class and ethnicity; Jessica’s story was a mixed one, she identified her White identity as influenced by both her class and ethnic hybridity; while Liam pondered why his White identity did not mesh with the high school system.

Erika pointed out that it took her a while to realize that her classmates viewed her as White: “I am White and that comes with certain rewards.” Compared to some of her Italian or Portuguese friends, she proclaimed her Scottish/Irish heritage worked in her favour; “being White and from England and not from Portugal or Italy has definitely given me the benefits.” Some of her peers have their specific stereotypical images, as she said that some of her Italian friends are known to be “lazy and pretentious.” Her boyfriend is not White; many of her high schools friends are not White, either. She insisted that she never identified other people by their race, by including:
Even my parents have friends who aren't White. I never identified myself as Scottish/Irish, because I was born here and I am Canadian, which is important to me. I am proud to be White but I never let it define who I am anyway. It's who I am and a big part of my identity. But being White does not make me better than other people.

Jessica’s White identity, however, was not one of those privileged ones described above by Erika. “I consider myself a White Canadian. And I know about people’s perception that White people are handed in things (entitlements) in Canada” said Jessica. Yet that never happened to Jessica; contrary to what non-White students said (see Chapter 7); not all White students are made equal in terms of their White privileges. Jessica was painfully aware of her dual identity and the perceived inferiority of her mother’s Portuguese side (Raksit, 2010):

I am White but half Irish and half Portuguese. My Portuguese side of the family is dirt poor and my Irish side isn’t. Unlike my Irish side of the family, my Portuguese side is very warm. I am quite surprised by the story my mom told me about my aunts. My mom was born in Portugal but she came here when she was 3. So she doesn’t associate herself as Portuguese but Canadian. My Irish side of the family came in the 70s; so they still have their Irish accent. They consider my mother as an outsider and not one of them. So these differences shape me who I want to be and who I don’t want to be.

Money was always hard to come by for her family and she mentioned that the acceptance from the university was a “big deal” for her because her family did not have enough money to send her to an out-of-town university.

Although Jessica considered herself a “White Canadian,” in her high school, her Portuguese identity was “kind of a struggle” for her because of the perceptions of people in her school that all Portuguese girls were “obnoxious, overdramatic, and loud.” She also revealed that
she was often at the receiving end of racist jokes because of the image problem and low status of Portuguese students in the city’s secondary schools:

The Portuguese students have the highest dropout rate. Although there are reasons behind that; these students’ dads are construction workers and moms are secretaries. They drop out of high schools to do that, but I don’t want to be a secretary because they can only go so far.

Socially conscious and critically well-versed Liam said that despite his openness to diverse ethnic groups, in high school he “was always considered White by others.” He wished that he had an ethnicity to defend, though; being a White Canadian, he sometimes felt like he had no culture, no religion, and no ethnicity; “they add layers to people’s identity. I feel like shallower than some other people.” He also contradicted Ogbu’s (1987) assumption that educational success automatically came to him because of his skin colour:

Being a White male, I definitely come from a place of power and I can see it in many aspects of my education. In classes, males always spoke more than females. But on the same point, like being a White male, I kind of felt that I never had a place for which I was criticized. I felt that the education system failed many people but not because of their race or gender. Sometimes, I felt like I was the problem, you know.

Interviewer: “Why did you think that?

Probably because I felt that I was supposed to fit in but I didn’t.

Parental Support

There is an ongoing debate in educational literature about parental involvement in schools. Often the absence of working class and immigrant parents’ involvement in school
affairs is acknowledged in educational literature (for example, Lareau, 1987; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2009). Yet school teachers frequently brand middle class and affluent parents’ over-involvement in schools as demanding, militant, and “counterproductive when it increased the child’s anxiety level and produced negative learning experiences” (Lareau, 1987, p. 76; Peshkin, 2001).

None of the current study participants came from families where parents are high income professionals, such as, doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Except Sheila’s parents, no other parents maintained on-going contact with their child’s school. Students’ accounts painted separate lives of parents; they basically did not know what their teenagers were doing in high schools. Even Erika’s father who is an elementary teacher in the same school district was not involved; despite the fact that her parents belong to middle class and Scottish-Irish heritage, have more time and resources; they decided to stay away from their daughter’s high school. Although most parents were not that involved in schools, education was important to all of them. In case of immigrant parents, findings of the study support the research that not only were immigrant parents struggling financially (except Sheila’s parents), but also, often their lack of proficiency in English language and the Western education system prevented them from being involved in their children’s educational matters (see also Choy, 2001; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Raksit, 2012). Sheila summed up her immigrant parents’ difficulties because they were often unaware of how Canadian education worked: “My parents are from different backgrounds and their high schools were very different from mine. They didn’t know much about the Canadian system; they tried to help as much as they could.” During the focus group discussions and personal interviews, every student shared their parents’ stories and how his/her education was different from what his/her parents received years ago. Immigrant students compared their parents’ educational experiences
back in their own countries with the Canadian education system and expressed their appreciation for the education they received here. During the focus group discussions, Salma highlighted some important issues:

School was not a social thing for them (her parents); it was all about education.

**Interviewer:** That perhaps explained their reluctance to let you go to your school’s social events.

They had a lot more rules to follow; for example, I heard that my parents’ teachers used to check their fingernails. Finishing the school on time was also a big thing for my parents [Noor agreed and said that “in Iran it was a stigma, if one didn’t finish high school at certain age.”]. It is not a big deal here; if you take an extra year to finish high school or university.

All the participants said that they did their homework on their own. “My parents nagged me about doing my homework and studying. Beyond that, they weren’t really that involved,” echoed Liam. Although students received minimum support in their homework, both parents were there when students needed their help in parents’ nights, driving them around for extracurricular activities, and in proofreading their assignments. Strengthening the research findings that immigrant parents from Asia or India have faith in education; they put a great deal of significance on the school related work and academic achievement of their children (Gibson & Bhachu, 1991; Lee, 1994), Sheila talked about her accommodating home environment. For example, Sheila’s parents always came to her games. Her mom would drive her in the morning to the earliest game practices. “When we had to go abroad (for tournaments and field trips), she would always be there, like 4 in the morning. She would wake me up and make lunches, everything,” she said. Irrespective of whether they were immigrant or Canadian-born, all
participants mentioned that they made their decision to go to the academic program and later to university without any parental help.

Many immigrants are prepared to face challenges posed by a new and often strange land (Massey, 2005) because of their children; one of the push factors that drives immigrants toward strange lands is better opportunities for their children (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2007). Participants from low-income and immigrant families were well aware of the sacrifices their parents made for their children. “I knew about the sacrifice my parents made for our education; they left their homeland and their family because of me and my three brothers. I felt obligated to do well in school,” Noor reflected. Mehdi shared her parents’ struggle in life and the financial hardship they went through in a foreign land; she said that their stories motivated her to pursue higher education.

Participants’ accounts clearly indicated that all parents valued their children’s education. Although some parents did not have much exposure to the Canadian education system, all participants pointed out that their parents’ high hopes for them moved them forward. Knowingly or unknowingly, each of them associated educational success with the prospect of a better life. To Liam, at the later stage of his high school life, school was not necessary for his happiness and fulfillment. Yet his desire to learn and his parents’ insistence made him finish high school. His parents woke him up every morning and insisted “you’ve got to go to school . . . (long pause); and there was always that threat: I didn’t want life to be any harder for me than it already was.” The following comment of Erika illustrates how her own ambition, drive to succeed, and her parents’ regard for education, had helped her to come this far:

I looked forward to going to school because I was good at it. My mom never went to postsecondary school. She is lucky that she makes a lot of money. They (my
parents) never insisted that I become a doctor or lawyer; however, education matters to them. They just said that school is important in order to get a good job. I always knew that in order to be successful, you had to do well in high school. Success is important to me. I like to be noted [for] what I do right and feel accomplished.

**Language Politics and Immigrant Families**

Lack of fluency in English language can be a significant obstacle in immigrant children’s educational achievement (Fuligni, 1998). Some of them come from families where English is not the medium of communication. Noor’s parents are newcomers and have little expertise in English language and limited knowledge of Western education. However, her father tried to support her as much as he could. Her father allowed her to do group work with boys at his home and left it to her sole discretion whether to wear hijab or not. Noor had mixed views about the support she received from her high school. She explained the difficulties she experienced initially to adjust with the new Canadian school life:

I came here in Grade 9; when I couldn’t speak a word of English. So that year had a profound impact on me; as you can understand it was a very difficult year for me. I ended up in ESL classes.

Studies show that because of the difficulty in mastering the English language, ESL learners become virtually extinct from the high school world in the early years (Watt & Roessingh, 2001). Yet Noor managed to overcome her difficulties by becoming involved with many extracurricular activities and clubs. Although a success story, because she finally earned the affirmation, she complained about the racism she faced in school as a Muslim girl. Her hijab, religion, and ethnic culture were under constant scrutiny (Raksit, 2010). Her story is a timely reminder that some students in our school system constantly struggle to be “accepted and
valued” and that “schools are saturated with practices of discrimination, privilege, and hierarchy” (Purpel, 2007, p. x). Noor’s account confirmed when it comes to dealing with newcomers/immigrants, teachers could sometimes be very inflexible and to some extent, even insensitive.

We came here on September 1. It was already late and I had to wait for my assessment. So I started school a little late. On my first day in high school, the French teacher gave me a test. And I ended up getting a zero on that test.

Yet Mehdi obtained moderate support from both her school and family. She said that she wanted to teach but unsure of whether to teach in high school or elementary school. Salma was the only student who was vague about her future career path. Compared to other students, Salma received very limited support from home because of her parents’ long working hours and frequent absence from home. Her foreign-born parents still are not that comfortable speaking in English, either. She and her family predominantly socialize with the Kurdish people in Toronto. She brought to my attention that “Kurdish people are not professionals and most are in blue collar jobs.” Therefore, she neither had the family support nor the social network available to her to make a clear career decision.

Class and Education:
The Nexus

Jessica touched on another important issue, that she and her cousins were the first generation who had the opportunity to go to university. She said that it certainly was a big deal for the Portuguese side of her family:

My grandparents even paid for the first year of my university. So when I told them about my new career plan (open a bake shop), they were really disappointed;
they were asking me “but aren’t you going to be a doctor”? It’s a big deal because that option wasn’t available to them or their kids.

Jessica explained her struggle to talk to her grandparents and parents about the difficulty and culture shock she has been experiencing in the university classes: “What they don’t understand is that the university and its transition are difficult. They don’t understand that in high school we didn’t have that many reading assignments.” Studies indicate that when members of the family have no college experience, they often fail to provide any help to college going students; first generation college students have to take all college related decisions on their own; they generally do not take the right courses; and often are puzzled by the perplexities of college world (Choy, 2001; Grayson, 2011; McDonough, 1997).

Furthermore, lack of financial resources can colour students’ schooling experiences. DiMaggio’s (1982) work confirms that students who are frequent visitors of art galleries and museums outperform in academic tests. Bourdieu’s (1984) ground breaking research establishes the correspondence between the power of money and cultural capital; a central focus of Bourdieu’s work is to find the nexus between culture and social class. Social class and one’s hierarchical position in a stratified political economy marked by low-status occupation, education and income affect people’s life chances (Grubb, 2000). Jessica echoed Bourdieu (1984) and her following comment reopened the argument that in a class-divided society, unequal access to cultural dispositions and broadening of mind were indicators of underlying class distinctions:

When I hear other kids, I know that we never were well off to afford summer camps or expensive field trips. We never travelled; once we had a long drive to Nova Scotia and that was a financial burden for my parents.
Jessica’s above narration hit home since I found out in another work that the cost of travel, and students’ socioeconomic constraints were major impediments for students of one high school to participate in the school’s student exchange project with Denmark: “The project, therefore, was not prevalent among minority and poor students” (Raksit, 2006, p. 229).

**Discussion**

An overriding theoretical underpinning of the paper is that class, race, ethnicity, and students’ identities are socially constructed overlapping processes that are closely tied to one another. Findings of the study indicate that students’ individual identities as individual-social-collective entities constantly shaped and were shaped by the education system. I problematised the crux of the educational equity matters (see Chapter 8) by identifying participants’ multiple social locations based on their class, race and ethnicity and how those could affect the study participants’ opportunities in life. I also recognized pride, uniqueness, and discomfort in students’ voices and critically analyzed how inequity could manifest in schools. My aim in bringing the young people’s accounts to the educational arena was to holistically describe the subjective experiences of participating students. Toward this end, I often looked for “different and often competing ways of understanding” (Cheal, 1991, p. 49) students’ stories about their family practices. The above stories clearly indicated that family served an important purpose in students’ smooth transition or not to high schools’ worlds. Students’ candid views often reflected the multiple truths and highlighted the relative aspects of their experiences. Like many other Canadian young people, the study participants (also international student Lee) valued their parents’ help and guidance (see also Sears, Simmering, & McNeil, 2007).

The results of the study have significance for policy and practice. First, it is important to recognize that the study participants truly represented diversity and difference in terms of class,
race, ethnicity, language use at home, and immigration status (first or second generation). Participants’ accounts reflected an uneven playing field; when they hierarchically lined up their racial and ethnic status; they defined their ethnic identities as a way to locate themselves and “their relationship to the social system at large and to others in it . . . . One may perceive oneself as inferior or superior in relations to others” (Breton et al., 1990, p. 11).

Three White students’ versions on Whiteness confirmed that there were grey areas to consider while looking at race privileges; one’s race is not a “distinctive, bounded and internally unified entity” (Keddie, 2011, p. 136). The fact that students brought class to the discussion table over and over during the focus group and interview sessions demonstrated that class still occupied prominence: “class does not disappear just because traditional ways of life fade away” (Beck, 1998, p. 99). Some study participants’ standing on class is interesting, considering the fact that social class difference does not often exist in Canadians’ collective psychic. Canadians love to believe that their hard work will be paid off and rewarded in the meritocratic Canadian society, if not today, but tomorrow for sure; in general, they also hate to acknowledge that class factors influence a great deal their opportunity structures and educational attainment; “most Canadians have expressed greater ethnic/nationalist consciousness than class consciousness” (see Livingstone & Managan, 1996, p. 7; see also Wanner, 2004). However, Livingstone and Managan’s (1996) study, conducted in Hamilton, a steel town in Ontario, begins by demystifying the myth that majorities in the developed countries, for example, in Canada belong to the “middle class.”

Despite some study participants’ clear focus on class, all of them associated their educational success and university education as a vehicle of social mobility, increased earning potential, and endless possibilities, despite the evidence that there is very little correspondence
with education, income, and social mobility; education alone cannot deliver economic growth and prosperity (see Bowles & Guintis, 1977; Wanner, 2004).

The stories of Mehdi, Noor, and Jessica confirm that preferential treatment and labelling are not so strange in North American society; although they manifest in subtler forms. Opportunity structures for marginalized students will often be blocked until schools accept and understand ethnic minority students’ and their parents’ differences as being the postmodern norm and recognize our diverse school communities’ dissonance from the very modern characteristics of unity and order (Furman, 1998). For example, Noor’s “self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5) when she decided to wear hijab in Canada. Her different lifestyle choice was significant in a meshed world of local and global in which “tradition loses its hold” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). Schools need to ensure that young girls like Noor who chose to wear hijab, ought to be left alone. It was hard to understand why Noor’s choice to wear hijab could create so much uproar in a multicultural and global city like Toronto. Noor’s story about her ESL teacher reflected what Young (1990, p. 59) portrays as, “the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture and its establishment as the norm.”

Participants’ rich stories about their parents’ and families’ cultural capital led me to believe that working class and immigrant families’ “thinking and acting capacities” were ignored by dominant social institutions (Livingstone & Sawchuck, 2000, pp. 122–123; also see Lareau, 1987). The findings of the study clearly illustrated that students were not the passive recipients of their families’ or schools’ norms. I find the lack of agency troublesome in Bourdieu's (1984) account of cultural capital; therefore, I did not view young people as the passive carriers of their parents’ cultural capital (Connell et al., 1982), either (see Chapter 8). There may be an elitist bias inherent in Bourdieu's European sociological roots.
More research is needed to understand the implications of cultural capital for the so-called culturally marginal students in North America (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural capital can be considered as informal knowledge that affluent and middle class parents pass on to their children in order to maintain the status quo and their upper class advantage. Later expanding on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, McDonough (1997) located cultural capital in students’ choices for higher education and prestigious schools that are directly or indirectly planted in their mindset by parents. Erika’s story was a clear indication that parental exposure to students’ educational and chosen career paths could benefit them in making informed educational and career decisions.

There is no shortage of literature in education about the importance of parental involvement in school matters and in their children’s education, such as homework. There is very little acknowledgement, however, that parental support comes in many shapes and forms. Students’ stories in this paper confirmed that other than Sheila’s mother, all other parents stayed away from schools. Practically all students finished their homework on their own. Their success in the academic program and ultimate arrival in higher education substantiated Fine’s (1993, p. 684) argument that “Parental involvement is necessary but not sufficient to produce improved student outcomes.” Furthermore, Nieto and Bode (2008, p. 260) have rightly looked at parents’ school involvement from a cultural perspective “There may be different perceptions of family involvement among immigrant parents”; in many countries, parental involvement in their children’s schools are minimal; parents take it for granted that it is the school’s responsibility to educate their teenagers. During the focus group discussion in this study, immigrant participants also discussed how their parents had different expectation of schooling.
4 out of 8 participants talked about one (in some cases two) of their parents’ long-time or chronic unemployment and the heartache and anxiety it caused for the young people from low-income families. The story of Mehdi’s mother reminded me that it was equally a struggle of women; she has been wrestling with the job loss of her husband and paying the family bills with her single income. Canada did not appear to be protected from the worldwide unemployment trend. Harsh economic realities in the midst of massive closures of businesses, layoffs, pay cuts, mortgage foreclosures, struck a chord with some of us that how hard people have had to fight for the most basic necessities of life – jobs, housing, and a quintessential search for a decent living in a strange land. The study found that parents were left with the responsibilities of their young people’s welfare even when some of the parents were out of job and frequently in-between jobs.

Some of the participants specifically mentioned how financial constraints posed additional challenges in their lives and school work, because they had to work hours in order to compensate for their parents’ cash flow problem. Not only were they forced to be financially independent at an early age, but also learned to be there for their families’ financial needs. Narratives of Mehdi, Jessica, and to some extent, Liam, evidently called for a new look at the harsh division between the rich and low-income families and a new materialistic interpretation of urban lives in today’s global cities. Despite the struggles they were going through, participants’ voices were not bitter because they recognized that their parents worked in factories as labourers, in gruelling hot kitchens, and drove trucks so that they could be in high schools. Yet some of their voices betrayed that emotional alignment as Jessica and Liam talked about their tense relations with their fathers.

Participants’ in-depth accounts of their families forced me to take a second look at family as a context that could block or open up students’ educational opportunities. Yet, what made
those former high school students overcome all the barriers and arrive at a prestigious university’s doorstep for higher education? Mehdi’s insightful reflection could provide a clue; having a better life opportunity was definitely a driving force behind Mehdi’s decision to continue with higher education. Some scholars also describe her determination to stay in school as a “proving process” (Griffin, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2002, as cited in Kimura-Walsh, 2009, p. 254). She said:

Seeing how my parents struggled in life, especially in terms of money matters motivated me to go back to school every day. My parents faced stress after stress simply to make the ends meet. I don’t want that kind of a life. I want to do better.

Perhaps more studies are needed to explore some participants’ resilience to overcome barriers. And perhaps researchers need to pay close attention to the struggling worlds of marginal students’ academic lives. Albeit Jessica, Salma, and Mehdi managed to arrive at the university, their arrival was not easy by any means.

Summary

In this chapter, a detailed examination of how participant lives were entrenched in their families is discussed. In the family section, the 8 divided subsections of privileged SES families, low SES families, juggling acts and unpaid work, White identities, parental support, language politics and immigrant families, and class and education are designed to show families’ roles in students’ lives, ultimately their significance on students’ educational experiences, and show the similarities and differences in students’ experiences based on the intersection of their class, race, and ethnicity. However, the focus of the study was on students and their identities and the study found that young people often had their own plans/aspirations different from their parents that were gained from their ever-changing process of identity formation (see Coleman and Hendry,
developed in different contexts of families, neighbourhoods, peers, and schools. In Chapter 7, we will see how young people negotiate with the cultural expectations of parents and how the days of adolescence are also shaped by their class, race, and ethnicity.
Chapter 6
Living Multiple Worlds:
High School Peers Resurfaced

The adolescent is dumped into a society of peers, a society whose habitats are the halls and classrooms of the school, the teen-age canteens, the corner drugstore, the automobile, and numerous other gathering places. Consequently, the non-occupational training the parents once gave to their children via “natural processes” has been taken out of their hands as well, not by the school teachers – many of whom are dismayed at the thought of having to take over parental functions – but by those very social changes that segregated adolescents into a society of their own. (Coleman, 1963, p. 4)

Coleman’s profound depiction above signifies how peers’ omnipresence in high school and their approvals or disapprovals are keys to adolescents’ identity development and schooling experiences. Coleman and Hendry’s British study (1990, p. 138) explains that as teenagers begin to develop their separate social identities and independence from their families, peers become significant points of reference: “Adolescents are influenced by each other in important ways, in learning social skills and strategies on the road to adulthood.” Coleman’s (1963, p. 9) classic study also pays attention to the subculture of high school adolescents, “a set of small teen-age societies, which focus teen-age interests and attitudes on things far removed from adult responsibilities,” as adolescents’ school days are consumed with peers sans parental supervision or restriction (Conchas, 2002). Peshkin (2001, p. 24) agrees that peers can serve as adolescents’ support systems “As models, norm setters, and definers of what is cool . . . are a central factor in the interactions that create acceptable options.” Young people who can form profound and meaningful relationships with their peers are better prepared to face life as adults (Giordano, 2003).
Peers are significant parts of adolescents’ lives with whom they feel they can share everything (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 2002). Peers are also linked to students’ higher school achievements and positive feelings about schools, and even are a significant part of students’ course selection (Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, Frank, & Muller, 2008; Ryan, 2001). All 8 participants in this study additionally described peers as very important significant others in their lives. When we talk about peers, we talk about the commonalities of people’s status; for this study, participants’ age groups (18–22), their class, race, and ethnicity, corresponding eight school locations, and the academic stream were considered. “For adolescents, their friends tend to be peers – people who are about their age.” Needless to say, not all peers are considered friends. Friends are those with whom young people “develop a valued mutual relationship” (Arnett, 2004, p. 236). Any adult who frequents high school knows that keeping friendship means more to adolescents than staying on teachers’ good side. Although I use the word peer consistently in this chapter, study participants used the term friends. In the next few pages, I try to demystify the myth that adolescents’ peers are a homogeneous group.

This chapter also deals with students’ relationships with their peers and the different identities developed from the self-contained world of peers beyond students’ families, and their peers’ influences on students’ educational experiences. Findings of the study suggested that students’ friendship choices were entangled with the complex web of class, race, ethnicity, social capital, and program specificity in high schools.

**Participants and Their Peers:**

**Differing Views on Similarity**

The focus of the data analysis on students’ peers was similarity, in terms of their academic orientation, class, ethnicity, and social capital. So the theme of my data analysis was
very different from Coleman (1990), who never considered above factors for students’ friendship choices; and the angle of my data analysis clearly went far beyond Rosenbaum’s (1976) preference for “social structure of the school track system” (p. 156). Studies suggest that people in general, and young people in particular, prefer to be with peers who are similar to them (Luo, et al., 1995; Rose, 2002). Especially, since all participants in this study came from academic programs, a significant issue was if streaming had anything to do with their friendship choices or their leading roles in extracurricular activities (Kelly, 1996; Rosenbaum, 1976). Although the focus of the analysis was on similarity, each participant of the study touched on something different when they talked about what was similar about him/her and his/her friends. For example, Jessica summed up the similarity aspects that brought her and her friends closer and emphasized on the time those friends from the same academic program spent together: “We were a group of friends who would hang out together, go out together, and have lunch together; and we were West-enders” (from the West end of Toronto). Just like her, her friends were “financially disadvantaged, White, and Catholic.” She added that four of them even used to go home together.

Except Mehdi, none of the other participants talked about fashion and their popularity in high school. Yet when I asked Mehdi what made her become friends with some teenagers in a school with predominantly Black students, she decided to talk about their preference for popular teenage culture and leisure activities:

Fashion and shopping were common. We listened to the same music: hip hop and R & B. We were the popular kids in school; we liked the same kind of guys: If he looked good or had the right pair of shoes.
Liam touched on the “interesting” shift of his gender preference in friends; most of his friends in middle school were White females; while most of his friends in high school were White males: “I would socialize with some Indian or Asian people, but they were more of acquaintances.” I appreciated Liam’s candid comment, but found it intriguing that even though his gender inclination in choosing friends changed in high school, his race preference remained the same.

Contrary to Liam’s claim that his high school friends were White, Erika said that her high school friends were from many ethnic backgrounds, Ukrainian, Indian, and Italian. Despite her admission that she was “more neurotic” “more controlling” than her friends, she said:

We are all very loud and opinionated. I am very abrasive and I don’t shy away from confrontation... We all have each other in common and same groups of boyfriends.

Although Sheila touched on the similarity aspects, she decided to focus on the multifaceted features of similarity with her private school peers, such as, race, program specificity, and the increasing gap between the second-generation students from immigrant families and the newcomers:

I went to a pretty small private high school near Pleasantville. It was a university-prep school with very academic and competitive students. Everyone was so focused; if I didn’t have to go university, I pretty much had no business to be there. It was a very diverse school; we had a large population of Korean and Chinese students. But I never associated with them because they kept to themselves pretty much in our school’s huge ESL classes. In fact, there was a particular hallway that was populated by Asian kids. Although I had South Asian friends, my close friends were White.
Class, Academic Orientation, Ethnicity, and Social Capital as Factors Choosing Peers

Erika and Sheila, who were from solid middle class and affluent backgrounds, mentioned about having high schools peers who were privileged and academically successful; how they clearly gained academic knowledge from their peers (see Bourdieu, 1984). Unlike Jessica and Mehdi, whose peers were from low-income backgrounds, Erika and particularly, Sheila talked about her peers from comfortable and privileged backgrounds, “Those of us who went to Trinity (not the real name), were all privileged. But some were more privileged and well off than others. None of us were struggling; we all had our cars.” Sheila’s peers were extremely goal oriented and focused; she even called her female peers “overachievers. Sometimes, it was hard to be with them. But they had a lot of influence in our high school life.” Unlike Mehdi’s peers (see below), Sheila and Erika’s peers did not raise their parents’ eyebrows. Sheila and her peers “were also close to each other’s family.” Sheila did not hesitate to add that her peers were more academic and ambitious than her and without her peers, she would not be here today: “They knew what they wanted from life; they will get somewhere.” Erika could not agree more about her peers from the academic program, “We were all pretty driven, determined, and we knew what we wanted.”

Very much like Sheila, Erika said that she spent a significant amount of time in her peers’ (including her boyfriend’s house) houses. However, she said that not all parents were as welcoming as her parents:

I always prefer to have friends in my house; just because I like being home and because my parents are very open to them; they have no problem of people coming over, staying for dinner, or staying late. That’s not always the case with some other parents.
McDonough (1997) analyzed students’ access to higher education and sustained success from the dynamics of one’s class. For example, Jessica’s generation is the first in her family to go to university and her account went hand in hand with McDonough’s findings that academic world of first generation university bound students from low socioeconomic background was not always congruent with the world of their peers. As we saw in Chapter 5, Jessica who came from a low-income family, resonated with Bourdieu (1984) that she was never exposed to world travel or expensive field trips. Not so hidden from Jessica’s narration was the cultural capital gap between her and some of her classmates.

