BRIDGING UNDERSTANDINGS OF DIFFERENCES, LEARNING, AND INCLUSION: VOICES OF MINORITIZED STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

Many Canadian children from minority status groups experience long-term academic complexities, influencing their sense of school belonging and engagement (Willms, 2003; Willms & Flanagan, 2007). Research demonstrates children with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability, and those in their middle years (10-13 years old), undergo heightened academic challenges (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Cobbold, 2005).

Within Toronto, one of the most diverse Canadian cities, this study explores the narratives of 6 middle years children with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disabilities. The narratives highlight participants’ understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion. Specifically, what are marginalized children’s personal schooling experiences, and how may these insights support inclusive learning, teaching, and sense of belonging?

Underpinned by conceptual lenses of (a) critical theory, from which stems critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education, and (b) the “new sociology of childhood” (Greene & Hogan, 2005), which includes social constructivist and participatory frames, this study employed qualitative narrative and critical discourse analysis research methods.
throughout 7 research sessions over a 4 month period. Accessing children’s multiple views, data collection included a “mosaic” (Clark & Moss, 2001) multi-method approach, such as semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, writing activities, imaginative story games, photography, and drawings. The children’s narratives are re-presented as portrait narrative summaries within this paper.

Surfacing findings include two predominant themes: (a) Participants’ conceptualizations of differences, race, ethnicity, language, culture, disability, and autism. Participants’ views relate to theories of denying differences, colour blindness, White discourse, and Othering; and (b) Interconnecting factors of inclusive and exclusive elements contributing to participants’ overall sense of school belonging. Additionally this theme highlights matters of meritocracy, individualization, and the “good” student. Underscoring both themes are notions of normalcy, and deficit and deficient-based discourses. Inviting student voice into educational conversations and research processes, this study demonstrates the importance of listening to voices of children with intersecting differences, as they may adeptly advance areas of inclusion and diversity.
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# Table of Contents

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

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

Table of Contents  .............................................................................................................................. vi

List of Tables  ..................................................................................................................................... viii

List of Figures  ................................................................................................................................... ix

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction and Background of Study  ......................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Personal Journey toward the Proposed Study ................................................................. 7
  1.2 Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................... 12
  1.3 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions ............................................................. 18

CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review  ............................................................................................................................ 20
  2.1 Differences and Intersectionality .................................................................................... 20
  2.2 Schools and Inequities ...................................................................................................... 25
  2.3 Inclusive Education, Marginalization, and Difference .................................................. 30
  2.4 Children’s Voices in Inclusive Educational Research .................................................... 35
  2.5 Teacher Conceptions of Minoritized Children, Diversity, and Inclusive Pedagogy .... 40
  2.6 Inclusive Education and School Knowledge .................................................................. 44

CHAPTER THREE
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework  ................................................................................................. 48

CHAPTER FOUR
Methodology  .................................................................................................................................... 58
  4.1 Design .................................................................................................................................... 59
    4.1.1 Narratives ....................................................................................................................... 60
    4.1.2 Critical Discourse Analysis ......................................................................................... 62
  4.2 The Empirical Study .......................................................................................................... 65
  4.3 Data Collection .................................................................................................................... 73
    4.3.1 Creative Mediums ........................................................................................................ 76
    4.3.2 Group Interviews ........................................................................................................ 80
    4.3.3 Researcher Notes ......................................................................................................... 81
  4.4 Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 81

CHAPTER FIVE
Context of the Study: Inclusion, Disability, Autism, and Policy .................................................... 88
CHAPTER SIX
Participants’ Portraits and Narrative Summaries ---------------------------------------- 109
6.1 Gem ------------------------------------------------------------- 110
6.2 Alice ------------------------------------------------------------- 116
6.3 Simon ------------------------------------------------------------- 123
6.4 Mew ------------------------------------------------------------- 132
6.5 Edward ------------------------------------------------------------- 140
6.6 William ------------------------------------------------------------- 148

CHAPTER SEVEN
Understanding of Differences ----------------------------------------------- 157
7.1 General Perspectives ----------------------------------------------- 158
7.2 Ethnicity, Culture, Race, and Language --------------------------------- 168
7.3 Disability and Autism ----------------------------------------------- 173

CHAPTER EIGHT
Sense of School Belonging ----------------------------------------------- 186
8.1 Inclusion ------------------------------------------------------------- 188
8.2 Exclusion ------------------------------------------------------------- 215

CHAPTER NINE
Conclusions --------------------------------------------------------------- 256
9.1 Intersections of Differences and Schooling -------------------------- 256
9.2 Implications for Schools --------------------------------------------- 260
9.3 Researcher Considerations, Reflexivity, and Voice ------------------ 267
9.4 Significance of the Study/Contribution to Existing Body of Knowledge --------------------------------------------- 272

CHAPTER TEN
References --------------------------------------------------------------- 275
List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Specifications---------------------------------------------------------- 72

Table 2. Examples of Amendments to Participants’ Original Interview Text to Narrative Text 86
List of Figures

Figure 1. Subset disorders of Pervasive Development Disorders, including Autism Spectrum Disorders

Figure 2. Common educational discourses and teachers’ conceptual repertoires surrounding notions of diversity: Potential effects on minoritized students

Figure 3. Venn diagram illustrating the interrelationship between inclusive and exclusive factors influencing participants’ overall sense of belonging
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

This is a time of suddenly acknowledged multiplicity and diversity. Voices long ignored or long repressed are making themselves heard, many of them demanding that we look at things from their perspectives and recognize how numerous are the ways of defining what is “real.” (Greene, 1993b, p. 241)

My doctoral thesis explores the narratives of middle years minoritized children who have intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disabilities. The narratives highlight children’s understandings of their differences, learning, and inclusion. More specifically, I ask what are minoritized children’s personal schooling experiences, and how may these insights support inclusive learning, teaching, and sense of belonging?

For my research, I conducted a 4 month narrative and critical discourse analytical study with 6 middle years (ages 10-13) minoritized children with disabilities from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Two over-arching theoretical lenses undergird this study: (a) critical theory, from which stems critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education, and (b) "new sociology of childhood" (Greene & Hogan, 2005), which includes social constructivist and participatory frames. I employed a multi-method qualitative approach involving: (a) narratives, (b) critical discourse analysis, (c) creative mediums (i.e., writing activities, storygames, drawings, and photo narratives), (d) group interviews, and (e) researcher notes. This study contributes to knowledge, practice, and research in minority education, inclusion, disability studies, and childhood studies.

A growing body of research suggests children from marginalized groups, with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability, and those in their middle years (10-13 years old), undergo heightened academic challenges (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Cobbold, 2005; Whitley, Lupart,
Research on minority education often concentrate on traditional notions of diversity (i.e., ethnicity, culture, race, and language), discounting other differences, such as disability (e.g., learning, autism, Asperger syndrome). The vast scope of diversity entering schools suggests addressing the many ways in which children differ, seeking insights to strengthen educational stakeholders’ capacities in serving marginalized groups, and destabilizing stereotypical notions of normalcy and conceptual repertoires of diversity (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Petrou, Angelides, & Leigh, 2009; Smythe & Toohey, 2009). Considering intersections of differences there is need for research that broadens parameters of diversity to allow a more inclusive understanding of children outside traditional or mainstream conceptions, accounting for those from multiple minoritized groups – that is, taking into consideration children with disabilities who are from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., a Muslim Pakistani child with autism, who is a newcomer to Canada). Therefore, there is a call to better understand the diversity increasingly typifying Canadian schools, seeking the lived schooling experiences of children from multiple minoritized groups, examining how to improve inclusive school environments to support their learning and sense of inclusion. My thesis explores the narratives of middle years children who come from various marginalized groups, including disabilities. Within the narratives, I examine their understandings of personal differences, learning, and inclusion, investigating how these insights could enhance inclusive learning, teaching, and sense of belonging.

By seeking the voices of minoritized children, inquiring about what, why, and how they would like to learn, and examining their schooling experiences, may present relevant and engaging pedagogy and learning contexts accounting for children’s differences. Namely,
as minoritized children contribute understandings of their learning and school life, we may use these to think broadly about issues of diversity and minority status, identifying ways of establishing greater inclusive educational milieus reflective of minoritized children’s lives and experiences, and thus engaging and empowering students in their learning. Their insights, knowledge, and experiences may begin shifting notions of normalcy within schools and contribute to supporting inclusive education. Narratives offer a distinct phenomenon and method for inviting diverse children into conversations and dialogue concerning their learning. In my study, children from marginalized groups had opportunities to co-learn, co-construct, and co-investigate together, confronting, challenging, conveying, and moving through bouts of uncertainty, to make sense of and theorize new ways of thinking and addressing issues of inclusion and diversity; demonstrating their agency and voice in negotiating educational matters.

For the purpose of this study, I define the following terms for clarification: (a) diversity – in my study I account for a range of differences, including race, ethnicity, language, and disability. These differences are the primary focus of my thesis, however, I am also aware diversity includes gender orientation, class, religion, etc; (b) minoritized – This term refers to those traditionally marginalized in society and schools due to structural inequalities (e.g., racism, ableism, etc.), and thus do not adhere to majority norms. I prefer the term minoritized, rather than minority: “‘Minority’ is stigmatizing and numerically incorrect. Minoritized conveys power relations and processes by which certain groups are socially, economically, and politically marginalized within the larger society. This term also implies human agency” (McCarty, 2002, p. xv). As Bishop (2013) asserted,

To be minoritized, one does not need to be in the numerical minority but only to be treated as if one’s position and perspective are of less worth: to be silenced or
Thus, minoritization is an enactment of disempowering particular individuals within society and institutions due to various aspects of personal differences misaligning with the mainstream. The terms *minoritized children* and *minoritized students* appropriately suits the context of my study, as a great deal of research suggests children and young people as a population, particularly those from diverse ethno-cultural and racial backgrounds, and those with disabilities, are frequently silenced and marginalized within schools due to social inequities and barriers (I further explain this research in chapter two of the thesis).

However, I do not propose all children from minority status groups experience minoritization, oppression, and marginalization within schools in identical ways. That is, some minoritized groups may encounter a greater sense of school exclusion and marginalization than others. For example, analyzing data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, it is noted Canadian children from Chinese, Indian, and “other Asian” immigrant families statistically attain higher academic achievement [i.e., completion of a university degree] compared to Canadian children from Caribbean, Latin American, and German immigrant families, and children from Canadian-born families) (Statistics Canada, 2008a, p. 13). More specifically, of the immigrant groups examined, Chinese immigrant children lead the way in terms of the most academically achieving (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Human capital (i.e., parent’s level of education, socioeconomic status, etc.) and social capital (i.e., close ties to the ethnic community, academic enrichment, preservation of language, cultural family values place high academic expectations on children, etc.) are suggested factors for such group differences among Chinese immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2008a). This is significant, as all my participants are from East Asian backgrounds, with a majority from
Chinese immigrant families. Although statistically it appears Canadian Chinese and other Asian children may not be as minoritized compared to other immigrant groups due to academically achieving at higher rates, I question whether successful school achievement is a determinant of an individual’s sense of minoritization. I argue academic achievement does not always directly implicate whether a student is minoritized within schools. For example, personally, I exceedingly achieved throughout educational systems, yet I encountered multiple moments of minoritization throughout school and society (i.e., silencing of voice, shame of ethnicity/difference, prejudices and stereotypes due to skin colour, etc.); thus, I consider myself minoritized. I posit my participants are minoritized when considering the historical, political, social, and family contexts.

The first arriving Chinese immigrants (approximately 1850’s) historically faced discrimination and oppression within Canada. Tolerated for cheap labour to develop the country (e.g., constructing Canadian railways, mines, etc.), the Chinese maintained no citizenship rights and were deterred from bringing their families to Canada (Man, 2013). A few years after arrival and contribution to Canada, various federal policies and acts were imposed to rid the country from what they considered, one of the undesirable racial groups (i.e., Chinese Exclusionary Act, head taxes, etc.) (Man, 2013). During 1923-1947 Chinese immigrants were prohibited from immigrating to Canada and only until the 1970’s did Chinese immigration begin increasing due to changes in Canadian immigration policies (Man, 2013). Interestingly, incarceration in psychiatric institutions was also employed among Chinese immigrants as a tactic to control social order due to fear among White Canadians in British Columbia (Kanani, 2011; Menzies, 2002). Thus, incarceration of the 65 Chinese “lunatics” and “Orientals” (Menzies, 2002, p. 197) was another means of ridding the
country of individuals who did not fit normal idealizations and conceptualizations of Canadian citizens, neither racially, ethnically, linguistically, or mentally/ability: “Their mass banishment signifies the power of dominant ideologies of race and reason that were hegemonic throughout Canadian and British Columbian public life during the early part of this century [1930’s]” (Menzies, 2002, p. 197). While such overt governmental racialized discrimination may no longer exist, they remain systemically woven into Canada’s historical past, and these prejudices implicitly manifest themselves in various shapes and forms among groups who were once regarded as unwelcomed and undesirable due to differences from the ideal norm.

My participants’ families emigrated from China and Vietnam, arriving in Canada during the late 1980’s throughout early 2000’s. Many of these families are employed as blue collar workers (e.g., chef, landscaper, machine operator, labour worker for automotive parts, dry cleaner, etc.). These families frequently require funding assistance for therapeutic and social programs for their child with disabilities, and once funding ends, so too does additional programs for the child. A majority of the parents have very limited functioning in the English language (beginner level of English as a Second Language [ESL]). Although, I did not explore minoritized parents and their understandings of schooling and the Ontario special education system, I would theorize based on the research, that my group of participants’ parents most likely faced obstacles and perhaps even marginalization in clearly conceptualizing special education within Ontario schools. For instance, (a) ethno-cultural perspectives and attitudes toward disabilities and special education philosophies may differ from educational doctrine; (b) parents’ notions of teaching and learning may clash with teachers’ understandings and expectations; (c) linguistic differences may exclude parents
from school processes; (d) parents’ work scheduling may reduce parent-teacher/parent-school interactions, particularly if both parents are required to work to support the families’ financial needs; and (e) parents may fear advocating and sharing concerns or ideas within an unfamiliar system in an unfamiliar country (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). Therefore, participants’ parents may lack a certain cultural capital, power, and privilege with regards to their understandings of disability and schooling for their child within Ontario society, in comparison to a White, middle-class family, in which English is their first language. Furthermore, all participants have a disability, and as such most likely experience various kinds of minoritization resulting from societal barriers (Gabel & Connor, 2008; Reid & Knight, 2006). I suggest minoritization occurs among those who do not fit within mainstream populations, and this often encompasses groups historically oppressed within majority society, such as those from visible ethnic and racialized groups, newcomer families, and those with disabilities. My study includes children from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds who also have a diagnosed disability, such as autism, developmental delays, speech and language delays, cerebral palsy, and/or undiagnosed disabilities requiring extra support or special educational needs.

1.1 Personal Journey toward the Proposed Study

As a young Indo-Guyanese-Canadian girl attending the same private religious school for 14 years, I quickly learned that the more I sat, shirt neatly buttoned to collar and tucked into uniform skirt below the knee, remained quiet, and rotely memorized, the more I succeeded and “passed” through the system. A majority of my educational experiences emphasized academic grades and regurgitation of others’ knowledge, stifling my knowledge and silencing my voice. The values of academic achievement outweighed the values of
creating my own knowledge, or exchanging of voices and dialogue within the classroom. To a great extent, my elementary, middle, and early high-school years of schooling were of teacher-centred learning, control, assumptions, evaluation and assessments, rather than student-centred learning, relationship building, and respect for student voice. Teachers relied heavily on transferring their knowledge, rather than transforming student knowledge, whereby critical thinking, risks, and curiosity embodies the classroom. After years of teachers zealously criticizing my “chatty” nature or my “too talkative” personality, I finally succumbed to the system: compliance, obedience, silence, and their correlation to that of a “good” student, boiled and coagulated within me, thickening as each year proceeded.

In addition to rote learning, rigidity, and inhibiting student voice, a climate of ignoring student differences existed. During elementary school there were infrequent “celebrations” of student diversity, although tokenistic in nature. For example, engaging students in cultural food potlucks for a lunch hour to experience the multiculturalism within our classroom, or once in grade 6 watching the film *Roots* for Black History Month, without deeply or critically interrogating historical and political contexts, or for one week of the school year listening to missionaries discuss their “exotic” and “heart-breaking” travels to developing countries. The absence of critical learning and teaching about different people, traditions, and backgrounds, was replaced with persistent pushes for conformity, similarity and sameness, and one student identity; the expectation placed upon students was to look/dress not only the same, but also to behave and achieve the same, despite that a majority of the student population consisted of children from various ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, living in quite different home environments and socio-economic status, and maintaining varying abilities. Although perhaps considered fair and democratic practices
within the school, disregarding students’ diversity further devalued the qualities and realities related to our personal differences (Harper, 1997).

Meanwhile, as I moved through my teenage years, questions brewed of where and how my knowledge and experiences fit in this school context, and why and who decided what content was worthy of discussion within classrooms. Imprinting tiny blots along my schooling career, these experiences cumulatively created an awkward portrait of my identity as student and young girl. My meaning making, knowledge, and voice confined to particular boundaries and limits as defined by educators, left behind trails of insecurity for voicing my opinions and a sense of shame for my diversity. At the time unaware, but now cognizant, my school, in which discursive threads flowed of traditional religious ideals coupled with majority White teaching staff, went to great lengths attempting to mould and shape students into docile products they saw fit, whilst simultaneously suppressing and neglecting pieces of students’ differences, diversity, knowledge, and voice, all of which fell to the fringes of learning and teaching.

Stepping into undergraduate schooling, similar surfacing tensions stirred around, between, above, and underneath my knowledge and learning and the Professors’ knowledge and teaching. Still, identifying as a vessel to fill, a blank slate to write upon, and fully aware of the way in which education was to proceed, I sat among hundreds of other undergraduates, for hours at a time, patiently listening, vigorously note taking, and praying for the ability to upheave all I could memorize and analyze of their knowledge and words of the texts for the upcoming mid-term or final exam. Moreover, much of earning my honours science degree demanded maintaining objectivity, validity, generalizability, and reliability from a rather positivist lens. I briefly experienced moments of writing critical essays and conducting small
research studies and papers, where bits of my voice and thoughts seized, albeit for a brief instant, time in the learning spotlight. Through this more personal writing and research, small crevices opened within the tightly narrowed hallways of my educational learning, to articulate some of Amanda’s interests, knowledge, and connections. Although, for the work to appear valid and unbiased from within a scientific frame, entailed I carefully tread through my writing and research, ensuring the “I” was not found, the personal voice resonated not, and the “me” and “my” be veiled among words and thoughts of other renowned and respected scholars and researchers.

In graduate school I slowly grasped, I was not tabula rasa, I was not a blank slate, and indeed no longer would others powerfully write upon me and expect of me to tell them what they wrote. Rather, I encountered spaces embracing dialogue, student-led teaching and presenting, civil debates and disputes regarding texts, relationships, and most importantly, respect for others’ voices. With opportunities to conduct more research and unconvinced with the “logico-scientific” (Bruner, 1986, p.13) ways, as they regularly overlooked and disregarded children’s voices, I shifted my positivist “paradigmatic” views of what is “good” research (Bruner, 1986) toward qualitative approaches, which place voice and heart at the crux of research inquiry.

During both my undergraduate and graduate education, I dedicated years to working as a therapist for children and adolescents with developmental disabilities (i.e., autism, Asperger Syndrome, speech and global delays, and Down Syndrome). Trained in Applied Behavioural Analysis, again within the positivist and behavioural realms, I developed, facilitated, and supervised parent relief, social skills, and treatment teaching programs. Many of these children also came from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, practiced various
religions, spoke multiple languages, and sometimes lived in lower socio-economic contexts. As a therapist I worked in small groups or individually with the children, developed trusting relationships, and designed relevant and engaging programs suited to children’s abilities. I also encountered opportunities to speak with parents, visit homes, meet extended family, all strengthening the learning and teaching. However, oftentimes these “different” children I worked with experienced either full exclusion from the typical classroom or were pulled out during academic work, which apparently they could not handle.

I frequently wondered how these children felt about their schooling experiences, especially those maintaining multiple intersecting differences (e.g., Sri Lankan child with autism living in government housing or a newcomer child with Asperger Syndrome who speaks English as a second language)? As I felt embarrassment for my diversity throughout most of my schooling, did these children also sense similar, perhaps greater, shame and stigma at school due to intersections of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and ability-related differences? Were these children presented with opportunities to voice personal perspectives, transform knowledge, and feel a sense of full participation and belonging within their school, or did they remain silent, existing within schools where educators transmit knowledge and maintain stereotypical assumptions? Could the stories or narratives of these children’s learning, differences, and school experiences serve as a resource for transforming and strengthening inclusive education? Could minoritized children’s narratives provide insights for establishing better inclusive schools to support their learning and sense of belonging?

As a minoritized student myself, my voice never authentically heard throughout most of my academic experiences, compels my spirit as a researcher and educator to “…pursue the
silences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 11) of those frequently shushed within our schools and society; to hear the stories, understandings, and voices of other minoritized children, especially among those who experience additional educational complexities resulting from intersections of differences.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Canadian educational landscape steadily shifts through the multiple diversities children bring to classrooms. For example, in 2006, the population of “visible” racially and ethnically diverse people in Canada reached 5,068,090 (Statistics Canada, 2010). Each year in Canada, nearly 50,000 children (under age 15) enter as newcomers, 760,000 children live in poverty, and 5% to 7% of children and youth have a disability (Ali, Corson, & Frankel, 2009). Moreover, intersections of childhood disability and living in poverty add to schooling complexities and educational strains (Emerson, 2007; Petrenchik, 2008). The Canadian Institute of Child Health (2000) reported 30% of Canadian children with disabilities (ages 0-12) live in poverty. In 2006, it was estimated that among the 173,180 (4.6%) of Canadian children with disabilities (ages 5-14), approximately 25% have unmet needs for special education learning and 17% lack educational resources such as specialized educational aids, tutors, programs, etc… (as reported by Canadian parents of children with disabilities) (Statistics Canada, 2008b).

Minoritized children regularly face countless and enduring academic difficulties, especially when experiencing intersections of differences. For instance, Artiles et al. (2010) contended children from “historically underserved groups” (p. 279) (i.e., diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and disadvantaged economic backgrounds), frequently experience long-term academic failure and are overly identified as children with disabilities, requiring extra
special educational needs. Traditionally, research suggested that such over representation of minoritized children in disability categories is correlated to: (a) the developmental difficulties associated with living in poverty observed among historically underserved groups, (b) special education programs providing minoritized children with educational advantages such as individualized teaching and learning, smaller student-teacher ratio, etc., (c) the promise of successful long-term outcomes in special education (Artiles et al.). However, much of this research ignores how the larger socio-cultural, socio-historical, and socio-political contexts “...shape the educational experiences and opportunities of students from historically underserved groups” (Artiles et al., p. 296). Subsequently, the learning and teaching carried out within schools is often unconnected to the lives, experiences, and socio-political contexts of minoritized children (Nieto, 1999). Incorporating the voices of minoritized children into educational discussions, and highlighting their everyday school realities and lived context, may inform inclusive school policy and practice.

Children who experience continuous academic failure begin feeling estranged and isolated from school (Willms & Flanagan, 2007). Identifying with and maintaining a sense of belonging to the learning environment fundamentally influences children’s engagement and learning (Willms, 2003; Willms & Flanagan, 2007). Of the 30,000 Canadian student participants in the 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (15 years old; excluding the three territories of Canada), approximately 21% reported a low sense of belonging to their school and 32% expressed feeling isolated within schools (Statistics Canada, 2008c; Willms, 2003). This depleted sense of belonging and connectedness during secondary schooling heightens among immigrant youth (approximately 1.4 times greater), those from low socio-economic backgrounds (approximately 1.4 times greater), single parent
households (approximately 1.2 times greater), or a combination of these factors (Willms, 2003). These odds ratios may be combined and multiplied, thus increasing the likelihood of a student’s disaffection toward school. For example, an immigrant youth from a low socio-economic background is approximately 2 times (1.4 x 1.4) more likely to feel a low sense of belonging compared to a native born student from an average socio-economic background. The PISA report did not examine students with disabilities’ sense of belonging, although, I would infer that feelings of school disconnect would also increase for this group of youth as they are often a marginalized and excluded group.

Although the PISA report measures students’ level of contentment with their schooling experiences via a survey (i.e., 4 point scale regarding school loneliness, exclusion, awkwardness, boredom, etc.), it does not present an in-depth understanding or reasoning for why youth may feel such school disengagement. In 2005 the Hospital for Sick Children prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) a report deeply examining student disengagement in Ontario high schools (urban and rural areas), particularly among “early school leavers,” “returned and graduated students,” and “high risk students” (Ferguson et al., 2005). The report indicated early school leavers commonly perceive school contexts as unfulfilling, wherein they experience negative student-teacher relations, social problems, and academic difficulties. More specifically, Ferguson et al. conducted qualitative interviews with 193 Ontarian young people (ages 14-21 years old), of which 68% were early school

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1 Young people who dropped out of or were expelled from high school without receiving an Ontario diploma/GED, and has not pursued any form of alternative schooling to receive the diploma/GED (Ferguson et al.).

2 Young people who left high school prior to receiving their Ontario diploma/GED, but later pursued alternative schooling to receive the diploma/GED (e.g., night school, internet, adult school, etc.) (Ferguson et al.).

3 Young people still attending high school pursuing their Ontario diploma, who have never dropped out, but are identified as high risk according the OME “at risk” guidelines (Ferguson et al.).
leavers. The sample of participants represented a wide range of student diversity: (a) newcomer immigrant/refugee (25 from visibly identified minority status groups, 3 from non-visibly identified minority status groups); (b) second generation (16 from visibly identified minority status groups, 13 from non-visibly identified minority status groups); (c) third generation or more (2 from visibly identified minority status groups, 66 from non-visibly identified minority status groups); (d) Francophone (27); (e) Aboriginal (31); and (f) lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans-sexual (10). Seventy-one of these participants had a disability, of which 85% were diagnosed in elementary school. Participants’ accounts for school disengagement were complex, highlighting multiple inter-related factors associated to family (e.g., school-home connection, adult status, etc.) and personal characteristics (e.g., gender, disability, identity issues, etc.), in addition to school factors. Rather than suggest a definite formula or linear explanation for what causes school disconnect or dropping out of high school, Ferguson et al. emphasized certain school related risk factors as described by participants. For example, participants reported school related reasons for educational disengagement included, negative school culture (i.e., discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping), poor school counselling, inappropriate assessments for students with disabilities or linguistic difficulties, cultural dissonance, irrelevant curricula to students’ lives, passive teaching-learning, curriculum not suited to students’ individual needs, academic streaming, inadequate support for students with disabilities, and unfair practice related to detention/suspension/expulsion policies (Ferguson et al.). Recognizing these feelings of alienation and frustration in schools among Canadian minoritized youth, my thesis study seeks ways of circumventing such disconnect at an earlier educational phase, before students enter high school. This research examines interpretations and feelings
regarding differences, learning, and inclusion among minoritized children with disabilities who are in their middle years of schooling, to enrich their sense of school belonging and learning experiences. The children’s understandings and personal narratives may open doors to new possibilities supporting inclusive learning and teaching for educational stakeholders.

A growing body of research in Australia, the United States, and Canada report the middle years of schooling (i.e., 10-13 years old) as a critical stage in academic learning, differing from other stages of development (Cobbold, 2005; Junoven, Vi-Nhuan, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; Pendergast, Kapitzke, & Luke, 2002; Whitley et al., 2007). Cobbold (2005) described middle years children as being “…at risk of what has been variously termed the ‘middle years slump’ and ‘Year 8 slump’ in student outcomes and engagement” (p. 9). In middle school shifts take place in teaching methods, curriculum, programs, and teacher-student relationships, often conflicting with biological/developmental changes occurring in the middle years (Cobbold, 2005; Jackson & Davies, 2000; Junoven et al., 2004; Murdock & Miller, 2003; Whitley et al., 2007). For example, when children enter the middle years of schooling, (a) classrooms become centred on teacher control and discipline, (b) evaluation and assessment become increasingly challenging without requiring students to participate in more cognitively advanced learning activities (e.g., rote learning), and (c) teaching instruction is geared toward the whole class, rather than small groups or individual learning (Junoven et al.). Moreover, middle school students demonstrate a decline in sense of belonging and connection to peers and teachers throughout their years of middle school, negatively effecting school engagement and motivation for learning (Anderman, 2003). Consequently, middle years children experience difficulty in academic learning, sense a disconnect from schools, and feel a lack of support, protection, and nurturing
(Cobbold, 2005; Junoven et al.). This marginalization likely heightens among children from minoritized groups, therefore compounding effects of disaffection, disengagement, and disconnect within schools. Thus, minoritized children in their middle years undergo multiple difficulties during their schooling.

Children bring their own beliefs, knowledge, and ways of learning to the classroom, and as such, may lend insight into ideal educational spaces, curricula, and teaching practices that work. As Keates and Gold urged, “Teachers have their own experience, as do students, and schools need to create a structure where both perspectives can be equally heard and valued” (as cited in Hopkins, 2008, p. 393). To a great extent, the research and literature pertaining to inclusive education, issues of marginalization, diversity, and educational reform frequently refer to teachers’, administrators’, or policymakers’ understandings, assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes (e.g., Fullan 2001, 2003; Jacquet, 2008; James, 2001; King, 2004; Milner IV, 2010; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, 2003; White, 2009). This is also the case when examining issues of inclusive education for children with disabilities (e.g., Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Frankel, 2006; Rose, 2001; Smith & Leonard, 2005; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998). However, although children are primary stakeholders within education, there remains a lack of research highlighting children’s views, attitudes, and understandings of their experiences of diversity and school life, especially during the middle years of schooling, and among those from traditionally marginalized groups, including disability. Children’s voices have long been ignored within school systems and research processes, particularly among those from minority status groups (e.g., children from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, and those with disabilities). Historically, children’s stories and experiences of their world were not taken seriously within research (Engel, 2005).
Thus, there is a need for researchers to deeply listen to children’s narratives (Brown & Gilligan, 1991), as these narratives describe how children make sense of their experiences and self. Recognizing the importance of inviting student voice into educational conversations (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Hopkins, 2008; Howard, 2001; McCallum, Hargreaves, & Gipps, 2000; McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005), and in research processes (Greene & Hogan, 2005), I focus my thesis on how learning through minoritized children themselves may contribute to fostering inclusive school contexts. Strengthening inclusion, thus, requires perceiving minoritized children as reliable reporters of their schooling experiences, bridging their understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion to support inclusive possibilities, improving learning, teaching, and sense of school belonging.

1.3 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of my study is to examine the narratives of middle years minoritized children (ages 10-13 years old) who have intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disabilities. Grounded in their stories and voices, the narratives highlight participants’ understandings of personal differences, learning, and inclusion, investigating how these insights enhance inclusive learning, teaching, and sense of belonging. In sharing their perspectives and experiences, minoritized children may provide insights for building more inclusive schools, benefiting learners, teachers, educational researchers, and policy makers. In accessing the voices of middle years minoritized children, I specifically ask what are the children’s personal schooling experiences and how may these understandings contribute to improving inclusive schooling to support their learning and sense of inclusion? Additionally, I explore the following:
(1) What are their conceptions of learning?

(2) What are their perspectives and understandings of diversity?

(3) How do they describe their school life and educational experiences?

(4) How do they feel about and identify with their own differences?
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The present chapter outlines key themes with relevant scholarly literature framing my study. In this review I highlight the following topics:

(a) Differences and intersectionality of differences;
(b) Schools and inequities;
(c) Inclusive education, marginalization, and difference in schools;
(d) Children’s voices in inclusive educational research;
(e) Teacher conceptions of minoritized children, diversity, and inclusive pedagogy;
(f) Inclusive education and school knowledge.

I discuss these issues in greater length, further exploring the scholarly research, literature, and theoretical models about inclusion, differences, diversity in schools, and student voice and knowledge, to better understand how these impact minoritized children’s schooling.

2.1 Differences and Intersectionality

Children with multiple differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability often fall to the margins within schooling systems, experiencing various forms of discrimination and heightened academic challenges. Drawing from her experience as an Italian-Canadian woman with disabilities, Barile (2000) noted the importance of considering the individual experiences of those enduring multiple forms of oppressions and prejudices resulting from being of “multiple minority status” (p. 127). That is, seeking personal understanding from those of multiple minority status groups, as they experience exacerbated discrimination belonging to more than one of these minoritized groups (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, and ability).
Thus, a fundamental piece of my thesis rests in examining notions and understandings of children’s multiple differences – accessing the voices of and learning from those that are different, hearing them talk about their many forms of differences, and seeking their perspectives, experiences, and knowing in relation to schooling and learning. Attempting to understand, define, and stipulate significances of Others’ differences “…without due regard to the (perhaps) very different meaning of those differences from within the perspective of those being talked about” (Burbules, 1997, pp. 97-98) is inequitable and oppressive practice, leading to misrepresentations, unsanctioned assumptions, trivializations, and oftentimes disregard for students’ differences in schools. In explaining the perils of this within educational institutions Burbules (1997) indicated,

And when these judgments are wrapped up with a high-stakes endeavour such as education, the choice presented to those who are different is to abandon or suppress their differences for the sake of conformity and ‘fitting in’; or to accept the characterization of one’s own differences from the dominant perspective, becoming alienated from one’s self; or to reject the standards and norms others have set, and so lose out on the opportunity education represents – and then often being blamed for it in the bargain. (p. 98)

Intending to offer alongside minoritized children, a critique of differences, explicating the meanings and understandings children attribute to their differences, and relating these to support their learning and sense of belonging within schools, I attempt to decentralize and destabilize dominant norms of differences, impacting minoritized children’s characterization of themselves and of their schooling and learning experiences.

Notions of differences such as race, ethnicity, language, and disability are dynamic, and their meanings are continually in motion, and thus constructed and enacted differently depending on the historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts. Articulation and portrayal of meanings associated to differences also shift and change when differences intersect in
particular contexts (Burbules, 1997). In considering differences and the multiple variations within each difference, issues of categorization and typification may surface; namely, such categories are grounded in particular societal assumptions, practices, policies, and ideals. For example, as Burbules (1997) argued, “Whose categories are these, and who is assigning instances to categories? From whom is one being identified as different?” (p. 99). Categories of differences are socially constructed notions (i.e., race, gender, disability, mental illness etc.) (Barnes, 2012; Kanani, 2011; Wendell, 1996). Constructions of differences are often developed within society to further categorize individuals on the basis of physical or mental differences. Kanani (2011) explained particular differences, such as race and mental illness, were constructed during times of colonization to fuel political powers and authority among dominant groups, whilst subordinating those different from societal norms, labelling and categorizing them as deviant, degenerate, and abnormal. Highlighting intersections of race and mental illness, Kanani (2011) examined how historically fields of medicine and science rooted in psychiatry, xenophobic governmental policies, and racism, intertwined to further justify and rationalize oppression, exclusion, and domination over Blacks, Aboriginals, and Chinese in Canada and the United States. Describing the social construction of disability, Wendell (1996) suggested various social conditions (i.e., pace of life, medical resources, lack of access to necessities of life [food, water, shelter], war, violence, physical and social organization of spaces, etc.) and cultural conditions (i.e., standard defining norms, stereotypes of disabilities, cultural meanings of disabilities, exclusion of disabled experiences, etc.) contribute to a person’s illness, functioning, and sense of marginalization. Wendell (1996) contended, “…disability is socially constructed through the failure or
unwillingness to create ability among people who do not fit the physical and mental profile of ‘paradigm’ citizen” (p. 41) and she urged when thinking of the construction of disability,

…we need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, thinking of a body’s abilities and limitations as given by nature and/or accident, as immutable and uncontrollable, and, on the other hand, thinking of them as so constructed by society and culture as to be controllable by human thought, will, and action. We need to acknowledge that social justice and cultural change can eliminate a great deal of disability while recognizing that there may be much suffering and limitation that they cannot fix. (p. 45)

Within my study I move away from “categorical analysis” (p. 100) of children’s differences, and instead address what these differences mean to children from minoritized groups, and how they interpret these differences within their lives and schooling experiences -- thus, I perceive understandings of differences as pliable, unfixed, and uncertain until conceived, articulated, and interpreted by the individual labelled with difference(s), creating new meanings and languages of differences, as determined by minoritized children themselves. As such, I try my best to refrain from any sense of “celebration of diversity,” or exoticizing and Othering minoritized children, recognizing the hegemonic societal oppressions and prejudice associated to these practices (Burbules, 1997; Dei, 2007; Harper, 1997; Henry & Tator, 1999).

Intersectionality refers to relationships between multiple differences, such as race, ethnicity, language, and disability, considering implications of intersecting differences in “individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Concepts of intersectionality, heavily founded and debated within feminist scholarship to address issues of differences among women (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Davis, 2008; Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scraton, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007) is a “handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible
the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (Phoenix, 2006, p. 187). Precluding essentialization of differences, intersectionality highlights differences within and between groups, seeking understandings of how differences serve to construct identities and experiences (Davis, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Intersectionality, also concerned with marginalization and inequity among groups due to intersecting differences, examines individuals’ strife toward empowerment and the effects of converging oppressions (Davis 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007).

However, common conceptualizations of intersectionality include “additive” (Flintoff et al., 2008) and/or “interlocking” (Jordan-Zachery, 2007) notions. The additive approach “adds” one oppression of difference to another (e.g., race + ethnicity + language + disability, etc.), and thus each becomes perceived as independent variables; the more variables added, the greater the individual’s vulnerability, marginalization, and inferiority (Davis, 2008; Flintoff et al.). This also reductively implies that if one form of oppression due to difference can simply be added to another, so too can it be subtracted. Notions of interlocking allude to similar understandings, in which different forms of oppressive systems interlock, suggesting the possibility that they may also be separated or unlocked (Jordan-Zachery, 2007).

Oppressive structures, however, are simply not extrapolated or desegregated from each other and from individuals – as Jordan-Zachery (2007) explained her own experience as a Black female she expressed, “Sometimes my identity is like a ‘marble’ cake, in that my blackness is mixed intricately with my womaness and therefore cannot be separated or unlocked” (p. 261). Alternatively, intersectionality contend structures and systems of oppressions, such as racism, ableism, sexism, etc., enact simultaneously, as each is etched within the other, reflexively and reciprocally contributing to the formation of each other (Brah, 1996; Davis,
In analyzing differences and their intersections, it is critical to “address the construction of power relations, how they are manifest in practice and how individuals respond to and negotiate these relations” (Scraton & Watson, as cited in Flintoff et al., p. 76). Accordingly, I examined the heterogeneous lived experiences and understandings of minoritized children’s schooling and learning in relation to their intersected differences – exploring structures of power within school and classroom practices, and how these children respond to and negotiate these experiences. Recognizing the interplay of power structures, prejudice, and oppression, I employed a liberating framework (Jordan-Zachery, 2007), intending to present more than visibility and descriptive narratives of marginalized groups’ experiences, but also to underscore social structures within educational institutions, and acknowledge and incite political agency among minoritized children.

2.2 Schools and Inequities

The demographics of Canadian classrooms are progressively expanding with students of varying abilities, from distinct ethnic backgrounds and cultures, speaking multiple languages and maintaining certain religions. Student populations in schools are rapidly changing, including children who may be

…multiracial or multiethnic…diverse along linguistic, religious, ability, and economic lines…. [there are] students of different races and ethnicities...students whose parents are incarcerated or drug–addicted, whose parents have never held a steady job, whose parents are themselves children (at least chronologically), and who are bounced from foster home to the next. And there are children who have no homes or parents. (Ladson-Billings 2001, p. 14)
To account for such range of students’ differences, and oftentimes, intersections of these differences, Canadian educational institutions are more and more concerned with ideals of diversity, inclusion, and minority. Despite the complexities and vagueness of these terms, holding numerous meanings and undertaking various forms within education, these notions exist as part of the official discourse within Canadian schools, striving to strengthen equity and social justice serving all students (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008b). Ambiguity surrounding concepts of diversity, inclusion, and minority in schools, however, frequently leave educators experiencing tension between curricular expectations and practices that include diverse students (Butt, Townsend, & Raymond, 1990; Skerrett, 2010; Sleeter, 2005). Such uncertainty also breeds stereotypical presumptions regarding minoritized children and their learning, consequently leading to differential treatment, affecting student engagement, esteem, and achievement (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Howard, 2001; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Nieto, 1994; Petrou et al., 2009; Turner, Christensen, & Meyer, 2009; Weinstein, 2002; Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). The unsteady undercurrent of addressing equity issues in schools leads to questions about whether present inclusive practices and policies serve and strengthen minoritized students’ learning and school experiences.

Tracing Canada’s historical policies to promote inclusion, five predominant official discourses on diversity surface (Harper, 1997). Although primarily associated to racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences, I also relate these official discourses to issues of disability: (a) suppressing difference of minoritized groups to assimilate toward dominant groups, creating a more unified country; minoritized groups are perceived as “inferior,” and thus need to learn to become like the dominant group (e.g., First Nations people); (b) insisting on difference promotes separation and segregation of differences between dominant groups and
minoritized groups; this response recognizes difference as “natural” and therefore, dominant
groups perceive segregation as necessary to accommodate for differences among minoritized
groups— as a source of opportunity and benefit for minoritized groups, dominant groups
initiate and implement segregated and separate institutions (e.g., Canadian legislated
segregated schools for Black children, residential schooling for First Nations children, or
segregated classrooms and schools for children with disabilities). However, there is a current
movement initiated by minoritized groups to create and establish their own segregated and
separate schooling within Canada (e.g., in 2009 Canada’s first Afro-centric school was
established in Toronto by the Black community); (c) denying differences minimizes notions
of difference among minoritized groups, and instead emphasizes equality and a sameness as
fairness approach, perceiving all children as the same regardless of their difference;
exclusion of differences within schools maintain 1) concepts of meritocracy (e.g., diligent
work ethic and perseverance ensure academic success), and 2) similar learning objectives for
all students regardless of individuals’ past experiences, social contexts, and cultures (e.g.,
standardized testing); (d) inviting difference purports ideals of “celebrating diversity” (e.g.,
multiculturalism, celebrating ethnic festivals and holidays, or including artifacts of people
with disabilities throughout classrooms); however, this discourse entails a sense of tokenism
and tolerance; (e) critiquing difference interrogates notions of difference, questioning how
and when difference is produced, highlighting issues of power relations and systemic
prejudice existing within society and thus are reproduced within schools (e.g., critical
multicultural education, anti-racist education). Although Canada’s educational system
historically demonstrated efforts in developing policies to address the rising range of
minoritized students (e.g., multicultural education, intercultural education, anti-racist
education, etc.) critical educators contend that the official discourses within these policies are enacted through schools in prejudicial and discriminatory ways, reflecting oppressions in larger society (e.g., racism, classism, ablism, etc.), and negatively impacting minoritized children (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008b).

Schools replicate inequities, stratifications, power imbalances, and cultural conflicts residing within society, thus influencing successful inclusion for children from minority status groups (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Nieto, 2002). These inequities and power relations infiltrate classrooms, negatively impacting minoritized children, shaping curricula development, pedagogical practices, student-teacher relationships, spoken and written discourse, and implicit rules and procedures (Banks, 2001; Cummins, 2001; Dei & Doyle-Wood, 2006; Delpit, 1988, 1995; Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; James, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Much of the educational systems’ practices, principles, and curricula surface from dominant groups’ assumptions and understandings of knowledge, human beings, and social order, conveying and prescribing worthy and elite educational knowledge, modes of thinking, traditions, and values. Cummins (2001) explained this coercive type of power relations, in which power is imposed by dominant groups to the affliction of subordinate groups, allows dominant groups to define superior versus inferior, normal versus abnormal, valid and invalid truths and knowledge, etc. As dominant groups develop these definitions they also create greater power differentials. That is, dominant groups maintain more power and superiority status, while subjugating subordinate groups as they become defined as maintaining inferiority and minority statuses. These coercive power relations radiate through discourses in schools and society, legitimizing minority status among certain groups (Cummins, 2001). For example, during times of colonialism, schools silently fortified
fallacies of high status knowledge, proliferating particular dominant groups’ ideals, norms, values, mannerisms, speech, etc., all in the hopes of generating the “good” citizen (Kanu, 2003). Fitting within the dominant groups’ defined world of normalcy and idealism of citizenship were ways in which dominant groups maintained control and power, further subjugating minoritized groups.

