THE EXPERIENCES OF MORNELLE COURT YOUTH
WITH SECONDARY SCHOOL STREAMING IN
SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO

by

Sana Zareey

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Humanities, Social Science and Social Justice Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Streaming involves dividing students at varying levels of education into distinct “streams” or “tracks”, each with its own set of future academic options. This qualitative study investigated the experiences of youth and their families in Mornelle Court, Scarborough, Ontario. Through bringing youth voices to the fore, this thesis addresses a critical research gap. Overall it was found that: (i) the streaming placement of these youth was not determined by their desire to pursue a specific profession; (ii) the youths and their parents did not have adequate information on streaming; (iii) there were strained relationships between students of different streams; (iv) for youths who attempted it, moving from less to more academic streams was not possible; and (v) there were clear race and class biases affecting stream placement. This study serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, educational practitioners, and the public at large.
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Preface

The following paper addresses streaming at the secondary school level. It should be clear from the outset that this thesis does not conclude my investigation of the streaming process. I am not a researcher who is taking a snapshot of an issue, like a journalist who photographs a socially unjust circumstance to advance his or her own profession, and yet, does not seek to meaningfully improve the problem. I will not allow this research to fall into the category of dominant, passive approaches to research in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake; meaningful action is and will continue to be taken as a result of the findings. The purpose of this paper is not only to fulfill my Master’s requirements. At the heart of this work is an attempt to deeply understand this subject, to get at the lived experiences of youth who have been affected by streaming, and to convey that experience to others. This piece of work is one aspect of an ongoing quest to make a meaningful contribution – however modest – to improving Ontario’s educational system.

While it is not fashionable in current academic research to include personal sentiments and experiences within a paper of this nature, this section is predominantly about my own position in relation to this research, and reflects a strong personal element. In asserting the need to begin from a personal standpoint, I am reminded of the writing of George Dei in the recent publication, Contemporary Issues in the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity: A Critical Reader. In discussing the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin, Dei writes,
“For many Black parents, the pain and anguish of Trayvon’s killing were compounded by the dismissal of the grief of a people/community, characterizing us as being ‘irrational,’ too ‘emotional,’... So much for a society that readily jumps to the guilt of Black youth. Race and racism are alive and well in our communities and we cannot be too ‘objective/rational/unemotional’ about this discussion... My learning objective in sharing this story is to affirm that “speaking race” is personal and important, and that race and racism cannot be addressed without emotion. Race and racism are about human lives and daily lived realities. The only way to enter a discussion of Critical Anti-Racist Theory is from the personal” (Dei, p.2).

I feel that the only way to enter a discussion of streaming, and its racial underpinnings, is also from the personal. Therefore, in the following section, I will give full expression to my own story, and to the journey I have taken in order to arrive at this research topic.

My journey to becoming a teacher, and to researching this issue, begins in 2008. At the time I was working as an electrical engineer at an automotive company. My job mainly entailed communicating between different agencies to ensure that car manufacturing parts were delivered to the right places. I had just finished my engineering degree at the University of Western and was glad to obtain work immediately in the industry. I was earning a proper salary for the first time in my life, and was able to help support my parents and younger sister. While I was grateful, I was also empty. My day-to-day work did not fill me with purpose.
I was happy to leave at the end of each day, and did not particularly look forward to returning the next.

In fact, I would wait in anticipation for the weekend when I could do something that I really loved. Each Saturday I worked with a group of 11-14 year old youth, serving as a volunteer mentor within the context of the “Junior Youth Empowerment Program”. Reflecting back, I ask myself, what was it that I loved so much about working with these youth? What made me so joyful to befriend and mentor them? I realize now that it concerns a synergy between working with these youth and working towards my purpose in life. After all, human beings feel joyful when we feel we are fulfilling our purpose. Nothing brings me more joy than witnessing someone become empowered, and develop their capacities. I feel that my purpose is to be a part of the development of others – however small and humble that role may be. From working with this group of youth, I discovered my calling. I observed that the youth would readily connect with and confide in me, and that the way in which I communicated with them seemed to resonate. In sum, I discovered two things – that I could fulfill my purpose through teaching and mentoring young people, and that I was suited for this purpose. After coming to this important realization, doing nothing about it soon became unbearable. Within two years I had quit my engineering job, and entered studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

In addition to spurring a complete career switch, working with this group of youth also represented my first real grappling with the issue of streaming. I remember clearly a conversation with one youth that brings light to this issue. I
will use the pseudonym “Mashiyatt” to protect the identity of this youth. Mashiyatt was a bright and inquisitive grade 8 student living in an impoverished neighborhood of London, Ontario. We were standing at his front door chatting as we often did. I asked him what he wanted to do after school. He said he wanted to drive a taxi. When asked why he said, “I dunno, it’d be fun”. I asked him if he knew what would happen if he told his guidance counselor this, and if he were sure of this decision. I was not worried that he might become a taxi driver. Indeed, this— as with all professions when done with dedication— is a noble profession. What I was worried about was that he may not yet be sure about this career decision, and by communicating his plans to teachers, may be funneled into a path of which he is unsure. It turned out he was not sure, and did not realize that by communicating his goal to his guidance counselor he would likely be placed in an applied or locally developed stream, and that if he changed his mind about his potential profession, it would become increasingly difficult to choose a different track later on.

My mind began to race. I was struck by how much the destiny of these youths was in the hands of a shaky and sometimes careless system – a system which either was unaware of its flaws or actively negligent of them, a system in denial to which so many families place their complete trust. I began to see patterns that I had known for some time in my head, but had not felt deeply in my heart. I seemed to pass from a state of knowing facts and pieces of information to a state of understanding, and this understanding filled me with motivation to do something.
Soon after, I began volunteering in a physics classroom at the same high school I had attended when I was young. I remember entering the academic classroom, and how familiar the environment felt; everything was just as I expected. Yet, when I entered the applied class, I distinctly remember entering a world I had never thought existed. As a student I always thought that streaming choice was a very deliberate and thought-out process for all students. Those who wanted to go to university, like me, chose academic streams based on the career they wished for. Those who wanted to be a plumber, electrician or another trade chose the applied stream as that made most sense for their goals. When I visited the applied classroom that day, I quickly realized how wrong I had been.

Students in this stream did not make an active choice to be here that reflected their long-term goals. Many were simply lost in a system in which they felt they did not belong. They had been funneled here by someone else, perhaps a teacher or a counselor, who encouraged them to choose a path that would be easy enough for them. And perhaps what struck me most were the behavioral issues I observed. These youth were bright, but they did not conform easily to the system. They were harder to teach, not because they lacked intelligence, but because they did not fit the mold. I realized that the system of streaming was more about addressing the lack of the ability of teachers to work effectively with a diverse range of students than about the actual ability of the students themselves.

The story then continues to Toronto where I began my Bachelor’s in education at OISE. While studying, I was part of a team that facilitated community activities within Mornelle, a highly diverse and low-income neighborhood of
Scarborough. Mornelle would later become the research site of this study. Mornelle is also where I met my wife, Alicia, who would later assist me with this research by being the ever-patient and highly competent editor. Alicia was also volunteering with the community activities in Mornelle, and our shared passion for working with young people brought us together. Working with the youth in Mornelle re-defined the nature of building relationships in a community setting. Not only were these youth important to me, not only was I joyful to spend time with them, they became our family. They were the first among our list of wedding invites, and our lives became forever linked with theirs. Now that we live in Hamilton we are still regularly in touch with them and their families. I continue to feel a strong sense of responsibility for their well-being and will always do so. Thus, when I gather insights from interviewing these youth, the knowledge this generates will not remain as words written on a page. Learning about their streaming story will help me to empower them to navigate this system, and to ensure their capacities and potentials are developed. Moreover, learning about streaming will empower me to make meaningful change to this issue, a change that I sincerely hope will positively impact many more youth.
Chapter 1: OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

In this introductory chapter, I outline the essential features of this research study including the research question and objectives, the important concerns of researcher positionality and how these have been addressed, and the discursive framework that informs the theoretical approach of this study.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal narratives – the “streaming stories” – of a group of students in Mornelle Court, a low-income and diverse neighborhood within Scarborough, Ontario. Doing so will involve investigating who has the most power over stream placement, the nature of student–student relationships across streams, the impact of stream placement on the youth’s self-esteem and future choices, the question of whether streaming is a fair process, and other topics that the youth themselves feel are relevant to expressing their lived experiences of streaming. Specifically, the research focuses on four questions:

1) What are the most significant elements that impact the stream placement of a student, and who exerts most power over this decision?

2) What is the nature of relationships between students of different streams?
3) How does stream placement affect the current well-being of students in the study, is there a degree of mobility between streams, and what is the impact of stream placement on the students’ goals for their futures?

4) Overall, how do the youth and their parents understand streaming, and what are their opinions concerning the fairness of the process?

**Researcher Position and Intellectual Project**

I have spent the last three years living at the research site, Mornelle Court. Mornelle is composed of several high-density apartment buildings and its population is predominantly comprised of people from South Asian and Caribbean backgrounds. In Mornelle, I was actively involved in the community life of the neighborhood through facilitating empowerment programs for youth. The fact that I lived at the research site for a few years meant that I had the opportunity to witness the transition of these young people from elementary school to high school.

Streaming has been a subject of import to me since I entered the field of education and for years now I have informally engaged in conversations with principals, parents, and students about this topic. However, I have not had the opportunity to formally collect these rich experiences, build upon them, and to contribute these insights to the broader discourse on streaming in Canada.

I identify myself as a male of South Asian/Persian descent. My skin colour is brown in complexion. My familiarity with Middle Eastern and South Asian customs puts me in a certain position in terms of this qualitative study, both
advantageous in some regards and disadvantageous in others. I recognize that many of the participants in this study will feel comfortable when engaging in conversations with me because they may more readily identify themselves in me, while other participants may feel the opposite. Moreover, it should be noted from the outset that I carry my own personal biases: I sympathize with minority families who are struggling to navigate the education system since my sister and I had similar experiences growing up in an immigrant family, and I have less sympathetic feelings towards various school administrators and the manner in which they perceive of and structure the streaming process.

By being upfront and transparent about my views, future researchers may acknowledge any biases I may hold and may be able to interpret my results while also acknowledging my starting point. I recognize that I cannot remove opinions, personal bias, and the influence of research positionality entirely; however, I will fulfill my responsibility to reduce their impact, and most importantly to remain aware, honest and transparent about their relationship to the research process.

Since I have personal ties to the research site, a disciplined and frequent “reflexion” was crucial. Reflexion is the process of considering one’s own impact on the research findings, in which one continually analyzes ways to either reduce this impact or at least be more upfront and transparent about it. I was aware that, in the context of interviewing close friends, it is possible to become too comfortable in the setting of the neighborhood, to take certain assumptions and understandings for granted, and thus fail to analyze the impacts of positionality. This would rob the research of much of its potential richness, and
thus continual reflexion was essential. I often reflected on the feminist definition of “reflexion” – the “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994). Through reflexion, one avoids the idea of pretending that the researcher can be a neutral, impersonal machine. Instead, it is acknowledged that personal views and emotions continually impact social relations, and that there is an ongoing impact of both the researcher and the researched on the findings. The task is to continually reflect on these, not to avoid them.

Rather than viewing my personal investment in the subject and context as only a potential barrier, by remaining open, honest, and vigilant, my connection to Mornelle added value and accuracy to the work. For example, there is less of a chance for students to lie or withhold information when they feel comfortable with the researcher. Also, I could more accurately interpret what the students meant by certain phrases as I had had many chances previously to discuss issues with them, and could understand their way of expressing themselves. There was also less of a chance for students to try to impress me with their responses since they were already assured of my respect through years of working together. For these reasons and others, my association with Mornelle likely had positive results in terms of gaining accurate information.

**Discursive Framework**

This research adopts an antiracist discursive framework. George Dei (1996) has defined anti-racism as an “action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression” (p.
Anti-racism within education is a political practice and theoretical framework that informs scholarly work, pedagogical, curricular and organizational change (Pon et al., 2011). In contrast to multicultural approaches, which emphasize the celebration of diversity and promote changes in non-tolerant attitudes, anti-racism involves tackling racism at a structural, cultural, economic, and spiritual level (Dei, 1996; Dei, 2008). From an anti-racist perspective, race is the entry point or focal point around which other injustices are situated. It is central to the unpacking of any social justice question. The historical legacies of colonialism also are important to the anti-racist framework, and an accurate understanding of these past injustices informs current complexities of racism for the antiracist scholar. From an antiracist perspective, without tackling racism at structural levels, social justice, equity and equality are impossible (Dei, 1996; 2008).

Another important aspect of the anti-racist framework is the concept of integrative anti-racism. This involves acknowledging that it is impossible to understand the impact of racism without unpacking the ways in which race intersects and interlocks with class, gender, ability and sexuality (Dei, 2008). There is a need to unify anti-oppressive movements, and thus integrative anti-racism calls for solidarity between those who are engaged in tackling social injustice. Integrative anti-racism does not “water down” the primacy of race as an entry point to discussing all social injustice; it is not a step away from earlier definitions of anti-racism. Instead, race is still primary to the perspective, and the relationships of racism to other forms of oppression are more thoroughly addressed.
While an antiracist discursive framework is an important part of my lens, this does not mean that the primary objective of my research is to understand how institutional racism influences streaming. This is a significant part of my research, but it is not the primary goal. Instead I strive to look more broadly at all of the factors that may influence the stream placement of Mornelle youth, and the many elements that affect their lived experience of streaming. I have attempted with diligence and sincerity not to let my views concerning racism direct the responses of the youth, and my interpretation of those responses. My aim was to hear their voices – their raw and honest opinions – and I have remained diligent in honoring that goal.

This thesis adopts a Critical Anti-Racist Theory (CART) standpoint. CART has several important tenets, the first of which is that racism has made race real (Dei & Lordan, 2013). It has been established through science that race is a social construct. The six taxonomic divisions that were first thought to divide *Homo sapiens* are now known to be completely arbitrary; these divisions were invented in the 18th century when the sciences of genetics and evolutionary biology did not exist (Witzig, 1996). According to Dei and other anti-racist practitioners, this has led to a fashionability among contemporary scholars in asserting that since race evidently does not exist, it must be the case that racism also does not exist, and is instead a fictitious problem created by the work of anti-racists (Dei & Lordan, 2013). On the contrary, it should be clarified that race exists *because of* racism, and anti-racists do not create this problem, but rather identify it and discuss its implications.
A second tenet of CART is that history and context are essential elements of any discussion of racism in modern society (Dei & Lordan, 2013). The legacies of colonialism and European imperialism have shaped the power dynamics which continue to replicate racist attitudes and actions. These historical legacies have created contexts of White supremacy, which cause “Whiteness” to be the “neutral”, “invisible”, and “objective” standard bearer against which all others are to assess their worthiness (Dei & Lordan, 2013). Within contexts of white supremacy, anti-Black racism becomes particularly severe, and skin color racisms in general take on a prominent role in comparison to other racisms.

Finally, CART does not dismiss the myriad of other oppressions to which people are subjected. Oppression based on sexuality, gender, religion, and disability are no less real, and play a significant role in the lived experiences of masses of people. CART as a theoretical framework does not exclude these other forms of oppression, but rather clarifies the varying intensities of each and demonstrates their distinctions while examining the defined areas by which these oppressions intersect and interlock (Dei & Lordan, 2013).

The dominant group’s accounting of history routinely excludes racial and other minority perspectives to justify and legitimize its power (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Thus, a reversal of this situation involves bringing the voices of those who have been historically excluded to the fore. In this study, it was essential to have the voices of youth, especially youth of color, be central to the generation of knowledge. Indeed, not only were these youth involved in the generation of findings, but also in the interpretation of those findings and in their final
exposition. I hope that this thesis will represent one out of many attempts to re-write the dominant understanding of streaming. With the voices of racialized youth whose potential has been labeled by streaming as not important, I hope to contribute to a re-writing of current conceptions of streaming in order to fully acknowledge its deep-set roots within a legacy of racial prejudice.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review includes a discussion of the arguments for and against streaming. Following this, the challenges of the unjust social stratification replicated through Ontario’s education system will be discussed. A thorough look at whether streaming fosters the academic success of students, whether initially academically inclined or otherwise, is elaborated upon. Forces that have given rise to the historical establishment of streaming, and propel its continuation are explored. Finally, gaps in the research landscape are highlighted, with a focus on the significance of this study in addressing these research gaps.

Definitions & Debates

Streaming or tracking, in grades 9–10 in Ontario, is the practice of dividing students through different sequences of core classes and categorizing learners into “academic” (preparing for university), “applied” (preparing for community college or the work force), and “locally developed” (preparing for the work force) groups (Allison, 1992; Ministry of Education of Ontario I, 2000; Oakes, 1985). In grades 11–12, essentially the same streams, beginning with the most academic, are labeled as “university preparation courses”, “college preparation courses”, and “workplace preparation courses” (Ministry of Education of Ontario II, 2000) ¹. The practice has been occurring in Canada and other developed countries for decades

¹ “Open” courses, unlike IB, academic, applied, and locally developed are the same across streams, i.e. students from any stream may be mixed within an open course (Ministry of Education, 2000).
(Krahn & Taylor, 2007). In 1999 streaming was formally abolished in Ontario secondary schools, following research in the 1970s and 1980s that demonstrated that the practice serves to replicate social inequalities (People for Education, 2013). Yet, streaming remains widespread across the province not only at high school levels, but also beginning earlier (People for Education, 2013).

While the present study focuses on secondary school streaming, the process begins in Ontario, both formally and informally, as early as elementary school and even in kindergarten (Zoric, 2013, pers. comm). French immersion, special education, and resource withdrawal are examples of streams at the elementary school level. Other schools are more explicit and will divide elementary classes into multiple streams such as “grade 5 A, B, C, and D” (Zoric, 2013, pers. comm). Overall, throughout a child’s schooling experience in Ontario, there are multiple points at which they may be labeled, divided, and stream-lined well before the official stream choice is made in grade 8. Furthermore, streaming extends beyond the categorization of classrooms to the streaming of entire schools in Ontario in which some high schools are "Business Technology Institutes" while others are “Collegiate Institutes”, the difference being that the former do not provide the classes required for a student to apply to university while the latter do.

Two of the most thorough sources concerning the history of streaming in a North American context are Stacking the Deck: the Streaming of Working-Class Kids in Ontario Schools by Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller (1992), and Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality by Oakes, first published in 1985. Stacking the Deck focuses specifically on Ontario, and demonstrates how
working-class students are abused by the system of streaming. The book includes a historical analysis of the process of establishing streaming, as well as the failed attempts to abandon the practice. Practical solutions in terms of how to make the school system more democratic are also given. In addition to analyzing the economic side of streaming, Oakes shows how racial groups are divided by stream and how the tracking process serves to replicate social stratification based on prejudice. In recent editions of the book, Oakes discusses the “tracking wars” in which there are perpetual movements to abandon the practice, which seem to be continually overridden by those who desire the practice to remain.