Jessica also admitted that some of her friends were academically more successful than her, “I was always surrounded by girls who got better marks than I did and they did it much easier than I did,” she said. For example, one of her friends got a full scholarship for a 4-year engineering program, which she acknowledged was beyond her reach.

**Program Specificity**

Some researchers (Kelly, 1996; Rosenbaum, 1976) are critical of academic students’ exclusive choice of peers as they seldom “intermingle with students in other peer groups.” The boundaries between high achieving academic (such as IB, gifted, and advanced) and non-academic students are “rigid and impenetrable” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 231).

Other than Noor, Lee, and Mehdi, 5 participants talked about having peers from the same academic classes. They all admitted that they had very little communication with students from other programs. They were clearly divided by schools’ structural arrangement of classes, tracking, and the academic culture. Erika pointed out that there was so much division among academic, IB, applied, ESL, and French immersion students in her high school (see also Chapter 8). Here was what Erika had to say about her peers from the IB program:
My first groups of friends were all IB . . . . There were never any new people. I had been with the same people for years. You go through the same experience, stress level, anxiety, same classes, and same teachers. There was no possibility for intermingling. Who you were friends with really depended on your elementary school and the program.

Unlike Mehdi (see above), Liam decided to talk about the exclusive paradigmatic boundaries of academic students; which I knew from my personal learning experience as an occasional secondary school teacher that other non-academic students branded as the predictable domain of “geek-club”:

Most of my friends and I didn’t like to be spoon-fed. We wanted to learn things on our own. We enjoyed the same things like sports and video games. We were kind of rebellious. We liked to challenge the school and the status quo. Most of my friends used to think out of the box in terms of their writing and presentation, incorporating a bit of themselves and their life experiences with irony and humour. It was kind of a fun. It was a good way of making school fun. Teachers understood that they were our ways of expressing frustration with boredom. Boredom was a killer. We were also comfortable with skipping classes sometimes.

The above view supported what Rosenbaum (1976, p. 163) summed up as the general perception of others about academic students:

College-track students are characterized as smart or “brains” by more than half of those responding as hard workers by more than a third, these descriptions being offered by a substantial number of respondents from each track. College-track students are also characterized as “snobs” and as “conformists” by one-sixth of the respondents.

Putting the onus on his school’s spatial arrangement, Liam said that his peers were from the academic program and it was impossible for academic students to spend time with other
students; this conformist view of Liam somewhat contradicted what he just quoted before about the “rebellious” nature of him and his friends:

We were always in the common spaces, in the same classrooms. It seemed more sense to mingle with people who you have to be in contact with on a regular basis rather than with the people on the hallways who you never met before in classrooms.

Liam also said that he was aware of the differences between academic and applied students. Some of his peers had the negative attitudes toward applied students and their much talked about intellectual inferiority. Therefore, streaming not only influences the pedagogical outcomes, but also students’ selection of peers and intermingling in school (Rosenbaum, 1976). During the focus group discussion, Erika clearly demonstrated that her intensity for academic learning made her impatient of not-so successful students who used to cut or disturb classes. She was very vocal about disruptive students, “Sometimes I can’t stand kids who waste my time. If you don’t want to learn, don’t come to the class.” The above findings were consistent with Rosenbaum’s work that described non-academic students as “unmotivated” (or “lazy,” “goof-offs,” or “don’t care about school”) by more than half of the respondents, as negativistic (trouble-making or tough) by more than one-third, and as not very smart (or stupid) by more than one-quarter. In fact, Erika’s above comments sounded more like a frustrated teacher in the staffroom than like a student who just graduated from high school.

Scholars argue that peer influence can work as cultural capital, specifically for academic and university bound students (McDonough, 1997; Peshkin, 2001). Both Sheila and Erika credited their peers in high school for where they were today. “My high school friends shaped who I am today,” clarified Sheila. Erika went to the extent of saying that without her high school
peers, “I will talk differently, dress differently, have a different boyfriend; I will be completely different in my values, pretty much.”

**Ethnic Affinity**

While 5 participants discussed their close contact with academic peers, Lee and Noor, who arrived in Toronto a few years ago, talked about their struggle to learn the English language and how that often made them feel like outsiders and their clear choice of peers from their own community. Noor said that she was looking for Iranian students since the first day in her high school because she could share things with them:

I had nine high school friends, all were from Iran. But out of the nine, I was close to three girls. They weren’t from the academic program. We were friends because we shared the common culture and tradition. At the same time, our personalities matched; we were all outgoing; we all liked to hang out.

Also “outgoing” Lee, who had a very nice way of presenting herself in terms of her fashion statement, cultivated Canadian accent, and her confident manners, talked not so confidently about her lack of English language proficiency when she arrived here and said that her high school “peers were the reason” why she went to school and her high school friends were “mostly Korean.” She met them through other Korean friends and they were often from different schools. They are no longer that important in her life, “I just became friends with them to look cool among the Korean society. Right now, I barely talk to friends that I had during high school years.”

Noor’s high school assigned a peer mentor for her who could speak her language. She described him as a bully who used to swear at her every morning in Iranian language; she could not talk to anyone about it because of her difficulty in English language and because she was
afraid that he might “retaliate if he knew about it.” Noor, however, was grateful to this peer mentor because:

He kind of helped me in the biggest way possible. Looking back, I think I owe him to some extent; because if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be what I am today. I think I got stronger after that. The school gave me a locker just beside him so that he could look after me. He would swear at me every morning in Iranian language; sometimes, the four letter word he was using wasn’t even familiar to me. I would be like “Ha! What!”

Noor also claimed that she was the one who kept her groups of Iranian female peers together by keeping contact with everyone and organizing everybody’s birthday. In her view, the common thing that held her peers and her together was the fact that they came from the same culture and religion: “Even when we went out together, we would talk about the people we knew who were from the same community or the country. We also shared the same political views.”

Even Sheila whose closest peers were White said that her family friends and their kids (mostly Indians) were her friends outside the school. So when I asked her about what she looked for in her ethnic friends, she reflected that she needed them for balance:

I need an outsider’s opinion, because sometime, you can get caught up in your school and can only focus on that community and not think about everything as a whole and how it affects other things. And you need that outsider to step in and evaluate what’s important for you. For example, one of my best friends, Paul helped me through with my little issues. Friends outside school also helped me to get break from kids in the school; sometime they were too much to deal with.

Salma also said that she had Kurdish friends outside of high school.
Social Capital

Despite scholars’ usual silence on this topic, peers, along with parents, can also be an important source of social capital (Conchas, 2002). Some scholars use social capital or useful resources (such as, help, information, and tough love or the right amount of control) gained from social networks to investigate the contribution of family and peers in students’ educational success (Clasen & Brown, 1985; Coleman, 1963, 1988; Conchas, 2002). Students from immigrant and low-income families depend more on their peers than their parents for education related assistance and information (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). In Chapter 5, I mentioned that students from immigrant families (for example, Sheila and Noor) talked about their parents’ lack of knowledge about the Canadian education system, which prevented them from depending on parents for homework, course selection, and university-related information.

In this study, different participants talked differently about their peer networks. As discussed above, some experienced supportive relationships with their peers because their peers served as their mentors, lighting rods, and sounding board and “provided encouragement and information throughout their high school lives” (see Kimura-Walsh, 2009, p. 245). However, Mehdi who was from a school with many Black students, talked about having peers who were not destined to be university bound. So her peers were not able to assist her in academic decision-making. Apart from her only one White friend, she was the other one who came to university. Her Black high school peers remained behind, she admitted that “our focus was different; they weren’t that focused then; they aren’t as focused now, either.” Her Black peers could not support her with right kind of networking and information needed for academic success. It is worth mentioning here that Mehdi took a few years more to reach the university. Sometimes, the collision between adolescents’ two worlds of family and peers is possible if
parents stress on academic achievement and peers “devalue good grades” (Phelan et al., 1991, p. 227). Mehdi mentioned her mother’s disappointment with her peers; her mother was very sceptical about her high school friends “because they were not ambitious and goal-oriented people. I was the one who was always saying that we had to go to university.”

Summary

In this chapter, the 8 university students from diverse backgrounds described their high school peers and their influences on students’ educational experiences. The focus of the data analysis was on similarity, in terms of students’ class, race, academic orientation or program specificity, ethnic affinity, and social capital. Findings of the study suggest that very much like students’ experience with their families, students’ views about their peers were class, race, and ethnicity specific. While Erika and Sheila, who were from solid middle class and affluent backgrounds, talked about having friends in high school who were ambitious, strong, and academically motivated. Others were not that sure; their peer network had limited influence on their academic decision making.
Paradoxically capital has fallen in love with difference; advertising thrives on selling us things that will enhance our uniqueness and individuality. It's no longer about keeping up with Joneses, it's about being different from them. From World Music to exotic holidays in Third World locations, ethnic tv dinners to Peruvian knitted hats, cultural difference sells. This is the ‘difference’ of commodity relations, the particular experience of time and space produced by transnational capital. In the commodification of language and culture, objects and images are torn free of their original referents and their meanings become a spectacle open to almost infinite translation. Difference ceases to threaten, or to signify power relations. Otherness is sought after for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrills and adventures it can offer. The power relation is closer to tourism than imperialism, an expropriation of meaning rather than materialism. (Rutherford, 1990, p. 11)

The quandaries of identities can take on a different meaning, as synthesized in these reflections on race and marginality by Caroline Hwang, the daughter of Korean immigrants. . . “My identity is hardly clear-cut. To my parents I am all American. . . I identify with Americans, but Americans do not identify with me. I’ve never known what it’s like to belong to a community. I know more about Europe than the continent my ancestors unmistakably came from. By making the biggest move of their lives for me, my parents indentured me to the largest debt imaginable – I owe them the fulfillment of their hopes for me. Children of immigrants are living paradoxes. We are the first generation and the last. When my parents boarded the plane, I don’t think they imagined the rocks in the path of their daughter who can’t even pronounce her own name.” (Portes & Rambaut, 2001, p. 191)

Canada is considered “one of the most ethnoculturally diverse countries in the world” (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 1). Sociocultural diversity is a fact of Canadian life that is prominent in public schools, universities, offices, and public spaces, especially, in a so-called “global city” like Toronto. Historically, Canada has often been branded as a salad-bowl nation, a many-folded whole in which ethnic subcultural practices are omnipresent. Giddens (1991, p. 5), however, captures the essence of the contradictory and unifying/dividing nature of this diversity:
It is in many ways a single world, having a unitary framework of experience (for instance, in respect of basic axes of time and space), yet at the same time one which creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal.

Rutherford’s above articulation can stand side by side with what Davis (1996, p. 41) calls “diversity management” and the salad-bowl commercial view of difference or what we call song-and-dance multiculturalism in Canada. Although, many scholars welcome the widespread diversity in Canada and the paradoxes that stem from this “sociological garden” and its “extraordinarily rich and complex environment” (Satzewich & Liodakis, 2007, p. XI), the notion of multiculturalism is often contested. The evolution of Canadian multiculturalism is also related to what Rutherford is saying above; while the old multiculturalism was a private issue; today it is widely acknowledged that immigrants can publicly share and promote their cultural pluralism and identities, language, religion, and heritage as social processes and group rights (Buzzelli, 2001; Quadeer, 2004). Erickson (1990, p. 34), on the other hand, extends Rutherford’s argument and is critical of the above artifact-based notion of diverse cultures and the cosmetic relevance of them: “A serious danger lies in treating culture traits in isolation, fragmenting and trivializing our understanding of people’s lifeways as we freeze them outside time, outside a world of struggle in concrete history.”

Caroline Hwang’s testimony (Portes & Rambaut, 2001) quoted in the epigraph to this chapter can very much become an example of “concrete history.” Phoenix (1998, p. 868) considers the above conundrum of diversity from another perspective that reduces multiculturalism into the three S’s of sari, samosas and steel bands and reflects that “parading other people’s cultures for consumption leaves one’s own unexamined” and, hence, suggests that it is possible to sum up a culture in a few statements.
Celebrating differences often becomes the focal point of multicultural societies; on the contrary, individuals’ self-identity can also be a form of responsibility and compels us to consider subjectivity in terms of citizenship. In this chapter, therefore, students not only talked about their identities and the complex manners they manage their daily lives in a multifaceted world through recollections of negotiation with parents, leisure activities, high school learner identities and to some extent, daily lives during the high school years, but also their connection with multicultural Canada that raised the disconnect between the ideals and realities in Canada’s multicultural visions.

As we saw in the literature review; the City of Toronto is now overpopulated with immigrants or strangers who are uprooted from their homelands (Massey, 2005). Participants’ views are analyzed in this chapter through the cultural dimensions of their identities in order to understand the relational aspects of young people and the social contexts of their schooling; the study participants were from ethnic minority groups. In general, educational studies neglect to include marginal voices often “reinscribing” their ethnic minority status. I did not try to understand the study participants’ ethnic identities as homogeneous entities, which Turner (1993) argues as an essentialist and reductionist sociological device that often views culture as the possession of an ethnic group (Keddie, 2011, pp. 133–136). Identity is viewed here critically as a phenomenon that is formed by the everyday social experiences of teenagers and in terms of relations. So I paid extensive attention to teenagers’ everyday experiences: “What they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences, and how they themselves structure the world in which they live” (Psathas, 1973, author’s own emphases).

Considering participants’ diverse identities (see Chapter 4) and different perspectives, in this chapter, I also try to make sense of the topsy-turvy urban world, where diversity is often a
perplexity; despite the fact that the discourse of cultural identity, multiculturalism, and immigration gained currency in recent years. Canadian high schools, in effect, have become “the site of difference” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 10) with students from diverse culture, language, and ethnicity. Indeed, studying high school students is a “way to understand the nation” (Olsen, 1997, p. 14). High schools and their education are considered as the processes “of individual becoming” and also where students negotiate their places and futures, (Goodlad, 1979, p. 37); and connect with others from the larger community. Through civic participation, volunteering, and informed decision making, students form a critical account of their sense of belonging within the nation they are growing up. In this chapter, former high school students’ accounts are not only depicted from their relative individual and positional aspects, but also from how research participants’ translate their cultural identities, and connect to the complex web of the national “Canadian identification” (Ghosh, 1996, p. 4). North American education systems, in Canada and United States can be examples here. The fundamental goal of education in both countries has always been the “transmission of the dominant culture, involving assimilation for those who were different” (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 6). Ghosh and Abdi’s above work provides a comprehensive discussion on Canadian multiculturalism and its paradigm shift from the assimilation model, and their implications for the education system: Educators need to understand the “complexities and dynamics” of their students’ identities which have correspondence with their class, colour, and cultures, and are “embedded in history” (p. 8). Families are also considered by recent studies as strong indicators of adolescents’ sense of citizenship; parents play a key role in how their children participate in their national affairs (Kahne & Spote, 2008; Lauglo & Oia, 2008).
In many ways, this chapter is my effort to understand the complexity of participants’ identities in terms of structure and agency. Especially, when the focus group discussants started to talk about what Canada meant to them; as mentioned in the method chapter, I had to add a new interview question; what Canada meant to the 7 study participants (Lee did not have to answer that question because of her status as an international student). In the last three chapters, I examined how the young people described their relationships with the family, neighbourhood, and peers. This chapter, however, deals with the study participants’ identities and their interpretation of their social identities. Social identities are formed by one’s social knowledge; social knowledge or doxa is defined by one’s everyday experience, belief system, and one’s cultural knowledge; the politics of representation always colour people’s social knowledge and identities; writes Rata (2012, p. 105):

Accordingly, people of different ethnicities and races, different religions and beliefs or different cultures and histories are also different in their understanding of the world – in their “knowledges,” “ways of knowing” and “world views.” This is undoubtedly true for those beliefs that remain as uncontested and unchanging ideas about the nature of humans and our world, that is, beliefs that remain as the group’s social knowledge.

In this chapter, I will explore the possibility of young people’s negotiations with the three identities. First, the subjectivity that is an extension of the 8 young people’s cultural identities gained from their families’ class, race, and ethnicity or home culture; this part deals with the 8 participants’ interpretation of their cultural identities or a sense of who they are. Second, how the accounts of urban participants interpret Canada’s multiculturalism. The third and final part deals with the 7 (again, international student Lee was excluded) young people’s views about their place in multicultural Canada. The second and third part concentrate on whether young people’s social construction of what Canada is – coloured by their European or non-European ancestry,
multiple worlds, social inequality, the reality of a stratified Canadian society, and by the “boundary concept” (see Ball et al., 2000, p. 43) of inclusion and exclusion. While the first part of the chapter deals with participants’ core cultural identities or what they are, the second and third part shed light on what participants “have become”; becoming is as much related to the “future as much as to the past” (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Bourdieu’s (1984) and Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) paradigm of “habitus” also can provide guidance on how the 7 participants from seven different schools (international student Lee was not included) understood their relations with the wider structures, personal biographies, and agencies to connect with the nation.

Part I: Cultural Identity

In this chapter, participants’ identities or their sense of life are understood through their “meaningful expression” (Taylor, 1989, p. 18). Cultural identity of who I am is informed by who we are; culture is learned, shared, and transmitted to the next generation (Hall, 1992). Identity should be construed as somewhat “created in response to a set of circumstances (see Ball et al., 2000; Tsolidis, 1996, p. 276, cited in Ball et al., 2000). Cultural identity, therefore, is a socially and historically constructed phenomenon; the “discourses of adolescence are structured by social class, culture” (Brannen, 1996, p. 117; Hall, 1992; Phoenix, 1998). Taylor (1989, p. 39) also takes into account the authenticity of young people’s stance “but the very possibility of this is enframed in a social understanding of great temporal depth, in fact, in a tradition.” Following Nieto’s (1998, p. 421) suggestion, I tried to understand all the 8 participants’ cultural identities as “dynamic rather than fixed, as process instead of just content, and as historically and socially contextualized rather than insulated.” However, for systemic analysis of the data, I grouped and unpacked the study participants’ accounts into three cultural realms, mainstream (Liam, Erika,
and Jessica), hybrid (Jessica, Sheila, and Mehdi); Jessica belonged in both mainstream and hybrid since I considered Jessica’s White and mainstream identity as hybrid because of her often talked about dual identity as Portuguese/Irish; and finally marginal (Noor, Salma, and Lee). At the same time, the emphasis was on the uneven playing field between minority and mainstream cultures. Therefore, the 8 university students provided a sense of who they were by articulating about their lifestyles (music, and clothes), religion, negotiations with parents, ethnic identities, learner identities, collective memories, especially of schools (focus groups) and individual accounts (personal interviews) of exclusion and inclusion from the above three positions. For example, Catholic Erika, Sheila, and Muslim Noor viewed their identities partly from a religious horizon and acknowledged its meaning in their daily family lives. Liam, Salma, Mehdi, and Lee decided not to talk about their religious activities.

**Negotiations with Parents:**

**Identity and Home Culture**

Everyday human life experience, although distinct for every young participant, is important in forming one’s identity. Taylor (1989, p. 14) explains the significance of “affirmation of ordinary life” in the framework of identity. Families provide the best learning experience for young people by being close to them and nurturing their growth. Negotiation with parents is paramount during adolescence because of the physical and cognitive development of young people. At the same time, parents expect more adult-like behaviour from their teenagers during this phase. In the following section, I try to explain how the 8 participants’ cultural identities were created, endorsed and not endorsed by their parents, and how their emerging identities were reflected in their everyday lives and practices. In Chapter 5, the family was seen more from the social and academic support angle. In this chapter, however, young people talked
about the emotional link with their parents and how it shaped their identities. Young people, however, are not seen here as “passive” agents, and their “active” roles in “understanding and creating new knowledge” are duly acknowledged in this chapter (see Luckett & Luckett, 2009, p. 470).

Erika, Jessica, Liam, and Mehdi said they were closer to their mothers than their fathers. Those young people delineated their mothers as ethically strong people and acknowledged their influence on their identity formation. While Sheila, Salma, Noor, and Lee talked more about their fathers. Salma’s parents kept their children under their tight leash. Noor provided a mixed view about her parents’ influence. As her accounts often portrayed her parents’ (especially, her father’s) efforts to come out of the traditional and commonly perceived shell of their Muslim identity (see below).

**Voices from the mainstream**

The 3 White participants, Liam, Erika and Jessica were considered as from the mainstream culture. As we saw in Chapter 5, all 3 participants were aware of their socially constructed racial advantages. In the West: “Young people are ideally expected to free themselves from parental control and interference as they move towards adult status” (Brannen, 1996, p. 118). In this study, however, parents of Erika, Jessica, Liam, Sheila, Mehdi (the two second-generation Canadians), and South Korean Lee gave their teenagers considerable freedom. For example, Liam portrayed his mother’s upbringing and her influence in the following statement:

In high school, I was very open to people who had different ethnic identities.

Interviewer: Why?
Why? Because of my mom; being a social worker, she always taught me that we were all humans.

Liam, who usually took a rational stance during the focus group and interview, and considered everything critically, said that his parents never complained about the clothes he was wearing or about the music he was listening during the high school years:

In their own times, they were usually wearing clothes or listening to music that people thought were inappropriate. But I also think that they liked the idea that I was a rebel in terms of the ratty (torn jeans) clothes I wore or the punk rock I listened to.

Liam also decided to touch on parental expectations and how those affected his learner identity and transition from a dependent adolescent to a responsible independent young adult:

There was a transition from middle school to high school, in terms of my parents’ worries about me. Their expectation was kind of different in middle school. In middle school, if I used the F word, they would be worried, not so much in high school. In high school, the expectation of getting good marks was much greater.

In Grade 11, I was really frustrated with school and fed up and my marks slipped, about 10%. And that kind of gave them the warning signal.

Jessica’s identity was frequently manifested by a family-centred ethos and deeply rooted class consciousness. Jessica said that despite the fact that she came from a Catholic family and went to a Catholic school, her parents never forced their religion on their children. Catholic school goer, pensive, discerning, and soft-spoken Jessica said that her parents did not have any problem with her casual (usually T-shirts and jeans) clothes; all other study participants agreed with Jessica on this matter. Even though “in your face dress now being an adolescent art form”
Music wasn’t a big deal” because she did not “usually listen to vulgar stuff” and belonged to Indy or pop music genre.

She also mentioned that her parents never had to push her hard in high school because she performed well in high school: “However, if I didn’t get a 90, my dad would sometimes ask, “why didn’t you get a 90?” I feel that pressure right now; my mom thinks that I am stepping down and insists that I go to med school.” Jessica’s mom was not the only one concerned about her slipping grades at the university; researchers argue that low-income students like Jessica have plenty to do with some of their disappointing performance in higher education and her current departure (or push/pull factor?) from the childhood dream to become a doctor. During the interview, she talked about the financial constraints as mitigating factors and considered opening her own bake shop as a more viable option. Scholars argue that young people from low-income families are known to be realistically adapted to their new plans in life (Brown, 1987).

Very much like Jessica who spoke of her mother as her “closest confidant” (see Chapter 5), Erika talked about her mother as someone more of a friend: “I am very close to my mom. She is a cool mom.” Her dad can be stricter though and Erika added, “Sometimes he doesn’t understand, and says the weirdest things. My dad is book smart while my mom is street smart.” Erika confessed that in many ways she was similar to her dad “we both like trivia and I will follow his footstep in teaching.” Articulate and forthright Erika also described her relationship with parents as open and trusting. They even go to movies together a lot and she does not “have a problem seeing with them in public.” She gave the credit to her parents for that kind of upbeat relationship:
I never went through the [usual teenage] rebellious stage, I didn’t need to, it all depends on what kinds of parents you have; they didn’t give me any reason to rebel against them.

Erika also reflected on her father’s family and generations of allegiance to Catholicism. Nevertheless, she was outspoken about Catholicism that did not always mesh well with her father. Her dad was born and raised as a Catholic; while her mom is an Anglican. She always says to her children that “you don’t have to be a good Catholic, I want you to have good values, morals, manners, and you have to be a good person and good to people.” Those values are more appealing to Erika and her sister than Catholicism. Although her father never forced his children to go to church, Erika revealed (after a long pause) that:

He is offended when we say we aren’t Catholic. Perhaps it is his upbringing; in his eyes it is like a rebellion, he even once called me an atheist. [laughs]

**Views from hybrid culture**

Second-generation and hyphenated Canadian, Sheila’s dual or hybrid identity appeared to be more secure than Jessica’s at certain levels. The two bicultural young people, however, frequently dwelt on their negotiation strategies with their parents, more often than others. Second-generation Iranian-Canadian Mehdi also belonged in this dual identity group. However, as discussed before, both Jessica and Mehdi came from low-income families. They both endured severe financial constraints in their personal and social lives.

Unlike Jessica, Sheila’s definition of her ethnic identity was devoid of essentialism; she talked about her dual identity in a matter of fact way and away from “once narrowly-defined notions of a tightly homogeneous culture (Hewitt, 1990, p. 194, cited in Ball et al., 2000) without an “excess of belonging” (see Ball et al., 2000, p. 30):
I really don’t know exactly where I fit in; the rewards are to experience two cultures; I never get the culture shock. I love having my mom’s and dad’s side. I never considered my dual identity as a curse.

Sheila’s calm and grounded demeanour made sense when she described a peaceful co-existence of two religions at her home. Her Filipino mother is a Catholic and her Indian father is a Hindu. Her father watched his two daughters baptized by his Filipino wife’s Catholic Church: “My dad sat there through everything. My parents never inflicted anything on us,” she said. Sheila, however, was familiar with the Hindu “Puja stuff. One of my Guyanese friends invites me over to her house for Pujas. But I really like to go to India to observe Holi” (festival of colour).

Compared to other parents from the same heritage (see also Desai & Subramanian, 2003), Sheila said that her “parents were more lenient. My dad wasn’t strict at all. He always gave me the freedom to do whatever I wanted to do.” She also reflected on the similarity and difference between her dad’s side and mom’s side of the family:

Both cultures are very family oriented. Although, I don’t know much about my mom’s side of the family; she doesn’t get along with them. She hasn’t seen them in a while. I came close to my dad’s side of the family when they came here to visit or we went to India. They are very argumentative; now I know where I got my spirits and temper.

Sheila’s parents never complained about the way she dressed, as she never “dressed scantily.” Her mother was happy as long as she “dressed warmly during the winter time so that I didn’t catch cold; she hated when I was sick.” She sounded very emotional when she stated, “They are good parents and I don’t know whether I can do a better job in parenting than what they have done.”
Insightful Mehdi, a sociology student, included that her activist parents fought for human rights in their entire life: “They are very open and understanding.” She said that her friends just could not believe that her Black boyfriend has been living with her family. She proudly tells them that her father “isn’t an usual Iranian. The reward is that we don’t belong to that traditional box.” She challenged head on the random stereotyping of Muslims in her next statement:

I don’t know; I get a kick out of it when I tell people that I am neither Black nor Spanish; in fact, I am Iranian. They assume the typical head band and religious background once you say you are from Iran.

Views from marginal culture

Salma, Noor, and international student Lee from South Korea were considered marginal because of their religious, linguistic, cultural, and minority status. However, as discussed before, Salma’s parents lost their restaurant business; while both Lee and Noor came from middle class families.

During the focus group discussion, Salma agreed that her Italian looks helped her to blend in with the mainstream student population of her high school, and she denied that she had any ethnic identity. However, during the interview, she did not seem to be so well-anchored in the mainstream Canadian culture; she painted a conflicting account of her inner turmoil and many of the choices she made based on her “very different and significant social and familial relationships” (see Ball et al., 2000, p. 40): “I was born in Turkey but grew up in Toronto . . . I am used to listening to parents and following their rules. So I was basically teachers’ pet; in other words, I was not a troublemaker in high school.”