This hidden, implicit, or as Dei (1996a) identified, deep curricula still quietly runs through Canadian educational institutions as there appears an underlying push to normalize and create the ideal citizen (e.g., academic streaming, ESL classrooms, special education or behavioural classrooms). The hidden curricula generate veiled rules and regulations, dictating acceptable modes of learning and schooling, while also validating specific social lessons, virtues, and norms not explicitly advertised within schools’ formal curriculum (Dei, 1996a; Eisner, 1985; Hemmings, 2000). Furthermore, as Eisner (1985) reminded us, that which is taught and told within schools, often established within tradition or habit, “…neglect areas of study that prove to be exceedingly useful to students” (p. 103) – the null curricula (those items neglected within curricula and absent from what is taught within schools). Consequently, children’s learning becomes surrounded by boundaries and limits, not accounting for their perspectives, understandings, skills, and repertoires of knowledge, significantly influencing inclusive practices, principles, and content.

Therefore, inclusive learning and teaching may only transpire once children from marginalized backgrounds and differences are brought into the “mainstream conversation” (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 95), in which multiple voices and perspectives are mutually included and empowered. Inviting minoritized children into these conversations aligns with Cummins’ (2001) notion of collaborative relations of power, whereby power may generate collectively
through relationships with others. Offering opportunities for children, especially those from minoritized groups, to create power through collaboratively voicing opinions and ideas provides a sense of empowerment, as children recognize validity of their voices and ability to contribute to changes and conversations impacting their lives and circumstances.

Minoritized children deserve to contribute to educational conversations. Schools informally and formally “sponsor” silencing of students, controlling “‘who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled’” (Fine, 1991, p. 31). As such, minoritized children are continually silenced and their differences overlooked within classrooms. Children’s “distinctive ways of constituting reality” (Greene, 1993a, p. 218) must be respected and validated as invaluable resources, as the stories and experiences of those that are different or those that are of minority status can influence educational stakeholder groups’ understandings. Recognizing minoritized children as resources within classrooms, and presenting them opportunities to make educational decisions, allows them to reclaim agency of their own learning. Otherwise, “to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 85); minoritized children may know precisely what is best for their learning and how it may be achieved. Hence, minoritized children’s voices can proficiently support inclusive pedagogy, bringing deepened understandings and knowledge pertaining to matters of differences, inclusion, and learning (Fletcher, 2011; Kordalewski, 1999; Nieto, 1994, 1999; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003), placing them as key players for inciting inclusive possibilities.

2.3 Inclusive Education, Marginalization, and Difference

The ideals of diversity and inclusion directly intertwine (Hanson et al., 1998; Sidorkin, 2002). Embracing diversity within education fosters a sense of respect, value, and
spirit of inclusion for difference within schools. Notions of inclusion embody principles of equity, social justice, and a “democratic belief that all children belong and should be educated within their communities” (Frankel, Gold, & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010, p. 4). Inclusive ideals appreciate and value diversity, seeking ways to ameliorate barriers to learning while securing full participation of all children within schools. Although extensively developed within fields of disability studies, inclusive education recognizes inclusion to educate and support all marginalized groups of children who may be vulnerable to exclusionary practices (Ainscow & Cesar, 2006; Messiou, 2002; Petrou et al., 2009). In keeping with a broader perspective of inclusive education, Booth and Ainscow asserted

... inclusion and exclusion are as much about participation and marginalization in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, poverty and unemployment as they are about traditional special education concerns with students categorized as low in attainment, disabled or deviant in behaviour. (as cited in Petrou et al., p. 446)

Slee and Allan (2001) posited inclusion as a necessary prerequisite for democratic education, positioning it within rights-based ideologies. Children’s rights for democratic education include a right to personal development, a right to foster confidence, and a right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally, and personally (Slee & Allan, 2001).

However, in addition to validating the rights and differences among minoritized children within schools, it is critical to begin questioning and examining power structures rooted within educational systems (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a, 2008b).

Schools, founded within communities, mirror many systemically embedded injustices, stratifications, and power imbalances existing within larger society. These power relations and inequities enter classrooms via curricula, pedagogy, student-teacher rapport, educational discourses, and implicit practices and procedures (Banks, 2001; Cummins, 2001; Dei & Doyle-Wood, 2006; Delpit, 1988, 1995; Harper, 1997; James, 2001; Nieto, 1999,
As such, “Regular schooling was never meant for all comers” (Slee & Allan, 2001, p. 186).

For example, Petrou et al. (2009) distinguished between two interconnected categories of marginalization within schools (p. 440): (a) marginalization due to particular educational rules or legislation and hence the child must attend a segregated classroom; and (b) marginalization due to hidden discourse within schools, whereby the child is “unofficially” segregated due to personal differences misaligned with the dominant culture or society. Consequently, children from various ethnicities, abilities, racial, and linguistic backgrounds may experience ongoing forms of discrimination within schools. As a result of silent systemic prejudices permeating educational terrain, minoritized children continue experiencing this “unofficial” segregation as their capabilities, knowledge, and differences often become unrecognized and under valued, attempting to assimilate and align minoritized children toward the dominant norm (Messiou, 2006; Petrou et al.). This marginalization occurs among children who maintain various differences – diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds (Dei, 1996a, 1996b; Banks, 2010), sexuality (Asher, 2007; Kumashiro, 2002), disabilities (Ajodhia-Andrews & Berman, 2009; Baker, 2002; Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006; Petrenchik, 2008), and low socio-economic status (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; Porfeli, Wang, Audette, Mccoll, & Algozzine, 2009), just to name a few.

From this marginalization minoritized students may incur bullying experiences and victimization, particularly in middle school (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Ferráns, Selman, & Feigenberg, 2012) and among children with disabilities (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Petrenchik, 2008; Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001). Bullying is a universal issue (Cook et al., 2010).
Internationally across the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, the United States, and Canada research indicates, on average, victimization rates of more than 50% among students with disabilities (Rose et al., 2011). Among Canadian children from the general student population, 35% report victimization in schools (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Therefore, victimization seems to occur more frequently among Canadian children with disabilities compared to those without disabilities.

Bullying is frequently defined as intentional and repeated negative actions/behaviours toward an individual or groups of individuals (Berger, 2007; Cappadocia et al.; Cook et al.; OME, 2011; Rose et al.; Sweeting & West, 2001). Typically, bullying relationships include differential power imbalances between the bully(ies) and victim(s), some form of deliberate harm or distress directed to the victim(s) (i.e., physical, emotional, mental, social), and recurrence of victimization and bullying over time (Berger, 2007; OME, 2011; Rose et al.). Common bullying types or modes of attacks involve physical aggression (e.g., pushing, hitting, punching, behavioural bullying [e.g., stealing lunch, pushing books, etc.], etc…), verbal aggression (e.g., teasing, mocking, verbal humiliation, threats, prejudice remarks, etc.), and social exclusion/relational aggression (e.g., exclude from social groups, spread lies/rumours, social isolation, cyber bullying [i.e., electronic harassment and bullying through email and/or text messages or digital photos], etc.) (Berger, 2007; Cook et al.; Rose et al.). Research suggests children susceptible to victimization are primarily those who are passive, submissive, and maintain social skills (e.g., misinterpret social cues) and communicative (e.g., verbal speech, language delays) challenges (Berger 2007; Cappadocia et al.; Cook et al.; Rose et al.). Due perhaps to social skills and communication difficulties, victims are also reported to possess fewer friends and are regularly dismissed and/or ostracized by peers
(Berger 2007; Cappadocia et al.; Cook et al.; Rose et al.). Often, bullying encounters become a group process and social event (e.g., presence of student observers/bystanders), seemingly serving as powerful and dominating experiences for bullies (Berger, 2007; Ferráns et al.). As such, friendships provide support and protection for victims during bullying events. Friends are more likely to stand-up for and defend each other during victimizations, operating as protective factors for victims while also subverting power from bullies (Berger, 2007; Cappadocia et al.; Ferráns et al.).

Tacit prejudices ensconced within schools also negatively effect minoritized children’s academic achievement, engagement, and feelings toward learning. For example, Buckner et al. (2001) investigated school achievement among 174 children (6 years old or older) from differing ethnic backgrounds, living in shelters or low-income housing. Buckner et al. attributed lower academic scores attained by this group of children to discrimination within school systems, teachers’ unawareness of complexities faced by minoritized children, and teachers’ low academic expectations for minoritized students. In examining schooling experiences of 150 Black Toronto youth, Dei (1996b) reported that a major concern for these students was the absence of diverse knowledge and perspectives from minority status groups within school curricula. Participants expressed educational disengagement and marginalization due to continuous focus on dominant Eurocentric official curricula. The youth candidly reported frustrations and a sense of exclusion moving through school systems deeply positioned within White Eurocentric ways of learning, neglecting minoritized students’ knowledge and histories (Dei, 1996b). Curtin and Clarke (2005) demonstrated that children with disabilities (ages 10-13) attending mainstream schools, maintained mixed views regarding their educational life and experiences. Teacher attitudes and assumptions,
access to the full curriculum, and exclusion from certain school activities (e.g., school trips, bus rides) greatly affected the quality of their learning. Therefore, I argue, for successful and sustainable inclusive education, we must begin to think of inclusion within schools as a community embracing children united in differences, rather than united as one,

…where differences are self-consciously drawn upon to enrich and texture the community; where negotiations of difference lie at the heart of the community; and where democratic participation is a defining aspect of decision making and daily life within the community…. (Fine, Weis, & Powell 1997, p. 252)

Understanding minoritized children’s views of difference and how these relate to their schooling experiences may strengthen inclusive education, agitating and interrupting stereotypes and prejudices about minoritized children.

2.4 Children’s Voices in Inclusive Educational Research

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) asserts all children have a right to freely express their perspectives and have a right to be heard, especially pertaining to issues affecting their lives. Considering this right, it is perplexing as to why educational reforms usually exclude and silence children’s voices, marginalizing the very group it is meant to serve. Raising this paradox, Nieto (1994) expressed, “Ironically, those who spend the most time in schools and classrooms are often given the least opportunity to talk….students have important lessons to teach educators and we need to begin to listen to them more carefully” (p. 420). Soo Hoo (1993) also plainly stated that frequently, “We listen to outside experts to inform us, and consequently, we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students” (p. 390). Children, the group most affected by established educational policies and practices, are the least consulted and collaborated with concerning the influence of these policies and practices on their school life and learning (Cook-Sather, 2002).
In negotiating experiences and ideas through dialogue relating to their schooling, power relations shift as children establish agency, voice, and empowerment in contributing to educational matters. Cook-Sather (2002) identified this power as “authorizing” student voice:

This call to authorize student perspectives is a call to count students among those who have the knowledge and the position to shape what counts as education, to reconfigure power dynamics and discourse practices within existing realms of conversation about education, and to create new forums within which students can embrace “the political potential of speaking out on their own behalf” (Lewis, 1993, p.44). (p. 3)

Children maintain particular views and perspectives that should be heard, as they often remain in schools as silent participants. Such silencing is especially evident among children with disabilities, whose lives, views, and multiple identities remain hushed and hidden (Wickenden, 2011). Thus, “…seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most” (Delpit, 1988, p. 297) requires acknowledgement that just as “…people are experts on their own lives” (Delpit, 1988, p. 297), so are children (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Greene & Hogan, 2005). Minoritized children are also “…authentic chroniclers of their own experience” (Delpit, 1988, p. 297), who competently navigate throughout and make sense of their social spaces and interactions within schools (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005). Subsequently, their experiences and understandings may inform practice, policy, and curricula (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Flutter, 2006; Giroux, 1991; Nieto, 1999; Villas & Lucas, 2002). Schools then become safe sites of “border-crossings” (Giroux, 1991, p. 510) in which children’s voices and experiences contribute to classroom pedagogy, creating pathways and “crossings” to zones of differences. Schools also can become “‘sites of resistance’ [where students may begin to] resist the oppression of silencing forces by expressing their difference” (Asher, 2007, p. 71). In my study I attempt to generate a space
for these sites of resistance and border crossings, as minoritized children explored each others’ differences and schooling experiences “…telling the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between” (Greene, 1993a, p. 218). As education directly impacts children’s lives, they are ideally positioned to voice their schooling experiences, discussing what matters to them, what their concerns are, and how this influences their school life and learning.

Inviting students as partners into educational processes contributes to effective learning and teaching (Fletcher, 2011). In a recent initiative on student-voice research in schools, Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning (2000-2003), Rudduck and Demetriou (2003) found that in discussing students’ learning experiences, students gained a stronger sense of (a) empowerment, (b) school belonging, (c) respect and esteem, (d) school agency, and (e) themselves as learners – thus, spanning “organizational,” “personal,” “pedagogic,” and “political” dimensions (p. 278). Children serve as credible reporters of knowledge in creating inclusive classrooms (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Howard, 2001; Keat, Strickland, & Marinak, 2009; Messiou, 2002, 2006; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009), and thus their understanding may contribute to and inform understandings of diversity and inclusion in schools.

Accordingly, with appropriate methodological tools, children should actively engage in research concerning their lives (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). Studies exploring children’s understandings and experiences of schooling and
differences shed light on ways to establish better inclusive schools, as they investigate issues such as:

(a) disability, stigmatization, and sense of belonging in schools -- Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman (2009) and Rabiee, Sloper, and Beresford (2005) accessed the voices of children who do not use speech to communicate. Utilizing talking mats and storyboards, these children readily reported issues concerning mainstream school life experiences, emotions, and perspectives;

(b) ethnicity and identity formation -- McNaughton (2001), employing dolls, pretend play, conversation, and art activities, provided accounts of minoritized children’s perspectives regarding cultural contexts. The participants raised issues pertaining to race, language, societal prejudice, heritage, etc.;

(c) language development and cultural identity -- Keat et al. (2009) explored immigrant preschool children’s use of disposable cameras as a communication tool with classroom teachers. Using photo narrations the minoritized children discussed issues of home experiences, language, and cultural identity;

(d) marginalization due to differences -- Through observations and one-on-one interviews, Messiou (2002, 2006) accessed the views and experiences of 31 minoritized children’s (ages 5-12 years old) understanding of marginalization. Messiou found that children’s conceptions of marginalization pertained more to social alienation among peers due to differences such as, religion, physical appearance, or disability, rather than to pedagogical practices;

(e) ethnicity and teachers’ pedagogy -- Howard (2001) examined elementary school African-American children’s understanding of teachers’ classroom practices. These students
raised major themes regarding their teachers’ ability to demonstrate an ethic of care, create a
community or familial atmosphere within the classroom, and foster exciting and engaging
learning opportunities;

(f) ideal learning conditions -- Along with open-ended interviews, McCallum et al. (2000) utilized a card sorting method to access young children’s (7-11 years old) views of ideal learning conditions within schools. Participants clearly expressed both “learner” and “classroom” conditions, highlighting their ability to conceptualize notions of learning and pedagogical practices.

Yet, although children are competent informants on issues concerning their education, inclusive reform is possible only when educators listen to and believe minoritized children’s voices do indeed present significant insight to improve teaching and learning. For example, McIntyre et al. (2005) found when selecting children’s ideas for change within classrooms, teachers frequently chose suggestions aligning with their present teaching practices and repertoires. Despite initial willingness to improve pedagogy embedded in children’s voices, McIntyre et al. reported, 6 months later, many teachers abandoned implementation of children’s proposals due to “official requirements” (p. 162); carrying out children’s suggestions were no longer availed in comparison to heavy workloads and pressures of meeting curricula mandates. Sustainable educational reform rooted in children’s voices, deeply relies on educators’ beliefs and perceptions of the legitimacy and potential of children’s knowledge and views to transform inclusive repertoires, practices, and understandings. Nieto (1994) highlighted the transformational potential of children’s voices, asserting that their “…voices can help us to imagine what it might take to transform entire schools” (p. 424). This entails “re-tuning our ears so that we can hear what they say, and
redirecting our actions in response to what we hear” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 4). Gaining insights into middle years minoritized children’s schooling experiences offers key information regarding the circumstances and conditions, which serve as barriers to inclusive education and possibilities to ameliorate these barriers.

2.5 Teacher Conceptions of Minoritized Children, Diversity, and Inclusive Pedagogy

Teacher beliefs, expectations, and conceptions significantly influence the inclusion process for children. Inclusive curricula, pedagogy, and professional learning regarding diversity and minoritized students succeed when teachers destabilize presumptions of normalcy or stereotypical notions of schooling (Banks, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Fullan, 2001). For instance, among novice urban-trained teachers, Watson (2011) found this group of White, female, middle-class participants maintained stereotypical assumptions, beliefs, and values toward minoritized urban children, guiding classroom expectations, assessments, pedagogy, and preparation. Most participants labelled “urban” children as academically unmotivated low achievers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and lower socio-economic statuses, whom often required greater behavioural discipline (Watson, 2011). The more “urban” teachers perceived students, the more pejorative their presumptions (Watson, 2011).

Research suggests some teachers underrate minoritized children’s academic abilities and negatively perceive their behaviours (Weinstein et al., 2004). These beliefs often lead to providing differential treatment among minoritized children, thus resulting in differential achievement (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Turner et al., 2009). In their study of approximately 14 urban Grade 5 classrooms, Kuklinski and Weinstein (2001) found that pronounced differential classroom practices due to teacher expectancy for high
and low achievers (e.g., public evaluation, comparing abilities, executing different curricula) significantly affected children’s academic achievement and self-expectations. Teacher expectancy influenced not only children’s school performance, but also children’s internalization of teachers’ expectations.

Moreover, educators’ beliefs regarding children’s abilities also influence pedagogy. Weinstein (2002) and Weinstein et al. (2004) suggested that teachers who perceive academic ability as an innate, predetermined, and fixed quality, engage in practices such as, ability based programming and student grouping, competitive classroom activities, or utilize public displays of positive and negative behavioural supports. Whereas, teachers who believe ability to be flexible, changing, and adaptable, implement cooperative lesson plans and student groups, or present challenging coursework and activities with multiple ways of completion for students of multiple abilities. Such educators expect effort and academic growth among all students, rather than among a group of particular students, and they engage in practices supporting an inclusive learning community (Weinstein et al.).

Minoritized children frequently perceive both the expectations and stereotypes upheld by educators, consequently impacting their level of student engagement and esteem (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Turner et al., 2009; Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979). Weinstein (2002) and Weinstein et al. (2004) indicated from their studies that children are aware of teachers’ treatment toward low versus high achievers. Namely, children reported high achievers receive more challenging coursework, leadership and independence within the class, and greater positive supports. In contrast, low achievers experience structured and rigid learning environments, rote learning curricula, and more negative supports (e.g., criticism). In Nieto’s (1994) study examining educational experiences from the perspective of minoritized
youth, many students were aware of teachers’ low expectations and stereotypical understandings of minoritized students, thus negatively affecting successful academic achievement. Teachers maintaining negative expectations and beliefs of minoritized students engaged in differential pedagogical practices. Such practices included, omitting sections of lesson plans to suit low expectations of minoritized students, or rushing through course material if minoritized students received poor grades or was known to have a “bad reputation” (Nieto, 1994, p. 410). Howard (2001) demonstrated that regardless of minoritized children’s level of achievement as identified by their teachers (e.g., low, medium, high), children attentively perceived teachers high academic expectations. Many of the minoritized children in Howard’s (2001) study understood such high expectations as a means in which their teacher demonstrated care, doing what was best for their students. Believing minoritized children can attain high levels of successful academic achievement is testament of culturally responsive educators (Howard, 2001).

To disrupt stereotyping and notions of normalcy requires supporting teachers to develop confidence in their efficacy to serve minoritized children, especially among educators in middle schools (Eccles & Roeser, 2009), and those teaching in highly diverse school communities (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Juvonen et al., 2004). To do this, we must understand teachers’ conceptual and pedagogical repertoires of diversity.

Educators typically adopt five conceptual frameworks when it comes to minoritized children: (a) Colour blindness refers to educators disregard for racial and ethnic differences among both themselves and their students as a means to manage diversity (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008; Milner IV, 2010; Watson, 2011). However, I extend this notion to denying of not only race, but also of any difference among minoritized children
in the hopes of creating a romantic sense of “equal treatment for all” (Harper, 1997, p. 197) within schools; (b) Cultural conflicts, and conflicts pertaining to any historically marginalized groups, also exist in schools (Banks, 1993, 2001; Milner IV, 2010). Both curricula and educators maintain particular frames of reference, ideals, ways of knowing, and experiences with differences and minority status groups. Subsequently, discrepancies occur between these frames of references and those maintained by minoritized children; (c) Meritocracy maintains that failure among minoritized children results from poor choices, lack of skill, and weak work ethic, disregarding “…social, economic, historic, political, and educational” privilege and power (Milner IV, 2010 p. 9); (d) Viewing minoritized students as deficient or lacking in some way leads educators to withhold particular academic content, believing minoritized children are unable to successfully comprehend the material (Cummins, 2001; Milner IV, 2010); (e) Similar to the discourse of deficiency, some educators lower expectations and academic opportunity for children from minoritized groups, due to their minority status, assuming such children cannot successfully manage the content; thus, confining their academic and intellectual development (Buckner et al., 2001; Cummins, 2001; Milner IV, 2010).

These conceptual repertoires hinder children’s academic success, value, and opportunity in the following ways: (a) devalue minoritized children’s experiences and qualities associated to their differences (Asher, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2009; Harper, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002); (b) mask challenges minoritized children experience within schools; (c) unjustifiably blame minoritized students for educational struggles, rather than contexts in which they are situated (Harper, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner IV, 2010; Nieto, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); (d) stifle minoritized children’s learning opportunities, creativity,
and academic and individual growth, leading to educational streaming, remedial classes, and special needs classrooms, which students from marginalized groups mostly saturate (Artiles et al., 2010; Harry & Klingner, 2006).

Learning about minoritized children’s schooling experiences and narratives highlight their repertoires of differences and inclusion, and may serve to reform educators’ repertoires. Minoritized children’s narratives may disrupt educators’ notions and assumptions pertaining to minority, difference, inclusion, and diversity, serving as a tool to inform and support inclusive learning and teaching, as they:

challenge assumptions and lead the teacher[s] to ‘see’ students as they are and not as they have been historically - and conveniently - constructed to fit the regimes of schooling….As teachers see students differently so they are more likely to respect and trust them and offer more opportunities for them to take responsibility for learning and for the management of their learning….‘re-profiling’ students in teachers’ eyes.” (Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003, pp. 281-282)

Insights present within the narratives may challenge conventional images and perceptions of minoritized children -- in the hopes of breaking traditional educational theories, presumptions, practices, and silences.

2.6 Inclusive Education and School Knowledge

School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become 'action knowledge'. (Barnes, 1976, p. 82)

The official discourse proliferated within schools denote educational transference of knowledge, rather than transformation of knowledge. Historically, educational institutions
ignored children’s voices and knowledge, teaching separation between personal thoughts and experiences within academic contexts:

For centuries schooling has reinforced the separation of private thoughts from public matter. We have taught students to put their own ideas in the last paragraph of the essay, as if they had not been motivating all the paragraphs that preceded the candid conclusion. We have forbidden them to think and write about their own thoughts, promoting scholarships as the representation of others’ ideas. The rhythms of classroom discourse preclude reflection and expression, in short, thought. (Grumet, 1989, p. 15)

Cochran-Smith (1995) confronted the way in which curricula features methodical lesson plans for teachers to follow and maintain controlled classrooms of knowledge transmission from teacher to student; harmfully, such an approach disregards principles of diversity, transformational knowledge, and co-constructing of meaning. In interviewing 100 teachers and principals, Gérin-Lajoie (2008a) found many educators perceived serving as “…agents of knowledge transmission within the regulation of the provincial curriculum” (p. 125) as one of their main school responsibilities. Employing transmission approaches may be, however, the primary pervading discourse within classrooms, as teachers, through years of traditional professional development, have been expected to learn, professionally grow, and accept pedagogical reform within rigid learning constraints filled with teaching models of training and transmitting of knowledge – thus, conveying an understanding that their primary task and role as teacher is also akin to that of “…conservator, custodian, or dispenser of knowledge, [whereby] pedagogy melt into passivity” (Grumet, 1989, p. 16).

Transferring of knowledge, as Freire (1970/2006) contended, is a domesticating form of education, rather than one imbuing liberation, transformation, curiosity, and unforeseen possibilities. Freire (1970/2006) referred to this transferring approach as the “banking concept of education” (p. 72), whereby educators make daily deposits of knowledge into
children, the depositories, “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 72). Barnes (1976) also described this transmission mode of teaching and learning, whereby the “Transmission teacher sees it as [her/]his task to transmit knowledge and to test whether the pupils have received it….as a tube down which knowledge can be sent; if a pupil catches the knowledge [s]he can send it back up the tube” (p. 142). In describing transmission models of learning and teaching, children take on qualities of commodities or products (e.g., bank accounts to fill), removing any sense of agency, legitimacy, and power in their learning as “knowers,” who can reliably *transform* knowledge within classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Knowledge by nature is an ideological and social construct, which is formed and fitted to suit particular groups. Namely, “Knowledge is neither neutral nor apolitical…” (Nieto, 2002, p. 43), rather it exemplifies ideals, norms, and practices of dominant groups. The transmission or transference of “unitary and stable” (Grumet, 1989, p. 16) knowledge perpetuates hegemonic oppressions among minoritized children, as there is no need for privileged dominant groups to critically view knowledge circulating within the world in which they live (Jacquet, 2008). Minoritized children of vast differences, ways of thinking, and types of knowledge, then become labelled as deficient or lacking in some way (Grumet, 1989).

Minoritized children are not blank slates to write upon or empty vessels to fill -- they are not tabular rasa. Rather, they maintain understandings of their own experiences, knowledges, and histories. Children learn, think, and make sense of experiences in diverse ways; ways in which may not coincide with the predetermined parameters of curricula, and nor should they be expected to. To foster inclusive learning and teaching, knowledge must be transformed within the classroom, wherein children critically explore, analyze, and
dialogically seek “‘form[s] of resistance to dominant modes of schooling’” (Sleeter, 1996, p.2), ensuring relevancy to their lives. Rethinking and re-examining surfacing knowledge within schools, ways in which this knowledge is conveyed, and gathering insights from minoritized children about their learning, presents different ways of knowing and different things in which to know about from multiple lenses, rather than adhering to “…the ‘safe’ or standard way of interpreting events and issues” (Nieto, 2002, pp. 43-44). Minoritized children thus “…become critical consumers of knowledge as well as knowledge producers…” (Banks, 1993, p. 12). I urge we re-examine these relations between children and school knowledge, recognizing children possess valuable insights and knowledge regarding content that is taught and how it is taught. Presenting minoritized children with opportunities to contribute to their learning, curricula, and schooling conveys a sense of promise and social dreaming, rather than a sense of imposed boundaries (Greene, 1971; Gutiérrez, 2009; Nieto, 1994).
CHAPTER THREE
THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Not all children from minoritized groups are homogeneous in nature (e.g., Latino children with disabilities vs. Chinese children with disabilities, etc.), as nuances and complexities of differences exist among each group and among each individual within the group. As heterogeneous entities, oppressed and marginalized groups maintain differences within the differences. That is, there are differences within cultures, religions, languages, abilities, etc., and there are individual differences such as, temperament, mentality, health, subjective views, etc., all contributing to the heterogeneous populations that make up most schools (Allemann-Ghionda, 2001). Maintaining notions of homogeneous norms among minority status groups, asserting individuals share common experiences, ideologies, identities, and perhaps even similar ways of learning, because they are from particular minoritized groups or communities discounts concepts of individuality and differentiated learning within schools. Homogenization of diverse children, classifying them as one uniform group representing minoritized children with disabilities belonging to a particular race, culture, ethnicity, etc., serves as the antithesis to notions of inclusion, further marginalizing and fortifying essentialized stereotypical assumptions associated to minoritized groups. Listening to and understanding minoritized children’s narratives of their personal stories, experiences, and views highlights the heterogeneous quality among each other, despite coming from similar minority status groups.

Accounting for heterogeneity among marginalized children fosters respect for diverse human experience, human agency, and human lives. Connecting to and understanding others’ lived experiences, particularly within schools, involves a critically grounded
approach to rethinking and reimagining inclusive teaching and learning. Critical lenses appreciate not only differences among minority status groups, but also see value in accessing minoritized children’s personal experiences, concerns, interests, and dreams, and engaging them in critical appraisals of their educational lives and schooling experiences; thus, drawing upon students’ voices and understandings as the basis for inclusive possibilities (Rezai-Rashti, 1995).

As such, two relevant overarching theories frame my study: a) critical theory, from which stems critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education, and b) the “new sociology of childhood,” which includes social constructivist and participatory frames. Undergirding both of these broad theoretical lenses is a deep interest to understand the experiences and lives of others, hearing, validating, and empowering others’ voices and stories, especially those from subjugated and marginalized groups. Both frames also see children as experts of their own lives, capable of conveying personal experiences and understandings, and as such should contribute to educational discussions and research about their school life. In this section I explain each theoretical framework, the interconnections between one another, and address how they suitably guide my study.

Critical theory seeks new insights addressing issues of power, oppression, and social justice, understanding how these interrelate with varying contexts and influence interpretations of lived experiences (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical theorists attempt to challenge predominant societal status quo, dismantling traditional and mainstream institutional norms, truths, and knowledge (Kincheloe, 2008). Theoretical perspectives of diversity usually rest within two categories: (a) a *variety*, and (b) a *critical* perspective (Dei et al., 2003, p.14).

The first relates to incorporating ideals of differences within schools through discussions of
the histories, works, and celebrations of the “exotic others,” without examining systemic power relations embedded in schools and society. Consequently, notions of equity are not conveyed, and experiences, knowledge, and histories of minority status groups “…remain peripheral to dominant educational discourses and practice” (Dei et al., p. 14). The second approach to inclusion, that is, critical theoretical lenses of diversity, challenge systemic prejudices and oppressions rooted within educational institutions, exploring how differences are interconnected with notions of power and power imbalances.

Critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education, both branching from critical theory, frame my study. Rooted in social justice and equity these theories promote reform of social hierarchy within schools, acknowledging schools as inequitable institutions, often silencing voices and views of minoritized groups (Freire, 1970/2006; Kincheloe, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Thus, rather than maintain and propagate inequities and prejudice within schools, critical pedagogy seeks to transform, redistribute, and restructure power imbalances and hegemonic oppressions currently arranged within educational institutions (Kincheloe, 2008). Recognizing schools as sites of oppression and domestication, Freire (1970/2006) urged re-examining and critically questioning educational policies and practices, which serve to silence children from minority status groups. For example, if examining school curricula, critical educators may interrogate what and how curricula is doing something, for whom and what purpose curricula serves in doing this something, and what is the content or knowledge in which curricula encompasses? Then, reconsider how these operate to support the learning and empowerment of children from all groups.

Critical pedagogy is also concerned with human suffering, attempting to understand the everyday lived experiences of children from traditionally marginalized groups who
encounter continuous discrimination and oppression for not adhering to regulated practices and norms – critical pedagogues “seek out the causes of such suffering in their understandings of power with its ideological, hegemonic, disciplinary, and regulatory dimensions” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 12). To foster transformational learning, critical pedagogy also embraces “dialogical relations” (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 5), in which roles and relationships shift between educators and learners. This notion invites children’s multiple knowledge(s), views, and voices into educational conversations, and as such educators learn from children, becoming “simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 72). As minoritized children construct, share, and reflect on their personal narratives, dialogical relations presents a necessary element for gaining fresh understandings and knowledge from children themselves, while also deconstructing and unbundling preconceived assumptions and inquiring about possibilities to improve inclusive pedagogy and learning.

Also aligning with notions of critical pedagogy, are the works of John Dewey (1902, 1964) and Maxine Greene (1971, 1993a), as they recognized the significance of incorporating children’s lived realities into schools spaces. For instance, Dewey (1964) conceived schools as institutions of the social and of communities, including present living representative of children’s current lives and experiences. He reminded us, education “is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (Dewey, 1964, p. 430). Highlighting curriculum from the “learners’ standpoint” Greene (1971, p. 253) criticized curricula studies for solely concentrating on the learned and prescribed, what knowledge to give, and what programs to teach, rather than considering children’s perspectives and personal understandings of their experiences and world. Thus, critical pedagogy invites into schools, understandings, views, problems, and lived experiences of children from diverse
backdrops. It embraces children as researchers, decision makers, and problem-solvers, allowing opportunities for questioning and re-questioning of academic content, as well as transformation of knowledge, all of which offer prospects to subvert oppressions, prejudices, and hierarchal power imbalances, improving inclusive education (Freire, 1970/2006; Kincheloe, 2008). A central piece of my study is exploring minoritized children’s personal perspectives and experiences to enrich inclusive education that best support their learning and sense of belonging. As minoritized children contribute to their own learning, we move beyond external learning and instead toward internal, meaningful learning that engage students in an “interior journey” (Greene, 1971, p. 264), gaining insights into past and present worlds, possibilities of future worlds, and perspectives of others’ worlds.

My critical lens toward diversity and inclusion is framed within a critical multicultural education perspective. Moving away from tokenistic and superficial “celebrations” of diversity and multiculturalism, which ignore hegemonic oppressions and systemic power relations within schools (Harper, 1997; Henry & Tator, 1999; Sleeter, 2004), critical multicultural education acknowledges intersections of personal differences as existing within terrains of power imbalances within schools (Asher, 2007; Jacquet, 2008). Recognizing schools as institutions shaped by societal structures (e.g., historical, political, ideals of power), critical multicultural education maintains societal power imbalances are reproduced in schools, propagating inequities due to race, ethnicity, language, and disability, affecting minoritized children’s learning, engagement, achievement, and sense of school belonging (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Nieto, 2002). As Ladson-Billings (2003) contended, it unveils buried “discursive practices” (p. 54) disseminating power and privilege to particular groups within society, and promotes reform of social hierarchy within schools. Ideals of
social justice, critical pedagogy, reflection and praxis, equity, and affirmation of “...pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, disability, religious, economic, and gender, among others)” are all rooted within notions of critical multicultural education (Nieto, 2002, p. 27).

Furthermore, Nieto (1999) suggested critical multicultural education,

(a) genuinely reflects students’ cultures, and fosters a curiosity of other cultures;

(b) challenges existing hegemony, and embraces histories, theories, and knowledge from all cultures;

(c) encourages educators to examine their practices as a means of becoming “more humanizing” (p. 194);

(d) considers the relationship between students’ self-esteem and school policies and practices that sanction particular groups while delegitimizing others;

(e) promotes “‘dangerous discourses’” (p. 195) in schools, and acknowledges these ignored issues as relevant to students’ lives;

(f) is not the universal cure for school dilemmas, but rather is a “hopeful pedagogy” (p. 195) which empowers marginalized students whom are often disregarded, unappreciated, and silenced by their schools and societies.

Implications of critical multicultural education highlight children’s voices as a key component to meaningfully improve schools for all learners – to “…inform our curriculum and instructional strategies and even challenge us to chance our unintentional biases” (Nieto, 1995, p. 213). I also perceive children’s voices as contributing to transforming educators’ traditional conceptual repertoires of diversity; this is another essential implication of critical multicultural education. Minoritized children’s voices and views may also support educators in becoming “transformative intellectuals” (Nieto, 1995, p. 213), as they rethink inclusive
understandings, attitudes, and pedagogy. My study closely aligns with the tenets of critical multicultural education. However, critical multicultural education typically adopts a focus on ethnicity, race, and language yet my study stretches beyond these and also relates to children with disabilities.

Rather than concentrating on prescriptive and predetermined parameters of schooling, critical pedagogy and critical multicultural education assert examining school knowledge to include children’s perspectives, experiences, and worlds. These theories highlight benefits of drawing from minoritized children’s lived experiences, and implementing these within schools, serving as catalysts to inclusive education, challenging prejudices, and informing pedagogy (Dewey, 1902, 1964; Fine, 1991; Freire 1970/2006; Greene, 1971; Neito, 1994, 1995, 2002).

The “new sociology of childhood,” (Greene & Hill, 2005, p.8) affirms children as capable creators of social worlds, identities, and voices, as they mindfully co-construct and make meanings of experiences and environments (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Greene & Hogan, 2005). This framework recognizes young children as trustworthy conveyors and experts of their experiences. It invites participatory research approaches with children, validating their agency as co-researchers within the research process, and ensuring methods appropriately suit children’s interests, knowledge, and abilities. The new sociology of childhood appreciates children as proficient articulators of their perspectives and understandings, and as such should actively participate in research concerning their lives, school matters, and issues of diversity (Ajodhia-Andrews & Berman, 2009; Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Greene & Hogan, 2005). A social constructivist framework (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978) also undergirds the new sociology of childhood, maintaining
minoritized children construct knowledge through social and cultural interactions, impacting their understandings about differences, learning, and inclusion.

In researching children’s experiences, the new sociology of childhood also debate (Greene & Hill, 2005, pp. 8-12):

(a) Notions of “developmental appropriateness” among children -- This framework argues age should not be a determining factor dictating a child’s level, abilities, knowledge, and interests. Rather, children’s experiences vary based on their contexts and individual qualities;

(b) Children’s level of suggestibility during research situations -- It is often assumed that children are significantly more impressionable than adults, and thus their understandings and perspectives are naturally more unreliable within research, than adult participants. Although children are much more accustomed to complying and agreeing with adults’ instructions and directions (e.g., the researcher), research suggests that children are not necessarily less trustworthy informants than adults. For example, in legal settings both adults and children demonstrate little variance between memory recall and memory loss, and both groups improve with recognition aids (e.g., Spencer & Flin, 1991);

(c) Power relations between adult/researcher and child -- Understanding their subordinate roles in the adult-child dynamic, children often struggle with disagreeing with adults who hold more power and control in their authoritative roles in society. However, children are capable of challenging these power imbalances, through deception, defiance, resistance, and rebellion. Thus, researchers should negotiate issues of power, considering ways in which to ameliorate power imbalances between researcher and children. For
example, presenting opportunities for child participants to make decisions regarding research
venue, time, analyzing data, etc…;

(d) Concepts of researcher role within the research process (e.g., during observation
or interviews) -- Rather than perceiving the researcher as neutral or having to become child-
like, the new sociology of childhood urges researchers seek a balance between child and
adult likeness. That is, while maintaining an adult/researcher position, researchers should
also become familiar with their child participants, ensuring to include this knowledge into the
research process (e.g., what language and forms of communication does this group of
children use, what are their routines and schedules, etc.?). This also further establishes
rapport with the children;

(e) Children’s role in the research process -- Employing the new sociology of
childhood as a theoretical lens requires reflection on notions of children and childhood,
especially in relation to the research process. In research, children may be perceived as
objects, subjects, social actors, and/or co-researchers (Christensen & Prout, 2002).
Conceptualizing children/childhood as objects promotes adult agency and power, as children
are considered vulnerable, dependent, and incompetent to understanding research.
Researchers perceiving children from this standpoint usually do not consult with child
participants during the research process and refrain from seeking child assent in addition to
parental consent. Children/childhood as subjects acknowledge children’s individuality and
personal experiences, yet researchers negotiate children’s role within the research based on
age and ability (e.g., assumes the older the child, the more competent to actively participate
in the research). Acknowledging children as social actors implies children as independent
beings, maintaining personal experiences and views, and engaging, interpreting, and
becoming influenced by their surroundings (i.e., social, cultural, political, historical). This perspective suggests research methods suitable for adults are also suitable for children, and power dynamics between adult-child are minimized. Researchers may also present opportunities for children to provide verbal and written assent for participation in the research, along with parental consent. In considering children as co-researchers, concerned with hearing children’s voices and views and ensuring their active participation in the research process, researchers consult and inform child participants in research activities, presenting them with decision making opportunities within the research process (e.g., data collection and analysis, presenting of the data, selecting research venue or research times, etc.). This perspective validates children’s agency and power as human beings and global citizens.

When engaging in research, children make sense of what is happening and what their role is as they participate in the research. As such, children should be perceived as active participants, rather than subjects in the research process. Specifically, understanding the researcher is conducting research with children, rather than on children, in which children become subjects of the research. This also necessitates considering the degree of child participation in the research process (e.g., child consent, child involvement in research design and data analysis, etc.). In my study, I considered children as capable social actors and co-researchers.
CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

This study applied qualitative research methods to more deeply understand the lived experiences and stories of others, while seeking deepened insights of the data (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research values voice and varied perspectives, “capture[ing] and communicate[ing] someone else’s experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story” (Patton, 2002, p. 47). Denzin (2004), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), and Kincheloe (2004) described the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur*, who seeks out any techniques and tools necessary to conduct research representative of diverse situations, contexts, and perspectives. *Bricoleurs* intend to “….break the lenses of present ways of viewing the world....because such frames have caused such heartbreak and suffering on the part of those who fall outside the favoured race, class, gender, sexual, religious, and ability-related demographic” (Kincheloe, 2004, pp. 15-19). Emerging from qualitative data are interpretations and findings bounded with resonance, particulars, and a deep richness, that cannot truly be achieved from traditional deductive approaches. Qualitative research is not “value-free” (Denzin, 2004, p. 449), but rather an interactive process as both researchers and participants are positioned in diverse contexts, which shape perspectives and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kilbourn, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Although quantitative and qualitative research both maintain an interest in capturing participants’ perspectives, Eisner (1985) argued that what sets them apart “….is how they choose to inform the world about what they have seen” (p. 239) – hence, to inform the world, qualitative inquiry prefer more vigorous explorations of participants’ challenges and constraints of everyday life, whilst acquiring thick details and rich accounts of participants’
social worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My participants’ experiences and understandings cannot copiously be portrayed and interpreted through research methods aligned with those of quantitative research. More aptly, to achieve deepened insights from my participants, qualitative approaches, which equally boast elements of scientific inquiry, rigor, and systematic processes, freely intertwine creativity, voice, dialogue, relationship, and story. As such, a qualitative methodology appropriately suits my study.

4.1 Design

I structured the research within (a) narratives, and (b) critical discourse analysis. Both serve as theoretical phenomenon and methodology. Through constructing and developing narratives, my study explores minoritized children’s understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion, and how these influence their schooling experiences. Subsequently, I utilized critical discourse analysis to further examine the narratives for hidden meanings and ideological presumptions, revealing power imbalances, prejudices, and inequities within schools. Recognizing the significance of contexts within critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), it was imperative to review educational policies regarding inclusion, disability, and autism within Ontario, Canada, further portraying a deeper understanding of participants’ educational contexts (see Chapter Five). In doing so I analyzed these policies for implicit notions of what is believed to be successful and achievable within school systems (Ozga, 2000). Policy development and enactment is a process, dynamically shifting and impacting social practices. Prior (2003) conceded all documents are indeed social products, which are “…constructed in accordance with rules, they express a structure, they are nestled within a specific discourse, and their presence in a world depends on collective, organized, action” (pp. 12-13). Thus, I examined discursive
practices embedded within specific Canadian educational policies, highlighting mobilization of these policies and their influence on minoritized students.

4.1.1 Narratives. Considering children make sense of who they are as they tell and re-tell their experiences and stories (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Bruner, 1996; Engel, 2005), narratives appropriately employ stories as a method to explore others’ lived experiences and to examine their understandings of these experiences (Barrett, 2009; Patton, 2002). More specifically it “…has been characterized as providing a method for ‘telling stories,’ … [accessing voices of those] traditionally marginalized, and providing a less exploitative research method than other modes” (Hendry, 2007, p. 487). Expanding beyond “surface realities” to the “deep structures” of school (Goodson & Walker, 1991, p. xiii) narrative research gains knowledge of minoritized children’s school experiences, as it “…tell[s] hidden and silenced narratives of suppressed and underrepresented groups to counter the preconceived meta narrative represented in ‘scientific based research’ that is often used to portray these groups as deficient and inferior” (He, Chan, & Phillion, 2008, p. 129). Through deliberation, dialogue, and storytelling, narratives “facilitates a healthy democratic, public life” (Gamson, 2002, p.197), possessing capacity to reveal possibilities for social change, foster empathy, and interrogate issues of hegemony and marginalization (Chase, 2005; Fox, 2009), ensuring personal narratives and experiences of marginalized groups “can be heard even by those who normally do not want to hear them” (Chase, 2005, p. 669).