Whether streamed classrooms are beneficial for student academic attainment continues to be debated in Canada. Proponents of tracking argue that since students vary in ability, the streamed classroom provides an important solution to meet the demands of diverse learners; academically inclined students are pushed to take challenging courses and enter university, while students who are less academically inclined pursue vocational streaming options that are better suited to their needs (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). Proponents also suggest that it is more manageable for teachers to work with homogenous groups of students, and that students themselves perform better when grouped with classmates who demonstrate similar levels of ability (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). Those in favor of streaming contend further that students choose vocational aimed streams since they have a special interest and capacity in fields such as carpentry, mechanics, or other jobs that are more “hands on” as opposed to academic in nature.
Opponents of streaming argue that tracking too readily categorizes students as not academically inclined and confuses lack of opportunity with lack of ability. Due to factors unrelated to student capacity – such as racial prejudice, lack of knowledge among parents of the postsecondary system, inadequate learning resources at home, and fewer academic role models – students that have aspirations to continue to university and would succeed in their goals, are prevented from doing so (Krahn & A. Taylor, 2007). These scholars contend further that streaming does not foster academic success, and instead serves to reproduce social inequalities. In many studies on streaming, poor and minority students are found disproportionately in lower streams, and these students are excluded from quality education due to their placement (Oakes, 2005; Boaler, 1997; Cooper & Dunne, 1999; Hannan & Boyle, 1987; Lynch, 1989; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Rees et al., 1996; Taylor, 1993). For example, currently the average family income in schools with a high proportion of applied students is almost half that of schools with a low proportion of applied students (People for Education, 2013).

Opponents argue further that the research indicates that the majority of students do not “choose” to enroll in vocational streams because they have the appropriate skills and a strong interest in following such a program. Instead, their ‘choice’ is attributed to a lack of ability required to be successful in general education, or to a lack of attitude, interest and determination to be successful in academic programs (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Thus, streaming opponents claim that vocational education is perceived as the ‘dustbin’ of the educational
process-- the final stop for those who cannot be or are not motivated to pursue valued educational goals.

The most current trends in terms of the impact of family income, immigrant status, English as a second language status, and parental education are described well in the table below, which uses applied math as an example of the patterns concerning applied classes in general:

**Table 1**
Demographic Characteristics of Ontario Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristics by school (averages)</th>
<th>10% of schools with highest levels of applied math enrolment</th>
<th>Provincial average</th>
<th>10% of schools with lowest levels of applied math enrolment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied students</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income</td>
<td>$61,720</td>
<td>$84,440</td>
<td>$112,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households living in poverty (LICO)</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents without high-school diploma</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with university education</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent immigrants (arrived in Canada within 5 years)</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal students</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*People for Education Report, 2013, p.2*

As the above table shows, students in Ontario this year were significantly more likely to be in applied mathematics if they were from a low income family, had parents who had not attended university, possessed a different mother tongue from English, or were Aboriginal. The argument that streaming is a decision based primarily on academic capacity and interest is refuted by these
facts. The report continues to explain that while the statistics given are only for mathematics, this subject tends to be the entry level into the applied stream in general. Many students struggle with mathematics in grade 9, are “advised” to switch their stream to a “lower” level, and often begin to follow suit with their other subjects.

It is interesting that Aboriginal students are singled out in the study above, and it is helpful to be able to access statistics on this particular population in regards to stream. It is frustrating, however, that certain racial groups are rarely given this sort of special attention and focus in educational research. Problematically, some studies on school achievement and educational aspirations of immigrants have compared 'immigrant' versus 'non-immigrant' groups or 'racial minorities' as one category vs ‘non racial minorities’. These studies have found few aggregate differences between those born in Canada and those born outside Canada in terms of educational attainment (Sweet et al, 2010). Such comparisons conceal significant variations among immigrant students, and mask the reality of the situation of each minority group, groups that have distinct backgrounds, and face unique challenges in Ontario’s schools.

**Educational Social Stratification: Race & Class Dimensions**

In many ways, the public school system in Canada is structured to replicate social stratification, thereby dividing students based on income, race, and ethnicity (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992; Martell, 2009; Parek, Killoran & Crawford, 2011). Certain students are systematically streamed away from academic opportunities without their knowledge or desire for this to occur. In
Canada, poor and minority students are greatly over-represented in lower streams and in the category of students with learning and behavioral disabilities (Artiles et al, 2010; De Valenzuela et al 2006; Martell, 2009; Skiba, 2006; Web–Johnson, 2003). Conversely, higher-income, non-minority, and students with parents who have a university education are over-represented within the advanced streams and within quality educational programs (Parek, Killoran & Crawford, 2011).

A relatively recent survey – “Streaming” in the 10th grade in four Canadian provinces in 2000 – is often cited to prove that visible minority students are not disadvantaged by the streaming system. Collecting data from 15-year olds in four Canadian provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Ontario) the survey shows that visible minority youth and immigrant youth are more likely to have post-secondary school options open than non-visible minority and non-immigrant youth (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). While this pattern is not strongly statistically significant, the bigger problem is the grouping of heterogeneous youth into broad, homogenous categories. To group all visible minorities into one category and pronounce that visible minorities are being treated well by the streaming system is highly problematic. There are significant differences between the barriers faced by, for example, Indian, Chinese, Black, and Native youth. Within each of these categories, such as within the category of “Native”, there are further differences that should not be overlooked between First Nations, Aboriginal and Metis youth. To group all “immigrant” youth as one category is also problematic, especially when considering the major differences in challenges faced by immigrants to Canada.
The above paragraph poses a challenge to my own research in which students have been grouped into the homogenous and ambiguous categories of “Brown” “Black” and “White”. However, there is thought behind these groupings. These categories, while they do reflect a heterogenous group, are the divisions that the youth and parents themselves felt were relevant to a discussion of streaming. The research participants did not find large differences between the experiences of East Indian or Iranian youth, i.e. “Brown”, or between Caribbean and African–Canadian youth, i.e. “Black”. Thus, to them what was relevant in terms of streaming was “Black” “Brown” and “White” and this reflected their lived experiences. Thus, I find it acceptable for research on immigrant youth to utilize broad and ambiguous categories if these are the terms and labels that most reflect the actual experiences of youth, and which the colonized bodies of the research participants themselves decide are relevant. The work of Krahn & Taylor, in contrast to my own, creates categories that the researchers feel are relevant, which bear no relation to what the “researched” finds to be of importance. In doing so, the racial trends that exist in the streaming process are masked.

The Every Student Survey, conducted in 1970, concluded that children whose parents were professionals were most likely to be enrolled within academic five-year programs and least likely to be among the group of over-age students and students taking special education and vocational classes (Wright, 1970). Students who had a single mother parent, parents who were unemployed, or receiving welfare, were more likely to be enrolled within “opportunity or special vocational” classes. The survey found a strong relationship between parental
occupation and student enrollment in vocational classes; students with parents who were laborers were over-represented in vocational streams while students with professional parents were under-represented in these streams. The Every Student Survey of 1975 found similar results and patterns (Desosaran & Wright, 1976). Unfortunately, there has not been an Every Student Survey that includes data on streaming since 1975.

While these trends are dated, it is important to demonstrate the historical roots of this issue; moreover, the trends are similar in recent years. The Toronto District School Board census from 2006 of grade 7–12 students, a census of parents of kindergarten through grade 6 aged children from 2008, and the achievements results for grade 9–10 students from 2008, show large discrepancies by family socio-economic status. For example, the 2007 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) results indicate that students with parents of higher income levels consistently perform better on their first try of the exam. It should be noted that students in Ontario must pass the OSSLT in order to graduate from high school. Among children of professionals and individuals in senior management positions, 89% were successful; 84% among children of semi-professionals; 74% among semi-professionals and trade jobs; 66% among unskilled clerical; and 54% among children of parents who were unemployed (Parek, Killoran & Crawford, 2011).

Part of the economic separations arise from the fact that middle class and affluent parents often pressure schools to implement streaming and to ensure their child is placed in higher streams (Kariya & Rosenbaum, 1999; McGrath &
Kuriloff, 1999). Michael Apple (2001) describes compellingly the advantages that wealthier parents hold in regards to ensuring their children are placed in quality educational programs:

“More affluent parents often have more flexible hours and can visit multiple schools. They have cars—often more than one—and can afford driving their children across town to attend a ‘better’ school. They can as well provide the hidden cultural resources such as camps and after school programmes (dance, music, computer classes, etc.) that give their children an ‘ease’, a ‘style’, that seems ‘natural’ and acts as a set of cultural resources. Their previous stock of social and cultural capital—who they know, their ‘comfort’ in social encounters with educational officials—is an unseen but powerful storehouse of resources” (pp.415).

These parents understand the school system, and have access to the knowledge and networks necessary to exert influence upon student grouping. School staff may guard against the removal of many intelligent and capable students from their programs, a phenomenon called ‘bright flight’ which has been shown to occur when schools do not offer exclusive streams. O'Shaugnessey (2005) terms parental selection of schools based on the quality of students their children will be exposed to as “peer effects”. Peer effects help to explain why such parents favour tracking systems and why these systems operate to the advantage of their children and their affluent peers (Brantlinger et al., 1996; Crozier, 1997; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). The arguments concerning the power of wealthy parents are not to imply that less wealthy families have no
power or are resource-less. Indeed, skill, courage, and cultural resources are required and shown by these families on a daily basis to navigate the education system in Canada, and to promote the well-being of their children against all odds (Fine & Weis, 1998; Duneier, 1999).

It is impossible to separate economic status from race; there is a consistent relationship between the two. Beginning at the most general level, there is a persistent and sizeable gap between the economic performance of racialized Canadians and other Canadians in Canada. Income, sectoral occupation and unemployment data demonstrate that a racialized economy is a feature of the Canadian economy (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Chui et al, 2006; Fleury, 2007; Galabuzi, 2006; Picot, Lu & Hou, 2009). There is a consistent over-representation of racialized individuals in low-paid, low-end, unregulated and precarious temporary work. Many are employed in exploitative environments in textiles and other factory environments (Galabuzi, 2006). These trends translate into negative implications for the well-being and achievement of racialized youth.

Honing in on Ontario as a province, multiple studies demonstrate an income differential based on race (Block, 2010; Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Chui et al, 2006; Collin & Jensen, 2009; Fleury, 2007; Galabuzi, 2006; Picot, Lu & Hou, 2009). Moreover, the income difference between European and non-European groups has grown steadily since the 1970s (Ornstein, 2006). There are also nuances to these racial and class dimensions, unique to particular ethno-racial groups. For example, as of 2001, 40 per cent of the members of African ethno-racial groups in the Greater Toronto Area were below Statistics Canada’s low income cut-off,
compared to 30 per cent for the Arab and West Asian groups and about 20 per cent for the South Asian, East Asian, Caribbean and South and Central American ethno-racial groups. The figure for European ethno-racial groups is 10.8 per cent (Ornstein, 2006).

The racial and class implications are further exacerbated when considering the fact that students are less likely to associate with one another when divided across streams. Groups of friends form around streams, which reinforces racial and class groupings which are already manifest in those streams. Studies suggest that streaming can influence students’ peer groups and attitudes regarding their classmates. Students are more likely to form friendships with peers in the same stream, than with students outside of their stream (Gamoran, 1992). Since lower-class and certain minority group students are overrepresented in less academic streams, interaction among diverse ethnic and class-based groups can be discouraged by streaming (Hallinan, 1994). Moreover, the stigmatization and alienation of lower streamed students is thought to have a negative impact on their academic performance and self-esteem (Hallinan, 1994), which serves to further solidify these groupings.

**Streaming for Student Success?**

Researchers often debate whether streaming fosters academic success. One of the primary arguments for the fairness of streaming is that students – at all levels of academic aptitude – perform better when grouped with those of similar abilities. In regards to the applied and locally developed streams, however, this argument has been contended in past research. Studies consistently find that
streaming has negative effects on academic achievement for low-stream students (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999). In Ontario, the proportion of students dropping out before completing grade twelve is evidence of this; the percentages are much higher in the applied (62%) and locally developed (79%) streams compared to the academic stream (12%) (Allison, 1992).

Teacher and parent expectations play an important role in fostering student success, and lower expectations for lower streamed students are a disservice to them. Overwhelming evidence indicates that teachers’ expectations of their students can become self-fulfilling prophesies (e.g., Rist, 2000; Rodriguez, 2008), and that teachers of low-income, working class, and certain minority students often hold learning expectations of them that are far below those of their more affluent peers (Thompson et al., 2004; Haberman, 1995; Good, 1987). For example, teachers tend to: accept low quality and even incorrect responses from low-expectation students; give high expectation students but not low expectation students “the benefit of the doubt” in ambiguous cases when marking assignments and tests; invite answers from students for whom they have low expectations less frequently; pay less attention to, and give shorter and less helpful instruction and feedback to, low expectation students (Zoric, 2013, p.10).

The impact of low expectations is exacerbated within the streaming process, and indeed, lower expectations are often justified by the existence of less academic streams. Research has found that teachers of advanced streams are the most experienced, highest status, and enthusiastic, while the least experienced teachers are assigned to the lower streams (Davis, 1986). Research
also shows that teachers in general hold lower expectations for students in lower streams, and thus do not motivate them to achieve success (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Teachers of lower streams spend more time maintaining discipline and order in the classroom than teaching the material, they instruct at a slower pace, on a more simplified level and focus more on basic skills, memorizing and classroom exercises compared to teachers of higher streams. Lower stream teachers often feel they are successful as a teacher if the students are well-behaved, as opposed to if they grasp the material necessary for their grade level (Oakes, 1985).

Teachers of higher streams appear to share a culture which is more academic in orientation and in which students are perceived as more teachable compared to the staff-culture among teachers of lower streams (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Part of the difference in culture can be observed in the language utilized in classroom instruction. Anyon (1981) discusses the impact of classroom language on the sense of agency among students. Those in affluent schools and higher streams felt they could be involved in the generation of knowledge, whereas students in lower class schools and streams felt that all knowledge came from textbooks and teacher lectures. Part of the difference stemmed from the manner in which teachers spoke with the two groups of students: teachers of affluent students used “we” more often, implying that teacher and student are exploring the topic together; the teachers of lower streamed students asked more rhetorical questions and questions that required a specific “right” answer as opposed to utilizing open and explorative discussion;
and the teachers of higher streams incorporated students’ suggestions to inform their instruction, using phrases such as “would you like to approach it this way?” or “Am I on track?” (Anyon, 1981). Agency is a critical requirement for academic success; students need to feel that they have some autonomy in the learning process. Critical thinking, also, through being engaged in exploratory discussion, is crucial for learning. These differences in the language of instruction clearly are a disservice to lower–streamed students.

The arguments for student success due to institutionalized streaming stem largely from notions of improving academic success for high achieving students – namely, for rich and White students. Indeed, some studies do conclude that streaming benefits high achieving students who are placed in advanced tracks (Kerckhoff, 1986; Slavin, 1990). Yet, the supposedly positive impact on students in advanced streams is not consistent in the research. In other studies, students in higher tracks have actually benefited when their school is de–tracked. For example, in an in–depth study of detracking in Rockville, USA, it was found that all students – whether originally in advanced or basic streams – benefited academically when tracking was removed altogether (Burris & Welner, 2005). In summary, young people placed in locally developed and applied streams are not benefited academically or socially by streaming. Moreover, it is inconclusive whether students in the advanced streams benefit. Therefore, the research does not provide a strong basis to continue streaming, at least in the manner in which this practice is currently implemented.

**Contextual Factors Impacting the Streaming Process**
It is important to unpack the broader context in which streaming exists, and the forces, which make streaming a difficult process to challenge. These forces are wide ranging, including global as well as local factors, historical as well as current. Moreover, these influences are not confined to the educational sector alone. For example, the economic system has an impact on this issue, particularly the effects of a neoliberal agenda. Neoliberal education policy imperatives have substantially negatively affected Canada’s social programs and provincial education systems (Hill, 2009). Under the Liberal governments in the 1990s, funding to secondary and postsecondary education in Canada decreased dramatically (Hill, 2009). In addition to funding cuts, the implications of the neoliberal agenda have also had less explicit effects concerning how policymakers envision the purpose of education, and which types of policies are considered modern and appropriate.

Neoliberalism emerged in the Western hemisphere in the 1970s with the coordinated removal of market restrictions, thereby initiating an era of international market competition (Coburn, 2006). Some scholars argue that all social systems existing within a neoliberal state are influenced by neoliberal principles such as deregulation, competition and stratification, and that education systems are no exception (Parek, Killoran & Crawford, 2011; Bartlett et al, 2002). Others go further to claim that the application of neoliberal principles to education systems is the chief cause of the evolution of educational exclusion (Olssen & Peters, 2005). While some neoliberal notions have value in the functioning of the Canadian economy (when applied in moderation), such
attitudes in the context of education are in direct conflict with the principles of inclusion.

Neoliberal frameworks contribute to discrimination against lower income families within our educational system. This system of economic organization normalizes the separation of students based on class, which is often tied to race. Within societies that wholeheartedly embrace neoliberal agendas, it becomes increasingly challenging to confront social injustice within education and to create truly democratic education systems. By ‘democratic’ I do not intend the narrow meaning of a market-based society that holds free elections. I embrace the widest definition of the term, which refers to: “…the open exchange of social and political ideas in public discourse, including the full inclusion and representation of voices and perspectives historically silenced…” and which implies an education system that “does not observe the usual polite silences on controversial or sensitive matters,” “does not shy away from publicly naming and taking up injustices” and “welcomes disagreement and conflict as critical to a dialectic of justice (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007).

While neoliberalism contributes to the creation of exclusive educational processes, such as streaming, and the difficulty in challenging such systems, the determination of who is streamed leads us to a discussion of deep-seated discrimination. A historical analysis of the racial categorization of students in Canada extends to the cruel legacies involved in the establishment and maintenance of Aboriginal residential schools. The residential school system began in Canada under a Church–State partnership in 1879 (Milloy, 1999). By
1939, thousands of Aboriginal children had attended the schools and thousands more would be forced to before the final close of the system in 1984 (Milloy, 1999). School spaces were marred by verbal, sexual, physical, emotional and psychological abuse of Aboriginal children and their families. Yet, while these abuses occurred, the common rhetoric continued that schools were “the circle of civilized conditions” providing children the “care of a mother” and a good education (Milloy, 1999). Residential schools constitute one of the most damaging elements of the genocide of Aboriginal cultures by European settlers, and its legacies continue until today.

In addition to the disturbing residential school legacy, the separation of students through Black–White segregated schools provides further historical context. There is a long and complex history concerning the exclusion of Black children and youth from educational opportunity in Ontario. Segregated schools were initially a response to Black students being denied any form of schooling, since Black students were routinely denied admission to “common schools” (publicly funded elementary schools) in Ontario (Walker, 2008). To be separated into segregated was not a desire of most Black families at the time as demonstrated by multiple appeals to the Act that instituted segregated schools. Walker’s “History of Immigration and Racism in Canada: Essential Readings” provides a thorough and accurate account of this history, and should be studied in–depth by any scholar seriously concerned with the racial dimensions of schooling in Ontario.

Gaps in the Research Landscape: Significance of Study
Very few recent qualitative studies have been conducted on streaming. In fact, this is the first truly qualitative study on this topic conducted in Ontario since 1992. Nonetheless, it remains an important issue. It is encouraging that the advocacy group, People for Education, has recently released a report on streaming; this report outlines many of the most current trends concerning this practice. However, it does so only through quantitative means. Thus, many of the trends discussed require much further exploration, and there are a number of trends that are omitted (e.g. the racial implications of streaming).

Out of the research that has been done with regards to streaming, almost none focuses on bringing the voices of youths to the fore. In some, the demographics of the streams are discussed, while in others the stories of teachers are elaborated upon, and in others, policies are analyzed. By interviewing youth, this study obtained insights into their lived experiences with an honesty that cannot be achieved through interviewing only parents or teachers concerning their opinions on the lived experiences of the youth.