There was another important thing; Salma said that being from the Kurdish community, her family experienced marginalization in their own country; despite Salma’s mainstream Italian
looks, her highly reflexive inner dialogue and tension with the majority-minority dilemma became apparent in her next statement. Salma described herself as “I generally keep things to myself,” however, decided to share a tormented ethnic history of her parents; which perhaps would explain her initial denial of having any ethnic identity in Canada:

I don’t know too much about it but I know this much that in Turkey, Kurdish population is a minority and isn’t accepted by the mainstream. There is no Kurdish culture and language, according to the Turkish government; officially, they aren’t accepted. So I don’t even speak Kurdish language. I know some Kurdish people here who say they aren’t Kurdish. Perhaps that’s a smart thing to do for survival, because their Kurdish identity isn’t accepted by the government (in Turkey). If they claim their true identity, they may get killed. So I know all about being a minority when I go home.

As explained in the family chapter, Salma’s parents needed to know the whereabouts of their three daughters and Salma and her sisters were compelled to inform their parents about their outside activities. “A crucial strategy available to young people is to withhold information about their external activities” (Brannen, 1996, p. 119). In Darling et al’s study (2006), all adolescents inform that they do not often disclose to parents about their whereabouts and activities. However, Salma did not tell me that she hid her school lives from parents nor did she reveal in detail how she managed to keep her high school and home lives separate. Salma talked about her negotiation with her father more than her mother.

Salma’s parents never had any problem with how she dressed, because she also said that “wearing revealing clothes” was never her style. However she often had heated arguments with her father while negotiating with what to watch on TV:
I argue with my parents a lot and I am the one who argues most with them. Recently, I had a brush in with my father about not wearing a traditional Turkish dress. My dad expects me to watch Discovery Channel all the time. If I watch programs like America’s Top Models, my dad would yell at me that it is a waste of time. He would also yell, “What are you gaining from this”?

Aside from Noor, an Iranian newcomer, who covers her head with hijab, and could not initially interact with males because of her religion; cultural mismatch (Cazden, 1988; Cooper, 2011; Heath, 1983) between students’ families and schools did not apply to any other study participant. Noor’s identities and her negotiations with parents were distinct as “some boundaries and boundary markers remain as very powerful constraints upon opportunity and identity” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 22). Yet, both Noor and Mehdi called their Iranian fathers “unusual” because of their progressive outlooks. Bold and expressive, Noor left a strong impression of having political savvy and social intelligence; her father’s educational background in social science and progressive outlook shaped Noor’s interest and academic identity; she also said that because she was in a new country with different sets of rules, her father allowed her to do group work with boys at his home and even left it to her sole discretion whether to wear hijab or not. In the first focus group, it was Noor who clearly communicated what her identity meant to her. She said:

I am moving forward because I know who I was and who I am today. And the fact that I am an Iranian girl with my hijab on makes me different. That makes the world more beautiful because we all can all draw from each other’s experiences. I can’t think of a society where everybody is the same; that is going to be so boring. The way I take care of myself is different from the way you take care of yourself. I wear long sleeves . . .

Lee’s high school education experience had a whole new meaning for her, though; it was significantly different from other native Canadian students. She said:
For me, it was my life. It was a whole new thing for me; I had to learn everything in English. Through interacting with others, I had to develop my verbal and new social skills. It just changed everything, right? As I had to adjust to this new high school environment, my personality changed in a big way. I am comfortable now but I came here with very little communication skills. I was very outgoing in Korea. Yet I was very shy here because of my limited English knowledge. I became an outsider with a little scope to interact with others.

Still busy exploring her new world in Canada, international student Lee chatted about her parents in South Korea, who expected her to work hard, and how she felt grounded in both worlds, “I didn’t let them (my parents) down so far, I guess!” Yet she explained the cultural clash with her parents, specifically her mother about her non-Asian boyfriend, “My parents are very close-minded in this matter.” Scholars suggest that over time, people’s persistent tie to their ethnicity becomes thinner (Breton et al., 1990), especially, when they arrive here early in an impressionable age. Portes and Rambaut (2001), however, concentrate on thickening and thinning of young people’s identity over time from a different angle – while the thickening process works for young people from ethnic minority groups; thinning of identities happens for young people from White and European descents. Yet in Lee’s case, her emotional alignment with the Asian community faded; even though she did not come here with her family as an immigrant. Eventually, adolescent Lee became more comfortable with her new environment and the host country. Her new independence in Canada changed her self-esteem, personality, and her identity as a young woman that were no longer under the shadow of her family and ethnic community; fashionable and determined Lee sounded like any young Canadian female: “I became more open. It’s after all, my life and it’s up to me to decide ultimately what would make me happy.” According to Lee, she “began to think more as an individual.” When Lee was in Korea; having a boyfriend in high school was unthinkable to her; she used to think it was too
early: “you were not even an adult yet. But when I came here, I was like whatever. Everyone has a boyfriend here.”

Lee revealed her problematic learner identity by stating that learning English and studying in English speaking countries such as Canada is a big trend in today’s South Korea. Parents are very eager to send their kids to study in English speaking countries; which are generally viewed as key to their success. Lee’s story, however, could be a cautionary tale to those parents that adjusting with the new “social surrounding and new learning environment” was not by any means, easy for Asian students studying in Canada. Lee briefly touched on the racially motivated insults that she had to endure in high school and the myth that “being Asian is always rewarding in Canada. My fellow students from high school used to make fun of my accent.” In the end, it became a rewarding experience for her, because she worked extra hard to cover her accent and “it worked!” Perhaps that also explained her desire to blend in with the mainstream with her well-groomed appearance and her conscious effort to speak like Canadians.

*The myth of Muslim solidarity:*

*Three distinct voices*

Salma, Noor, and Mehdi were the 3 university students from Muslim backgrounds in the study with three unique stories to share. Noor and Mehdi’s families were from Iran. Yet their worlds seemed to be poles apart when they narrated their experiences and demonstrated their agency. Their stories are caveats to keep in mind that there is difference within ethnic groups. Some researchers caution us about the risk of assuming that ethnic groups are homogeneous (Hayano, 1981; Kibria, 1998; Lee, 1994). After 9/11, when Muslims were demonized all over the world, following those wise recommendations becomes a more difficult task, and schools are no exceptions to that norm.
Mehdi’s parents left their homeland in order to escape from Iran’s unequal opportunity structures and oppressive political regimes. When I asked Mehdi about her religion, she said that except her Muslim grandmother, her entire family was atheist. Although when they were in Iran, Noor’s family was never close to Iranian mosques; their religious practice was expanded here and the local mosque was the only place where she and her family socialized. Noor came from a traditional Shia Muslim family where boys and girls basically lived separate lives. According to Tillion (1983), that seems to be the norm in many Muslim households; Muslim societies still hold a traditional division between males and females in every facet of life and public discourse. Noor’s agency became prominent when she said that in the beginning she had a “problem sitting beside her male classmates.” Over time, she “conquered that problem;” recently she even learned to shake hands with them. When an Iranian friend asked her about the integrity of a Muslim woman who was willing to shake hands with men, she boldly replied that “Since the guy was a non-Muslim, the Muslim rule didn’t apply.” Later she reflected that “You change over time and make your own decision about what is appropriate and what is not.” She was not very pleased when I classified her as a newcomer to Canada. She informed with a broad smile that recently she became a Canadian citizen.

Mehdi, on the other hand, noted that she was born and grew up in one of the city’s Black neighbourhoods and was physically attracted to Black men. As explained earlier that she was romantically involved with a young Black man, also living with her family.

Noor covers her head with hijab; a Muslim tradition that some scholars identify as making women’s modest social position apparent to the outside world (Tillion, 1983); while Mehdi was unabashed about her shopping spree in high school days (we laughed a lot when she
talked about spending her hard earned money on expensive boots.). She and Salma dressed like any other young Canadian woman.

Hijab is a contentious issue in Canada; Baker (2005, p. 296) writes that immigrants’:
“Cultural practices such as . . . the wearing of hijab [emphasis in original] . . . have challenged Canadian practices, traditions, and laws.” It appeared that Noor’s ESL teacher was not prepared to accept her difference. In summer, that teacher often asked Noor whether she should take off the “head scarf” when it was so hot. Once she complained to the school vice-principal about her, but the vice-principal said that “No matter what happened, the school would be behind the teacher.” Noor clarified that the hijab defined who she was and what her identity was all about:

It means everything to me. In Canada, I am wearing it for myself. I don’t know, but I can’t define myself without it. I feel safe with it. Usually I cover myself with long clothing and I tell myself that I want to create boundaries for myself; I know if I take them off, long sleeves are going to be short sleeves; short sleeves are going to be tank tops, and tank tops . . . you know what I mean. I accept this way of living and I want to be discreet. Honestly, I don’t feel comfortable if I wear something short.

Unlike Baker (2005), in this study the cultural practice of hijab wearing was considered from multiple perspectives. Noor’s decision to cover her head is described by some researchers as active resistance and detachment from “whiteness” (Tatum, 1992, p. 15). Some scholars also agree with Noor’s previous statement that Muslim women who wear hijab or veil take a strong feminist standing and refuse to accept the hegemonic sexualized representation of female body (see Zine, 2006). Her unique lifestyle choice took a new meaning in the “constitution of self-identity and daily activity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). Yet her next statement may open a political floodgate: “In Iran, I was kind of wearing my hijab to become the good girl in the family.”
Hassan (1991) claims that the family honour of a Muslim household depends on women’s upright behaviour. Recently, hijab wearing and honour killing were debated in Toronto’s media when a high school girl was killed by her father and brother because of, among other things, her refusal to wear hijab. That crime was culturalised as a demon of Muslim society and created a huge public uproar far beyond the city’s boundaries (see Hassan, 2002; see also Toronto Star, June 17, 2010). However, some scholars find that there is something wrong with “criminalizing the entire Muslim” community for a single crime (Keddie, 2011, p. 136; also see Hussein, 2006).

In Turkey, Salma’s parents belonged to the Kurdish minority group. Although her family is Muslim, it is not a religious family. Her family still maintains some of the patriarchal traditions and gender-based cultural expectations. Salma and her two sisters are expected to abide by their father’s rules. She presented a conflicting account of her desire to fit in with the permissive teenage culture in Canada and the authoritarian rules of her father; her freedom seemed to be shackled by her parents’ outdated customs of extending constant vigilance on their three daughters and their whereabouts: “I have to ask for my parents’ permission if I want to go out.” Like any other young Canadian girl, she longed to be independent and outgoing; she wanted to go out with her friends to school concerts, movies, and restaurants to eat out. At the same time, Salma’s world views were caught between the two cultures; she understood her father’s position and the shame and humiliation he would suffer in the Kurdish community; if for some reason, he lost control over his three daughters; and if Salma and her two sisters caused any kind of embarrassment to the family.

Salma mentioned that despite her family’s Muslim background, she and her family were not mosque going people. Later she flatly denied that she had anything to do with the Muslim religion.
In contrast to Noor’s above account, Mehdi and her family do not socialize only with Iranian people; the mosque has no part in their atheist lifestyle. Although her parents retain their mother tongue, Farsi and speak with their two daughters in Farsi, Mehdi and her sister in turn, use English. Iranian history and traditions do not play that much role in Torontonian and second-generation Canadian Mehdi’s life. While Salma and Noor talked about their frequent association with their ethnic groups and cultural activities, Mehdi never mentioned any of them. When I asked Noor about her weekend activities, she informed me that on Fridays, she attended the youth nights at the mosque. She and her family used to go to the mosque every Saturday. She added:

I generally don’t go socialize outside of the mosque. That is the place where I meet people. It is easier for us to find common grounds with each other as Muslims and Iranians; just because we share two distinct identities that define us.

Salma and Noor never considered marrying someone outside their own ethnic groups. However, according to Mehdi, neither she nor her parents were concerned about marrying someone outside the Iranian community. The fact that her boyfriend is Black and living with her family clearly indicates her activist parents’ liberal attitudes toward marriage and romantic relationships.

Part II:
Identity and Difference:
Canadian Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism was not in my mind when my supervisor and I agreed to include one personal question for focus group discussions: What students’ identities meant to them. I was worried about the presence of that big elephant in an only hour long focus group; among other
things, in Canada, multiculturalism is a controversial topic that is being interpreted differently by different people (Ghosh, 2002). Furthermore, studies suggest that estimations of the mainstream Canadian scholars and scholars who are at the receiving end of Canada’s immigration and multicultural policies differ considerably and make it a contested notion (Banerjee, 2000; Feuerverger and Richards, 2007; Ghosh and Abdi 2004; Kymlicka 1995; Satzewich and Liodakis, 2007; Ungerleider, 2007). For example, the ideals of Canadian multiculturalism and the realities of a stratified nation is translated in Galabuzi’s (2001) research that finds a consistent economic gap between Whites and non-White racial groups in urban Canada. Ghosh (1996, p. 4), nevertheless, analyzes multiculturalism from an ideological standpoint; according to her, multiculturalism is defined by people’s belief system and by the existence of many cultures: “Therefore, to understand multiculturalism it is important to know that culture refers to the way in which a group of people responds to the environment.” Multiculturalism in Canada strives to follow Allport’s (1954) contention that prejudice is the product of people’s ignorance about other groups of people. Deconstructing this view, Phoenix (1998, p. 868) writes that “Familiarity does not necessarily... breed liking.”

In order to integrate into the mainstream. “Young people now grow up in social, economic and political conditions radically different to those encountered by their parents’ generation in the post-war years of relative economic prosperity and social cohesion” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 20). Canada’s multicultural practices do not “take into account social class, gender, ... power relations among societal groups as salient to discussions of identity and equity” (James & Schecter, 2000, p. 34) However, compared to the bloody history of United States, Canada’s political record speaks for a better and peaceful implementation of the federal policy of multiculturalism.
During the focus group discussions, I observed that similar to the different contention of scholars on multiculturalism, it also meant different things to different participants. Aside from Liam, 2 other White students’ perceptions of multiculturalism came closer to Bibby’s much debated argument, the “celebration of Canadian nothingness” (as cited in Satzewich, 1992, p. 15). Their views echoed the liberal criticism of Canadian multiculturalism that inhibits the integration of immigrants in Canadian society. On the second day of focus group discussions, Erika and Jessica dominated the conversation about Canadian multiculturalism and its close ties to their perceived identities. Scholars argue that multiculturalism is not only for ethnic students to embrace: “White students must develop a consciousness of ethnicity and the cultures of other students. Whiteness cannot remain invisible and outside the framework of multiculturalism” (Ghosh, 2002, p. 2). Yet both Erika and Jessica echoed a growing concern about the lack of Canadian identity; in their views, multiculturalism was celebrated in Canada at the expense of Canadian nothingness. That kind of pessimism is even strong among some Canadian scholars. In his controversial work Mosaic Madness, Bibby (1990) defines Canadian multiculturalism as a “mosaics within mosaics” (pp. 7–8) in which excessive individualism takes precedence over social rules. Especially, Jessica and Erika were not in favour of the all-inclusive nature of Canadian multiculturalism; whereas non-White students were appreciative of multiculturalism; when they talked about their day-to-day experience in Canada, they often painted it as not inclusive enough (see below). Scholars like Phoenix (1998) agree with that view and assert that multiculturalism is not supposed to interrogate racism; instead it only confronts “individualized notions of prejudice” (p. 869). Prejudice is related to one’s attitudes; while discrimination is linked to one’s behaviour (Reitz & Breton, 2004). Admitting Canada’s multicultural nature,
Noor explained her place in it and sounded somewhat grateful because of Canada’s liberal policies:

I feel I am a minority because I am a Muslim and I am Iranian. The rewards are that being a minority, you are more recognized and the Canadian system and its government make sure that you are treated right.

The following is an excerpt from the heated debate on multiculturalism during the focus group discussion on day 2. The discussion was dominated by the 2 participants, Erika and Jessica. Both of them claimed that they were tired of the fellow high school students constantly asking them where they were from originally. All participants talked about multiculturalism from their own experiences and social locations. In an immigrant dominated society like Canada, Canadian identity is “too varied to be a unitary and homogeneous thing” (Said, 1993, p. xxv). Yet the notion of multiple “ethnicities and cultural identities on a global scale” has been dominated by cultural practices without borders and created “tensions” in democracies (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 1). Both Erika and Jessica’s perspectives about their immigrant peers could raise the issue of lack of young people’s embeddedness in Canada; a complex matter which demands researchers’ attention. Erika also associated multiculturalism only with Canada’s cosmopolitan and plural cities. Both Jessica and Erika questioned the threshold of tolerance, inclusion, and compromise, the three tenets of Canadian multiculturalism. However, unlike Mehdi, they kept mum about the deeply rooted structural racism embedded within multicultural Canada and racialized people’s struggle to cope with racism in their everyday lives.

**Interviewer:** What does your ethnic identity mean to you?

**Erika:** I am White; I have never ethnically identified myself because my parents aren’t immigrants. My grandparents kind of were, but not really, because they
were from Ireland. My boyfriend isn’t White; he is Spanish and from Ecuador. I went to an elementary school where everyone had to overcome his/her ethnicity. I learned a lot from the differences of my elementary school friends; they were Spanish, Asian, Italian, Pakistani; Interacting with so many different people helped you to accept difference. So when you are sitting in a political science or history class, it makes you understand your point of view as well others’ points of view; because you have interacted with so many different identities as well as your own. It also helps you to teach others and the overall curriculum.

**Interviewer:** That’s a good point; identity isn’t a fixed entity; your identity changes over time as you change.

**Jessica:** I am half Irish and half Portuguese. I think Portugal is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Financially, Portuguese families are very poor. People have this misconception that Whites are not discriminated here. But I think we are discriminated a lot; many Portuguese people have even been deported from this country. At work, I hear them all the time, the jokes they make about White people. I was sitting there and thinking if I were saying that about you, a non-White person, you probably would tell the boss and I probably would be fired. White people aren’t allowed to say things but ethnic people are. As Whites we have privileges but socially we are the target of many jokes and racism.

**Interviewer:** How do you deal with your dual identity in the educational arena?

**Jessica:** The thing that comes to my mind is that my school is in a Portuguese dominated area. But there I am recognized as Irish not Portuguese. In my high school, some of the Portuguese girls made themselves ridiculous with their loud and obnoxious behaviour. One of my friends’ kind of made fun of them and their behaviour. Is anyone Canadian in my high school?

**Erika:** Yes, in high school, no one was Canadian.

**Erika:** They all wanted to know where you were from originally and about your ethnic background. They wanted to know where your parents and grandparents
were from. It’s not like in the US or England. From visiting Ireland, I know they are Irish through and through. Here you aren’t Canadian even though it is in my passport and citizenship; even though I was born here and live here. Looking at other countries, such as the US and England, you can tell that they are very American and English.

**Sheila:** I like that multicultural side of Canada.

**Erika:** I don’t. There is a difference between embracing it and rejecting it. I feel like there is no sense of Canadian identity. All my friends were born here and not a single one thought they were Canadian.

**Sheila:** Do you travel though? I travel a lot and whenever I go out of Canada I introduce myself as Canadian.

**Erika:** [Erika did not let her finish and she jumped in.] That’s because you were from somewhere else.

**Erika:** You can only see different ethnic groups in big cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. I have family lives in Best Town (Cottage town, North of Toronto) and my cousin has never seen a Black kid in her home town. She only sees them when she visits us in Toronto; and she has never interacted with one Black kid. My cousin brother saw a Muslim person first time when he moved to University. There is something wrong with that; we say we are multicultural but it is just an assumption. The reality is something else . . . . My boyfriend has been here for 15 years; yet he doesn’t consider himself a Canadian.

**Jessica:** Actually, I think that’s why Portuguese girls are seen as crazy. Portuguese people are so patriotic; in a way, it is good because they are keeping their heritage alive; in Toronto keeping your separate ethnic identity is kind of like pride. I think we need to have some sort of ethnicity to be socially accepted. I don’t know whether it is your individual identity or the pressure from the community; if you aren’t part of an ethnic group, you don’t have that background; you may not be socially accepted.
**Erika:** My sister goes to a school in the Italian neighbourhood; where she is the only non-Italian. She doesn’t understand why Italians have so much Italian influence in their lives even when their grandparents were born here.

**Discomforting Racism in Multicultural Canada**

Dillabough and Kennelly (2010, p. 165) contend that race relations in Canada “has been marked by exclusion, discrimination, and intensely racist policies.” For example, Chinese Immigration Act and Chinese Exclusion Act imposed exorbitant taxes on Chinese immigrants; the Continuous Journey Stipulation of 1908 put a cap on immigration from India; and the 1910 Immigration act directly promoted institutional racism in Canada (Abu-Laban, 1998). The findings of a recent University of Toronto study reveals that immigrants’ skin colour is the biggest obstacle in the way of their sense of belonging in Canada; the darker the skin colour, the bigger the alienation (see Taylor in *Toronto Star*, 2009). Despite the presence of multiculturalism in contemporary Canada, Toronto’s Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Sri Lankans, and Somalians not only have to cope with poverty, but also with persistent police harassment (Ornstein, 2000).

Although respective governments in contemporary Canada have taken many corrective steps, including both the provincial and federal governments’ initiatives to generate business from the two rising giant economies, China and India. Foreign trade is often indicative of a nation’s hardening or softening attitudes towards other nations. However, the residues of racism still haunt young people in multicultural Canada. For example, a front page *Toronto Star* article (2009, p. A6) quoted the research findings of a University of Toronto professor Reitz of ethnic, immigration, and pluralism studies that “a lack of trust was also higher among the successful, Canadian-born, Canadian-educated children of visible minority immigrants.” Reitz also argues that those feelings of isolation among visible minority immigrants have to be addressed.
While all non-White participants in this study said that they liked the multicultural side of Canada, they were not oblivious of racism in Canada. Some participants had first-hand experience with racism than others. Mehdi, the second-generation Iranian-Canadian expressed her frustration that growing up in Canada, she “faced racism. However, the biggest part of racism came after September 11” (see also Ahmed, 2003). Although Mehdi had no connection or part in the September 11 massacre; her following comment showed how young people from Muslim backgrounds felt: “Just because I came from Middle East, people automatically assumed that I was a suicide bomber.”

Newcomer Noor talked about the naked racism and blown out of proportion public panic that she experienced in her daily lives in Canada. Many scholars blame media’s role in creating this panic (see Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010). Yet she expressed her faith in the good intentions of the government’s policy in Canada. She communicated with a stoic look on her face that:

I see people staring at me at the grocery store, on the subway, and on streets. You step in any of the above places and you can feel people’s hardening attitudes toward you. I am kind of used to getting the dirty look. I sometimes feel that I am excluded.

Sheila, another second-generation Canadian wondered whether her successful “dad ever faced the challenges by being the brown man in a White dominated corporate world” [Interviewer: Do you anticipate that you will face any challenge in future?]. Sheila’s following comment was a usual take of middle and upper middle class women; whose ambition and accomplishment suffer because of gender inequity, “while ruling men continue to be the norm” (see Raksit, 2003): “I think it is more because of a woman than a coloured woman.” According
to Sheila, it is just a matter of making herself out there and making the first impression [long pause]:

We will see; I haven’t had any challenges yet. If it happens, you have to deal with it then, I guess. The most important thing is to know yourself well and don’t let other people judge you so that you can have doubt about yourself. I know who I am; just because I am different, that doesn’t make me a bad person. I am still a good person whether I am White or Black. I don’t know, but I think it would be very different if I went to a public school. I don’t know who I would hang out with, if I went there; probably, I would have gone with the Indian kids.

Unlike the United States, multiculturalism is a “state sanctioned, state organized ideological affair in Canada” (Banerjee, 2000, p. 27). While reflecting on their places in multicultural Canada, Salma and Noor decided to unpack the rigidity of their ethnic communities and continuity with their homeland practices. Their views were similar to Jessica and Erika that ethnicized communities have their fair shares of blame. In Canada the notion of more than one citizenship is accepted; which can create ambivalence about one’s citizenship, home status, and loyalty to Canada. Both Noor and Salma were absorbed in a highly reflexive soul searching that merged objective social and subjective personal domains (see Luckett & Luckett, 2009, p. 471). “I think Iranian people living in Iran are more accepting and tolerant than the Iranian people living in Canada,” said Noor. Indeed it can be the generation gap; however, many teenagers are in crash course with their parents because of their strict rules. Some of the immigrants’ essentialist cultural worlds have been frozen ever since they moved in to a foreign land. They maintain the same old traditions and norms of their home countries that have long became obsolete even in their home countries. For example, Salma said that her parents used to complain about Westernization a lot, but now that they have Turkish channel at home, “they see that things
are changing in their homeland too. Turkish culture is more Americanized today than they could imagine” (Interviewer: That’s a very good point; nobody talked about it).

Part III:
To Be or Not to Be a Canadian:
Canadian Identity Contested

One significant feature of self-identity is that the self can never be talked about without reference to others (Taylor, 1989). The founding fathers of sociology, both Durkeheim (1947, 1961, as cited in Goetz & Le Compte, 1984) and Weber (1947, as cited in Goetz & Le Compte, 1984) wrote to a great extent on schooling and both were concerned about schools’ role in nation building and moral growth. Those who visit Ontario’s high schools on a regular basis know all too well that teachers and administrators try their best to incorporate citizenship education; yet there is a distinct lack of civic engagement among young people, especially their lack of identity with the nation, waning sense of community, and lackadaisical turnout during elections (see O’Neil, 2001, 2004). According to O’Neil (2001, p. 32), young people’s decision to stay clear from political participation “appears less conscious a decision to turn away from politics than a failure to see the importance of political participation.” Nevertheless, it is not only the young people; overall, civic participation in Canada is declining at an alarming rate (see Burt, 2002). Despite the ceremonial playing of national anthem every day (every student talked about it as a school ritual during the focus group discussions), celebration of Remembrance Day, and Multicultural Day, the rational world of Ontario’s secondary schools do not often reflect that schools have roles in preparing future citizens of society. That is why, Osborne (2001, p. 32) argues so strongly, “that schooling should not be left to private initiative.” In addition, he reminds us that the discourse in democratic citizenship is a process in which “men and women
excluded or marginalized from the political process sought to find a place within it” (Osborne, 2001, p. 37). That special attention to inclusion is particularly important in a pluralistic nation like Canada where the shifting demography is embracing heterogeneity and the intersection of different identity markers. As described previously in the focus group discussion in this chapter that there is a constant tension in Canada between ethnicized people’s different identity markers and the singular notion of Canadian identity. Since Erika and Jessica argued loudly against Canadian multicultural policy that it had been pointlessly attentive to the needs of ethnic identities; which in turn, had been balkanizing Canadian society at the expense of Canadian identities. However, because of global border crossing, the unitary meaning of national citizenship and its substance has changed drastically (see Scott, 2001).