Narrative research, as Chase (2005) explained, may include brief and relevant stories about specific events or people, lengthier stories associated to significant experiences or positions, or life histories or autobiographical stories extending from birth to present day. It is (a) a deliberate, reflective, and chronological process of accessing first-person accounts
of individuals’ experiences; (b) socially and contextually positioned; (c) a practice of examining and re-storying provocative and perhaps even veiled educational matters and experiences; (d) a journey where individuals’ identities shift and are reconsidered; (e) concerned with construction of meaning and knowledge; and (f) a method emphasizing collaboration and negotiation of data between researcher and participants (Creswell, 2005; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). In keeping with these principles, narratives serve as essential tools to providing insights into what and how minoritized children think and feel about diversity, learning, and inclusion.

Chase (2005) also identified five analytical lenses narrative researchers maintain (pp. 656-657):

(a) Narratives as discourse -- Narrative is a meaning making process, reflecting on past experiences and understanding its influence on the present and future. This process is emotional, detail driven, thoughtful, interpretive, and establishes order to the narrative data;

(b) Narratives as verbal action -- The narrator actively constructs and contours stories through communicating verbal actions (e.g., complain, defend, entertain, etc…) that highlights the narrator’s voice;

(c) Narratives are facilitated and restrained by social resources and contexts -- Narratives are shaped by the narrator’s community, setting, social, cultural, political, and historical contexts;

(d) Narratives develop through interactive performances -- Although stories and experiences are expressed solely from the narrator’s voice, narratives also become influenced by their audience or listener(s);
(e) Narrative researchers perceive themselves as additional narrators within the stories, as they interpret and pursue ways to (re)present the narratives. Through this process, narrative researchers may also “develop their own voice(s) as they construct others’ voices and realities” (p. 657).

Taking the latter into consideration, the aforementioned lenses apply to both the researcher and the researched. Recognizing the interconnected nature of these five lenses, I moved between all intersecting lenses, as I collected narratives, listened to stories, and interpreted and (re)presented the narratives together with participants.

4.1.2 Critical discourse analysis. In this study the notion of discourse is perceived as a social construct influenced by social relations, practices, and history; thus, it is more than examining language and communication, but also reflecting on how forms of communication (verbal, written texts, images, etc.) are used to sustain regulated practices of dominant groups (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008b; Mills, 2004). These regulated practices serve as structures within society and therefore institutions (e.g., schools), sanctioning what is normal, appropriate knowledge, and speech, and as such afford greater power to those following and abiding by these regulated norms. Failing to fit within the dominant regulated practices dictates abnormality and exclusion. Foucault identifies various forms of exclusions resulting from the ways in which discourse is controlled within institutions (as cited in Mills, 2004, pp. 57-60): (a) taboo or prohibited subjects (e.g., death, sex, etc.); (b) irrational and insane individuals (e.g., mental illness); (c) true vs. false knowledge – who determines the validity of statements and true knowledge? (e.g., the news, journal publications, etc.). In my thesis I explore surfacing discourse within the children’s narratives, investigating how these contribute to forms of inclusion and exclusion for minoritized children within schools.
Critical discourse analysis is useful to examine text, talk, events, and practices among children, as these experiences pervade power relations, dominance, and various inequalities and biases. Van Dijk (2004) emphasized, critical discourse analysis “…primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). As such, it seeks to understand the discursive resources contributing to power imbalances, social inequalities, and discrimination among particular groups within particular social contexts, participating in particular relationships (Luke, 1997; McGregor, 2003; Van Dijk, 2004). Critical discourse analysis research, stemming from feminist and post-colonial work, aims to challenge dominant discourses, while presenting spaces within society and institutional sites to access and hear the voices of historically marginalized and silenced groups (Luke, 1997).

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) outlined eight primary features of critical discourse analysis for researchers to consider (pp. 271-280):

(a) Attempts to address social problems through a critical lens, explicitly exposing power relations;

(b) Power relations are negotiated and move through discourses;

(c) Discourses influence society and culture, reproducing and altering power relations;

(d) Discourses generate and contribute to ideologies;

(e) Discourses are rooted within historical contexts;

(f) Discourses connect texts to the processes and development of society and socio-cultural practices, seeking to mediate the relationship between text and society;

(g) In addition to analyzing texts, it also interprets and explains texts;
(h) It endeavours to generate equitable societal change, as it reveals unjust and imbalanced power relations – as such, it is a research paradigm devoted to social action.

Conceptions of discourse also include systematic analysis of the discursive practices, meanings, and texts embedded within larger society and reproduced within institutions, influencing power and knowledge relations (Fairclough, 1995; MacLure, 2003; Mills, 2004). Accordingly, schools as institutional reproductive sites of dominant discourses, serve as gatekeepers of agency, power and social relations, acceptable knowledge and ideologies, suitable values and voices, and presumptions of normalcy, influencing children’s identity construction (Luke, 1997). Critical discourse analysis, both a reflective and productive process, seeks to understand the purpose of particular discursive threads surrounding power relations among dominant and non-dominant groups and how these discourses are reproduced in society (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Wodak and Meyer (2009) suggested in critical discourse analysis the text “…is often regarded as a manifestation of social action which again is widely determined by social structure….Therefore, texts are often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” (p. 10).

As participants socially interact and discuss diversity and inclusive learning, they begin to participate in a “discursive event” (Luke, 1995/1996, p.13), where conversations become intertextually intertwined with written text and images. Discourses rest and breathe within texts; the words spoken, written, and illustrated. As such, I explore children’s “inclusion discourses” and “differences discourses” through narratives of their schooling experiences. Additionally, examining minoritized children’s texts, and the discourses within these texts, may emphasize what such texts “do,” and whether they stream new meanings and
promises for inclusive education, suited to those who may not conform to mainstream regulated educational discourses.

4.2 The Empirical Study

The sample includes a purposeful selection of 6 children (ages 10-13) from a non-profit organization for persons with disabilities in the GTA. More specifically, I conducted homogenous sampling: identifying a sample of individuals and sites belonging to a specific subgroup and maintaining similar characteristics (i.e., middle years children, community centres and/or non-profit organizations maintaining a diverse population, including individuals with disabilities) (Creswell, 2005; Warren, 2001). This sample size allows for extensive and more in-depth discussion and examination of issues related to diversity, inclusion, and learning. Narrative researchers frequently use smaller sample size groups to strengthen deeper immersion into topics, group cohesiveness, collaboration, and analysis of narratives (Chase, 2005).

I first contacted various community centres and/or non-profit organizations that I am familiar with to inquire whether they were interested in being involved with my research project. I distributed to these centres recruitment flyers (via email) providing brief details of the study and my contact information. These centres carry out programs specifically for middle years children. I then followed-up with each centre by emailing the director/manager of these centres to see whether they were interested in the project. The executive director of a non-profit organization for persons with disabilities expressed interest in my study, indicating the centre facilitates a social skills program for middle years children with disabilities. We arranged for meeting in person. During this meeting, I provided a description of the study, discussing its purpose, goals, and benefits, as well as highlighting
issues of confidentiality and administrative and parental consent. Reassuring to the executive
director that the purpose of the study was not to evaluate program practices or teaching
styles, but rather to listen to children’s stories and hear their voices, I reiterated my interest in
minoritized children’s views and understandings, as it allows us to rethink conceptions of
inclusion, differences, minority, and inclusive pedagogy, to better support diverse learners.
To receive administrative consent, I presented the executive director with a consent form
confirming their agreement to employ the centre as a research venue for my study.

After receiving administrative consent, I contacted the lead program instructor to
discuss the screening process to recruit suitable participants for the research. With the
instructor, I explained the inclusion criteria for child participation in the research (e.g., ages
10-13 years old; maintains differences of race, ethnicity, language; disabilities, such as those
on the autism spectrum disorders scale [i.e., autism, Asperger syndrome], and/or children
with mild global developmental delays, and/or learning disabilities; adequate level of
proficiency in the English language). I also reviewed with the instructor the proposed
research activities and interview protocol, ensuring that children’s developmental level
appropriately fit the study so that they may participate (e.g.,
reading/writing/drawing/understanding how to use a photo camera/ level of English
proficiency [receptive and expressive language]). Based on the instructor’s understanding of
the inclusion criteria and the proposed research activities, I requested she forward
recruitment information to parents of children who fit within the inclusion criteria.

I sent the program instructor a recruitment flyer to distribute to parents/guardians of
children who appropriately fit criteria for the study. The flyer described brief details of the
study, my contact information, and the possibility of an information session for interested
parents/guardians. Attached to the recruitment flyer was a parent/guardian consent agreement form. Within the consent form, parents/guardians were notified that their child’s participation was voluntary, and would not affect their attendance at the centre or evaluation by the program instructor or centre director. They were also told that their choice of whether their child participates would not influence future relations within the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, and they were free to withdraw consent and stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which their child was allowed. Furthermore, this would not affect her/his relationship with the program or centre they are currently attending. English was the primary language used for the recruitment flyer and consent letter, and to better suit the group of families, the language level used was of a grade 6-7 level. As the lead program instructor knows the families best, I consulted with her regarding my use of the English language, and whether the information given to parents/guardians required translation. For families requiring language translation, the program instructor arranged for a centre staff member, who also knows the families, to assist in translating these items. I also consulted with the instructor regarding the parent/guardian information session, as I recognized potential difficulty in attending the session due to parent/guardian availability. The families did not request for an information session.

Six children attended the middle years social skills program at the centre, and I received parental/guardian consent for all 6 children. Although a mix of minoritized groups was represented in the final sample pool, all participants are from similar ethnic backgrounds and a majority have an autism diagnosis (see Table 1):

(a) All participants are of East Asian descent (i.e., China or Vietnam);

(b) 5 out of 6 participants are bilingual in Cantonese and/or Mandarin, and English;
(c) 4 out of 6 participants were born in Canada, and 2 participants emigrated from China to Canada in their early years (3-5yrs old);

(d) 5 out of 6 participants are diagnosed with autism. Some participants have multiple disabilities in addition to autism (e.g., global developmental delays, major speech and language delays, hyperactivity, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], attention deficit disorder [ADD], cerebral palsy, and hemiparesis [muscle weakness on one side of the body]);

(e) All participants attend segregated special education classrooms, with 5 receiving partial integration into “regular” classrooms for certain academic subjects;

(f) 2 girls and 4 boys.

Additionally, to receive further information regarding participants (e.g., medical and school reports, family, home, etc…) I first inquired with their lead program instructor, and then requested parents/guardians complete an information form regarding their child and family. I also reviewed participants’ centre files. These details heightened the richness of participants’ stories, conveying a more comprehensive understanding of the children’s experiences.

Further information regarding participants is presented within the children’s portraits.

In collaboration with the executive director and program instructor, we decided the most convenient meeting day and time for my research sessions would be during the social skills program. In arranging the logistics for the project, the instructor suggested the best time during the 5.5 hours program to carry out the research sessions. Prior to beginning the research, I attended one social skills class to build rapport and familiarity between myself and the children.
Participants engaged in seven group sessions, approximately 90 minutes/per session, over a 4 month period. This amount of sessions was chosen to build rapport with the children overtime, and to allow opportunities for accessing thorough and rich information. The number of sessions also provided chances for participants and me to review their data and narratives on a continuous basis, ensuring accurate representation of their experiences and lives. Considering the importance of these topics and recognizing some activities take more time than others (e.g., photo narrations, interviews, etc…), I wanted to provide ample time and opportunity for the children to deeply engage in activities without feeling a sense of hurriedness and urgency. Rather, I hoped participants experienced a sense of relationship building, time, and safe space to extend discussions throughout the research process.

When researching with young people, group sessions present a more natural research context as children are seemingly more familiar and relaxed when conversing about particular issues in group settings (Darbyshire, Macdougall, & Schiller, 2005; Eder & Fingerson, 2003). Conducting the study in group sessions appropriately collected multiple understandings and perspectives via interactive conversations, whereby participants build upon each others’ ideas and experiences (Creswell, 2005; Eder & Fingerson, 2003). Group sessions may also ameliorate power imbalances between researchers and participants, allowing for candid sharing and articulation of stories and experiences in a forthcoming and supportive fashion (Wood & Kroger, 2000), especially among children (Eder & Fingerson, 2003; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Westcott & Littleton, 2005). Yet, some may argue facilitating the research in a group format may “stir the pot,” raising sensitive issues between participants and affecting their social dynamics outside of the group. However, as the participants’ centre and program were not associated in any way to their schools, there were
no concerns of the group discussions negatively affecting relationships outside of the researched group. Furthermore, because the children attend the same social skills program together, they were already familiar with each other and had an established rapport. Within a group of peers who have similar characteristics (i.e., age range, disability, from a minority status group, etc.) participants favourably shared their stories and listened to others’ experiences regarding issues that may seem taboo or embarrassing to typically discuss. These group sessions opened doors to exploring topics such as race, culture, ethnicity, disability, inclusion, and children’s school life within a supportive fashion.

The sessions occurred within a private classroom in the centre and all the children participated together in one group. I was the sole facilitator of all research sessions and maintained a 1:6 researcher-child ratio in each session. However, the lead program instructor was available during all group sessions for support if necessary outside of the classroom in the centre.

Prior to data collection, within the first session, I described details of the project, highlighting voluntary participation in the study, and ensuring participants willingness to be involved with the study. Directly asking young children whether they would like to participate in the research, not only recognizes the rights of the child, demonstrating a sense of mutual respect, but I am also more likely to obtain a sample of children who independently desire and choose to be involved, rather than feel obliged because they were approached by their parents/guardians or program instructor. All 6 children desired to participate in the project. Participants also completed a child assent form. Thus, participants provided both oral and written assent to participate in the study. In accordance with the new sociology of childhood, the child assent form conveys the child’s interest to participate in the
study, addresses the agreement between researcher and child, respects the child’s sense of control in the research process, and demonstrates recognition for the rights of the child (Hill, 2005). In the first session, I also discussed group guidelines regarding respectful discussion, active listening, group confidentiality, and the importance of sharing distinct personal views. In each session, I distributed to participants their own “Research Kits” that included their personal journals, drawings, photo camera, etc. In each meeting I provided food/snacks for participants, and we held regular break periods (approximately 10-15 minutes). During all group sessions, I highlighted topics and issues raised from previous meetings. I continuously analyzed the data and brought them to meetings, requesting participants’ feedback and clarification.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>GEM</th>
<th>ALICE</th>
<th>SIMON</th>
<th>MEW</th>
<th>EDWARD</th>
<th>WILLIAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>12yrs</td>
<td>12yrs</td>
<td>11yrs</td>
<td>12yrs</td>
<td>13yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Gr. 8</td>
<td>Gr. 7</td>
<td>Gr. 7</td>
<td>Gr. 6</td>
<td>Gr. 7</td>
<td>Gr. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth Country</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
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<td>Cantonese(^{\text{H}}), English</td>
<td>Cantonese(^{\text{H}}), English</td>
<td>Cantonese(^{\text{H}}), English (speaks only English)</td>
<td>Cantonese(^{\text{H}}), English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Chinese (China)</td>
<td>Vietnamese (Vietnam)</td>
<td>Chinese (China)</td>
<td>Vietnamese - Chinese (Mom from Vietnam, Dad from China)</td>
<td>Chinese (China - Hong Kong)</td>
</tr>
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<td>autism; global developmental delays</td>
<td>autism</td>
<td>autism; attention deficit disorder</td>
<td>autism</td>
<td>autism; global developmental delays; hyperactivity; potential attention deficit hyperactivity disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregated Classroom Placement: (a) Special Education Class (SEC) - Full-Time (FT) or</td>
<td>SEC (F/T)</td>
<td>SEC (PI)</td>
<td>CC (PI)</td>
<td>CC (PI)</td>
<td>CC (PI)</td>
<td>SEC (PI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Data Collection

Within the seven group sessions, I collected data through audio taping and various field texts (Creswell, 2005; Denzin, 2004), such as personal researcher memos, participant interviews, and creative methods -- I employed imaginative and artistic methods to engage participants in exploring their schooling experiences, differences, and inclusion (i.e., artistic writing, drawings, storygames, visual narratives/photography). The narratives were developed orally (dialogue, interviews, storygames), textually (written activities), and visually (drawings, photography).

In utilizing a multi-method approach to accessing children’s understandings of issues regarding inclusion, marginalization, diversity, and their learning, I obtained a richer, more thorough, and clearer understanding of participants’ views on these topics. For example, cross-examining participants’ reports during the interviews with her/his drawings or journal writings. Also, some participants felt more comfortable and responded more easily to sharing their experiences through creative methods, presenting data and insights not
discussed during interviews. For example, some participants more readily wrote about their experiences, rather than verbally spoke about them during the interviews. These creative mediums allowed participants to contribute to the research in additional ways, beyond interviews; ways in which were more interesting, engaging, relevant, and exciting for participants. Applying a multi-method approach with various creative mediums presented participants with different avenues to express themselves, and as such revealed rich and valuable data that may be unlikely to access through a single medium.

An overall consensus among various scholars suggests research works best with children when there are multiple and engaging activities, encouraging the use of creative and multiple mediums, as such methods are more appealing and enjoyable for children and generate valuable and pertinent data (e.g., visuals, photography, writing, journals, mapping, drawings, videos, etc.) (see, for example, Carrington, Allen, & Osmolowski, 2007; Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Keat et al., 2009; Lemon, 2006; Moss, Deppeler, Astley, & Pattison, 2007; Punch, 2002; Veale, 2005).

Darbyshire et al. (2005) argued that using multiple qualitative approaches through different exercises/activities may complement each other, rather than replicate, allowing participants to share different stories and experiences each time they engage in a different activity. Punch (2002) also contended that using traditional (e.g., interviews) combined with creative (e.g., photos, drawings, writing etc.) methods maintains a suitable balance for when researching with children, as it helps prevent participant boredom and heavy reliance on one research method, while also allowing for triangulation of data and amelioration of power imbalances between researcher and child (e.g., pressures during interview process between researcher and child interaction may be reduced through activity based exercises such as, writing,
drawing, or photography – the interaction is between child and paper, or child and photo camera). I encouraged participants to engage in all activities. However, in employing multiple methods during each session I was aware that some children may not want to participate in all activities for varying reasons (e.g., boredom, fatigue, etc…). Children, as adults, have different preferences regarding which methods, techniques, or activities they find appealing or engaging, and although trying to include interesting and fun research methods for the children, there may be limitations to fulfilling their ideal preferences (Punch, 2002). When a child no longer wanted to take part in an activity during a session, they were offered to take a break and engage in another activity of their choice.

As I utilized a variety of research methods and tools throughout my study, I developed a group session itinerary and script guiding the facilitation of each session. The itinerary described the organization of each session, outlining sequential accounts of which research methods to carry out and its duration, as well as a loose script for me to follow throughout sessions. However, recognizing the itinerary and script as a useful guide, I still maintained flexibility within each session, adapting the schedule if necessary to manage issues such as, lack of time, participant fatigue, etc. I often found myself simply “going with the flow” to accommodate for the group climate, modifying the structure of sessions. At times for example, I omitted an activity, switched the order of activities, reduced the length of time for a particular activity, played games as chosen by participants, or took longer break/snack time. Also, because I obtained information regarding the children’s behaviours and reinforcers prior to beginning the research sessions, I was not only aware of any behavioural issues or triggers, but also ensured I had access to the reinforcer items to redirect the group.
In groups, I collected data via:

4.3.1 Creative mediums. Research with children work best when interviews are centred around multiple and engaging activities (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Furthermore, in “make[ing] visible the experiences of particular marginalised groups” (Flintoff et al., 2008, p.81), utilizing innovative and creative approaches in conducting research with minoritized children, may foster more comprehensive understandings of their experiences. Creative mediums include artistic writing activities (e.g., poetry, creative story-writing), drawing, artwork, storytelling, photography, drama, etc.; methods which entail “…inventive and imaginative processes…” (Veale, 2005, p. 254). Through creative mediums, minoritized children may expand and reflect upon experiences, thoughts, and beliefs that may be difficult to articulate in interviews. I engaged participants in a variety of creative methods during group sessions. Within my study I used writing activities, drawings, storygames, and visual narratives through photos (Carrington et al., 2007; Lemon, 2006; Moss et al., 2007; Veale, 2005). In addition to using electronic media such as, digital audio recording and digital photo cameras, I also incorporated computers, as they are reinforcing for most children and very prevalent in their lives. Thus, I introduced opportunities for computer use throughout the research, hoping to simulate further participant engagement. More specifically, during the writing activities and participant break periods. The computer served as an inclusive tool, allowing all participants to actively contribute to the research, especially for those who had difficulty with writing.

Artistic writing activities powerfully provide accounts of children’s experiences through writing. Participants engaged in writing activities (e.g., journal writing, brainstorm mapping/bubbles, and “Thoughts about Me…” booklet) 5 times (approximately 30 minutes
in length) throughout the research project. Within each activity, I requested participants reflect and record their thoughts, feelings, experiences, ideas, and stories in relation to issues of differences, learning, and inclusion. Through writing, participants explored pre-selected topics relating to inclusion, exclusion, school experiences, learning, and diversity. To further examine participants’ personal insights, ideas, and knowledge, they also completed a booklet I developed entitled “Thoughts about Me…” The booklet served as a tool to learn more about participants’ schooling experiences, and also to reinforce ideas discussed through interviews. Ensuring writing activities were suited to participants’ developmental level and encouraging full engagement in the activity, I offered choices of typing responses on the computer or scribing (i.e., participants dictated responses a loud and I wrote them down in their journals, brainstorming maps/bubbles, and/or “Thoughts about Me…” book).

Drawings are powerful representations of children’s understanding of the world in which they live (Veale, 2005). The children completed drawings based on issues of inclusion, student differences, and their learning. Participants engaged in drawing activities 3 times (approximately 30 minutes in length) throughout the research project. Drawings serve as a form of communication, offering visual representation of children’s understandings and experiences. However, as Veale (2005) noted, for drawings to serve as research data, verbal interpretations conveying meanings should accompany the drawings. As such, participants shared and discussed their drawings in the group.

Storygames provided greater insights into minoritized children’s understanding of inclusive education and difference. Storygames entails each child to add one line to an open ended story until the story reaches a natural conclusion (Veale, 2005). This method presents participants with opportunities to develop a “…collective, shared understanding” (Veale,
2005, p. 261) of their reflections, meanings, hopes, and dreams, in order to produce an organized and interconnected story. In this study, the children participated 2 times in the storygames activity (approximately 45 minutes in length).

Visual narratives, defined as “reading of a series of photographs” (Lemon, 2006, p. 2) were used to further understand minoritized children’s views regarding their differences, learning, and inclusion (Carrington et al., 2007; Keat et al., 2009; Lemon, 2006; Moss et al., 2007). The use of photography complemented participants’ responses in the other methods (i.e., drawing, group interviews, journal writing, etc.), and provided an interesting and unique way for the children to express themselves, shedding light into their world and experiences (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Punch, 2002). Using photography and combining it with children’s description of their photos, presents participants’ expressions and understandings regarding abstract topics, such as inclusion, exclusion, diversity, and learning, particularly if uncomfortable discussing these issues through writing or dialogue (Moss et al.), or if there is difficulty depicting certain images/actions through drawing (Punch, 2002).

As a creative and current tool, minoritized children used digital photography to preserve their experiences and visibly highlight experiences and stories within their narratives. Subsequently, to give life, voice, and meaning to their images, the children created a narrative of their photos, offering meanings and insights that may “…inform a conscious reflection on previously taken-for-granted assumptions” (Carrington et al., 2007, p. 9). I presented participants with digital cameras to capture images representing their experiences of inclusion and marginalization (e.g., spaces or objects that provide a sense of inclusion/exclusion, welcoming/unwelcoming, etc…) and what they wished for when thinking about inclusive schools. I developed and distributed a “Photo Camera Reminders”
sheet to guide participants during the photo taking process. Participants were given approximately 1.5 months to take their photos. To avoid issues of confidentiality and identifiable information of third parties, I advised participants to take photos of only physical places/spaces and objects, and not of people. Therefore, participants did not need to seek consent from third parties. If participants did take photos including building names (e.g., school or centre) or people, I ensured to blur/pixelate out the building name and/or faces to maintain confidentiality. To further clarify appropriate use for photo taking, I presented participants with an example of my own photo narration, displaying photos of places/spaces and objects that make me feel included/excluded. I attached this example to the “Photo Camera Reminders” sheet, discussed it during the first group session, and conveyed this information in consent forms, assent forms, and the photo reminder sheet.

I printed all digital photos and returned them to participants. Working in pairs, participants reviewed images, discussed its importance, and narrowed down order of importance (Moss et al., 2007). They described the photos reflection of their school experiences and its significance to them; this photo narration took place 2 times (approximately 30 minutes in length) throughout the research project.

From time to time, as participants discussed their photos, they raised sensitive issues that they or others in the group have been dealing with (e.g., difficulty with friendships, etc.). Although perhaps eliciting unpleasant and vulnerable memories or encounters, these discussions opened doors to further exploring taboo or stigmatizing issues related to race, culture, disability, difference, inclusion/exclusion, and school life in a supportive environment with a group of similar peers. Research demonstrates the effectiveness of visual narratives as an engaging method to explore inclusive education, disability, ethnicity,
schooling experiences, and social relationships, among pre-school, middle school, and secondary school children (see, for example, Carrington et al., 2007; Keat et al., 2009; Moss et al., 2007). Carrington et al., Keat et al., and Moss et al. demonstrated that photo narrations presented opportunities for children to break stereotypes, inform repertoires of diversity, and raise awareness regarding issues impacting their lives, deeply exploring matters of inclusion, exclusion, and diversity.

4.3.2 Group interviews. At the centre of qualitative interviewing are “conversational encounters” (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 72), whereby researchers pose questions, listen, and participants respond (Warren, 2001). Merriam (1998) noted the significance of interviewing to recount (a) unobservable behaviours, feelings, or perspectives, and (b) un-replicatable historical experiences or events. Throughout the interviews I used a semi-structured approach, including broad and flexible pre-established topics, open-ended questions, and probes, while also allowing discussion of topics outside of the interview protocol. For example, we often explored surfacing themes from the creative mediums, using these topics to guide our discussions during the interviews. Importantly, in using a narrative framework with minoritized children, I employed research questions in attempts not to attain answers to questions from interviewees, but rather stories grounded in narrators’ voices (Chase, 2005). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended topics, concentrating on participants’ experiences, stories, attitudes, and concerns, while probing elicited further clarification, rationale, information, and examples (Warren, 2001). In narrative research with children, open-ended and more conversational type of discussions further elicits children’s stories (Engel, 2005). The semi-structured nature of the interviews permits researchers and participants to engage in a “…dance together for the moment, but
also extending outward...backward and forward in time” (Warren, 2001, p. 98). The provided space to allow for such movement within semi-structured interviews is critical to developing narratives and deeply examining issues. During the study, group interviews occurred 4 times (approximately 30-45 minutes in length). As one participant maintained a significant speech and language delay, I presented her with picture exchange communication symbols (PECS) to support her involvement during group discussions.

4.3.3 Researcher notes. Throughout the study and in all group sessions, I maintained a personal journal, recording notes, memos, and mental and jotted notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2002). I captured particulars of what I heard, saw, felt, or reflected on regarding the setting, participants, activities, interactions, frequency and duration of particular situations, and any other subtle factors that did not emerge in the group sessions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1990). Immediately following each session, I used these notes to add rich details, descriptions, and comments (Emerson et al., 2002; Merriam, 1990). Additionally, these personal notes and records revealed researcher reflexivity, as I disclosed my personal assumptions, perspectives, beliefs, and biases in relation to the study (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Merriam, 1990).

4.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is “one of the most creative parts of the [research] process where the researcher puts their own unique stamp on the project through the interpretation and analysis” (Gray, 2003, p. 147). Denzin (2004) identified data analysis as “the art of interpretation” (p. 447), emphasizing the aesthetic-like and flexible quality of the analytical process of translation, interpretation, (re)presentation, and legitimacy:

Interpretation is a productive process that sets forth the multiple meanings of an event, object, experience, or text. Interpretation is transformative. It illuminates,
throws light on experience. It brings out, and refines, as when butter is clarified, the meanings that can be sifted from a text, an object, or a slice of experience. (p. 453)

The analysis demands a sense of interrogation and dissection, establishing patterns and tensions, identifying codes and thematic categories, organizing text, and most critically searching for meaning and making sense of the data (Delamont, 2002; Denzin, 2004; Gray, 2003).

Using a narrative approach places stories within a systematic, methodological, and social scientific realm, in which they may be studied (Randall, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1988). To develop and make sense of the children’s stories and experiences, identifying significant emerging elements within the data, I explored field texts highlighting contexts, characters, key events, and conclusions (Creswell, 2005). Riessman (1993) classified this as “scrutinizing” (p. 57) the data or drafts of texts, for surfacing meaningful patterns, tensions, discourses, and positioning of the narrator as self and with others.

In analyzing the data, attempting to stretch “beyond the text to the context” (Fox, 2009, p. 51), I used various overlapping lenses or filters to sieve for meanings (pp. 51-56):

(a) Cognitive -- Establishing extensive categorizations of ideas, objects, knowledge (e.g., religion, job skills, etc.);

(b) Semiotic -- Extrapolating metaphors, insinuations, and reflective words or phrases from the texts, allowing meanings to materialize, from “the use of pictures projected into the minds of the interlocutors who are seeking to describe the relationships between ideas and objects” (p. 53);

(c) Experiential -- Awareness of researchers’ position to the narrator/text, and consideration of narrators’ body language, sensory experiences, emotions, and affective behaviours;
(d) Ethical -- Recognizing the range of narrators’ moral, political, and legal beliefs and views depending on the context in which they are positioned;

(e) Hermeneutic -- Understanding that critical reflection of past experiences/events and narrators’ interpretations of these experiences/events are grounded within particular cultural, historical, political, and linguistic contexts.

Crucial to interpreting children’s narrative accounts, identifying common threads, linkages, and interconnections, is the narrator’s voice (Chase, 2005). Listening to minoritized children’s particular narratives, and taking into account Fox’s (2009) lenses, I maintained a “supportive voice that pushes the narrator’s voice in the limelight” (Chase, 2005, p. 665). After I scrutinized the data and searched for emerging themes and patterns, the participants and I collaboratively told, re-told, wrote, and re-wrote their narratives, negotiating which pieces of stories to include, what they thought of surfacing themes and interpretations, where to position texts, and the organization and editing of each narrative (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2005).

In developing the narratives, it was sometimes necessary to re-word or re-structure participants’ original interview texts in order to support readability and comprehension. All participants maintained some form of communication, language, and comprehension difficulties. Thus, in sharing experiences participants did not always employ complete sentences, grammar structure, or clearly articulate terms and/or phrases. Additionally, as participants in this study were young adolescents, they frequently provided brief and/or “yes/no” responses requiring ample probing. In such cases, I revised participants’ verbatim responses (e.g., editing sentence structure, adding punctuation, pronouns, etc.) to fortify reader comprehension and strengthen participants’ conveying of personal understandings and
meanings, ensuring narratives flowed as complete and understandable stories grounded in participants’ experiences. To illustrate my amendments of original texts, I present one example for each participant in Table 2.

Highlighting children’s voices and stories, ensuring their experiences, understandings, lives, and concerns are heard becomes the primary task – that is, their voices, as narrators, were clearly positioned within the centre of each narrative (Chase, 2005). Ensuring the analysis and interpretation of children’s narratives are representative of participants’ perspectives and voices, I continuously conferred with participants during and after group sessions, confirming accurate reflections of responses or intended responses. Also, I re-presented to participants completed drafts of their narratives to ensure accurate and appropriate portrayal of their stories, as they desire. For example, I re-presented children’s narratives to them 3 times during the research process: (1) the first reflecting group session #1, (2) the second reflecting group sessions #1-3, and (3) the third reflecting sessions #1-6 (final narrative). Although I engaged in interpretation of the data, I recognized the intersubjectivity between myself as researcher and participants’ voices, and as such presumably became “vulnerable in the text…. [incorporating my] emotions, thoughts, research relationships, and … unstable interpretive decisions” (Chase, 2005, p. 666).

I also used critical discourse analysis to interpret participants’ narratives. Critical discourse analytical approaches do not heed to one specific theory or method of analyzing texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). However, depending on the research questions, broad theories and suggestions guide analysis and interpretation of data (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). For example, based upon the study’s focus on schooling experiences of minoritized groups, general theories and methodologies guiding critical discourse analysis included (a)
sociocognitive approach - social actors interconnections with social systems, individuals’ cognitive perceptions, subjective experiences, and its relation to social representations (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies); and (b) discourse-historical approach – utilized within studies on discriminatory discourses and emphasizes contexts as chiefly historically grounded (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). From these approaches, some suggestions for researchers involve (a) analyzing linguistic properties, such as word order, intonation, figures of speech, hesitations, coherence, lexicon, linguistic repairs (e.g., “I mean…”), etc.; (b) tending to discourses within the text that are not only explicit and present, but also implicit and absent, considering implicit meanings, insinuations, implications, and assumptions, as these may indicate whether something interesting is happening; (c) interrogating contexts for official norms and discourses, including the historical contexts; and (d) contemplating language, terms, and arguments employed strategically within texts for: membership categorization (e.g., metaphors, figures of speech replacing words/phrases for another with similar meaning, figures of speech describing a part in reference to a whole or vice versa), stereotypical inferences and ascribing of traits toward groups, and perspectives rationalizing political inclusion and exclusion of groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). I deliberated the text, considering other ways in which they may be interpreted, and related them with other texts (e.g., literature, documents, etc…) (McGregor, 2003). Moreover, critically stirring about and agitating the texts, I questioned the text (McGregor, 2003), contemplating how discourses and discursive practices may be produced, reproduced, and arranged within the texts, and how these influence learning and inclusion for minoritized children.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants:</th>
<th>GEM</th>
<th>ALICE</th>
<th>SIMON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context:</strong></td>
<td>Gem and I discussed what makes her feel included at school.</td>
<td>Alice and I discussed understandings of difference and being different.</td>
<td>Simon and I discussed exclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original Interview Text:</strong></td>
<td>Amanda: So Gem what are you going to make in here that makes you feel included? Gem: I included in school...I feel school...bus [shows her drawing of school]. Amanda: Can you show me what you do at school that makes you feel included? [referring to her PECs book] Gem: [Selected Computer PEC] Amanda: Oh, OK. Computer. Gem: In school. Amanda: In school. It makes you feel included? Gem: Yes. Amanda: What else? Anything else that makes you feel included at school? Gem: [showed the birthday cake PEC]. When have birthday. Amanda: Oh, when you celebrate your birthday? Gem: Me.</td>
<td>Amanda: So tell me what is different? Alice: Good. Amanda: So different is good. So, Alice said being different is good. What else? Alice: Nice. Amanda: Different is nice...What else, Alice? Different is...? Alice: Friends Amanda: Oh, different is your friends. Wonderful. Friends are different. Alice: Different is good. Amanda: Yes. Alice: Different is nice. Amanda: Yes, different is nice. Being different is...? Alice: School. Amanda: School....Different is? Alice: Spanish. Amanda: That means languages. Good job. Alice: Yes.</td>
<td>Simon: If someone was bullying me that makes me feel excluded. Amanda: Yes. Did that happen to you before? Simon: That’s...that’s...bullying happened to me before and it makes me feel excluded. Amanda: Oh, what happened when you were bullied? What did they do? [no response] Amanda: Can you remember? Simon: I can’t remember what it was... Amanda: I remember last time [previous session] you said somebody swore at you. Simon: Oh, yes. That was the autistic kid. That was grade 8. He swear at me when I go to that boy to see something. He was on the computer. He said “go away” and he swore. Amanda: Oh, he was on the computer and he was in grade 8. Simon: Yes. Amanda: And he swore at you and said to “go away.” And that made you feel...? Simon: Excluded Amanda: Excluded. And what did you do? Did you go away? Simon: I go away. I ignored it. Amanda: Was he in your special class? Simon: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrative Text:</strong></td>
<td>This is my school. I am included in school. I feel included in school, especially on the school bus. Something that makes me feel included at school are the computers. I also feel included at school when my class celebrates my birthday.</td>
<td>I think being different in school is good. I think being different is nice. I see differences at school, like different languages, such as Spanish.... Different is my friends.</td>
<td>Bullying makes me feel excluded. Bullying has happened to me before and it makes me feel excluded.... There was an autistic kid. He is in Grade 8. He is the special needs class. He swears at me. I go to that boy to see something, because he was on the computer. He said “Go away” and he swore at me. That made me feel excluded. I went away and I ignored it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants:</strong></td>
<td><strong>MEW</strong></td>
<td><strong>EDWARD</strong></td>
<td><strong>WILLIAM</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Context:</strong></td>
<td>Mew shared his understandings of disability during a brainstorming session.</td>
<td>During photo narrations Edward described a photo he took representing exclusion.</td>
<td>During photo narrations William described a photo of his teddy bear, inclusion, and exclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Original Interview Text:</strong></td>
<td>Amanda: What do you think about people that have disabilities? Mew: They’re poor. Amanda: Poor, OK. Mew: They’re not rich. They have little. They don’t have money... It’s sad when you don’t have money... They lost their friends or their life, or their house, or food. Amanda: Wow. So you think that people who have autism will lose their friends?... Has that happened to you? Have you lost any friends? Mew: Maybe if they don’t know what you say. Amanda: They don’t understand. Mew: Or, they don’t understand another language. Amanda: Yeah, understand what you say. Mew: Some people don’t speak the same language as us... Maybe they are inside they are good, but inside their heart is good, but outside they are bad. Amanda: Why are they bad outside? Outside in the world? Mew: Because they can not control themselves. Amanda: Oh, OK. Outside they are bad because they can not control themselves... like their behaviours? Mew: Yeah. Oh, or maybe they take drugs. Edward: I think this is exclusion. Amanda: What is it? Edward: When I take a picture of that building. Amanda: Mhmm. Edward: And then my mom told me to take a picture, because that’s where the people goes. Amanda: Who people? Edward: Other people. Amanda: Yeah and why is it exclusion? Edward: Because it’s almost getting old. Amanda: OK. So how does it tell me if people feel left out like they don’t belong? Edward: They don’t belong there, that’s why it’s an old place. Amanda: Uhh, but people do live there. Are they rich people or poor people or average people? Edward: Average people. Amanda: OK. Edward: Sometimes the apartment got broken wall papers. Amanda: Right. Would you want to live there? Edward: No. It’s too old right now. Amanda: Do you remember excluded [from previous session]? Makes you feel what, good or bad? William: Bad. Amanda: Bad. So does your teddy bear make you feel excluded or included? William: Included. Amanda: Included, OK. Do you wish that the teddy bear was at school? William: Uh, nope. Amanda: Why? William: Not included in school. Amanda: What makes you feel excluded, which makes you feel bad? William: I can bring this [point to photo of teddy bear]. Amanda: To school? William: No. Amanda: OK. Listen. What makes you feel excluded from school? William: This [points to photo of teddy bear]. Amanda: Oh, I thought it made you feel included. William: This, will bring it. Amanda: Yes, but what makes you feel bad? William: Bring this. Amanda: Bring the teddy bear? William: No, people will laugh. Amanda: They will laugh at you. William: They will laugh at people if you bring a toy. Amanda: Oh, why would they laugh at you? William: Cause it looks like a baby toy. Amanda: Oh, so that would make you feel excluded. William: Yes.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Narrative Text:</strong></td>
<td>I think that people with disabilities are poor and not rich. They have little or no money, and it’s sad if they don’t have money. I also think maybe on the inside people with disabilities are good... inside their heart is good, but outside they are bad. They are bad outside, because they can not control themselves. People with disabilities may lose their life, their house, and food! They may have to take drugs to control their behaviour... If you have autism you can lose friends if other people don’t know what you say... if they don’t understand you... like a different language, and some people don’t speak the same language as us. This building reminds me of exclusion... It’s a building where people live. The building is getting old... it’s an old place. People don’t belong there. People that live there are not poor or rich, they are average. Sometimes the apartment has broken wall paper. I wouldn’t want to live there. It’s too old right now. Even though she [teddy bear] makes me feel happy and included, I don’t want to bring her to school... this will make me excluded and feeling bad. Bear will not make me feel included at school. I will be excluded, because people will laugh at me. The kids laugh at people if you bring a toy. Bear looks like a baby toy.</td>
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Image Caption: Table 2
CHAPTER FIVE

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY: INCLUSION, DISABILITY, AUTISM, AND POLICY

Fields of special education and educational policies serving students with disabilities are fully established within medical frameworks maintaining deficit oriented discourses (Gabel & Connor, 2008; Reid & Knight, 2006). Educational institutions undergirded by practices and ideals from medical models pathologizing students in accordance to disorders and conditions, cast deficits unto students and blame them for educational struggles, legitimizing classroom categorization, educational remediation, and streaming of students based on traditional and predominant norms of students’ abilities. Such perspectives breed educational inequalities and power imbalances, emphasizing concepts of ableism, which lends more powers and privileges to those fitting within dominant definitions of “able-bodies.” Rauscher and McClintock (1996) contended ableism is,

> a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities. . . . Deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combine to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities. . . . fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable. (p. 198)

Hence, such oppression has nothing to do with impairments situated within the individual, but rather it has everything to do with impairments situated within society, which are then reproduced within schools.

Social models of disability recognize individuals with disabilities as a marginalized and minoritized group due to physical and social barriers; it is this societal exclusion and oppression which disables individuals, not their individual abilities (Gabel & Connor, 2008; Reid & Knight, 2006). Social model perspectives do not deny the importance of intervention
and support for individuals with disabilities, however, it highlights that some interventions embedded within educational, medical, rehabilitative, governmental, etc. institutions may further restrict and disempower those with disabilities (Barnes, 2012). Rather than focus upon limitations within the bodies and minds of those who are disabled, social models draw attention to the environment (physical and social) and cultures (practices, policies, philosophies, prejudices) that disable individuals (Barnes, 2012). I think Wendell’s (1996) viewpoints regarding accessibility, abilities, and opportunities for individuals with disabilities speak to the primary objective of the social model of disability:

> I talk about accessibility and ability rather than independence or integration because I think that neither independence nor integration is always an appropriate goal for people with disabilities. Some people cannot live independently because they will always need a great deal of help from caregivers, and some people with disabilities, for example the Deaf, do not want to be integrated into non-disabled society; they prefer their own, separate social life. Everyone should, however, have access to opportunities to develop their abilities, to work, and to participate in the full range of public and private activities available to the rest of society. (p. 56)

Thus, a social model lens advocates re-conceptualizing societal barriers (i.e., environmental and cultural) that marginalize and limit access and opportunities for those with disabilities.