In addition, while there are clear relationships between race and class in the research, and their compounded impact on streaming, race also has an effect on achievement independent from class. Thus, it is a variable in and of itself that demands attention. One is hard pressed to find an in-depth study that looks at race fully and its impact on stream in Canada. There is a study from the UK, released in 2012 that compares the academic achievements of White British students to that of Black Caribbean students. In this study, Steve (2012) found that there is an achievement gap, disfavoring Black Caribbean students, which
cannot be accounted for by social-economic factors or a wide range of contextual factors. The gap persists after controls are applied for prior attainment, socio-economic variables and a wide range of pupil, family, and neighbourhood factors. Steve’s (2012) conclusion is that teacher expectations, based on race, have a major influence. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to bring the stories and voices of youths into the centre of the discussion on streaming, and to attempt to ground already existing theories in their stories. My purpose is not to develop a theory that could be applied Ontario-wide. Given the small sample size, and the diversity of experiences depending on the neighborhood in which a youth lives, their race, their gender, and many other factors, this would be an impractical aim.

Moreover, I do not believe that developing a generalized theory is a more desirable aim than gaining insight into the experiences of Mornelle youth specifically. Socially minded individuals and organizations are increasingly recognizing that the most effective and lasting projects begin at a grassroots level (Sundaram, 1997). A small geographical locality is identified, how the issue affects people living within that area is thoroughly and meaningfully investigated, and solutions are developed – in collaboration with the local inhabitants – that address the issue in that locality. Top down, national-level policies that are designed to be applicable within local contexts have been shown to be ineffective (Sundaram, 1997). Thus, if my research can accurately reflect the lived experiences of Mornelle youth, it will be possible to develop solutions that are applicable in Mornelle and could dramatically improve the educational experiences of young
people living in this neighbourhood. Similar initiatives could be implemented in various neighborhoods, involving neighbourhood-specific research and action.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

In the following discussion of research methodology, I begin with a general look at the benefits of qualitative research methods, and then demonstrate the applicability of these benefits to the current research goals. Subsequently, I discuss my approach in recruiting participants for this study. Research ethics are then elaborated upon. The backgrounds of research participants, using pseudonyms to protect their identities, are given in order to contextualize the presentation of findings. Considerations given to the design of interview questions are discussed followed by an explanation of this study’s approach to data analysis. I end with considering methodological challenges and the limitations of this current study.

Benefits of a Qualitative Approach

In this study, I adopt qualitative methods through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Many social science researchers advocate qualitative research methods, stating that their “openness... allows the researcher to approach the inherent complexity” of the subject (Dei, 1997). Most qualitative approaches also demand adequate reflexion, which is a term often used in anthropological research, and is defined as a process of continual reflection on the impact of the researcher on the research findings. Thus, many qualitative methods, through incorporating reflexion, acknowledge the researcher’s role within the story being told, such that the researcher’s subjectivity becomes part of the research itself. Qualitative methods steer away from simplistic interpretations of a problem based
on numerical “facts” and attempt to understand the complexities and inter-relatedness of themes within one area of investigation. For this study, which explores the lived experiences of high school youth, qualitative methods were thus considered best suited.

The merits of qualitative verses quantitative methods are rigorously debated among researchers. Since I aim to understand the lived experiences of Mornelle youth in regards to streaming, such a complex and multifaceted question demands a qualitative approach. In addition to the advantages in approaching this complex topic, qualitative methods enabled the placement of the youth voices at the centre of the work. In this study, not only did the youth answer the questions I posed, they created new questions that I had not originally developed. They did not only provide information that I then analyzed; they analyzed trends and patterns themselves, further enriching the data. Their narratives continually guided the analytical process, in a similar fashion to the process adopted by Dei et al (1997) in the work, *Reconstructing Dropout: A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students’ Disengagement from School*. As the authors write, “by centering the students narratives in our analysis and working from these experiences to develop a theoretical understanding, the students themselves have played an integral role in the creation of this knowledge” (p.290). My hope is that researchers will increasingly adopt this empowering approach to research, as it allows those who have been historically thought of as passive subjects of study to become part of the research team, thereby promoting accuracy and fostering the translation of research into meaningful action.
Traditional positivistic researchers may contend that this study lacks the kind of numbers that achieve statistical significance; I invite such critics to find 200 high school students who live in low-income neighborhoods of Toronto who have a vastly different experience of streaming. While the numbers of research participants in this study were modest, it is essential to unpack what is defined as “significant”. A study that enlists thousands of youth and yet fails to uncover any ounce of their reality may be defined as statistically significant by some. I cannot find such approaches meaningful, as it is hard to uncover what is discovered in such a manner. This is not to say that quantitative methods cannot be used effectively alongside qualitative investigation. From an action research perspective, quantitative methods are often necessary to translate the findings into meaningful action. The ideal course at present is to discover a trend through in-depth qualitative methods, and then to justify it through quantitative samples that are still considered superior in the eyes of many policy makers and administrators. Indeed, that course of action is the long-term goal in order to promote implementation of the policy recommendations of this study.

The particular subset of qualitative research that I adopt in this study is an ethnographic approach. One of the primary objectives of ethnographic research is to achieve what researchers term “emic validity” (Whitehead, 2005). An emic phenomenon is any physical or mental item that is regarded as meaningful, real, accurate, and appropriate by the culture members or research participants themselves (Lindlof, 2013). Since a valid emic account is consistent with the views of native informants, it was essential for me to continually ensure the patterns I
was recognizing were valid according to my research subjects. Thus, I sent drafts to the informants, asking them to comment on particular sections, and I continued phone conversations with Mornelle community members following the formal interview period. These efforts served to continually refine my exposition to more closely align with the view of my informants.

**Sampling Methods**

In terms of sampling, it was relatively easy to enlist the participation of interviewees since I had organized youth groups while living in the Mornelle neighborhood over the past few years. This experience encouraged trust and lent insight into the dynamics of the neighborhood. I had developed close relationships with many families in the community, and thus the parents demonstrated no hesitation for me to converse with their children. Also, an important component of the youth programs involved periodic visits with the parents to update them on how their child was doing in the context of the programs. Through that experience I learned of the most effective ways to contact and arrange meeting times with parents. This involves blocking off a weekend, or a few weekday evenings, and making oneself available at multiple times during that period. Calling in advance and trying to arrange a time is not effective due to the dynamic nature of many of the parents’ schedules. I knew the general times that are best for the parents and took care to visit at those times.

Utilizing the earlier described scheduling process, I created a list of the youth I could interview from the various buildings, and over the course of two weekends, I traveled to the neighbourhood and visited families representing a
diversity of backgrounds, each with a unique perspective on this issue. In the initial list, I sought to promote diversity in grade, gender, ethnicity, and stream placement. I had a high success rate of finding research participants at home when I arrived. The sampling process was similar to “snowball sampling” in that the youth and their parents would then recommend other youth to be interviewed, beyond the initial list. This helped to expand the pool of interviewees.

**Ethical Considerations**

All participants signed confidentiality agreements, and youth under the age of eighteen had a parent or legal guardian sign in addition to their own consent. Before the start of each interview or focus group, it was explained to the participants what confidentiality means, and I reassured them that the recorded conversations would remain confidential within the research team. It was also emphasized to the participants that they should not discuss confidential matters with other people post interview.

A standard confidentiality agreement form was used for the study. Before the participants agreed, the following key points were explained: (i) all information shared by research participants is to remain confidential within the research team; (ii) all research participants are to ensure that every piece of information shared by others, e.g. in the context of a focus group, is confidential; and (iii) that all participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and that they are not obliged to address any question they do not wish to answer.
It was crucial to take steps to avoid any unnecessary feelings of discomfort or emotional disturbance among the youth and parents. Having the youth interviewed with their siblings in some cases helped to promote comfort. If the youth had been interviewed along with those they had never met, or were not close to, this could have created discomfort. Even though I did not anticipate siblings would interfere with their brothers’ or sisters’ response, I emphasized the importance of the interview space being free from ridicule and embarrassment prior to each interview. Another potential source of discomfort could have been my reactions to the answers provided by the youth or parents. I was mindful not to let my biases related to how I felt about the applied stream make any student or parent feel bad about their placement, for example, through carefully choosing my tone and word choice. I was careful to pose questions in a way that provoked thought, but did not make students feel that they had made a bad choice, or to make parents feel that they had been negligent or unaware.

Whether a focus group or a one-on-one interview was held depended on what the parents wished, the preferences of the youth, and whether the primary interviewee had siblings. Also, some participants had siblings within the middle-high school age range, and it was natural and comfortable for them to be interviewed together. Having siblings grouped together was advantageous in most cases because it promoted logistical ease, a back-and-forth discussion, and also fostered the comfort of research participants. In one case, however, it was problematic because the two siblings were in different streams, and the opinions
of the more academically streamed sibling may have inhibited the other sibling from openly sharing his thoughts.

The influence of power dynamics cannot be overlooked within the context of any research project. In this case, my age, gender, societal status, position as a teacher, position as a researcher, and status as a Canadian citizen all would impact the manner in which the youth and parents interacted with me. Indeed, these are common problems for social scientists. As research increasingly seeks to incorporate the voices of the oppressed and the marginalized, and not just the voices of the White, male, and middle-class – as was predominantly the case in the past – it raises new challenges. Kim England (1994) articulates these challenges compellingly:

“Years of positivist inspired training have taught us that impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research. In these discussions of detachment, distance, and impartiality, the personal is reduced to a mere nuisance or a possible threat to objectivity. This threat is easily dealt with. The neopositivist’s professional armor includes a carefully constructed public self as a mysterious, impartial outsider, an observer freed of personality and bias. [Instead of adopting this flawed approach] ...the openness and culturally constructed nature of the social world, peppered with contradictions and complexities, needs to be embraced, not dismissed...This, in turn, ignites the need for a broader, less rigid conception of the “appropriate” method that allows the researcher the
flexibility to be more open to the challenges of fieldwork” (England, p.242).

My attempt to adopt this broader, less rigid approach included scheduling according to the nature of life in the neighborhood, where there are few pre-fixed appointments, and it is often more effective to show up for an interview rather than calling ahead. I was also upfront with my beliefs about streaming, after giving the youth a chance to express their views. Thus, the interviews followed as more of a natural conversation as opposed to a rigid interview with a neutral researcher who did not express his personal feelings. I strove to ensure the appropriate degree of flexibility in my sampling methods, where I consulted with research participants concerning how to recruit more youth and used their opinions in order to expand my pool of interviewees. It was also important for me to embrace home norms, where a parent should be allowed to walk in and out of an interview with his or her son, instead of being asked to remain outside. Similarly, siblings who wished to speak about their experiences together were free to do so.

The relationship between researcher and research subject may be reciprocal, asymmetrical, or potentially exploitative; and the researcher can adopt a stance of intimidation, ingratiation, self-promotion, or supplication (Smith, 1988). To shift the power imbalance that I knew existed, I attempted to take the position of supplicant. This involved seeking reciprocal relationships based on trust and empathy. It also involved being honest about my reliance on the youth
and their parents in order to complete this work. It meant I was upfront about my lack of knowledge compared to theirs, and I was honest in stating that only through their willingness could I obtain a glimpse into their experiences. Thus, I explained my reliance on their willingness and my gratefulness of their openness to share with me.

**Backgrounds of Research Participants**

Overall, four focus group discussions, and nine in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of eighteen research participants, twelve of whom were students, while six were parents. Following ethical approval, data collection spanned a 3-week period during January 2013. The participating students attended six different schools in Scarborough, and all four streams were represented. These are locally developed, applied, academic, and International Baccalaureate (IB). Seven participants were from Sri Lankan backgrounds, six represented Black Caribbean heritages, three were Pakistani, and two were Afghani. In terms of races, 12 of the interviewees were Brown, six were Black, and none were White. All of the participants were either first or second generation immigrant youth, meaning they were born outside of Canada or born within Canada to non-Canadian born parents, respectively. All of the participants had lived within Mornelle for at least six months. Eleven participants were female, while seven were male. The grades of participants spanned from grade 7 to grade 12. Table 2 below details the characteristics of the student research participants and their parents.
Table 2.

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Career Goal</th>
<th>Parent Educational Attainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Aiden</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Loc/Dev/Applied</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Both parents graduated from high school in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Brenkshan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Enjoys computer programming and wants to go to university</td>
<td>Both parents graduated from high school in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Sophia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mainstream (Elementary)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Plans to aim for the academic stream when she enters grade 8</td>
<td>Both parents graduated from high school in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Madushalia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>College for photography</td>
<td>Both parents graduated from high school in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Level of Study</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Applied</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Applied/Academic</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black Jamaican</td>
<td>Policeman or business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Applied</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black Jamaican</td>
<td>Secondary school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sinoja</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>I.B.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Shajinnia</td>
<td>Second Year University</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>Environmental planning</td>
<td>Both parents graduated from high school in Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Laylee</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>IB switched into academic</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Afghani</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
</tr>
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Design of Interview Questions

The questions explored in interviews and focus groups investigated the understanding of the interviewee concerning their streaming experience. Questions such as, “Tell me a bit about your high school experiences” began the interview to promote the ease of the research participant. The interviews would start with predominantly open-ended questions, and then move to more specific questions. The wording of the interview questions was important. It was crucial not to word questions such that they were “leading questions”, prompting the youth to answer in a particular fashion. My tone in articulating the questions also
had the potential to lead youth in one direction or another, and I was mindful of this throughout. I also took care to ensure the questions were not double-barreled (e.g. “Does your streaming placement make you feel confused and angry?”) and overall ensured the wording of the questions did not influence their answers toward my own pre-formed objectives.

Though a set of questions was created, this was used as a guide, not a manual. There were a few main themes that we wanted to explore, including questions concerning: (i) power, such as “who has the most power over your choice of stream?”, (ii) the relationships between students of varying streams, (iii) how and when the students or parents first learned about streaming, (iv) why the youth chose the stream that they did, or how the decision was made, (v) their opinions on whether they thought streaming was a fair process, and (vi) their reactions to being presented with suggestions for solutions to streaming. However, beyond these, the youth guided and directed the interview, asked questions of me and of each other, and generated a depth of insight on questions I had not thought to ask.

The order of research questions was just as important as the content. There were natural opening questions such as “how is school going?” and “what classes are you taking?” that provided a comfortable start to any conversation and would lead the discussion forward. From being asked what classes they are taking I would ask if it was applied or academic (if not already stated) and then I would ask why or how they ended up taking the stream that they are in. This would then lead to more open questions such as “tell me about the relationships between
students in different streams” or “can you share with me a bit about your overall experiences in high school so far”. Questions such as these helped me to investigate the lived experience of these students, and opened doors for further conversation.

Data Analysis

My system for initially analyzing the research involved immediate reflection. After each evening of interviews, I set aside an hour and a half to reflect on how those interviews had gone, and the nature of the content I was receiving. I thought about power dynamics, about my positionality, and about the points and experiences the youth had discussed. I recorded these reflections, and referred back to them throughout the data analysis process. I also used the reflections to inspire new questions and avenues for discussion, such that the youth were spurring the types of questions asked, and therefore assisting collaboratively in the generation of knowledge. These consistent periods of reflection were instrumental to the research process.

In order to code, analyze and identify emergent themes, I first reflected on each interview individually. I listened to the conversation a number of times and transcribed the recording in its entirety. In the transcription, I made note of when the youth or parent paused, of the nature of their tone and mine, as well as other factors such as body language. I recorded my memory of the scene of the interview immediately after conducting it, including the time of day, where each participant was seated, whether the TV was on, how long the interview lasted, and
other details. I then coded the interviews into major themes, and attached variables of stream, race, gender, school, building, and grade to see if any emergent trends stood out. Due to the relatively small sample size, this coding was done by hand rather than using software. I extracted salient quotations from the transcripts that addressed each theme for inclusion in the presentation of findings. I ensured that these quotations were taken from a diversity of participants in order to represent their diverse viewpoints, instead of similar opinions being put forward as evidence to back up a point. Where appropriate, graphs were drawn to aid in evaluation, or percentages used to give a clearer picture of whether the responses of students varied, or were clearly the same when pertaining to a certain issue. I used Microsoft Excel to statistically analyze the research findings and to observe trends and patterns arising from the experiences the youth have shared. This allowed me to visualize many of the trends that will be presented in the research findings section.

**Methodological Challenges**

Throughout the research process, I navigated the balance of ensuring the research was formal and followed all expected protocol, while also continuing my natural relationships with the families, many of which are of an informal nature. Of course, there are a series of positionality issues that arise due to my relationship to the Mornelle community. These pose barriers to objective research in some ways, while at the same time allowing a level of objectivity due to open and transparent expression of lived reality that is impossible to achieve without lasting relationships. Questions and concerns of this nature were addressed in the
Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations sections of this thesis, and will continue to be addressed throughout.

In addition, I was challenged to obtain a thoroughly representative sample of youth. For example, it would have been helpful to have more youth voices to represent the locally developed stream, although I could only enlist the participation of one. Moreover, most of the youth I interviewed had arrived in Canada either in their early childhood or had been born in Canada. I could have gained more insight into the influence of language barriers on streaming placement if I had more students who had come to Canada later on – in their late elementary or middle school years. The question of the impact of language on stream is thus not thoroughly explored in the context of this study. Finally, I was not able to enlist the participation of any Aboriginal youth nor any White youth due to the demographic characteristics of the Mornelle neighborhood. The lack of an opportunity to hear their voices is a major limitation.
Chapter 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The following results are organized into thematic sections. The first concerns stream placement, which analyzes the youth’s responses to whether they and their families had adequate knowledge of the streaming process at the time of placement. In this section, I also tackle the question of who has most power over the streaming decision. Finally I develop a model, based on testimonies of participants, called the “game based model” of stream placement. Next, I look at the important topic of relationships between students of different streams. Finally, I discuss whether the students feel that streaming is fair. The youth felt that economic, racial and language biases, as well as stream mobility, were important dimensions in assessing fairness.

Knowledge of the Streaming Process

Knowledge of the streaming process is an important dimension of agency. If families thoroughly understand the process, then they are presumably in a better position to make an informed choice about the matter. Guidance counselors are supposed to be an important source of information on streaming. They are assigned to explain the streaming process to students while in grade 8, and to send material to parents. According to the youth in the present study, they also often encourage students to “choose” certain streams, and are the staff member that students are told to turn to if they would like an opinion on which stream would be best for them.
However, there was a clear trend among the students of not finding guidance counselors particularly helpful. Some felt that the counselors did not give them the information they needed, such as which careers required a university education. Others remembered the whole process as a “blur” since they were only in grade 8, and did not feel that the guidance counselor communicated the significance of the decision. Moreover, some students felt that guidance counselors were difficult to approach, and did not help them with their concerns. A few students expressed particular concern that they had been pressured by their guidance counselor to choose a stream that was not in line with their goals.

Omar, a grade 10 Pakistani student in applied math, raised the idea that only people who are really close to a student can reasonably be expected to assist students with this decision. He felt that friends and family, who know the person as a whole –their goals, capacities, and temperaments– have established the types of relationships that foster meaningful accompaniment. Omar felt that guidance counselors, however, had not achieved this depth of relationship. There was a degree of bitterness in his tone, especially when he spoke of the decision seeming to be based only upon grades. Omar had been placed in applied math the year before, to the chagrin of his parents. Omar stated:

"I don’t like talking with guidance counselors. I like talking to people who are close to me. They can help me understand better than guidance counselors can...Counselors just tell you what to take and it's your choice what you do. It's their job to give you all the information, but it's not their responsibility what you do with it...they don’t care if
you do well at the end of the day. Once they give the information, their job is done. If I was confused about what to take, I would rather ask one of my friends who are in my class, who know if I'm struggling or not, than a guidance counselor who just goes to the computer and checks my mark."