During the focus group discussions, every participant agreed that in high school, students seldom discussed about their Canadian identity. However, race plays a role in this chapter when all 3 White participants Jessica, Liam, and Erika vociferously claimed their Canadian identities. They emphasized that they were Canadians above all; being Canadians came to their minds first; then they considered their respective ethnicities. Jessica who previously called herself “half Irish and half Portuguese” declared that “I am Canadian. But in school I was never a Canadian. In fact, no one was Canadian.” Canada’s worldwide name as a country of immigrants may have something to do with it. Even if someone is White and even if his/her grandparents were born and raised here; in high schools, teenagers assume that their fellow students are from somewhere else; especially if they are visible minorities. The formation of one’s ethnic identity is often the product of one’s quest for one’s ancestry. Young people’s social identities are forged in terms of constant comparison with others of who they and their friends are based on their social similarity or difference (Portes & Rambaut, 2001). Salma was in accord and added, “There is no place in
the world like Canada [laughs]. Even if you say you are a Canadian, they know you are from somewhere else. So you would always face these questions: “Where are you from? Where your grandparents are from?” In Jessica’s view, “the Canadian government is far from being perfect. There are many things in Canadian history that are terrible.” However, she mentioned that she was “quite proud to be a Canadian” and being a Canadian was still “a privilege” to her. Some participants’ adherence to the nation sounded utopian “in which human relations are organized more perfectly than in their community (Cohen, 1997, p. 45); the following comment of Jessica was similar to Hall’s (1990, p. 226) reflection that her national identity is “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth”:

There are things I’ll never have to worry about, like a war outside my doorstep, or access to school, and healthcare. I also like that as a group, Canadians are proud of their nationality without being arrogant. Being Canadian is just who I am and I say “eh”. Watching the winning goal during the gold metal hockey game during the Olympics was one of the highlights of (my Canadian identity) this year.

Erika’s position on her national identity was also interesting and not devoid of controversy, because unlike her previous focus group argument, here she decided to accept Canada’s democratic side from her strong cultural capital, articulation. She was grateful for Canada’s openness; for her voice will never be “silenced”: “Being Canadian means being happy and living in a world where people can express who they really are sexually, religiously, politically and culturally.” Being a Canadian meant to her that “I am accepting of differences and that I am free to make that decision for myself,” she added. Salma agreed and spoke from her ethnic experience, as being a member of the Kurdish minority groups in Turkey. Her view was far from being abstract; Canada’s openness was not a folklore to her. She compared her emotional link to Canada from the sketches of her parents’ ethnic ostracization in their home country (see above), Turkey:
We are all equals to begin with. Because this is a country of immigrants, people are very accepting of immigrants here. It is an open society; nobody is blocking your way to do anything. If I were in Turkey; probably, I wouldn’t have come this far. First of all, because Turkey is a messed up country; they have no rules and no order; except money, nothing talks in Turkey. Second of all, I am Kurdish and that would make it harder for me to go places.

Salma grew up in Toronto and said so much in Canada’s favour, but she did not claim her Canadian identity; she never called Canada her home; nor did 5 other non-White study participants; not even Mehdi or Sheila, the second-generation young people, who talked and behaved like any other Canadians. Findings of this study support Banerjee’s (2000) argument that constructing Canada was not an easy project, especially for those who were born outside Canada, they “cannot directly project Canada”; as they are riddled with the “feelings of belonging and alienation.” It is indicative that “in the polity of Canadian liberal democracy, there is always already a crisis of gender, race, and class” (Banerjee, 2000, p. 66). Salma reflected on the complex world of belonging and outsider/insider dilemma: “However, my parents are first generation immigrants here. You aren’t as comfortable or free as other people who came here 30 or 50 years ago.” She had been in close ties with the Kurdish community centre and was active in the cultural activities such as folk dances; yet she included:

If I were born here, I wouldn’t have anything to do with it. Or probably I would just visit and watch them dance. At the same time, I also feel advantaged to have another language and culture to deal with and go back and forth. For example, in our school’s multicultural events, I have another culture to showcase; I have something else to bring in to school other than just being a Canadian.
Interviewer: True, you could safely say that you have a hyphenated identity and you are proud of it. That reminds me, can you define what it means to be a Canadian? Everybody’s definition is unique; what is yours?

Salma briefly dwelled on Canada’s international image as a peace-keeping nation, and the nation’s effort to create a just society and protect human rights. This liberal arts student was well aware of Canada’s international image; a typical Canadian, according to her, “has to be accepting of everyone; you have to be a peacemaker or peace loving person; you have to be open to everyone. [Interviewer: A profound comment, indeed!]. In America, you have to be an American or go somewhere else.”

During the focus group, Mehdi noted, “I believe I am extremely lucky to be here. The rights and freedoms expressed here are often taken for granted.” While during the interview, she candidly reflected on her family’s struggle in a strange land and the burden of carrying a Middle Eastern ethnic identity:

In school I wasn’t considered an Iranian; I was associated with Black people. But I did correct them and never lied about my Iranian background; as my mom told me that you should always be proud of who you are [Interviewer: that’s true]. I don’t think you should hide who you are. That’s why we observe the Iranian traditions at home, such as celebrating our new year.

Interestingly, Noor, who just became a Canadian citizen, did not call herself a Canadian, either. Instead, she said that her identity and what she evolved into “includes both my ethnicity and religion. They go together, hand in hand, you know what I mean.”

Discussion

Using each youth’s experience as an individual case, I used both participants’ SES and ethnic history proposed by Max Weber, in order to find out the correspondence between
students’ space, history, and identity. Participating university students did not shy away from expressing strong and candid opinions about their cultural and national identities, and their boundary crossing from one world to another. As a researcher, I on the other hand, was grappled with the dilemma whose stories to tell (see below), why, and how to interpret participants’ accounts. After long deliberation that included intense discomfort, I decided to delve into a whole range of power relations that defined participants’ identities.

Participants described their negotiations with parents differently in terms of their family’s socioeconomic location. The data available suggest different parental attitudes toward adolescents. Some parents were described as providing more independence and encouragement to move towards responsible adulthood than others. Clearly, affluent and middle class parents could afford to shower their kids with computers, books, extracurricular lessons (such as flying or tennis lessons), the opportunity to travel around the world, and not to mention, a decent home. While others like Salma reflected on her parents’ strict rules (see Chapter 5) and specifically, lack of time:

My home world wasn’t as strong as I wanted it to be, because my parents were always working at the restaurant. It was a place where I slept, ate, and did my homework. My school was more my world, and more my family. So when I made a cake, I wanted to share it with my friends in school.

Participants’ accounts were viewed above and beyond the socialization angle (see Coleman, 1963). From Salma’s account it was evident that immigrant students’ schooling experiences were not monolithic and universal; she clearly had struggled to make sense of her belonging, her place, and to reconcile with her cultural identity (Bourdieu, 1984). Her self-
deprecating humour about her different rule-abiding teenage demeanour (in the West, teenage is usually associated with rebellion) could reopen the canon of “teachers’ pet.”

Second-Generation Canadians

In general, study participants were cordial to each other. However, during the second day focus group discussion on multiculturalism, I sensed a tension brewing between Erika and Sheila. Erika perhaps instinctively assumed because of Sheila’s brown skin colour (even though she spoke and behaved like Erika, Jessica, and Liam – the 3 mainstream White “Canadians” in the group) that she was an immigrant and implied that she was born and raised somewhere else. In fact, like Erika, Sheila was born here. So I decided to intervene and said, “Erika, you raised a valid point here; sometimes, Canada’s multiculturalism is out of control.” I noticed that Sheila did not open her mouth rest of the afternoon after the above heated conversation. Partly, I was to blame; because, Sheila could interpret my comment as unfair and blame me for taking Erika’s side. Yet I was in a difficult position because of my minority status and my own brown skin colour. Moreover, I went to the two focus groups with a mindset of a listener and did not want to interrupt conversations. Wilkinson (1998) is right when she observes that research participants have more power over the focus group discussions than the researcher. Considering the limited 1-hour time frame I had; I rarely interrupted focus group discussion, unless it went out of control. I was more in control during interviews and ran them more like conversations.

Before the above incident, I never questioned the space that the second-generation and hyphenated Canadians occupied in Canadian society. Sheila’s silence prompted me to think that despite her Canadian-like behaviour, speech, and exclusive lifestyles (she came out of a Lexus van for the interview); she could be considered an outsider. Later speaking with Mehdi and Salma, I realized that it would always be difficult for those 3 young women to feel grounded in
Canada, because, no matter how hard they tried, they would always be perceived as strangers: “Never quite Canadian enough, never quite white enough, these women remain ‘others’ in their own land” (Aujla, 2000, p. 41). I took it for granted that the insider/outsider turmoil I often felt in Canada was exclusively the first generation immigrants’ domain. Who were Sheila, Mehdi and even Salma (who arrived here at age 3)? Were they Canadians? If they were, why did not they vehemently support the idea of being “Canadians” like the 3 White participants in the study, Erika, Jessica, and Liam? What was the relationship between one’s race and one’s national Canadian identity? Perhaps, the answer lies in scholars’ assertions that for the young people from White and European descents, their long-standing acculturation leads to the thinning of their ethnic identity and thickening of their growing unhyphenated Canadian or American identities; as Portes and Rambaut (2001, p. 149) argue that their ethnic “identities become fuzzier and less salient, less relevant to everyday social life” and in consequence, lead to Alba’s (1985) contention and the title of his book, a disjuncture from their ancestral history “into the twilight of ethnicity.” Second-generation young people from immigrant families, however, are our best hopes to understand whether the integration of Canadian immigrants ever happens in the long run. A great deal of research is needed to explore this ambivalence of young people in terms of their national identity or the lack of it; especially, the second-generation Canadians’ duality of being Canadian or not Canadian; this bruise on the Canadian identity could be costly for the nation (From the field notes taken on November 24, 2009).

Results of the study have implication for policy and every day practice. Mehdi and Noor’s narrations indicated that, first, after 9/11, certain ethnic groups, such as, Muslims became synonymous with terrorists; and second, immigrants were not received equally in Canada (see Anisef & Kilbride, 2003); for example, despite the government’s successive liberal policies,
some ethnic groups “may not be as respected and accepted as others” (Breton et al., 1990, p. 8). Especially, Muslims experience prejudice and discrimination in the Canadian society; perhaps that explained second-generation Mehdi’s dilemma to declare herself a Canadian. There are needs for more research and agenda setting on the government’s part; so that all immigrants feel welcome in Canada. We know from our experience that in policy-making good intentions mean very little; it is the action that counts.

Findings of the study suggest that ethnicity impacted students’ family cultures and their border-crossing experiences, but contrary to the popular belief in Western countries, religious minority groups, such as Muslims, were not found homogeneous and their Muslim identities were intersected with their class, duration in Canada, family cultures, and their families’ political beliefs. I was compelled to view 3 Muslim students as three distinct voices; to me, their ethnicity and religious identities were not all about their past, but “also a reflection of the present and the anticipated future” (Breton et al., 1990, p. 6). Mehdi could be an example; her identity was based on her experience living in a Black neighbourhood and her educational exposure to a high school that was overwhelmingly Black, more than on her Iranian ethnicity.

Despite the claim that Canada has a “long history of multicultural policies designed to promote civic integration” (Rothon et al., 2009, p. 1405), ethnic neighbourhoods are realities in Toronto with divided sections dominated by Jewish, Italian, Sikh, Somali, and Portuguese immigrants. The above ethnic communities are also segregated by their class, thereby, pockets of poverty (Carey, 2001; Ornstein, 2000) and affluence. Toronto’s woody-wealthy neighbourhoods like Forest Hill, and Rosedale are colour coded as pristine White. Ethnic dominance creates neighbourhoods with niche market discernible by distinct Prices and aesthetic qualities (Buzelli, 2001; Quadeer, 2004). Although Quadeer and Kumar (2006) view Toronto’s ethnic enclaves
positively in terms of residents’ preferences, common interests, cultural or religious needs, and in terms of sustained network for integration, Jessica’s reflection about the Portugal-obsessed lives of her grandparents portrayed a different picture of a stratified society; she pinpointed that in a profoundly divided urban enclaves, integration of immigrants in Canadian society was practically non-existent:

My grandparents came here in the 60s. Yet they still speak very broken-bad English. But they live in an overwhelmingly Portuguese dominated neighbourhood; that area is like little Portugal. I sometimes feel that they never left Portugal. As much as we say we are multicultural; we are still very much segregated by our ethnicity.

Summary

In this chapter participants’ identities were discussed in three parts. The first part dealt with participants’ cultural identities or a sense of who they were gained from their families, especially parents, and home culture. The second part dealt with urban participants’ accounts on Canada’s multiculturalism. The third and final part dealt with the 8 young people’s views about their place in multicultural Canada and how their personal identities merged with the multicultural Canadian identity. In the next and last data analysis chapter, the 8 schools and their structural and cultural practices receive prominence; so does the university students’ recollection of their relationships with the school programs and educators.
Chapter 8
From IB to Academic:
Where the 8 Participants Meet the
Structure and Culture of Secondary Schools

We are compelled to care about the well-being of other people’s children as a condition of preserving our nationhood. If the value placed on national life recedes, displaced by an ethos of autonomy and dissociation, our relations with children and each other change profoundly. Children lose their collective status, and are no longer the ancestral and progenitorial bond of national continuity. Instead, they become the private presence whose entry into the world is occasioned by the pursuit of private fulfilment. The child of choice becomes the responsibility of the adults who choose. The life quality and life chances of children increasingly reflect the arbitrary fortuities of family origin and genetic endowments. (Novick, 1994, pp. vii-viii)

Introduction

The above view reminds us that schools, especially, public schools are not profit making institutions; like parents, teachers have key roles in educating young people and thereby, in nation building; public schools are indeed “fundamental social institutions on which rest the core of society’s commitment to educate its young people” (Natriello et al., 1990, p. 187). Despite the eight families’ very different social and material status, in the family (Chapter 5) and identity (Chapter 7) chapters, it became obvious that families provided the needed support for young people to face adulthood. In this chapter, however, schools are also portrayed as key institutions that make social capital available for young people by providing guidance, resources, and assistance; so that young people can negotiate their border crossing and “institutional barriers” (Arriaza, 2003, p. 72; Coleman, 1988; Conchas, 2002; Gaskell, 2001). Social capital is distinct from human capital and cultural capital. Human capital entails the skills and knowledge individuals bring to the job market. While cultural capital, as described before, is related to
cultural markers of style and class reflected in lifestyles, taste, body language, and dress (Bourdieu, 1984). As stated in the family chapter that the participants in this study did not come from families where parents were high income professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Researchers claim that parents’ lack of education and low-income can impact high school students in a negative way (see Kao & Turney, 2010; Lareau, 2003); participants’ narrations confirmed that assertion as the above two phenomena created challenges in participants’ school lives, in terms of finishing the homework or selecting the right courses without the parental guidance, and in consequence, made them work extra hard. Despite parents’ very little involvement in their teenagers’ school lives, the high school students’ achievement in the academic program and ultimate arrival in higher education bring in the issue of high schools’ role in shaping adolescents’ academic success (Conchas, 2002).

In Canada education for minors is compulsory and publicly funded by the provincial governments. Public schools in Canada are not only to educate children, but also to help build a civic community (Gaskell, 2001). From the outset, it must be established that democracy ought to be the way how we view public school lives. The “give and take of democratic politics” that is open to listening and taking into account “perspectives of all groups” (see Kymlicka, 1998, p. 104) is adopted in this chapter to understand the former high school students’ narrations about their schools. Smith et al. (1998, p. 140) discover a “compelling” truth that students possess far more ability than we give them credit for. They suggest that “If you want to know what a school is really like, ask the kids” (authors’ own emphasis). Many young people have insightful views about what goes on in schools and classrooms, the dynamics between their schools and communities, and on the multiple worlds they live in (Phelan et al., 1991, 1998). Therefore, in this study the former academic stream high school students not only talked about programs and
academic engagement, schools’ student cultures, and the structure and culture of their eight schools, but also about their relationships with adult educators.

Despite the increasing levels of college education in Canada, it must be kept in mind that in a merit-based stratified society like Canada, only a handful of students can graduate from high school academic programs, and can join the undergraduate level university education. Those higher-streamed and university bound students are provided with “a variety of services, resources, and privileges not available to others” (see Powell et al., 1985, p. 119). However, despite receiving “the gravy” (Powell et al., 1985, p. 119) from schools, findings of the data show that the structure and culture of high schools and particularly, their academic programs were differently conceptualized and summarized by the 8 academic stream students. For example, 4 out of the 8 participants were not aware of their special privileges as higher-streamed students. Liam joked about the special status of academic students; Erika in a serious manner talked about how academic students were protected by teachers, which researchers viewed as too much of “handholding and caretaking” (see Powell et al., 1985, p. 121). Both Mehdi and Noor reflected on the special privileges of a very few elite academic students and their cosy relationships with teachers and administrators (see also Phelan et al., 1998; Powell et al., 1985).

The data in this chapter indicate that Sheila, Jessica, and Liam credited the small size of their high schools (in Liam’s case, the alternate school) for their sense of belonging in the school community. Erika, however, went to a large school with 2,000 students; she claimed that her high school had shaped who she had become and that although not every student belonged in the school community; without any doubt, she belonged in her high school. Scholars associate school support, control, and organization to students’ sense of belonging. Those three aspects of school climate and positive reinforcement from teachers are also related to students’ engagement
and academic success (Roser et al., 1996). On the contrary, adolescents’ negative perception of teacher support can harm students’ belonging and well-adjustment in school community, self-esteem, and positive outlook (Way et al., 2007).

I set out to accomplish three tasks in this chapter. **First**, I will concentrate on how students’ unique identities in relation to their multiple worlds discussed in the previous chapters intersect with their academic identities. Academic identity is an understanding of who the students are within the school context, in which academic activities within and outside of school are valued (Jackson, 2003). “High academic achievement depends on a substantial degree on the time and mental energy students put into academic pursuits,” writes Jackson (2003, p. 580), “including such activities as completing homework, reading independently, and asking serious question.” Phoenix’s (1998, p. 861) definition on identity is also useful here; identity is a “source of positive feelings of inclusion and belonging, while difference is often associated with psychological and material threat.” **Second**, I try to compartmentalize participants’ schooling experiences and definitions that generate a host of relevant school issues, under the broad umbrella of structure and culture of secondary schools, students’ experiences, including the class size, quality of the programs offered and academic engagement, extracurricular activities, group work with peers, student culture of the school, and participants’ relationships with teachers. Participants’ views about programs included not only academic students’ views but also the former IB student Erika’s views about the IB program. **Third**, I strive to see whether the study participants describe their high schools with a sense of belonging and from his/her perceived place in the school. In Chapter 5, Noor talked about the scrutiny she received from school because of her religion and hijab. However, others such as Erika, Jessica, Liam, and Sheila clearly state in this chapter that they belong in their school communities. Therefore, it remains to
be seen whether the school worlds accommodate some students by acting as cultural brokers and reject some students by acting on the premise of cultural mismatch (Cooper, 2011; Deschenes et al., 2001).

The Structure and Culture of Secondary Schools:

The School Contexts

Although secondary schools’ structural and cultural attributes are intimately linked, research on schools is divided along the line of argument either on structural or cultural phenomena. The structure of schools calls for the examination of the organizational composition and functional procedures. From that standpoint, the school’s size, and streaming of students and their teachers are structural issues.

“Culture,” contends Hargreaves (1997, p. 1304), “is central to the life of school, as it is to the life of any organization.” Culture is viewed as the organization’s system of values, norms, beliefs, and structures that persist over time.

Uneven Distribution and School Factors:

Students’ Experiences and Belonging

The 8 study participants came from 8 different neighbourhoods and schools in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. The 8 schools described by participants were distinct, complex, and independent entities with their own “contexts, histories, cultures, and personalities” and of course, facilities (see Danielson & Hochschild, 1998, p. 281). Not only did the participants describe the difference in their neighbourhood school organization, but also the structure of the student body. Those schools reflected diverse communities from representing mostly White and affluent residents, to middle class and multicultural population, and then to disproportionately Black and low-income groups.
In recent years, the gap between the wealthy and not so wealthy has widened worldwide and that gap is reflected in stratified neighbourhoods and neighbourhood schools (Charles, 2003; Massey, 2009; Oakes & Stuart Wells, 2004). That contrasting picture of opulence and sheer poverty among students often mirror that gulf: “Individual and neighborhood poverty builds wall around schools and classrooms” (Anyon, 2005, p. 70). Charles’ neighbourhood study (2003) finds that White children frequently live in wealthy neighbourhoods endowed with good schools; while Black and other minority children frequently live in impoverished neighbourhoods and attend overcrowded schools with limited resources. Poverty and the lack of security are important backdrops that influence some adolescents’ choices, and identities (Ball et al., 2000, p. 5). Disparities in student experiences and uneven distribution of school resources were therefore, the order of the day, when the 8 young people decided to concentrate on their schools. The characteristics and the structure and culture of schools the 8 young people attended and illustrated in this chapter inevitably shaped their schooling experiences: “school effects are entangled and enmeshed in an ever-expanding array of formal and informal experiences” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 123).

Participants’ definition of schooling generated a host of relevant issues, including the small size of student population described later by Liam, Jessica, and Sheila (see below), quality of the programs (including Erika’s narration on IB) offered and academic engagement, extracurricular activities, group work with peers, student culture, and relationships with teachers.

Both Erika and Jessica attended Catholic schools; however, Erika’s school was a co-ed school in one of the affluent suburbs with 2,000 students. The school year was divided into two full semesters. The school offered the following programs: extended French, co-op education, and ESL, including IB, and a very well-known athletic program. The popular student
extracurricular activities in the school are the student newspaper, yearbook, and the peer ministry. In its mission statement the school does not talk about excellence, but about creating a better world by educating adolescents. Like any other Catholic school student in the province, including Jessica, Erika wore the school uniform.

Erika described her Catholic school as “very racially divided and divided by class.” The school itself was in a wealthy area. Yet the area had pockets of poverty. So the students were divided by their class. “If I could, I would take my high school out of the bubble,” this former IB student quipped. The division among academic, IB, applied, and ESL, and French immersion students in Erika’s high school made her ponder: “We had so much to deal with and figuring out who we wanted to be.” Like many middle class parents, she said her parents, however, sent her to that high school equally because of the prospect of their daughter getting a good education and because of the school’s reputation for being a safe school, where Erika would be safe from the “wrong” crowd (see also Taylor & Woollard, 2003, p. 625). She acknowledged that it was her high school and its social and cultural processes that shaped who and what she had become; very much like Sheila, her following comments showed how she internalized the privileging beliefs (see also Luther & Latendresse, 2002):

I strongly feel that I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t gone to my high school. And it influenced me or made me exactly who I am today. The only problem was that I graduated not knowing how I had to be poor. But it was the atmosphere, the feeling that I was a part of the majority (Because I never had that feeling before in my elementary school). That was an odd thing to say because I know I am White and belong to majority. But in my elementary schools I was never a majority (which I didn’t even realize).
Erika’s views about her fellow high school students were not always that favourable; she talked more like a teacher than someone who just graduated from the high school; when she said that she could not stand kids who wasted her time: “If you don’t want to learn, don’t come to the class. Kids can sometimes waste their and everybody’s time to their own demise.” Erika was also clearly against the excessive forms of handholding for academic students and expressed that so many leniencies did not help anyone in the end; instead, she said that school policies needed to be a lot stricter. Students must be told what they should do; “otherwise, they aren’t going to do it.” Her following views were in direct conflict with Liam’s plea for a student-centred school community discussed below:

Especially teenagers, they think that they run the world. There are kids who don’t want to go to class and if they went to class, they would screw everyone’s learning. I just don’t understand it.

Interviewer: You are still a kid though.

I guess I am not one of those kids who act like children.

Jessica’s inner city school building was falling apart; according to her, it was in bad need of funding to move to a new place, reflecting the quintessential woes of urban public education in the Western Hemisphere. Recently, in all developed and English speaking countries, diminishing support for education has overstretched every aspect of public schools’ lives. Urban schools are thus struggling to meet the multiple needs of students with scarce educational resources. They have been facing the most difficult challenges, as they are frequently swamped with poor, minority, and immigrant students (Artillis, 1996; Rong & Brown, 2002; Seashore Louis & Miles, 1990). For instance, in summer 2012, the cash stripped Ontario government and its austerity mantra hit the province’s school districts with unprecedented budget cuts in cafeteria
closing, cut in teachers’ professional development, and in maintenance and operation of school buildings. The front page article published in the Toronto Star suggests that the two biggest school districts in Ontario have been facing the budget “bloodbath” for 2012-13, while “accusing the Liberal government of not providing near enough funding for programs and services for schools and students” (Rushway, 2012, p. A1).

Jessica depicted her all-girl Catholic school as, “a pretty small and unique school; by the time I finished, we had 500 students” (Interviewer: Yes, gender segregation in high school isn’t that common here). The school was not very far from the undergraduate building where I was conducting the interview. Jessica mentioned that the school used to start at 8.30 and every morning with prayer and finished with prayer in the afternoon. It was owned by nuns and they actually lived upstairs. Jessica explained the multicultural student population of her school:

Our teachers had to be Catholic, but because it was a public school, students came from all walks of religion, Muslims, Jew or Hindu. . . .It was very multicultural. But the school’s student population was divided by race. And we had too many drama queens in school and a lot of time fights broke out between them. [laughs]

The school has had its fair share of now-you-see-it and now-you-don’t policy changes incurred by the succession of administrators. The old principal was in the school for about 10 years, Jessica said that students had good relationships with the administration then; but things changed after the arrival of the new principal, who came from a bad school: “She introduced unnecessary strict policies that didn’t make sense to me, other students, and even to teachers. You simply couldn’t talk to her.”

Jessica labelled her school as “really academic and a great school.” The school’s extracurricular activities mostly involved multicultural clubs as well as sports teams. She knew
everybody in her grades; however, she claimed that “the school was segregated – very much separated by race. As well, you were separated because of the clubs and the friends you made there.”

Jessica did not claim that she was involved in changing any school policies. Yet in her last year of high school, she and some of her peers were able to convince the administration not to cancel the AP Physics course because of low enrolment. Very much like Liam and Sheila, she credited her school’s small size for her sense of belonging there; she became confident in her abilities because the school educators were confident that the school students would do well in life after high school. She talked about developing her capabilities through the nurturing of her school’s social networks and the watchful eyes and “intervention of protective agents” like teachers (see Arriaza, 2003, p. 72; Putnam, 2000).

Lee did not conceal her disappointment with the secondary school system and clarified how her dignity was compromised in school every day: “As international students, we paid a lot of money; yet the principal and vice principals tried to kick us out from the school.” Lee described her high school as “very academic school.” Basically, in this very “Asian school full of Chinese and Korean students” student life was segmented; it was “divided in Black, White, Asian kids’ sections. Sometimes fights broke out between groups.” Students’ drug problems were not considered as “big deals; although some kids were stoned.” She did not think that the school was strict at all; she did not have that much homework, except math. Lee left that school in Grade 12 and went to a private school, but talked only about that public school in the focus group and interview. She seemed to be aware of the stereotype in Western education systems that painted Asian students as model minority students (Healey, 2007; Lee, 1994; Tan, 2000). Her take on this matter was quite pragmatic; she said that “we (Asians) do well in school because we
come from families that have faith in education.” For example, it was her grandmother who insisted that she should learn English and study in an English speaking country like Canada.

Very much like Lee, Liam left his big public high school for a small alternate school in Grade 12. Compared to his previous public high school with 2,000 students, the alternate school had about only 200 students. “It was such a small school that you kind of knew everyone,” said Liam.

Liam who described himself as someone who thinks “out of the box” described the school as an ideal establishment in terms of its different structure and culture. Besides its small class sizes, the school hour was longer (8 am to 4 pm); students had an hour long tutorial for each class; so the school was trying to structure the classes like universities. Liam recalled that teachers used dry materials for tutorials; for example, grammar for English classes; and the classes would cover the material/content. And in terms of evaluation, teachers were more interested to see how much “students contributed to the school community, classrooms, and created a positive school environment.” Liam recognized that teachers did not waste time on small questions and fill out the blanks stuff: “It was more of higher-order learning throughout; so essays, thesis statements dominated the learning discourse.” According to Liam, the current structure only works for certain students; who need to be pushed: “However, the school needs to be democratized and where self-directed learning should be encouraged.”