Classified as a disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)\(^4\) derives from a larger umbrella diagnostic category described as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). PDD is identified by developmental delays surrounding social and communication skills, as well as onset of repetitive behaviours and interests (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000; Hundert et al., 2005; OME, 2007a). Subsets of PDD include “traditional” autism, PDD Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Asperger’s Syndrome, Rett’s Syndrome, and

\(^4\) The presented description and Figure 1 of ASD and PPD do not account for the potentially revised definition and diagnostic criteria of ASD in the new DSM-5, as this thesis was written prior to the publication of DSM-5. However, some major proposed changes include: (a) removing the term PDD, (b) removing Rett’s Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder from ASD, and (c) merging autism, PDD-NOS, and Asperger’s Syndrome into one single diagnosis of ASD (currently these three are considered part of the ASD continuum) (Kaufmann, 2012).
Childhood Disintegrative Syndrome (APA, 2000; Hundert et al.; OME, 2007a). ASD includes only autism, PDD-NOS, and Asperger’s Syndrome, ranging in developmental continuum from severe (i.e., traditional autism) to mild (i.e., Asperger’s Syndrome) (see Figure 1). Five out of six participants have autism, along with other diagnosed conditions. Gem was the only participant not diagnosed with autism, however, her clinical symptoms related to global developmental delays and cerebral palsy align closely to the other participants’ communication and social challenges due to autism.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1.* Subset disorders of Pervasive Development Disorders, including Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Characteristic symptoms of autism are associated predominantly to cognitive and neurological impairments in social skills, forms of communication (i.e., verbal/expressive, non-verbal/receptive), and repetitive, restrictive, and atypical behaviours, interests, and play (APA, 2000; Hundert et al., 2005; OME, 2007a). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - IV-Text Revision (DSM IV-TR) denotes specific diagnostic criteria within each of the three major impaired areas (e.g., there must be a minimum of 6 characteristics displayed over the 3 categories prior to the age of 3; minimum of 2 within
social impairments, minimum of 1 within communication delays, minimum of 1 within repetitive behaviours, etc…) (APA, 2000). However, diagnosis is a complex process, as these characteristics vary along a continuum. Autism appears to be hereditary, correlated with some medical conditions (i.e., fragile X syndrome, William’s syndrome), genetic components and compositions, and biological and neurological brain variations (APA, 2000; Hundert et al.; OME, 2007a). Typically, autistic features present themselves chiefly among boys (i.e., 4-5 times higher than girls) and within children by the age of 3 years old (Hundert et al.). Although early diagnosis can be obtained by 18 months of age, frequently children are not diagnosed until ages 5 or 6 years old (Hundert et al.; National Epidemiologic Database for the Study of Autism in Canada [NEDSAC], 2012). For instance, data from across three Canadian provinces (i.e., Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Southeastern Ontario) indicated approximately 44%-55% of children received an ASD diagnosis after the age of 5 years old (NEDSAC, 2012).

Given the benefits of early childhood care and education for young children with disabilities (Frankel et al., 2010) there has been some governmental advocacy promoting early identification and intervention among young children with ASD (Hundert et al., 2005). Presumably, with increased early identification and diagnosis follows increased prevalence rates of ASD, yet according to the NEDSAC (2012) report this is not the case among Canadian children. Despite the substantial rise from 39% to 204% of childhood ASD (i.e., 2-14 years old) across Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Southeastern Ontario during the period of 2003-2010 (based on the first and last years of the study), NEDSAC (2012) suggested this increase resulted not from earlier age of diagnosis, but perhaps due to (a) increased detection of children with milder forms of ASD within only
Newfoundland and Labrador, (b) increased migration of children previously diagnosed with ASD into Prince Edward Island and Southeastern Ontario, and (c) incorrectly accounting for cases that should have been eliminated (i.e., due to moving out of the region, death, diagnosis removed, or aged out at 15 years old) past the removal date in Southern Ontario.

Data specifically from Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island reported prevalence rates nearly doubling by the last year of the study among children 2-14 years of age; in Newfoundland and Labrador (2008) approximately 1 in 120 children had ASD, and in Prince Edward Island (2010) approximately 1 in 110 children had ASD (NEDSAC, 2012). A rise in autism diagnosis was also demonstrated among boys versus girls within these two provinces; Prince Edward Island (111% boys vs. 18% girls) and Newfoundland and Labrador (87% boys vs. 63% girls) (NEDSAC, 2012). Focusing solely on Southeastern Ontario, as this is the particular Canadian province in which the present study was conducted, there were 1408 children identified with ASD within at least one year during the period of 2003-2010 (NEDSAC, 2012). More specifically, between 2003-2010, prevalence increased in preschool children (2-4 years old) to 1 in 144, elementary school children (5-9 years old) to 1 in 75, and middle years children (10-14 years old) to 1 in 63 (NEDSAC, 2012). Thus, throughout the 7 years span, the overall ASD diagnosis rates among Southeastern Ontario children from 2-14 years of age was 1 in 77 children, almost 2.5 times more prevalency than in 2003 (NEDSAC, 2012). Although, the gender variance appears staggering with 1 in 48 boys versus 1 in 208 girls receiving an ASD diagnosis, the average ASD prevalence percentage increased significantly among girls (161% increase) compared to boys (142% increase) (NEDSAC, 2012). Studies estimate 1 in 165 children receive an ASD diagnosis in Canada (OME, 2007a). However, this estimation is over 5
years old and thus seemingly prevalence rates may have increased, especially considering the extensive rise in ASD prevalence across the NEDSAC (2012) study of the aforementioned three provinces.

Unlike the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, Canada does not maintain a national disability policy (McColl & Stephenson, 2008). Rather, on its federal level, Canada employs a multi-legislative approach in efforts to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals with disabilities (Frankel et al., 2010; McColl & Stephenson, 2008): (a) Signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), (b) Signatory of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), (c) Universal health care system, (d) The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Constitution Act (1982), (e) The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985), and (f) The Employment Equity Act (1995). The latter three Acts prohibit disability discrimination and pledge equitable rights for all Canadians. Federal legislation also extends into areas of education to promote equal educational opportunities, such as the Indian Act (1985), the Canada Student Financial Assistance Act (1994) and Regulations (1995), and the Canada Student Loans Act (1985) and Regulations (1993) (McColl & Stephenson, 2008). Although, these financial Acts and Regulations only pertain to post-secondary students with disabilities.

Legislative acts supporting equality for citizens legally guarantee all children receive free education within local schools, despite disabilities (Frankel et al., 2010; Statistics Canada, 2008b, 2008d). Yet, currently, there is no specific Canadian federal legislation regarding public education for children with disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2008d). Rather, educational policies supporting children with disabilities differ across provinces and
territories, school jurisdictions within provinces and territories, and even within school jurisdictions (Frankel et al.; Statistics Canada, 2008b, 2008d).

The province of Ontario maintains various acts, policies, and regulations specific to educational services and rights for students with disabilities (OME, 2007b, 2012a; McColl & Stephenson, 2008). For example: (a) the Multilateral Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities (2003) contends financial support for post-secondary students with disabilities; (b) Accessibility Plan (2007-2008) emphasize the OME’s responsibility to implement strategies ensuring full accommodations for students with disabilities within their school setting; (c) Education Act (1980) is the hallmark Ontario legislation outlining educational provisions serving children with disabilities. This governing Act highlights the OME’s duties for ensuring free adaptations and accommodations within schools and classrooms for all children with disabilities in the public school system, including assessments, resources, in-class supports, etc. The Act also suggests the Ministry’s responsibility of appointing school districts in undertaking accommodated transportation for children with disabilities to and from school.

There are two predominant special education regulations serving as the mainstay for appropriate implementation of the Education Act (1980) throughout Ontario schools (OME, 2000, 2007b; Nonverbal Learning Difference Ontario, 2007): Firstly, the Special Education Programs and Services (Regulation 306), explicates requirements for school boards to maintain specific special education plans for children with disabilities (i.e., delivery of programming, services, supports/resources, etc.). Secondly, entwined within Regulation 306, includes Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils (Regulation 191/98), overseeing student identification and appropriate classroom placement for students with disabilities (i.e.,
Identification, Placement and Review Committee [IPRC]) and ensuring appeals and/or disagreements to students’ identification and placements are heard by the Ontario Special Education Tribunal. Guardians have legal rights to request for an IPRC. Based on a school team (i.e., parents, teachers, principals, psychologists, etc…) and previous assessments, the IPRC formally identifies and assesses students with disabilities to justify particular educational plans and placement; the IPRC is reviewed annually to continually re-assess students. Once an IPRC decision is finalized students receive an Individual Education Plan (IEP), outlining students’ skills and abilities, areas to improve upon, specialized programming, services, delivery methods, and students’ progress. However, an IEP may be developed for any student, in which the board identifies as requiring extra special educational supports, without the formal process of attaining an IPRC. The benefits of averting the IPRC process is reducing time delays in receiving specific education plans for students with disabilities and it also allows students to participate inclusively within the regular classroom. For example, in 2006/2007 Ontario elementary and secondary school boards reported approximately 293,000 students were receiving some form of special education. From this figure, 198,385 were formally identified with an IPRC, whilst 96,000 were not, and 30,000 did not have an IEP (OME, 2009a). However, the IPRC is a legally binding contract ensuring students receive special education services and supports while also providing guardians with recourse to appeal placements, plans, and services for their child. Funding for these special educational supports are distributed by the Ministry through Ontario’s education funding model (OME, 2000, 2007c, 2012b): (a) Foundation Grant provided to each school board based on total student enrolment within the board; (b) Pupil Accommodation Grant allots funds toward maintenance and construction of school buildings; and (c) Special
Purpose Grant based on specific additional costs for particular boards and students. This grant offers the bulk of special education funding through The Special Education Grant, which provides additional funds to the Foundation Grant and any other Special Purpose Grants. The Special Education Grant is allocated specifically for students requiring special education resources, specialized personnel, equipment, programs, and services. The grant is composed of six factors: Special Education Per-Pupil Amount, the High Needs Amount, the Special Equipment Amount, the Special Incidence Portion, the Facilities Amount, and the Behaviour Expertise Amount.

The OME also provides policy directives related to inclusive education in Ontario school boards. In 2009 the Ministry unveiled the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy as a means to strengthen academic achievement, equity, inclusion, and sense of safety and tolerance for all children (OME, 2009b). The strategy strives to ameliorate discrimination based on differences (i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, language, disability), and instead purport acceptance and respect for diversity. However, 16 years prior in 1993 the Ministry, recognizing the importance of equitable and inclusive schools, devised a policy/program memorandum No. 119 (PPM 119) Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity, instructing school boards to develop individual policies acknowledging institutional barriers perpetuating racist and discriminatory practices within schools (OME, 2009b, 2009c). The main goal for PPM 119 was to move beyond the tokenism of multiculturalism that merely celebrated differences, toward acknowledging embedded prejudice and inequalities within schools (OME, 2009b, 2009c). Due to the newly elected Ontario government in 1995, the policy was never implemented (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008b). However, in June of 2009 the OME put forth a revised
PPM 119 as part of its Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. This memorandum was to expand upon the fundamental principles of the 1993 PPM 119. Interestingly, the strategy includes a few brief mentions of disability and intersections of differences.

Considering a primary focus of this dissertation pertains to inclusion of minoritized students, I present a brief analysis regarding the revamped PPM 119 (2009). The PPM 119 prides itself in maintaining democratic and inclusive education ideals. Such ideals include equity and equality, respect for diversity beyond celebration of differences, and recognition of human, religious, and linguistic rights. The policy also provides a definition of the term *diversity*, in which it lists particular differences of human attributes. It also defines *equity* as “fair,” “respectful,” and “inclusive,” in which it dismisses notions of equal treatment based on unified standards for all, and rather advocates acknowledging all human difference. In rejecting philosophies of meritocracy (Harper, 1997), the PPM 119 appears to recognize the difficulties that reside with a belief in same opportunity for all students regardless of difference.

These democratic principles are further reinforced within the policy’s established “action plan,” as it concentrates on “…identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ learning growth, and contribution to society” (OME, 2009c, Introduction section, ¶ 4). Such ideologies are associated with providing exceptional education for students. The policy clearly articulates that, “Providing a high-quality education for all is a key means to fostering social cohesion based on an inclusive society where diversity is affirmed within a framework of common values that promote the well-being of all citizens” (OME, 2009c, Introduction section, ¶ 3). However,
the underlying assumption within this passage is Ontarians reside within an inclusive society, in which similar values and beliefs toward diversity and well-being are shared among its citizens. It assumes that the norms, ideals, legislation, guiding principles, etc., are culturally neutral, and that Ontarians may freely participate within an inclusive society (James, 2001).

This statement ignores systemic discriminatory practices and power structures entrenched within society. Believing a fully inclusive society exists conveys a commitment toward democratic racism, as there is a denial that racism is submerged within societal systems (Henry & Tator, 1999). Although the policy stands upon a platform of democratic values, fairness, and equity, it discounts societal systemic attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours which often translate into discriminatory practices within institutions (Henry & Tator, 1999). On the one hand, the policy appears to emphasize systemic barriers and power relations within the school system, but on the other hand disregards these within the general society. As Nieto (2002) clearly emphasized, schools are rooted within communities, and thus they mirror the many systemically embedded injustices within larger society. Thus inferring, prejudices within schools results from prejudices within society (Harper, 1997).

Eliminating discrimination and systemic barriers are phrases reverberating throughout the revised PPM 119 memorandum. In removing such hindrances, the Ministry hopes “all students feel welcomed and accepted in school life” (OME, 2009c, Background section, ¶ 3). It is positive that the policy recognizes within schools the relationship between systemic barriers, discrimination, and power, as it demonstrates a push beyond the “bland, pluralistic, multicultural talk celebrating ‘cultural diversity’ and/or ‘cultural difference’…” (Dei, 2007, p. 188). In efforts to eradicate discrimination within schools, the policy emphasizes the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom. However,
the Charter does not provide a definition for discrimination or racism, and as Henry and Tator (1999) argued “…while the Charter prohibits racial discrimination in law…it does not require governments or legislatures to promote racial equality” (p. 101). Ironically, PPM 119 asserts equitable human rights and abolition of discrimination grounded within a document refraining from identifying meanings of discrimination or racism, and without the means to promote ideals of equality (i.e., it can only forbid discrimination). Although these documents powerfully reaffirm rights for students as Canadian citizens, it does not challenge the institutional and societal systems in which prejudice exists (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004).

Another area of ambiguity within the policy pertains to ideals of citizenship and students. The policy suggests through the school system, students become equipped to function within society as “engaged, productive, and responsible citizens….where] engaged citizens are aware of their rights….accept responsibility for protecting their rights and the rights of others” (OME, 2009c, Introduction section, ¶ 3). Additionally, schools will “…help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizens who can contribute to both a strong economy and a cohesive society” (OME, 2009c, Introduction section, ¶ 5). Yet, one may wonder who determines what an engaged, productive, responsible, skilled, knowledgeable, and caring citizen looks like? Most likely these definitions are derived from the predominant groups’ understandings of what productivity, responsibilities, intellect, and kindness entails. If a citizen does not adhere to predominant groups’ perceptions of a “citizen,” they are susceptible to forms of discrimination, prejudice, and harassment. The “good” citizen as postulated by Ontario schools, rest within values, practices, and ideals of dominant groups. That is, the prescribed normal Ontario citizen likely originates from dominant groups’ discourse, thereby perpetuating imbalanced power relations.
Furthermore, by suggesting knowledge and protection of societal rights is the responsibility of the individual (i.e., the current student and future citizen) insinuates a sense of blame. For example, if a citizen complains of prejudice and discriminatory practices within their community, it is her or his responsibility to understand their rights and how to protect these rights; otherwise, it is the citizen’s fault for a lack of awareness. Firstly, it must be recognized that these rights emanate from the Canadian Charter as generated by the dominant discourse. Secondly, it is unfair to assume students and families from minoritized groups are fully versed in their rights as Ontario citizens. This assumption dismisses inequitable power structures favouring one group (i.e., those with awareness and capacity to protect personal rights) whilst blaming the other. This statement inadvertently contributes to the hierarchy separating Ontarians into “‘us’” versus “‘them’” (Henry & Tator, 1999, p. 99). Another point of contention pertains to the notion that students, a marginalized group, are not considered to be citizens until they have been prepared and groomed by the Ontario school system for roles and responsibilities within society. This continues to fuel hierarchal structures within schools, devaluing students’ current capacity to contribute to society, and subsequently shifting power away from students and placing it back into educational institutions.

The PPM 119 defines *inclusive education* as being founded in “…principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students” (OME, 2000c, Appendix: Definitions, ¶ 4). However, the policy does not define the term *inclusion* or its principles. Without a concrete explanation of inclusion through the lens of the Ministry, there cannot be a true understanding of inclusive education. The policy merely meanders around the term. It is a
passive definition void of proactive or substantial conceptualizations of what it means to embrace inclusion within the education system.

The definition further stipulates “Students [should] see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment…” (OME, 2009c, Appendix: Definitions, ¶ 4). This effort to include curricula mirroring student experiences, histories, and cultures is also supported by Nieto (2002), as she called for educational systems embracing global perspectives and knowledges throughout school subjects. She argued that “…those who have been present in our history, arts, literature, and science should be made visible” within schools (Nieto, 2002, p. 36). Through this embracing, existing hegemonic practices may be challenged (Nieto, 1999). However, this integration of diverse knowledge must genuinely reflect students’ cultures, and foster a curiosity of other cultures (Nieto, 1999), rather than a superficial relay of information (e.g., celebrating differences).

In addition, the policy suggests schools employ educators and personnel representative of various diverse backgrounds through race, gender, ethnicity, etc… (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009c, Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices section, ¶ 1). Both Nieto (2002) and Dei (1996a) suggested schools include staff reflecting societies’ diversities and knowledge. Yet, this does not necessarily prevent systemic prejudice, as such incorporation still contributes to inequality, as those from minoritized groups still must conform to dominant groups’ ideologies, values, and beliefs framing the educational system (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004).

A main priority within this policy is increasing student achievement and minimizing achievement gaps. The revised PPM 119 contends through “…inclusive curriculum and assessment practices and effective instructional strategies that reflect the diverse needs of all
students....[this will] support student success and reduce achievement gaps” (OME, 2009c, Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices section, ¶ 1-2). While it is commendable the policy recognizes the importance of adapting and accommodating curricula to suit students, there is an undertone of bias residing within the phrase “...reflect diverse needs of all students....” This statement associates inclusive curriculum with supporting needs of students, rather than with transforming curricula to reflect differences residing in society. By indicating schools provide inclusive adaptations and accommodations reflecting students’ needs, presents a notion that differences among students is a weakness, a deficiency, and a need. Not only is it disempowering to minoritized students by equating needs to differences, but it also suggests due to students’ inability to understand and succeed within traditional curricula, it must now be revised, adapted, and inclusive to fit individual needs. This lens shifts fault onto students’ needs rather than onto the educational system, and propagates deficit-based discourses toward minoritized students.

The policy also asserts inclusive curriculum maintains assessment practices “...designed to ensure consistency of standards...” (OME, 2009c, Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices section, ¶ 3). In this way, students’ achievements earned through evaluations will be “...valid and reliable and lead to improvement of student learning...” (OME, 2009c, Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment Practices section, ¶ 3). It may be argued that although there are a set of “Assessment and Evaluation Strategies” determining appropriateness and fairness of evaluation practices, there is still potential for discriminatory practices (intentional or unintentional) based on teachers’ judgments and decisions, stemming from personal conceptual repertoires regarding minoritized students. For example, teachers decide which assessment methods suit students, and whether evaluation processes
are fair to all students. However, if teachers maintain unclear understandings of antiracism, social justice, societal oppressions, and assumptive, stereotypical, and pejorative views of minorized groups, their decisions regarding equitable assessments and evaluations for minoritized students may perpetuate prejudicial discourses and norms operating in society (Henry & Tator, 1999).

Furthermore, greater clarification is required pertaining to the idea of developing assessments to maintain “…consistency of standards….” There is ambiguity with regards to interpretation of this statement. From one perspective, it may suggest the way in which student assessments are devised should be reliable to ensure fairness for all students. From another perspective this statement implies a sense of sameness, opposing the policy’s promise of adapting and accommodating inclusive curriculum and assessment practices. The latter interpretation suggests particular criteria are outlined to promote consistent standardization of assessments designating student achievement. In doing so, student differences are ignored and notions of equal treatment surface, contradicting the policy’s definition of equity.

As the Ministry endeavours toward greater inclusive education through its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy and PPM 119, it also developed a policy specifically for students with ASD: policy/program memorandum No. 140 (PPM 140) Incorporating methods of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) into programs for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (OME, 2007d, 2012a). PPM 140 emphasizes school boards responsibilities to provide ABA behavioural and methodological approaches supporting students with ASD. ABA, grounded within positivist and scientific frames, observes, analyzes, and measures behavioural changes in attempts to solve behavioural issues. ABA
studies relationships between the environment and behaviours, noting antecedents and consequences serving to increase or decrease behaviours (Hundert et al., 2005). The overarching goal of ABA is to support individuals’ behavioural temperaments and overall functioning through systematic behavioural modification techniques and learning principles (e.g., reinforcement schedules, data tracking of behaviours, defining functions of behaviours, assessment of behavioural deficits and excesses, etc…). Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI), first established in the late 1980’s by Dr. Ivar Lovaas, employs ABA principles and techniques specifically for young children with ASD to strengthen developmental domains, including social skills, social-emotional/behavioural, language/communication, and academics (Hundert et al.). ABA, however, conveys ideals of the medical model, individualizing deficits of behaviours while also attempting to normalize functioning of the individual to suit more appropriate and traditional developmental and behavioural norms as dictated by societal dominant discourse. Although some groups suggest it is the behaviour that is of concern, rather than the individual with autism, it is unclear how one might disassociate an individual’s behaviour from the individual themselves. Ultimately, the individual with autism receives treatment through ABA principles and techniques to “fix” their deficits and normalize behaviours and developmental skills. Rather than address deficits within society and schools, which serve as barriers for those with autism, ABA addresses deficits within the individual with autism.

PPM 140 indicates incorporation of ABA methods into IEPs and states educators employ ABA methods. However, the policy is unclear regarding professional training for ABA and who will serve as ABA therapists employing ABA techniques within the classroom. Namely, the policy does not specify which educators are expected to take on the
additional role of behavioural therapist (e.g., teachers in the regular classroom, special education teachers, resource teachers, hired paraprofessionals, such as child and youth workers or specially trained ABA therapists/consultants, etc...). Many teachers acknowledge incorporating inclusive education approaches into classrooms (e.g., antiracism, critical multicultural methods) as inherently time-consuming and laborious, adding to workloads and pressures; thus inclusion becomes assimilated to curricula overload and burden (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2013; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, 2003). Requesting teachers undertake behavioural therapy responsibilities further add to their already overwhelming sense of classroom obligations and accountability to foster inclusion.

In addition to the Ministry of Education’s PPM 140, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (OMCYS) also developed a government funded Autism Intervention Program for children and youth (up to age 18 years) diagnosed with ASD to receive autism support services and ABA/IBI services if referred by a medical doctor (i.e., family physician, psychiatrist, paediatrician), psychologist, occupational therapist, nurse, and social worker (OMCYS, 2011a, 2011b). As of 2007-2008, 1,400 children received services from the Autism Intervention Program (OMCYS, 2010), which is approximately 2% of the 7,000 children with ASD in Ontario schools (Ministers’ Autism Spectrum Disorders Reference Group, 2007). Children may receive ABA/IBI services from one of the OMCYS’ selected nine service providers or guardians may receive funding directly to arrange for services from a private organization. Interestingly, after surveying the OMCYS’ nine allotted service providers, the Toronto Star Autism Project (Oleniuk, 2012) found the average waitlist time before receiving any services is between 1-4 years, depending on the region of Ontario in which the child resides. According to Oleniuk (2012), the OMCYS reported 1,700 children
throughout Ontario were on the waitlist for the Autism Intervention Program (as of June 30th, 2012). Furthermore, as part of the Autism Intervention Program, the OME and the OMCYS jointly established the School Support Program linking school boards with ASD Consultants from one of the nine service providers. However, although families may apply for the program, not all children are deemed eligible (e.g., children should be considered on the severe side of the ASD spectrum) and others may be discharged from services, which guardians have the option to appeal (OMCYS, 2011a). Children may reapply for services after discharged, but only to acquire novice skills or build previous skills and if eligibility criteria are still met (OMCYS, 2011b). Another point of contention is the misleading number of ABA/IBI hours provided to children. On the one hand, the Autism Intervention Program states services are offered for only 2-6 months, 2-4 hours/per week depending on the services, with some flexibility in increasing or reducing service duration (OMCYS, 2011b), yet on the other hand in the Program guidelines report to hopeful parents the expected service provision hours of IBI per week is between 20-40 hours (OMCYS, 2011c). Limiting service provision to 2-6 months for a few hours per week with potential of reapplying for more services seems unmerited considering the benefits of ABA/IBI are due to its intensive hourly and yearly commitment: 20-40 hours/per week for a minimum of 2 years in therapy (Hundert et al., 2005). Although, the Program acknowledges its services are not to provide intense therapy or address all the child’s needs, as it only focuses on the highest priority domains for the child (OMCYS, 2011b). With unexplained long wait-lists, limited eligibility, and muddled duration periods for service provision, many families distraught and confused by promises of the Autism Intervention Program opt instead for
private ABA/IBI services, despite the significant and often prohibitive financial costs (estimated $60,000.00/year [Oleniuk, 2012]).

Considering the rise of ASD diagnosis within Ontario, and the ambiguity of educational policies and practices supporting children with ASD and other disabilities, some parents seek out privatized educational supports for their child. Private service providers (i.e., centres, organizations) offer individualized and specialized programming and training catered toward children’s abilities and skills (e.g., social skills groups, IBI training, academic tutoring, etc…). Although PPM 140 and the Autism Intervention Program encourage parent involvement related to programs and services provided for their child, privatized centres more likely provide parents with frequent and consistent access to discuss, monitor, and review their child’s progress and any areas of concerns. Often, therapists and instructors within privatized centres advocate on behalf of parents of children with ASD, serving as liaisons between families and schools (e.g., develop funding applications, serve on special education school team/committee for child with autism, volunteer to meet with school teacher, etc…).

Participants in this study attended a non-profit organization for children, youth, and adults with developmental disabilities (e.g., autism, learning disabilities, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, etc…). All participants received some form of private teaching (i.e., ABA/IBI, academic tutoring, speech and language, life skills, and social skills), as well as participated in group social skills programming. Within small learning groups, the physical environment and teaching methods and instructions are suited to clients’ personal learning pace, modes, and abilities. Located in the GTA, the organization maintains a holistic and inclusive approach in providing services to clients from various ethnic backgrounds. The
centre also maintains strong community partnerships for clients to engage in community training and vocation, fostering independence, self-confidence, and greater community inclusion.
CHAPTER SIX

PARTICIPANTS’ PORTRAITS AND NARRATIVE SUMMARIES

The following chapter contains brief portrait summaries of the participants. The portraits provide an overview of each child, portraying details of their families, interests, disabilities, academics, school experiences, and personal understandings of difference, learning, and inclusion. In writing the children’s portraits, I referred to participants’ completed narratives, parent/guardian information forms, descriptions from the lead program instructor, and other relevant documents retained in participants’ centre files.

Consulting with the program instructor, parents, and documents, corroborating medical and school details, dates, diagnosis, and family living situations and practices serves to support a holistic and complete representation of participants within each portrait. However, participants’ narratives served as the primary source of information for all portraits. Intending to present accurate accounts and descriptions as reflected in participants’ narratives and remaining faithful to their voices, I included specific details and terminology drawn from their narratives (e.g., particular interests or pastimes). Occasionally, such details/terms may seem peculiar or unusual to the reader, however, in keeping consistent and truthful to participants’ narratives it was important to include such information. Moreover, the subsequent portraits aim to provide only a summary of the narratives, rather than analysis of the narratives. Particulars, concepts, themes, patterns, etc., requiring additional discussion are presented within a later chapter; participants’ verbatim narrative texts with analysis ensue within the Findings and Discussions chapter. All names of participants, people, and places are pseudonyms. Here, then, are the portraits of Gem, Alice, Simon, Mew, Edward, and William.
6.1 Gem

Gem was 13 years old and in Grade 8 when the study began. She is an only child. Her parents are divorced, and currently she lives in the GTA with her mother and another caregiver. Gem remains in touch with her biological father and visits him frequently. Her family is from China, and Mandarin is the predominant language used at home. Gem was born in China, however she moved to Vancouver at approximately 3 years of age and resided there for a few years. Her family then moved to Hong Kong, where she lived for approximately 5 years. Gem and her family returned to Ontario in 2006, where she was enrolled in a public elementary school in the GTA. Currently, Gem’s mother runs a home daycare and her biological father is an assembly factory worker. Gem’s mother is considered to be at an ESL level 1 or 2 (i.e., beginning to high beginning level with limited English language vocabulary and comprehension). Gem is bilingual in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese, and reports her family believes in the Tao religion, however she is also a Christian and believes in Jesus. Although, her mother reports the family does not practice a religion at home.

Gem is diagnosed with cerebral palsy, global developmental delays, and mild hemiparesis (muscle weakness on one side of the body). Shortly after birth, during the evening, Gem began having seizures and was hospitalized for 10 days. Gem is
developmentally delayed in all areas, especially in her speech and language development. Cognitively, Gem is working at a Grade 3 level (approximately age 8/9), and she has severe challenges in expressive/verbal communication (i.e., making recognized English language sounds, limited vocabulary). For example, she often babbles words and sentences, making it difficult to fully understand her speech. She also frequently uses one or two word responses. Therefore, Gem relies on her writing and drawing skills, body language, facial expressions, as well as the use of Picture Exchange Communication Symbols (PECS) to support her verbal communication. Gem is stronger in her receptive language skills, and comprehends simple and slow instructions and phrases well, in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Gem receives various service supports and assessments, including, developmental paediatrics, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and social skills programming and individualized training at the centre or in her home. She is physically independent and does not require the use of a wheelchair, and she has independent self-help skills (e.g., toileting, dressing, and feeding). At the time of the study, Gem lived approximately 20-30 minutes from the centre. She is regularly driven by car to the centre by her mother or biological father to attend her programs.

Gem attempts to engage in social interactions, and she maintains interests seemingly typical for 13 year old girls. For example, she professes a love and fascination of boy bands and pop stars (e.g., One Direction, Jonas Brothers, Justin Beiber) and school crushes (e.g., she indicates a love for another student at the centre). She finds pleasure in going to the beach, eating pizza and ice cream, playing volleyball, and using the computer. Despite her disabilities, Gem maintains a positive self-perception, identifying herself as pretty and as a good student.
Gem attends a special education classroom for children with disabilities at Litteune Public School. She remains in this fully segregated special education classroom for her entire learning day. She enjoys her schooling experiences and learning, stating she often feels happy at school. Although, Gem also notes feeling worried about her books and her teacher, Mrs. O. Gem thinks she participates in the special education class because she is in trouble; she perceives the students in her special education classroom as bad.

At school, Gem plays many sports, such as mini-golfing, hula-hoops, and volleyball. She finds these activities engaging, especially when she plays volleyball outdoors, as it makes her feel happy and calm. Gem’s friends include Lucy from school, Alice and Edward from the centre, and her Mom. Gem is proud she has girlfriends. When asked to describe her best day at school, Gem struggled to provide a response. However, she competently explains her desires for school, stating she wishes her class would hold more ice cream parties, just like in the regular classrooms. She also wishes she could take her One Direction boy band books to school.

Gem reveals the awkwardness she feels when hearing people talk in her classroom. She attempts to speak to others in her class, however prefers using her picture symbols. Gem regularly visits a teacher throughout the school year who assists in developing her speech skills, encouraging her to talk. As Gem describes her efforts to speak, she explains it is fatiguing for her, and she becomes quite tired.

Currently, Gem feels a sense of inclusion in school, especially on the school bus. She also highlights feelings of inclusion at the centre, because of her friendship with Edward; she enjoys playing together. School features supporting Gem’s sense of inclusion include, computer use, celebrations of her birthday, and participating in graduation proceedings.
Graduation is a particular schooling experience, which Gem explains provides her with a sense of school belonging and involvement. She eagerly describes participating in the graduation photo taking process, and expresses her feelings of excitement and joy. Gem is quite proud of her class graduation book. Receiving school awards, such as the “I can succeed” and “Future Aces” awards also provides Gem with feelings of happiness and belonging.

In discussions of school bullies, Gem is uncertain why bullies harm other children. Even though Gem has not incurred any bullying experiences at school, she expresses feelings of exclusion, in which she sometimes feels left out. Although Gem finds it challenging to explain how exclusion makes her feel, she describes people staring at others in school as negative, relating this to exclusion. Gem describes the need for her iPhone at school for phone calls and listening to music, yet she also indicates her cell phone makes her feel excluded sometimes at school. Thus, Gem maintains mixed emotions regarding schooling, with both a sense of inclusion and exclusion.

Gem expresses difficulty in describing her conceptualizations of differences, however, she indicates noticing differences at school and considers being different in school good. Gem highlights that students in school talk differently and practice different religions. She also relates differences to diversity in hair and hairstyles, and identifies herself as being different, because she has a ponytail. Otherwise, she does not identify as being special or different.

During the study, Gem shares personal ideas and thoughts pertaining to culture, religion, language, skin colour, and disability and autism. Gem acknowledges that other people’s cultures are fine, and is aware of cities and countries, such as Hong Kong and
Guyana. She reports knowledge of cultural foods, such as, curry and roti, and she identifies Portuguese as a language. Gem relates concepts of religion to prayer, Taoism, the Son of God, Jesus, and Christianity. Gem identifies black as a skin colour and does not identify herself as being of white skin colour (another participant considered Gem as having a white skin tone, and Gem disagreed). During discussions of skin colour, Gem indicates she likes the colour green, although recognizes people do not have green skin colours, as these are reserved for animals. Gem is unsure whether she enjoys diversity of skin colour among people or if she prefers everyone to have the same skin tone. Although Gem is not diagnosed with autism, she indicates it is OK to have autism. She explains people with autism easily lose friends and they are capable of seeing (i.e., people with autism do not have vision impairments). A behaviour she associates to people with autism is grumpy, and she notes autism makes people confused. Gem also acknowledges that it is OK if people have speech/communicative difficulties, as it is another difference; optimistically she perceives these as acceptable differences.

Overall, Gem is a sensitive, helpful, and optimistic girl. Similar to most early teen girls, she has celebrity boy crushes, love interests in her social settings, and enjoys listening to pop music, drawing red hearts, and wearing fashionable trends. Scattered across her bedroom walls are boy band posters and home-made love signs. She maintains close relationships with her mother and her female teacher. Gem is athletic and enjoys sports; she recognizes its benefits in reducing anxiety. She also seems to have a strong desire to socialize and assimilate with other peers. Aware of her speech and language delays, Gem candidly shares the discomfort, fatigue, and perhaps embarrassment she feels when surrounded by talking peers. In spite of these challenges, she positively makes efforts in
contributing her ideas, participating in social events, and embracing differences in the ways in which people communicate and speak. Gem maintained mixed feelings regarding her schooling experiences, with moments inciting both an inclusive and exclusive sense of belonging. Gem is very excited about starting high school in the new school year, and continually works toward developing her communication skills, life skills, and cognitive growth. Her mother hopes and dreams one day Gem will obtain a suitable job, wishing her daughter happiness in life.
6.2. Alice

Alice, 12 years old and in Grade 7 when the study began, is the youngest of three daughters in her family. Her two older sisters, Jessica and Elli, are both young adults, ages 18 and 21 years old; Jessica currently attends a local high school, and Elli attends university in Toronto. Alice lives with her mother, father, and two sisters together in the GTA. Alice’s family is from China, and they immigrated to Canada in 2004. Alice was born in China, and with her family, immigrated to Canada when she was 5 years old. Alice is bilingual in Cantonese and English, however, Cantonese is Alice’s first language and it is the primary language spoken at home. Alice’s parents are considered to be at an ESL level 1 or 2 (i.e., beginning to high beginning level with limited English language vocabulary and comprehension). She reports practicing a religion and praying, but is uncertain of what the religion is named. However, her parents report the family does not practice a religion at home.

Alice is diagnosed with autism and global developmental delays. In China, Alice was born as a healthy baby girl, with no complications during the pregnancy and delivery. Approximately 1.5 weeks after birth, Alice returned to the hospital requiring treatment for a cough and umbilical cord infection. From 3 months of age until 5 years old (upon immigrating to Canada in 2004), Alice lived with other relatives in China. Due to China’s strict child birth policies, Alice’s parents decided to “hide” Alice in the care of other relatives, as she was the 3rd girl child born into the family; her parents visited her every few
weeks. Alice was first diagnosed with developmental disabilities approximately 2-3 months after her birth. The family struggled to find suitable services in China for Alice, and thus opted to move to Canada.

Alice is developmentally delayed in her cognitive and communication skills, especially her receptive and expressive language abilities. She also maintains challenges in her social skills (e.g., understanding social distances, physical touching, eye contact, conversing, etc.) and occasionally exhibits anxiety in social settings. Cognitively, Alice works at an early Grade 2 level (approximately age 7/8), and has difficulties in areas of literacy, numeracy, and writing skills. She is also learning to improve upon her verbal articulation of words and language/instruction comprehension. Within a group setting, Alice may sometimes loose focus and attention on a task, requiring re-direction or repetition of instructions. However, when working one-on-one with Alice, she demonstrates wonderful attentive abilities. Alice maintains strong gross and fine motor skills, visual memory skills, and she is independent in a majority of her self-help skills (e.g., toileting, dressing, and feeding). She receives various service supports and assessments, including, developmental paediatrics, psychologists, speech and language therapy, and social skills programming and individualized training from the centre. At the time of the study, Alice lived approximately 20 minutes from the centre by car. Her father is the only driver in the family and he frequently works when Alice attends her programs, thus she is regularly brought to the centre by her mother or two sisters via public transportation.

Alice also maintains interests typical for a tween girl (i.e., in-between a child and a teenager). She is captivated by nailpolish of all colours and kinds, enjoys Justin Beiber movies, and from time to time pretends she is a movie star. As most 12 year old girls, Alice
is aware of her body size/image; she notes feeling that her body is heavy. Pink is one of Alice’s favourite colour, and UNO is one of her favourite games to play. Alice also spends time using the computer and playing games on her iPad. She often thinks about sports, like basketball and volleyball, and she reports dreaming about the park.

Alice attends a special education classroom for children with disabilities at Prince Baylis Public School. She remains in her special education class for more than 50% of her school day, and is also partially integrated into the regular classroom for at least one academic subject. Alice enjoys participating in the special education class, referring to the class as good and special. Her friends include Steward from school, and Gem from the centre. Alice considers Gem to be a friend, because she is nice. As with Gem, Alice assumes she participates in the special education class because she is in trouble, and this classroom is for bad students.

In school, Alice describes learning about math, computer, and different languages. Alice understands learning math is beneficial, and the teacher helps her learn this academic subject. However, the teacher often confuses Alice during the computer period of the class. Alice’s preferred learning experiences include studying different languages and playing games, especially UNO. She often plays UNO at school by herself, but it makes her feel happy. Incorporating games into her school experiences supports Alice’s learning, as she indicates learning is fun and easy when she can learn through playing games.

Alice reports contradictory feelings of both happiness and upset when attending school; sometimes she does not enjoy school, while other times she feels happy, good, and fine. Candidly, Alice explains worrying about herself in school, as it is hard, and at times she becomes frustrated. Yet, she tries in school and makes an effort to do well. Although her
classmates and teacher provide her with positive feelings, such as happy and good, Alice also indicates she wishes her class is a good class, and that her teacher was nicer, even though the teacher is not particularly mean toward Alice. Alice associates feelings of goodness to her teacher, because sometimes she takes the class outside to the park. When asked to discuss her best day in school and what it might include, Alice indicates that she simply does not know.

In examining her understandings of inclusion at school, Alice struggles to think of schooling experiences, in which she feels included with a sense of belonging. She describes playing UNO by herself at school as an inclusion experience, because it is fun and makes her feel happy. Alice reports mostly having fun at school, and rarely feeling left out. Alice also anticipates graduating from middle school next year; thinking about this experience presents her with a sense of hope and involvement in school. Further reflecting on her inclusion experiences, Alice explains Amanda (the researcher) offers her a sense of belonging at the centre.

Although Alice does not bring her iPad or cell phone to school, she indicates these technological devices provide her with a sense of school inclusion. Specifically, her iPad supports her learning experiences, as it assists with school work and she can also use it to play games. Having a cell phone also offers feelings of inclusion at school, but on the other hand, as Alice reports, it makes her feel excluded and left out. Alice dislikes feeling left out at school, yet she notes feeling a lack of belonging because she does not listen well in school. Alice considers students who do not listen in school, as students who do not belong in school. Alice also reports experiencing a bullying situation one time in school, in which another student pushed her by the lockers. Unaware as to why the student pushed her, Alice
did not retaliate or cry, but rather she told her teacher. She is unsure as to the outcome of the situation. When asked during photo narrations to select and discuss her research photos pertaining to exclusion, Alice describes three images relating to her home. The first two images are of baby birds hatching from their eggs in a nest. Alice states the birds have a mommy and the nest is situated on a tree near her home. For Alice, these photos impart feelings of exclusion. The third image is of a tree on her front lawn, which she describes with much distress and annoyance. She states her disapproval and unhappiness for the image, and stresses that the tree in the photo makes her mad, upset, and engenders feelings of exclusion and being left out; she indicates the tree is a problem.

In discussing insights pertaining to differences, Alice explains that not everyone is the same and acknowledges we are all different. She reports differences between individuals’ hair, and she recognizes differences in ambulant versus non-ambulant individuals, such as someone in a wheelchair. Alice thinks being different is nice, good, and to have friends, and she conveys her enjoyment of different languages, such as Spanish. She is aware of differences at school, however, expresses difficulty in describing the particular differences observed. Alice identifies as being different, because she has friends and she is nice. She juxtaposes other students’ mean behaviours to her own nice behaviours, and acknowledges this is what makes her different from other students.

Alice emphasizes her desire to be the same as other peers, as she perceives being the same, as good and special. She appreciates herself just as she is, and does not foresee changing anything about herself to fit in with others. Maintaining a positive self identity, Alice openly shares her fondness for her face, hair, height, skin colour, languages she speaks, and her intelligence.
Throughout the study, Alice shares personal thoughts regarding culture, religion, language, skin colour, and disability and autism. Alice appreciates different cultures, and she is aware of cities and countries, such as Hong Kong, China, and Canada. She is familiar with the Chinese culture, and describes foods and drinks people consume in Hong Kong: noodles, rice, and juice. She suggests Tao as a religion, and explains her enjoyment for different languages, because they are easy to learn and speak. When asked which languages are easy to learn, Alice shouts, “all of them!” Alice reports white as a skin colour, and indicates white as her favoured skin colour. She identifies herself as being of white skin tone, and mentions Gem also looks like she has white skin colour. Rather than embrace diversity among people’s skin tones, she prefer everyone has similar skin colours, more specifically, white skin colour. In discussing disability, Alice states that people who have disabilities are good, but she does not identify as having a disability; she clearly asserts that no participant in the research group has a disability. She explains that it is OK to have a disability, but she unsure as to why. In terms of autism, Alice is less clear about whether she or anyone else in the group is diagnosed with autism; she wavers back and forth between not knowing to knowing for certain that no participant has autism. When asked to describe autism, she reports it is good. With certainty, she also highlights troubles with communication (e.g., it is hard to speak), and explains it is easy to make friends, even if a person has autism. Expressing what her autism looks like, Alice indicates it looks good.

Alice is a confident, playful, and energetic girl. She enjoys the outdoors and engaging in sports, as well as playing card games, such as UNO or spending time on the computer or iPad. Being the youngest girl of two older sisters, Alice is particularly girly, taking immense pleasure in activities involving nail polish, listening to teenage pop boy
bands on her iPod, fantasizing of becoming a movie star, musing over her body image and size, enjoying brand name clothing, and favouring the colour pink. Alice expresses mixed emotions about her school life, and appears to feel a sense of school belonging by engaging in activities with herself, rather than through experiences with other peers/friends or school practices; Alice relates friendships to her identity of being different, instead of school inclusion. In spite of her challenges, she remains self-assured in her abilities and maintains a positive attitude regarding her learning and school life. Her parents hope and dream Alice will have a good life.
6.3 Simon

Simon, the only child of his parents, was 12 years old and in Grade 7 at the time of the study. Currently, Simon lives in the GTA with both his mother and father. His family is from Vietnam, however Simon was born in Ontario, Canada. Simon’s mother is a home-maker/ “stay at home” mom, and his father is a labour worker for an automotive parts manufacturer. Simon’s parents are considered to be at an ESL level 1 or 2 (i.e., beginning to high beginning level with limited English language vocabulary and comprehension), and Cantonese is the primary language spoken at home. Simon is bilingual in English and Cantonese. Simon indicates his family does not practice any religion, as he does not attend church or pray.