Omar raises some important points. One is that friends and family need to be equipped with more information on streaming. As Omar points out, those who are close to a student can best provide mentoring on this decision. Yet at this point usually those who are closest to the student know very little about streaming, and are thus not empowered to take up this role. Another idea that Omar raises is the importance of guidance counselors becoming more deeply acquainted with students. Omar disliked that his counselor would simply look up his grades on the computer, as if his grades were all that mattered for his identity. Most of the students had barely met the guidance counselor of their schools, underscoring a need for more interaction and spaces for the counselor to form meaningful relationships with students.

Omar’s other main complaint on the effectiveness of guidance counselors was that he felt information was not provided to him, but rather only given if he demanded it:

(Researcher: Do you know you have to have academic courses to go to university?)

"Yes"
"Did you learn that from me?"

"Yes. But then also in grade 9 I was thinking of switching to applied French. I went to the guidance counselor, and they're like, if you keep taking main subjects like math, English, science applied, you don't have a high chance of getting into university, but you can still go to college. They only told me when I went to the guidance counselor to ask them."

It is important to note that other than this brief conversation with his counselor, and in the absence of our previous association, Omar would not have known clearly what streaming was. It is also problematic that the conversation with his counselor described above occurred in grade 9, i.e. after the streaming decision had already been made.

Jordan, a Caribbean grade 10 student in applied math, felt that guidance counselors did not allow students enough agency. He felt he did not have enough choice in the decisions affecting his future. Jordan said that his guidance counselor simply instructed him and his family on what the counselor felt needed to be done, and did not converse with him about his own wishes and aspirations. He stated:

"Well...she wasn't really helpful or encouraging whatsoever...She tries to be nice, but she's just like, ‘you're not doing well, we want to put you in a lower level’. I really don't get any say. She just hands me a form and says my parents have to sign this so we can put you in a
lower level. But she doesn't ask me if I want to stay or not. They tried
to do this with math and they called the house and my mom said no.
But I still didn’t pass so they put me in the lower level.

[Mother interjects]: "And they still didn’t stop calling, and then they
started bugging him about it at school and I got really mad. I said, ‘you
know what? I know my son can do it, if he pays attention and applies
himself, I know he can do it’. We left it at that. But the teacher then
talked to the guidance counselor and they kept pushing it. They started
asking what does he want to do because it depends what they want to
do. Like does he really want a career in math or something? But then
they sent a letter home. Guidance counselors try to push kids into
things that they don't want to do. They told my sister you'll never go to
university, you'll never do anything. She graduated from Ryerson."

Jordan’s mom pointed out that the guidance counselor pushed Jordan to
state what he wanted to do as a career. However, it is important for counselors to
consider a student’s career aspirations, and to be so narrow as to say “does he
want a career in math” is misleading. Becoming a math teacher, math professor,
or mathematician are clearly not the only careers for which academic math is
needed. Counselors should be seeking out a students' own wishes and providing
them with high school options that will facilitate the accomplishment of their
aspirations, leaving doors as open as possible as students grow in their goals and
wishes.
Grace, a grade 12 Black-Jamaican student, felt that guidance counselors were difficult to talk to. One reason, she felt, was the lack of confidentiality. Another was that, from her perspective, guidance counselors did not understand her or her concerns. Grace was extremely frustrated by her interactions with guidance counselors since she felt that she was funneled into a stream that did not match her goals:

“For some people [talking to a guidance counselor] is helpful but for me it’s hard. They don't really get me. Or they don't give answers to my questions, or things that are helpful to me. Some people are uncomfortable so they don't go. I don't know anyone who likes the guidance counselor. I know one girl who talked to them in private and they took her away from her dad. She was so hurt. I don't see why they didn't help her parents instead of just separating them...”

“...In grade 8 we had to choose what courses we want. The teachers gave it [a form on streaming] to us and explained that applied is normal level and academic is beyond that, like university and higher knowledge...My grades in elementary school were not that good. I chose applied. They said applied would be easier so it'd be smarter if I took applied. But now I realize that this kind of screwed me over because I have to take university courses if I want to be a teacher. I can't change my courses because it’s too late. Now I can't come back for a fifth year because they're getting rid of it. I want to be a teacher.
It sucks when you decide what you want to be at the last minute because they don’t give you a chance."

Grace evidently realized that academic is for university, and applied is for college. However, she did not have access to specific information on which careers required a university education and which did not. Depending the situation of the student, gaining that information from the school may be the only source available to them.

Grace stated that in grade 8, “they said…it’d be smarter if I took applied”. I later clarified that by “they” she meant her teachers and guidance counselor. She evidently trusted them on this, and chose the stream they encouraged her to take based on her elementary school grades. Throughout her interview, the notion of discussing career aspirations in grade 8 did not arise. In fact, discussing career choice during grade 8 did not factor into the decision making process of any student, despite the fact that the entire reason streaming is considered a logical and necessary process is that is supposedly prepares students for different career paths in line with their own abilities and goals.

Now that Grace has decided to become a teacher, she feels this goal is impossible due to being in applied classes. She feels at a loss for options. While she is bitter and frustrated at others, she has also internalized the situation within herself. She says, “it sucks when you decide what you want to be at the last minute” as if she is responsible, in part, for the whole process due to not making up her mind earlier.
It is appropriate that the above paragraphs focus on guidance counselors and teachers since their roles are most relevant to the experiences of my research participants. The students often felt there was a disconnect between them and the school staff member, which translated into a negative outcome for their educational future. This disconnect may be explained by a “culture of power”, which many students from lower income and racialized backgrounds are barred from accessing. As Lisa Delpit (2013) puts it:

“The culture of power is, essentially, the culture that maintains power – economic power, status power, and kinds of power that you can imagine in a society. If students don’t have access to aspects of that culture, to the language of that culture, to the style of that culture, then they won’t be able to be successful. For the most part, one is not aware of one’s culture…Many teachers and educators don’t realize that first, they have a particular culture, and second, their culture, generally, is the culture of power.”

While the comments from the students are critical of both guidance counselors and teachers, it would be inaccurate to lay the blame for the injustices within the streaming process solely on the shoulders of school staff. There are wider institutional-level forces, which impact the environment in which streaming takes place, an environment in which school staff members form but one part. These wider forces do not strip school staff members of their responsibility to fight for social justice, however, and the comments of students in this regard speak to a need for more teachers and guidance counsellors to embrace and operate within anti-oppressive frameworks of thought and action.
Many of the grade 8 and 9 students mentioned their careers and civics class in grade 10 as a potential future source of information on streaming and on academic matters. These students had not taken this class yet, but felt assured that once they took it, they would understand the process better and would have guidance on their career options. This raises the issue of timing in terms of receiving satisfactory information on streaming. None of the participants felt they had a full handle on what streaming is and its consequences at the time of their decision in grade 8. They either received this information once they had shifted to their high school (i.e. right after the decision was made) or felt they would soon receive the necessary information in their careers and civics class. Below are examples taken from separate interviews with two grade 10 female students, both of whom are in academic classes:

(Researcher: What did you know about streaming in grade 8?)

Laylee: “When I was applying to high school I didn't really know the difference between academic and applied, I just wanted to choose a good high school. But then just before I got in, I learned more because of my big brother. But when you're young you don't always think about the future.”

(Researcher: Do you know which classes you have to take to get to university or to do what you want to do?)
"Madushalia: "No, we're going to learn that in civics at the end of grade 10.""

This idea of learning all one needs to learn in careers and civics, which students do not take until grade 10, was cited by many grade 9 students. However, students who had already taken careers and civics did not mention the class in their interviews. This could be because the class did not provide useful information on streaming, and their career options, or it could be for other reasons.

The feeling of ambiguity about what streaming is was not just among the students interviewed. Even among the most active and involved parents, the understanding of what each stream is seemed unclear. One parent, Clara, is the mother of Jordan, a grade 10 African Canadian student who is in applied math. Clara is one of the most active and assertive parents I know. She is highly involved in the community, and throws her heart not only into ensuring the best for her own son’s future, but also for the futures of many youth in the neighborhood. Even Clara, however, seemed unclear on what streaming is. In the middle of an interview with her son, she expressed concern at hearing that Jordan was in applied math:

Jordan: "I didn't pass the course, and then I didn't take it in summer school, so now I'm doing applied this year. I'm repeating applied. I didn't get a choice – they just put me in applied."
Clara: "Wait a second, academic is the hard one? And you're not repeating that one? I didn't know that!"

Jordan: "Mom, I told you!"

Clara: "I'm really mad now, if I had known I would have gone to that school in person."

Evidently it was important for Clara for her son to be in the “hard one” or the most challenging stream. From further conversations with Clara, it seemed that this reflected not necessarily her desire for Jordan to go to university, but rather her desire for her son to have the best in life. Regardless of whether Jordan wants to go to university, Clara felt that her son would be treated better, have better peer influences, and enhanced self-esteem by being in academic.

In summary, in the experience of the Mornelle youth I interviewed, the decision of stream seemed to be a quick and ambiguous one. The guidance counselor gave a presentation in grade 8, a form was sent out with high school choices and class choices, the parents and teacher signed this form, and this concluded the process. The level of attention and clarity given to this process in grade 8 did not seem to match the magnitude of the decision. Overall students did not feel they understood the particular requirements of different career options, nor did they feel comfortable in approaching their guidance counselors for more information. Parents also were at a loss for proper information on the process, and often felt shut out from the decision.

Stream Placement: Who Has Most Power?
All of the students except for two (i.e. 10 out of 12) stated that students themselves had the most power or authority when it came to the choice of stream. Their language when stating that students have most power, however, seemed to be abstract. Either they were speaking as if from the perspective of others, or from the perspective of how things should be. When answering this question, none of the students referred specifically to their own experience. Aiden, a grade 9 student in locally developed classes articulates below his opinion, which reflects a high degree of consistency with many of his peers on this question:

“The student has the most power. They choose their courses and the skill level. They have the most power. Next are the parents because they care. Next are the guidance counselors.”

Like Aiden, most participants felt that students had the most power over stream placement. However, their opinions about this did not seem to match their actual experiences. Concerning the “choice” of stream, five students explained that their mother was the reason they were in their stream, five were directly told what to do by a teacher or guidance counselor, and two were encouraged by an elder sibling. Thus, although the students felt they themselves were most influential over this decision, in reality family members and school staff had the most impact, as reported by the students themselves when recounting their own experiences.

It is challenging to understand where the students obtained this strong sense of agency – that it was their own choice that determines their stream and
academic future – since the stories they told of their own experience and that of their friends did not seem to demonstrate a great amount of choice. Laylee, a grade 10 Afghani student in academic classes, stated:

“If they want to stay in applied, it’s their decision. But if they want to go to university, they should switch. It could be seen as unfair, but it’s so easy to change your classes. So if they really want to switch, they can.”

Laylee had recently switched some of her IB classes to a “lower” level, the academic stream. It was a simple process to do this. In fact, all of the students that had experience switching from so called “higher” to “lower” streams met no resistance in doing so. The much more difficult task is to switch from lower to higher streams, which none of the students had managed to do despite repeated attempts in some cases. This will be discussed further in the mobility section. However, it is relevant that students often assumed that they had control over which stream they were in because they had experience switching. However, many did not understand that switching into more academic programs is near to impossible.

Omar, a grade 10 student in applied, said:

“I guess some students don’t care about education and they get put in applied. They don’t take education as they should. There are people who like working hard and want to be strong at a subject…they grow up to be strong at that subject. If someone wants to be good at math,
they take math throughout high school, they'll take math in college and become successful...There are people in high school who are always skipping, there's a reason they're in applied, it's because they don't care about education. It basically means their parents don't care very much because if they did they would have called the school or done something. People make a choice not to follow education.”

Even though Omar is in an applied class himself, he ascribes a high degree of blame to the individual student and their family on the placement of a student in applied classes. It is even more interesting that Omar uses the example of math since mathematics is the one class in which he is in applied. Omar definitely cares about his education, and he stated that his parents are extremely proactive and determined for him to succeed academically. Therefore, his description of the apathy of students and parents who “choose” the non-academic route is interesting given that he too is in applied, and none of the assumptions he makes about his peers’ choice to be in a “lower” stream bear any resemblance to his own experience.

Somewhat surprisingly, students in both academic and applied streams were adamant that ultimately it was the choice of the student to be in whichever stream they liked. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, in response to other questions, students would readily discuss social determinants of stream choice. Thus, the students claimed on the one hand that stream placement was their choice, and yet openly expressed on the other, all of the factors that strip youth of their ability to make their own choices on this matter.
Below are some examples of the ways in which students discussed societal determinants in relation to streaming. Sinoja, a grade 10 student in academic classes, begins with the often articulated “they just don’t try hard enough” idea, but then proceeds to discuss some of the environmental and socially determined aspects of choice:

“The people in applied just don’t try. They’re very smart, they’re just lazy. They don’t know how to work properly. They don’t do their homework. But you know when someone is smart, by the way they act and the way they talk. They don’t have those skills in order to work hard. The reason is the people around them, their influences. When you’re with someone a lot then you start picking up on what they do. I guess if you’re smart but you’re hanging out with people who never do their work, they go places, so you go places and get away from where you want to go, where you’re supposed to go, where you could go – your goals and everything.”

Jordan, a grade 10 student in applied, thought deeply about why some students might be in locally developed classes. In a similar fashion to Sinoja, he spoke about the influence of peer groups on academic achievement:

“I think the reason they [those in locally developed classes] would take something like that is because they didn’t have the support or seek the support they needed. I know myself I ask a lot of questions in class, I ask my friends, I may ask my teacher, if me and my friends all have the
same question we'll go up together to ask so I don't go alone. So I think they didn't seek the support they needed, so they felt alone."

Interestingly although Jordan discusses peer influence on individual achievement, he still ascribes blame to the individual student through stating that they do not seek the support they need. Thus, the conflict between describing social influences on stream placement that make “choice” nearly impossible, and at the same time, paradoxically ascribing ultimate responsibility to the individual student persists.

Madushalia, a grade 10 student in academic, spoke further about social determinants of streaming placement by addressing the relationship between self-esteem and external expectations:

“Some people just don't want others to be on the same level because they think they're better. Some people in locally developed, over time, their mindsets change and they become what they believe. If you say you're a 90s student, you will be. But if you think you're going to fail, you do, because no one has high expectations of you.”

Madushalia articulates the complex and reciprocal interaction between the individual and their environment. When students see and hear that others expect less of them, they often internalize these expectations. This leads to lowered self-esteem and an under-fulfillment of their potential. She also touches on the superior attitude that students in upper streams often have. Madushalia is in academic classes, but she talked often during her interviews of the arrogance of
students in IB, the stream above her. This arrogance bothered her very much, and she felt it was responsible for the negative relationships between the academic and IB streams in her school.

On the topic of expectations and its relationship to agency, Grace, a grade 12 student in the applied stream, felt that teachers have no incentive for lower streamed students to succeed. She said:

“I like a teacher who is strict but not too strict, helpful, some teachers just think I’m getting paid no matter how you’re doing. Class average in my class is 39%, but the teachers don’t get red flagged for that. It’s just on us as students but some teachers don’t know how to teach.”

Grace’s comments articulate highlight some of the major flaws with streaming as practiced. In a sense the process allows teachers to fail their students by placing blame on the students themselves. If students are in an applied or locally developed class, it is reasoned, they have lowered capacity to begin with as well as lower drive to learn, though I do not support this position. Teachers of these streams, therefore, supposedly cannot be expected to achieve much in such an environment. Instead, they often focus on boring, meaningless exercises and on maintaining some form of discipline.

A teacher’s responsibility is to endeavor to engage all students in the learning process. Without stripping students of all agency, it should also be clear that if students are not engaged, the teacher is responsible to make considerable efforts to engage them. Furthermore, if a student is not succeeding, the teacher is responsible to promote his or her success. However, within the current system, if
a teacher is frustrated because they cannot properly engage a student or connect with him or her, the student can easily be sent to a “lower” level class. And if students are doing poorly, teachers can simply state how difficult it is to teach students in applied and locally developed classes, and this excuse is accepted by the systems at play.

In cases when parents or students preferred a stream that opposed the opinion of either a teacher or guidance counselor, the preference of the school staff member dominated. Overall, the power of school staff members, especially teachers, seemed very important in the end stream in which a student was placed. Sinoja, a grade 10 student in academic, had a friend who was “forced” by a teacher to be applied. She states:

“I think teachers have the most choice. Because they kind of like talk you into it even if you…but then it’s ultimately your choice, but they’ll keep talking you into it.”

Grace, who felt betrayed by teachers who encouraged her to take applied, also agreed that teachers have a lot of influence:

“Teachers…tell you what’s better for you. Even if you want to do academic, they’ll tell you to do applied. The teachers get their way. Everyone believes they know what’s best for you. I trusted my teacher.”

The influence of teachers reported by Sinoja, Grace, and many other youth as well as parents is informative. Often it is assumed that guidance counselors are the conveyers of information on streaming and are the primary school staff that
assist students with this decision. In reality, there is evidence that teachers have more influence. This is not surprising since teachers spend more time with students than do counselors during the elementary years, and therefore have more chances to influence their decisions. Moreover, even after students have entered high school, teachers have a high degree of influence, especially when it pertains to switching to lower streams. One student reported that when his classmate struggled with a concept in applied math, her teacher said in front of the other students that there is a lower level she could easily be switched to. This of course was humiliating for the student, and impacted her self-esteem as well as making her intimidated to ask questions in future. According to the youth and parents in this study, teachers routinely encourage students they feel are difficult to teach to switch to lower streams, a situation, which I feel is highly problematic.

The situation is more complex than teachers and guidance counselors funneling students into lower streams against their wishes, however. The process that leads to the end stream placement of a child begins much earlier, as early as the beginning of elementary school. Therefore, there is a need for intervention and increased collaboration between school staff members, students, and families well before the formal streaming decision is to be made in grade 8 (Zoric, 2013, pers.comm). Within the current system, teachers and guidance counselors have a duty to assist students to enter a stream in which they will not be academically overwhelmed to the point of inability to engage. However, as the students have pointed out, school staff members also must ensure class and race biases do not affect their assessment of the ability of any student.
In this section I have discussed the opinions of students that they themselves have the most power over stream placement. Yet I have also given examples of how clearly these youth are able to analyze the social determinants that affect and limit individual “choice”. The question therefore remains – what accounts for this apparent contradiction, and how can it be reconciled?

**The Game–Based Model of Stream Placement**

Based on the data, the decision about stream was not based on a well-planned out idea of what was required for the future of a student, but rather on present assessments of worth. To substantiate this claim, first let us consider that the students I interviewed did not have knowledge of which careers required a university degree. Thus, it cannot be logical to assume their streaming decision was based on a desire to pursue a certain profession for which university is needed.

Second, let us observe that the stream placement of students in almost every case did not match their career aspirations. For example, one of the students in academic, Madushalia, said she wished to go to college to become a photographer. Another student in applied, Grace, said her main objective was to become a teacher, for which she just found out this year she would require a university degree. The trends were similar among all of the other students except one. (Congruence between stream and goals did exist in the case of Jayla, in grade 9 applied, who said applied suited her since she wanted to be an athlete.) However, for each of the other cases, there is no clear link between career goal and stream.
Third, let us consider that many students simply do not have a well-planned out formulation of their future goals while they are in grade 8. Thus, the assumption that streaming is a fair and logical process given that students of varying capacities naturally have different goals does not reflect what is actually occurring. Thus, the question remains that if streaming is not based on future career goals, what are the factors that are underlying the stream placement of students? This important question will be addressed in the following section.