Mehdi’s West-end high school was situated in a low-income and mostly immigrant neighbourhood. Although Mehdi’s neighbourhood school was “up the street” and is even included in her sketch, she did not go to that high-tech focused school, recognized by the district as one of “the neediest secondary schools.” Instead, she went to a nearby collegiate school; the school’s website claims it has been “recognized nationally and internationally by many
universities.” The school offers advanced placement courses in all subject areas and is “currently ranked first among all public schools in Ontario.” Over 80% of the school graduates go on to university or college.

Mehdi, however, reflected that her “high school was in a rough area with a lot of gun violence. So I had a lot of friends who died in high school. They didn’t have to go through that.” She also pointed out that the school “was located in a predominantly Black community.” The school has about thousand students, who, according to the school website, “come from over 15 feeder schools and represent an unbelievable mix of cultures and experiences.” The school’s website recognizes that “School is not just about books and memorization, it is also about learning life skills, making friends and discovering one’s true self. Mehdi admitted that in her high school students mingled with each other. However, she also recognized “the presence of cliques” in her school community.

Despite the school’s claim that it wants all students “to enjoy coming to school each and every day in order to learn and to better themselves.” Mehdi disclosed that she was once accused by the VP in front of the class of stealing a school camera which she returned but later learned that it was misplaced. The camera incidence made her realize that certain educators “look at you in a certain way. I think that needs to be changed.” Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1970) seminal work concurs with Mehdi’s critical contention and argues that educators are the finished products of schools’ reproduction systems, and they in turn, keep school reproduction alive. Mostly middle class and White educators’ perceptions of students are not devoid of their own class, race, and ethnicity (see Kelly, 1993; Phelan et al., 1992). Not only do they seem to expect less of some students academically, but also of their social network discussed before (see Cooper, 2011). Taking a parallel stand with Liam, furthermore, Mehdi questioned the hidden
administrative rules that “this is a smart kid and so that kid wouldn’t do that. We should all be looked at as high school kids.” She also said that the vice-principal accused her because of her peer group demographics, as she “hung out with Black kids” who were not as academically successful and because she had a Black boyfriend: “If I were one of those kids who they were chummy with, they wouldn’t blatantly accuse me of stealing a camera.”

Mehdi also described the school facilities as “really old. The school itself has been around for really long and not much has changed about the school since then.” The school washrooms were run down with broken stalls. The science classrooms had the tale-tale sign of decay with old wooden tables. The only new facilities of the school were the “large gym and swimming pool.” Those two facilities “did not belong to the school” and students did not always have easy access to them.

Mehdi recalled that the school had extremely old and out-dated computers. Most often they would break down:

In my last year, they did get a couple of new computers in the library. But again I remember going to the library so often to take print out of my work and to use specific computers that were able to read my hard disk drive. It got to the point where I always just knew which computers to go to because only specific ones worked. There weren’t enough computers.

Mehdi’s high school, however, had influenced her to be more organized. Moreover, she recognized that her school could use the much needed presence of a counsellor/psychologist who students could talk to when they were “stressed out about difficult issues. We had that in middle school and everybody took use of that figure.” High school life, especially Grade 12 was very
stressful for her, because her parents always expected the best from her: “my mother always got 100% in high school; so she expected the same from me.”

Mehdi was the only one in this study who talked about the bridging program; it was called “Academic Bridging.” In order for her to be accepted into the university as a part-time student, she needed to take that course in her first year of university. The course provided her with a critical outlook and helped her with writing skills, “I found it extremely helpful as it gave me the tools to better transition from a high school to a university life,” she said.

Noor’s 40-year-old school has managed to maintain its reputation for delivering excellent programs to diverse student population. Academic excellence, arts participation, and community service were some of the significant and recognized school foci. Students were encouraged to contribute to the school community through school teams, clubs, community service projects, and extensive art program. Noor depicted the high school as a “diverse school in terms of the student body. We had 75% of immigrant students and it was really multicultural. Half of the school’s student population were Asians.” However, she did not think students were that involved in the school community. Speaking of some of the positive features of her high school, Noor described a relatively fight-free environment: “If we saw the police, we were like what just happened here!” Occasionally, when the fights broke out, they were generally between different ethnic groups, for example, between Asians and Blacks. Most of the fights were verbal like swearing, and cursing.

Later almost at the end of the interview, Noor wished that she had more power and connection to change her school into a more friendly school for multicultural students. She said that if she could get a second chance, she would be more involved in school life and maintain closer relationships with the school administrators, because:
They were distant from our student life and their distance made our student lives harder. I wanted to make a difference in newcomers’ school lives. I also wanted to be recognized in the school because of substance/who I was and not because I looked different.

Salma said that her goal in life was to become a professional. So she looked at her high school as a stepping stone to reach that goal: “Obviously, having friends also made me go to school every day. Especially, I remember the lunch time, when we used to hang out with each other.” The school eventually turned into an arts school and have had frequent concerts. As symbolically illustrated by Salma, it was a pretty diverse but segmented school:

We had doors in the school where different ethnic kids used to hang out and were named as the White door, Black door which was the main door, and the Gino door. That was how we identified the school doors.

Salma was the only one who mentioned bad and greasy food in her school cafeteria; so “it wasn’t used very much.” The community police were frequently around and were friends with students: “They were there not because of the fight but because of the drug problem among the White kids.” She described the school principal “ok” but the VPs as “really bad.” They brought in so many changes in life.” Students would literally boo when one VP would talk. Salma painted a disconnected school life that did not make much of a difference in students’ lives:

The administrators in our school tried their best to scare us, but nobody took them seriously ever. I wanted to trust our administrators, and I wanted them and teachers to be more involved in our school life. They should be the big part of high schools. Having good teachers could have been a bonus and we didn’t have too many of them.
As mentioned before, Sheila went to a pretty small private and university-prep high school with very academic and competitive students. She credited her school size and culture for belonging in the school community: “You knew everybody’s business; you knew what was going on with everybody. I was really involved in school business.” The school offered primary, junior-intermediate, and university entrance level education. Teachers in the school were described by Sheila as caring and subject experts. School wide, there was a recognition that the right mix of caring and teaching ability worked in students’ favour, as their full potential was nurtured in a safe teaching environment. Classes were kept small; so that students could be engaged in classroom participation and teachers could monitor students’ progress. Sheila said “My graduating class had 136 kids.” According to her, skipping classes was impossible in school: “I didn’t know how, because you get suspended from the school for skipping classes.” Parents also monitored their children’s school performances by checking the school diary sent to home by teachers. Sheila developed her emotional intelligence skills in the school’s sports teams; they taught her “how to work with people with different personalities and that you still had to work with people even if you didn’t like them.” Sheila summed up her high school experience with a very positive note:

As much as I want to say that I don’t want to go back and relive my high school experience; I really enjoyed my high school life. I very much appreciate the help I got from friends and teachers.

It is also important to keep in mind that neither Sheila nor Erika expressed any negative opinion about school administrators.
“Having a small class was important to me”:

Liam and the School Size

Some researchers argue that secondary schools need to be made smaller to allow closer relationships between students and their teachers. Since most secondary teachers meet with more than hundred students daily, many students remain nameless and faceless to their teachers (Lee, 2000; Ready et al., 2004). Liam who transferred to a small alternate school from a large secondary school decided to focus on his high school class size: “Having a small class was important to me.” Knowing the reality in this province, I was curious, it was one thing to have a wish list; it was another thing to get it. So I asked him whether he was placed in small classes in his high school. At the public high school, he described his classes comprised with usual 20–30 students from the provincial standard of class size. At the alternate school, however, his class sizes were significantly reduced to 10–15 students. Liam said that “reduced numbers made a huge difference in terms of the quality of education, actual connection with teachers, and other students” [laughs]. It was such a small school, everybody kind of knew everybody; therefore, unlike his former large public high school, students’ invisibility was not an issue. Most students in the alternate school were from mixed European descent, including the 50 Grade 12 students. Liam recalled that the school did not have so much segregation; all spaces were public spaces:

At lunch time, you can sit with any one and strike up a conversation pretty easily. Whereas at my former high school, the biggest divide was between the White and Asian kids. And compared to my former high school, the students and teachers were more accepting of my learning styles of asking critical questions. We were much more involved in classroom participation and the materials covered were much more in-depth.
The International Baccalaureate (IB) and Academic Programs:
An Introduction

Secondary schools offer many programs to students, in effect, serving the multiple purposes of high schools. Powell et al. (1985) observe similarity between secondary schools’ various special programs and specialty shops. For example, higher-streamed programs for international baccalaureate, gifted or academic students deal with demanding subjects; teachers in those programs hardly ever have to deal with student disengagement and discipline issues (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Middle class, highly educated, enterprising, and affluent parents put their full support behind these programs because they know their kids benefit from these advanced programs. While applied or vocational programs provide work bound students with significant work experience in auto body, cosmetology, and cooking, and many others. In general, most clientele of voc/tech programs are different from the top-track programs (see Oakes, 1990). Higher-streamed programs prepare students to take on leadership skills, responsibility, and cooperative work spirit (Peshkin, 2001; Reich, 1992). Higher-streamed students also describe their curriculum as “fun, interesting, and challenging” (Kelly, 1996, p. 297).

Academic Students’ Engagement

Students’ mere presence in the classroom does not really ensure their engagement in learning. A taken for granted and elusive concept, student engagement, according to Smith et al. (1998, p. 5), “is a relatively new expression in the educational literature and, as such, has no universally accepted meaning.” Similar to Gardner’s (1983) broad framework of multiple intelligence, the above authors argue that student engagement must be broadly understood. Two of their colleagues Portelli and Vibert (2001, p. 78) extend that argument and make a strong
connection with student engagement and Freire’s (1972) generative themes. Within their proposed setting, students’ engagement is directly related to their learning experience, both in their school community and the community they live in.

“The Expectation Kind of Floundered”:

**Erika and the IB Program**

The IB program originated in Europe and was initially intended for the children of foreign service employees and other international professionals posted abroad. The IB Diploma Programme has become one of the best advanced academic programs in secondary schools today in Canada and the United States. IB covers the last 2 years of secondary school, along with a series of international examinations in many disciplines. IB students need to study and examine in six different academic subjects (Sjogren & Campbell, 2003). IB and its strict college preparation curriculum with an international focus is often considered by middle class parents as an effective alternative program and public schools’ answer to elite private schools. However, Sjogren and Campbell (2003) argue that IB is offered in all shapes and sizes of schools: public, private, small, large, rural, urban, suburban, comprehensive, and specialized.

IB program also appeals to students who perform extremely well in academic subjects (Gehring, 2001; Hammack, 2004; Mathews, 2002). IB students, therefore, are groomed for prestigious universities worldwide including Ivy League universities such as Harvard, Cornell, Yale or the bastions of academic traditions/famous campuses like Oxford, Cambridge, Heidelberg, or Sorbonne (Kraemer et al., 1999).

Erika’s Catholic high school was in an upper class area and offered IB program; however, Erika only mentioned European schools “IB prepares you to go to European schools.” According to Kraemer et al. (1999), students join IB program to better prepare themselves for an
academically demanding college or university. Erika seemed to agree with that view and informed that she joined the IB program because she wanted to go to Ireland for higher studies. Erika also said that she was always very academic and wanted to be in an environment with similar minded academic people: “I wanted to be surrounded by academic kids; so that if a teacher was teaching, I could hear him/her.” Later in her high school life, she decided not to go to Ireland for higher education and instead went to the academic program.

The IB program is so openly college-university oriented that one cannot help but wonder whether the idea of going to prestigious schools consumes IB students’ entire high school lives. So I asked Erika whether her IB classmates were obsessed with the academic life after high school. She nevertheless said:

In IB, you are expected to work hard; yet some kids didn’t work hard at all and some even dropped out of the pre-IB program, which wasn’t hard at all. It is just that you expect more from the IB program and unfortunately, that expectation kind of floundered. There were some kids who were very focused. Others were into partying a lot.

IB programs, in general, epitomize comprehensive and rigorous academic lives and are designed to maintain a balanced learning in both humanities and sciences (Kraemer et al., 1999). “One thing about IB is that you take advanced classes; IB is very math and science based; but I was not good in math and science.” said Erika (our conversation was interrupted here by a phone call from her mother). She also added that her preferred teaching subjects were not math and science, but religion and history. Erika recalled that the math teacher in Grade 9–10 held a clinic for pre-IB math every Thursday and prepared students for senior IB math. French was a different story. Erika left here a clue why she did not stick with the IB program: Unlike many other kids
who came from core French schools, she said that she did not have a strong background in French:

Yet there was very little scope for learning; teachers weren’t patient at all; they were rushing all the time. If you didn’t know something, they didn’t have the time or patience to teach you.

**Academic Programs and 7 Other Participants**

Although academic programs “vary from school to school in the ways they are organized, the number of courses they offer, and the intellectual and time commitments they require”; in general, they serve the most elite students (Powell et al., p. 118).

Mehdi described her school’s AP classes almost like the university classes: “We had web postings from which we had to take print out before we went to that 7:30 in the morning class. The teacher would put the slides in and we had to take notes.” However, she enjoys the university courses more than her high school AP classes. At the university, she has been working for herself and not to please anybody else. She reflected that she was going to high school for her parents and teachers: “So my care level just went down; because I was doing it for other people and not for myself.”

Unlike the biology class, Mehdi was doing well in her family studies class. The family studies teacher was the only teacher who checked her notebook when she was marking. Mehdi recognized that she was a good teacher and she told Mehdi that if she were interested to get in sociology, she would provide good recommendation letter for her. “I should have listened to her, instead I declined her offer because I was fixed on going to science,” Mehdi recalled.
Looking back, Jessica was critical of her academic program that often imposed knowledge upon her and her classmates through prepackaged lesson plans and lectures; her following comments showed her yearning for higher-order learning in high school; she said that “Although AP classes were supposed to cover university materials; except calculus, I didn’t see that happening in other courses such as, chemistry or biology.” Even though she confessed that the stuff she was learning in high school was very relevant for what she has been learning at the university; she said:

Material-wise, they prepared us for the university. But the way they were taught wasn’t. Teachers used to put overheads and ask us to copy everything. We didn’t have enough practice to takes notes from lectures, the way they are done at the university.

Jessica was also critical of the grade inflation and easy evaluations she received from her school, even the expertise of some teachers that she thought was detrimental for her to thrive at the university:

We had some teachers who were easy markers; that helped us to arrive here, but that didn’t help us in the end. In order to learn the materials and do well in class, you had to have a good teacher who knew exactly what he or she was doing. There were teachers who weren’t supposed to be teaching the specific classes. We had a gym teacher teaching science. She had a science degree, but she was teaching gym for 10 years. So we weren’t getting stuff from her that easily.

At the end of the interview, Jessica decided to reiterate her opinion about the knowledge gap between the higher-order learning at the university and rote learning at her high school. She questioned the age old hierarchical learning and structure that stifled her progression as a learner;
which hooks (1994, p. 15) argues as “well-being” of learners that happens only when they are empowered by teachers. Jessica reflected:

Now that I am out of my high school mind set, I will say this: Memorization was the dominant way we learned in high school. If your students are going to postsecondary institutions, let your students cut their own meat. Yes, in high school, there was always a fixed way of learning.

Liam’s description of the philosophy class in his alternate school was interesting to say the least and far removed from the spoon-feeding that Jessica was referring above; since he talked about a “fluid and interactive” curriculum (see Reich, 1992, p. 230). His teacher would give students a list of philosophers and ask them to choose one of the three texts (works) of the philosopher and discuss them in class. The whole assignment involved writing an essay and a class presentation. Liam chose Nietzsche; before the assignment, the teacher also gave him a short introduction (or a short profile) of the author, “which was very helpful.” Powell et al. (1985, p. 120) rightly describe higher-order academic programs such as the one described by Liam above as “gruelling for both students and teachers.” The above program deliveries usually aim for more than mere “transmission of information”; the goal is to see learners’ “judgment and interpretation”. The learners are encouraged to defend their selection of chosen topics or authors, why they think their selection is important. Students learn “to examine reality from many angles, in different lights, and thus to visualize new possibilities and choices.” Students are evidently encouraged to be “skeptical, curious, and creative” (see Reich, 1992, p. 230).

When I asked what was important about the academic program, Liam answered without any hesitation, “Mostly the good teachers; they were the only reason for me to attend classes.” He then narrated the story of one English teacher who did a unit on architecture and film,
especially, the urban architecture, the city and its bureaucracy, and the hegemony expressed through architecture: “We were watching great films on the subject (one of them was *1984*) and talking about them.”

Noor’s academic perspective changed when she came to Toronto. In Iran she was very science oriented. Yet she began to hate science once she was in a Canadian high school: “I felt that I couldn’t keep up with math and other science subjects. So I leaned toward social science.” Because she stayed in high school an extra year more, she took many social science related courses and she loved them, especially, law.

All of Lee’s courses in her public school were media arts related. She said that she also “loved volunteer[ing] disabled kids.” The co-op course was with the city’s largest TV company and “it was an amazing experience for me. I did news, parenting and night shows.” As well, she gained experience in camera, lighting, and prompting. She was also a teaching assistant for the ESL class. Lee did not receive that much of teachers’ individual attention because of the large size of the public school classes: “Once I went to the private school, I received one-on-one attention from teachers,” she said.

Salma indicated that she chose courses all by herself and her dad only signed on the form; she said that she experimented with some of the courses just “for the fun of it” and then dropped out of them, such as, music and violin. The lack of guidance, including Salma’s indecisiveness, and her inexperience to select the right courses reflected the empirical findings that first generation students whose parents did not go to university often choose the wrong courses (McDonough, 1997). Salma supported that view and said that she had her parents’ struggle in mind when she was working hard in high school. She was in a small French class where students worked together, organized, and participated in many mini-presentations. Although she did not
like the gym, she was forced to take it in her junior years. She was not against the active lifestyle but said, “When you were in school and all sweaty from playing a game and then changing and going to your next class weren’t that fun for me.” However, like Noor, she took law and liked it; she described both law classes as:

fun and had very good teachers; who were very young and enthusiastic about the stuff they were teaching. One of the teachers was very quiet, but her comments were hilarious. I could relate to those interesting teachers.

**Extracurricular Activities**

Extracurricular activities in school can effectively connect students with their life world (Freire, 1998a; Smith et al., 1998). Adolescents’ sense of belonging in their high schools is also deepened by extracurricular activities (Mahoney et al., 2003).

Erika said that her high school life was full of extracurricular activities; she played rugby; she was in the peer ministry group (organized the Christmas food and present drive) and leadership program (in Grade 11, she was involved in running a Grade 9 orientation leadership camp), and musicals. Through the above extracurricular activities, Erika bonded and made long lasting friendship with some of her best friends (see also Barber et al., 2001). She even referred to the shared values between her and her friends. Similarly, Jessica and Sheila commented that through the school extracurricular activities they made friends with like-minded peers (see also Eccles, 2004). Erika described her experience playing rugby in the following way:

In Grade 10, I joined the rugby team with a friend. Grade 10 was one of the best years of my school life. The game which I don’t play anymore was very painful to play. The team members and the coach were very welcoming. The coach wanted us to have fun and play not because we had to win. However, I liked to win all the time. It taught me the team spirit as I was interacting with not only the kids of my
own age, but also older kids. I only played for 2 years. But I went back to help the team out in Grade 12. Once you were a part of a team, I guess you couldn’t just leave.

Jessica’s extracurricular agenda in high school sounded overwhelming as she was in so many clubs and activities: cultural club for ethnic groups, film club, drama club, and leadership club. Cultural club taught her how to dance; she had been dancing all 4 years of high school. Film club just vanished over the years. She said that the leadership club was a coveted program in the school; everybody wanted to be a member of the club. It was the leadership club that made her an inner member of her high school:

Every year, we would get together with 14 other schools of the district and we would go to ___ for a 3-day leadership camp. Last year, we actually ran it and I was in the council that year. That taught me a lot. They put me in charge of the home group going. I was in charge of 33 girls. I was also counselling students during the weekends. Because of this experience, I am no longer shy and afraid of speaking in public. In fact, I wouldn’t be talking to you this uninhibited in Grade 9. I remember when we first met, you said I was very quiet; but today I am not as shy as I was before.

Barber et al. (2001) are in accord with Jessica’s above comment and argue that extracurricular activities reinforce students’ self-esteem and interpersonal skills. Jessica acknowledged that a lead role in a school play helped her open up in public.

Lee, on the other hand, disclosed that she did not take any extracurricular activities.

The lack of physical activities was taking its toll on Liam’s dormant university life. “I learned that physical activities are good for both your mind and body”; he sounded like Sheila when he said that playing makes one feel closer to other people and communicate with them at
an intimate level. So he was on his public school’s rugby, Frisbee, and chess team. He took them to release tension. Liam’s alternative school did not have a sport team, but he was with a chess team.

Mehdi’s high school website maintains that “We are very proud of the extensive extracurricular program” at the school. Apart from the student council, the school has a large number of clubs; students are engaged in athletics, drama productions, and music nights. However, Mehdi only took part in her school’s Black history club in Grade 12 and that was her only extracurricular engagement in high school.

In Noor’s first year of high school, she did not even know that her school had so many clubs. However, in Grade 10, she joined the choir group and Project Equity. In Grade 11, she became the head of the newcomers’ club.

Academic students, including IB, are often criticized for milking the grade-grubbing and being obsessed with college applications; whenever students “thought about getting involved in sports or school activities, they considered first how it would look on their college applications” (see Powell et al., 1985, p. 122). Noor was the only one who admitted the existence of the above practice, but denied its influence on her; instead, she recognized that she learned to take a lot of responsibilities when she became the head of the newcomers’ club:

Basically, we used to have weekly meetings and our goal was to make newcomers of the school to be more connected with the school community. We used to watch a lot of movies in order to improve the new students’ speaking skills. I had to cope with different people and with their different situations in life. I didn’t do it to gain a title and for the sake of applying to a university. I did it because I thought I would be good at that job.
Noor was also a part of the ESL debate club; where she with other ESL students would debate on different topics, from economics to school uniform. In the first year of Project Equity, she said that the emphasis was learning about what was happening in school and “what concerned us.” But then the project got extended and for example, Noor and other project members collected money to build a well for an East African community. Noor also said that “I would never miss a choir practice on Wednesday; that was my absolute favourite” [laughs]. Last year, she joined the Green Council to make her school greener. In that environmental project, Noor and other involved students cleaned the school and its ravine, and managed the school’s recycling program.

Finally, Noor had introduced and organized Farsi New Year in her school. She wanted a title for that activity; unfortunately, she didn’t get that: “I wanted to show the people from my own community how it should be done. I thought why should there be only Chinese New Year celebration; why not Farsi New Year?”

Salma joined the ESP (empowered student partnership) club to get community policing in school and to make the school environment friendly. Yet she confessed that her involvement did not go far beyond making greeting cards: “We didn’t really do much other than valentinograms and halweengrams; that’s all we did.” She also joined a culture club in Grade 12 and organized a bake sale.

Sheila’s plate was more than full with responsibilities during her high school days; she was the co-captain of Trinity’s basketball team, was on the roster of the volleyball team, and was the captain of the rugby team, and the co-captain of the senior basketball team. She was on the executive committee of the school’s cultural show and a part of the yearbook committee. Those leadership roles helped her to step up and teach people, she said (after a pause) “You come to the
understanding that you are a role model to people; they looked up to you. So I didn’t goof up and set examples for tomorrow’s leaders.” In Grade 10, she was on the executive committee of the cultural show. Sheila described that as “a huge event. We had to organize three cultural shows from different nations.” She explained that there was one girl who barely did anything for the cultural show. She could not stand her but she had learned to “keep my mouth shut and just kept on doing what I was supposed to do; I learned to work with people I didn’t even like.”

Sheila worked for the Habitat for Humanity and she and her peers built houses in Zambia. Her extracurricular commitment on the yearbook committee was not that big, but it taught her how to meet the deadline:

My two best friends were the heads of the committee. So if I didn’t do my part, they would be very forgiving. It taught me to consider another career path - to be a journalist. But it was hard work; if you didn’t do your part, you disappointed everybody. It taught me to take responsibility for my own action and to know that everything I did would affect people around me. So I learned that I should not only consider myself, but others too.

**Group Work**

Progressive education or critical pedagogy demands more from teachers, who are expected to focus on relationship building and discourse generation with their students (hooks, 1994). Dialectical constructivism is far-reaching than method-centred learning (Vygotsky, 1978); particularly, in academic classes in which collaboration is important. Reich (1992, p. 233) argues that group learning is quintessential today as students learn to negotiate with others and learn to accept others’ ideas:
Students learn to articulate, clarify, and then restate for one another how they identify and find answers. They learn how to seek and accept criticism from peers, solicit help, and give credit to others.

While talking about the academic program, Mehdi decided to focus on the group work in her Grade 12 academic class. She said that she ended up doing all the work for the group. When she told the teacher about it she understood it, but did not do anything more than that. Monitoring group work has not always been easy for high school teachers; teachers discover that students’ individual performances are easy to evaluate than their group work (see Reich, 1992). Group work in high school has been a contentious issue for students from low-income and immigrant families; they often experience being unheard, marginalized, and removed or ignored from classroom discourses (Cohen et al., 1995).

In her AP biology class, Mehdi worked with others in the lab, but there was no group work in actual assignments. “In that class, I didn’t receive any help from my classmates. They were even reluctant, if I asked them to clarify any question for me. They were like, ‘You are cheating,’” she said. However, she was not trying to cheat; she just wanted them to explain the question to her. Her academic classes were opposite; students were more open and they interacted with other people and were ready to help. “I think I did poorly in the AP class because I didn’t have any peer help,” she added. Reich (1992, p. 233) claims that the significance to “achieve a consensus are not usually emphasized within formal education.” On the contrary, the emphases are on “quiet and solitary performance of specialized tasks. No talking! No passing of notes! No giving one another help!”

In Sheila’s private school, however, learning to work together, communicating abstract task results, and arrive in an agreement (see Reich, 1992) were emphasized by educators.
repeatedly. She said that her school prepared people to do “group work and prepared one person to take charge. They prepared you for time management and group work to give you a sense of the upcoming university life.” Sheila said her friends helped her with academic work.

Salma acknowledged that she participated in group work, but that was not her first choice. She preferred to work all by herself. The fact that she was forced to do group work struck a chord with Hargreaves’ (1994) much discussed notion of contrived collegiality. Salma then clarified that she did not like group work because her “ideas weren’t taken seriously by her peers. Besides, some people weren’t serious about group work, at all.”

Noor’s academic classes had both individual and group work assignments. Highly expressive Noor, on the other hand, was often afraid to speak in her academic class. When she was in the ESL classes, she used to have the courage to talk in public and she talked quite a lot in class, but her academic class was a different story:

I knew that if I made a mistake, it wouldn’t be a big deal and other ESL class mates would understand, because they used to make a lot of mistake too. But I had hard time opening my mouth in Grade 11 academic classes.

Cohen et al. (1995) illustrate a real-life classroom situation of a low-status student who is looked down by his peers and is expected not to contribute in group tasks because of his low academic achievement, immigrant status, ethnicity, and of course, his accent. Academic status is the determining factor of how a small group of students behave with their peers. Grades, teachers’ evaluations, competency to read out loud in the reading groups, are all evidences of where individual students academically stand in their peers’ eyes. Race and ethnicity influence how students will be treated on a group work; Whites and Anglos are “more active and influential” than Blacks or Mexicans (Cohen et al., 1995, p. 20).
No wonder, Grade 11 was such a difficult year for Noor. She had hard time making connection with other academic students; basically she was very intimidated by some of them. Noor was also eloquent about her difficulty in ESL classes; she sounded a great deal like Lee when she said, “I was an outgoing person, yet because of my language situation, I couldn’t interact with anyone,” she added, “So that year, I really was very quiet in group works with very little or no speaking. I really enjoyed the group work if I liked the group.” But usually in high school, students do not choose their groups; students are generally assigned to certain groups by the teacher. Yet Noor questioned teachers’ decisions saying that their choices did not always work: “I would give you an example; among the five of us in one group, only two of us did all the work. Yet we were all given the same marks.”