Simon is diagnosed with autism. He first received a diagnosis when he was 3 years old. Communication and language skills are major areas requiring improvement, such as expressive and receptive language abilities, reading comprehension, verbal reasoning, and writing skills. Simon also demonstrates some delays in his social skills. For example, he is building on his social interaction skills through learning turn taking, sharing, developing friendships, etc… Further strengthening his social-emotional development, Simon strives to improve his awareness of others’ emotions and feelings, and level of empathy. Yet, Simon proficiently expresses his own feelings and emotions; he is very aware of his own emotional states. Cognitively, Simon is working at a Grade 5 level (approximately age 10/11). Simon
works independently at school, and fully participates in school activities. He has strong
mathematical skills and non-verbal reasoning abilities (e.g., understanding relationships
among abstract concepts and patterns), and he has strong memory skills. He is also
physically independent, and requires no support for his self-help skills (e.g., toileting,
dressing, and feeding). Simon receives various service supports and assessments, including,
occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, psychologists,
audiologists, and social skills programming and individualized training at the centre or in his
home. At the time of the study, Simon lived approximately 30 minutes away from the centre.
He is regularly driven to the centre by his mother to attend his programs.

Simon is an active boy who enjoys playing soccer, badminton, and volleyball. Simon
finds cartoons very amusing, especially Sponge Bob Square Pants cartoons. Sponge Bob 2 is
one of his favourite movies and the colour light-green is one of his favourite colours. Simon
also enjoys playing board games, such as mouse trap and checkers. Sometimes, he pretends
to be funny, and he also pretends he can hear the sound of the ocean. When asked about
what some of his dreams are for himself, Simon reports dreaming of both positive and
negative dreams when he sleeps. Simon is unsure about his future career choice and
occupation, and he expresses frustration in having to choose one particular career due to the
overwhelming amount of professional career options. Simon fears insects and animals; to
manage this fear, he is learning to use anxiety reducing techniques. In thinking about his
appearance, Simon describes himself as tall.

Simon attends a special education community classroom with partial integration for
particular academic subjects in regular classroom settings (i.e., he remains in the special
education classroom for more than 50% of the school day). Simon’s community classroom
is specifically designed for only children with autism. Previously, Simon was placed on a full-time basis in a developmentally delayed class for children with various disabilities, but the following year he moved to the autism specific program with partial access to regular classrooms. Simon is aware he attends the special education classroom due to his autism diagnosis.

When exploring his feelings regarding school, Simon expresses happiness and enjoyment for learning. He indicates one of the benefits of the special education class is having access to a large number of teachers. This is a feature Simon appreciates, as he explains it supports his learning when there are more teachers in the classroom. Simon also finds his schooling experiences fun, because he plays with his friends, John and Brad. Just as Simon, John and Brad are both in Grade 7, however, John attends only the regular classroom and Brad attends only the special education classroom. Simon and his friends socialize with each other through engaging in sport activities, such as badminton and volleyball. Although Simon does not hate school, he expresses some negative feelings regarding school. For example, he emphasizes a fear about school, worrying he may sometimes become scared. He also attributes feelings of happiness toward his school and teacher, yet states his classmates just make him feel OK, and he wishes they would be more positive.

Considering his academic work and learning, Simon sensibly suggests learning is fun and easy when he feels included and involved in the learning activity. He reports his teacher provides learning support when questions are too difficult to answer, but his teacher becomes confusing when she asks too many questions. Simon values his learning experiences at school, and would like his teacher to learn and teach new material. Simon reports he understands science, but wishes he could be better at art. Simon enjoys learning about math,
explaining his diligent efforts to improve his math skills and further succeed in this academic area. He describes one of his proudest school moments was receiving 100% on a math test; despite receiving this grade only once, he recalls his parents’ satisfaction when he achieved the perfect math score, musing over their comment “you did a good job.” Simon also takes pleasure in participating in gym class, although, he notes it is occasionally difficult to keep up with the running. When asked about what his best day in school may entail, he excitedly shouts “to have gym!”

Although Simon insightfully recognizes his learning improves when there are elements of involvement and participation in the learning, he has difficulty describing these inclusive schooling experiences. He acknowledges feeling an overall sense of inclusion and belonging in school when participating in subjects, such as gym and math. More specifically, physical education appears to bring Simon the most sense of belonging in school, as during this time he participates in sports, such as basketball and soccer. He cheerfully reminisces upon a school experience during gym period, in which he played soccer outside with his classmates. In describing the experience, he reiterates feelings of happiness and involvement. Simon also notes feeling included in school when he does not experience any negative events or situations.

Simon’s conceptualizations of school inclusion extend to his learning experiences at the centre for individuals with disabilities. He highlights features of the centre’s learning environment, which offer a sense of belonging: (a) the classroom where he receives individual training; (b) the social skills group where he learns with other peers; (c) the kitchen area where he cooks meals during the social skills programs. Simon explains cooking is a particular activity that brings him a sense of inclusion, at both the centre and at
school, as he cooks together with his classmates; and (d) particular sensory toys and objects, such as the “Kid Active” musical toy or a large stress ball. At both the centre and school, Simon uses the stress ball, because it provides feelings of happiness, and at the centre he frequently uses the Kid Active toy, because he enjoys the sounds.

Simon demonstrates his understanding of exclusion through describing an image of a stop light during his photo narration. He explains exclusion is similar to a red stop light, as it signifies stop, negativity, and upset. Rather, the green colour on a traffic light signifies positivity. Simon also conveys understandings of notions of good students and fairness in schools, as he suggests fairness in school entails respect for others, and good students refrain from swearing and they are not bullies. He acknowledges bullying in schools is wrong and negative, and he candidly shares personal bullying experiences.

Simon powerfully provides accounts of bullying experiences in school from both children in his special education class and in the regular class. For example, in his special education class, Simon narrates stories of being bullied by a boy with autism in Grade 8. Whenever Simon observes the boy playing on the classroom computer, the boy intermittently curses or behaves negatively toward Simon. Simon also reports of bullying experiences in the cafeteria. He describes a group of Grade 6 boys, two from the regular classroom and one from the special education classroom, staring, teasing, and shouting profanity (i.e., the “F” word, sticking up the middle finger) directly at him for lengthy periods (i.e., approximately 15 minutes) while he sits at the lunch table in the cafeteria. He notes one instance, in which one of the boys opened his mouth with food in it and stared at Simon. Even though teachers monitor the lunch period, the boys continue bullying Simon, and temporarily cease their behaviours when the teacher glances over at the boys. This bullying behaviour leads Simon
to frequently move around the cafeteria, finding somewhere else to sit and eat his lunch. Simon is confused as to why this group of boys bully him, and he recalls feelings of sadness during these experiences, but he does not cry. Another time, two boys from the regular classroom teased and chased Simon outside in the playground. They pushed him and even tried spitting on him. Simon describes another instance of physical violence, whereby he was pushed against his locker by one of the Grade 6 boys in the regular classroom just before morning recess. Simon confidently articulates the deliberate and intentional nature of the push, and explains the bully’s consequence was to engage in a brief conversation with a teacher, and then go to the principal’s office. Simon is reassured the bully will never push him again, because he was sent to the principal’s office. After the occurrence, Simon states he was physically hurt and emotionally upset, sad, and mad. Interestingly, Simon highlights, the students attending the regular classroom mostly bully him at school, making negative comments about him. Throughout all of these experiences, Simon indicates ignoring the bullies’ behaviours, walking away, and sporadically notifying a teacher. As he shares these encounters, Simon repeatedly discloses immense feelings of exclusion resulting from bullying experiences in school.

Further examining his bullying experiences, Simon comments that bullies come in all ages and sizes, stating they are not only tall and towering teenagers, as he was also bullied by small and young students in Grade 6, who were not yet 13 years old. Simon is uncertain whether the bullies are aware he attends the special education class, however, he believes his association to this class does not make him a target for bullies. He notes hearing about students being bullied due to their differences.
Simon recognizes that to be different is to be dissimilar, or to not be the same. He relates differences to distinctions between physical appearances, such as home versus school, gender differences between male and female hair styles and body types, height, and classroom environments. Simon also acknowledges differences among people’s cultures, languages, and personalities. Simon identifies as being different, because of his haircut, and he indicates being different in school is to have fun. Simon perceives himself as being different, noting we are each special, and he appreciates that everyone does things differently.

In exploring his thoughts regarding differences, Simon shares personal ideas pertaining to culture, religion, language, skin colour, and disability and autism. Simon thinks cultural diversity is nice, and he associates culture to a country, such as the USA, and a continent, such as Asia. Simon describes Asia as a country [sic] consisting of Chinese people, and he indicates they speak the English language. He reports knowledge of cultural foods, such as dumplings and curry, and specifies people from Hong Kong drink water and green tea, and people from Italy eat spaghetti, meatballs, and pizza, and Italians particularly have talents in making sauces. Simon perceives different languages as good, and identifies languages such as Chinese, English, Asian, Polish, Mandarin, Indian, and Hindi. He explains hearing all of these different languages, and affirms his ability to speak multiple languages. Simon associates concepts of religion to church, God, history, Buddhists, and temples. When asked about his views regarding skin colour, Simon first questions why people are always of white skin colour, and then remarks that those born in Hong Kong or China are always a white skin tone. Simon also discusses the skin colour of Egyptians, stating they have black, brown, or white skin colours. Interestingly, Simon categorizes Canadians as
similar groups of people who speak different languages, yet he also notices differences between my [Amanda] skin colour and his own, even though we are both born Canadian citizens. Simon explains his preference for people to have similar skin colours, especially white skin tone, because he identifies himself as being white. Simon also points out that another participant in the research group looks as if his skin colour is becoming darker. In examining concepts of disability and autism, Simon lists what he considers potential disabilities: visual impairments, allergies, and asthma. As discussion surfaces among the group regarding drugs and medicines among people with disabilities, Simon repeatedly mentions he never takes any medicine. Simon agrees that having disabilities is similar to other differences. He reports everyone has autism, yet when asked whether he has autism, he states “No.” Paradoxically, Simon acknowledges attending the special education class due to his autism diagnosis, and he states his autism looks happy. He highlights people with autism may have speech and language difficulties, however, he perceives them as capable of seeing (i.e., people with autism do not have vision impairments). He also indicates people with autism sometimes have asthma (Simon does not have asthma). Behaviours and feelings Simon associates to people with autism are grumpy, fear, and frustrated, poignantly explaining that autism can be scary and that it is all about emotions. Despite understandings of autism characteristics, recognition of feelings of having autism, and awareness of his autism diagnosis and the need to attend a special education class, Simon does not identify as having a disability or autism.

In sum, Simon is a considerate, pensive, and polite boy. He takes pleasure in participating in various physical activities, and enjoys engaging in these activities with his school friends; these physical sport activities appear to bring him the most joy and sense of
inclusion at school. He values laughter, funny jokes, and comedic and silly entertainment. Simon demonstrates a strong sense of personal emotional competency, clearly articulating his own feelings regarding schooling experiences and matters of learning, inclusion, exclusion, and differences. He desires continuous learning of fresh and new ideas, and appreciates learning experiences, in which he is actively engaged and involved. Simon seems to have mixed emotions regarding his schooling experiences, reporting he sometimes feels happy and included, and other times scared and excluded. This periodic fear of school and sense of exclusion is perhaps due to his victimization and bullying experiences. Simon’s parents wish for him to one day attend college.
6.4 Mew

Mew was 11 years old and in Grade 6 when the study began. He lives with his mother, father, and younger sister (9 years old) in the GTA. Mew was born in Ontario, Canada, however, his parents are from China. Mew’s parents immigrated to Canada in 1999, and currently his mother is a home-maker/ “stay at home” mom, and his father is a chef. Mew’s parents are considered to be at an ESL level 1 or 2 (i.e., beginning to high beginning level with limited English language vocabulary and comprehension), and Cantonese is the predominant language used at home. Mew considers himself bilingual in English and Cantonese. He is unsure whether his family practices a religion, noting he does not go to church or pray. His parents report the family does not practice a religion at home.

Mew is diagnosed with autism and attention deficit disorder (ADD). Mew first received a diagnosis when he was 6 years old. He also has a history of speech and language delays, difficulties in social-emotional interactions with others, and repetitive behaviour. Mew’s major challenges rest in areas of concentration, behavioural self-control, following requests and routines, and social skills. He frequently struggles to communicate personal feelings and emotions, and consequently this leads to disruptive behaviours (e.g., temper tantrums, attention seeking behaviours, escaping tasks, etc.). Cognitively, Mew is working at a Grade 3 level (approximately age 8/9). Mew has an extensive English vocabulary and
capably expresses his ideas when he chooses to share them with others. However, he continues developing his comprehension and language skills. Mew willingly attends the social skills programs at the centre, as these programs provide him with opportunities to improve his social skills, social mannerisms, and peer interactions. He is also physically independent, and requires no support for his self-help skills (e.g., toileting, dressing, and feeding). Mew receives various service supports and assessments, including, psychologists, and social skills programming and individualized training at the centre. However, his program training at the centre is inconsistent, often fluctuating due to his family’s financial needs. Mew is regularly driven to the centre by his mother to attend his programs.

Mew is a highly energetic boy, who attempts to engage in social interactions with other children. He enjoys playing sports, such as basketball, badminton, and baseball, however, he detests horse back riding. Mew is also fond of dogs, stating that he sometimes pretends to be a dog. Humorously, he reports his future career desire is to be a dog, because they are cute, soft, and fluffy. When asked to describe himself, Mew identifies as being a monster and wonders if he is a basketball player. He loathes writing by hand, and prefers using the computer to type out his school work, although, he primarily employs computers for playing games. Additionally, Mew uses the iPad for games, such as Angry Birds. Mew also finds pleasure in playing video games, and hopes he will one day receive an Xbox gaming console. Some of his favourite game genres include car racing games or violent shooting games. Mew also enjoys anything pertaining to Pokemon, so much so, that he explains dreaming about Pokemon. Mew describes winning games as one of his most proud moments, and he also indicates being proud of his baseball skills. Mew confesses trying hard
in two areas: (a) winning videogames, and (b) obtaining a girlfriend; he eagerly notes a girlfriend would make him very proud.

One of Mew’s favourite colour is green, especially dark green, and he enjoys eating chocolates, such as coffee crisp, and drinking soda pop, such as Barq’s Root Beer; root beer is his favourite drink and he routinely orders it with his McDonalds’ meal. Mew also reports eating various Chinese foods at home. He does not enjoy eating these foods, except for the catfish dish. Mew emphasizes only eating Chinese food at home, and he states he would never bring them to eat at school. When requested to name the various Chinese foods he eats, Mew admits knowing only the Cantonese names for the dishes, rather than English terminologies. Although encouraged by the other participants to share his knowledge in Cantonese, Mew refused, expressing embarrassment to label the foods in Cantonese.

Mew attends a community special education classroom specifically for children with autism. He also receives partial integration for particular academic subjects in regular classroom settings (i.e., remains in the special education classroom for more than 50% of the school day), however, this was recently incorporated into his IEP. Mew associates quite negative feelings to his schooling experiences, indicating feelings of embarrassment and fear in school. These emotions become heightened when others stare at him in school; he is uncertain as to why they stare. Mew also indicates worrying about new students in his school. He describes school as horrible, and as an institution of work, rather than fun. Mew repeatedly mentions he does not enjoy attending school. He poignantly articulates school makes him feel bad. Mew is aware he attends the special education class, however, he does not associate this class to his autism diagnosis. Rather, he reports students attend the community classroom to enhance their learning, especially in math, and to also improve upon
their verbal communication skills, in order for others to better understand what they are saying. In spite of these unfavourable emotions, Mew finds comfort in playing with his friend Shiloh at school. Mew explains that Shiloh likes him, and together they play Pokemon, Bayblade, and computer games. Mew also maintains an optimistic view of his classmates, suggesting they make him feel proud. His most favourite elements of school include computer usage, engaging in videogames, and playing with friends.

Mew expresses difficulty in learning at school, but suggests it may become easier and more fun if he is presented opportunities to type and if learning about subjects, such as Pokemon. He also highlights classroom environmental characteristics that support his learning: (a) computers, (b) markers, (c) desks, and (d) papers. Mew dislikes the current desk arrangement in his classroom, as students’ desks are set-up in rows and separate from each other. Mew also recommends more experiential learning opportunities through field trips. He wishes his class would participate in more field trips to either the town fair or even to Walmart. Unsure about the kinds of learning experience at Walmart, Mew excitedly states he could purchase toys and videogames. Mew also expresses his desire to have classroom pets, such as a turtle and fish. During his photo narrations, Mew describes photographs taken of a turtle and guppy fish, reporting it would be wonderful to incorporate these as pets in his classrooms. Currently, his classroom contains a small aquarium with a guppy fish, but not a turtle. Mew also highlights discontent during his lunch periods. Scolded frequently by young lunch monitors for talking aloud during lunchtime, Mew confusingly wonders why the monitors report his behaviour to the teachers, whereby he is further reprimanded for the talking. Mew reports a strong understanding in mathematics, however, he does not enjoy learning about this subject. Mew confirms his teacher’s support in learning math, however,
he also expresses that his teacher sometimes makes him feel angry and sad. Mew thinks it is important students discuss and share their thoughts regarding calloused and unpleasant teachers. He also conveys understandings of notions of good students and fairness in schools, explaining good students listen to their teachers, and fairness in school implies taking turns. In describing his desires for school improvement to support his learning experiences, Mew simply states he wishes for teachers and other classmates to recognize he is fun, kind, and beautiful.

Reiterating his distaste and unhappiness toward school, Mew finds difficulty in examining moments of school inclusion. Mew indicates he is unable to think of experiences, in which he feels a sense of school belonging. However, he cleverly articulates his feelings of school exclusion. During his photo narrations, Mew describes a photo of a sizeable grey rock resting in front of a cemetery. He draws parallels between this rock and his sense of exclusion in school, explaining that similar to the rock he feels he does not belong in school; akin to the rock, which feels “nothing,” school also makes him feel nothing. Mew contends never encountering bullying experiences, yet, if he ever comes across a bully, he indicates using physical violence and profanity (e.g., punching, breaking necks, kicking butts, etc…). He plainly indicates if someone bully’s him, he will bully them back.

Mew admits the challenges of discussing differences, noting that although he recognizes and understands the meaning of differences, it is awkward to speak about aloud. He indicates everyone is different and relates these differences to hobbies and interests (e.g., one person may enjoy playing Blayblade, but another might not; one person may enjoy using public transportation, but another might not). He associates differences to distinctions between sizes, such as big and small, and gender differences between male and female. Mew
also recognizes differences among people’s skin colour (i.e., Amanda’s skin colour versus Mew’s skin colour), however states he is unsure why people have skin colour differences. Additionally, he reports understanding differences pertaining to languages (e.g., Jamaican people speak different languages), ethnicity (e.g., students emigrate from different countries), and disability (e.g., a person in a wheelchair is different). Mew identifies as being different, because he speaks different languages. Mew also considers being different in school as good.

Throughout the study, Mew refrained from participating in the beginning discussions regarding differences of culture and religion. However, he later on thoughtfully shares insights pertaining to language, skin colour, disability, and autism. Mew identifies languages such as, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Tamil. He explains people who speak Tamil come from India. In describing skin colours, Mew names colours, such as white, peach, black, and brown. He associates blonde hair to white people and disagrees with Simon’s understanding of Egyptians’ skin tones (i.e., brown, black, and white), stating instead that Egyptians have pink skin colour. Mew demonstrates an appreciation for diversity of skin colour among people, expressing that if people had the same skin colour, it would be boring, un-fun, and un-cool. He further explains differences in skin colour between people are irrelevant, because internally people are the same; we are all the same people. During the discussion on skin colour, Simon notes that Mew’s skin colour appears dark, but Mew quickly clarifies his darker skin tone resulted because he went to the beach. Further exploring conceptualizations of disability and autism, Mew states it is OK to have a disability. He agrees that having disabilities is similar to other differences, such as possessing different body parts (e.g., different fingers, noses, teeth, and heads). He considers disabilities, such as impaired
hearing, autism, as well as states that some people who have a disability can not smile. He also identifies smoking as a disability. Interestingly, Mew associates people with disabilities to notions of homelessness and poverty. He assumes people with disabilities possess little money, are not rich, and lose their friends, family, home, and food; he expresses the sadness of when people undergo financial hardships and lack funds. Mew continues describing those with disabilities as maintaining good hearts on the inside, but on the outside they appear bad, due to lack of behavioural self-control. He also comments that persons with disabilities may use drugs; he acknowledges the need for medication if someone has autism or ADD. Mew indicates it is OK to have autism, but is unsure as to the meaning of the diagnosis. Mew’s understanding of his autism diagnosis is unclear, as during the research he occasionally indicates not knowing whether he has autism and other times he clearly reports not having a diagnosis of autism, ADD, or ADHD. Moreover, he explains communication challenges experienced by persons with autism. Mew compares these challenges to that of speaking different languages; he notes sometimes others do not understand the language, because they do not speak the same language as someone with autism. He expresses that it is acceptable if others have difficulty speaking and communicating. Additionally, Mew associates people with autism to behavioural challenges (e.g., not getting along, behaving badly or terribly). He reports the difficulties in developing and sustaining friendships for persons with autism, because of their behavioural and communication struggles, explaining frequently those without autism misunderstand what the person with autism is saying or doing. Mew also states some people with autism have vision impairments. Feelings Mew associates to people with autism are grumpy, angry, and frustrated. Mew also considers children with autism to be violent, physically hitting and “beating up” others. He also explains autism is all about
emotions and actions (i.e., doing something to help the autism). Insightfully, Mew states autism can be paralyzing, in which the person with autism can not move. Although, Mew confidently reflects on behaviour traits and feelings of those with autism, he is unsure of his own diagnosis of autism and ADD. Thus, he does not clearly identify himself as having a disability or autism.

Mew is a witty, lively, and active boy. He is fascinated with video and computer games, and enjoys participating in selective sport activities. With a competitive spirit, Mew is most proud of winning games, valuing the effort required to conquer the games. He also enjoys animals. Mew consistently describes negative emotions regarding school, such as embarrassment and sense of fear. He does not demonstrate mixed feelings toward school, but rather school incites an overall adverse feeling for Mew (e.g., teachers stir up sentiments of sadness and anger, school is an institution filled with excessive academic work and minimal fun, ostracization during lunch, etc.). He recognizes his learning difficulties, however, suggests connecting his learning to his interests (e.g., Pokemon). Through Mew’s knowledgeable explanation of behavioural and communication challenges among those with autism, it appears he is aware of his behavioural obstacles in school and may also observe these behaviours among other peers in his special education community class; accordingly, he wishes peers and teachers in school perceive him positively (i.e., fun, kind, and beautiful), striving to be liked. Mew’s parents emphasize their desire for him to live a life of normalcy, hoping he improves upon abilities to express himself and socialize with others. They wish Mew a healthy life, trusting one day he may live as a normal person.
Edward was 12 years old and in Grade 7. He is the youngest child in his family, with one older brother, age 17. Together, Edward, his brother, mother, and father live in a home in the GTA. Edward was born in Ontario, Canada, however, both his parents are from East Asia. Edward’s mother, currently a home-maker/“stay at home” mom, is from Vietnam. His father, from China, currently works as a machine operator. Both parents immigrated to Canada in 1988. Edward’s parents maintain proficient knowledge in the English language and competently communicate using English. Edward’s parents report Cantonese as the predominant language spoken at home. Despite Edward’s language competency and understanding of Cantonese, he does not identify as being bilingual in English and Cantonese; he indicates speaking only English and no other language. Edward explains he prays to Father God, yet reports uncertainty as to whether he practices a religion. He notes attending church scouts, explaining it is not affiliated to the Christian or Catholic faiths. He also indicates he does not read the Bible and has no desire to do so. His parents report no religion is practiced at home.

Edward is diagnosed with autism. He first received a diagnosis when he was 2 years old. As Edward entered his early years of schooling (i.e., 3-4 years of age), he showed signs of severe language delays and communication difficulties and was diagnosed with a language
disorder. In addition to his speech and language challenges, at approximately 6 years old, it was reported Edward began engaging in atypical social interactions and repetitive behaviours. Cognitively, Edward works at a Grade 4 level (approximately age 9/10), and continues improving upon his receptive and expressive communication skills, including comprehension abilities (e.g., reading, understanding verbal instructions), social skills, attentiveness, and staying on task. He maintains a sense of inquisitiveness and is quite detail oriented in his thoughts, paying attention to particular features of objects, stories, experiences, people, etc. Edward is independent at school and also maintains a keen interest in math. Edward also possesses strong artistic abilities, especially in drawing. He is physically independent, and requires no support for his self-help skills (e.g., toileting, dressing, and feeding). Edward receives various service supports and assessments, including, psychological, paediatrics, and speech and language therapy. Additionally, Edward receives his social skills programming and individualized training at the centre. At the time of the study, Edward lived approximately 10 minutes from the centre. He is regularly driven by either parent to attend his programs.

Edward is a calm and curious boy, who enjoys sports and playing checkers. One of Edward’s favourite sports to play is soccer, because he likes passing the ball to others. He often dreams about playing soccer, hearing the coach whistle, and sometimes dreams he is a superhero. Edward wonders about whether he is a soccer player and he pretends he is a fast runner. He excitedly reports his primary career choice is to be a soccer player. Although, he expresses concerns of being hit in the face with the soccer ball, as previously he experienced injuries while participating in a soccer game.
Edward also enjoys chewing gum, especially lemon and orange flavours, and he is fond of discussions regarding Sponge Bob Square Pants, the Science Centre, and Canada’s Wonderland. Edward finds pleasure in watching movies, such as August Rush and Holes. Edward describes himself as thin and reports he does not have a girlfriend. He observes the routines of his older brother (i.e., arrives home during the evening and stays up quite late), and seems to admire or “look-up” to him. For example, treasuring a pair of All-Star shoes previously owned by his brother, Edward notes although the shoes are old and worn, they are special to him as they are from his brother.

Edward attends a special education community classroom with partial integration for particular academic subjects in regular classroom settings (i.e., remains in the special education classroom for more than 50% of the school day). This community classroom is specifically designed for only children with autism. Previously, Edward was placed on a full-time basis in a special education class for children with various disabilities, but was later placed in the autism specific program with partial access to regular classrooms. Edward is aware he attends the special education classroom due to his autism diagnosis. Edward maintains mixed feelings regarding his schooling experiences. He explains feeling somewhat happy and good regarding school, yet, he also reports school sometimes makes him feel upset, shy, and sad. His feelings of shyness intensify when others at school are annoyed and stare at him. Edward appreciates discussing ideas to improve his school, providing examples such as the school recycling program; recycling is one of his favourite school activities. When asked about his worries in school, Edward simply expresses trepidation about thunderstorms striking the school.
Although Edward admits occasional overload of school work, he reports enjoying academic work. He especially enjoys learning math, as this is his favourite subject. Edward explains math is a subject he could learn all day, and division is an area of math he finds particularly interesting. Edward describes learning math through playing games on the computer at school; the game is “Cool Math.” He also reports his most favourite pastimes in school are playing board games and using the computer. He explains winning in board games and obtaining straight B’s and A’s in school make him proud. He is also proud of riding his scooter and of the sensory area at the centre (i.e., room filled with various stimuli to support child’s sensory awareness – sights, sounds, textures, relaxation, movements, etc.). When asked what his best day at school may entail, he exclaims, “receiving no homework!”

Edward highlights learning becomes engaging and enjoyable when it is fun (e.g., playing board games) and when presented opportunities to talk in class. He also adds learning becomes especially pleasurable when students receive special lessons. In considering his dislikes about school and learning, he promptly states social studies, explaining this subject is taught prior to gym class, typically going over time, and causing students to be late for gym. Edward shares understandings of unfairness at school, describing situations of cutting in-line, however, he admits difficulty in thinking of times of fairness in school. His conceptualizations of good students include those whom are attentive, quiet, and hard working. He identifies himself as a hard worker.

Edward appreciates his classmates, as they make him feel fine. He considers his friendships with peers, describing their helpful and amicable relationship (e.g., ensuring Edward was taken care of in school after returning from his appendectomy, playing soccer, walking to the school bus). Interestingly, Edward identifies his teacher as cool, and also as
one of his friends, because he provides Edward with academic grades, corrects his school work, and helps him learn and gain knowledge. Yet, he notes from time-to-time, his teacher can be confusing and tends to give too much homework, frequently giving Edward headaches. Although Edward’s teacher makes him feel happy, Edward suggests his teacher may improve through modifying some of his teaching practices for math (i.e., rearranging his writing on the blackboard) and modifying his dressing (i.e., wearing more sports paraphernalia would increase his cool factor). Edward desires to switch from the special education class to attend the regular classroom setting on a full-time basis. Even though he attends the regular classroom for only mathematics, Edward confesses the regular class comprises of better students, teachers, and classroom environments (e.g., cleaner carpet), perceiving these classrooms as good. Specifically describing the regular classroom teacher, Edward states he is cool, and suggests he learns better when working with this particular teacher, especially in math. Edward provides various suggestions to enhance his learning experiences at school: (a) cleaner classrooms, (b) research programs for students at school (i.e., similar to this research project), and (c) re-arranging desks from rows to cooperative seating arrangements (i.e., sitting around one large table to learn lessons). Additionally, Edward wishes he could bring a cell phone to school for emergency purposes, and he candidly expresses his hope for teachers and classmates to recognize he is a kind and helpful person, with exceptional cleaning skills.

Edward confesses he does not feel a sense of belonging in school. He finds it difficult to reflect on inclusive schooling experiences, as he infrequently feels involved in school. However, he senses school involvement when learning math with the regular classroom teacher and when helping others (e.g., cleaning the classroom computer wires).
He experiences exclusion during social studies and occasionally during gym class. Edward reports becoming fatigued in gym from the frequent running, feeling bad and left out when he cannot keep up with his other peers. Edward also holds doors in the hallway for other students, often causing him to be late for his next class, and consequently he receives reprimands from teachers; again, imparting feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging.

Throughout his photo narrations, Edward introspectively describes his understandings of inclusion and exclusion, relating these two concepts to an old apartment building and a flower garden. Negatively describing his photo of a dilapidated apartment building near his aunt’s home, Edward suggests the building reminds him of exclusion, because it is old, run-down, and filled with average people. He emphasizes that he would not want to live in this building. He also relates a photo of his neighbour’s flower garden to notions of both inclusion and exclusion. The flower garden consists of mostly yellow and orange flowers, with one lone white flower, and a white swan outside of the garden. Edward explains, from first glance the white flower and swan appear to be excluded, because they do not belong among the rest of the yellow and orange flowers, however, they are still included within the garden, blending amongst the other coloured flowers.

Although Edward reports never encountering bullying experiences, he indicates observing Grade 8 students kick soccer balls in students’ faces during soccer matches; Edward finds this upsetting, leaving him with feelings of exclusion. He also provides examples of bullying situations, such as violence (e.g., pushing by the lockers), teasing (e.g., mocking student’s worn-out shoes), and humiliation (e.g., pulling student’s pants down in front of others). Edward contends most of the school bullies are from Grade 8, associating their bullying behaviour to their older age (i.e., teenagers). As Edward discusses school
bullying, he expresses concerns of bullies yelling at him. In reflecting on bullies, Edward emphasizes feelings of unhappiness, upset, anger, and injustice. He also shares a photo of his “Stop Bullying” bracelet, which he no longer wears at school. He advises bullying victims share their experiences with school authorities or ignore the bullying behaviour. Regardless of whether students maintain differences (e.g., disability, race, ethnicity, language, etc.), Edward perceives all students as potential victims of bullying. Yet, he acknowledges that even though he is different and has autism, he does not experience bullying in school.

Edward recognizes everyone is different, highlighting people are not the same. He associates differences to physical characteristics of individuals (e.g., eye colour, freckles, hair, height, weight, and facial features). Edward also explains people sound and speak differently, because of one’s voice. He notes differences in people’s feelings (e.g., boredom, students’ reactions to changing schools, etc.). Edward recognizes differences related to language (e.g., some people speak Spanish) and indicates a person with a disability is different (e.g., a person who has lost their legs due to cancer and uses a wheelchair). Edward positively perceives differences among his friends, and enjoys having friends with varying qualities (e.g., his friends speak diverse languages, such as French and Spanish). Edward identifies himself as different from others due to his voice and eye colour. He also adds he is different and unique because he has autism. Contradictorily, Edward does not identify himself as different from others, reporting he does not feel different. He emphasizes his desire to be similar to his peers (e.g., having similar and normal hairstyles), associating similarity to normalcy. Edward is uncertain as to why he wishes being the same as others. He appreciates himself just as he is, and does not think he would change anything about himself to fit in with others. Edward maintains a positive sense of self, candidly sharing his
fondness for his face, hair, height, and intelligence. However, Edward seems to disapprove of his skin colour, explaining the colour of his skin looks like a sun burn. At the time of the study, Edward was absent during participants’ brainstorm discussions pertaining to personal ideas of culture, religion, language, skin colour, disability, and autism. Therefore, his deeper understandings of these aforementioned topics are not presented in this portrait.

Overall, Edward is an inquisitive, insightful, and helpful boy. He loves participating in soccer games and often fanaticizes about the sport. He has exceptional talent for drawing, and enjoys watching movies and playing board games. Edward expresses diligent efforts in working and trying hard at school, demonstrating his value for education and learning. He presents insightful suggestions for school improvement, which may support his learning. He enjoys socializing with peers, and finds comfort in his friends’ supportive relationships at school. Edward also expresses mixed feelings toward school, describing both inclusive and exclusive schooling experiences. With a desire to attend the regular classroom environment on a full-time basis, Edward perceives the regular class as consisting of many more benefits and positive qualities in comparison to his special education classroom, particularly the classroom teacher and students. Regardless of his challenges surrounding autism, Edward upholds a relatively positive self-image, striving to be a normal boy attending the normal class at school.
6.6 William

At the time of the study, William was 13 years old, in Grade 8, and the only child of his divorced parents. William lives primarily with his mother in an apartment in the GTA. William’s father visits him from time-to-time at the apartment; he enjoys these visits. However, on weekends, William frequently stays over at his father’s home, in which his grandparents and uncle also reside. William’s parents emigrated from Hong Kong to Canada in 1995. A few years later, William was born in Ontario, Canada. William visited Hong Kong on one occasion with his mother when he was 2 years old. Most of his extended family lives in Hong Kong, with a few family members residing in Toronto. Currently, his mother works as a seamstress at a local dry cleaners shop, and his father, a landscaper, is unemployed. William’s parents are considered to be at an ESL level 1 or 2 (i.e., beginning to high beginning level with limited English language vocabulary and comprehension), and Cantonese is the primary language spoken at home; very little English is used within the home. William is bilingual in Cantonese and English. He is proud of his home language, reporting that it is a positive quality for others to learn to speak Chinese languages. William indicates his family does not practice a religion, but he does talk to God.

William is diagnosed with autism, global developmental delays, hyperactivity, and potential attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). William was born as a healthy baby boy, but throughout infancy he experienced various kidney problems. As he entered
the preschool years, William’s parents became increasingly concerned with his overall
development, especially as they noticed delays in his communication skills. William first
received his diagnoses at approximately 3.5 years of age. In his early teens, William presents
delays in his communication and language capacities (e.g., expressive and receptive language
areas), and continues working on his comprehension skills and ability to follow instructions.
He capably articulates full sentences expressing his thoughts, however strives to build upon
his conversational skills. He is improving on his writing skills, as he often struggles to write
complete ideas and sentences. He continues developing his social skills, life skills, and fine
and gross motor skills. With an exceptional memory, William demonstrates savant like
abilities to memorize details of maps, commuter routes, and public transit features.
However, William tends to perseverate on topics related to transit and bus systems, as they
are one of his strongest areas of interest. He maintains a sound understanding of his
emotions and feelings, but he is further developing his social-emotional understandings of
others. William is an independent student at school, with interests in science and math. He is
also physically independent, and requires no support for his self-help skills (e.g., toileting,
dressing, and feeding). William receives various service supports and assessments,
including, psychologists, psychiatrists, speech and language therapy, and social skills
programming and individualized training at the centre. At the moment, William’s
programming and therapy sessions at the centre is inconsistent, due to lack of funding and his
family’s financial needs. At the time of the study, William lived approximately 15 minutes
away from the centre. However, his travel time is approximately 30 minutes, as he
independently commutes via public transit to attend his programs.
William is a witty and entertaining boy, with a keen sense of humour. He appreciates his privacy, recognizing his apartment contains his personal private property. He values his bedroom, reporting it is not only an ideal place for sleeping, but it also contains important items, such as money, his teddy bear, and his wall clock. One of William’s prized possessions is his teddy bear, which he identifies as a female and calls her “bear.” William explains bear is special, because she is a gift from his mother, and he owned bear for over 10 years. He especially enjoys bear’s fur coat. William strongly emphasizes he does not bring bear to school, as she simply stays in his bedroom all the time. William also enjoys eating food. One of his favourite Chinese restaurants is “Tasty House.” At the restaurant, he often orders a particular soup, and although finding this soup delicious, William has no desire to eat or bring the soup to school. William also interestingly wonders about men, and hears a great deal about the topic “optimism.” William defines optimism as the presence of different people. Deeply fascinated by transit systems, William frequently thinks about the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) and the York Region Transit (YRT), considering their bus systems and transit routes. He also dreams of specific buses, such as the YRT 2010 Eltorado [sic] Rider BRT Bus, number 1062. William highlights his excitement for riding buses, exclaiming “everything’s on buses!” He describes his use of TTC transfers for commuting to and from school. William independently uses the bus and travels alone.

William attends a special education classroom with partial integration for particular academic subjects in regular classroom settings (i.e., remains in the special education classroom for more than 50% of the school day). Reports suggest William attends gym class with the regular Grade 8 class. William does not express particular emotions associated to school, although he indicates a desire for his class to be better. William describes school as
an institution filled with too much work, and when exploring ideas regarding what his best at school might entail, he exclaims, “No homework! Hooray, I’m free!” Ideally, William’s school day would also include an increase in computer usage for playing games, rather than for school work. He suggests extending students’ computer time to perhaps the entire school day. William enjoys learning science and math (i.e., “Cool Math”). However, he notes, although enjoying math work, he does not want to engage in learning math all day. William desires to learn more about maps, as well as the TTC at school; he wishes these were academic subject areas. William finds exams and math tests fun and easy. William’s special education teacher provides a sense of happiness for him, supporting his learning in math and language. Yet, William’s teacher becomes confusing when informing him of his school work mistakes. William wishes his teacher better supports his learning in math, especially in learning multiplication. William also wishes his teacher would be normal and similar to the teacher in the regular class. This would make William proud. Even though William acknowledges feeling good in his classroom, hanging out with friends and his teacher, he indicates a desire to participate full-time in the regular Grade 8 class, perceiving it as an improvement from his current special education class, with a better teacher.

William conceptualizes good students as those who work hard and complete their homework. He also remarks good students refrain from swearing and bullying in school, such as giving the middle finger. Most of William’s classmates incite feelings of happiness. He specifically highlights his friend Jonny, who is slightly older than him and has big hair. William and Jonny often play football together, and as William simply states, “Jonny makes me feel good.” Further discussing his classmates, William expresses extreme dislike for
Kwai Bo, a student whom William describes as annoying, silly, little, and acts like a kindergartner. William hopes never to be friends with Kwai.

As William nears the end of 8th Grade, he describes mixed emotions regarding transitioning to highschool in the fall. While he expresses some excitement, he also reports concerns and anxiety of bullying once entering highschool. William earnestly shares if he could improve anything about his schooling experiences it would be avoiding highschool and eliminating bullies. Candidly, he explains the expectation and need to transition to a new highschool incites a depleted sense of school belonging at his current elementary school. However, he understands he must change schools and attend highschool, noting changing schools is good.

Although William struggles thinking of moments of school involvement, he highlights his friendship and experiences with Jonny provide feelings of school belonging and inclusion. He also admits a sense of inclusion when presented opportunities to be the boss. Participating in the Grade 8 graduation events and experiences throughout the school year also incites feelings of school belonging for William. Excitedly describing an upcoming graduation trip to Ottawa and attending special graduation dinners, William states with pride his sense of belonging because he is graduating from school. He reports the Grade 8 graduation trip as his favourite element of school. Beyond school experiences, William highlights particular objects as inducing emotions of happiness and inclusion, such as his bear and photo camera. William reiterates his favourite property, bear, supports his learning due to her calming and comforting fur. He strongly asserts, however, bear is never brought to school due to fears of other students teasing him, as she is a baby toy. Insightfully, William reports the teasing will turn his feelings of inclusion and happiness with bear to
feelings of exclusion and sadness. William also extends notions of school inclusion to his experiences at the centre for individuals with disabilities, expressing wishes for his school to be more like the centre, as he feels quite included at the centre.

In exploring ideas regarding school exclusion, William recalls his experience of utilizing the computer for 8 hours at school one day. Although he enjoys computer time at school, William expresses feeling excluded in the computer lab, as it was mandatory he stay and engage in computer usage for 8 hours. He notes this experience was not related to a school suspension or detention. William also indicates that although he brings his cell phone to school, it makes him feel excluded when he uses the phone. He simply keeps the phone in his school bag.

William reveals insights regarding school bullying, explaining bullies are violent, use profanity, and interestingly reports all bullies come from Grade 5. Maintaining strong feelings toward bullies, he expresses they are the “worse!” William identifies Kwai as a school bully, employing vulgar language and physical aggression toward William and his classmates, rendering within William feelings of school exclusion. William also feels a sense of exclusion from another classmate, Elton, who discusses inappropriate topics in Chinese. William indicates dissatisfaction during lunch period, encountering aggressive lunch ladies and observing bullying situations. William describes the lunch room supervisors as young and thin bullies, constantly shouting orders for students to line up. Wittily, he remarks one positive of attending highschool is the absence of lunch ladies, providing him with greater independence during lunch time. He also highlights physical fights occurring between students, in which the lunch ladies intervene. William positions bullying behaviours of physical violence and profanity on similar calibres in terms of their “meanness” effects.
When asked if he would or could change anything about his encounters with bullies, grimly, William notes he would not alter anything, as the bullying would subsist, just the same. However, he advises others to report bullying occurrences to teachers. William does not think he is bullied due to his autism diagnosis.

In discussing understandings of differences, William draws from his lived reality, highlighting differences in the way people live, who they are raised by, where they come from, and the languages they speak. More specifically he provides examples, such as living with a single parent mother in the same household, emigrating from countries like China, and speaking languages like Tamil. William also relates differences to changes in one’s hair style, colour, and dressing (i.e., new t-shirt), as well as to the arrival of new people/students, and behaving nicely. William positively perceives learning about difference and diversity, identifying himself as being different due to his facial features, and also because he commutes using new buses with new bus drivers. Yet, despite acknowledging his different characteristics, William suggests there is nothing special or unique about him, perceiving himself as similar to his friends. He contends being the same is good and normal. He indicates no desire to change anything about himself to fit in and be the same as others, perhaps, because he already views himself as normal and the same as his peers, and thus requiring no change. William also appreciates his height and his autism diagnosis, asserting it is good. In requesting William describe what his autism looks like, he simply replies “happy.”

As he explores his thoughts regarding differences, William shares personal ideas pertaining to culture, religion, language, skin colour, disability, and autism. He appreciates different cultures and learning about new countries. He relates cultures to cities and
countries, such as Hong Kong, China, and Australia. He explains people arriving from other countries use an airplane for travel. He shares his knowledge of Chinese foods (i.e., rice noodles, fish, spicy curry) and drinks (i.e., tea, lemon tea). He explains people from Chinese countries eat a particular soup, especially during Chinese New Year (William names the soup in Cantonese). William associates religion to notions of a leader/leadership, church scouts, Jesus, and Christianity. In discussions regarding language, he identifies languages such as, Cantonese, Portuguese, and Chinese. William also highlights the value of learning languages from one’s family. In terms of skin colour, William classifies black as a skin colour, and indicates he is white. William reports enjoying diversity among people’s skin colours and reminds the group we all have differences in the colour of our skins. Paradoxically, however, he expresses a preference for people to be of similar skin tones, because it is normal. In exploring ideas of disability and autism, William relates those with disabilities to notions of poverty, candidly explaining people with disabilities often beg for money and do not have much food to eat. He indicates people with disabilities may use drugs, such as alcohol. William also indicates tolerance for others who may struggle to verbally communicate, and he acknowledges misunderstandings when a person with autism experiences temper tantrums. He adds people with autism may sometimes behave worse, enduring emotions of fear and frustration. When asked to define autism, William replies “it means awesome,” explaining it is acceptable to have autism. Excitedly he discusses Autism Awareness month and reports his school will be holding an autism assembly.