According to the students in this study, the decision about stream placement is similar to selecting levels for a video game. My observation is that the behaviors and attitudes of students are as if they are playing a game, which involves decisions applicable to the present moment, and not to future life choices. Students select their level based on an assessment of competence, so that they can enjoy the game and can continue to play it as opposed to flunking out. In a video game, there is no future goal beyond the game, and one therefore does not choose a level based on the future. The youth do not sit down and think, 'I need to learn about this kind of material in order to pursue my dreams so I will choose level A'. Instead they consider the option that would be least stressful and most likely for them to succeed, given their “level”. Brekshan, a grade 10 student in academic, stated:

"People choose applied because it's stressful to be in academic. People who think, ‘I know this, I can do this’, choose academic. Academic just gets harder and people think I might as well switch to applied instead of failing academic."
(Researcher: Why did you choose academic?)

"Actually, my teacher chose it. My marks were OK in grade 8 and my teacher recommended my stream for that reason."

The students, mainly informed by their teachers and guidance counselors or family members, based this decision on their grades during elementary school, and therefore an assessment of their "skill level". The idea was that they should be placed in a stream in accordance to their level or intelligence. If they were to choose a stream above their level, they may do badly or even fail. The below interaction with Jayla, a grade 9 student in applied, sheds light on this issue:

(Researcher: You're doing really well in grade 9 applied. Would you ever think of taking academic?)

“No.”

(Why not?)

"Because I might fail...It doesn't have to do with leaving my friends or anything, it's just that I might fail."

Thus, their words and attitudes seemed to express an idea of assessing one's worth, an assessment based on elementary school experiences, and choosing a stream accordingly. Moreover, they allowed others to guide them to help explain to them what their level was, and would readily trust the opinions of teachers and guidance counselors.
This is a critical finding – students saw streaming as a filtering process whereby everyone is placed according to their worth. The bright, hard-working and “good” kids are placed “higher” while those regarded as “dumb,” “lazy” or “bad” are placed “lower”. The idea that academic and applied could both contain equally intelligent, hard-working, and well-behaved students aimed toward different goals seemed out of the question. The distinction between careers that are more academically focused, and those that are more hands-on, seemed lost on the youth, and the idea that hands-on professions actually often generate large personal incomes in Canada was unheard of.

The following interaction between Madushalia, a grade 10 student in academic, and her younger sister Sophia, demonstrates the commonly held assumption that academic students are smart whereas applied students are slow. Note that Sophia is in grade 7 and therefore has not been placed in a stream yet:

Sophia: "What exactly is streaming? What's applied?"

Madushalia: "Applied is for students that need more help, academic is for average, and IB is for really smart."

(Researcher: Which stream will you choose?)

Sophia: "Well, I'm like average, I get As and Bs. I guess I'll choose academic."

Madushalia further explains the streaming process in the segment below. It is informative to note that she states “it depends on your grades right now which
courses you can choose”. There is a clear perception among students that one must achieve high grades throughout grade 5–8 in order to have the option to choose academic or IB courses in high school. This notion lends support to the game-based model since students are choosing classes based on an assessment of their skill and capacity now, often based arbitrarily on elementary school grades, as opposed to an investigation of what might be required for their future. Madushalia explains:

"The librarian came in, handed us a sheet, and we choose our grade 9 courses. We had a presentation, they used the projector. She just showed us the different types of courses we have to take in grade 9, she showed us the different levels. It depends on your grades right now which courses you can choose. Academic is the high one, applied is easier and then there's locally developed, which is really basic."

(Researcher: "What made you choose academic?)

“My mom. But also my grades were good so figured I could do well in grade 9."

Attitudes of self-confidence vs. self-doubtfulness also have a profound impact on stream choice. Instead of students having future goals that they feel motivated to achieve, and choosing courses on that basis, the youth have internalized the strata to which they have been placed, and this dictates their “choice”. Students that have been labeled as intelligent and full of potential tended to exhibit “go getter” attitudes; their academic achievements in grade 5–8
and the encouragement they had received from school staff had boosted their confidence. Many of these students spoke about choosing the top stream – even if they did not fully understand what that stream was – purely because it was the best option and they felt they could do it. In contrast, students who had been labeled in the system as lacking in potential internalized this judgment, and felt confined in their choice. With apparent timidity and a tendency to follow the safe course, they chose a stream in which they thought it would be easy to succeed.

Laylee, a grade 10 student who had chosen IB, exhibits the go-getter attitude:

"I learned from my guidance counselor...She would come and visit our class and explain this [streaming] to us. I actually had to take IB because I wanted to go to Laurier like my brother. For IB I told my friend we have to take it and go to Laurier because it's a good school. And for IB I wanted to do it because it's the best program, so why not try it, right?"

Overall, feelings of worthiness to be in academic, elementary school grades, and "go getter attitudes" or lack thereof (each informed by external labeling and internalized judgments) counted among the most important factors in stream placement. Fear of being labeled as dumb and fear of failure was another factor. In the following two scenarios, the students independently discuss the case of a friend who was told not to take the academic stream when she wanted to do so, and the associations of worthiness attached to this. Aiden, a grade 9 student in locally developed classes, was friends with this student during elementary school
and had been there for her during this process. He discusses the scenario in the following manner:

"The teacher recommended this person to go into applied...but she got ticked off...I forgot why they went to a lower level...I'm not sure how it happened. It was in elementary school, in grade 8. She felt like the teacher thought she was dumb or something. It was not fair. Maybe she should have been able to go into academic, but I'm not sure about that...there's something important about the teacher, the teacher pretty much hates all of the students except for one, who was the class president.

(Researcher: Did that girl end up moving streams?)

"No, she stayed in applied."

Madushalia, a grade 10 student in academic, had a friend with a similar experience. Madushalia empathizes that if she were told she had to take applied, she too would feel upset at the label of being “dumb”. She explains that if this happened to her she too would try to oppose the streaming placement. Her primary concern was that people should not view her as lacking in intelligence and she should not feel dumb; indeed, she states that opposing such a label is the main reason that she chose academic:

(Researcher: Why do you think your friend was upset when her teacher told her she couldn't choose academic?)
"Basically her teacher is telling her that she's dumb."

(What if that happened to you?)

"I would get mad too."

(What would you do?)

"I'd talk to the guidance counselor and try to change it. I don't want to feel dumb."

(Why did you go into academic?)

"I don't want people to see me...I don't know...as stupid. I just chose it."

(Why didn't you take IB?)

"I just thought, well, I'm not that smart."

Another dimension to the game-based model concerns the influence of stress on the choices of students. Two of the youth had opted to move from IB to academic. Two others had moved from academic math to applied math. I often began the interview with asking how school was going. Many of the youth who were in academic courses spoke about their high level of stress, and the large amount of work they had to do. Those that had switched to “lower” streams often said that they were afraid of doing poorly if they had continued in academic. Just as selecting one’s difficulty level in a video game enables an enjoyable experience,
applied and locally developed streamed students (in particular) seemed to think it was best to “play the school game” at their level in order for high school to be a manageable experience. The idea that one’s “level” can and is supposed to change through hard work and learning, or the idea of challenging oneself to new levels were not spoken of by the youth who were in the applied or locally developed streams.

In the above discussion on stream placement, I noted some important gendered trends in the findings. The female students were more likely to discuss notions of worthiness, fear of failure, and fear of being regarded as “less” as important dimensions in their “choice” of stream. How others viewed them, especially if others viewed them as intelligent, was very important to them. The worry of choosing a stream beyond one’s capacity was also related to the fear of failure, a fear that the girls spoke of more often than the boys. The male students in this study were more likely to discuss their choice to be in applied as a means of reducing stress and allowing themselves to “get through the high school game” with as little headache as possible. They did not discuss their reputation or feelings of self-worthiness as much as they discussed their need to be as stress-free as possible. The demands of the academic stream often felt overwhelming for them and they felt they needed an easier stream in order to maintain emotional and mental wellbeing.

These findings are not unique to the present study. Surveys, administered as part of a recent national study on students at risk, demonstrated the attitude among middle school aged boys that serious engagement with school was not a
desirable aim (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007). The responses indicated that these boys took up discourses of what Michelle Cohen (1998) identifies as “healthy idleness,” nurturing a disinterested attitude toward schooling that reinforced dominant masculinities. Boys and girls exhibited strikingly different survey responses: while the girls' responses were predominantly serious, earnest and self-blaming, many boys identified themselves inaccurately as successful in school, and located any shortcomings in their own choice not to put in an undesirable amount of effort into their studies.

As a number of writers have demonstrated (Connell, 1994; Finn, 1999; Martino, 2003), these gendered identities among working class boys and girls are both common and educationally destructive to themselves and others (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007). The self-blaming attitudes among girls, reflected in my study in their comments concerning worthiness, fear of failure and fear of being regarded as unintelligent, were similarly found in the work of Meece, Glienke and Burg (2005) in which girls' and boys' motivation-related beliefs and behaviors were found to follow gender role stereotypes. Additionally, it was found that these differences in perceptions of self worth were evident early in school, beginning in the early elementary school years.

In summary, the primary factors that influence stream choice can be conceptualized utilizing the game-based model. Just as a video game concerns choices about the present game, not the future beyond the game, so too does streaming from the perspective of students in this study. None of the students spoke about future goals; indeed, few of them seemed to know which streams led
to which future options. Instead students internalized assessments of their
current capacity, based on their academic performance in elementary school and
the opinions of others, and used this assessment to base their decision. Similar to
selecting levels in a game, they chose the appropriate level for their skills and
abilities. If they felt capable to choose a “higher” stream then they did, often
without knowing where that stream would lead.

Those that did not feel capable often chose “lower” streams due to a strong
fear of failure, and in order to avoid doing poorly. There were many connotations
associated with each stream – academic was perceived as the class for smart,
hardworking and capable students whereas applied was for dumb and lazy
students. In terms of the negative connotations associated with lower streams,
students recognized them, and either actively opposed such a label, or if they felt
this was fruitless, eventually succumbed to these labels.

The implications of the game-based model of stream placement are
profound. If decisions on streaming are detached from the future career
aspirations of students, then its intended purpose has been completely thwarted.
Instead, it serves at present to classify students into ranks, each with labels and
associations that they internalize, either to their benefit or detriment. For those
labeled as lacking in potential, the emotional and social implications are
unacceptable. To be told that one is not worthy at a young age hinders a child’s
academic development, their ability to navigate important life decisions, develop
goals, and find the strength to work actively toward them.
Relationships Among Students Across Streams

Most of the students agreed that it is very unlikely to find students who are friends with those from other streams. This was largely due to the fact that one becomes friends with those that they spend a lot of time with, and there are very few classes that place students together regardless of stream. Students in academic streams reflected that it is only natural to want to be friends with those who are smart and who can help them succeed, not those who are doing poorly. Students also expressed that they feel it is likely for people to become friends with those who are similar to them. Academics and IBs were more likely to form friendships with one another than any other combination, but still, these students did not feel that their relationships were strong. Moreover, some students discussed serious bullying issues across streams.

In the following excerpt, Grace, a grade 12 student in applied courses explains how the streaming process damaged her friendship:

"I had a friend who was in applied but she ended up going to academic. She just went for it. She went to Pope, though, so I don’t get to talk to her anymore. We don't see each other. You base your friends based on what classes you’re in. So I don't really talk to them, to anyone outside of my stream. Only in gym do I actually talk to them, where everyone is mixed. Otherwise, I don't."

Brenkshan, a grade 10 student in academic, explains why his circle of friends is drawn only from the academic stream:
“People like being around people that…I mean, I would want a friend that thinks like me. If I'm friends with people in academic it's because they're also in academic. Applied is for people who are weak in a subject. People would want to be friends with someone who's strong in a subject because they're smart…I've witnessed bullying between the streams. If someone in academic gets a low mark on a test they say go to the applied class now, you don't deserve to be in academic.”

Grace, a student in the applied stream, felt that she did not have friends across streams due to lack of time spent with these students; she did not have the chance to spend quality time with students in the academic stream and therefore could not keep up old friendships or develop new ones. For Brenkshan, however, from the academic stream, it was not a matter of time, but of status: “people would want to be friends with someone who’s strong in a subject because they’re smart” he says; for him, there was an element of image and a responsibility to keep up an image of intelligence. He also wanted to do well in school and to be viewed as belonging to the “good crowd”, and he therefore wanted to spend time with those in his stream.

Madushalia, also a student in academic classes, expressed similar sentiments to Brekshan. She too felt that it was only natural to be friends with those that are similar to oneself. Since she was in academic, she was friends with the “smart” kids who “went places” and achieved as opposed to the applied students who, as she said, “more don’t do anything”. Madushalia articulated a clear delineation of friendship choices based on stream:
"The IBs are with the IBs, the academics are with the academics, and the applied are with the applied. So the IBs only do studying, like in the cafeteria, that's all they do. The academics are a mix but the applied, they more don't do anything. The IBs are usually never friends with the applied because it's like different levels, you could say…None of my friends did applied, at least my close friends. Usually you're with people who are like you, so I was always friends with the smart people. I know people in applied, but we're not close."

Upon speaking with Brekshan and Madushalia further, and other students in academic classes, it became apparent that many of these sentiments concerning mixing only with one’s own are based in anxiety concerning maltreatment if one were to befriend those in lower streams. These fears are not unwarranted; there are serious stigmatization issues based on stream placement, and maltreatment towards students in less academic streams is, according to the students in this study, a widespread and troubling issue. Jordan, a grade 10 student in applied, explains his perspective on the rough treatment of lower streamed students:

"The applied kids are treated differently. I know people who are in academic, they treat the applied kids bad. My friend, Tom, they say he's dumb, that he's not going to get a job. Then there's the locally developed – they really like to beat on those kids. They see them in the hallway and ask, 'what class do you have?' If the guy says he has locally developed history, they call him stupid and dumb but it's not really
their fault, well they did choose it, but it’s also to do with self-esteem because they didn't believe they could do anything else.”

Jordan emphasizes the particularly bad treatment exhibited toward the students in locally developed classes. Unfortunately, I could only enlist the participation of one youth who represented the locally developed stream, and thus I do not have a great degree of reports of firsthand experiences. Aiden, a grade 9 student, was the one youth I interviewed who was in locally developed classes. Aiden did not speak about maltreatment in high school during his interview. However, I know from previous conversations that Aiden has been bullied throughout elementary, middle and high school, and that this bullying, including comments such as “you’re dumb” or “you’re slow”, are, from his perspective, linked to and exacerbated by streaming placement.

The negative treatment of students in applied and locally developed streams is sometimes reinforced by the actions of teachers. Shajinnia, who recently completed high school and was in academic classes throughout, discussed an experience in which their teacher instructed them to mark the chemistry tests of applied students:

"The academics did look down on the applied kids. Remember I told you that story from chemistry where our teacher told us to mark something of the applied? It was so easy. It was obvious they didn't try. This was not grade 12 stuff; it was like grade 9. We all just sat there and laughed."
Perhaps the teacher’s intentions were to assist academic students with their understanding of chemistry through having them mark the tests. However, I would argue that the detrimental effects of this exercise far outweighed any positive outcome in terms of advancing their knowledge. Through marking the tests of the “lower” class, the academic students were taught superiority. The exercise served to foster judgmental attitudes and an environment in which ridicule was accepted.

So far I have discussed the maltreatment of students in applied and locally developed streams, particularly those in locally developed streams. However, there is also friction between students in the academic and IB streams. The same types of attitudes that academic students often show toward applied youth can be found in the perspectives of IB students towards academic. Madushalia, a student in the academic stream, explains:

(Researcher: How close are you to the people in IB?)

"The streams split up friends. For IB and then academic, there's like me, “Mary” and “Alicia” in academic. Then “Sandra”, “Becky” and “Bella” are in IB. Becky's always with the IB. Sandra’s always with the IB. And we only get to see them a few times. IBs talk about academics, academics talk about IBs. There's a group of people in our school, they're all Brown, they're all IB. They're blunt and they have bad attitudes. They don't act their age. They act like they're older, they act like they're tougher, they think they're tough. They're confident. I avoid them all the time. I don't like them, I despise them..."
(Do you think applied kids might look at academics in the same way?)

"I'm never over-confident, I don't like being over-confident. People in academic can be annoying – 'I need to get better, I got a 90 on my test', I don't like it when people talk about their marks and say I'm doing so good. It makes others in applied feel bad."

There are a number of interesting points to explore based on Madushalia’s thoughts. One is that gossiping exists between the IB and academic streams. Such subtle forms of contention are often far worse than overt forms. Another important point is the type of attitude that higher streamed students often exhibit. Madushalia is articulate in naming each of the superiority attitudes at play – she discusses over-confidence, acting as if older, toughness, and bluntness. She explained that she often felt undermined by the girls in the stream above her. When asked if the same patterns exist among academic students toward those in applied, Madushalia agrees. She states that she personally does not engage in such behavior, but that it certainly pervades the school environment. The example she cites is of bragging about marks, which she observes often makes other students feel bad about themselves.

A third point concerns racial issues – Madushalia mentions off-handedly that IB students are mainly Brown. By “Brown” she clarified later that she means students representing predominantly Indian, Iranian, Afghani, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan backgrounds. Upon further probing, Madushalia explained that Black students are mainly in the locally developed and applied streams, while Whites are
found in both the academic and IB streams. These racial segregations will be discussed further in the following section on fairness, but they do bear mention here due to the implications in terms of the splitting up of friends.

There was one student out of 12 who said there were no issues concerning lack of friendship between streams. This student was Jayla, whose opinions on streaming differed from her peers in almost every regard. Jayla reported that she had friends across all streams except the locally developed:

"I don't see any bullying between the streams. Most of my friends are in applied, but I have some friends in academic from my elementary school."

(Researcher: Do you have any friends in the locally developed class?)

"No, I don't know any of them."

Perhaps timing could have been part of the difference of opinion between these students. The student who had favorable opinions about the lack of bullying had just recently entered grade 9, whereas the comments from the students that spoke seriously about bullying represented grades 10, 11, 12 and post-graduate levels.

The separations between streams that were discussed by most students appeared severe, with overt forms such as name-calling in and outside of the classroom, as well as covert forms, no less damaging, such as gossip and
backstabbing. Hamid, a first year college student, reflected that while these divisions are formed in high school, they persist after graduation:

“I think that university people...look down on community college people. They might say it’s not real education, it’s like high school because they don't have to pay much money. They could say, they’re not in university and we're the ones that will get good jobs. I don’t think there should be divisions in high school or university. There should be just one level and it’s up to you to pass the class. We shouldn’t have all these different strands. If kids passed all at the same level up until grade 9, they should be able to continue to do that.”

Hamid’s opinion that the superiority complex among university students had a basis in economics. He felt that university was worth more in society because people pay more for it. In a sense, he is stating that the students who go to university are worth more also since society invests more in them. In a world largely governed by economic dynamics, his reflections are not far-fetched.

Hamid felt that the level of division was a problem large enough to do away with the streams entirely. The option of detracking entirely is explored in full in the discussion and conclusion section.

To summarize, this study found that relationships are poor between students of different streams. The extremes of these poor relations amount to outright bullying, exclusion, and demoralization of “lower” streamed students, particularly those in locally developed classes. Teachers, whether intentionally or
not, foster the divisions and were not reported to play a positive role in remediation. Attitudes of superiority among those in higher streams began in secondary school and continued through to post-graduate levels, allowing the separation of students to persist for years and one might argue, even for generations. In the following section I will discuss the aspects students discussed in order to evaluate the overall fairness of streaming.