Student Culture in Eight Schools

School culture cannot be described in the singular form; schools have many cultures and subcultures. We also know that schools have at least two dominant cultures: one for adults (administrators, teachers, and non-teaching staff), and one for students; cultural practices for adolescents ought to be different from adults (Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sarason, 1996).

Erika informed that not every student belonged in her high school community. Student lives were separated by race and ethnicity as well as status as preppy, popular, and that the people “who were really involved, were White. And you definitely had a sense who were involved and who weren’t.” Many students hated people in school because of the in-fighting between groups. Student life in her school was so divided but at times it could also be united. According to Erika, the school area itself was a problem: “It was in such upper class area.” High school students frequently do not hesitate to flaunt their parents’ wealth in how they dress, drive expensive cars, and carry gizmos; Erika was visibly bothered by that overindulgence and
remarked that “Many kids were so entitled to things. It often bothered me that it was like a melting pot; everyone was wearing the same clothes, carrying the same purse.”

Describing the student life of her school, Jessica said that most students were involved with the school life and clubs. Their mingling was based on the courses and clubs they went to. Furthermore, friendship was divided by people’s ethnicities. The student council was not always a success story because sometimes bad people were elected. Jessica included: “And when a fight broke out, it was really bad. I remember most of them were in-group fighting.”

Liam portrayed the student body of the alternate school’s as “entwined with the education that was taking place.” While the school did not have many extracurricular activities, students were still contributing to events, school programs, and the learning environment. He also mentioned town halls that were taking place every week:

Basically we all gathered in one room; we would talk about issues, such as lateness or a memorable one, drug use (as some students were showing up high in class), chosen by teachers or students; as long as they were approved by the administration. Those meetings were not confrontational at all; people were always very respectful to each other.

On the contrary, Liam was very “pessimistic” about the event-oriented student life of his former public high school. He and his friends were always questioning school events; “even . . . I am ashamed to say, the Black history month. They never made a difference in my life.” He could never buy into even those assemblies; which were supposed to be about school spirit. However, in his alternate school, the year round events were tied to their daily conversations and activities in class, and created a forum school-wide, and they kind of made sense to him: “They were really rewarding learning experiences.”
In North American multicultural high schools, these days it is taken for granted that school staffs will “routinely hear Spanish, Portuguese, Creole, Chinese, Hindi, Russian, Arabic, and more in the hallways” (Sizer, 2004, p. xiii). For example, Liam’s former public high school was a very Asian school; more than 50% of its students were Asians. It was a school rife with newcomers coming from non-English speaking Asian countries and with very limited English language skills (Interviewer: So did they mingle or did they keep themselves to themselves?). “They were speaking Chinese: Mandarin, Cantonese to each other in class, cafeteria, halls and almost everywhere,” answered Liam. Some of his friends even felt excluded by Asian students’ usage of Chinese language in class.

Moreover, presenting a picture of monolithic school culture where adolescents were treated like back seat riders, Liam claimed that he never experienced democratization of education in high school. He did not think that the SAC (students’ activity council) had any real power. Although, occasionally they were trying to make petitions to remove a teacher, or form an assembly; their whole operation only involved planning of events. Despite having some good writers, the high school newspaper was never vocal against school administrators, policies, and teachers. “Yet they were supposed to be the trouble-makers,” Liam lamented. However, he put the onus on students’ shoulders, including on his own and wondered why high school students never wanted to take charge of their education:

I wonder why. They never did question the power gap between administrators, teachers, and students. High schools are so compartmentalized; students have to find their way in . . . you know what I think? We need more small sized alternate schools, where students could be recognized as individuals. In our broken school systems, some of the brightest get totally lost.
Weick (1976, pp. 1–19) defines schools as “loosely coupled” organizations. Historically however, normative institutions like schools have never acted as change agents or models of democracy. Liam and Mehdi were the only 2 participants who condemned the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of high schools. Liam acknowledged that students were at the bottom layers of the school power equation and were persistently kept out of the decision-making process. He rejected the authoritarian school structure and culture that did not allow any communication between students and administrators. One of the negative impacts of that rigid anti-democratic stance, according to Liam, was students’ silence: “Arguing against any kind of policy or a teacher or administrator seemed useless because of the hierarchical nature of school; because they didn’t care about students’ voices.”

Approving of Liam’s perspective above, Mehdi flatly denied that she had a say in her school life. She said that she belonged to a popular group: “My friends were pretty social people; I wasn’t; I belonged in the background.” Students, however, mingled with each other in Mehdi’s school: “We all knew the school jocks, popular kids, and nerds,” but agreeing with Noor below, she added that students who were excelling in school with distinct academic identity had more voice in school matters than other kids: “They were the ones who were more involved and friendly with administrators and teachers.”

Students were not that involved in Noor’s high school community because she said that it was “a very academic school and students were so busy in their studies.” Noor was not alone, Powell et al. (1985, p. 121) likewise cite a regular teacher who commented that academic students studied so much that they did not participate in extracurricular activities and were “not very well rounded.” Concurring with Liam, Noor proclaimed that SAC did not make that much difference in students’ lives. As stated before that she added a new dimension to academic
students’ extracurricular activities by a very incisive observation that some students were only involved with clubs because they wanted to put that in their resume or the university application. Noor’s following argument matched also with Mehdi since she said that those who ran the SAC, nevertheless, had the special kinds of relationships with teachers and administrators: “If they wanted something, they would get it. If you had connection you had more influence on school life (Interviewer: You are talking about power dynamics of academic students’ lives here). Yes, I guess, I do,” Noor answered.

As well, Salma said that individual students had very little say in her school community. Students basically stayed away from school matters: “Our school even had problem selling tickets for assemblies. There was no school spirit. No one really cared that much.” Her depiction of five SAC members made of friends sounded like the gang of five: “Those five people were elected and ran things.”

According to Sheila, some kids just hated her high school because of its hard academic life, “and some kids just did not care.” The school also had to deal with drugs and alcohol problems among some students. “The school life was very competitive because major scholarships had to be won; kids knew what was at stake,” she said.

Teachers’ Places in Students’ Lives as Understood and Defined by Students:
Student-Teacher Relationships

Historically the reality about teacher-student relations has been difficult to identify because we either hear students’ or teachers’ sides of the story, or we hear from a researcher in search of evidence of good or bad teaching in a few observations (Rousmaniere, 1997). Teacher-student relationships are not built on a blank slate, after all. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970, p.
196) use the term “habitus” to describe teachers as both the products of the reproduction system and in turn, as key agents in institutionalizing reproduction.

Sheila fondly remembered that she became close to her high school teachers, especially the rugby coach. She was still in touch with her rugby coach who was also her English and philosophy teacher. Teachers in her school wanted students to do well and they really cared a lot about their students: “If you had any problem, they spent hours with you. It wasn’t just a job to them; they really wanted to make a difference in their students’ lives.” Perhaps the above kind of intimate and caring relationships with students became possible because of the small size of the upscale private school and perhaps teachers saw those affluent students from a different angle (see Rist, 1970).

IB teachers and department heads are expected to be top-ranking model educators. These educators receive enough backing in terms of “professional development opportunity” so that they become proficient in design, delivery of classroom instructions and evaluation of students’ progress (Kraemer et al., 1999, p. 118). Yet Erika was very critical of the frequent absence of her school’s IB department head, because of her administrative commitments to various conferences:

Our head of IB was not teaching at all. She gave us quite a few wrong and mixed information. She was never on top of anything. Our schedule was often messed up and she wasn’t flexible enough to change it. She was never there; she would be gone for weeks and we will be strangled, especially, during the exam or university application time in Grade 12. She wasn’t available for writing recommendation letters for our university applications. There was no way to be in touch with her. We were never told in advance that she would be absent for a long period of time. And if we asked other teachers, they would tell us that she had gone to a conference.
At the same time, Erika was very generous about other teachers in the IB program; she described them “helpful and understanding; they understood what we were going through and that we needed extra help.” A significant portion of IB class time was allotted to writing labs, specially, when their English papers were due; so that students could be editing and working. “Teachers would be in front of the class, editing, talking, and waiting after the class. They were preparing us since day one that it would get harder for us.” Erika did not talk about her father but a “passionate religion teacher” who inspired her to be a teacher and “to be exactly like her”:

My favourite teacher was my religion teacher in Grade 12. She was the reason why I want to be a teacher. She was known to be a tough teacher, but that was never a problem for me.

Feminist researchers claim that caring is quintessential to teaching (Noddings, 1992). In Lortie’s (1975) classic study, 76% of the teachers interviewed suggested “psychic reward” was their major source of satisfaction that involved ‘reaching’ out to students and help them actualize their potential. However, the availability of these rewards can never be taken for granted, nor are they seen in abundance. Students’ failure, lack of desire, and non-cooperation are constant reminders for teachers that their aim has not been achieved (Hargreaves, 1994). Erika did not seem to be one of those students; she never skipped that “amazing” teacher’s classes; the teacher made them so interesting. She brought different articles every day; she had movies for students and she did not just rely on textbooks. Erika said that “Unlike many teachers who were very private, she was very open about who she was and shared her life experiences with us.” That religion teacher was very community oriented; she organized the Green Power, the school’s environmental project. She was responsible for Grade 12’s charity sales week; she also orchestrated the school’s productions all by herself. She was very involved in the organization of
the Christmas food drive and present drive every year. That teacher undoubtedly acted as a cultural broker for students like Erika by creating connections across (Cooper, 2011) her life worlds and the school world.

The religion teacher was “very strict as well as very understanding.” Some of Erika’s classmates went through rough times at home. The religion teacher would send the homework down when requested and she would try to talk to them. Erika’s following comment may spark the other side of student-teacher relationships – far from the emotional angle and held students’ inertia responsible for the lacklustre relationship: “The kids weren’t very responsive but you could see that she would try to pull them out of their shell.” Then Erika decided to share a personal story about her favourite teacher:

My mother had cancer last year and she was the only teacher who knew about it. One day I had to skip classes. Next day when I came back, she asked me if my mom was doing okay and then she told me that she could give me an extension on my project but she also told me that wouldn’t help me in the long run. She was caring yet she taught me that despite all the personal problems, I needed to get my work done; I couldn’t use life’s difficulties and the fact that some people care as my crutch. It was important for me to work through the difficulties any way.

Students’ self-esteem is influenced by “significant others” such as parents, teachers, and peers. High school students have many reasons to comply with their teachers. Teachers’ powers over their students are widely acceptable and even a slight revolt on students’ part may raise eyebrows. Especially, academic students are eager to please their teachers as educators hold the reward and the future for their academic success (Metz, 1993). On the other hand, higher-streamed students only approve of teachers who “meet the expected standard of performance. Trying isn’t enough; teachers have to be able to deliver” (Powell et al., 1985, p. 123). Sizer
(2004, p. 3) argues that “Managing a high school classroom is a complex business” which requires sound knowledge about adolescents as well as “a firm grasp of the subject under study, and a thorough understanding about the accepted folkways and crafts of teaching.” Teachers who efficiently and smoothly run assignments and classroom with authoritative parenting style can also enhance students’ engagement and success (Eccles, 2004; Walker, 2008). That pressure is taxing on teachers, to say the least. Teachers have to go through hours of work preparing “lecture notes, write questions to guide class discussion, and turn to reference books to research issues. This, combined with reading and grading essays” left teachers with very little time for themselves, their families, and virtually with no social life (Powell et al., 1985, p. 123). In my Master’s thesis, I talked about the above problems as intensification of academic teachers’ lives (Raksit, 2006, 2003a).

Oblivious of the intensification of teachers’ working lives, Salma, Lee, Liam, and Noor expressed in their own ways concerns about bad teachers and the negative impacts of teachers’ actions on their academic lives and ultimately, academic identity building. Following are Liam’s comments about bad teachers:

And bad teachers? I could attend their classes, but couldn’t tolerate them. I never had any confrontation with them, but they made classroom environment so negative … [pause] I don’t know, I don’t want to say that I hated them, um but . . . [long pause] luckily, for me, minority of teachers were bad; I was never overwhelmed by them [laughs].

In his alternate school, Liam had three teachers for six courses; so he knew all of them quite well. He described a female creative writing teacher in positive terms: “I really liked the way she organized her classes with very engaging activities.” (Interviewer: How so?). For
example, Liam explained that the creative writing teacher would break up the classes in 20 minutes’ segments: 10 minutes of writing and 10 minutes of sharing students’ writing, then the next 20 minutes addressing the creative issues in writing, addressing certain topics, and 10 or 20 minutes for homework: “It was really fun; it definitely helped” (see also Patrick et al., 2003).

At his former public high school, Liam had a history-political science teacher who would explain everything from a Marxist angle, and principles of social justice. Other students considered him as an extremely biased parrot; Liam said that he differed with his peers on that matter and found a paradigmatic affinity with his mentor:

I don’t know [laughs] . . . I didn’t agree; I thought he was interesting and his critique made me understand Marx really well. Right now, I am studying equity; the focus of which so far is racism. But I often wonder which is more prevalent: classism or racism? Can we get rid of one if we eliminate the other?

Liam also spoke about a history teacher at his former public high school; who was fired because another teacher saw him having coffee with a student: “He wasn’t . . . [pause] like doing anything. He was a new teacher and was always interested to communicate with students one to one.” Anytime Liam was in the office, he could spend at least half an hour talking to him. He actually brought some new perspectives for Liam. That teacher made a difference in Liam’s life; not only did that teacher accept Liam as a student in his classroom but also as an individual by serving as his mentor at a crucial time in teenager Liam’s life; when the high school life lost its meaning for him. Liam felt frustrated that he was pushed to university and it did not feel right for him at that time. The history teacher was really open “about other options that were available for me, and he encouraged me to like explore the world. . . .It really helped me in a big way.” Liam followed the teacher’s advice and took a few years off between high school and university,
travelling and working. Although he admitted that getting back to the different world of university was not easy for him; for example, he was having trouble writing essays: “But I am getting over that hump now. And I found out that the resources here are very good too.”

Jessica was the only one who revealed her awareness of high school teachers’ difficult lives and expressed mixed views about teachers: “I knew that teachers’ lives weren’t easy at all and I appreciated my teachers.” She recognized that she had good relationships with teachers all through elementary to high school: “They all loved me because I was quiet and did my homework (Interviewer: You must have been a good student.); Jessica replied, “Well, I was. I remember one time my Grade 3 teacher gave me a kiss on the cheek” [laughs]. She also said that her teachers were the ones who brought her where she was today. At one point in her elementary school, when she thought her marks were not that great and she had no faith in herself; she went to a teacher and told her that she would be going to the applied program and “the teacher thought I was crazy. She also told me that I would be bored in applied classes.” By the time she went to the academic program, she realized that it was a good choice for her. Her favourite physics teacher also told her that he would not give her any option; she had to go to the AP classes. “So I had help from teachers all along,” she said.

Mehdi was going to high school for her parents and teachers; despite that, she confessed: “I never had that much relationship with my teachers as much as I probably should have.” She could not recall a teacher who made a difference in her life but considered the family studies, drama, and math teachers as her favourites; she was getting 95 in the math teacher’s class: “She (the math teacher) was concerned about me because I was sitting in the back and wasn’t mingling with others that well. She thought I had some problem.” [laughs]
Authors find the cultural gap between visible minority students and their middle class-
White teachers in urban schools is growing at an alarming rate (Exposito & Favela, 2003;
Futrell, 2000). Teachers in urban schools need to be well versed in local political economy,
culture of diversity, and the dynamics of urban family, community, and social service network
(Irvine, 2000; Oakes, Franke, Quartz, & Rogers, 2002). The reality however, is different; Nieto
(2000, p. 1) describes her experience as a Puerto Rican student in her school: How she had been
belittled by teachers who made her feel not so proud of her own ethnic identity, and that “there
was something wrong with us. We learned to feel ashamed of who we were, how we spoke, what
we ate, and everything that was different about us” (author’s own emphasis). Similarly, Gibson
and Bhachu’s ethnographic study (1991) on Punjabi students in rural California reveals that
despite the academic success of the Punjabi boys, they often were exposed to a hostile school
environment and subjected to ridicule, and even physical abuse.

Noor echoed with the above authors and said that she never particularly liked the French
teacher who gave her a zero on her first day in class. “I heard the rumour that she didn’t like
Iranian people that much. In the end, I managed to get good marks in that course. But I never
have had good relationship with her,” Noor said. In Gibson’s above study, like Noor (see below),
Punjabi students received the message loud and clear that India as a nation and Indian culture are
substandard compared to the US and US culture. Actually, except that French teacher, most of
Noor’s teachers were caring. 75% of students in her school belonged to ESL classes. Noor gave
the credit to ESL teachers for her success as an ESL learner and admitted that the high school
had to have a good ESL program. There was one ESL teacher though, who used to “bug” her
because of her nationality. She used to tell Noor that “Iran was the poorest and worst country in
the entire planet.” She was one of the reasons why one of her Iranian friends took off her hijab.
This passive reaction to school’s demand for conformity may camouflage hijab wearing girls’ negative experiences in schools. Researchers have warned us against labelling all immigrant children in the same category (Blair & Cole, 2000). As adolescents come from unique families and their unique rules, scholars acknowledge that how students negotiate in classrooms depends on students’ social capital or their “capacity to negotiate social borders and institutional barriers.” Students carry some sorts of “habits, understandings, skills and knowledge” as symbols of their social status, “which in turn mediate their social position” (Arriaza, 2003, p. 72). Noor’s ethnicity and religion intervened again when she focused on her interaction with the above teacher. Noor narrated:

In summer, that teacher would often ask, “Isn’t it hot? Don’t you feel hot with your scarf on”? Once I complained to the VP about her, but she said that no matter what happened, the school would be behind the teacher.

Noor also talked about a guidance teacher as a role model from her own community, who specifically looked after students from the Iranian community and made a difference in her life. That view of Noor resonates well with researchers who claim that minority teachers manage to establish positive relationships with minority students (Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Studies, however, have found that diversity among Canada’s teachers has not kept pace with the nation’s increasingly multicultural student populations. The teaching workforce in Canada mostly represents White and middle class communities (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

Like Noor above, Salma brought in the cultural affinity with teachers and its positive impacts on students. In Grade 11 she had a law teacher who was Greek: “Our cultures are pretty similar; I found that she was a lot like us; I don’t know. I felt very comfortable around her.” She
mentioned a math teacher who was a curriculum leader. He clearly wrote instructions and subject matters on the board. He waited patiently for students to finish writing; he was good at explaining, and making things clear to students. He took a year off. So another teacher replaced him, “he looked terrible.” His wife had a baby and he was absent from the school for a month without even telling students that he would be away. He could not even assign textbooks to the students. Then Salma spoke about an incompetent math teacher who always gave students the wrong answers:

With our math teacher, we always got deducted marks if we were submitting assignments late; even though he himself was the laziest teacher ever. The smart kids in the class always made fun of him and corrected him all the time.

Interviewer: How did he manage to remain in his job?

He dressed and looked professional but he wasn’t at all good at what he was doing. He would be more interested in talking about the current world events than math. He would say, “now that we got that out of way, let’s talk about what’s going on in the world.” He would actually use those exact words. [laughs]

Summary

In this chapter, schools came to the foreground when the 8 participants described how their identities in relation to their multiple worlds discussed in the previous chapters intersected with their academic identities. Participants’ accounts in the previous chapters provided enough evidence that their successful completion of high school depended on their family support (see the family and identity chapter), academic engagement, and school contexts (Conchas, 2002). Findings of the data showed that the structure and culture of high schools and particularly, their academic programs were differently conceptualized and summarized by the 8 academic stream students. Except Liam, Erika, Noor, and Mehdi, other participants were not aware of their special
privileges as higher streamed students. Participants’ schooling experiences and definitions
generated a host of relevant school issues, under the broad umbrella of structure and culture of
secondary schools, students’ experiences, including the class size, quality of the programs
offered and academic engagement, extracurricular activities, group work with peers, student
culture of the school, and relationships with teachers. Participants’ views about programs
included not only academic students’ views but also the former IB student Erika’s views about
the IB program.

**Discussion**

In this chapter, the 8 former high school students reflected in detail how the eight schools
they attended shaped their educational experiences, and in turn, young people’s academic
identities. While some participants like Erika, Jessica, Liam, and Sheila gave credit to their
schools for their academic success; 4 other students from immigrant families (including
international student Lee) had mixed views, as they talked about teachers’ and administrators’
low expectations, indifference, and discriminatory treatments. Benevolence in public education
may be an idealized concept in Canada and the United States; however, “poor, working class and
racialized student populations often experience a multitude of difficulties in their relationships
with schools” (Darder, 2005). As stated before, not all students belonged in the school
community and their schooling experiences were significantly different from one another (see
also Arnett, 2000). Although Sheila, Jessica, and Liam’s views came closer to scholars’
recommendations (Artillis, 1996; Lee, 2001) that schools need to be made smaller to allow closer
relationships between students and their teachers. Liam spoke passionately about his small
alternate school’s community spirit motivated by personal relationships. However, when it
comes to students’ belonging in the school community, there may be more than size that meets
the eye, because Erika belonged in her large high school community. It is worth mentioning here that Erika considered race as a factor with students’ engagement in her school; she clearly stated that White students were more involved than others. Although 3 out of the 8 participants in this research came from small schools; in an era of massive school closures, they are rare commodities in urban Ontario.

I examined seven public urban secondary schools and one suburban private school by using student discourses on their biographical, historical, and sociological background data. I also tried to make a connection between the biographies/identities of students, the school community, and the larger society. In so doing, I tried to make my position clear that education is not dissociated from the social and political implications. Eight schools represented eight neighbourhoods and the gulf of social inequalities: from an urban working class school to a private university-prep school in one of the wealthiest suburbs of Ontario. Mehdi’s school with so many Black students, aptly characterized in Grace’s (1978, p. 5) much acclaimed classic work, has always been one of the “schools of confrontation and struggle – in a classroom sense, in a cultural sense, in an ideological sense and in a socio-political sense.” In another classic study in distressed East St. Louis, Kozol (1991, p. 159) cites a parent who raised the lack of social justice and fairness issue in America: “It becomes striking how closely those schools reflect their communities, as if the duty of the school were to prepare a child for the life he’s [sic] born to.” While Sheila talked about caring teachers in this study, Mehdi recalled how an administrator in her school wrongly accused her of stealing a school camera. Again, when Sheila stated about the stress factor in students’ lives, because major scholarships to be won; Mehdi talked about gun violence in her neighbourhood and the unfortunate and untimely death of some of her high school friends, who were gunned down. She spoke about the much needed stress counsellor in
her school. Sheila never complained about the facilities in her private school; in fact, she candidly acknowledged that she and her schoolmates were all privileged. Mehdi, however, reflected on her decaying high school building, washroom facilities, and lack of enough and new computers in her school. In a stratified society where people’s class, race, and ethnicity, priorities, and life chances are so different “particular school districts and individual schools inevitably march to different drummers” (see Danielson & Hochschild, 1998, p. 294). Despite the folklore that racial segregation is non-existent in Toronto; Mehdi’s high school proved that de facto stratification of schools and the district boundaries were realities in the city. So it was no surprise that the 8 participants’ schooling experiences were so dissimilar, especially, for Mehdi and Sheila, the two second-generation participants. Except the fact that both were children of immigrants, Sheila and Mehdi had very little in common with each other. Sheila’s hybrid identity, worlds of gated neighbourhood, private school, and mostly White friends were diametrically opposed to Mehdi, an offspring of Iranian couple, her Black and working class neighbourhood, and mostly Black friends. More studies are needed to talk about the social, economic, and educational gulf among the second-generation students in secondary schools.

However, it is out of the schools’ boundaries and control to change the home environments, economic constraints, and the lack of opportunity structures that Jessica, Mehdi, Salma, and to some extent, Liam portrayed in Chapter 5.

The research represented much more than mere reflection and interpretations of students’ views; I learned to critically place their comments within a wider social context. What I came to understand was that relationship was indeed fundamental and everything else was derivative (Ronald David’s comment, 1996, personal communication, as cited in Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997). Teachers, who openly showed their affection for their students, got more of their students’
approval and cooperation in the learning process (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Metz, 1993). Those teachers gained Liam, Erika, Jessica, and Sheila’s trust because of their compassion, care, tolerance, academic competence, and subject expertise. At the same time, all study participants stressed teachers’ academic proficiency that they relied in order to reach the world of higher education. Newcomer Noor and international student Lee viewed themselves as being short changed by some teachers and described them from a different light. Noor’s experience with teachers who were openly critical of her hijab and even her homeland Iran, and with one VP who Noor turned to in vain, supported researchers’ assertions that “Teachers typically work alone in classrooms, isolated from each other and outside the reach of administrative control and external pressures” (see Danielson & Hochschild, 1998, p. 280). Noor’s story underscored that those teachers and the administrator were not well-versed in diversity training and also demanded the district’s attention, in terms of whether it was lack of training or simply educators’ resistance to the district’s diversity mandates.
A critical pedagogy for democracy does not begin with test scores but the questions: What kinds of citizens do we hope to produce through education in a postmodern culture? What kind of society do we want to create in the context of the present shifting cultural and ethnic borders? How can we reconcile the notion of difference and equality with the imperatives of freedom and justice? (Giroux, 1991, pp. 47–48)

This research work is built on a year of fieldwork investigating how the 8 young study participants’ unique identities (in relation to their heterogeneity and multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, peers) shaped their high school educational experiences. Although scholars associate higher education with “adolescents’ life opportunities and choices” (Cooper, 2011, p. 7), academic success is not the focus of the study. I do, however, acknowledge that university education defined the participants’ academic success and their articulate narrations were indeed by-products of that success. Giroux’s above notion of citizenship, however, is pertinent and applicable when I talk about the 8 young people. They were honest, politically conscious, energetic, and active people seeking their place in the school community. They were willing to give back to the community (see their extra-curricular profiles in chapter 8).

The study is built on young participants’ narrations; the 8 people also spoke against the stratified worlds of schools, parents’ rules that did not make sense to them, and the uneven playing field in today's lean and mean Canada. Although the participants talked about their parents and teachers, they are not the centres of my attention.

Pre-fieldwork conundrums made me afraid that the limited time I would have with the study participants through my classroom presentations (see Appendix C), interviews, and focus
groups would not give me the enough time to build meaningful relationships with them, and they would basically “remain as comparative strangers” (White, 2002, p. 35) to me. Furthermore, I was not sure whether the 8 participants would trust me enough – a virtual outsider – to disclose highly personal information about their backgrounds. The study participants proved my fear wrong. The 8 young people had plenty to say about their multiple identities in relation to their families, neighbourhoods, peers, and the academic and social worlds of secondary schools. Most of them talked more than they needed to about their adolescence. Not only that, the sophisticated quality of responses I received from the participants was immensely valuable for the data analysis from which I drew the conclusions of the study. I would not have received those mature responses if I collected data from students of a high school – as was my original plan.

Yet the thematic interviews that focused on students’ (a) background information, (b) relationships with the academic programs, (c) multiple worlds, and (d) identity and agency went far beyond the ethical boundaries of confidentiality and anonymity. I had to deal with the ethics of representation, the usual discomfort that came with the territory of building critical research, and my own ontological dilemma. My own epistemology was challenged by the nuanced findings emerged from participants’ class, race, and ethnicity. “The complexities of researching private lives and placing accounts in the public, ” especially the accounts of young people, created “inherent tensions” in the analysis stage of the research (Birch et al., 2002, pp. 1–2).