William is a clever and humorous boy, who confidently shares unique and unexpected ideas and opinions. He treasures his privacy and property and maintains profound interests in transit systems and routes. William seems to have a strong sense of his
cultural identity, appreciating his Chinese heritage and ability to speak his home language. School is tolerable for William, as he enjoys learning math and science, spending time on the computer, participating in graduation proceedings, and interacting with some of his classmates. However, William also reports feelings of school exclusion due to issues of bullying and his considerable anxiety to transition into high school. Additionally, William expresses a desire to attend the regular classroom environment on a full-time basis, perceiving these classes as generally better in quality with a normal teacher. William continues upholding a positive disposition toward his autism diagnosis, describing his autism as good, happy, and awesome. As William expresses a desire for greater independence, so too does his mother, whose hope and dream for William is to one day be independent.
CHAPTER SEVEN

UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENCES

In efforts to empower experiences and voices of children from marginalized groups within this study, particular conceptual frameworks foreground data analysis. Such frames include those deriving from critical theory. More specifically, critical pedagogical and critical multicultural education lenses. Further embedded within the research analysis are theories of the new sociology of childhood, social constructivist, and participatory frames. Cumulatively, these theoretical models affirm and legitimize not only the stories and voices of those from subjugated groups, but in particular those of children who are perceived as proficient reporters of personal educational experiences. In keeping with such conceptual frameworks, data analysis employed both narrative and critical discourse analysis processes. Firstly, the narrative approach offered a scrutinizing of the data for meaningful emerging patterns and discourses grounded within participants’ voices and views. Personal narratives, collaboratively developed between participants and me, wove together emerging patterns, stories, and themes. Critical discourse analysis further supported interpretation of participants’ narratives, as I continuously questioned the texts and explored meanings of how particular discourses and discursive practices contribute to participants’ understandings of differences and inclusive education.

This chapter describes participants’ understandings of differences. Participants presented general ideas surrounding definitions of difference. They highlighted conceptualizations regarding ethnicity, race, language, culture, disability, and autism. Throughout their narratives, participants expressed discourses of denying

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5 Throughout the next two findings and discussion chapters, I frequently return to excerpts from participants’ portraits and/or repeat passages from participants’ responses in order to sufficiently present their views as evidence for themes and sub-categories.
differences, colour blindness, White discourse, Othering, notions of normalcy, and deficit and deficient based discourses.

Notably, as participants discussed personal understandings of differences, they seemed to demonstrate a level of conformity to some of the official discourses (e.g., suppressing differences, insisting on differences - separation and segregation, denying of differences, inviting differences) and teachers’ conceptual repertoires (e.g., colour blindness, deficit based discourses) on diversity lurking within Canadian schools. Participants’ narratives raise questions regarding educational discourses and teachers’ repertoires surrounding notions of diversity and how these influence minoritized children’s understandings of personal differences. Throughout this chapter, it appears that most of these children perceive themselves through the lens of dominant groups. Consequently, as a minoritized and oppressed group they begin oppressing and marginalizing themselves.

7.1 General Perspectives

Nearly all participants positively perceived notions of difference, associating differences to terms, such as good, fun, optimism, nice, learning, and special. For instance, William suggested, “Being different in school is learning and it's good to learn…. Optimism is when there are different people.”

Alice indicated, “I think being different in school is good. I think being different is nice.” Simon indicated, “I like being different. Everyone does different things. We are each special.” Furthermore, some participants reported they would never change anything about
themselves to fit in with others, as they appreciated their personal qualities and differences.

Alice confidently explained,

I wouldn't change anything about myself to fit in with others. I like myself as I am. I like the way my face looks. I like my hair. I like how tall I am. I like my skin colour. I like the languages I speak. I like how smart I am!

A majority of participants conceptualized differences as dissimilar. That is, participants expressed an understanding that individuals are different and not the same:

“I understand that not everyone is the same. We are all different.” (Alice)

“To be different means other things. Being different is not the same…being different is not always the same!” (Simon)

Participants described basic awareness of individuals’ differences, highlighting both outer and inner characteristics. Indeed, all participants illustrated differences related to physical/concrete/outer appearance. For example, they noted differences in a person’s hair, voice, speech, body weight and height, and clothing:

“People also have different hair.” (Gem)

Being different in school is that everyone sounds different…we all talk differently and have different voices from each other. My voice is different from others. People also look different. Some people are bigger and some are tall. For example, some people might have different eye colours, like red eyes. Or, people may have spots all over their body, like freckles or chicken pox. Or, someone might have changes to their face, like face reconstruction, and they will have to stay in the hospital. If someone gets a new hair cut, that is different. (Edward)

In my school, students get a hair cut, so that is different. Students look different when they get hair cuts. Boys hair is different from the girls. Girls have long hair. Women are less fat and men are mostly more fat. People are tall and some people are short. (Simon)

“She [student from school] is different, because she has yellow hair. She changed her hair design. This is what being different at school means to me. My t-shirt is new, so it's also different.” (William)
A few participants also noted physical differences between objects. Simon explained that his home and school look different,

“This is a picture of my school.”  

“This is a picture of my home.”

Simon

Mew described differences in size between objects, “In my drawing, I have a computer and laptop. They are different because one is big and one is small.”

(Mew)

In addition to physical and outer differences, some participants noted inner differences associated to individuals’ personal traits, feelings, and personalities. Simon plainly stated, “Also, everyone has different personalities,” and Edward suggested differences in a person’s feelings,

People feel different, for example some people might feel bored. Or, if you change to a new school, this might be different for you. See in my drawing here, this is my old school from last year, and it was different for me compared to my new school.
Mew reported differences in individuals’ interests, “When I think about being different, I think about how my friend likes Bayblade and maybe I don't like Bayblades…so we like to do different things. Another example is that William likes the TTC and maybe you don't.”

In describing differences, both Gem and William emphasized differences related to their own personal experiences. For instance, Gem emphasized talking as a difference and explained each person talks differently, “In school they talk different. Everyone talks different.” Perhaps she is suggesting that she also can talk and converse, even though her forms of communication may sound or look different; thus all people talk differently. Gem’s statement reflects her understandings of variances in speech and communication, and potentially serves as her way of advocating and accepting differences in people’s speech and talk. William also associated his own personal differences when explaining what it means to be different, “Being different is living only with your mom in the same house or coming from different countries or places like China. Or speaking different languages is being different....” William’s description closely aligns with his own current family situation of living primarily with his mother (parents are divorced), coming from a family who emigrated from China to Canada, and is bilingual. Yet, intriguingly neither Gem nor William identified themselves as being different based on these descriptions relating to their personal lives.
Rather, most participants provided very concrete understandings regarding their identity of difference. That is, participants attributed hair, eye colour, and bus changes as characteristics shaping their distinct differences. Edward explained, “I am different, because I got a red eye. I have a different eye colour than my friends.” Gem and Simon referenced their hair as a trait that makes them different:

“I am different, because I have a ponytail!” (Gem)

“I think I am different, because I got a hair cut.” (Simon)

William identified himself as being different due to changes in buses, “I am different because I go on a new bus…it's a small bus. I changed the bus from the morning today and tomorrow…My new buses. I changed bus drivers!”

Proceeding a bit deeper in identifying traits forming her differences, Alice posited, “I think I am different, because I have friends. Different is my friends….I am different because I am
nice. Some students are mean, but I am nice, and this makes me different from the other students.”

(Alice)

Alice associates her identity of difference to inner traits and behaviours (i.e., the ways in which people treat others, friendships). However, very few participants acknowledged personal differences tied to their race, ethnicity, disability, etc… Mew was the only participant identifying himself as different due to being bilingual, “I am different, because I speak different languages.”

(Mew)

Although Mew acknowledged personal differences resulting from language, paradoxically, he indicated a sense of embarrassment to speak his home language within a venue other than his home. This shame also related to his cultural foods, which Mew agreed was acceptable for his home environment, but not school:

These are Chinese foods. These are foods that I eat at home. I don't bring this to school to eat. I don't like these foods, except for the cat fish. I don't know how to say these foods in English, only Cantonese. I don't want to say the foods in Chinese/Cantonese -- I am embarrassed.
Similarly, William reported,

Sometimes we eat at this restaurant. It means "Tasty House." That's "Tasty House" in Chinese [referring to the restaurant sign]. The name of the restaurant. This is soup that I buy at the restaurant. I don't eat this at school. I don't want to bring this soup to school.

It appeared some participants reserved features associated to ethnic differences, such as language and cultural foods for distinct spaces encompassing home and family life. School did not seem to be an arena in which they could comfortably express and partake in practices related to their culture. Congruent with these findings, Boone and Chan (2005) indicated that in recounting memories as students, their participants of teacher-researchers from various diverse backgrounds, reported feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, and embarrassment when discussions of their personal differences (e.g., culture, ethnicity, or religion) were brought into school curricula and classrooms. These participants highlighted shame in asserting their differences and preferred assimilating toward the norm within their schools (Boone & Chan, 2005).
The shame and discomfort related to notions of difference perhaps transpire due to proliferation of ideologies embedded within the official educational discourses surrounding sameness and normalcy. More specifically, intertwining discourses of suppressing difference, segregation of difference, and denying of difference (Harper, 1997). Historically, through explicit and implicit discursive practices of dominant groups, minoritized groups swathed within blankets of inferiority and mediocrity have continuously been impelled to suppress differences and assimilate toward dominant groups. Part of this suppressing of difference to normalize minoritized groups includes segregation of those which are different. For instance, educational institutions assert it is in minoritized groups’ best interest to learn within separate spaces and places, serving them better. Thus, as participants attend segregated classrooms as a means to normalize differences, such as disabilities, they are slowly sanctioned to learn with normal students in regular classrooms (i.e., partial integration). This raises questions of whether through normalizing differences to fit ideals of the regular student, minoritized students become ashamed of their differences and are compelled to deny differences.

Discounting differences, another implicit discourse perpetuated within schools, underscores accentuating similarity and sameness, rather than difference. Some participants highlighted their desire to attain sameness within schools, attributing sameness to concepts of goodness, specialness, and normalness. Alice emphasized the special quality of being the same, stating, “I like being the same. It's good…special. I really like being the same.” Gem refutes being different or special, therefore implying a sense of sameness, “I do not think I'm special or different.” Edward and William explained desires for sameness relates to desires of fitting in and being perceived as normal:
I like being the same. It's just that way. I don't know why I like being the same as others. I think my haircut looks the same as others. My hair looks normal. It's normal, because I don't feel different. (Edward)

Even though my face is different, I don't think I am really different from other people. It's good to be the same. I like being the same, because it's good and normal. There is nothing special or unique about me. I'm the same as my friends, and I even think I look like them! (William)

Participants seemed to maintain an underlying impression that difference is negative, and sameness is positive. They positively perceived sameness among others, equivocating this to notions of normalcy. These understandings also prevailed through their storygames. During their story regarding a newcomer boy to their classroom, participants reported, “He came to our class. He was good. He was normal,” suggesting perhaps his goodness is tied to being normal. Participants conveyed awareness that social alienation within schools increase due to differences (i.e., ethnicity, disability, physical appearance) (Messiou, 2002, 2006). In narrating their story of a Tamil girl with autism, participants indicated, “They [classmates] made fun of her, because she had autism and they say ‘Hey, what are you? Your name is stupid.’ ” The mere question of “what are you?” signifies the Tamil girl is abnormal due to her autism diagnosis.

Yet contradictorily, participants also reported they considered themselves to be different, positively viewing these differences. On the one hand, they appreciated differences among themselves and their peers, and on the other hand, they longed to be the same as those around them; to be normal. As participants navigated between what seem to be polarized ends of embracing difference and yet also desiring a sense of sameness within school, this raises questions regarding the official discourses undergirding educational institutions and its influence on minoritized students with intersecting differences. For instance, does phrases
such as, “We are special” (Simon) or “Optimism is when there are different people” (William) reflect discourses of inviting and celebrating differences? Do desires to be normal stem from official discourses of suppressing and denying ability related differences in segregated classrooms to become similar to regular class students? Or do these contradictions shed light onto the intricate nature of negotiating identities within a school context among middle years minoritized students, particularly as they think about difference and diversity?

The complexities surrounding notions of difference and their relations to personal identity may explain participants’ sense of hesitation in discussing differences. As dialogue concerning differences ensued, some of the children struggled to articulate personal understandings of differences. Mew candidly reported, “It's hard for me to talk about differences. I know what differences mean, but it's hard to speak it out.” Similarly, Gem stated, “I see differences at my school, but it's difficult for me to describe these differences.” When asked what being different entails, Alice explained her drawing, “This is a drawing of what differences mean to me. This is my school and these are faces of people in my school. It's difficult for me to explain the differences in my school.”
Evidently, participants did not immediately feel at liberty to dialogue about differences, however over time they acknowledged conceptualizations of difference.

7.2 Ethnicity, Culture, Race, and Language

Throughout the children’s narratives, they highlighted differences related to ethnicity, culture, race, and language. Participants maintained a strong awareness of global languages (e.g., Spanish, French, Portuguese, Tamil, etc…), and they easily identified languages spoken in China and India. Mew also noted differences in language in Jamaica, although he did not specify the actual language (i.e., Jamaican Patois), “I also think there are differences in the languages people speak. For example, people in Jamaica speak different languages.”

Participants also related religion to a person’s culture, as well as associated notions of religion to church, history, prayer, and forms of religious leadership. They also reported three predominant religions: Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism. Brainstorming around the children’s perceptions of skin colour, they competently exhibited awareness of skin colour, race, and ethnicity. For instance they quickly observed differences in my skin colour in comparison to the rest of the research group: “Alice thinks Amanda [the researcher] is dark. Even though Amanda was born in Canada, our skin colour does not match…We're not all the same. We all were born in hospitals and we all have different skin colours.” They also identified skin colours, “There are skin colours like: white, peach, brown, and black. Sometimes White people are also blonde. Some people are black, brown, pink, and white if they come from Egypt.” Participants also indicated some understandings regarding culture, associating conceptualizations of cultures to countries (i.e., emigrating from various countries, newcomers to Canada), and to stereotypical foods and drinks. For example, during a brainstorming session on cultures, participants shared the following ideas:
Cultures are nice and fine. 
Cultures mean countries. 
Countries like Hong Kong, China, Canada, USA, Australia, and Guyana. 
People come from another country if they go and take the plane. 
We like different cultures and new countries. 
Asia is a country of Chinese. People speak English languages there too. 
There are different foods in every culture. 
In the Chinese culture there is sushi, dumplings, rice noodles, and fish. 
People in Chinese countries also eat "din go. [sic]" It looks like a different food, and you eat it during New Years. 
People in Hong Kong eat rice and noodles. They drink juice, water, lemon tea, or green tea. 
Other cultures also have spicy foods like curry. 
People from Italy eat spaghetti and meatballs. They also eat pizza. Their talent is making sauce.

From their brainstorm bubble, it is also clear participants demonstrated a positive lens toward cultural diversity, stating cultures are “nice,” “fine,” and “We like different cultures and new countries.” This keen sense of appreciation for cultural differences was also expressed during discussions of language. For instance, Edward described his enjoyment of when friends speak diverse languages, “I like it that my friends can speak different languages from me, like French and Spanish.” Demonstrating a sense of pride for his bilingual abilities, Simon reported, “People speak different languages. I like the languages I speak.” More specifically, William directly associated the value of learning home languages directly from family, thus associating language to culture. He affirmatively suggested, “…it's good to learn languages from your family.”

Despite positive remarks related to ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences, participants also associated these differences to bullying experiences, especially when differences intersect, and when the individual has a darker skin tone. For example, as participants narrated their story of a Tamil girl with autism in school they recounted:

Some people did not make fun of her language, but other people did. They bullied her.
Some people did not make fun of her skin colour, but sometimes people did. They called her "You are black." That made her feel sad. She cried. They made fun of the girl and thought she had a rash. They thought her black skin had a rash, and they made fun of her. They think it's bleeding blood, and it's not good. They made fun of her skin colour, because it's different. They thought it was bad and worse. They called her skin ‘Horrible.’

Although bullied for speaking a different language, she received the main bullying brunt for her skin colour. Noticeably, participants’ description of the Tamil girl’s skin colour was quite negative, employing terms such as worse, bad, and horrible, and identifying the skin as black and dirty (i.e., bleeding rash). Perhaps such pejorative concepts surrounding dark skin derive from a predominant discourse commonly enacted throughout school practices: *Otherness.*

Frequently, minoritized children are slotted into categories of the foreign Other, maintaining exotic traditions and customs that do not typically have a place within daily teaching lessons (James, 2001; Sleeter, 2004). This understanding of classrooms filled with immigrant children presents a distinct division between the ethnic Other and those from White majority groups. Consequently, minoritized children remain as powerless abnormal outsiders compared to those within prevailing norms of White discourse, maintaining invisible power and privilege as insiders (Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008). Educators, particularly those from White groups, further perpetuate power imbalances, as they often refrain from critically examining personal societal positioning, power, philosophies, and practices in relation to minoritized students. Possibly indoctrinated with White discourse inhabiting schools, some participants displayed a strong positive disposition toward white
skin colour. During discussions of skin colour, Edward and Mew justified the dark colour of their skin by suggesting it was simply from a sun tan:

“I don't like my skin colour, because it looks like it has a sun burn.” (Edward)

“My friend Mew looks like his skin is getting a little bit dark. He thinks it's because he went to the beach and got a sun tan.” (Brainstorm Bubble)

Negatively perceiving their darker skin tone, Edward and Mew felt the need to defend their darker skin, attributing the colour to a tan -- something impermanent that would soon fade. This suggests a sense of shame for their skin colour, which may have been darker than the rest of the research participants. This sense of shame regarding darker skin was also noted among Simon, William, and Alice, whom identified themselves as being white, reporting their keenness for others to also maintain white skin colours:

Simon likes mostly the white skin colour, because he thinks he is white....William and Alice think they are white too. Alice mostly likes the white skin colour. She thinks it's good.... William, Alice, and Simon like it when everyone has the same skin colour, especially a white skin colour. William thinks it would be normal if everyone has the same skin colour. (Brainstorm Bubbles)

Interestingly 3 out of 6 participants identified as part of the White dominant group. Plainly these participants considered white skin colour to carry a sense of supremacy and superiority. They also associated white skin colour to concepts of normalcy and a desire for sameness in skin colour among individuals, particularly sameness of the dominant group. Perhaps participants internalized notions of the dominant group so much so they began victimizing themselves, convincing themselves of dominant group status while ridding themselves from minority group status. Although it appears to be a grave attempt to acquire powers and privileges of dominant group cultures, it may serve as self-assurance that within this one particular area of difference they refuse to be perceived as inferior and inadequate victims
void of agency, which are frequent notions ascribed to minoritized students (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2013; Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a). Participants may recognize the disadvantage, deficiency, and subordination attributed to those who defy the normal and prescribed standards of White discourse (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2013; Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a), and ability based discourse (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996). Yet, although they consider undertaking such an identity (white skin colour) as empowering, internalizing these White discursive ideals contradictorily breeds inequities among minoritized groups – hegemonic process. Consequently, minoritized groups fall further into a powerless chasm.

In addition to discourses of Otherness and Whiteness, discourses of colour blindness also surface within classrooms. As a means to serve minoritized students, colour blindness or ignoring differences related to students’ ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds is a principal and mythical discourse embedded within many teachers’ practices (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a, Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008; Milner IV, 2010; Watson, 2011). Considering differences as inherent school elements, some teachers refrain from compartmentalizing students based on differences, and instead recognize students as equal and the same irrespective of differences, receiving equal treatment and educational opportunities (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Harper, 1997; Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008). Mew disagreed with a majority of participants, expressing a definite appreciation for ethnic and racial diversity, yet his understandings were masked with notions of colour blindness and a saga of sameness:

Mew likes all the different skin colours, because he thinks if you have the same colour it's so boring…it's not fun or cool. Mew thinks skin colour doesn't matter, because we are the same person on the inside…it doesn't matter, because we're all the same people. (Brainstorm Bubble)

Seemingly, Mew conformed to notions of colour blindness. Through engendering teachers’ repertoires of colour blindness, minoritized students continue oppressing themselves.
Denying differences firmly fastens concepts of deficiencies onto minoritized students, holding them accountable for educational difficulties (Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 2004). Furthermore, disregarding students’ differences ignores and devalues minoritized children’s personal experiences and qualities associated to their differences, thus contributing to further repressive effects of minority status groups (Asher, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2009; Harper, 1997; Milner IV, 2010). Moreover, differences become portrayed as irrelevant to student learning, as such differences are denied. This is a socially accepted practice and is often considered as a non-discriminatory and just repertoire. However, once again the sameness as fairness approach further normalizes and contributes power and privilege to dominant groups while concurrently further marginalizing minoritized groups. Ignoring students’ differences demonstrates a disregard to critically confront prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and practices within schools (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008; Kumashiro, 2002). Asher (2007) described this as a “‘closed openness’ which can appear, on the surface, to be democratically progressive and ‘inclusive’ is ultimately narcissistic and fear driven and effaces the other as subject” (p. 69).

7.3 Disability and Autism

Participants demonstrated valiant efforts in discussing and voicing personal understandings of disability. They capably shared ideas of types of disabilities. For instance, participants suggested disabilities such as, vision impairments, hearing impairments, non-ambulant, autism, and Asperger syndrome. During a research brainstorming session, they shared, “A person has a disability if they are blind or deaf….Autism is also a disability….Simon knows that Asperger's is autism.” Narrating a story through storygames, they described a student in class with a disability: “He had trouble seeing things. He had trouble
with his eyesight. He was blind. He was in a wheelchair.....The boy can't see.” In addition to these common associations to disabilities, participants explained disabilities related to allergies and asthma, “Or, if they can not smile or breathe, because they have an allergy or asthma....Maybe you can get a disability if you have an allergy to poison ivy or smoke.” Interestingly, this may reflect participants’ learning of allergy awareness highly promoted throughout Canadian schools.

In addition to identifying particular disabilities, many participants also acknowledged disabilities as a type of difference that is similar to any other type of human differences (Gabel & Connor, 2008). For example, Edward explained,

I understand if someone is in a wheelchair they are also different. Being different is also if someone injures their leg...remember when Terry Fox got cancer in his leg and then he got a fake leg. Having a disability is being different.

Likewise, during a brainstorming session, Mew reported, “...having a disability is like having a different skin colour or like having a different body part. Like we all have different heads, teeth, noses, or fingers. It's OK, because it's just differences.” Additionally, a majority of participants expressed positive perspectives of having a disability, specifically autism:

“It's OK to have autism.” (Gem)

“I think it's OK to have autism, but I am unsure about what autism means.” (Mew)

“I think it's OK to have autism, but I don't know what it looks like.” (William)

“...it's good to have a disability....” (Alice)

However, Simon shared a sense of negativity associated to disabilities: “When Simon thinks about disability, he thinks sometimes it's negative” (Brainstorm Bubble). Possibly, Simon’s response may reflect feelings common among children with autism, as autism accompanies
increased bullying experiences, difficulties communicating, socializing, and developing friendships, academic challenges, segregated learning, etc… (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Indeed, participants clearly identified characteristics and feelings associated to individuals with autism.

Conceivably drawing from personal experiences of having autism and other developmental delays, and/or observations in their special education class, participants associated disabilities and autism to challenges surrounding communication, friendships, behaviours, and educational aptitude. For instance, themes of communication challenges and a lack of intelligence emerged throughout a few of participants’ stories during storygames:

“They make fun of her and they say ‘Your name is stupid.’ She always trips all the time and they call her names, like clumsy.” (Storygames; girl in special education class being teased at school)

“People at school call her funny names, like ‘Bad Bird…..’ They make fun of her voice and the way she talks..... They call her stupid, because she has autism.”

(Storygames; Tamil girl with autism)

Within their brainstorming session, participants explained, “Some people with disabilities also have trouble speaking and this is OK, because we are all different….Autism is when you can not talk and you have trouble speaking. It's hard to speak.” Insightfully, they attributed communication difficulties to struggles in developing and sustaining friendships. Mew and Gem discussed,

...people with autism may also lose friends….If you have autism you can lose friends if other people don't know what you say…if they don't understand you…like a different language, and some people don't speak the same language as us. (Brainstorm Bubble)
Alice, Mew, and William debated issues of building friendships and behavioural challenges:

Alice thinks it's easy for her to make friends. But, Mew thinks it's hard, because other people don't know what you say if you have autism, and they don't understand what you're doing...you're behaviours. William thinks that other people don't understand why you have temper tantrums, like "Arrrrhh!! I want to fight!!" Children with autism may beat you up...they may be violent, because they are frustrated. People with autism do not get along. Sometimes people with autism are bad or terrible...William thinks they can be the worse! (Brainstorm Bubble)

During storygames about a boy being teased at school, participants also acknowledged the association between hyperactivity and food intake, “Jonny was at the birthday party and he was negative. He is being noisy. He has too much energy. He ate too many sweets. And too much junk food.” Thus, the student who is victimized at school also exhibits behavioural problems, such as hyperactivity and being noisy. Seemingly, participants extended these behavioural issues to not only autism, but also to any disability in general, highlighting concepts of behavioural control. Participants expressed during a brainstorm session,

Mew also thinks maybe on the inside people with disabilities are good...inside their heart is good, but outside they are bad. They are bad outside, because they can not control themselves.... They may have to take drugs to control their behaviour. Not bad drugs like alcohol or poison, but medications.

Further sharing ideas regarding individuals with disabilities, participants described notions of poverty and homelessness, “Mew thinks that people with disabilities are poor and not rich. They have little or no money, and it's sad if they don't have money. People with disabilities may lose their life, their house, and food” (Brainstorm Bubble).

Participants appeared well versed in behavioural challenges and the importance of controlling behaviours. These understandings possibly stem from personal experiences of behavioural difficulties at school. Moreover, although participants seemed to maintain some positive dispositions toward disability and autism, they also ascribed negative associations
and terms to these concepts (i.e., bad, worse, bad bird, terrible, stupid, ideas of poverty and homelessness, temper tantrums, uncontrollable behaviour, hyperactivity, loss of friendships, and difficulties communicating). Wickenden (2011) demonstrated adolescent participants with disabilities directly articulated desires to be perceived as more than just their impairments or deficits. Similarly, participants in my study, although not exactly personalizing deficiencies, clearly conveyed a sense that disabilities and autism are tied to notions of deficiencies. Such negative attributions suggest a deficit based discourse undergirding participants’ understandings of disability and autism.

Similar to inferior and deficient status affixed to minoritized students from various ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds (i.e., the Other) (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a), minoritized students with additional intersecting differences of disabilities intensify deficit and deficient based discourses. Deficit ideologies pertaining to children with disabilities are historically entrenched within educational systems, policies, and practices, due to a medical model lens (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Gabel & Connor, 2008; Liasidou, 2012; Reid & Knight, 2006). Such clinical and positivist founded perspectives purport cures and treatments for disorder and disability, shifting and realigning individuals with disabilities closer to realms of normalcy (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Gabel & Connor, 2008; Reid & Knight, 2006). Ideals of “fixing” disabilities or any other difference posits problems within the individual, hence coercively blaming and victimizing the individual for educational struggles and failures. This individualizing discourse supports deficit based thinking and is often employed as a means of managing minoritized students from ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a) and those with disabilities (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006). Conversely, social models of disabilities purport fixing and
treated deficient learning and teaching conditions, school environments, and contexts in which students reside, rather than situating deficits within minoritized students. Identifying needs and deficits of minoritized children and burdening them through individualistic discourses serve to avert attention from systemic societal and educational factors of exclusion perpetuating power imbalances and inequities (Liasidou, 2012), whilst also masking accountability of those from non-minoritized and dominant groups in contributing to issues of educational problems (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006).

Deficit and deficient ideologies beget notions of abnormality, leading to the Othering of individuals based on abilities (Liasidou, 2012), ethnicity, language, culture (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a), and their intersections amongst each other (Gabel & Connor, 2008). That is, minoritized students deviate from standard notions of normalcy represented and reproduced within society and schools. Discourses of abnormality, propelled by discourses of deficit and deficiency, then too propel discourses of otherness based on divergence from the norm. These notions of normalcy are profoundly ensconced within White, Eurocentric ideologies defining what are acceptable knowledges, abilities, dialects, behaviours, ways of learning, ways of living, images of beauty, etc. Individuals differing from these norms become pathologized as the abnormal defective Others. Within a medical and clinical framework, pathologizing individuals based on empirical study of qualitative differences, dictates a sense of impartiality and equality, somehow justifying cataloguing of individuals due to impairments (Baker, 2002; Reid & Knight, 2006). Aligning as closely as possible to dominant groups’ notions of normalcy and being able bodied (i.e., ableism) are historically founded in eugenics (Baker, 2002). It then becomes natural practice to categorize anyone differing from dominant groups’ defined notions of normalcy as abnormal and deficient,
especially if deriving from groups historically marginalized, oppressed, and positioned as the Other (Liasidou, 2012; Reid & Knight, 2006). Consequently, minoritized students from various ethnic, cultural, racial, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, who are also identified as having disabilities, increasingly are streamed into special education classrooms (Liasidou, 2012; Reid & Knight, 2006). Educational institutions sanction such segregated learning, allegedly not based on students’ race, ethnicity, culture, or language, but rather due to their disabilities (Reid & Knight, 2006). Yet, ironically, students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and those living in lower socio-economic status’ are receiving disability diagnosis’ and being placed in segregated special education classrooms at disturbingly increased proportions compared to students from White dominant groups (Reid & Knight, 2006). Reid and Knight (2006) concluded,

…marking students of color as disabled allows their continued segregation under a seemingly natural and justifiable label. Because it makes segregation seem appropriate and even preferable, the enduring belief that impairment and disability are empirical facts is at the centre of the disproportionality problem. (p. 19)

Receiving exposure to such discourses endorsed by schools and societies, whilst also navigating and forming a sense of self and identity, especially throughout the middle years, minoritized students accordingly recognize and internalize categorizations of abnormality, deficient, and the Other. Realizing their positioning on the fringes of normalcy as labels of abnormal and “less than” become strapped to their backs within school contexts, middle years minoritized students logically prefer to be in the centre of normalcy with other peers. This desire to be normal as defined and decreed by dominant groups serves as a catalyst for denying differences among minoritized groups. Similar to educational discourses of denying differences and colour blindness within classrooms as a means to foster equality (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008a; Harper, 1997; Jacquet, 2008; Knight, 2008; Milner IV, 2010; Watson, 2011),
participants convinced of sameness as fairness and normal as better, also conveyed a denying of difference as they denied their disability. For instance, although a majority of participants eloquently described characteristics and understandings of disability and autism, half of participants denied having a disability or autism. During a brainstorming session, participants candidly shared,

Simon does not think he has autism…... He thinks everyone has autism. Alice does not think she has a disability. She does not think she has autism…. Mew doesn't know what autism means, so he is unsure if he has autism…… He doesn't think [we are in the special education class] because we have autism or ADHD.

Despite Mew’s and Alice’s positive understandings of disabilities, they still do not identify as having autism or a disability. Interestingly, Mew capably explained characteristics of individuals with autism, but when asked whether he has autism he indicates unawareness of the disability, and thus he is unsure whether he is diagnosed with autism. When asked what his autism looks like, Mew stated “surprised, because he doesn't think he has autism” (Brainstorm Bubble). Contradictorily, Simon denies having an autism diagnosis, but also suggests everyone has autism. This possibly signifies his aversion of labelling only himself with autism, as it would be much more normal and acceptable to attribute autism to everyone. It may also indicate Simon perceives characteristics of autism in everyone within his social and school contexts (e.g., he is placed with a community classroom, designed specifically for children with autism). Nevertheless, he still refutes his own autism diagnosis. These responses imply a sense of shame or embarrassment in disclosing personal disability diagnosis, as they may recognize it differs from discourses of normalcy; identifying as having a disability within a school context inevitably places them within discourses of abnormality and deficiency. Adding further complexities, when asked what their autism looked like, Alice and Simon reported positive attributes, such as “good” and “happy”
suggesting that although these participants deny their differences associated to disability and autism, they still attribute positive attitudes toward autism. Perhaps this signifies that despite an unwillingness to classify themselves as students with disabilities or students with autism, recognizing ramifications of such categorizations (i.e., shifting them into realms of deficiency, neediness, and abnormality), they also recognize they are still a part of a school community for children with disabilities attending special education classrooms and they may accept and enjoy this community. For example, Simon explained, “I know I belong in the special class, because I have autism.” On the other hand, Edward and William expressed optimistic views regarding their autism diagnosis. William reported, “I like having autism…it's good…. autism is awesome! [My] autism looks happy!” Associating his autism to uniqueness, Edward stated, “I am different and unique, because I have autism.”

The convoluted nature and intricacies of participants claiming their disabilities status illustrates the unsteady, malleable, and dynamic processes entwined within notions of identity, to some extent because they are also shaped by social norms and power relations (Gérin-Lajoie, 2011). For instance, in spite of participants’ abilities to define, discuss, and share experiences of autism and disability, and in some cases identifying with autism, there was an underlying understanding of predominant societal and educational discourses and conceptual repertoires associated to disabilities (i.e., deficit, deficient, unacceptable, abnormal, needy, “less than,” and the Other). Thus, certain determinants and circumstances shape “…the way in which individuals build a rapport to identity” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2011, p. 173, italics in original text). This rapport or understandings of one’s identity differs between individuals despite deriving from similar cultures or ethnicities, speaking similar languages, maintaining similar religious faiths, and as in this study, having the same autism diagnosis
(Gérin-Lajoie, 2011). As participants move through their middle years and enter adolescence, they are continually navigating and negotiating which aspects they prefer claiming as part of their identity. As a result of the fluidity of identity construction, participants’ identities may change due to influencing variables (e.g., dominant discourses, environmental contexts, social contexts, etc…). In her study of adolescents with physical disabilities, Wickenden (2011) explained participants identified distinct aspects of their identity, other than their disability status (e.g., helpful, exceptional math skills, etc…). Wickenden’s (2011) participants did not want their disability to function as a main piece of their identity, as it detracted from being a normal teenager and placed them within discourses of Otherness, ultimately leaving them with a sense of exclusion. Similarly, these findings align with a few of my participants’ hesitation and refrain from identifying with having a disability and/or autism, as they desired a belonging within societal and schools discourse of normalcy; they want to “fit in.”

Seemingly, participants demonstrated an internal contention between confidently accepting disabilities as part of their identity, rather than serve as a predominant core to their identity, and also trying to overcome pejorative and discriminatory discourses relating disability to notions of difficulty, deficient, deficit, defect, and abnormality (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Liasidou, 2012); they expressed an undertone of “overcoming” to be more normal. Gem explained efforts in overcoming her communication difficulties by learning more acceptable forms (i.e., verbal speech):

People talk in our class...it's awkward for me. I try to talk to others by speaking, but I prefer using pictures instead. This is one of my teachers this year [Gem is showing a photo of her teacher during photo narrations]. I go to see her to talk. She helps me talk. She also does sign language. I think I try to speak "A-B-C, C-I-D," but I get so tired.
Gem highlighted a sense of discomfort, fatigue, and frustration in trying to learn more normal and conventional modes of communication in order to overcome her communicative disability. She also stated a preference for maintaining the ways in which she currently communicates (i.e., PECS). Some participants explored emotions an individual with autism may feel. For example, Simon and Mew explained the emotional and performative facets to autism:

Simon thinks autism can be scary too! He thinks autism is all about emotions. Mew also thinks it's about action, where we do something with the emotion to help our autism. But, we are not sure what we do and what our actions are. (Brainstorm Bubble)

Although perhaps their understandings stem from lessons learned within therapeutic sessions, they capably conveyed insightful recognition of the varied emotions accompanying autism, along with the importance of seeking ways to manage these emotions. Further highlighting emotions, participants poignantly shared feelings someone with autism might experience, “When someone has autism they may feel: grumpy, fear, angry, frustrated. Autism can also make you feel confused or even paralyzed, like when you have brain damage and you can't move” (Brainstorm Bubble). Drawing from personal experiences and knowledges, participants demonstrated an overall awareness of the societal challenges endured with having a disability or autism diagnosis, especially as they undergo complexities of identity construction.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, participants competently shared conceptualizations of differences and its influence on their identities as minoritized children with intersecting differences. Although sometimes positively conceptualizing and appreciating diversity, it was interesting to notice some participants’ view of themselves from the lens of majority groups, highlighting a sense of shame or taboo for claiming
particular differences as part of their identity (e.g., skin colour, language, disability). This hesitation to fully embrace all personal differences is perhaps associated to the educational discourses and teachers’ conceptual repertoires surrounding diversity. As these discourses and repertoires operate throughout educational spaces, it may create a school climate whereby discussions of differences become perceived as taboo, influencing feelings of shame for differences, and potentially constructing silences around identifying with differences, all oppressing and disempowering minoritized students (see Figure 2). Thus to “come out” with personal differences diverges from discursive school practice and from what appears as normal within school contexts. However, as demonstrated through this study, once minoritized children are presented with a safe, comfortable, and empowering space and venue, debates and discussions of difference seemingly flow. The subsequent chapter sheds light onto participants’ overall sense of school belonging as minoritized students with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability.
Figure 2. Common educational discourses and teachers’ conceptual repertoires surrounding notions of diversity: Potential effects on minoritized students.
CHAPTER EIGHT

SENSE OF SCHOOL BELONGING

The second theme related to participants’ sense of school belonging. Participants described interconnecting factors of inclusive and exclusive elements contributing to their overall sense of school belonging. Shedding light onto matters of inclusion, participants highlighted factors, such as social interaction with peers, school recognition, engaging and active learning, and independence and voice in school. Exclusion factors included, mixed feelings associated to school, special education class versus regular class, cell phones, particular school subjects, authority reprimands, and bullying. Other concepts emerging from this theme were notions of normalcy, meritocracy, individualization and deficit based discourse, and the “good” student.

Participants’ narratives explored various understandings regarding their school sense of belonging. Similar to other studies (e.g., Carrington et al., 2007; Moss et al., 2007) participants capably reflected upon schooling experiences, presenting insights, meanings, and examples of inclusion and exclusion. Participants expressed broad understandings pertaining to inclusion and exclusion, conveying a proficient sense of the meanings attributed to these terms. For instance, Edward perceptively shared his general perceptions of inclusion and exclusion as he described photos of a garden during his photo narrations:
These are photos of my brother's friend's neighbour's house and flower garden. I like those flowers. They're kind of yellow with lights. The flower garden reminds me of inclusion and exclusion at the same time. I think it is exclusion, because some things don't belong, like the white flower and the white bird. But, this same picture is inclusion, because you see that the small white flower, is about 3 yrs old and it's a younger flower. And there is also the white bird. They are with the yellow flowers that look like weeds. The white flower and white bird still seem included even though they are with the yellow flowers. (Edward)

Insightfully, Edward’s comments regarding the colours of the garden emphasize his views of belonging; that is, although within a group, one may appear as if it does not belong due to differences (i.e., white non-dominant flower and bird), yet still coexist simultaneously among others (i.e., yellow dominant group). During the photo narrations, Simon explained his understandings of inclusion and exclusion in relation to traffic lights, “Exclusion is like this traffic light when it's red. This is excluded. It means stop and it's negative. The red light looks like upset….upset. The green light means positive, like included!”

In addition to sharing general conceptualizations surrounding inclusion and exclusion, participants also highlighted enactments of these concepts within their school context. Interconnected inclusive and exclusive factors contributing to participants’ overall sense of school belonging emerged from the children’s narratives (see Figure 3).
Figure 3. Venn diagram illustrating the interrelationship between inclusive and exclusive factors influencing participants’ overall sense of belonging.

8.1 Inclusion

As discussions of school inclusion surfaced, all participants acknowledged difficulty in sharing inclusive school experiences, yet, did not provide reasoning as to why it was difficult to think of these moments:

“It's hard sometimes to think about how I am included or involved at school.” (Alice)

“It's hard for me to think about what makes me feel involved at school. Sometimes, nothing makes me feel involved at school.” (Edward)

“I can not think of a time I felt like I belonged in school, where I was involved and included.” (Mew)
The silences and struggles in readily describing school inclusion perhaps indicates infrequent occurrences of inclusive school activities and experiences, thus affording participants with a faint sense of school involvement and belonging. Although marginalization among minoritized children within schools is extensively reported in the literature (e.g., Asher, 2007; Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Banks, 2010; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Cooney et al., 2006; Dei, 1996a, 1996b; Messiou, 2006; Petrou et al., 2009; Rose et al., 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001), participants’ narratives underscored particular activities and events, which incite personal contentment and connectedness in school. One primary surfacing theme included activities involving social interactions with peers.

All participants reported attaining a sense of enjoyment when engaging in outdoor activities and specific sports/physical activities. Alike other studies examining middle years students’ perspectives of inclusion, outdoor spaces and sports fields were reported as welcoming social spaces to comfortably relax, socialize, and have fun (Moss et al., 2007). Alice expressed fondness for going to the park during the school day, “I dream about the park…. We [teacher and classmates] sometimes go to the park.”

Edward explained the value of participating in sports to foster cooperation and socialization among other peers, “I really enjoy sports. I like sports, because I like passing the ball to someone else. Soccer is one of my favourite sports to play, and when I grow up I want to be a soccer player!” Mew stated, “I'm good at playing badminton....I am also proud of my baseball skills...other times I wonder if I'm a basketball player.” As Mew employed phrases,
such as “I am good” and “I am proud” he demonstrates the potential for sporting activities to cultivate children’s confidence, especially among those who feel marginalized. Gem described engaging in many different sports activities in school, reporting volleyball specifically assists in reducing anxiety and provides her with overall enjoyment:

“I also like the sport Volleyball…sometimes I wonder about Volleyball….I like playing ball, like the one in the photo. These are my shoes for playing ball. I go outside and play. It makes me feel happy and calm.”

“I like playing sports at school, like mini-golfing….I also like playing with the hula hoop!”

Simon indicated participating in gym provides a sense of inclusion, and reported his best day in school would entail a full day of gym class, “For me, my best day at school is to have GYM! I am involved in Gym…Gym is involving! It's fun. Gym makes me feel included.”
Simon further conveyed his excitement and enjoyment when playing outdoor soccer,

I was very happy, because I was playing soccer. I think last month I played soccer outside. Playing soccer makes me feel included…. This is me! I kicked the soccer ball. I drew a tree, because after, I was sitting near the shade. I was happy.

Simon and William also described engaging in sports activities with friends,

“We [William and Jonny] play football together.” (William)

“Something that we [friends] like playing is badminton. I'm good at badminton…sometimes I don't bat really well, sometimes I bat well! I also play volleyball with my friends.” (Simon)
Participants’ recognized physical sporting activities developed confidence, increased calming sensations, and presented opportunities to socialize with peers, contributing to their sense of inclusion. Demonstrating through a case study of a child with disabilities, Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman (2009) highlighted friends as a main component when engaging in various favourite and interactive social activities. Considering sports are cooperative and social activities, they serve as prime activities to engage in with friends.

Unsurprisingly, friendships foster children’s sense of school inclusion and belonging. For instance, both Simon and Mew indicated the socializing aspects of friendships supported their overall sense of school engagement:

I like going to school. It's fun, because I get to play with friends. I have friends at school. John is one of my friends, but he is the regular class and I am in the special class. I also have some friends in the special class, like Brad. Both John and Brad are in Grade 7 and I play with them. (Simon)

I like to play with my friends at school. I have a friend named Shiloh. He likes me. We play computer and Bayblade. Bayblade is a game where you battle someone. We also play Pokemon…. Playing with my friends is also another favourite part of going to school. (Mew)

Asher and Gazelle (1999) contended, established friendships among children ensue when relationships are mutually acknowledged with mutual affection toward each other. Socialization among friends provide relationships for minoritized children with disabilities, whereby “in these interactions they are active beings who contribute to their social worlds” (Wickenden, 2011, p. 18). Children’s friendships at school may serve as forms of emotional support and companionship, circumventing risks of loneliness and isolation (Asher & Gazelle, 1999). Friends also provide assistance and support when necessary, and in some cases serve as allies and protective factors during school experiences (e.g., bullying) (Asher
& Gazelle, 1999; Cappadocia et al., 2012). For example, Edward explained his interactions with friends and the helpful dynamic of their relationship:

I have some friends at school. For example, at school Ackeela was my friend, but now Milliken and Victoria are my friends. We're in the same class. I had a friend, Yous, who sold her house in September and moved to an apartment right beside the Woodlake square. We still see each other though, on the bus and in class. I like playing soccer with my friends at school. My friends also help me. When I was in the hospital and had my appendix removed, my friend helped me, telling others in the school not to push me, because of my surgery. And then I just stayed inside at school. My friends also helped me at my old school, when I got hit by a soccer ball in my stomach, and went to the hospital. My friends Shikira and Ackeela helped me not to get pushed. Also, sometimes me and my friends walk to the school bus.