**Racial and Economic Dimensions**

The students in this study consistently emphasized the racial issues at play in the streaming process. Sinoja is a grade 10 Sri Lankan student who was accepted into the IB program but later chose academic in order to reduce her workload. She explains her views on the racial segregation inherent in the streaming process:

"People talk bad between streams. Once someone was talking about how the majority of the class in applied math are Black. She was just making fun. It's bad, but it's kind of true though.

(Researcher: Is there any racism toward Brown students?)

“Yeah White people often make jokes about us. Like in my school, all the White people made this joke, oh IB [International Baccalaureate] stands for ‘I'm Brown’, and no one said anything, but I personally was offended.”
(Do you think this kind of racism is as offensive as what happens to kids in applied?)

“No, it’s not as bad. And sometimes we can use our label to our advantage. Like I think my IB interview, it was really laid back, but if I had been Black, I would have had to try harder. There are only one or two Black people in my IB class.”

The fact that IB stands for “I’m Brown” is a school-wide joke is telling. Sinoja’s thoughts on the admission process into IB are also powerful. She felt strongly that if she were Black, she would have to try harder to get in. She recognized that while the “I’m Brown” joke is unkind, it also works to her advantage. She is assumed to be someone of potential partly because of her skin color. Grace, a Black student in grade 12, also discusses the impact of stream on fostering racism:

"Our school's already really racist. It's pretty bad. We have a Black hallway. We have a Brown hallway. We have a White hallway. And you just can't chill in any place you want. So separating them [by stream] there's good to it, but there's a negative side."

Grace attends a different school than Sinoja and yet the pervasiveness of these issues appears to be similar. While there is not a school-wide joke with racial connotations, there are observable physical separations in terms of racially divided spaces. There is an element of constraint in these physical segregations, and it seems that students cannot easily defy the boundaries. Grace says “you just can’t chill in any place you want” as if there are consequences if one were to
attempt to do so. Grace continues her thoughts on this issue by discussing the relationship between race and class, and both of their impact on stream placement. It should be noted that Grace is Black, and she specifically focuses on the situation for Black students:

“Those who are wealthier have more money to make sure their kids get a good education. There’s stuff for Black people too but they’re so far gone, so why bother...People think, ‘my mom can’t afford this so I’m just going to try to get money any way I can’. It's hard when you see them walking down the hallway with their pants halfway down blasting rap. And there's good rap. But this isn't good rap. And they're like falling into the category. And I think if they really tried and took the resources around them then they could actually make it too. I think we should all be equal, and get the same level of support... The government separates wealthy from middle class to poor. It’s some way of control, I think.”

Grace is frustrated at her peers who reinforce stereotypes of Black students being up to no good, with their pants held low and listening to profane rap. She says doing this causes these students to “fall into the category” and later in the interview she shares her frustration that by doing this, these students reinforce the stereotype to which she is also subject. Grace also touches on the issue of control and power imbalance in society, stating that the separation of wealthy and poor is a way of ensuring control.
The issue of race and its relation to stream is not only about color and class; it is also about language. Aiden, a grade 9 student from Sri Lanka spoke about this issue:

(Researcher: Do you think streaming is fair?)

"No. Because they don't know English they might put them in a lower level. Sometimes people just automatically think they are clueless about the subject, but they're smart."

Although Aiden, who is in the locally developed stream, says “people...think they are clueless” it seemed that he was also referring to himself, that people may think he is clueless when he is not. Both of his parents are from Sri Lanka and neither speak English very well. Aiden and his brother came to Canada in middle school. Thus, they did not have a great deal of time to master English. Other students did not raise language as an issue, and through observation it appears that language could only have played a role in one other case, that of Omar. Omar also came to Canada in middle school, and neither of his parents speak English well. In terms of the other students, however, there is an inconsistent relationship between stream and language background. All of the other students in applied classes speak English fluently, have always done so, and their parents speak well too. There are many students in the academic and IB programs whose parents hardly speak English at all and who came to Canada recently. Thus, there is no clear relationship between language ability and being streamed in a lower class.
However, this is not to say that such trends do not exist. This study represents a very small study sample, and it is illogical to conclude that language plays no role.

The Mornelle students were highly perceptive about the racial issues that exist within the streaming process. They were also very aware of racism more broadly in their community and even in their country. Shajinnia, a Sri Lankan student who recently graduated from high school, discussed Canada's multicultural policy during her interview, stating that this policy often masks racism:

“*We were talking about this in my politics lecture because in Canada, racism isn't really brought out, it's more hidden because...we have this multicultural policy or whatever, it's something we're proud of. In the US you have to conform to be American. But here you are allowed to practice your own culture and engage in Canadian culture too. Other cultures are more accepted here. So people here think racism doesn't exist. But even if it's happening, no one realizes it. Like people casually say racist jokes, and no one notices. Like if you tell people you're being racist, they just tell you you're making a big deal out of nothing... I've never actually seen a Brown person fight racism. There are a lot of immigrant jokes, they're not nice. Also someone said to my mom, 'go back to where you came from', and we just walked by. He bumped into her, and then he said that.*”
As Shajinnia’s testimony suggests, being stereotyped never feels good, even if it is a supposedly "neutral" or "positive" remark. Feeling grouped into a set of characteristics – academic, social, and emotional – based on one's skin colour is disempowering and frustrating, and the fact that this type of stereotyping is reinforced through the streaming process is deplorable. Laylee, an Afghani student in academic classes, further discusses the stereotyping inherent in the streaming process:

"I've seen patterns of races of people. I'm not trying to be racist, just being honest, like it's usually, for example in my school, it's very multicultural. But the IB's most of them are Brown, and most of the applied, they're Black. Sometimes really smart people just get put into the group, into where their race is. I can't say Black people aren't as smart. But there's no Black person in IB. The smart Black people are not being put into high levels because everyone refers to them as being not as smart. So sometimes it's not as fair. It's not in their hands, even if they want to get somewhere else than everyone else, they still get put into their group. It's not only others putting them down, they put themselves down. Sometimes when I talked to a Black person before, and they said, oh 'bla bla bla because I'm Black'. They say that. They know that the majority, their standards are not very high so they put themselves down sometimes, except for the ones that want to get somewhere, right? Their standards are low because of influence,
everyone around them does this, so they bring their standards down and feel comfortable because everyone around is like that."

(Researcher: What do you think could be done to make it more fair?)

"That's a question to the President. Ask Obama. He's Black. He was just elected recently again, too, right? Well, what do I think? What could we do? Even now we're having groups with extra-curriculars. I guess we should talk about things in those groups...But you know you can't change a kids' mind unless the parent thinks about it. And usually you can't change a parent. Because to be honest everything I do depends on what my mom says. Whenever I take a decision, I ask her. So it depends on her."

When considering solutions to confront racial issues, Laylee thinks most efforts are fruitless unless parents are involved. She hints that racism is mainly fostered by the attitudes of parents by stating that, "you can't change a kids' mind unless the parent thinks about it". Through tackling this question, Laylee begins to unpack some of the social determinants and external influences that shape racism. She recognizes that if an individual student demonstrates racist attitudes toward other students, this is often shaped by their parents, and their home environment. Other students discussed that such attitudes are also shaped by teachers, school staff and the school environment at large. In the previous excerpt Shajinnia explained that racism at an individual level is shaped also by country-wide policies such as Canada's multicultural policy. The youths thus demonstrated
a deep understanding of the individual, local, community, and national
determinants that shape racial attitudes.

One of the most worrying reports concerning the racial dimensions of
streaming came from Jordan, a Black student in the applied stream:

"I would say that certain teachers treat kids differently, with race. Like
my auto-mechanics teacher, who's White, he's not the nicest guy
around. He's always making comments about the Black students in my
class. ‘Oh I see you decided to show up today, you weren't outside
smoking’. There will be times where he gives money if you answer a
question correctly. But with the Black students if we get it right he says,
‘What are you going to do with the money? Going to smoke some
marijuana?’ ...Also my math teacher is rude. A Black girl asked him a
question and he said, ‘I don't know why you don't get this, it's easy,
you know there's a level underneath this that you can take’. The girl
said she was insulted. The teacher just continued with the lesson. My
auto teacher is just rude all the time. He tells us to shut up all the time.
He told me to shut up and make like I'm interested. The math teacher
he doesn't do this often, but if someone asked a question, you should
just answer it, you shouldn’t make comments, because they're asking
because they don't know so just answer it.”

Maltreatment of Black students within the Ontario education system is
widespread (Brathwaite, 1989; Dei, Mazzuca, Mclsaac, & Zine, 1997; James, 1990;
From the perspectives and experiences of my study participants, Black students tend to be placed within the lowest quality educational programs and within the lowest streams. These educational environments – the spaces of the locally developed and applied classrooms – in turn expose these students to cruel treatment and exacerbate cruel and unjust high school experiences.

In addition to discussing the placement of Black students in lower streams, the students often mentioned that middle and high-income families pressure schools to put their children into more academic streams. Mornelle Court is a low-income neighborhood, and all of the students we interviewed represented working class families. Thus, when the students discussed class elements, they spoke of “them” and “those families” as opposed to speaking from the personal. The students were angered that higher class parents “get their way” and also that their wealthy class-mates did not have to fight the system since their parents would do this for them. The students from Mornelle who were in the IB stream, for example, felt they had to fight on their own to make it. Each of the IB students in my study had parents who spoke limited English and knew little of what the IB stream entailed. On their own, or with the help of a sibling, these students had found out about the stream and worked hard to get placed in it, even when this involved commuting to a school outside of their geographic school zone. The role of wealthy parents in the propagation of streaming is a critical point; in addition, there are numerous other class-related factors to consider in a thorough discussion of streaming. However, since my discursive framework involved a
critical anti-racist framework, and given time constraints and the corresponding need for focus, I chose to hone in on the racial elements.

**Impact of Stream on Future & Stream Mobility**

As discussed in the game-based model of stream placement, students tended to select their stream based on a current assessment of their ability, and not on a future goal. Thus, there was no discussion concerning the impact of future goals on stream choice, but there was discussion of the reverse relationship – the restriction of future options based on stream placement. Grace, the grade 12 student who only found out this year that she would not be able to go to university due to taking applied classes, was very frustrated by the entire process. She specifically spoke about not knowing how to switch from lower to higher streams. Based on her personal experience of feeling limited in her goals due to streaming, she felt the process was unfair:

“I know some people who went to academic, but now they’re in applied because it’s too hard. Many of my friends who stuck with academic are stressed out, but if I could go back, I would choose academic because I need it for what I want to do. I’m not sure how to switch streams to know what I want to do. But I can do volunteering like with homework clubs and show them that even if my grades aren’t amazing, I am good with kids…I would be a good teacher. You don’t need grades to be good at something. I don’t know how to say it. If someone has a low average, they can still be good at something. It should be more hands-on learning instead of sitting down and reading it off the board.”
Jordan, also in applied classes, was similarly concerned with the impact of his stream placement on his future options. He spoke about the potential impact of learning a watered-down curriculum on his ability to find employment:

“...Since I'm in applied, my teacher says some of the stuff academic students learn we don't learn. So I think it’s unfair because you can't be taking out stuff from the unit. Some students are getting the most education they can and others are getting the least. Let's say they try to get a job and they didn't get taught the information so they won't be as good...but to be honest, I've never really thought about this.”

Madushalia, a student in academic, adds to the discussion of the impact of stream placement on future life goals by discussing the issue of self-esteem. She feels that the labels placed on students in less academic streams may carry forward into their futures, and affect them negatively in terms of their ability to achieve their goals.

“It [streaming] tells those people that are in applied that they [those in academic] have higher expectations, higher self-esteem and that the others are below them....who have low self-esteem...it's unfair. Feeling like less than like other people...it's not about what you actually learn and stuff...I hate feeling like those girls in IB are so great, I mean they think they’re so great, and they want everyone to know it. It’s gotta be
worse for people in applied – when you’re told you’re less it’s actually hard to shake that off.”

The impact of feeling lower in a hierarchy on one’s overall well-being is established not only in educational research, but also in health research. It has long been understood that being labeled as less important and less worthy than others is detrimental to one’s moral, and to one’s physical health (Bell et al, 2004). The implications of being categorized as “lower” than others at the age of middle school is troubling.

Brekshan, a student in academic classes, feels that the stereotypes applied to people depending on stream is unfair, and the lack of mobility between streams is also unjust. He states:

“It’s kind of unfair because people say it’s the smart people in academic and the dumb people in applied, and that’s not really the case. It’s also kind of unfair because I think once you get to grade 11 it’s harder to switch from applied to academic and so if someone changes their mind and wants to go to university, they would probably have a harder time, but then, at the same time, without streaming, how else would you do it?”

In fact, it is difficult beginning in grade 9. As stated earlier, it is very easy for students to switch from more academic to less academic streams, but it often feels near impossible for students to switch in the other direction. According to the recent People for Education Report (2003), 34% of schools require students to
take an additional course in order to transfer from applied to academic classes. Of these, 81% do not offer the courses during school hours. Thus, there are significant barriers to switching to more academic classes. In 2013, 91% of principals in Ontario report that students transfer from applied to academic courses “never” or “not very often” (People for Education, 2003).

In summary, students consistently linked the question of stream mobility with the issue of impact on future life goals. This is quite logical. If the impact on of stream on future goals exists, which the students felt is the case, then it is unfair if this impact cannot be avoided through switching streams. If on the other hand, students are able to easily switch streams, and therefore control the impact on their futures, then it is a much more fair situation. Overall, most students who spoke hypothetically about stream mobility thought it was relatively simple to switch from less to more academic streams. Those students who actually had experience trying to do this, however, knew that it was very difficult. The impact on future life goals ranged from subtle and debilitating issues of self-esteem to practical considerations concerning the ability to get the certifications needed to fulfill their career goals.

**Overall Assessment of Fairness**

The students were challenged to reconcile competing points when trying to decide whether streaming is a fair process overall. On the one hand, they felt it was important for students to be able to learn at a level that is comfortable for them. On the other, they felt that bullying between streams, stream placement based on race and class, teacher maltreatment of less academic streams, and the
future impact of being in a lower stream were unfair. When participants stated that they felt streaming is a fair process, the two points they used most often were that streaming is ultimately the choice of the student, and that it is simple and easy to switch between streams. Below are some of the differing opinions of students on this matter. Interestingly, the first thought comes from Aiden, the only student I interviewed in locally developed classes, who feels streaming is “kind of” fair:

“Yes, it’s fair. People from IB, academic, applied or locally developed all learn different things. It’s kind of fair. It could be unfair if [streaming didn’t exist and] they can’t actually do the work in the advanced stream. It makes it fair because if you go into the academic one and it’s too hard for you then you have to go down a level. But it’s not fair because you don’t know if you can do it and someone recommended you for something else.”

It seems Aiden is saying that if it is truly the choice of the student, based on an assessment of their own abilities, then it is fair to have some separation. As he says, it would be unfair if everyone were to be in the same level and if certain students are not able to keep up with the material. Aiden recognizes that being in the locally developed stream is helpful for him in terms of the pace of the material. However, he also does not like the feeling of others thinking he is clueless, an idea he raised earlier, or others assuming and “recommending you for something else”. Evidently, ownership over the streaming decision, and a feeling of control over which stream he is in and how he is perceived, is important to him.
Omar, also a student in applied, cites some reasons why streaming could be considered fair:

“I think it's fair that there are streams in school because it gives students a choice whether to take it easy or take it to the next level, but some people don't like working hard, and they just go with applied, but other people, they like studying, they want to get somewhere in life, that's why they push themselves to take academic. Some of the people in applied are a bit lazy. Others want to take it easy – they don't want the stress.”

Omar’s points reflect the current state of the streams. Indeed, applied classes have a reputation for students skipping classes and not really learning anything of consequence. Thus, the idea that those who want to “take it easy” should take applied may be true. Academic students have more workload, teachers expect more from them, and skipping classes is unacceptable. The applied and locally developed streams on the other hand are thought of as the “dustbin” of the education system. Students that are placed there are therefore often viewed as hopeless cases, those who have little potential anyway and so almost anything goes in terms of teacher expectations of them.

Sophia, a grade 7 student, discussed the separation of students she observed during elementary school:

“People shouldn’t have low self-esteem just because people have more marks and stuff... but like it's important [to have streaming] because
people have different ways to learn... maybe they go to applied because they need more understanding so maybe it has to be a little dumbed down for them and they find it more comfortable because they have their own pace of learning and they should have a choice to be in the section that they feel more comfortable in.”

(Researcher: Do you think that most people have a choice about their stream?)

“In elementary school they have like HSP where they go to different classes where everything is dumbed so they can learn more... but they have no choice the teacher just chooses them if they think they’re like not good enough to be in certain classes in their home room.”

Just like Aiden, Sophia reflects that it is necessary to have some division based on ability. There is a need for students to be comfortable with the pace of learning, and feel that the material is possible for them to master. Her thought on the idea of “dumbing down” the curriculum, while it may sound harsh, reflects the reality of the streams. As stated previously, the applied stream is not currently a different curriculum that prepares students well for hands-on learning; it does not delve deeply and with excellence into a different sphere of knowledge involving more practical skills such as carpentry, mechanics or fine arts. Instead, applied truly is a bare-bones version of the academic curriculum, and one with significant loss of quality.
Students and parents thought the maltreatment by their teachers of locally developed and applied students was unfair. I interviewed Grace’s mother, “Angie”. Grace had had quite a negative experience in school, particularly being put in the applied stream and later feeling trapped in this stream since she wanted to go to university. Angie stated:

“Honestly speaking I think the teachers are getting ridiculous these days. The things they say. They're not as supportive as they were before. A lot of them they put down the kids and they break their self-esteem and they don't realize the little things they say actually do something to these kids. There have been so many things over the years. I can't remember everything, like some teachers are very supportive. She had a teacher last year that would email me, let me know what's due. I think that's amazing; they were encouraging. But there are some teachers that put them down and say you're not going to amount to something. They don't realize that small thing you say sticks with them. You are an authority figure and so to them what you say is true... Teachers should also be trained to handle behavioral issues, they should have mental health studies and taking workshops to educate them so they understand the behavior is not who the kid is. Obviously there's an underlying reason for the behavior. But what they do is they label them, ignore them, or say bad things about them. But these teachers should get to know these kids."
Angie is concerned that Grace’s teachers have not endeavored to get to know her daughter well, but rather have judged her. She also appreciates more communication between herself and the teachers, and notes a positive experience when Grace’s teacher would email her about assignments. Most of all Grace is concerned about the negative comments that teachers say to students, whether intentionally or not, which can break a child’s sense of self and discourage them from achieving their goals. Tellingly, none of the parents of students in the academic or IB stream, nor their children, reported any maltreatment.

Aiden, who is in locally developed classes, felt that teachers berate those who are not as good at a subject:

"It’s so unfair…our math teacher is always picking on the students that aren’t good at stuff. He tells us we’re going to work at McDonald’s. A teacher should never talk to students like that. There’s this kid in our math class, he’s really smart, he’s a transfer student from China; he always gets 100% in math. Our teacher is always looking at his answers and comparing them to ours."

Aiden felt it was unfair that teachers “picked on” them according to ability – he said that if a student is trying hard, whether or not they are good at a subject should not matter. Ideally what Aiden has experienced should never happen; however, it seems that in the locally developed and applied classroom, teachers get away with a level of maltreatment towards students that is totally unacceptable in other streams.
Omar, also in applied classes, said that whether a teacher is helpful depends to a large degree on their assessment of a students’ ability:

“Teachers don’t help everyone the same way. I guess if they don’t really believe in you and you go to them for help, it doesn’t help much. But some students they’d actually sit down and help.”