Considering the recent shifts in Canada’s demography and political economy, revisiting Ontario’s changing student populations also involves revisiting the contemporary Canadian context. The more Canada’s diversity increases, the more we are grappled with Giroux’s above notions of “difference . . . freedom and justice.” The multicultural communities and the marginalized groups in Canada are keen on having proper representation and a reflection of their
voices in the policy-making and political decision-making processes (Riffel et al., 1996). As border crossing becomes a norm in the global village; so does the upsurge of ethnic tension. Furthermore, in the era of cost-cutting and the rapid disappearance of Keynesian policies, there is a growing sense in Canada that its old sacred public institutions, for example, health care, education, and social services, are in danger of privatization. Young people such as the study participants are therefore shaping and being shaped by the “risk society” (Beck, 1999) marked by the shifting worldwide mantra of neoliberalism that is more interested in channelling resources into the “massive expenditure toward the military and prison industrial complex, while poverty worsens across the nation” (Darder, 2005, p. 850; see also Ball et al., 2000; Galabuzi, 2001).

Considering the nation’s changing demography, three questions need to be contemplated: First, who are the study participants, and what are their social class, race, and ethnicity? Second, how does the research cast a second look at the unique identities of the heterogeneous group of participants and their different educational experiences? Third, what are the implications, especially educational implications, of a study such as this one?

The 8 Participants’ Multiple Social Identities and Educational Experiences

In this study, the 8 participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, for example, Indian-Filipino, Iranian, Jewish-Italian, Portuguese-Irish, Scottish-Irish, South Korean, and Turkish-Kurdish. Although some have hybrid or marginal cultural identities, but the 8 academic stream students, at the time of the study enrolled at a prestigious university, were neither homeless nor “socially excluded” by any stretch of imagination (see Ball et al., 2000, p. 42). Although some of the participants came from low-income families, they all came from single houses with two parents.
Academic stream classrooms in Toronto’s secondary schools are no longer filled with only White and middle class students (see also Camarota, 2007). This study is a case in point that public schools and their academic classrooms are now populated by students from different, and sometimes marginalized backgrounds who have different needs than their White peers. However, I started the research with the assumption that the issues related to minority students and their communities or adolescents from low-income families are frequently ignored by educational research, and the minimum or non-existent school supports exist for the above groups of students; therefore, the pleas of the above groups of students “have remained largely marginal to the reform agenda” (James and Schecter, 2000, p. 27; Phillips Swanson, Chaka Edwards, and Beale Spencer, 2010) and consequently, to the policy and educational radar. Findings of the study suggest that the 8 secondary school students’ unique identities stemming from their heterogeneity and multiple worlds had interacted in “complicated fashions” with the “complex contexts” (Artiles, 1996, p. 33; Cooper, Brown, Azmitia, and Chavira, 2005; Fuligni, 2007; Raksit, 2010) of the eight schools, resulting in differences of experiences.

The study provides an opportunity to take a very intimate look at the participants’ diversity and multiple identities because of the small number of participants. The scope of qualitative study enables me to examine whether adolescents’ identities stemming from their multiple worlds of family, neighbourhood, peers, and schools were constructed differently by different young people and whether the 8 participants had equal opportunities to thrive in their high schools. The participants’ narrations in this research often highlighted the burgeoning complexities stemming from their situational identities in terms of space, materialistic interpretation of their history in urban Canada, the social chronicle of their race, ethnicity, family, neighbourhood, and peers. The participants, therefore, were neither authors nor subjects
of their own narratives, “but always subjected to, and subjectified within, a particular time and space” (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010, p. 204). Yet explored in the study is young people’s agency; common experiences of young people from the same ethnic groups were overshadowed by their unique experience, for example, the individual participant’s and his/her family’s duration in Canada, class, and religion. In Chapter 8, the study found three distinct voices among the Muslim students, Mehdi, Noor, and Salma. Whereas newcomer Noor and her Iranian family reacquainted and realigned themselves with the Muslim religion and a local mosque in Toronto, Salma rejected the Muslim religion and said that she and her family had “nothing to do” with the mosque. Despite Mehdi’s declaration that she and her Iranian family were atheists, Mehdi echoed Noor’s remark that she felt excluded and marginalized in Canada. Their experiences of discrimination prompt me to examine the broader contextual influence of their much maligned religion, especially after 9/11.

The research also explores how academic streamed secondary students with “determined dispositions” attempted to make sense of their world full of “high educational and career aspirations” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 2). The voices of the participants revealed their thinking processes and their future aspirations as they talked about their schools, classroom environments, career plans, and many other hopes and dreams. All participants associated higher education with upper social mobility. Unfortunately, that is not always the case in contemporary Canada when “inflation of credentials, sustained high levels of youth unemployment, and vocational training problem among university graduates” (Teese, 2000, p. 220) remain as persistent problems. Understandably, the dynamic data those former high school students shared with me were deeply personal and controversial. However, adults’ perceptions of young people are easier to document than the perceptions of people themselves (Gaskell, 1995). The 8 participants’ contents or
discontents often ignored the big picture – and focused on their specific problems. Young people’s views were not social theorists’ views; their meaning-making process attached to class, race, and ethnicity was often concrete and very situation specific (Kelly, 1993). Except Liam, the opinions of 7 other participants were a far cry from scholarly critical views. As James and Prout (1996, p. 50) remind us “not all children recognize the subtle biases which are to be found in different social environments.” On the other hand, 3 participants, Mehdi, Jessica, and Liam, contradicted the prevailing myth of Canadian meritocracy. Mehdi and Jessica in particular frequently focused on their lack of social inheritance and its negative effect on their life opportunities. I like to think that those were not just the individualized accounts of the 8 people.

Since these young people identified and associated their race, ethnicity, as well as family income, and parents’ occupation and educational status with life opportunities. Unlike their middle class and affluent peers, Erika and Sheila, the participants from low-income families, such as Jessica, Mehdi, and Liam, often spoke about the lack of social mobility in their lives and hesitated to talk about their future possibilities and opportunities. Despite living in a prosperous country, second-generation Canadian Mehdi was forced to work in the service sector during her entire high school life. Classroom learning has very little correspondence with such jobs (Packer & Pines, 1996). In order to compensate for her immigrant family’s low-income status, and the struggle to survive in Canada, she had no other choice but to work. Erika, Jessica, and Liam also worked part-time in the service sector, but it was Mehdi who clearly viewed her afterschool job to be in direct competition with her school work. She admitted that if she did not have to work, she could have done better academically and started university earlier. Her story inspires me to ponder about the protection adolescents need when they start working early without mature skills and knowledge. Child labour (in Mehdi’s case) is deplorable anywhere. These struggling stories
depicted in this research are in conflict with the “widespread belief that Canada represents one of the last bastions of social welfare and public support for young people,” a myth “beyond acceptability” (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010, p. 13). Jessica specifically dwelt on the lack of money and the negative influence it had on her cultural capital building, valued so much by schools, and the challenges she faced as the first generation of university goers in her family. However, in the end, when she revealed that her university grades were slipping, her account was riddled with self-blame. Similar to 6 others (excluding Liam), she was in tune with the mantra of educational achievement and meritocracy and decided not to focus her attention on the "structural designs that systematically block" educational success of people from low-income families (Fine and Burns, 2003, p. 844). Consistent with the observation of Ball et al. (2000), I have found a huge gap between how critical scholars perceive the structural constraints of choices available to young people in class-based societies and young people’s own perceptions of the opportunities available to them. Today’s young people indeed see the combined influence of a meritocratic society, their own decision making, and hard work on their choices and discount the structural constraints, while critical authors repeatedly address the theme of individualism and individualization (see Conchas, 2002).

Frequently, however, those who study young people often recognize that their “unacknowledged dilemma of unequal access” is a “political reality” and “of special salience during adolescence given youths’ capacity for more abstract reasoning, sense of fairness” (Phillips Swanson et al., 2010, p. 8). Given Canada’s unequal social structure, the unease in Mehdi, Jessica, and Liam’s voices is not that hard to understand (see also Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005; Shanahan, 2000). Unlike the participants from low-income families, who reported an increasing sense of anxiety, and insecurity about their future, participants from
more affluent backgrounds, such as Erika and Sheila, explored privileges with ease and talked about their career choices and related plans with confidence. Choice or the freedom available for young people to have an ideal future is indeed a privilege: “what is possible for some individuals is not possible for all” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 22)! So it is no surprise that the above authors find close link between “Post-16 choices” and “the expression and suppression of identities” (p. 24). There is, however, virtually very little research in this area of anticipated challenges that disadvantaged young people briefly explored in this study.

As discussed before, the participants’ sense of who they were often echoed their class, race, and ethnicity, and in turn, affected their academic identity and engagement. Salma and Jessica highlighted the need for a viable social network; they considered their respective Kurdish and Portuguese communities to be predominantly blue collar and, despite their parents’ strong encouragements, they never received the structural support from their own communities. Their ethnic communities lacked role models and were not committed to their academic aspirations. The presence of social capital can foster adolescents’ sense of belonging; while the lack of it can generate alienation and lowered socioeconomic expectations: “When shrinking opportunities constrain identity exploration, understanding adolescents’ agency and its limits is essentially important” (Cooper, 2011, p. 46).

Although new to the country, Noor and Lee’s agencies were prominent as both of them constantly looked for and received help from the “supportive institutional structures” (see Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 268) available to them. It was amazing to watch how Noor and Lee communicated in spoken English; especially when I compare their ease in speaking with their unfamiliarity with the language even a few years ago; both of them talked about their struggle to learn a foreign language. Noor clarified her tribulations to learn a new language, on top of
learning French, math, and other academic subjects. Beating all the odds stacked against them, they are now at a renowned Canadian university. Their adaptive behaviour to their host country demands attention in light of educational scholars’ assertion that the integration of immigrant children becomes more difficult, especially for ESL learners; when they arrive here at the age of five or older (Beiser et al., 2005; Katz, 1995).

The participants in this study showed remarkable resilience in overcoming obstacles to be admitted to a prestigious university. I see striking similarities with Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba’s (1991, p. 14) insightful comments on resilience of especially immigrant youth south of the border and their Canadian counterparts: “the children’s talent for integrating values, priorities, and demands from home and school reveals their significant potential for accomplishing their goals in schools and in life in general.” Furthermore, Portes and Rumbaut (2001, p. 103) associate children’s resilience with parents’ ambition or “resilient optimism” for their children; in a similar fashion, all of the study participants recognized their families’ contribution, especially parents’ “high hopes”, affection, and support, to their academic success. Many of their high school lives were anything but easy and arriving at the university was not trouble-free by any means; they coped with academic and parental pressures, change of high schools, parents’ unemployment, terminal illness in the family, demands from a strange society that was not always friendly to newly arrived young people and their specific cultural practices, and, at times, identity crises related to their multiple worlds, and yet they had arrived at the ultimate destination of any academic student, the university (see also Krahn and Taylor, 2005).
Summary of Major Findings and a Few Nagging Questions:

Lessons Learned

A unique focus of this small-scale study is heterogeneous students’ negotiations with their multiple worlds of family, neighbourhoods, peers, and schools as well as life opportunities, access, and constraints in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. In so doing, the study captures the fragmented self of the 8 participants in their multiple worlds and how they are “constructing their lives and forging their identities” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 20). As I move from the two oppositional worlds model described by Phelan et al. (1991), I have learned something significant and different from each of those worlds. “What each reveals is partial, overlapping, and sometimes at odds with what we might learn from others” (Peshkin, 2001, p. 107). Using the multiple worlds model, it has become easy for me to understand the patterns of the participants’ movement from one institutional setting to the other. Data from the study suggest that an adolescent sought numerous expressions of identity through his or her dealings with different sets of worlds.

Families and Support Structures

How do we pay attention to low SES students’ stories and struggles for survival? What can public policy do to address the inequity issues raised in this study? What do the findings of the study indicate about nuclear families’ relationships with schools and communities? Why is there a need to explore the class-ethnicity-culture-specificity of parents’ involvement in their sons’ and daughters’ educational experiences?

The family worlds of some participants, for example Sheila and Erika, had more than adequate resources; their families live in good neighbourhoods; their cultural capital was enhanced by their parents’ income; they were well-travelled; they had personal computers,
laptops, cell phones, books, and many other cultural and “educational paraphernalia” that affluent parents are “delighted to shower on their progeny” (Reich, 1992, p. 233). Recent studies, however, confirm that in urban Canada, most people who are affected by the rising poverty level and social discord are young Canadians, children and adolescents, particularly from immigrant and visible minority backgrounds. Over the last two decades, their numbers have doubled (Galabuzi, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2009; UNICEF, 2000). Jessica and Liam, who are White, also mentioned their families’ economic problems, including their fathers’ unemployment. Although all the participants (except Lee, whose grandparents live with her family in South Korea) came from nuclear families, some of their low-income families’ lives were not picture perfect. Mehdi revealed that her low-income, immigrant family had been coping with the rising costs of a global city life with one income, that of her mother. However, Salma, Mehdi, Noor, and Jessica disclosed that they took their parents’ struggle and the adverse conditions of their lives as motivating factors to pursue university education with dogged determination. They cited that parents’ lack of education, modest, or unrecognized foreign education were “the reasons” for them to be in higher education. While these participants might not have had enough material support, they had their parents’ emotional support. More scholarly work is needed, however, to shed light on (a) low-income urban families’ struggles, (b) the struggles of immigrant families and their children, and (c) long-term parental unemployment and its caustic effect on adolescents’ lives.

Accounts of the participants from immigrant families also indicated the presence of tensions in the family because of their quicker assimilation into Canadian life and obvious changes in lifestyle. Salma’s parents, for example, struggled to keep up with the free-spirited teenage culture in Canada. However, like their children, the coping mechanisms of immigrant
parents differed; for example, Salma dwelt on strict family rules. In the same fashion, Noor talked about the cultural traditions of her Muslim family, for example, gender segregation and hijab wearing. To some extent Salma, and especially Noor, concentrated on their experiences of belonging in Canada and how they dealt with cultural mismatches and the competing norms and values of Canadian society. Salma and Noor’s narrations were clearly indicative of “how styles of agency change as children mature” (James & Prout, 1996, p. 50).

Parents’ Absence From the School Lives of Their Teenagers:
A Meaningful Look

The civic capacity of schools increases if all the stakeholders, including parents, participate and if the key players or insiders, such as teachers and administrators can bridge the divisions based on class, race, and ethnicity in the school community (Stone, 1998). However, parents’ virtual absence from the school community is another finding of the study that is consistent with the existing literature (Epstein, 2008; Natriello et al., 1990). Even when one parent, Sheila’s mother, was involved, she was only engaged in fundraising events and checking her daughter’s homework. Participants’ accounts depicted parents’ virtual absence from their high school lives (Raksit, 2012); all participants said that their parents basically left their education to the school professionals. Although none of them were very involved, education was significant to all of them. Jessica, who came from a low-income family, informed that her parents and grandparents were disappointed when she changed her initial plan to go to medical school. Mehdi, Noor, Salma, and Sheila’s parents expected them to perform their best in the academic world. South Korean Lee also said that high academic values were instilled in her by her parents and grandparents. Liam and Erika’s Canadian parents did not expect anything less from their children.
Considering parents’ overwhelming support and high aspirations for their children, why has the parents-school partnership remained so elusive? The answer may lie in class, ethnicity, personal preferences, and school politics. The study found that some parents (especially, immigrant parents) stayed away from their children’s high schools because of their (a) lack of English language proficiency, (b) unfamiliarity with the Canadian education system, (c) perception of teachers as intimidating (some parents, particularly new immigrant parents, felt they had very little in common with White and middle class teachers); and (d) lack of time (in particular, parents from low-income families). Erika’s father was an elementary teacher in the same school district; yet her parents were not involved in her high school. Although her middle class parents have more time and resources, are of Scottish-Irish heritage, they decided to stay away from her high school. The findings suggest that there was no arm-twisting to make parents accountable to the schools, either. In reality, network building with the community had become a luxury in some of the participants’ impersonal and large urban schools.

**Stratified Neighbourhoods**

Some young people’s identities cannot be discovered without exploring the social disparities in their living spaces, and how inequality manifests in low-income students’ daily lives (see Nayak, 2003). Participants’ narrations in this study clearly indicated that indeed their neighbourhoods deserved more attention from educational researchers. According to the study data, not all neighbourhoods were equally endowed with material comforts and safety. More scholarly attention is needed to explore the relationship between the income inequality and stratified neighbourhood schools. For example, the participants’ portrayals depicted social mobility, gated communities, and nearby affluent private schools co-existed in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area with Black and working class neighbourhoods and their schools. Their
views were in accord with Massey’s (2009) account of concentrated opulence and poverty across the city. “As the concentration of Blacks in a specific neighbourhood increases, the available resources dwindle, given the long-standing overlap between race and class in Ontario/Canada,” write Menash and Firang (2007, p. 23). Both Mehdi and Jessica talked about decaying school facilities that often reflected colour-coded, spatialized, and impoverished communities in Toronto, made up of low-income and visible minorities that were indeed very much in need of improvements in social infrastructure (Ornstein, 2002). What was more, while the lexicon of the former was how to ease access to the academy, the latter suffered from a distinct lack of the social capital needed to gain access to the academy. I learned that young people were gun downed in Toronto because of unsafe surroundings; studies identify the root cause of unstable neighbourhoods is “persistent and prolonged poverty that spans generations and consumes the entire communities.” Poverty is a “predisposing factor” that “makes families, schools, and communities vulnerable to decay, thereby weakening the bonds these institutions forge between children and society” (Natriello et al., 1990, p. 195). Although neighbourhoods and their amenities leave their footprints on adolescents’ development, “it is difficult to estimate the causal effect of neighbourhood characteristics on individual outcomes” (Kao & Turney, 2010, p. 195).

**Education and Peers**

For all young people, friendship with their peers occupies a vital space, especially, during the teenage years. All participants acknowledged in one way or another, the importance of having the right kind of peers in order to foster positive self-identities. Of particular interest to the study, however, is the question: How is peer support significant for students from immigrant families whose parents are not familiar with the Canadian secondary school system? For Sheila, a second-generation Canadian from an immigrant family, the peer network allowed her to stay
connected with her current academic path. However, her mainstream peer culture was sometimes at odds with the norms of her Asian family and community. Mehdi mentioned more than once that her mother did not like her Black friends who she perceived to be unmotivated. Very few scholars, however, pay attention to the conflict between parental values and peer culture. Given the significance of the family described by the participants in this research, this area of conflict should be explored further by researchers.

Participants’ accounts clearly showed that their friendship choices were entangled with the complex web of inclusion, exclusion, and flourishing and suppressing identities in high school. The study found a stratified world of peers in high schools; participants’ views about their peers and peer networks were class, race, and ethnicity specific. For some, their peer network proved to be invaluable; for example, middle class Erika and affluent Sheila received the right kind of knowledge about education from their peers; both of them talked about having peers in high school who were ambitious, strong, and academically motivated. Erika and Sheila credited the social network of their middle class peers for gaining the insider knowledge about the academy and how to benefit from it. For other participants their peer networks had limited influence on their academic decision-making. Mehdi’s Black and low-income high school peers remained outside of her academic inner circle (see also Davies & Guppy, 1997).

**Multiple Identities, Multiple Worlds**

Participants’ multifaceted identities are repeatedly described in this study “as plural and shifting, rather than unitary and static” (Phoenix, 1998, p. 863). The young people in this study found their identities unfolded in their everyday lives in relation to their families, neighbourhoods, peers, and teachers. How did young people describe the culture-specific world of family? How did they navigate from their cultural worlds of families to school’s worlds? How
did participants’ negotiations of their developing identities depend on their family values? How did participants see their relationships with multicultural Canada, particularly Mehdi and Sheila, the two second generation Canadians?

Although the 3 participants, Liam, Sheila, and Lee had physically moved away from their parents’ homes, they had not emotionally detached themselves from their parents. They seemed to be as connected with their parents as the 5 other participants branded by scholars as the boomerang generation, who stayed longer with parents (see Brannen, 1996). During the focus groups and interviews, the 8 young people repeatedly spoke of their close relationships and negotiations with parents and, in some cases, even with grandparents. Their views support scholars’ assertions that “identity development is an intergenerational project rather than a solitary journey” (Cooper, 2011, p. 35).

In the identity chapter, I also tried to understand the cultural variation among the participants in how they talked about their families and cultural identities. The interview transcripts reflect that the multiple and situational identities of the 8 young people were “discursively and interactively constituted” (Ball et al., 2000, p. 20). So young people’s negotiations with parents, religion, and cultural traditions are discussed from both the angles of independence and connectedness, as they explained how they moved from one world to another in their daily interactions with home culture, religion, and school culture. For example, participants’ social agency was prominent when they took a stand against parents’ rules that did not make sense to them. The 8 adolescents evidently managed their active agency by skillfully negotiating with parents’ rules. The family and identity chapters provide instances of the cultural practices of the eight families that can inform policy-makers about ethnocultural differences. More research is needed to understand the tension created by some adolescents’ constant
negotiation with their parents, and family values that were in direct conflict with the cultural worlds of peers and secondary schools in Canada.

**Multiculturalism and Race-Specificity:**

**How 7 Participants Envisioned Canada**

In this research when the 7 participants (international student Lee was not asked to talk about Canada) explored their relationships with Canada and their national identities, they made it clear that it was one thing to talk about the multicultural and global identity (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rizvi, 2005) of Canada’s growing young population; it was another thing to talk about the ambivalence the two second-generation Canadians’ felt in constructing their Canadian identities. Why did Sheila and Mehdi appear ambivalent about their Canadian identity? Did they ponder about the risks of involvement, while at the same time, talking about their emotional alignment with Canada? How did Erika and Jessica’s notions of citizenship sometimes echo the neoliberal concept of citizenship (Dillabough & Kennelly, 2010)? Newcomer Noor recently became a Canadian citizen; yet, why did Noor and Mehdi talk about exclusion? Young people’s identity development is often wounded by rejection, because “citizenship does not provide automatic membership in the nation’s community” (Banerjee, 2000, p. 66; see also Ball et al., 2000).

Apart from Liam and Lee, other participants talked about their emotional connection with their parents’ homeland or their homeland. For example, Noor and Mehdi repeatedly brought in Iran as their points of reference. Even Erika and Jessica, who were so vocal against the all-inclusive nature of Canadian multicultural practices, talked about their connection to Ireland and Portugal, respectively. Furthermore, participants’ views often reflected the objectivist and divide and rule versions of multiculturalism that deny the cultural differences and the politics of
inclusion in urban lives. They also failed to acknowledge the wider inequity and the distinct lack of redistributive socioeconomic policies in Canada, as Banerjee (2000) vociferously maintains.

Salma left Turkey when she was 3; yet she called Turkey her “home” on more than one occasion. In Sheila’s case, her use of English at home, mostly White friends, and her private school were all indicative of her supposed strong association with Canada (see Portes & Rambaut, 2001). Yet Sheila described the cultural traditions of India, her father’s home, and some of the country’s inner core with ease and familiarity; she never called herself a Canadian. Portes and Rambaut, (2001, p. 150) attribute the dilemma of second-generation Sheila, a hyphenated Canadian to complexity, and suggest that this predicament frequently:

entails the juggling of competing allegiances and attachments. Situated within two cultural worlds, they must define themselves in relation to multiple reference groups (sometimes in two countries and in two languages) and to the classifications into which they are placed by their native peers, schools, the ethnic community, and the larger society.

Very little is written on why second-generation Canadians hesitate to call Canada their home, or how young people’s loyalty to Canada may clash with their loyalty to other nations, and what can be done to make some of them feel more at home in their adopted homeland. In a world marked by border crossing, more studies are required to investigate the contested facets of cultures, and perhaps the research focus should be more on immigrants’ or their children’s ever-changing transnational identities and tenets than on how they embrace shared national ideals (Cooper, 2011; Linger, 2006) in their adopted homeland. Mehdi and Sheila’s dilemma also came close to confirming Ogbu and Simon’s (1988) assertion that the second-generation people from
immigrant families in the US suffer more from self-doubt than those who were born outside the US.

How the 7 participants envisioned Canada depended first, on their race; second, on how their respective ethnicity and religion were viewed in Canada; third, and consequently, on how they were treated by the nation; and finally, on who or whose parents came from where, and of course, the memories of their home countries. Among the 5 non-White participants, Salma’s opinion about Canada was most favourable because she focused on democratic Canada’s relative openness compared to Turkey’s closed-door, autocratic, and corrupt politics.

Implications for Future Research

Throughout the family and identity chapters, the link between participants’ families and their schools was narrated only by the 8 participants. I didn’t have the opportunity to interview parents because of the limited nature of graduate research. However, scholars have warned us that young people often have agendas that do not resonate with their parents’ agendas (Brannen, 1996). The analysis of the participants’ narrations would be more rigorous if I had the first-hand accounts of the parents’ side of the story. Due to the limited scope of the research, neither could I include teachers’ accounts, the significant others of students’ lives.

However, some researchers will challenge any universal propositions drawn from this study because it was limited to the 8 young people, and the stories of their family, peers, neighbourhood, and school. They will argue against making a grand narrative out of this research and suggest that particular findings from this study cannot be generalized to the wider population of schools or students. As well, I admit that this research effort is very much shaped by my own epistemology.
The research is built on “a multi-discipline, multitheory lens” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, p. 3) through which I viewed young people’s perspectives in context while I travelled through the periphery of social sciences: including sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and urban studies of neighbourhoods, education, and youth accounts. I agree with Dillabough and Kennelly’s (2010) contention that as researchers, we should not concentrate only on one of the above disciplines. Definitions of research are changing; Cooper’s (2011, p. 10) view about cultures from different perspectives across social sciences comes to mind: Social researchers define culture from a conceptual lens “as both stable and dynamic, shared by groups and disputed within and across national borders, and operating at multiple levels of analysis.” Aside from culture, scrutinized also in this research is the issue of social mobility in Canada. Using an interdisciplinary approach from sociology and economics, I have examined participants’ and their parents’ educational, occupational, and class status, cultural and social capital, ethnicity, parents’ income status, and “social community” (see Esping-Anderson, 2006, p. 400). Anthropology occupies a space in this study as well, because 5 out of the 8 participants came from immigrant families; however, findings of the study indicate that anthropological analysis could be multilevel, tricky, and messy.

Policy Implications

In this study Jessica and Mehdi, and, to some extent, Liam talked about financial disadvantages because of their parents’ low-income and unemployment status. Yet educational policies rarely focus on the “poverty of families or neighborhoods.” Although Canadian school funding formulae are different from those in the US, low-income parents in Toronto do not seem to have enough political influence to change the “outdated buildings, broken computer labs, and overcrowded classrooms” that Anyon (2005, pp. 69–70) raises in her work in the US. Calling for
a change in education policy, this research will invoke further debates on Ottawa’s involvement in restoring equity in the educational landscape, and on the need for further research, more resources, and overall changes in the way secondary schools conduct their business.

Hathiyani’s Canadian study (2007) provides some suggestions for overcoming employment barriers for immigrants. First, the government should provide training for immigrant job seekers. Second, the government should help immigrants settle in areas where suitable jobs are available. Third, the lack of recognition of foreign credentials is a major barrier to finding suitable employment, as was the case with Mehdi’s parents described in this study. However, her parents only found out about that barrier once they arrived here. Very much like the Australian model, recognition of foreign credentials should be done prior to immigrants’ arrival here, so that they could face the reality before immigrating.