However, children with disabilities often encounter challenges in building and sustaining friendships. This is particularly the case among children with autism and/or developmental delays, as they experience difficulties in areas of traditionally effective communication and social skills. Compared to their typical peers and compared to standard societal norms, several children with autism maintain niche interests, uncharacteristic behaviours, misinterpret traditional social cues, and struggle with socio-communicative skills, complicating peer interactions (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Wickenden (2011) highlighted many of her teenage participants with physical and communicative impairments expressed difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships, reporting having only one consistent friend (e.g., family friend or primary school friend) with a desire for more friends of similar age. Similarly, William, Alice, and Gem described possessing only one friend at school. For instance, William explained, “I have friends at school, like Jonny Tay. He's 14 years old. He has big hair..... I play with Jonny, and he makes me feel included. He's my friend..... Jonny makes me feel good.”
Both Alice and Gem indicated having one friend at school in addition to more friends at the centre, and Gem associated her mother as a friend:

“I have friends at school, like Steward. Gem is also my friend, because she's nice. I like my friends.” (Alice)

“My friend at school is Lucy, and I also think my Mom is my friend. I have feelings about my Mom as my friend. Alice is also my friend. I am proud that I have girlfriends. I also love Edward.” (Gem)

From participants’ accounts, it appears perhaps the quantity of friends are negligible in comparison to the quality of their friendships. Despite having few friends, participants’ intimate, consistent, and familiar bonds with other peers may operate as a key contributor to their sense of school inclusion.

Beyond friendships, some participants reported feelings of inclusion when participating in activities with the general student population, regardless of whether the student was a friend. Simon indicated his sense of school inclusion when participating in his cooking program at school, “This is where we cook at the centre. I like cooking. My school
also has cooking and I like it. I cook together with other kids at school. It really makes me feel included.”

Gem reported, “I also feel included at school when my class celebrates my birthday”

She also expressed a sense of belonging on the school bus, “This is my school. I am included in school. I feel included in school, especially on the school bus.”

Each of these activities (i.e., cooking, birthday celebrations, and riding the school bus) entails some type of socialization with peers in a group setting. For example, Simon expressed enjoyment in cooking with other school peers, possibly affording him opportunities to
socialize with students his age. Celebrating birthdays with her class may provide Gem the chance to socialize with peers while sharing a personal and pleasurable event. Likewise, her remarks regarding inclusion on the school bus perhaps suggests further opportunity to engage and interact with peers on a one-on-one basis (e.g., sit beside peers on the bus and socialize), contributing to her sense of school inclusion. However, from participants’ responses it is unclear whether these activities occurred with students from their special education class or the regular class. In Gem’s case, she most likely experienced these events with other children with disabilities, as she attends the special education class on a full-time basis.

Although ideals of inclusive education emphasize the democratic right of all children, with various differences, to fully participate in complete aspects of education alongside their peers within regular classrooms (Ainscow & Cesar, 2006; Frankel et al., 2010; Slee & Allan, 2001), these participants may have felt a sense of inclusion, not from within an inclusive education class, but rather from within their special education class. Conceivably contributing to feelings of school inclusion, Gem and Simon may have participated in these enjoyable activities with peers from their special education class, engaging in events with other classmates who presumably appreciate their disability and relate more closely to their experiences (Wickenden, 2011).

As such, a majority of participants identified their centre for individuals with disabilities as a primary site kindling a sense of inclusion and belonging. Describing the socialization and friendship opportunities presented at the centre, Gem expressed, “I love Edward. He makes me feel included at school. He is my friend and we play everything together,” and Simon explained,
I also feel included at the centre. This room [the learning room] makes me feel included..... I do individual learning in this room and some social skills learning too. I like the social skills group, because I like learning with other kids.

William stated he wished his school was more like the centre, “I wish my school was like this [shows a photo of the centre]. The centre makes me feel included.” Moreover, when engaging in storygames regarding a girl being teased at school, participants identified the centre as a place of refuge for the child:

Instead she came here, to our centre!
She felt lucky, because she got to come to our centre and she didn't have to go back to school.
She's happy when she's here at the centre.
She feels safe here, safer than her school, away from the people, the classmates, the bully people.
No one bullies her at the centre.
She felt happy.

Seemingly, the centre serves as a site of safety and support for participants, whereby they are surrounded by an overwhelming sense of similarity, which in turn generated a sense of comfort and belonging. That is, participants’ sense of inclusion increased within a space filled with similar groups of individuals, from similar ethnic backgrounds, similar abilities, and similar experiences. Yet, can this enhanced sense of inclusion derived from a segregated space of similarity (i.e., the private centre) be achieved within a public institution of difference (i.e., the public school)? Nutbrown and Clough (2009) suggested young participants (aged 3-6 years) expressed ideas for improving inclusivity within their non-segregated early years setting. Similar to the views of middle years participants in this study, Nutbrown and Clough’s (2009) early years participants highlighted key elements for inclusive learning environments. Namely, these spaces (a) ensure children feel comfortable and secure, (b) reduce children’s fears, (c) function as a place of refuge, (d) function as
equitable spaces (e.g., reassured matters will be managed fairly), (e) provide children with a sense of community, and imperatively (f) encourage children to feel confident and positive about their differences. During the middle years, establishing relationships and friendships serve as critical contributors to students’ self-esteem and security, and assist in transitions to high school, where they may be required to seek out and create new friendships. As participants cope with understandings of their communication differences and navigate between suitable social skills strategies and behaviours, they demonstrated deep desires to socialize within peer groups and secure friendships at school. At their centre, however, the nexus of security, socialization, friendship, and belonging neatly entwine, perhaps stemming from an embedded sense of welcome, acceptance, and understanding of differences conveyed by both students and educators – a culture of inclusion. Affirmative discourses of differences emanated through the centre, yet somehow participants found similarities within differences.

Participants also expressed feelings of inclusion from engaging in school experiences involving students from the regular class. Two major events included receiving school awards and Grade 8 graduation. For example, Gem indicated,

These are my award pictures [During photo narrations Gem explained her photos of school awards]. I got these from school. My friends gave it to me at school. It's an "I Can Succeed Award" and "Future Aces Award." These awards make me feel happy.

Receiving these awards enhanced Gem’s sense of inclusion and confidence as a minoritized student. In accepting the awards, she presumably participated in a school assembly, further supporting her feelings of school belonging in the school culture. Graduation was also a predominant inclusive event reported by 3 out of the 6 participants:
“I am graduating next year. That makes me feel really happy and involved at school.” (Alice)

“I am graduating this year. Graduating makes me feel involved and like I belong at school. I am going to high school next year! This is my graduation book with pictures!” (Gem)

My favourite part of school is going on the Grade 8 graduation trip, because we get to go on a field trip. My upcoming Grade 8 trip to Ottawa also makes me feel included and involved. Belonging to me is graduating. I feel included and like I belong, because I'm graduating from school. I am going to have a graduation dinner! (William)

Excitedly participants discussed graduation, highlighting the sense of school belonging the experience imparts. Seemingly, school belonging increases as participants partake in such a grand event along side their typical peers from the regular class. Namely, the experience of engaging in the graduation process and procedures (e.g., gown fitting, graduation field trips, class parties, ceremony, grad school photos, etc…) with the regular children enhances their sense of school inclusion and involvement. At first glance, William’s affirmation that “Belonging to me is graduating,” contradicts his fear of transitioning to high school (later presented in the exclusion section of the paper), as school graduations insinuates a ceremony for leaving one school and transitioning to another. Yet, William’s positive views of
graduation perhaps reflect the opportunity to participate in a whole school spotlight event with the regular students, more so than happiness for leaving his current school.

In both graduating and receiving school awards, participants are acknowledged in front of peers for school achievement. The school body positively validates and affirms participants for attaining particular academic milestones and realizing the schools’ ideals for success, presenting them with a sense of accomplishment, pride, and school community membership, impacting self-esteem, social moods, and feelings of school inclusion. Through these events, school peers and teachers begin re-shifting and re-thinking perceptions of minoritized students, appreciating that just as any student, they also desire to be positively seen and understood, rather than permanently typecast as abnormal students with disabilities in the special education class (Wickenden, 2011). Thus, by means of these normalizing events of student success and achievement as defined by educational institutions, students absorb conceptualizations of the good students. Graduation and receiving academic awards signify closer attainment to educational ideals of the more acceptable good student; as participants experienced these moments, perhaps they felt they were edging and nearing their way toward becoming the ideal student. Rather than realizing positive characteristics, and plausibly associated to frequent reprimands due to behavioural issues, some participants conveyed a sense that their teachers and peers negatively perceive them as students. For example, Edward and Mew shared their desires for classmates and teachers to validate the positive qualities they possess. Edward stated, “I want them to know I'm kind and helpful… I wish my teachers and other classmates knew that I was helpful and I'm good at cleaning-up messes.” He goes onto explain the sense of belonging he attains when helping others in school, especially his teacher, “I feel involved at school when I help others. I am happy
when I help Mr. Steward, our teacher, by putting the wires on the computer.” Similarly, Mew articulated, “I wish my teacher and other classmates knew that I am fun, kind, and beautiful.” Both boys highlighted qualities pertaining to intrinsic worth as a citizen and student, demonstrating perhaps that others in school do not acknowledge and notice their positive traits.

Similar to societies spawning of good citizens, schools desire spawning of good students, ascertaining and legitimizing dominant groups’ ideals, norms, values, behaviours, knowledge, etc… and defining these as good (Kanu, 2003). The implicit and discrete rules, decrees, and discourses undergirding schools, prescribe fashions of learning and teaching, suitable social ethos, and demarcate what is normal (Dei 1996a; Eisner, 1985; Hemmings, 2000; Thompson, 2006). As minoritized students strive to fit within these predetermined subjectivities of the good student, as established by dominant groups within schools and societies, power imbalances ensue. More specifically, students aligning closely to the idealised conceptualization of the good student retains more privilege, power, and positioning within the institutions’ hierarchies. Many minoritized students, situated among lower-levels of the school’s hierarchies, may recognize to successfully achieve and escalate status necessitates moving toward the idealised, securing some of the power; yet ironically further subordinating themselves. Thompson (2006) demonstrated secondary school students negotiate their stance within the hierarchy, differentiating between types of good students, and conducting themselves accordingly – achievers, sports stars, quiet, and rebels (this group resisted the institutions subjectivities of the good student). Consistent with Thompson’s (2006) findings, and underscoring notions of good students, many participants in my study drew attention to work ethic, academic achievement and grading, and attentive docility.
Emphasizing work ethic and effort, Alice simply stated, “I try in school,” and Edward specified, “I'm a good student, because I pay attention and I am quiet. I also work hard…you have to be a hard worker.”

Edward’s response also suggests in addition to being a hard worker, good students are silent and focused. Mew also noted the value of compliance, stating “Good students listen to the teacher.” This concept of working and trying hard in school reveals participants’ submission to one of the predominant official discourses of diversity barraging Canadian schools; that is, concepts of meritocracy (Harper, 1997). Namely, academic achievement is possible with diligence and hard work. Participants aspired to be perceived by teachers as hard workers capable and competent of school achievement (Ashby, 2011; Thompson, 2006). In addition to being hard workers and submissive listeners, other students indicated good students refrain from bullying behaviour. Simon suggested, “When I think about good students, they do not swear and they are not bullies,” and William reported “….to be a good student is to do work and to stop giving the middle finger. Good students also do homework.” Lastly, participants discussed the importance for good students to try and attain high academic achievement and
grades. For instance, in deliberating notions of good students, Edward remarked, “I'm also proud...when I get straight B's and A's in school.” Simon also reported,

In school, I understand science, but I hope I can be better at art. I also try really hard to be good at math.... Something that I am really proud of is when I got 100% on my math test! I got 100% on the math test once, and my parents said "You did a good job."

Simon’s account suggests notions of good students are also validated by parents. These implicit and subjective discourses of goodness and grading stretch beyond students and also impact parents’ understandings of their child as a good student. Consequently, the child receives messages of what it means to be a good student both at home and school.

Learning and school work also emerged as a subcategory related to participants sense of school belonging. More specifically, participants’ emphasized moving beyond traditional worksheets and targeting students’ personal interests through fun, engaging, and active learning activities contributed to their feelings of inclusion. This variation among academic tasks, affording students multiple ways of demonstrating knowledge and learning highlights teachers’ efforts to implement inclusive practices, as well as their beliefs of flexibilities within ability, expecting academic achievement among all students (Weinstein, 2002; Weinstein et al., 2004). Such appealing activities included those incorporating children’s interests into the learning. For example, computers supported participants’ learning and sense of pleasure at school. Both Edward and William reported their desires to utilize computers for the entire school day, “I really like going on the computer all day at school” (Edward), and “I mostly like going to school when I go on the computers all day!” (William). Gem clearly reported that computers provide her with a sense of school inclusion, “Something that makes me feel included at school are the computers.”
Mew highlighted the computer as an accommodating writing tool in classrooms to support students who may dislike physically writing down ideas on paper. Mew indicated, “I don't really like writing; I think it's too hard to write, but I like typing on the computer. Learning is fun and easy when I can type.”

Participants’ accounts of enjoying computer usage for learning suggest incorporating more technology within classrooms. Computers and other technology serve as inclusive practices benefiting and engaging students, whereby they demonstrate abilities and knowledge in varying ways (e.g., smart boards, academic software/programs, research via internet, completing writing reports via typing, etc…). Efforts to incorporate more technology into classrooms inspire modern learners, yet participants reported a tension between bringing technology from home into their schools. Edward, for instance, shared his desire to bring his cell phone to school in order to learn more about safety,

   This is my cell phone. My mom bought it for me…. I also wish I could take my cell phone to school. It would be for emergencies. At school we could learn if there's something bad, you have to call the police for emergencies.
Alice indicated,

This is my iPad. It makes me happy! It has games on it. It helps me for school, like with my school work. I don't bring my iPad to school…I don't want to. We're not allowed to bring iPad to school.

Both Alice and Edward suggested the use of technology (i.e., cell phones, iPads) to support their learning, however, due to perhaps school policy they are restricted from bringing these items to school. Edward and William specifically reported a computer math game entitled “Cool Math,” which entertainingly reinforced mathematical skills: “I especially like playing Math games all day. Games like, ‘Cool Math.’ This is a math game you play on the computer. It's fun!” (Edward), and “I like to learn about .... ‘Cool Math’ ” (William). Intriguingly, among a majority of participants, math was reported as a school subject that they enjoyed and/or found inclusive. Alice, Simon, and William optimistically explained math as an enjoyable academic topic:

“I learn math at school…that's good....” (Alice)
“I am also included and involved in math. I like learning about new things in math!”
(Simon)

“I like to do math work, but I don't really like doing math all day..... Learning is fun and easy when it's exams and math tests.” (William)

Edward highlighted math as a subject that brings about a sense of inclusion:

I like doing school work, like doing Math all day. In school, I feel very involved and included when we learn about Math. This is a picture of me learning Math. The regular teacher is writing about Math on the board.

(Edward)

Participants’ satisfaction from engaging in math learning perhaps derives from learning through games (i.e., Cool Math), and/or additionally receiving math lessons within the regular class, both supporting the children’s sense of involvement.

Learning through games that integrated participants’ interests and ensured active participation heightened their overall sense of inclusion. Student participation in learning activities strengthens class belonging (Anderman, 2003), and fosters transformation of knowledge whereby minoritized students actively contribute and produce knowledge (Banks, 1993; Cook-Sather, 2002). Simon plainly reported, “Learning is fun and easy when I feel included and involved,” and Alice acknowledged the value of games in supporting her academic engagement, “Learning is fun and easy when I learn through playing games!”
Mew admitted his challenges in learning at school, but emphasized his desire to incorporate personal interests into academic learning. “Learning is hard for me, but I like to learn about Pokemon!” He further suggested participating in more out of the classroom experiential learning opportunities, such as field trips,

I wish my class would go on more field trips. Trips to the Markham Fair or Walmart. I'm not sure what we would learn, but we could buy stuff from Walmart, like video games or toys. I would only want to buy Pokemon toys from Walmart.

Despite uncertainty connecting precisely what he may learn from such field trips, Mew indicated his interests (i.e., Pokemon, toys, video games) and excitement for extending opportunities to learn outside of his school environment. Gem and William also conveyed additional requests to integrate students’ interests into their school learning. When asked what she wished for in school, Gem stated, “I wish I can take my One Direction books to school. I wish I had these books at school,” perhaps suggesting her desire to employ these books in her learning.
William’s profound interest in transit systems is a topic he wishes to incorporate into his learning at school. During his photo narrations he explained, “This is my TTC transfer and Day Pass. I want to learn about these in school. I wish I could learn about the TTC at school, as a subject.”

Although perhaps difficult to perceive encompassing discussions of Pokemon, One Direction books, or TTC transfers into classroom learning, participants’ accounts highlight that there must be place within schools to connect children’s interests to school curricula. This practice supports tenets of critical pedagogy, contending school spaces be filled with children’s lived realities characteristic of their lives (Dewey, 1902, 1964; Greene, 1971, 1993a). For instance, participants suggested particular games or paraphernalia, which may easily be incorporated into curriculum objectives and academic subjects. This entails educators seek insights from students, inquiring about topics to learn, how they may want to learn it, and what they find engaging and interesting. Recognizing at the outset this requires additional
workload and creativity, educators begin positioning curricula from the “learners’ standpoint” (Greene, 1971, p. 253), and strengthen students’ sense of school belonging. Participants aspired for greater involvement and entertainment in their academic learning. As minoritized students actively engage in material aligning with their interests, they incite transformational and liberating learning, presenting new insights from multiple lenses (Freire, 1970/2006). Education that liberates fosters a horizontal kind of learning, in which student-teacher relations and roles shift through dialogue and collaboration with others (Cummins, 2001; Freire, 1970/2006). Poignantly articulating a critical aspect of transformational learning, Edward expressed, “Learning is fun and easy for me when it's fun, like learning through playing board games, and I can talk!” Therefore, suggesting active, engaging, and liberating education provides transparent prospects for student voice, talk, and dialogue within classrooms. In doing so, power imbalances dismantle, reshuffle, and redistribute within schools’ hierarchies, as collaboratively minoritized students ignite school spaces with their voices, empowering them to create personal power in the process of learning (Cummins, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008).

In keeping with notions of transformative and liberating education, ensuring collaborative power relations, Banks (2008) asserted that teacher structured cooperative learning environments, in which students are placed in mixed groups, improve student attitudes, interactions, self-esteem, and motivation. These types of group learning situations “…foster cooperation rather than competition among students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups….promot[ing] positive interracial interactions and deliberations” (Banks, 2008, p. 136). A few participants explained the disgruntled state of their classroom desk arrangements, requesting row seating transition to group seating. Besides wishing for a
cleaner classroom, Edward specifically conceptualized collaborative and cooperative learning in relation to organization of students’ desks,

I wish my classroom could be cleaner.... I also wish we could re-arrange our desks at school, because right now they are separated and in rows. I don't like it and I can't pay attention, because I'm staring at the desk. I would like our desks to be put together where we could learn at one large table and sit around it.

Echoing Edward’s suggestion, Mew explained, “Having computers, markers, desks, and papers in my class also helps me learn. I don't like how the desks are arranged in my classroom; the desks are separate and in rows.” Similarly, McCallum et al. (2000) reported students in their study expressed the importance of organizational arrangements within classrooms to support learning. In particular, students explained details of seating arrangements (e.g., desks positioned ideally to see and hear their teacher) and learning independently in group situations. Students explained, maintaining small group size (i.e., no more than 5 students per group) and mixed ability groups were most critical to maximizing individual learning in groups (McCallum et al.). Evidently, Mew and Edward perceptively recognized that positioning of students’ desks impact their learning experiences and sense of inclusion. Participants preferred learning environments suited for collaborative and cooperative engagements, perhaps because these group arrangements afford more socializing opportunities with other learners.

Educational environments considerably impact students’ overall attitudes toward school and learning, influencing their sense of belonging (Docket & Perry, 2005; Flutter, 2006). Further highlighting the influence of classroom environment on students’ inclusion, and possibly referencing students’ behaviours, Simon explained the importance of a positive school climate, “When there are no negative things in school, it makes me feel included.” Mew also reported his sense of enjoyment from having classroom pets,
I wish I could have a turtle in my classroom. Just like this one [referring to a photo during photo narrations]. I already have a fish in my classroom, but not like this one in the photo. The fish in my classroom is a guppy fish, not a gold fish. There's a snail inside too where the guppy fish is. It eats garbage and stuff. He cleans up those garbage stuff and eats it….It's wonderful to have fishes and turtles in my school!

Perhaps the classroom pets heighten Mew’s curiosity and interest in the classroom, or the pets may serve as a calming tool for reducing anxiety and/or hyperactivity. Pets serve a therapeutic purpose for many children with disabilities, and considerably more so among children diagnosed with emotional and behavioural disorders (Anderson, 2007). In her case study, Anderson (2007) reported pets, specifically dogs, supported children’s emotions, fostering empathy, relational skills, and responsibility. Other participants described objects as imparting feelings of inclusion. These objects, similar to pets, provided therapeutic support for participants, as they contained a sensory component that many children with autism enjoy (e.g., sound, light, squeeze, music, movement, etc…). Simon explained, “This ball makes me feel happy. I think it's called a ‘Stress Ball.’ I think we have these at my school. I use it. It makes me feel included and happy at school.”

Conceivably, this sensory item incites feelings of enjoyment, fun, and calmness for Simon when at school or the centre, thus elevating his sense of belonging. However, Simon and William both reported sensory items they enjoy, but refuse to bring to school. For example, Simon indicated,
This is the "Kid Active" toy. We have this in our sensory area in the centre. It makes me feel involved and included. I use it a lot. When you're playing you stand on the black thing…it's a machine and it makes sounds. We don't have this at school. I don't want to take this to school. I want to keep it at the centre.

(Simon)

William also contended,

Bear makes me feel happy. My teddy bear makes me feel included. She can help me learn at school…she can help me at school with her fur. Her fur makes me feel good; it makes me feel better. I cannot bring bear to elementary school. The other students are going to make fun of her and me. Teddy bear is my favourite property. Even though she makes me feel happy and included, I don't want to bring her to school…this will make me excluded and feeling bad. Bear will not make me feel included at school. I will be excluded, because people will laugh at me. The kids laugh at people if you bring a toy. Bear looks like a baby toy.

(William)

Unlike the stress ball, which Simon may perceive as more age appropriate for the middle years, the boys are embarrassed to employ more child-like sensory toys (i.e., bear, Kid Active toy) within a school environment. They are cognitively aware of the potential teasing and bullying experiences incurred if using these toys at school. Thus an object that provides
a sense of safety, calmness, and inclusion at home or at the centre, inevitably turns into an object that provides bullying, anxiety, and exclusion at school. From participants’ accounts, sensory objects are seemingly no longer socially acceptable in middle school environments, yet children with autism benefit from the emotional stability and therapeutic aid endowed from these objects, presenting them with a greater sense of control in learning milieus.

Possessing more control, independence, and autonomy within school environments is a natural desire for children as they mature throughout the middle years of schooling, however, this becomes challenging as they navigate through classrooms heavily focused on teacher control and management (Junoven et al., 2004). Further complexities surface among children with disabilities due to lack of peer groups and/or assumptions of heightened vulnerability and helplessness, and thus requiring more control and dependence on others (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Wickenden, 2011). Children and youth with disabilities may often feel the need to defend their right to independence and autonomy just as any other person (Wickenden, 2011). Participants described their desire for greater independence in school. For instance, William stated, “At school sometimes I feel like ‘the boss,’ and this makes me feel included.”

He continued explaining, “When you go to high school there's no lunch lady. You'll be on your own, because you’re older, you’re old enough.” Seemingly, his responses demonstrate a wish for more control over his school life. William seeks independence, ability to take
charge, make choices, and retain some agency and power over his schooling experiences; all akin to being a “boss,” rather than be bossed around by school authority (e.g., lunch ladies). With this agency and autonomy, his sense of confidence and belonging strengthen.

Affording children opportunities to make decisions and contribute as resources to their own learning environments fosters students’ sense of belonging (Anderman, 2003; Flutter, 2006; Freire, 1970/2006). Edward conveyed pleasure in participating in school experiences inciting student voice for educational matters (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fletcher, 2011), “…I think it's good to talk about ideas to help our schools become better, like helping with recycling programs at school.” He went on stating, “…I wish there could be more programs at school about research.” Similarly, Alice explained, “This is a picture of Amanda. She makes me feel included.”

Edward and Alice both suggested the research project and experiences within the study conveyed feelings of inclusion and involvement. This may possibly be due to the nature of the study, evoking participants’ voices, perspectives, and suggestions within a space in which they are desired, heard, and appreciated. Additionally, in this study, this group of minoritized students were placed within positions of power to fully express themselves and contribute ideas regarding their education. As schools often function as oppressive sites silencing students’ voices, particularly among those whom are different (Asher, 2007), this study
presented minoritized students with an authorizing power to debate and generate fresh conversations regarding their school-lives, shifting power relations and discursive practices surrounding educational affairs (Cook-Sather, 2002).

8.2 Exclusion

In this study, participants’ narratives suggested a majority of these children maintained mixed emotions regarding their schooling experiences. For instance, participants described feeling good, fine, and happy in school, yet, sentiments of fear, embarrassment, upset, frustration, sadness, and shyness, also closely trailed behind:

Alice explained her varied feelings pertaining to school, stating,

Prince Baylis [School] is good….I feel happy when I go to school and sometimes upset…. Sometimes I don't like going to school….but other times school makes me
feel happy and good. I feel fine when I'm in my classroom….Sometimes school is hard. Sometimes it makes me feel frustrated.

Echoing parallel feelings, Edward expressed, “Going to school is fine for me. My school makes me feel good….When I go to school I sometimes feel kind of happy, but I also sometimes feel upset. Other times, I feel shy and sad.” Edward’s use of the term kind of denotes an incomplete sense of happiness, as if he is not fully happy, only kind of.
Simon highlighted his enjoyment for learning, however, unnervingly expressed his fear of school, “I feel happy when I go to school, because I enjoy learning….But in school I do worry about getting scared.”

Mew reported intense negative feelings when thinking of school, maintaining a similar sense of school fear:

School does not really make me feel happy….I don't like going to school. It's horrible! My school makes me feel bad. School sometimes makes me feel embarrassed and of course, scared.

Associating to his school life, Mew powerfully employed vocabulary, such as bad, embarrassed, and horrible, and emphasized the perhaps recurring experience of his scared
emotion, as demonstrated in his use of the term *of course*. In addition to the negative emotions, participants acknowledged feelings of worry at school, fuelling school anxiety. For example, Mew worries about incoming new students (i.e., newcomer students), Alice worries about herself, and despite fairly optimistic views of school (e.g., “When I go to school, I feel happy. School is the best. I really like going to school….“[Gem]), Gem worries about books and her classroom teacher, which may be interpreted as a concern for her academic school work, achievement, and school authority figures.

Naturally, participants’ classmates and teachers influence personal emotions related to schooling. A few participants described their classmates as “fine” or as providing feelings of happiness and pride. For example, Alice simply asserted, “My classmates make me feel happy,” whereas Edward reported “fine,” and Mew, “proud.”

In addition to highlighting hopeful impressions of classmates, other participants conveyed a satisfactory and tolerating sense toward students in their classroom. Simon, for instance, conceded “…my classmates just make me feel okay….I wish my class would be more positive,” and William emphasized, “Most of my classmates make me feel happy.” Both boys insinuated opportunity for improvement in terms of their classmates, possibly in areas
of classroom behaviours and attitudes, as William suggested not all his classmates provide feelings of happiness, and Simon seeks greater positivity from his overall class.

Participants acknowledged teachers as a resource for learning support, particularly in areas of mathematics (i.e., 3 out of 6 participants), and a few participants suggested teacher improvement in further supporting and developing students’ mathematics skills and learning. For example, Edward explained, “My teacher could help me learn math better, especially dividing. He should put the multiplications on top on the board,” and William reported, “I wish my teacher could help me do math better, especially learning times tables.” Beyond recognizing teachers as sources of academic support, participants also expressed personal feelings toward their classroom teachers. However, participants once again demonstrated an emotional fusion of positive and negative feelings regarding their teachers. Alice stated, “My teacher makes me feel good.....[but] I wish she was nicer, but she is not mean to me,” implying her teacher’s pleasant disposition may vary from day-to-day, perhaps taking on more authoritarian or disciplinary roles. Similarly, with mixed emotions, Edward asserted,

I also think my teacher is my friend, because he gives me rights and corrects check marks on my work...this is good....My teacher makes me feel happy, but sometimes I wish he could be better...he could dress better. Maybe he could wear the Toronto Maple Leaf sweater and the hat, and that would make him better and more cool.

He related academic achievement and grading (e.g., receiving correct marks from his teacher) to friendship. Edward also candidly admitted the importance of his teacher’s outer appearance and image, suggesting perspectives of his teacher may become even “better” and more positive if dressed in a particular fashion. Mew maintained negative associations toward teachers, expressing, “I think it's good to talk about mean teachers.....My teacher sometimes makes me feel angry and sometimes sad.” Most likely experiencing frequent negative encounters with teachers, Mew sustains miserable impressions of teachers, with
desires to share his experiences of “mean” teachers; possibly, through disclosing these
disempowering experiences, he in turn becomes empowered.

Noticeably, participants’ understandings of classmates and teachers contribute to
mixed emotions regarding their school life, reporting feelings ranging from happiness, pride,
and supportive, to moderate levels of tolerance, areas for improvement, and complete
distaste. These findings highlight the importance of student-teacher relationships and peer
relationships in impacting students’ overall sense of belonging, both positively (inclusion)
and negatively (exclusion). For instance, in her study of 618 middle years students,
Anderman (2003) reported a majority of participants demonstrated decline in their sense of
belonging over time (i.e., beginning of 6th grade to beginning of 7th grade). Thus, as students
moved through middle school, their sense of belonging diminished, feeling less connected to
their peers and teachers (Anderman, 2003). In examining obstacles to school inclusion
among 163 minoritized students with disabilities from differing ethnicities and races, along
with 110 of their teachers, Crouch (2010) highlighted a positive correlation between student-
teacher relationships and students’ school belonging. That is, students reporting positive
student-teacher relationships indicated a higher sense of school belonging compared to those
reporting negative student-teacher relationships (e.g., criticism, disagreements, arguments,
annoyance, inducing feelings of anger, too much school work, etc.). Interestingly, although
teacher participants identified their students’ sense of belonging (i.e., student did belong or
student did not belong), a majority were unaware of their role in contributing to students’
sense of exclusion. Likewise, the children’s narratives shed light onto the critical nature of student-teacher relationships and its correlation with students’ sense of belonging (Anderman, 2003; Bartram & Bailey, 2009; Crouch, 2010). Some of the children also conveyed mixed emotions regarding classmates, aligning with Crouch’s (2010) findings, in which student participants reported mixed social experiences with peers (i.e., receptive and accepting versus rejection and teasing). Although, Crouch (2010) noted students expressed greater positive peer social experiences than negative experiences within an inclusive school.

As such, other inter-related factors affecting participants’ mixed feelings pertaining to school may include attending segregated special education classrooms with partial integration in the regular class for short durations of the school day. All participants were aware of their special education classroom placements. Petrou et al. (2009) contended marginalization occurs within schools, from not only unofficial segregation of differences emanating from implicit educational discourses, but also from official segregation of differences emanating from explicit educational policies and practices, such as segregated special education classrooms. Mindful of such official segregation and its marginalizing effects, 4 out of 6 participants maintained disapproving dispositions toward the special education classroom, perceiving these classes as academically inferior, with mediocre educators, classroom conditions, events, students, and a space assigned for “bad” students. During participants’ brainstorming session, Alice and Gem both explained “…we go to the special class because we are in trouble…it students are bad.” Alice also expressed “I like being in the special class, because it's good and special. [But] I wish my class is a good class.” Although Alice interprets belonging to her special education class as special and unique in nature, she also communicates a desire for her class to be good.
It appears even though these girls somewhat positively view schooling experiences, they maintained mixed emotions in part resulting from belonging to a class that they believe is geared toward bad students; thus, bad students do not belong in the regular classroom, but rather are suited for the special education classroom. Perhaps, the term bad refers to students with behavioural issues, and/or students with disabilities, and/or students with academic challenges, and/or a combination of all three. Ergo, if bad students attend special education classes, then good students attend the regular classes. However, from the girls’ understandings of the nature of their special needs classroom it is unclear as to what extent they consider themselves as bad students for being part of the class. In comparison to their special education classroom, 3 out of the 6 participants viewed the regular class as a space with superior learning conditions, teachers, students, and events. Quite candidly Edward confessed,

I wish I could be in the regular class with the regular students. It's kind of good...The regular classrooms have new carpets. I also like the students in the regular class better. I like the teacher better in the regular class, because he's cool. He teaches better. I go to the regular class to learn math only. He teaches me math really good. I wish I could switch from the special class to the regular class.

Likewise, William asserted,

Even though I'm in the community class, I wish I could go to the regular class. I like the regular Grade 8 class better. It's good, because of the good teacher.... I wish my class was better....I wish my teacher will be normal and good like Mr. Stan [teacher in the regular classroom]! I would be proud!
Both Edward and William associated a sense of prestige, normalcy, and pride to the regular classroom. These participants also anticipated regular classrooms comprise of better quality or good students, perhaps identifying such students as high achievers with negligible behavioural and learning challenges. With envy, Gem also highlighted regular classes in her school participate in more special events, such as ice cream parties: “Something I wish we could have more of in my special class is ice cream parties! They have those in the regular class….I really like ice cream.” Alluding to frequencies in which her special education class holds ice cream parties compared to the regular classroom, Gem desires greater participation in these parties, conceivably providing an entertaining and relaxed school climate fostering peer socialization and interaction.

On the other hand, Simon and Mew maintained positive understandings of their special education classes. Simon described his appreciation for attending a class filled with multiple educators, as they support his learning: “I like being in the special class, because there's lots of teachers. I like having lots of teachers in the special class. It helps me learn better when there are more teachers.” Despite Mew’s harsh views and experiences of schooling, he perceived his community class as a space “…to help us learn better, so that when we talk to people they can understand us. We can even learn how to do math better….”

Research suggests a number of children and youth with disabilities report a sense of mixed feelings regarding their school life, especially when attending mainstream school
settings (i.e., not a segregated special education school or centre) (Ajodhia-Andrews & Berman, 2009; Cooney et al., 2006; Curtin & Clarke, 2005; Norwich & Kelly, 2004). In this study, participants’ feelings surfaced from personal understandings of their teachers, treatment from class peers, and views of their classroom placement (i.e., special education class vs. regular class). The children disclosed concerns of teachers’ attitudes, questioned the quality of learning in the special education class, and expressed less access to particular school events (Curtin & Clarke, 2005). In examining schooling perspectives from 101 children (ages 10-14) with “moderate learning difficulties” (p. 43) attending mainstream (n = 51) and special education (n = 50) schools, Norwich and Kelly (2004) reported approximately 31% of the children expressed mixed emotions regarding their schools. Yet, both groups of children maintained greater positive perspectives of special education schools in comparison to mainstream schools. Although 53% of the children from mainstream schools positively viewed special education schools, 98% of these students preferred attending their own school. Only 17% of the children attending special education schools positively viewed mainstream schools, yet 36% of these students desired attending mainstream schools. Thus, even though participants acknowledged more positive understandings of special education schools, they preferred participating in mainstream school settings, possibly demonstrating a desire for increased socialization and learning within surroundings of children from regular, non-special education labelled classrooms. Similar to Norwich and Kelly (2004), a majority of participants in my study, identified regular classrooms filled with typical students as being of higher educational status, with enhanced learning experiences and opportunities, and void of bad students.
Participants described the possibility they may not be receiving full educational opportunities similar to those of students in the regular classes. Although Simon and Mew highlighted learning benefits from attending the special education class, their mixed emotions regarding school may relate more to issues surrounding peer socializations and interactions, as well as teacher experiences and relationships. The remaining 4 children expressed a sense of “missing out” in schooling and learning experiences. Similar to other studies asserting minoritized students possess keen levels of attentiveness and awareness toward teachers’ expectations, stereotypes, and differential classroom treatment and pedagogical practices (e.g., Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Howard, 2001; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001; Nieto, 1994; Turner et al., 2009; Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979; Weinstein, 2002; Weinstein et al., 2004), participants were cognizant on some level of lower academic prospects, disparities among teachers’ abilities, and mediocre classmates, all ensconced within their special educational classes. Maintaining impressions that regular classroom teachers are “better,” reflect Weinstein (2002) and Weinstein et al. studies reporting children’s insights of teachers’ treatment toward low versus high achievers. Seemingly, during opportunities to learn and engage within the regular classroom (i.e., partial integration) participants may feel considered as high achievers, presented with more opportunities for challenging course work.

Participants’ narrative accounts suggest recognition of some of the common conceptual repertoires maintained by teachers toward minoritized students. More specifically, maintaining interlaced frameworks of a) deficiency, and b) lowering academic expectations and academic opportunity for minoritized students (Buckner et al., 2001; Cummins, 2001; Milner IV, 2010). As previously highlighted, some of the children
conveyed understandings of differential learning experiences between their special education
class and the regular class. Indeed, participants requested learning fresh and exciting
educational material: “It's really fun when we get special lessons” (Edward) and “I wish my
teacher would learn new stuff [sic] ” (Simon). Both Edward’s and Simon’s responses
suggest ardent wishes to engage in more new, creative, and original learning material in their
special education programs. Analogous to deficient repertoires of minoritized students is the
deficit lens underpinning the basis of special education programs, which situates and
individualizes educational struggles and failure toward minoritized children (Dudley-Marling
& Paugh, 2010; Liasidou, 2012). Through a deficit lens, educators frequently lower
academic expectations, and/or employ skill based programming, and/or academic streaming,
all with prospects of “fixing” minoritized children to overcome personal deficits and yield
toward educational standards of normal, non-minoritized groups (Dudley-Marling & Paugh,
2010; Liasidou, 2012). Affixed to such myopic lenses of deficit and deficient based
ideologies surface notions of meritocracy, which trivially advocate all children can
academically achieve and succeed with hard work (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Milner
IV, 2010). Conveniently then, if learning failure occurs, blame is quickly placed upon
minoritized students, for lack of work ethic, lack of skill, and/or lack of intelligence, rather
than acknowledging educators’ and educational institutions’ contribution to students’ failures
(Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006). Faulting minoritized children,
whom have intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability, exposes
dominant discourses of individualism and meritocracy lingering within schools and society
(Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2010; Reid & Knight, 2006). Such ideologies absolve dominant
groups from not only accountability in their roles of breeding inequities, but also from
responsibilities in actively seeking means to amend inequities; thus, expanding the
dichotomy between privileged and unprivileged students. I am not suggesting participants’
teachers are indeed lowering academic expectations or that they are aware of the deficit
approaches embedded within many special needs programs. I also do not intend to
generalize participants’ data across all children in special education classes. However, a few
of my participants’ understandings regarding inconsistencies between the regular class and
their special education class raise questions about their schooling experiences, especially
when considering deficit frameworks typically operate within special needs classrooms, in
which differential learning and teaching ensue, including lowering of academic expectations.
For example, why do Edward and William sense a degree of superiority in the regular class
to the point that they desire leaving their special education class to be part of the regular
class? Why are regular classroom teachers perceived as better for these 2 participants? Does
Simon and Edward’s desire to learn more exciting educational material in their special
education classroom indicate the need for more stimulating school work? Does Gem’s
reports of more ice cream parties in the regular class compared to her special education class
suggest the importance of ensuring more access and opportunities for children with
disabilities to socialize in her school?

Participants’ narratives highlight minoritized students’ back-and-forth negotiation
between dominant groups’ conceptualizations of elite versus subpar knowledge/education,
normal versus abnormal, regular classrooms versus segregated special education classrooms,
and good students versus bad students. Power remains within the hands of dominant groups
as their ideals continue coercively pervading educational institutions (Cummins, 2001).
Participants’ recognized the power imbalance subsisting within their school spaces, in which
students in regular classes receive superior status’ of regularity and normalcy, whereas participants, the minoritized, remain in special education classrooms carrying inferior status’ of irregularity and abnormality due to differences; thus sanctioning minority status (Cummins, 2001). Yet, paradoxically, as minoritized students persist toward fitting within the confines of normalcy, with desires to achieve superiority status, two issues emerge: (a) minoritized and oppressed students perceive themselves through the lens of the oppressor, consciously adhering to notions of dominant groups’ ideal student. Subsequently, affording power to dominant groups, whilst subjecting themselves, as they perceive themselves as students whom are less-than and less-ideal; and (b) minoritized students fail to recognize that special education classrooms are meant to normalize, regularize, and fix students to become akin to the standard student, as defined by the dominant groups (i.e., the hidden curricula [Dei, 1996a]).

The emotional interconnections woven between participants’ views of their classmates, teachers, special education classrooms, and overall school, impact their personal sense of school belonging. In spite of participants’ reports of some inclusive experiences with peers, ceremonies, objects, and short-lived moments of independence and learning based on students’ interests, cumulatively, the children’s narratives reflect emotions and experiences conveying a sense of exclusion, or lack of school belonging. This feeling of exclusion was a common consensus among all participants.

Participants highlighted various reasons for their general sense of no school belonging. For instance, Alice expressed feelings of exclusion resulting from her poor listening skills, “Sometimes I feel like I do not really belong at school, because I don't listen well in school. If you don't listen in school, you don't belong at school.” Plausibly, Alice’s
response indicates her sense of belonging is associated to attentive listening to school authority, which entail obedience and compliance to instructions – essentially, symbols of the good students. Gem, however, acknowledged feelings of school exclusion, but finds it challenging to explain, “I have been left out before. It's hard for me to explain how I feel when I'm excluded. I'm not sure.” Mew, on the other hand, profoundly described his lack of school belonging, relating himself to a rock in a cemetery:

“This rock is in front of a cemetery beside a shop that sells apples, cherries, chicken, and other stuff. Like this photo of a rock, I feel like I don't belong in school. It makes me feel nothing” (Mew). A large, lifeless, inanimate rock, situated in a place of death (cemetery), represents Mew’s diminished sense of school belonging, explaining his school engenders a feeling of “nothing.” Rather than interpreting his use of the term nothing as void of feelings, he may be referring to emotions of numbness and emptiness when contemplating personal schooling experiences. From his previous accounts of distaste for school, Mew clearly indicates deeply negative emotions, potentially alluding to a sense of depression, in which he associates school to a place of death (i.e., cemetery), leaving residues of nothingness and numbness (i.e., rock). William also disclosed feelings of school exclusion, explaining
Next year I'm going to change schools…in the Fall. Next year I'm going to high school! I'm going to Grade 9 at Fisher Oxlan High School. If I could change anything about school to make it better it would be so that I don't have to go to high school..... I don't feel that I belong in school, because now I have to change schools. But, I understand that I have to change schools. Changing schools is good.