In sum, students were not sure whether streaming was overall a fair process. Without exception, these students were socially minded and cared about the well-being of their peers. Those that believed streaming to be fair were convinced that students do better when taught at a level suited to their needs. They also believed that once the “slower” students had a chance to catch up, they could easily switch into a different stream. If these two elements were present, then perhaps streaming would be a more equitable and reasonable process.

In reality, however, the material taught to the lower streamed students is not just a slightly slower version of the same curricula; there is a significant loss of quality to that curriculum. Generally there is very little overlap between what applied and academic students are learning— in fact, they may be two or three grade levels apart, and much of the academic curriculum is never taught to applied classes. Students were concerned about this, and thought it would affect their future career and life goals. In many cases, they were right. There are many elements that make the spaces of the locally developed and applied classroom an inadequate learning experience. Redundancy and boredom is a factor in students in the applied streams not being engaged. The focus in applied classrooms is usually to maintain discipline as opposed to engage in learning (Stevens &
Moreover, it is currently very challenging for students to switch from applied to academic levels. Finally, there is a high degree of teacher maltreatment toward students in locally developed and applied classes.

While racial and class dimensions were the focus of a previous section, they must also feature here in this discussion of fairness. All students thought that the racial and economic bases of streaming were unfair. That students of higher income families are more likely to be placed in higher streams was of concern to them. Also, the fact that one can visibly see racial divisions between the streams, they stated, was highly problematic. While the students acknowledged these elements of injustice, they also could not decide if streaming was fair overall since they recognized the importance of having educational experiences be tailored to the unique needs of different students. Thus, although they generally felt there were many unfair elements, they could not think of a preferable alternative.

Overall, in the discussion of results, three key themes emerged. The first concerned stream placement, which specifically included: the knowledge that students and parents had about streaming, and the sources and timing of that knowledge; power and who had most impact over stream placement; and the game-based model, which posits that stream placement is more to do with assessment of current ability than to do with aiming for a particular future goal. The second major theme concerned the nature of relationships across streams. Students reported that there is lack of friendship, and even bullying between streams, and that these interactions persist outside of the classroom and even
beyond high school. The final theme related to assessing whether streaming is a fair process.

Under the third theme, students spoke about economic and racial dimensions of stream placement, whether they thought streaming promoted academic success, teachers’ treatment of students in locally developed and applied classes, and whether there was mobility between streams. In regards to fairness, most students felt that since streams had clear racial and class biases, the process was unjust. Those that recognized the difficulty in moving from less to more academic streams also thought this contributed to it being an unfair educational process. However, other students thought streaming was fair since there is a need for a structure that accommodates the learning needs of certain students, such as allowing a slower pace of learning. They hoped that such a structure could exist without the discrimination that currently ensues as a result of being placed in less academic streams.

It is important to note that most of the students we interviewed were under the erroneous impression that it is relatively simple to switch from less to more academic streams at any point in one’s high school experience. In their assessment of fairness, then, they thought the ability to move between streams made the process more equitable. Unfortunately, this mobility largely does not exist, and many of their perceptions were based on an assumption of the experience of others. In cases where students had firsthand experience of attempting to switch, it became clear that it was nearly impossible to do so. Indeed, none of the students in this study who endeavored to change to more
academic streams were successful. The broader research supports this finding; according to the People for Education report of 2013, 91% of principals in Ontario report that students transfer from applied to academic courses “never” or “not very often” (p.2).

**Reflections**

In the above paragraphs, I have compiled brief thoughts from the youth on various themes, taken from their interviews and focus groups. In the journal entries below, however, I present reflections from two interviews in their entirety. In doing so, many of the themes above are woven throughout, for example, stream placement, mobility, relationships between streams, and an assessment of fairness. By presenting two interviews in their entirety I hope to demonstrate to the reader how these themes arose in my own personal reflections from listening to the youth. I also hope that from analyzing these reflections the reader can see how I arrived upon certain solutions or areas for further research, which will be discussed in the discussion and conclusion section.

**Jordan**

*Jordan is an intelligent, perceptive and friendly young person. When asked his background, he answers "Canadian-born Jamaican". He wants to be a police officer, and would be great at it too. Jordan has had this dream since grade 8, although he's thought of starting his own business at different points also. To be a police officer, it is not necessary to take the academic stream. In theory, the*
applied stream followed by a college degree is acceptable. Yet, Jordan's mom, Clara, is adamant that Jordan be put in the "higher" stream, the academic one. Is Clara justified in her attempts to defy school administrators and make sure Jordan is in academic? Does she understand the real purpose of the streams? Is she aware of her son's career goals, and does she support them? I would answer a strong 'yes' to each of these questions. Clara sees the streams for what they are, and is perfectly justified in her efforts to make sure Jordan takes academic.

If the decision to take the applied stream were really based on one's career goals, and not an assessment of worth, it would be different. If the quality of education were equal between the streams, then I might encourage Clara to see it from a different perspective. If there was no student–student bullying and teacher–student bullying as a result of "low" stream placement, I may not support Clara in her efforts to encourage Jordan to take academic. And if the words "dumb" and "lazy" were not applied to the students of the applied stream, again, it would be a different story. If as a result of these judgments, kids in the applied streams did not get into a number of habits and activities that are detrimental to them, I might see the situation in another light. But these are realities, and because of these factors, I am concerned that despite Clara's best efforts, Jordan has been placed in applied math, and I want to help Jordan get into academic math.

Jordan says that most of the kids in academic and IB are Brown or White. My other interviewees have said the same. Jordan tells me that towards Black students in applied classes, teachers throw all kinds of verbal abuse. Upon entering the
classroom, the teacher says, "nice of you to show up, guess you weren't out smoking today". The teacher sometimes gives money as a small prize for answering questions correctly – to the Black students he says, "don't go spending it on marijuana". When one of Jordan's Black classmates asked a question to the teacher, the teacher responded by saying that this concept was easy and that there is a lower level of math that she could go to if she still does not understand. Jordan says that bullying towards students in the locally developed is the worst of all. In school hallways, they are called stupid and dumb, and told they will never get a job.

After completing Jordan’s interview, my mind whirls with thoughts and ideas. I wonder if it would be possible to make the applied stream just as rigorous as the academic stream. The system would be much improved if value judgments were not attached to the streams such as easy verses hard, stupid verses dumb, lazy verses hard-working, lowest verses highest. It would economically favour our country and the youths themselves if students could receive genuine mentoring on career possibilities, free from racism and classism. Moreover, if students are to make this type of decision in grade 8, they need a lot more information in grades 5–8 about the world of work.

Instead of being asked, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" kids need to be asked, "what are your unique talents and capacities, and how will you create a job for yourself that utilizes these?" Instead of thinking about finding a job, youth need to start thinking about creating jobs to fulfill needs they observe in their communities and world. We need education systems that foster creativity
and innovation in both academic and applied settings. Creativity is stifled by prejudice and low self-esteem. So we are doing a disfavour to ourselves and our country if we continue to label one form of knowledge as inferior to another, and if we continue to label groups of students as inferior.

**Jayla**

As I walked away from Jayla’s interview, my mind struggled to digest the conversation, and I felt increasingly overwhelmed and bewildered. Why was this family, whose daughters attend one of the least reputable high schools in the area, so excited about their schooling experience? Why were their sentiments so different from Graces, just down the hall, who was frustrated and angry from her experiences with the same school, within the same stream, and as someone who represented the same racial background and went to the same elementary school? Grace was angered by streaming, and felt betrayed by teachers who coached her to take applied without taking an interest in her career goals and aspirations to become a secondary school teacher. Grace spoke of bullying and racism at her school. She said her entire high school experience was terrible. Her mother spoke of cruel teachers whose comments crush students in the applied stream. Jayla, on the other hand, had nothing but good to say about her school. Throughout all of my years living in Mornelle, I had never heard a student speak about her school in this fashion. I jokingly wondered if a representative of the school had paid Jayla and her mom to give me such positive reviews of the school!
Jayla was dressed in sporty gear, as she often is. She won best athlete during her grade 8 year, and her passion for sports is something she speaks of a lot. It seems that Jayla's athletic talents are an important part of her identity. Jayla and her mother made no hint at not wanting to be interviewed. On the contrary, they seemed eager to discuss the questions. Their body language and eye contact evinced no sign of discomfort, intimidation or unease. When my wife and I lived in Mornelle, Jayla was part of our youth group. We would visit her and her family often, and engage in deep conversations. Thus, the idea of Jayla hiding her real opinions out of discomfort or intimation due to the interview seemed unlikely.

Yet, from the get-go Jayla's interview had a different tone from any other, almost as if I was interviewing an extremely confident individual for a job. Most of the other interviewees demonstrated a mixture of curiosity and nervousness, as would be expected within an interview context. Jayla, on the other hand, seemed to cry out ‘I got this’. She was unwavering in her answers to every question, and showed complete conviction in her opinions throughout. She did not ask for clarification on the meaning of any question. If I probed her to answer more, she continued only with short, surface responses. She was armed with walls that kept in-depth conversation safely outside.

I began as I usually do by asking a few simple questions about school. This usually leads to further conversation, however, she was giving me no ‘ins’ to probe about deep feelings towards her educational process. Jayla told me that she is in the applied streams for all of her classes and she loves it. She loves
sports and can’t wait for the dispute preventing teachers from holding extra-curricular activities to end so that she can start track and field.

As the interview unfolded, Jayla’s mother explained that Jayla’s elementary school experience was terrible, but that the support she is now receiving in her high school is exceptional. She is in the top of her math and science courses with 90s. I found it interesting that when I asked if she would consider switching to academic with those grades, she hesitated. After further questioning, she responded with a strong “no” and explained that she would be afraid of failing if she changed her classes.

When I asked Jayla’s mom if they had any further experiences to share, she mentioned that a few years ago when Jayla’s older sister was attending the same school, there was an issue with one of her teachers. Apparently the teacher was “not grading fairly” and not giving her the support she needed. However, the issue was quickly resolved: her daughter complained through the proper channels, Jayla's mom was granted an interview with the vice-principal, and after one discussion the problem was resolved. I was floored by this picture-perfect description of crisis and victory.

Even now, my thoughts are battling each other as I try to analyze that interview. I do carry with me some resentment toward the education system and I hope that my disappointment with the system is grounded, and not impelling me to find fault where fault does not exist. In fact, I have done my best to allow myself to feel better about the educational process in that there must be others like Jayla and her sister who have had positive experiences in high
school. Besides, it is almost feeding into an elitist attitude to think that one must achieve academic standards in order to be happy.

On the other hand, I am finding it hard to ignore my nagging discomfort in response to Jayla being afraid to try academic level math. I imagine how difficult it must have been for her in elementary school, based on what she told me about her experience. From what she said, it seemed that she felt inadequate coming out of elementary school to the point that now having experienced being at the top of her class in high school, she would not risk that feeling for anything. Does our education system not have a responsibility to give students not only the feeling of achievement, but also a sense of courage in order to never be afraid of failing? To teach young people that failure is part of the learning process is essential to education. Youth should learn that the most successful people have failed many times, and that the most important thing is to never lose the spirit of trying.

Also, I can’t help but contrast Jayla’s mom’s textbook-sounding account of how seamlessly her issue with a teacher was resolved with what I have heard from dozens of families in the past. In expressing my thoughts I run the risk of letting my previously held beliefs interfere with my analysis; however, I hope that by making this struggle apparent to the reader, my responses will remain grounded. How can it be that this mother advocated for her child with such ease and success, while other parents struggle so much? I wonder how other mothers could learn from the approach Jayla’s mom took?
Yet, there seemed to be other forces involved, related not to the specific approach of this family, but to the broader nature of the request. Jayla was happy to be in the applied stream, and the school was happy to have her in applied classes. Thus, there was a mutual goal of promoting Jayla’s success within the slot where she supposedly belonged. There are unwritten rules, and Jayla’s mother was not trying to break them. Instead, she demonstrated contentment with those rules, and only requested that they be enforced properly. In contrast, in Jordan’s case, the school does not want him in the academic stream. It is an unwritten rule that students like him do not belong in academic level classes, and Jordan’s mom was trying desperately to break that rule. Yet, no amount of advocacy on her part could achieve this. Perhaps Jayla and her mom are an example for how great one’s schooling life can be, but only if your dreams fit into predetermined boxes.

* * *

There are a number of important insights that can be drawn from the above reflections on Jordan and Jayla’s interviews. These concern the nature of streaming, but also more generally the “black box” of Ontario’s schooling system, of which streaming is but one part. One observation is that the system is set up such that students fear failure. Jayla was so excited by the feeling of “success”, and success has been defined for her and many others as achieving high marks. Whether these marks have any bearing on gaining knowledge, skill, and capacity is questionable. Jayla’s main reason for not wanting to switch into the academic
equivalent of her classes was fear that she might not be successful, in that her marks might suffer.

This fear of failure is an element well studied in the research, as it is known to impact the engagement of students in school. Caraway et al. (2003) explore the impact of fear of failure on student's goals using Connolly's model of the "contextual" and "self-variables". Their discussion reflects current, and I would argue, misguided notions of how to reduce a students' fear of failure. The thrust of their argument is that students should be praised more when they are doing well, and more opportunities for success should be made available after which praise is given. While this is true in some ways, it misses the point. Students should actually be praised more when they are doing poorly – they should be praised for attempting something that is challenging for them, they should be praised for wanting to learn, and they should be rewarded not for attention to marks but for attention to learning. The learning process should not be structured in such a way that marks define “success” as these arbitrary definitions of intelligence are often flawed (Furnham et al, 2003). Indeed, their arbitrariness is often readily perceptible to students who are highly intelligent and realize that such marks and tests are pathetically over-simplifying the manner in which the human mind grasps new concepts and navigates the process of learning (Furnham et al, 2003).

Drawing further from this discussion on marks, the fact that the streaming placement of Ontario’s high school students is largely determined by their grades and experiences in elementary school should be called into question. If a student
is inclined toward academia, it cannot be reliably assumed that their true capacities have been shown in grades 5–8. Moreover, students who first arrive to Canada during these years, and are learning English for the first time, may have added barriers to their true academic capacity being fairly assessed at this time. Furthermore, many students do not develop their academic goals until closer to graduation, and would be successful at those goals if given the opportunity to pursue them. To be clear, I do not believe that academia is superior to hands-on learning; my point is that the inclinations of students are generally still forming in middle and high school, and slotting students into cookie-cutter positions based on elementary school grades lacks logic as well as an accurate understanding of how human beings develop.

In addition to the false definitions of success often propagated by school systems, another insight raised by the above interviews, specifically Jordan’s, is the injustice faced by many Black students in Ontario school systems. And what he observes, although he himself does not label it as racism, is outright racist and cruel behavior toward Black students. The amount of verbal abuse he reported on the part of teachers toward Black students was startling and cannot be overlooked. He observed that when Black students are struggling with a subject, teachers frequently fall back on the option of them switching into a lower stream, instead of the correct course of action which would be to help the student understand, with patience and tenderness. He observes that teachers often make jokes about Black students doing drugs, and expect them to skip classes. Importantly, as with many other students in this study, he observes that most of
the students in the applied classes are Black while most students in academic are Brown or White.

Finally, I was struck by the relationship between parents and school administrators, a relationship which Jordan’s mom, Clara, seemed to consider as perfectly normal, although no less frustrating. She felt she had to prove her son to the administration, just as her sister had to prove herself as someone capable of going to university. Clara was proud to report her sister had studied at York, despite her guidance counselor and other school staff being adamant that she was not fit for university. Clara was engaged in an ongoing battle of proving the worth of her family. Teachers and staff should actively seek to understand the viewpoints of parents, and work with them in a collaborative and truly respectful manner. Moreover, it is important to consider which type of parents are treated with most respect, and whether as teachers and administrators our own prejudices are influencing who is treated well and who is not. Ultimately, race again underlies the issue here, and this variable intersects with class and parent educational achievement. Unfortunately, these are the factors by which judgement is often passed in terms of whether a parent will be taken seriously, and whether the destiny of a child is taken seriously.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this final chapter, I first discuss the action-oriented steps that the presentation of findings impels me to take. This is an important aspect of the research process and cannot be over-stressed. Next I present a series of policy options that could improve the present situation in terms of the injustices faced by many students due to secondary school streaming. “Options” are presented instead of recommendations since the ideal course of action is often impractical given the current policy environment and lack of political will. Thus, more ideal and less ideal options are given and their benefits and disadvantaged are discussed. Finally, the research is summarized and key points that were revealed in the presentation of findings are reiterated.

Action Research Elements

Action research is a fairly common approach to educational research (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Freire, 1972a, 1972b; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 1999). Mills coined the term action research in 1934 (Mills, 2000). Essentially, action research is a process that gives credence to the development of the powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by researchers, and indeed ordinary people, who pursue knowledge not for its own sake, but for its potential to effect meaningful change. In the context of education, action research is a practical strategy to produce studies that require systematic, organized, and reflective investigation. Action research is one of the few
approaches that strongly promote the principles of participation, reflection, and emancipation of people interested in improving their social situation. In an action research framework, also termed participatory action research, both “researchers” and “subjects” are involved in generating knowledge and are contributors to multiple facets of the research process (Berg, 1989).

The four basic procedures of action research are in some ways similar to most qualitative methods: (i) a research question is identified; (ii) information is gathered to address the question; (iii) this information is analyzed; (iv) the knowledge generated is shared with the participants, and indeed, feedback is often sought before any publication is pursued; (v) action is taken to translate the research findings into policy and practice. It is the fourth and fifth elements that tend to differ from other approaches – since participants are collaborators in the research process, it is deemed impossible to move forward without their meaningful contribution, and since action is the purpose of knowledge generation, without action-oriented results, the research has not been true to the action research framework.

In the context of this study, I learned a great deal from the research participants. With this knowledge, as Dei (1997) puts it, one must ensure not to exploit, but to achieve positive change. Through hearing the stories of these youth, I have been drawn further into the lives of these families. It is important to reflect continually to analyze if we are more focused on growing the program, and achieving the aims of the program, or if we are focusing on building quality relationships that help the youth based on their needs and aspirations even if
these are outside of the scope of the program itself. This is an ongoing challenge, and this research study was an extension of that challenge.

The question then becomes how to implement meaningful action that is drawn from the knowledge generated through the study, and is consistent with the goals of research participants. One solution is to list a set of problems that have become clear during the research process, define solutions to these, and begin to implement them. However, this approach can become paternalistic and short-lived since it is the youth themselves and their families that need to be the ones to drive these changes. Otherwise, one’s understanding of the solutions may not hit at the heart of what really needs to change, and the youth become recipients of an action plan as opposed to developers of an action plan that will encourage them to develop many solutions to problems they may encounter in the future.

It seems that a more sustainable approach is to ensure that I am committed to being part of the lives of these families in the long-term. Being supportive to one another is an ongoing process of being accessible to each other. It is a two-way process of one person being available (both in terms of time and attitude) and the other seeking help when needed. There have been multiple examples of this since the generation of this research – I have assisted a family in navigating the streaming decision in grade 8, and I have sought out options for one of the research participants, Grace, who wished to pursue university but was placed in the applied stream.
Another dimension of action research in this study is the sharing of knowledge and contacts. Knowledge of how the school system works, what is required for certain professions, how streaming actually functions in contrast to what is claimed, who can be called upon to help youth reach their goals, and other pieces of knowledge, can and should be shared widely. The results of this research should also be shared, and made accessible. Future researchers can be spurred on by certain questions posed in this study, and the youth themselves can benefit from reading the results.