**Educational Implications of the Study**

**Stratified Schools and Participants’ Academic Identities**

Public education in Canada is a huge enterprise; and it is especially complex in urban areas. The 8 study participants’ reflections on their school lives, however, support Sizer’s (2004, p. 5) critical assessment of schooling that it creates barriers in students’ lives, and, in fact, “makes winning often very difficult indeed” and demand for a second look at the school success. Why did only a handful young people claim that they belonged in the school community? How did the schools hinder some adolescents’ positive academic developments? How did the schools facilitate opportunities for some adolescents’ positive academic developments?

The study found that not all adolescents had equal access to schooling. Schools, particularly public schools, are and will be the social institutions in democratic countries. The
issues raised by the 8 participants in this research, however, were not very promising for the democratic vision adopted in Canada and for the fair representation of students in the school community. Students were divided into small cliques in most of the participants’ schools; only Noor depicted a relatively fight-free school environment. Almost all of the participants mentioned that fights often broke out among students in their high schools. Salma’s description of White door, Gino door, and Black door was an example of how divided her schoolmates were. She also painted her school as anything but a caring community, making her and her fellow high school students susceptible to academic failure. Despite the public invitation all of the participants’ schools posted on their websites for students to participate in the school community, the 8 participants painted an altogether different picture. Mehdi talked about her struggle to learn from some of her academic peers who were intensely competitive. Salma discussed her unsuccessful efforts to select the right courses; at the same time, Mehdi and Salma’s extra-curricular activities were also as light-weight as possible. Most disturbing was the way some participants described their relationship (or the virtual absence of relationship) with administrators. Mehdi provided a concrete example of administrators forgetting the guidelines against publicly humiliating adolescents. Offering the roots and remedies of the academic pipeline problem, Cooper (2011) argues that when educators see students’ cultural heritage as an asset, they facilitate students’ success. The opposite also happens when educators do not trust students, which can lead to feelings of alienation among students. Without a doubt, the degree of support or distrust minority students receive from educators affects their chances in life (Stanton-Salzar, 1992, as cited in Arriaza, 2003). Whether educators acknowledge it or not, schools are embedded institutions. Very limited numbers of educators have received the necessary training, according to Peshkin (1995, p. 256), “that helps them to understand the magnitude and meaning
of institutional embeddedness and how to find opportunity in its profusion of constituent voices.” Teachers seldom recognize the much needed professional support for effectively dealing with their growing multicultural student population; and the lack of multicultural training and knowledge can negatively affect their interactions with minority students, and create a negative classroom environment for students, as it did in the cases of Noor and Mehdi (see Exposito & Favela, 2003).

Both Mehdi and Liam took a few years after high school before entering the university. Mehdi talked positively about the bridging program that gave her a second chance to enter the world of higher education. Educational researchers need to pay more attention to bridging programs, how they work, and whether they make a difference to marginalized students’ academic experiences. Liam received helpful information from one of his high school teachers about how to return to university to study after taking some time off. Noor mentioned the positive influence of an Iranian peer mentor that her school assigned to her during her initial days of high school life in the city.

The study found the observation of Grace’s (1978) classic study still relevant based on the 8 participants’ descriptions of their high school teachers: “Teachers in contemporary urban schools are socially and ideologically more differentiated than their predecessors – more middle class, more cosmopolitan and less firmly associated with . . .” (p. 52). The vast majority of the multicultural student population in Canada, however, is still educated by White and middle class teachers as diversity among the Canadian teaching workforce has not kept pace with its multicultural student population (Ryan et al., 2009; Solomon et al., 2005). These teachers share very little in common with their multicultural students (Irvine, 2003). On the other hand, minority teachers of colour can play a key role in minority students’ academic success. Since
these teachers often (a) serve as role models for minority students; (b) recognize and relate to their multiple worlds; and (c) use their knowledge about their minority students as a building block for their teaching and lesson plans (Siddle-Walker, 2000).

Considering the consistent flow of migrants to Canada from Third World nations, I also argue that high school teachers need to have a flexible mindset in order to successfully include this growing multicultural student population in the educational arena. The French teacher who gave Noor a zero on her first day in class is an example of the problem; the teacher’s negative evaluation of Noor’s performance did not take into account how unsettling a new school in a new country could be for an adolescent, especially when that adolescent had the language barrier described by Noor in Chapter 5. This kind of incongruence between teachers and students can build stumbling blocks for students’ academic prospects (Irvine, 2003, Nieto, 2000a).

Consistent with the findings of Noddings (1992) and her “ethic of care,” all study participants said that they worked harder for creative and passionate teachers. Perhaps a lot more caring on teachers’ parts would also make the first and second generation of minority students feel welcome in Canada and firmly plant them in Canadian society. Jessica’s multiple and insightful perspectives about her high school teachers are pertinent here. Although she described her teachers as caring people and she understood her teachers’ difficult lives, evidently, she did not think caring was enough as she brought up the issue of some teachers’ incompetence, the pervasive problem of rote learning, and grade inflation in high school. In order for students to cope with the complex lifestyles of the postmodern world, schools have to teach students flexibility, collaboration, inventiveness, and also problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills (Starratt, 1996).
Perhaps teachers can also play a role in making students understand “the complex relation of schooling to social class.” Teachers can touch on the fallacy of meritocracy that thrives in stratified societies and their collective mindset that hard work is reciprocated with material success. That myth is “relatively unproblematic, pumped out across educational contexts . . .” (Fine & Burns, 2003, p. 844). I can understand teachers’ concerns that the harsh truth might rob another impetus from students to succeed in school. However, teachers need to raise students' awareness so that young people can “absorb, challenge, internalize, and resist” the myth of meritocracy and above all, that there should not be any stigma attached to being poor and the “class-based shame” of working class people (Fine & Burns, 2003, pp. 845-846). That act of consciousness raising depends on teachers' own soul searching; Milner (2003, p. 205) reflects that teachers need to ask how does s/he situate himself/herself “in the education of others” and how does s/he “negotiate the power structure” in his/her “class to allow students to feel a sense of worth?”

**Summary of Findings for the Districts and Schools**

Schools need to be aware of the cultural, socioeconomic, and ethnic issues and the challenges that are in the way of minority young people like Noor and Mehdi’s progress. In the previous chapters I provided many examples/evidences that the six participants (except Erika and Sheila) referred to as discriminatory practices in schools; however, here I hope to give a sense of the possibilities that arise from my conversations with young people; so that secondary schools can extend their support to low income and immigrant students. For example, young people from low-income and immigrant families often are in need of:

1. A safe neighbourhood and school with adequate community and educational resources; the district is urged to consider Mehdi’s plea for adding in the school’s staff list a trained
stress counsellor in order to support and outreach adolescents and their families in a violence prone neighbourhood.

2. Free time to study without the heavy burden of domestic chores and loads of work outside of home

3. Positive role models in young people’s own ethnic community

4. Free and even subsidized programs, such as expensive field trips, summer camps, and other extra-curricular activities

5. Educators from their own ethnic community with whom they can share their feelings and multiple worlds without the perceived fear of cultural mismatch or miscommunication

6. Adult education program for their parents who are unfamiliar with the Canadian education (see Leithwood et al., 1999)

7. Student mentors from the same ethnic background with whom newcomers can interact in their own language; schools are encouraged to continue or adopt peer mentorship program

8. Inclusive academic programs that respect and take into account students’ disadvantageous life worlds. There is a dire need to respect new immigrants’ cultural traditions and lifestyles (Anisef and Kilbride, 2003); and finally

9. Bridging programs that can give struggling students a second chance to regain their academic identities

The following are the recommendations for policy-makers: (a) Provide resources, ongoing education, and training for principals and teachers on how to work with parents; (b) Exert influence and offer incentives so that schools reach out to parents from all social classes,
and ethnic groups (Cummins, 1986); and (c) Improve settlement services to facilitate new immigrants’ “Canadian identity formation” (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003, p. 1).

The following are the recommendation for schools: (a) Develop approaches for communicating with newcomers and non-English speaking parents and making them a part of the school community; (b) Tap parents’ strengths so that they can meaningfully contribute to the school community beyond the peripheral roles of bake sale contribution and organization of events; (c) Provide orientation for parents who are new to the country.

At a time when the austerity mantra and low per-pupil funding are spreading everywhere, the above recommendations may not make much sense to politicians; they will, however, offer new hope to adolescents, especially those from low-income and immigrant families.

**The Challenges Ahead**

Belonging occupies a substantial space in this study; given the unequal and uneven structure of Canadian citizenship, all participants in this study have been trying to make senses of who they are and their meaningful location in Canadian society. Despite the official multicultural policy in Canada and its promotion of static cultural practices that glosses over the price immigrants, specifically, their children pay to “overcome their problems of otherness” (James and Schecter, 2000, p. 34), social institutions in Canada have not been known to respond swiftly “to the needs to create structures, systems, and services to support the development of newcomer children” (Beiser et al., 2005, p. 22). This study can be a cautionary tale for policy makers that without a viable option for integrating the newcomers into the mainstream society “the net result is an exacerbation of the overall climate of social tension” (Scott, 2001, p. 6).
References


Cooper, C. R., Jackson, J. F., and Azmitia, M. (1998a). Multiple services, multiple worlds: Three useful strategies for research with ethnic minority youth on identity, relationships, and


Nonprint Media: Video

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me about a typical day in your high school.

2. Did you think your schooling experience was different from your parents/guardians? Please explain.

3. Did you think your high school had an influence on you? How?

4. Have you ever voiced your concern against any school policy? How did you negotiate with people in authority, for example, teachers, and school administrators to change any school policy (Probe about the rules of different worlds)?

5. What does your ethnic identity mean to you?

Mandira Raksit, TPS
Appendix B
Interview Guide for Students

***Students’ Background Information

Gender: Family Background

Parents/Guardians:

Siblings:

Age: lives with:

Grade:

Parents’/Guardians’ Occupational Status

Father:

Race/ethnicity:

Mother:

Years in the city:

Parents’/Guardians’ Educational Background

Mother:

Father:

Language Spoken at Home:

If Immigrant, Country of Origin:

Future plans after Secondary School:

Tell me a bit about yourself and your family (probe to get a sense of the students’ multiple worlds)

Relationships with the Programs (Research Question 1)

1. How did you get to be in your current program? Was it your decision to be in this program or did you receive help in this matter from counselors, teachers, and parents/guardians? Please explain.
2. Tell me about your program. Specifically, what was important to you about your program and the classes?

3. How involved were your parents/guardians in your education, such as, helping you with homework, extra-curricular activities, and course selections, and other related activities?

4. Tell me about the teachers in your program.

5. Can you give an example of a teacher who had made a difference in your life? What did you like about that teacher?

6. If working was a part of your study, tell me a bit about the work you did.

7. Did you take part in extra-curricular activities? If yes, what were they? What did you learn from them?

Students’ Multiple Worlds (Research Question 2)

1. Tell me a bit about your neighbourhood (Here is a template; can you make a rough sketch of your neighbourhood for me?).

2. What does it mean to be a ____ (name the student’s ethnic identity such as as Caribbean black or Southeast Asian or South Asian) in Canada? What are some of the challenges? What are some of the rewards?

3. Who were your friends outside the school? What was important about them?

4. Where did you spend time outside the school?

5. Who were your friends in school? Were they from the same program (probe)?

Student’s Identity/Agency (Research Question 3)

1. Describe a typical weekend for me.

2. Where did you see the commonalities between you and your friends?
3. Where did you see the differences between you and your friends?
4. Tell me a bit about your parents'/guardians’ expectations of you during the high school years (for example, in terms of the clothes you used to wear; the language you used to speak frequently; the cultural norms you used to observe).
5. What were the things and events that made you want to come to school? What were you learning from them?
6. Tell me about the student life in your school (probe). Did you feel that you had a say in the school’s student life and programs? Please explain.
7. If you could change anything about your high school, what would that be?

Mandira Raksit, TPS
Appendix C

Information for the Recruitment of Students
Participate & Have Your Voices Heard

To appear on OISE Letterhead

I invite you to take part in a focus group discussion and later in possible interviews as participants of a doctoral research on secondary school students that I am currently working on at OISE/University of Toronto, under Professor Reva Joshee. I am trying to make sense of the experiences of students from different programs and interested to learn about your academic and school lives, family, friends, and teachers. Particularly, my goal is to understand how your identities influence your secondary schooling experiences. In order for you to take part in the interviews, you need to join the focus group discussion first.

The study will have 2 parts; first, you will participate in a focus group with 9 other students and me as a moderator; where you will have a chance to talk about your school life. The focus group will be for an hour and will be audiotaped and transcribed with your permission. Second, if you want to talk more about your lives and experiences, volunteer to be a part of the possible, final individual interviews (I aim to interview 8 students from the University’s _ ). Both the focus group and interviews will be scheduled according to your free time and availability.

I personally guarantee you that what you share with me in the focus group and individual interviews will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Equally, I expect you to be discreet and maintain confidentiality about every aspect of this project.

If you have any question or you are interested to take part in this study, email me as soon as possible at mraaksit@oise.utoronto.ca and provide me with your contact information so that I
can email you the consent letter. In order for you take part in the final interview, you need to sign the consent letter.

Finally, please sign the consent letter and promptly return it to me.

THANK YOU and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Mandira Raksit, TPS
Appendix D
Letter Requesting Administrative Consent (1)

To appear on OISE Letterhead

Study: Students’ heterogeneity and Multiple Worlds: Revisiting Ontario’s Changing Student Populations

Attention: Principal _
University _

June I, 2009

Dear Professor _:

I am a doctoral student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/University of Toronto, working under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee. I am currently working on an approved research project (by the University of Toronto’s Ethics office) that will focus on students of _ who will be invited to recall and share their high school experiences. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent.

I aim to investigate students’ heterogeneity and multiple worlds in relation to the dynamics of comprehensive secondary schools’ multiple programs offering. The focus of the study, in particular, is how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling. I am seeking 8 participants from the University’s _. I also want you to know from the outset that focus groups and student interviews will be scheduled according to students’ free time and availability.

Mandira Raksit/ . . .Contd.
The significance of understanding how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling is paramount. Yet in busy high schools, neither the educators nor their students have the time to reflect on the phenomena of students’ identities. Furthermore, school districts are often grappled with challenges posed by newcomers in this province. This study will provide clues on how to address the issue of diversity. Specifically, the focus groups will allow students to articulate their schooling experiences. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups will also allow placing students and their peers within the educational setting and social context. As well, new understanding of students’ worlds will be beneficial for educational researchers.

The study will have three steps. First, I will invite students to participate in the study through an information sheet. In consultation with you, I will visit classrooms of 3-4 professors and invite students to participate in a focus group and possible interviews later. The information page will be distributed to students when I visit their Professors’ classrooms. The visits will not take more than 15 minutes. I will encourage students to read the “Participate and have your voices heard” information page (see attached) and make an informed decision to participate in this study. Consent letters to students will be sent via email, once they express interest to participate in the study. Second, once I get approvals from students, I will ask interested students to come to a one-hour long focus group, conducted in one of the available rooms at _.

Depending on numbers of interested students, focus groups may be divided into two or maximum three sessions (with 10 students in each group). During the focus groups, I will encourage students to volunteer to participate in final interviews, if they want to share more of their life experiences.

Mandira Raksit/ . . . Contd.
The third phase will be the interviews that will take place at __. The first sets of interviews will be approximately 30 minutes. The first interviews will concentrate on students’ background information and cultural identities. The final interviews will take approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide will focus on students’ (a) background information, (b) relationships with their streams/programs, (c) multiple worlds, and (d) identity and agency. Focus groups and interview discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with the permission obtained from participants.

Participants in this study will have the option to receive his/her own transcript. Transcripts will be sent to him or her by email. Each Participant will have two weeks to review his/her own transcript. If I receive changes in comments in time, they will be duly incorporated in the revised transcript.

My confidentiality safeguards will include your written, informed consent, the freedom for the students to withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and the assurance to participants that pseudonyms will be used in all written reports. In addition, participants may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants may also decline to answer any focus group/interview question. They will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk or harm.

The information gathered from interviews and focus groups will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a PhD
thesis, perhaps for subsequent research articles, and possibly a book. Five years after the completion of the study, the raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes) will be stripped off all identifying information, such as, the master lists and individual names.

A summary of the complete study will be provided to participants upon request. Furthermore, you will have access to the report of the study; a copy of the final thesis will be available for participants in the OISE/UT thesis collection of R. W. B. Jackson Library.

I sincerely appreciate your considering this matter. If you have any question or comment about this research, please feel free to contact me by e-mail or phone.

If you have any question about the rights of research participants, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-948-3273.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Mandira Raksit, PhD Candidate, Dr. Reva Joshee, Professor
OISE/University of Toronto OISE/University of Toronto
Email: mraksit@oise.utoronto.ca Email: rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca
Phone: (905) 232-3391 Phone: (416) 978-1515

By signing below I am allowing Mandira Raksit to conduct the requested research within the _ as outlined above:

____________________  __________________________ Date

Principal’s Signature

*Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

*Please return a copy of the signed letter to me.
To appear on OISE letterhead

Study: Students’ heterogeneity and Multiple Worlds: Revisiting Ontario’s Changing Student Populations

Attention: Director, _ Programme

University_

Dear Professor _,

July 30, 2009

I am a doctoral student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/University of Toronto, working under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee. I am currently working on an approved research project (by the University of Toronto’s Ethics office) that will focus on students of the University’s _ and _, who will be invited to recall and share their high school experiences. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent.

With this letter, I accept your suggestion to recruit only graduate students of the _ Programme. The list of students’ names will be provided to me by your office.

I aim to investigate students’ heterogeneity and multiple worlds in relation to the dynamics of comprehensive secondary schools’ multiple programs offering. The focus of the study, in particular, is how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling. I am seeking 8 + 8 participants from the University’s _ programme and _.

I also want you to know from the outset that focus groups and student interviews will be scheduled according to former students’ free time and availability.

Mandira Raksit/ . . Contd.
The significance of understanding how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling is paramount. Yet in busy high schools, neither the educators nor their students have the time to reflect on the phenomena of students’ identities. Furthermore, school districts are often grappled with challenges posed by newcomers in this province. This study will provide clues on how to address the issue of diversity. Specifically, the focus groups will allow students to articulate their schooling experiences. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups will also allow placing students and their peers within the educational setting and social context. As well, new understanding of students’ worlds will be beneficial for educational researchers.

The study will have three-steps. First, former students will be invited to participate in the study by your office through an information sheet (see Appendix C) and will be asked to contact me if they are interested to participate. If they are interested, only then I will email them the consent letter. Second, once I get approvals from students, I will ask interested students to come to OISE for a one-hour long focus group. Depending on numbers of interested students, focus groups may be divided into two or maximum three sessions (with 10 students in each group). During the focus groups, I will encourage students to volunteer to participate in final interviews, if they want to share more of their life experiences.

The interviews will be the third phase and conducted in one of the available rooms at OISE. The first sets of interviews will take approximately 30 minutes. The first interviews will concentrate on students’ background information and cultural identities. The final interviews will take approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide will focus on students’

Mandira Raksit/ . . Contd
(a) background information, (b) relationships with their streams/programs, (c) multiple worlds, and (d) identity and agency. Focus groups and interview discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with the permission obtained from participants. Participants in this study will have the option to receive his/her own transcript. Transcripts will be sent to him or her by email. Each Participant will have two weeks to review his/her own transcript. If I receive changes in comments in time, they will be duly incorporated in the revised transcript.

My confidentiality safeguards will include your written, informed consent, the freedom for the students to withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and the assurance to participants that pseudonyms will be used in all written reports. In addition, participants may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Participants may also decline to answer any focus group/interview question. They will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk or harm.

The information gathered from interviews and focus groups will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a PhD thesis, perhaps for subsequent research articles, and possibly a book. Five years after the completion of the study, the raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes) will be stripped off all identifying information, such as, the master lists and individual names.

A summary of the complete study will be provided to participants upon request. Furthermore, you will have access to the report of the study; a copy of the final thesis will be available for participants in the OISE/UT thesis collection of R. W. B. Jackson Library.

I sincerely appreciate your considering this matter. If you have any question or comment about this research, please feel free to contact me by e-mail or phone.

If you have any question about the rights of research participants, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-948-3273.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Mandira Raksit, PhD Candidate, Theory and Policy Studies in Education OISE/University of Toronto Email: mraksit@oise.utoronto.ca Phone: (905) 232-3391

Dr. Reva Joshee, Professor Theory and Policy Studies in Education OISE/University of Toronto Email: rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca Phone: (416) 978-1515

By signing below I am allowing Mandira Raksit to conduct the requested research within the ___ as outlined above:

____________________  ____________________ Date

Director’s Signature

*Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

*Please return a copy of the signed letter to me.
Appendix F
Informed Consent Letter for Student Participants

To appear on OISE letterhead

Study: Students’ Heterogeneity and Multiple Worlds: Revisiting Ontario’s Changing Student Populations

Dear Student (Name),

I am a doctoral student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/University of Toronto, working under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee. I am currently working on a research project that will focus on former students of Ontario’s secondary schools. With this letter, I am inviting you to take part in an hour long focus group session and in two possible sets of (first one will be for about 30 minutes and the second one will be for about 45 minutes) interviews. In order to begin the project, I need your written consent.

The significance of understanding how students’ unique identities influence their experiences of secondary schooling is crucial. Yet in busy high schools, neither the teachers nor their students have the time to reflect on students’ identities. Furthermore, school districts are often grappling with challenges posed by newcomers in this province. This study will provide clues on how to address the issue of diversity. Particularly, the focus groups will allow students to speak about their schooling experiences. New understanding of students’ worlds will also be beneficial for educational researchers.

I am interested to find out how students’ unique identities influence their secondary schooling experiences. I also want to learn about students’ academic and school lives, their family, friends,

Mandira Raksit/..Contd.
and teachers. The research will have two-steps. Once I get all approvals from you, I will organize the first two steps: first, one-hour focus group sessions with 10 students and second, possible two sets of interviews (first one will be for about 30 minutes and the second one will be for about 45 minutes) with 8 students (from the University's _), according to students’ free time and availability. The interview guide will focus on students’ (a) background information, (b) relationships with the three programs, (c) multiple worlds, and (d) identity and agency. With your permission, focus groups and interview discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed.

If I receive responses from a lot more than 8 students, students will be selected based on whether they (1) were academic students of Ontario high schools, and (2) the diverse life experiences in terms of their class, race, and ethnicity. 8 students will be notified by email about the interview schedule.

You will have the option to receive your own transcript. The transcripts will be sent to you by email. You will have two weeks to review your own transcript. If I don’t hear from you within that time frame, I will assume that the transcript is acceptable to you. If I receive changes in comments in time, they will be duly incorporated in the revised transcript.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. I assure you that that no real names of the district, school, students, and their parents will be used. In addition, you may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be taken out from the project. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may also refuse to answer any interview question. You will at no time be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk or harm.

Mandira Raksit/ . . . Contd.
I have taken steps so that participants in this study maintain confidentiality. However, as you may be aware that there are limits to confidentiality. During the focus groups and individual interviews, you will be instructed that any project related discussion must not leave the room. Despite my efforts to maintain confidentiality, I cannot guarantee that participants will keep the project related information as confidential. The interview and focus groups questions will pose no more risks than your everyday communications with peers. I will pay special attention to the psychological and emotional needs of you. If for some reasons, you feel uncomfortable, I will stop the interview immediately.

The information gathered from interviews and focus groups will be kept in strict confidence and stored in a locked cabinet in my home. All data collected will be used for the purposes of a PhD thesis, perhaps for subsequent research articles, and possibly a book.

A summary of the complete study will be provided upon request. Furthermore, you will have access to the report of the study; a copy of the final thesis will be available for participants in the OISE/UT thesis collection of R. W. B. Jackson Library.

I may have to conduct brief follow-up interviews for the sake of clarification or for further enquiries. If you have any question about the rights of research participants, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-948-3273.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Mandira Raksit, PhD Candidate,  
Theory and Policy Studies in Education  
OISE/University of Toronto  
Email: mraksit@oise.utoronto.ca

Dr. Reva Joshee, Professor  
Theory and Policy Studies in Education  
OISE/University of Toronto  
Email: rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca  
Phone: (416) 978-1515
The conditions and nature of the study, and any questions raised by me about the study above have been explained and answered to my satisfaction. I agree to (1) participate in the research study; (2) maintain confidentiality; (3) allow the interview to be audiotaped.

Name of the Student:_________________ Signed:_______________________

Date:________________

Here are my initials to receive (a) a summary of the study findings upon completion________; (b) the interview transcript to review________

*Please keep a copy of this letter for your records and

* Please return a copy of the signed letter to me.
Appendix G

Request to Instructors to Permit Access to their Classrooms

To appear on OISE letterhead

Study: Students Heterogeneity and Multiple Worlds: Revisiting Ontario’s Changing Student Populations

Dear Dr. ___________ 

I am a doctoral student in the Theory & Policy Studies in Education Department at OISE/University of Toronto, working under the supervision of Dr. Reva Joshee. I am currently working on an approved research project (by the University of Toronto’s Ethics office) that will focus on students of __, who will be invited to recall and share their high school experiences. In order to begin the project, I require your written consent to visit your classroom. The purpose of my visit is to invite former secondary school students from academic program to participate in focus groups and possible interviews with 8 students (8 Academic students from the University’s __) later. The visits will take about 15 minutes.

I aim to investigate students’ heterogeneity and multiple worlds in relation to the dynamics of comprehensive secondary schools’ multiple programs offering. The focus of the study, in particular, is how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling. In doing so, I want to learn about students’ academic and school lives, their family, friends, and teachers. I also want you to know from the outset that focus groups and student interviews will be scheduled according to students’ free time and availability.

Mandira Raksit/ . . Contd
The significance of understanding how students’ unique identities shape their experiences of secondary schooling is paramount. Yet in busy high schools, neither the educators nor their students have the time to reflect on the phenomena of students’ identities. Furthermore, school districts are often grappling with challenges posed by newcomers in this province. This study will provide clues on how to address the issue of diversity. New understanding of students’ worlds will also be beneficial for educational researchers.

The study will have three-steps. First, I will visit 3-4 classrooms and invite students to participate in the study through an information sheet. I will encourage students to read the “Participate and have your voices heard” information page (see attached) and make an informed decision to participate in this study. Consent letters to students will be sent via email, once they express interest to participate in the study. Second, once I get approvals from students, I will ask interested students to come to a one-hour long focus group, conducted in one of the available rooms at _. Depending on numbers of interested students, focus groups may be divided into two or maximum three sessions (with 10 students in each group). During the focus groups, I will encourage students to volunteer to participate in final interviews, if they want to share more of their life experiences.

The third phase will be the interviews that will take place at _. The first sets of interviews will be approximately 30 minutes. The first interviews will concentrate on students’ background information and cultural identities. The final interviews will take approximately 45 minutes. The interview guide will focus on students’ (a) background information, (b) relationships with their streams/programs, (c) multiple worlds, and (d) identity and agency. Focus groups and interview

Mandira Raksit/ . . .Contd
discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim with the permission obtained from participants.

If you have any question about the rights of research participants, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-948-3273.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and support.

Sincerely,

Mandira Raksit, PhD Candidate, Theory and Policy Studies in Education OISE/University of Toronto Email: mraksit@oise.utoronto.ca Phone: (905) 232-3391

Dr. Reva Joshee, Professor Theory and Policy Studies in Education OISE/University of Toronto Email: rjoshee@oise.utoronto.ca Phone: (416) 978-1515

I agree to let Mandira Raksit visit my classroom for a period of 15 minutes as requested above:

Name: _______________________________               Signed: __________________

Date:_____________________________

*Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

*Please return a copy of the signed letter to me.