A final element of giving back is to never forget the stories one has heard. These stories become part of one's knowledge, and part of one's motivation to continue to seek change. This is not a superfluous or poorly defined aim, but rather a stringent goal that one must keep to through ongoing reflection on these stories, and through continuing to communicate these lived experiences to others.

Policy Options

(i) Addressing Racial and Class Prejudice Thoroughly and Explicitly

A recent issue of Professionally Speaking (The Ontario College of Teacher’s monthly magazine) bears the title “The New Face of Aboriginal Education” and features a collage of photos of Aboriginal children and youth. This issue
embodies advancement in province-wide awareness of the issues that face Aboriginal students today within our education system and it shows a sense of commitment toward resolving these challenges (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013). However, such steps may also be applied to Black students.

From my research and the research of others, it is clear that Black students are being poorly served by the educational system (Brathwaite, 1989; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; James, 1990; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Mata, 1989). The problem of streaming is central to this maltreatment. The presence of racism within the school system warrants being immediately addressed in policy and action. Moreover, further studies are needed that quantify the racial underpinnings of streaming, such as a large-scale quantitative studies on why Black students are primarily streamed into the applied streams. Large-scale surveys could be administered that ask students to disclose whether they have been treated unfairly. Only when studies that involve large numbers of students are produced, the types of numbers that policy makers take seriously, can this issue be adequately addressed.

Another dimension of addressing racial prejudice in our schools concerns the recruitment of diverse teachers and school administrators who reflect and respect marginalized students and their families (Zoric, 2013). As Portelli (2007) puts it, “teachers working in disadvantaged schools have particular, urgent, and added demands placed upon them...requiring specialized knowledge and expertise” (p. 57). Teachers who reflect the backgrounds of marginalized students often have access to a great degree of insider knowledge and cultural resources,
thereby equipping them with the tools to practically engage many social justice issues that teachers representing a culture of power could not. Examples include the ability to develop culturally responsive pedagogies with the first-hand knowledge of the importance of utilizing the students’ home languages to do so (Zoric, 2013). Moreover, it would be effective for school boards across Ontario to provide supports, including the allocation of additional funds, to encourage stable leadership and a low turnover rate for teachers with a proven anti-classist commitment demonstrated through dedication to working in high poverty schools (Portelli et al., 2007).

To confront the current prejudices inherent in streaming, it is also necessary to recognize and challenge class and race biases in the curriculum (Zoric, 2013). Most formal and informal school curricula are filled with race and class biases to such an extent that such biases are effectively normalized. A few examples, cited in the work of Zoric et al, 2005, include: the assumption that all students can afford school activity fees; the widespread devaluation of physical labour in contrast to intellectual labour; the overemphasis in classroom activities on competition and individualism rather than cooperation and collective action; and the exclusion of the contributions of working class people and racialized individuals in the curriculum. Teachers should work with other staff to question the hidden curriculum and rewrite the stories being told and to begin to write the stories being omitted (Zoric, 2013).

Teachers and other school staff require training to recognize that much of the formal and informal curricula, and indeed the functioning of school boards
and educational administrative bodies, embrace a “deficit discourse” framework. This framework, whether articulated explicitly or implicitly, posits that the responsibility for educational failure is placed on individual and family shortcomings rather than in institutional or structural practices and power relations. They identify intellectual, cultural, and linguistic differences as disabilities and deficits. The implication is that these differences represent pathologies in need of correction rather than alternative and legitimate ways of being (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007). For teachers and guidance counselors to be able to play their part in confronting the racial and class biases inherent in the streaming process, curricula-level change is required. Moreover, dramatic alterations in the form of training that school staff members acquire, from status quo professional development to anti-oppressive education, is called for.

(ii) Ensuring Streaming is a Transparent Process and Providing Support to Marginalized Families

If streaming is to continue at all, it is imperative to make public and transparent not only school selection and admissions procedures but also their grouping strategies. The inside life of schools needs to be opened up for democratic scrutiny and public challenge (Lynch & Baker, 2005). This study has shown that students and parents do not have adequate and timely knowledge of the process of streaming nor of their rights. More specifically, it is low-income and certain racial minority parents and students that have the least knowledge
and are most compliant with the often-erroneous opinions of authority figures. Many of the students in our study did not realize that applied and locally developed courses would not allow them to apply to university following grade 12. When decisions are made at the end of grade 8 in regards to streaming, low-income parents and students rarely realize exactly what is occurring, and therefore do not have the knowledge necessary to help ensure that students are placed according to their actual potential and interests.

Schools should begin initiatives to ensure information about streaming is properly communicated. For example, home visits on the part of guidance counselors, teachers and volunteers could help to address some of the issues. Often, parents who have the least knowledge of streaming work multiple jobs and find themselves overwhelmed to keep abreast of every relevant process occurring at their child’s school. A home visit from a guidance counselor, teacher or community volunteer, where they come to the home of the parent, and properly discuss the streaming choice, is needed. Two-way, back and forth discussion is called for, not a one-page form with checkboxes. Those conducting home visits should be trained and closely accompanied to ensure they are providing information free from prejudice. While this step may seem complex, it is necessary since this decision made at grade 8 has a tremendous impact on a student's' future.

Moreover, intervention is required much earlier than grade 8, indeed, as early as grade 1. There is a need for increased collaboration between educators, families and students, beginning early on in the educational experience of a child.
If a child is struggling in basic skills such as literacy and mathematics, procedures need to be in place that identify the situation and ensure it is properly communicated to families. Work plans and extra supports then must be put in place that assist students with their academic challenges well before grades 5–8 in which students begin to be observed for their academic “worthiness”.

In cases where parents are not able to collaborate with school staff, due to for example, English not being their primary language, working multiple jobs, lacking the time and resources to physically attend school meetings, or other situations, “student advocates” need to be mobilized. I served as a student advocate through working with the Junior Youth Empowerment Program, a community-based initiative in which volunteers mentor 11–14 year olds through promoting their academic excellence and character development. This role enabled me to take steps such as meeting with guidance counselors and principals, on behalf of students, and at the request of their families, to ensure their academic success is promoted. I found myself active particularly in situations in which racial and class biases were implicated in the challenging situation at hand. Student advocates would therefore require thorough and ongoing anti-classist and anti-racist training in order to operate within anti-oppressive frameworks.

Student advocates are only one example of the types of support required to level the playing field for marginalized families. It is not adequate to provide knowledge only, i.e. to inform parents that their children are struggling academically, if a family lacks the resources to take action in order to rectify the
situation. Funding needs to be allocated to these families, which would enable students to have the benefit of high quality academic tutoring, extra-curricular activities and camps, and the types of assets that higher-income families offer their children as a matter of course. Intentional distribution of resources through policy and funding strategies, to those families that lack the material resources to ensure their child’s academic success, is a critical need.

(iii) Detracking Entirely

Given the negative impact of streaming, particularly on low-streamed students, recent efforts have been implemented to entirely de-track or de-stream certain schools and school districts, particularly in the United States. Detracking is the dismantling of ability-driven tracks and the placement of students into classes that are intentionally heterogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived ability, and previous achievement (Renda et al, 2009). Generally, these efforts have resulted in benefits to students – not only those in the lower streams, but also those in upper streams (Burris & Welner, 2005). While students tend to benefit, teachers often find themselves ill equipped to teach a heterogeneous or inclusive classroom, and thus experience high degrees of stress and frustration. Renda et al. (2009) suggest that teachers require additional training courses in order to realize the equity-minded aspirations of detracking.

Without proper training as well as opportunities to create meaningful relationships with students from underprivileged backgrounds, teachers tend to fall back on “common sense” notions of success and failure of their students.
These include labeling students in their classes as advanced or slow, grounded or troubled, teachable or non-teachable. If teachers are not aware of the reproduction of race and class within society, and within the school system, they may unconsciously continue to produce these inequities even within the context of a detracked classroom. Thus, detracking efforts must be pursued in parallel to teacher training courses that equip educators with the necessary skills and attitudes to create genuinely inclusive classrooms.

One option is to first attempt to re-define what each stream stands for, ensure the process is more transparent, give students and families more information about future career options at relevant times in their lives, and promote anti-racism in schools. However, if these avenues are found to be ineffective, the option of detracking could then be considered as a means to addressing the challenges this study has identified.

(iv) Delaying Streaming and Reducing its Negative Consequences

In cases where it is not possible to de-stream entirely, a less desirable and yet important policy course in this situations would be to at least delay the grade at which tracking occurs. In a Swiss study on 62,500 youth, the timing of tracking was found to significantly increase educational mobility (Bauer & Riphaunm, 2005). The authors define educational mobility as the degree to which children are unaffected by the educational status of their parents. For example, a child of a parent who has not gone to university would demonstrate mobility if he or she successfully completes university. In all cases, late tracking increased the relative
advantage of children born to non-educated parents, therefore increasing their mobility (Bauer & Riphaunm, 2005).

The timing of tracking has also been debated in Ontario for a long time. In 1994, a public opinion poll found that 59% of the Ontario population thought streaming should be delayed until at least grade 10, and support for this idea was held within all social groupings (Livingstone et al, 1994). At about this time, the official de-streaming of Grade 9 occurred, due to political efforts to reduce discrimination on the bases of class, race and gender (Livingstone et al, 1994). However, teacher’s federations were among the most avid critics of the Grade 9 de-streaming process, and the effort was soon halted (Gidney, 1999). Presently in Ontario, streaming continues to occur formally beginning in Grade 9, and occurs both formally and informally as early as kindergarden (Zoric, 2013).

While the students and parents in my study did not explicitly suggest delaying streaming, they did discuss the fact that they did not feel ready to make the streaming “choice” at grade 8. For example, one student said, “when you are that young, you don’t really think about the future”. Mobility within streams was also an important aspect of fairness according to the students. They did not like the idea that a decision made so early in life could be hard to reverse, and many had convinced themselves that it must be easy to switch between streams when one determines a career path, later in high school, or else they felt the whole process would be very unfair indeed.

Delaying streaming at least to grade 10 is one option that could make the process more equitable and logical. The fewer years that students are separated
could reduce bullying between streams and allow students more time to develop friendships that are not bound by stream divisions. Also, the fewer years that students are separated, the less partial treatment teachers can give to applied and locally developed students since they simply have less time with students once they have been labeled. Delaying streaming would also give students more time to think about their future choices so that perhaps the decision for which stream could be based on university or college aspirations, and not an assessment of worth determined by elementary school experiences.

In addition to delaying streaming, if this process is to exist at all, it is critical to take practical steps to offset at least some of the negative consequences of this process. Financially rewarding schools that ensure a high percentage of their locally developed and applied streamed students graduate from secondary school would be a first step. Conversely, schools could be penalized for high dropout rates from lower streams. Schools could also be rewarded for high mobility rates from less academic to more academic streams. Understandably, there would be a number of complexities in the implementation of these ideas. Therefore, further research is needed to determine their efficacy and practicality.

(v) Promoting Knowledge Translation in Education

In order to move forward, one pragmatic step could be to promote “Knowledge Translation” concerning streaming and its consequences. The Knowledge Translation (KT) movement began in medicine, but is since being applied to a number of fields including public health and environmental research
and policy. The basic principle of KT is that there needs to be more communication between the producers and users of research. Far too much research is produced that remains on the desks of researchers or confined within databases that only fellow researchers use. Meanwhile, policy makers, administrators, and other stakeholders at the grassroots either lack the knowledge necessary to make meaningful change, deliberately ignore the research or are not motivated to become aware of and utilize this knowledge (Strauss et al., 2009). Indeed, often policies and practices on the ground either bear no relation to any research or are based on alarmingly outdated research notions. This is the case in many areas of educational policy and practice.

It should be noted that some educational scholars are critical of applying “evidence-based” notions to education (Luke, 2010). The argument is generally that such approaches ignore local knowledge and claim that peer reviewed articles are superior to all other forms of knowledge (Luke, 2010). However, it is quite possible to apply KT to education without discounting local and cultural knowledge. In many circles, such knowledge is classified as “grey research” and is just as important as peer reviewed and other forms of knowledge. Clearly, if a KT approach was applied to streaming, local and cultural knowledge could be consciously and systematically incorporated. This would be done by ensuring that quantitative and qualitative, generalizable and locally based, realist and discourse-analytic documentation are utilized to create evidence based policy educational policy (Luke, 2010).
In summary, I have proposed five policy options that could serve as potential solutions to the unjust manner in which streaming is currently implemented. These solutions are grounded in the opinions that the students and parents in Mornelle have expressed, as well as in the broader literature on streaming, and represent different points on the continuum from less to more ideal recommendations. This is necessary since policy environments do not always favor the most ideal options. The policy options are to: (i) address racial and class biases inherent in the streaming process through giving research and policy attention to the unjust treatment of low-income groups and certain racial minorities, particularly Black students; confronting racial and class biases in the curricula; and providing anti-oppressive training and professional development to school staff members (ii) ensure streaming is a more transparent process through providing thorough and timely information to parents and those who can mentor students through the process and providing the financial and other resources required for marginalized families to promote the academic success of their children; (iii) re-launch de-streaming efforts in Ontario in order to do away with streaming entirely, ensuring this is not only a policy adjustment, but also a sustainable change in practice; (iv) if policy option iii is not viable, at least delay the onset of the streaming decision to later grades in high school, specifically at least to grade 10 and offset its detrimental consequences through rewarding schools that promote the academic success of marginalized students; and to (v) promote knowledge translation within education such that policies on streaming
and other educational matters must be supported by evidence before being actuated.

It is important to analyze the impact of these policy options on the individual classroom practitioner, and to analyze the relevance of such changes to teachers in Ontario; indeed, this consideration cuts across all of the policy recommendations discussed above and affects their viability. One must bear in mind that not every teacher in Ontario entered the profession of education in order to work towards social justice; indeed, it is my personal experience that many teachers view their role as strictly within the classroom, and feel that their job description involves delivering material, not ensuring every student succeeds. It is important not to be overly critical of teachers, nor to lay the blame for all educational injustices on their shoulders. Teaching is hard work – amidst marking, navigating school politics, building rapport with parents, knowing one’s material, creating lesson plans, and other tasks, the everyday work can be demanding and stressful. Moreover, many teachers report low job satisfaction due to the high amount of working hours with low pay (Kersaint et al, 2007; Liu & Ramsey, 2008).

Thus, to ask teachers to become advocates for their students in every sense, to recognize the racial, gender, and class influences that hinder the development of many of their students, and to work toward creating learning environments where all can succeed, is not a simple request. Education and training that fundamentally changes mindsets and attitudes among teachers is required, not simple instructions or directives that force teachers to be what they currently are not. Such training and education will take time; indeed, it will likely take generations to meaningfully transform the culture of teaching.
Any policy changes concerning education in Ontario should be carried out with teachers included in the planning and implementation. If teachers are neglected in the policy change, the desired transformation will not be achieved. For example, if teachers are not trained to recognize social justice barriers to the success of their students, and to seek to end such barriers, the same prejudicial attitudes that led to their creation will remain, and the same patterns will continue. Teacher training is essential, beginning at the earliest point possible – during one’s education degree. Following this, ongoing professional development that includes a focus on social justice must become mandatory for all teachers. Ideally, educators should be reimbursed for their time in attending such sessions such that they are keen to participate. Ideally over time, their participation could be motivated by other factors and not only economic incentives.

**Closing Remarks**

This study has gathered the opinions of young people on streaming, an issue that affects them most. By bringing young voices to the fore, this research is unique as most past studies have investigated the streaming process indirectly based on the opinions of adults about the experiences of youth. The youth in Mornelle Court, as well as their parents, have expressed valuable insights that contribute to research on streaming, and should be taken seriously when considering policy and action on this issue, particularly because their voices represent the marginalized families who are currently most negatively impacted by streaming. Through using qualitative and ethnographic methods, as well as
interviewing youth directly, this study has obtained a level of depth and accuracy that has not been achieved by other Ontario–based studies on this topic.

Overall, this study has five major findings, which are grounded in the experiences of Mornelle Court youth and their families:

- (i) The choice of stream in grade eight was based upon an evaluation of the current academic ‘worthiness’ of a student – an assessment often made by others, such as guidance counselors and teachers, and indeed society at large, which the youth then internalized. I used the ‘game-based model’ of stream placement to elaborate upon the factors the youth discussed that influenced their ‘choice’ of stream, a model which emphasizes that stream placement is based upon assessments of current worth and not well planned out academic goals. This is a significant finding since the most commonly cited pretext and justification for streaming is that it equips students more adequately for their diverse career goals. Not only were the students largely not aware of which requirements are necessary for specific careers, youth in Mornelle had not given this question a great deal of attention, naturally, as they are in grade eight when the decision is formally made. Moreover, the observations of their academic potential begins in their early elementary school years, during a period of time in which Mornelle Court students and families are often unaware of the process.

- (ii) While the majority of youth in this study suggested that they had most power over their own streaming placement, their reported
experiences indicated that societal and institutional class and race biases, the expectations of guidance counselors and teachers, as well as family influences, had a large bearing on their secondary school stream placement. The youth’s opinions switched unpredictably between a “deficit discourse” reading of their situations, in which they ascribed blame to themselves if they were streamed into lower quality educational programs, and a “power or dominance” framework in which they understood the source of unequal educational outcomes to be rooted in power differentials in their school environment and society at large (Zoric, 2013). Examples from their experiences that attest to a power or dominance framework included marginalized families not having access to adequate and timely information on streaming, and not possessing the economic and social capital resources required to confront the system and promote the academic success of their children.

(iii) Instead of serving to prepare students for different post-secondary options, I found that, in the experience of Mornelle Court youth, streaming currently serves to divide students along economic and racial lines and to limit academic and career options for already marginalized youth. Relations are strained between students of different streams – examples ranged from exclusion and isolation to verbal and physical abuse – and these strained relationships persist both in and outside of the classroom.
- (iv) Stream mobility from less academic to more academic streams did not occur successfully in the cases of Mornelle Court students who attempted it. Yet, most of the students I interviewed were under the erroneous impression that it is relatively simple to switch from less to more academic streams at any point in one’s high school experience. In their assessment of fairness, then, they thought the ability to move between streams made the process more equitable. Unfortunately, this mobility largely does not exist, a finding supported by the firsthand experiences of those Mornelle youth who endeavored to switch, and by the broader research on this topic (People for Education, 2013).

- (v) In the experience of Mornelle Court youth, there are racial biases inherent in the streaming process, which are consistently affected by class-based oppressions. Out of the diverse range of students I interviewed, the Black students in this study were treated particularly poorly. The spaces of the applied and locally developed classrooms were found to serve as an arena where verbal abuse and lack of academic support is tolerated when directed toward low-income students and certain racial minority groups.

While streaming at the secondary school level was formally abolished in Ontario in 1999 (People for Education, 2013), the practice persists. The reasons for its abolishment were the same then as they are today. Streaming is an ineffective practice that exacerbates current race and class based social injustices, and deprives this province of the significant potential that could be accessed if
education truly fostered the potential of all youth, regardless of their racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. My hope is that the voices of the youth in Mornelle will contribute to a more accurate and in-depth understanding of this unjust practice, and I will strive to ensure that their suggestions to rectify the current abuse will be taken seriously by educational policymakers and practitioners alike.

I am indebted to the participants in this study, the youth and parents in Mornelle, who generated the knowledge that is the basis of this work, who gave of their time to willingly provide insight into this issue, and who possessed the courage to speak frankly on the challenges that are too often left unheard in dominant discourses concerning Ontario’s education system. I thank them for allowing me to grapple with and attempt to understand their experiences, and for possessing the openness to allow me to communicate these insights to others.
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