For William the necessity to change schools from his current middle school to high school incites feelings of exclusion and a lack of school belonging. Perhaps this is due to his sense of comfort and familiarity within his current school; undergoing transitions departing from routine and familiar daily events and environments pose significant challenges, fear, and anxiety for some children with autism, as they prefer consistency within their surroundings. Moreover, he may recognize the power dynamics will likely shift once transitioned into high school. Namely, whatever power status, or lack thereof, he currently maintains within his middle school context and relationships (i.e., student-teacher, student-student) will vary once he enters high school. William may fear this changing power dynamic in high school, especially considering he may be more at risk for bullying victimization due to his autism diagnosis, and such bullying experiences generally increase throughout not only the middle years, but also during the transition to high school (Cappadocia et al., 2012). Nevertheless, he admitted coming to terms with transitioning to high school, recognizing the change is beneficial.

Cell phones surfaced as an object inducing feelings of school exclusion for 3 out of the 6 participants:
Throughout the study, Gem, William, and Alice reported,

This is my cell phone. It makes me feel left out sometimes at school..... I use it to make phone calls. I bring it to school and I use headphones to listen to music. I need the phone for going to school. I got the phone for school. (Gem)

“This is my cell phone. It makes me feel excluded when I use my cell phone. I bring my phone to school, but it doesn't help me learn. It stays in my bag after I go to class.” (William)

“Having a cell phone makes me feel included at school. But it also makes me feel excluded and left out. I don't like feeling left out.” (Alice)

Interestingly, despite serving as an emblem of teenage membership and as a technological device useful for communication between friends, some participants identified cell phones as contributing to the decline in their sense of belonging. This finding suggests a few possibilities: (a) participants may consider their cell phones to be older or not the newest ones parading the school halls, thus stirring up feelings of embarrassment; and/or (b) participants observe peers utilizing cell phones primarily for verbal communication and texting with friends. In view of participants’ challenges to verbally communicate and converse, socialize, and develop and sustain friendships, it may be conceivable they are excluded not only from typical face-to-face chatter and conversations between peers, but also from cell phone chatter of phone conversations and texting with peers, thus influencing their
level of school belonging. Similarly, Wickenden (2011) noted in her ethnographic study of 9 young people with disabilities who use minimal to no speech to communicate, that participants frequently experienced marginalization during conversations and characteristic teenage chit-chats, which form basis’ of adolescent friendships. She suggested teenagers understand and navigate social relationships and friendships via regular conversations at school and other social settings (Wickenden, 2011). Although Wickenden (2011) referred specifically to ostracization during verbal speech, this exclusion relates to any form of communication, regardless of the medium (i.e., in person conversations, emails, texts, cellular phone calls, etc.). Participants in my study explained communication difficulties stemming from autism and issues with developing and sustaining friendships, and as such correlates with cell phone usage for communicating to peers, as they most likely do not use it for social correspondence, justifiably fuelling a sense of school exclusion.

A few participants also explained specific school subjects heighten personal feelings of school exclusion. For instance, Edward described his lack of belonging in academic subjects of social studies and physical education:

Something I hate about school is social studies, because we might get too late for gym, and miss parts of gym….I do not feel involved in social studies….Sometimes I also feel left out in gym class, because I often get tired from all the exercising….This picture shows me getting tired when running round the circle outside of school. The other students keep going, but I got tired and I feel left out. I can't keep up with them and it makes me feel bad.
Perhaps Edward is not academically achieving high grades in social studies, as in other subjects, such as math, impacting his self-esteem and overall sense of exclusion. Even though Edward enjoys physical activity and engagement in physical education (e.g., does not want to miss or delay gym class, sports activities such as soccer provides feelings of inclusion, etc.), he perceives a form of rejection during individual competitive physical tasks (e.g., timed running, sprints around school property). All participants highlighted a sense of involvement and inclusion in school when engaging in cooperative sport activities, enriching social experiences with peers (with and without disabilities, as partial integration typically takes place during physical education). Edward raises issues of stigmatization based on the types of activities carried out in physical education, discerning between individual and competitive activities versus cooperative and competitive activities. Sweeting and West (2001) similarly found among 2,586 children participants (average age of 11 years old), whose parents and teachers identified as below average in academics and gym/sports, reported higher incidents of experiencing teasing/bullying compared to those identified as above average in academics and gym/sports. Interestingly, children classified by teachers and parents as above average in physical abilities and gym/sports were more likely to report never experiencing teasing/bullying, even compared to children described as high achievers.
or above average academically. Although Edward does not highlight teasing or bullying encounters during social studies or physical education, he may recognize an implicit or unspoken social exclusion from peers during these subjects, especially if he is below average in these particular areas. Also reporting exclusion during an activity primarily engendering a sense of inclusion, William described his feelings when left alone in the school computer room for 8 hours one day, “Once I felt excluded and not involved when I had to go on the computer for 8 hours at school! It was not for a suspension or detention… I was in the computer room.” Although William deeply enjoys computer usage and desires for more computer time within his school day, he explained the exclusion felt when segregated and affixed to the computer room for an entire day.

Issues of school workload, excessive questioning, and homework also surfaced predominantly among the boy participants. This general consensus of unwarranted amounts of school work contributed to their lack of belonging, as school increasingly became related as a place of work, rather than fun and pleasure. William openly expressed, “There is too much work at school,” whilst Mew bluntly noted, “School is not fun. It's too much work.” Illustrating frustration and confusion from homework overload, Edward reported “... sometimes there is too much work…. My teacher helps me learn when I don't know something, but sometimes he makes me confused and I get headaches from too much homework.” Additionally exacerbating participants’ confusion were significant amounts of teacher questioning, “My teacher helps me learn when the questions are too hard, but makes me confused when there are too many ….” (Simon). Evidently, regardless of teacher supports for learning, boy participants’ perceived the quantity of school work and homework as overwhelming and confining, influencing their sense of school belonging. Moreover,
Edward and William excitedly confessed their best in day in school would entail receiving no homework, expressing a sense of liberation and freedom:

“For me, my best day at school is NO HOMEWORK!” (Edward)

“For me, my best day at school is to have NO HOMEWORK! Hooray, I'm free!” (William)

Seemingly, participants disclosed encumbered feelings resulting from a surplus of schoolwork and homework. William’s response of freedom emphasizes a sense of punishment and restriction participants may experience due to understandings of school workload. Bryan and Nelson (1994) asserted children with disabilities attending mainstream schools tend to receive increased amounts of homework to support integration into regular classrooms. Additionally, Bryan and Nelson (1994) highlighted children with disabilities presumably require extra time for class work completion, and thus most likely class work turns into homework. In their study of elementary (grades 4-6) and junior high (grades 7-8) school students’ perspectives of homework, junior high students placed in segregated special education classrooms reported receiving greater amounts of homework compared to junior high students attending regular classrooms or resource rooms (i.e., partial integration between regular classrooms and classrooms with special education teachers providing specific academic adaptations for particular subjects) (Bryan & Nelson, 1994). Although the boy participants in my study attend special education community classrooms with partial integration in regular classrooms, their responses align closely with Bryan and Nelson’s (1994) students in full-time segregated special education classrooms. One inference may be the boys are receiving more homework from their time spent in the special education classroom, rather than in the regular class. Naturally, as students move from elementary to
middle school to high school, homework assignments and time spent completing homework increase, however, for children with disabilities, these transitions may be exacerbated and arduous (Bryan & Nelson, 1994).

Additionally, as students evolve throughout the school system, they begin associating intrinsic motivation for homework completion to development of positive traits (e.g., responsibility, discipline, adult approval, peer approval, etc…) (Xu, 2005). Students reporting greater intrinsic justification for homework more frequently attend school with completed homework and a desire to earn higher grades (Xu, 2005). Notably, however, is from Xu’s (2005) 920 participants (grades 5-12, approximately 487 boys and 433 girls), boys reported less intrinsic reasons for homework completion, and demonstrated a significant positive correlation between receiving homework help from family and intrinsic motivation to complete homework. That is, as family involvement in homework increased, so too did boys intrinsic motivation for completing homework. Girl participants, on the other hand, reported relatively high-levels of intrinsic motivation to complete homework, regardless of family support. Thus, as all the boys in my study described the difficulties and strain of homework in their daily lives, perhaps greater family involvement during the homework process may benefit the boys, as they begin developing more intrinsic reasons to engage in homework.

In addition to school and home workload as a form of punishment, authority reprimands also emerged from participants’ narratives as contributing to their overall sense of exclusion. For example, Edward described his experiences of authority reprimands for holding doors for others, “At school, I sometimes get in trouble for holding the door. Once I was holding the door for other people and I was late for class. I think I got in trouble for
going to class late.” To “get in trouble” and chastised by school authority for helping other peers influences some of Edward’s feelings of school shame and exclusion. Receiving reprimands from adults extended beyond school authority to also parental authority. As participants engaged in storygames throughout the research sessions, they illustrated one story, in which a boy who was teased at school also experienced bullying from his parents:

- The adults were bullying him.
- His parents said "kicked out!"
- The parent's kicked the boy out for his birthday….he is not listening.
- He is not listening to his Mom.
- He was kicked out with the legs and thrown out!
- He was going to the police.
- He talked to the police about being bullied.
- His parents got angry at him.
- The parent's were handcuffed.
- The parents got in trouble.

The participants’ story highlighted conceptualizations of authority and reprove for poor behaviour (i.e., not listening to authorities). Humorously, after the boy received the scolding, his parents, one form of authority figure, received a reprimand (i.e., arrested) by a higher ranked authority figure, the police. William and Mew also explained their tumultuous encounters with lunch monitors, often leaving them with a sense of confusion, exclusion, and frustration. Mew stated, “I do not like the lunch ladies. They are young. If you talk at lunch you get in trouble. I don't know why…I don't do anything, but they tell on me and I get in trouble.” With annoyance, William reported,

- What I hate at my school is the two lunch ladies named Ms. Linda and Ms. Wendy. The lunch room supervisor is like they look after kids for lunch. They are bullies…these two lunch ladies. They are young and thin. They always say "Line up! Line up! Line up!"

Presumably, the lunch monitors are students who hold a position of power within the existing school culture. This power imparts upon them particular liberties to control students’
behaviour, such as talking, orderly line-ups, etc…, which may often entail aggressive behaviour management tactics. Consciously aware of the hierarchies of authority within their schools (i.e., principals, teachers, lunch monitors), home (i.e., parents), and society (i.e., police), participants may be negotiating individual power status’, level of independence, and understandings of personal authority, rethinking the positioning of these within the social order of their surrounding systems (i.e., Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems). This may be particularly expected during the middle years, a time of substantial biological/developmental growth (Cobbold, 2005; Jackson & Davies, 2000; Junoven et al., 2004; Murdock & Miller, 2003; Whitley et al., 2007), in which greater levels of autonomy naturally follow.

As participants explored notions of school social hierarchies and social order, bullying experiences and victimizations emerged from their narratives. This finding, frequently supported by research examining bullying and victimization in childhood, demonstrates the escalated prevalence of such school-based encounters during the middle years (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2010; Ferráns et al., 2012; Sweeting & West, 2001), particularly among children with disabilities (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Rose et al., 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001), and more specifically among children with autism (Cappadocia et al.). Participants in this study reported experiencing some form of bullying by students within their own schools, rather than from other schools, centres, programs, or neighbourhoods, aligning with Norwich and Kelly’s (2004) participants with learning disabilities. The children also expressed general understandings and characteristics of bullies: (a) they come in a variety of ages and sizes, (b) students mostly from the regular classroom, however can also derive from the special education class, (c) in Grades 5-8, (d) portray negative attitudes, and (e) students mostly with light brown or white skin tones. For
instance, as participants engaged in a storygame regarding a Tamil girl with autism, they highlighted her experiences of victimization and described her bullies, “The students telling her this [name calling] are in Grade 7 and Grade 8. These students have light brown skin and they were also white.” Edward similarly acknowledged, “Bullies like to be bad….It's mostly the 8th graders that bully, because they are teenagers,” yet Simon and William asserted bullies do not always emerge as older teens. William contended, “All the bullies are from Grade 5,” and Simon explained his multiple encounters with older and younger bullies,

He [the bully] is in Grade 8. He is in the special needs class….[Also the] Grade 6 boys…. Two of the boys were from the regular class and 1 boy is autistic and he is in the special education class….[But] mostly it's the regular students that say negative stuff….I don't think only teenagers bully, because these bullies are in Grade 6 and they're not 13 yet. This bully was small and younger.

Interestingly, despite bullying incidents rising in middle school years, Berger (2007) reported a United Nations survey, *Young People’s Health in Context*, found as students grew older there was a positive correlation between aging and the number of accounted older bullies, however additionally, there was a negative correlation between number of bullies and number of victims. That is, as children (ages 11-15) grew older, progressing through middle and early high school years, the number of bullies increased yet victimization decreased. One plausible reason may be older bullies select younger victims (Berger, 2007).

Cappadocia et al. (2012) indicated younger children with autism are also more likely to become victims of bullying, as reported by parents of children with autism. However, the authors noted this age-related factor may be due to parents’ unawareness of bullying incidents in their older children’s lives (e.g., the older child may not report bullying experiences to parents, specifically as they begin developing greater levels of self-reliance) (Cappadocia et al.). Although some participants described older bullies from upper middle
school (i.e., Grade 8), others explained experiences of victimization by younger bullies in lower middle school (i.e., Grades 5-6); thus, contradicting some of the research, Simon and William reported experiences of victimization as older students (i.e., Grades 7-8) being bullied by younger students (i.e., Grades 5-6). Moreover, William, one of the oldest participants in the research group clearly stated bullies derive from the 5th grade, which was the lowest grade level highlighted by participants.

In defining a bully of older age, Berger (2007) provocatively asserted,

Older children call each other fatso, nigger, or bitch; they criticize other children’s hair, shoes and everything in between; they curse at their friends. Young teenagers respond to their peers’ inept sexual advances with abrupt rejection. These actions seem to be bullying, but no single act defines a bully. To be bullying, harmful actions are repeated and victims are defenceless…. (p. 96)

When considering commonalities among research examining victimization and bullying experiences, Berger’s (2007) perspective that “no single act” or incident constitutes bullying due to lack of repetition is widespread across the literature (i.e., bullying events occur repeatedly over time – days, months, years) (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001). Yet, as highlighted throughout participants’ narratives, it can not be denied such experiences contribute to minoritized children’s sense of belonging. Such direct forms of physical, verbal, and social bullying, whether ensuing once or recurrently, intensify feelings of humiliation, shame, fear, and upset, further marginalizing minoritized students and fuelling their sense of school exclusion. Furthermore, recognizing validity of children’s voices, if a child considers an experience to be of a bullying nature, than is it not, regardless of frequency of the event?

As Edward and Simon shared their understandings of bullies, they associated bullies to behaving badly and verbalizing negative statements/comments toward students. Cook et
al. (2010) reported this aura of bullies being bad and maintaining a negative disposition is one characteristic of the typical bully (i.e., “negative attitudes and beliefs about others” [p. 75]). Participants conveyed strong disapproving feelings toward these typical bullies, and justifiably so, as some participants endured and/or observed frequent bullying experiences throughout their school life. For example, participants reported, “It makes me feel angry and upset. I don't think it's fair, because they are bullies” (Edward), “I think bullies are negative” (Simon), and “Bullies are the WORSE!” (William). Likewise, Norwich and Kelly (2004) demonstrated 83% of their 101 participants with moderate learning disabilities also recounted some form of victimization, in which 77% of this group capably described their feelings regarding bullies. Similar to Edward, Simon, and William, 56% of Norwich and Kelly’s (2004) participants emphasized negative emotions regarding bullying (e.g., hurt, upset, etc…).

A majority of my participants described personal bullying experiences involving “direct” attacks from a bully (i.e., both bully and victim are present during the bullying encounter) (Berger, 2007, p. 95). Evidence suggests children with disabilities experience increased amounts of various forms of victimization compared to their peers without disabilities, including verbal aggression (e.g., verbal abuse, name calling, mockery, derogatory comments, teasing, etc..), social exclusion/relational bullying (e.g., staring, ignoring peers, gossip, spreading rumours, etc…), and physical aggression (Berger, 2007; Rose et al., 2011). Although physical bullying and aggression tend to decrease as children mature and grow older (Berger, 2007), studies still report small amounts of physical aggression among middle years children with disabilities (e.g., Norwich & Kelly, 2004). This was also the case for participants, as they described enduring physical bullying
experiences of pushing, spitting, punching, and kicking. Alice explained her confusion and desire to remain composed after being pushed by her locker,

> Once, someone pushed me by the locker. I don't know why they pushed me, but I did not cry. I didn't do anything afterwards, except I told the teacher. I don't know what the teacher did to that student who pushed me.

Simon also indicated incidents of pushing and spitting, “Sometimes they [bullies] push me....These boys also try to spit at me.” He further explained,

> One time, one of the Grade 6 boys in the regular class ran so fast and pushed me while I was near my locker. It was just before morning recess...that guy, he pushed me purposely. I got hurt. I didn't bully him back. Once that boy pushed me, I told the teacher and the teacher had a conversation with him. He was sent to the principal's office after the conversation. Once he got sent to the principal's office, the regular boy, he will never do that again. He is a bully. It makes me a little bit upset, sad, and mad too. I was not happy with what happened. I wished I did not get hurt.

Simon acknowledged the deliberate attempt for the bully to catch him “off-guard” and cause harm. William also vividly described his experiences and conceptualizations of physical bullying at school,

> Bullying is also when someone kicks you.... After someone sticks up their middle finger they will punch you...if they stick up the middle finger, you'll be punched in the face..... Once, I saw Kwai with Rocky at recess, and Kwai punched people in the face, like "pew, pew, pew, pew!" Then, he was sticking up his two middle fingers. Sometimes there is bullying in our lunch room. Like last time at lunch time on Tuesday, Shakira and Devin were having a big fight. Like last time at lunch time on Tuesday, Shakira and Devin were having a big fight. They got into a big fight and they were pushing each other, like "pew, pew!" And the lunch lady said, "You're in big trouble! You're going to speak to the teacher!" Devin kept pushing Shakira, and she was like "Oh I want to stop you!" They didn't stop fighting, and finally the two lunch ladies came over and stopped it. This is a mean situation, just the same thing as if you show your middle finger.

From his recounts, William often observes physical aggression at school, and he clearly associates physical aggression with verbal aggression, merging the two forms of bullying into one entity.
Participants’ discussions of physical encounters were reported less frequently and descriptively compared to their reports of verbal aggression. Sweeting and West (2001) suggested some students and teachers stereotypically relate only physical aggression to notions of bullying, often disregarding other forms of bullying, such as verbal aggression, social exclusion, etc…. Research highlights educators in particular perceive physical aggression and threats as more serious concern compared to social and verbal aggression (Rose et al., 2011). Yet, as children mature (e.g., during the middle years) instances of verbal and relational bullying occur more regularly compared to physical bullying, becoming the customary approach for bullies, including among children and youth with autism, learning disabilities, and verbal/speech communication delays (Berger, 2007; Cappadocia et al., 2012, Crouch, 2010; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Wickenden, 2011). Moreover, children with disabilities report experiencing forms of social and verbal aggression much more frequently than forms of physical bullying (Rose et al.). Participants’ assertion of prevalent social/relational and verbal aggressive experiences is consistent with the research, reporting incidents of staring, teasing, humiliation, swearing/profanity, inappropriate language, and ostracization.

Wickenden (2011) illustrated the ogling youth with physical and communicative differences often tolerate from curious observers. Similarly, participants described moments of being stared at by other students, inducing a sense of exclusion, fear, and timidity:

“I think it's negative when people stare at you at school.” (Gem)

“I often feel scared [at school] because people keep looking at me…I don't know why.” (Mew)
“Sometimes I feel shy when I think someone is annoyed and looking at me.”

(Edward)

Staring also appeared to be interconnected with other forms of verbal bullying and social exclusion, such as swearing, teasing, and ostracization:

Another time, a group of Grade 6 boys started to bully me in the cafeteria. Two of the boys were from the regular class and 1 boy is autistic and he is in the special education class. They were staring at me for 15 minutes when I was eating lunch. This one is not good. That was negative. I don't know why they were staring at me, but they were staring at me, looking at me for 15 minutes in a row. Also, one day they were eating lunch and they open their mouth and look at me. That makes me feel excluded. I had to sit somewhere else. Once I sit on the other side, they do not look at me anymore. When the teacher looks at those Grade 6 boys they were not staring at me anymore, but when the teacher is not looking at them, they are starting to stare at me. I did not tell the teacher or the lunch helper, but my friends already knew and they helped me. They're all making fun of me, all of them. They sometimes…the two regular boys from the regular class they swear at me, but the autistic boy does not swear. I heard them say the "F" word and I saw them stick up the middle finger. Two of them are sticking up the finger. They were standing and called me the "F" word. I felt very sad, but I did not cry. (Simon)

This is me sitting at the lunch table in the cafeteria. These are the 3 Grade 6 boys. Those 2 guys in the regular class say the "F" word to me. They make fun of me and say the other swear words too. The other guy is the autistic guy. (Simon)

Simon candidly reported feelings of school exclusion and social bullying from other peers during his lunch periods. Despite his distressed emotions from the ostracization and teasing, he remained composed, perhaps for fear of inciting more teasing and bullying.

Evidently, participants’ experience of physical aggression often incorporated some form of verbal aggression. Particularly, the use of profanity and inappropriate language
emerged as a segment in participants’ bullying experiences. Use of the “F” word, sticking up the middle finger, and making offensive comments, frequently accompanied not only physical bullying, but also stood alone representing its own form of social bullying. William considered his experiences with verbally aggressive and offensive school bullies,

I do not like Kwai Bo. I never want to be his friend ever again. He's annoying and silly, and acts like a kindergartner.... Mr. Kwai is little. I hate Kwai. Kwai sucks..... Kwai makes me feel excluded too. I am annoyed from him. He bullies me and other classmates! He calls people names and swears in school. He says the “F” word…“F-U-C-K.” He also sticks up the middle finger. Kwai makes me feel badly. Elton also makes me feel excluded. He says inappropriate stuff in Chinese. One time I heard him say “Victoria drinks coffee blood.”

Simon also reported another experience of verbal aggression and social exclusion from a student in his special education community class,

Bullying is not good in school. I have been bullied at school. Students swear at me. Bullying makes me feel excluded. Bullying has happened to me before and it makes me feel excluded. It was a Grade 8 student. He said the "F" word. It makes me sad and sometimes it makes me mad. There was an autistic kid. He is in Grade 8. He is in the special needs class. He swears at me. I go to that boy to see something, because he was on the computer. He said "Go away" and he swore at me. That made me feel excluded..... This autistic guy is too playful and he doesn't do his work, only playing on the computer game.... This is a picture of the Grade 8 boy being negative. He is at the computer.... Man, that guy makes me feel excluded. This makes me feel excluded. (Simon)

In addition to the social bullying endured during lunch period by students in the regular class, Simon further reported these students ridicule him during recess: “When I'm outside at recess
the 2 regular guys [students from the regular classroom] are chasing me and making fun of me…still making fun of me.”

A few participants also described humiliating and embarrassing experiences surrounding specific topics, such as a lack of finances and showing of “private parts.” For example, Edward expressed, “Sometimes people make fun of you and laugh at you. For example, if a student has a broken shoe, bullies might laugh at them.” Edward draws a connection between bullying and students who may not be able to afford new material items. Highlighting the awkwardness of when other students comment on genitalia, William explained, “It's not nice…it's like all the people [bullies] talk about penises…that's a private part.” Furthermore, Edward described pulling students’ pants down as a mortifying form of social bullying, “An example of bullying is when someone pulls your pants down and other kids laugh at you. It's not funny and it's humiliating, but it has not happened to me.” Nevertheless demonstrating his understandings of bullying, it is unclear from Edward’s examples of humiliating forms of bullying whether he observed these events in school, heard rumours, or received these examples as part of an education lesson on bullying.

Noticeably, from their descriptions of bullying experiences, participants’ highlighted strategies to manage bullying behaviour. Predominant strategies included, reporting the situation to school authority (i.e., teacher and/or principal) and ignoring the bullying behaviour:

“I think when others bully you, you should tell the principal or ignore it.” (Edward)

“If you are bullied you should tell the teacher.” (William)
“Once, someone pushed me by the locker….I didn't do anything afterwards, except I told the teacher. I don't know what the teacher did to that student who pushed me.”

(Alice)

Simon in particular employed a variety of these approaches to deal with his recurrent bullying encounters,

“I went away and I ignored it [the bullying behaviour]….I turned and walked away [from the bully].”
“I had to sit somewhere else. Once I sit on the other side, they do not look at me anymore.”
“I try to ignore the bullying and I sometimes tell the teacher.”
“I didn't bully him back….I don't bully them back, but they think I do.”

Although Simon expressed refraining from retaliation, he indicated bullies may think he bullies them, perhaps serving as a justification for his victimization. Participants’ tactics for managing school-based victimization incidents are consistent with some of the research examining children’s bullying experiences (e.g., Norwich & Kelly, 2004), as well as with adult advice regarding dealing with bullies (Berger, 2007; OME, 2011). Evidently, participants’ responses strongly paralleled the educational discourse on methods to handle bullying experiences. For example, the OME (2011) developed a bullying guide for parents, in which it advocates, regardless of a child’s age, if she/he is experiencing forms of bullying parents should encourage their child to “walk away,” “don’t hit back,” “tell an adult,” “talk about it,” “find a friend,” and “call kids help phone” (p. 3). Participants reported carrying out four out of the six advised suggestions (i.e., walk away, don’t hit back, tell an adult, and find a friend). Although appearing as logical and rational methods for children to employ, these strategies occasionally backfire for victims. More specifically, studies highlight, from children’s perspectives reporting the incident to a trusted school adult (e.g., teacher, principal, etc…) is an unfavourable tactic for a variety of reasons (Berger, 2007; Ferráns et
al., 2012): (a) adults may mismanage the situation, (b) adults make no difference to the situation, (c) adults do not understand their perspectives and feelings, (d) children fear causing trouble for others, and (e) adults sometimes exacerbate the situation. When experiencing bullying, children much prefer seeking support from a friend, rather than school authority (Berger, 2007), and this approach is supported by the OME (2011). This was demonstrated by Simon, as he explained in one bullying scenario, “I did not tell the teacher or the lunch helper, but my friends already knew and they helped me.” Research suggests, the presence of peers serve as protective factors during bullying (e.g., defend and assist victim), as well as reduce the risk of victimization, particularly among children with autism (Asher & Gazelle, 1999; Berger 2007; Cappadocia et al., 2012; Ferráns et al.). However, considering the social and communicative complexities children with autism face, including challenges in developing and sustaining peer relationships, they may rarely experience the value of supportive friendships serving as protective factors (Cappadocia et al.). Therefore, as participants may not possess steady and established peer groups, they consequently turn to support from school authority, which from children’s reports in other studies, may not be the best choice.

Perhaps due to his negative relationships with school authority and lack of substantial friendships, Mew denied following suggested procedures for dealing with bullies, and instead seeks physical vengeance. He explained,

I have never been bullied. If someone swears at me at school I would probably use violence against them. I would punch him or break his neck off. I think I bully other kids, because other students bully me, so I bully them back. I would kick their butt off.

Plainly, Mew’s response exhibits his desire for physical avenge against bullies, however he also contradictorily expressed on one hand never experiencing bullying, yet on the other
hand bullying other children as a form of retaliation. Throughout his narrative, Mew reported a sense of fear and embarrassment in school due to others staring at him, highlighting a form of relational aggression. Possibly Mew is ashamed to report experiences of social bullying. Mew’s type of victimization aligns with the bully/proactive victimology, in which some victims develop bullying traits and attack others due to their victimization (Berger, 2007; Cook et al., 2010; Rose et al., 2011). As participants grappled with suitable methods to manage encounters with bullies, I inquired whether they would change or do anything differently during their moments of victimization. William realistically explained, “I would not change anything on those days with the bullies, because it just be sticking [sic], just the same.” His reaction that the bullying situations remain unaltered, regardless if victims manage these experiences differently may reflect students’ understandings that bullying experiences are unpreventable, inevitable, and usual occurrences, dismally out of victims’ control (Ferráns et al., 2012).

Minoritized students carry with them markers of difference, which contradict conceptualizations of the normal student, serving to reinforce notions of essentialization and stereotypical understandings. Messages from media, teachers, and children frequently typcast bullied children as victims due to personal differences (i.e., somehow differ from their typical peers) (Sweeting & West, 2001). Additionally, victimization escalates among children with communication difficulties, language impairments, emotional, behavioural, and social skills challenges, those who lack consistent peer groups, maintain a timid temperament, physically look different, clumsy/uncoordinated, struggle academically, and experience mental health related issues (i.e., hyperactivity, repetitive behaviour, anxiety, etc.) (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Crouch, 2010; Rose et al., 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001;
Wickenden, 2011). Many of the aforementioned traits are characteristic of children with autism, thus placing them at greater risk for victimization (Cappadocia et al.). Such studies further reaffirm stereotypes suggesting minoritized children, especially those with disabilities, experience increased amounts of bullying throughout their school life.

In keeping with the research, participants also described instances of bullying and marginalization due to differences. This predominantly emerged as they engaged in storygames during the research sessions. For instance, in developing a story regarding a girl experiencing teasing at school, participants highlighted repeated incidents of verbal aggression:

There once was a girl who was teased and made fun of all the time at school. She got bullied all the time. They make fun of her and they say "Your name is stupid." She always trips all the time and they call her names, like "clumsy." She cried. It was cruel. They called her stupid and all she wanted to do was play UNO with her friends. She was in the special class.

When narrating a story of a non-ambulant boy with vision impairments, participants explained, “The boy was distracted by bullies.....He came to school scared, and he came out of school scared. He feels scared, scared, at school.” Participants also described a story highlighting bullying of a girl with intersecting differences:

Once there was this girl with short hair and brown skin. She spoke languages like Tamil and she had autism. She had glasses. She was bored and tired at school. She always felt sad when she went to school, because she got teased all the time. People at school call her funny names, like "Bad Bird." They also call her bad names...bad name calling. They make fun of her voice and the way she talks. Some people did not make fun of her autism, but other people did. They made fun of her, because she had autism and they say "Hey, what are you? Your name is stupid."
They call her stupid, because she has autism.
Some people did not make fun of her language, but other people did.
They bullied her.
Some people did not make fun of her skin colour, but sometimes people did.
They called her "You are black."
That made her feel sad.
She cried.
They made fun of the girl and thought she had a rash.
They thought her black skin had a rash, and they made fun of her.
They think it's bleeding blood, and it's not good.
They made fun of her skin colour, because it's different.
They thought it was bad and worse.
They called her skin "Horrible."
The students telling her this are in Grade 7 and Grade 8.
These students have light brown skin and they were also white.

Participants’ stories emphasized characters’ emotions of fear, sadness, and upset, supporting reported feelings by some participants who experienced bullying in school. For example, both Simon and Mew expressed encountering some form of physical, verbal, and/or relational aggression, and they both maintained a sense of fear and desolation when thinking about school, which is common among victims of bullying (Berger, 2007). Thus, Simon’s mixed emotions and Mew’s ample distaste for school may stem from bullying experiences. In describing bullying experiences among minoritized children, participants’ stories also explored issues related to victimization, such as disability, attending special education classrooms, language, race, ethnicity, and physical appearance. Participants’ understandings align strongly with research reporting heightened victimization for students with disabilities (e.g., Cappadocia et al., 2012; Crouch, 2010; Petrenchik, 2008; Rose et al., 2011; Sweeting & West, 2001; Wickenden, 2011). However, in terms of their perceptions relating bullying to visibly minoritized students (i.e., race, ethnicity, culture) and special education classrooms the research is unclear and contradictory (Berger, 2007; Rose et al.; Sweeting & West, 2001). For example, explaining the inconsistencies of racial/ethnic bullying Sweeting and West
(2001) and Berger (2007) reported some studies highlight increased prevalence of victimization among visibly minoritized students and/or newcomer students, yet other studies demonstrate no significant correlation between bullying and students’ race/ethnic backgrounds. Additional research suggests (a) greater ethnic bullying occurs within similar ethnic groups, rather than between differing ones; (b) ethnic bullying decreases when students attend highly multicultural schools; and (c) definitions of bullying vary across cultures, influencing students’ views of whether they experienced racial/ethnic bullying; all of which muddle the research on racial/ethnic bullying and further problematize drawing definitive conclusions (Berger, 2007; Sweeting & West, 2001). Rose et al. indicated discrepancies among literature pertaining to segregated special education classrooms and bullying. That is, various research purport similar victimization patterns among students, regardless of whether attending special education or regular classrooms, whereas other studies describe victimization of children attending special education classrooms as “2 to 3.5 times more than any other subgroup of students” (Rose et al., p. 123). Therefore, intuitively, inclusive education may ameliorate further victimization and negative stereotypes of children with disabilities, as they learn amongst peers in regular classrooms. Yet again, a few studies report increased stigmatization and peer exclusion for children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, influencing their sense of belonging (Crouch, 2010). Although fairly arduous for children with autism, establishing peer groups and relationships within inclusive classrooms may be critical for reducing victimization and increasing a positive sense of belonging (Cappadocia et al.; Rose et al.).

Despite fluctuations of the research, participants clearly associated bullying to differences. They demonstrated a strong awareness of the victimization and perpetration
minoritized students may face due to personal differences. For instance, when narrating stories of the two girls with disabilities, participants related victimization to physical ability (i.e., clumsy, always tired at school) and lower intelligence (“Your name is stupid,” “They call her stupid”). However, victimization significantly escalated once the protagonist took on intersecting differences. An illustration of this is noted in participants’ story of a Tamil girl with autism. In addition to victimization due to her physical ability and intelligence, she incurred further bullying resulting from physical appearance (i.e., glasses), communication difficulties (i.e., they make fun of her voice and the way she talks), abnormality of her autism diagnosis (i.e., bullies saying “Hey what are you?”), language, and skin colour (i.e., called her Black, skin had a rash, bleeding skin, skin colour was “bad,” “worse,” “horrible”). Participants’ stories of minoritized children correlated with their conceptualizations regarding differences of skin colour, ethnicity, autism, and disability (as featured in Chapter Seven). Participants’ raised two issues in their associations to darker skin colours: (a) negative stereotypes (e.g., dirty, rash), and (b) disapproving and negative nature of possessing darker skin (e.g., black skin colour was used as an insult toward the Tamil girl, horrible, worse, bad). Interestingly her bullies maintained lighter skin tones (i.e., light brown and white). Participants’ clearly conceived a superiority to white skin colour. They also recognized the complexities and challenges endured by children with autism, and the potential for amplified victimization and bullying in schools for those with multiple intersecting differences.

Intriguingly, however, when participants were asked whether they consider themselves vulnerable to bullying experiences due to their differences, a few participants disagreed. Edward asserted, “I think children get bullied if they are undifferent [sic] or
different….I don't think I get bullied, because I'm different or because I have autism.”

Similarly, William indicated, “I don't think I would get bullied because of I have autism.”

Both participants did not consider their personal differences, such as autism, to promote bullying encounters. However, Simon acknowledged rumours of bullying resulting from differences, yet appeared uncertain whether his experiences of bullying stem from personal differences,

I have heard that somebody got bullied, because they are different. I don't think they bully me, because I'm in a different class…the special class. I don't know…I don't know. I don't think they know if I'm in the special or regular class, but they continue making fun of me.

Differences often incite feelings of discomfort, fear, shame, and marginalization resulting from deviation of societal and dominant norms (Petrou et al., 2009). Along this continuum of normalcy defined by dominant societal groups, negative attitudes and stereotypes surface the more an individual differs. Seemingly, from this study and others, minoritized children with intersecting differences incur consequences, such as increasing their odds of physical and/or social victimization. Consequently, this reinforces stereotypes that some minoritized children, especially those with disabilities, may become victimised in someway during their school life. The concern, herein, surrounds blaming children for oppression, stigmatization, and marginalization due to differences, rather than addressing the negative social construction surrounding those who are different. These social constructions affix differences to deficits and deficiencies, fuelling the “…need to stand apart from those who are ‘different’…” (Asher & Gazelle, 1999, p. 19), whilst simultaneously indoctrinating among those who are different to either (a) disavow and refute personal differences, and/or (b) improve upon and fix themselves to adhere closer to standard norms, eradicating
differences and reducing stigmatization (e.g., teaching children with autism better social and communicative skills, behaviour management techniques, etc…to develop friendships).

In close, such unofficial segregation of underrating and denying differences in efforts to conform toward the norm (Messiou, 2006; Petrou et al.), leave minoritized groups with remnants of powerlessness, ensuring the oppressed remain not only oppressed, but in addition end up oppressing themselves. Most of the participants in this study reported a depleted sense of school belonging. Perhaps in hopes of engendering greater acceptance and elevating their positioning in the school’s social hierarchies, participants desired attaining a status of normalcy as dictated by their schools, an institution merely reproducing societal notions of normalcy. Yet, in doing so, participants ultimately contribute to the victimization of themselves.
CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

Within this chapter I do not intend to review or delve into deeper analysis of findings, but rather present overall broad conceptualizations of the data in relation to my initial research questions. I also return to theoretical frameworks foregrounding my study as I highlight significant aspects of the research and central premises of participants’ understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion and its association to their schooling experiences. Firstly, I reflect on matters and tensions concerning minoritized children with intersections of differences in school contexts. Secondly, I provide general implications to address some of these tensions and support inclusion for minoritized children. Thirdly, I emphasize various research considerations and the importance of researcher reflexivity and child voice in conducting research with children, in particular among those from traditionally marginalized groups.

9.1 Intersections of Differences and Schooling

Throughout participants’ narratives, discourses of differences aligned closely with discourses of deficient and deficit. These negative associations pertaining to understandings of differences clearly surfaced in the children’s discussions of race, ethnicity, language, disability, and autism. Seemingly, the more differences intersected, the greater the deficient and deficit discourse. Such pejorative discourses affix notions of neediness, abnormality, and otherness toward minoritized children, devaluing and marginalizing students peripheral to conventional societal and educational norms. These very discourses purporting fixing of the dis-abled, non-efficient, and abnormal emerge from schools, unneutral institutions.
mirroring its social contexts. Despite reflecting societal ideals, schools remain as sites responsible for ameliorating social inequities and injustices of minoritized children, as this is a mainstay objective undergirded by critical theory and pedagogy; contesting and confronting systemic prejudices within educational institutions and examining power relations and hegemonic structures among those whom are different, emancipating voices of oppressed and minonoritized groups (Freire, 1970/2006; Kincheloe, 2008), in particular those with multiple intersecting differences, enduring “…the interweaving nature of multiple forms of oppressions…” (Liasidou, 2012, p. 170).

Participants expressed positive understandings toward ideals of differences, appreciating qualities of differences within themselves and others, yet they also shared desires for sameness and normalcy within school. These contradictory feelings most likely surfaced due to indoctrination of predominant official discourses on diversity embedded within schools: suppress, segregate, deny, and invite. The continuous cyclical nature of these discourses explicitly and implicitly imparted upon minoritized students as they pass through school systems results in apprehensive understandings of personal differences. Minoritized students are incessantly bombarded by discourses to suppress and segregate differences to fit traditional and standardized customs and types. They are also compelled to deny differences as a means of fostering equality and fairness among groups, and yet they are requested to invite and celebrate differences, serving as tokenistic representations of diversity. This rotation among suppression, segregation, denying, and inviting of differences internally fuels tensions between minoritized students confidently claiming identities of differences (i.e., skin colour, languages spoken, cultural practices, and diagnosed disabilities) and fitting within dominant groups’ notions of normalcy.
Experiencing these tensions and internalizing markers of abnormality and deficiency, minoritized students may strive to work toward ideals of a good and normal student as legitimized by schools and society, alleviating their inferior status in hopes of becoming socially accepted and attaining some power as they regulate toward majority groups. For example, various participants strived on the one hand to overcome deficit based discourses chained to intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disabilities, whilst concurrently on the other hand surrender to normalcy based discourses. Ironically, a tactic in managing overcoming of deficit and abnormal discourses entail denying of differences in order to be perceived as more normal (e.g., some participants maintained negative impressions of darker skin colour with desires to be of a white skin tone, one was ashamed to speak their home language outside of the home context, and others denied possessing any disability despite well-versed understandings of autism, behaviours, etc…). Consequently, this perpetuates power inequities affording dominant groups more power and privileges, as those that are different from the dominant submit to dominant ideals of normalcy. Participants victimized themselves by perceiving the self through lenses of dominant, non-minoritized groups; essentially, a case of the oppressed oppressing themselves.

In addition to being unneutral institutions, schools are also normalizing sites whereby through formal and hidden curricula and dominant groups’ ideologies, standards, and behaviours dictate particular norms engendering valuable citizens (Dei, 1996a; Holt, Lea, & Bowlby, 2012). Shifting toward majority groups’ ideals, norms, and values contributes to the power pool of dominant groups, “…[the] spread of power – away from banishment of the minority towards regulation of the majority” (Holt et al., 2012, p. 2194); thus, normalization enacts power. However, what is normal can not exist without the abnormal. Societal and
educational institutions immerse children within an abnormalization process, specifically those from traditionally marginalized groups (i.e., racially, ethnically, linguistically, and ability related groups), categorizing, labelling, separating, and conveying images of the abnormal Other (Holt et al.; Liasidou, 2012). This image of the Other among children with disabilities manifests itself more and more among children who are also from racially, ethnically, and economically diverse backgrounds in comparison to dominant White upper class groups (Reid & Knight, 2006). Therefore, recognizing intersections of differences among minoritized children is imperative, but even more so is “understanding the intersections of systems of oppression and challenging the multiplicity of factors that disable certain groups of students…” (Liasidou, 2012, p. 170).

Although participants shared moments of school inclusion, a majority reported mixed feelings regarding schooling experiences, and some expressed a diminished sense of school belonging, perhaps undergoing negative effects of such intersecting oppressions due to intersecting differences. I am not suggesting all minoritized children with disabilities experience a lack of school belonging. However, given participants’ particular social, political, and historical context in which they reside, they presented indication of oppressive and marginalizing experiences as those who are different (e.g., bullying and victimization, desires for normalcy and sameness, etc…), which demand “…critiquing dominant ideologies, educational policies and institutional arrangements that maintain and perpetuate social and educational injustice” (Liasidou, 2012, p. 170). Currently proliferating notions of deficit, deficiency, and despair, discourses surrounding ideologies of differences require reform. Those who are different need not be ashamed, repressing differences, and affording dominant groups more power and privilege. Rather, differences must be perceived as
powerful and paramount, reclaiming superiority status in being what the majority has relegated as the minority, and displacing boundaries of normalcy extending across all forms of differences. Anticipating that differences become the “new” normal entails tolerance for the shifting, re-shifting, and re-shifting again of meanings and ideals of what and who is different and normal, as this fluidity evolves from ever changing social, political, and historical contexts.

9.2 Implications for Schools

Contributing to participants’ mixed emotions and overall lack of school belonging included student-teacher relationships and attitudes, peer relationships, and segregated learning. Some participants described teachers as academic resources and a friend, and others perceived teachers as mean, some participants occasionally experienced hopeful feelings from peers and other times became victims of bullying, and some participants criticized their special education classroom, desiring to be part of the regular classroom. The interrelationship of teachers, peers, and learning in segregated spaces impacting participants’ level of school belonging and acceptance perhaps pertains to issues of power, normalcy, and uniformity.

Evidently, many participants bleakly perceived learning in segregated spaces, recognizing a sense of inferiority and minority status enacted through teachers’ conceptual repertoires, classmate socialization, and quality of learning environments (e.g., desire learning new or “special” school material, special education class as a space for “bad” students, restricted experiences in comparison to regular class, substandard teaching in the special education class, etc…). Participants discerningly realized discrepancies between themselves and conceptions associated to normal students and/or standard learning
development, highlighting issues of power differentials among those in segregated versus regular classrooms. As Holt et al. (2012) discussed the work of Foucault (2003) they highlighted power associated to normality is frequently positioned within discourses claiming positive intervention and inclusion, refraining from disclosing such intervention requires some form of rejection or exclusion (e.g., segregated classrooms, treatment, etc.). The political discourse surrounding special education optimistically purports segregated educative spaces as necessary for providing resources and facilitating intervention to children with disabilities (i.e., physical, behavioural, emotional), equipping these children with appropriate academic and social skills. Yet, I would argue special education classrooms and other forms of academic streaming/tracking are employed to shape minoritized children into regular non-minoritized students as declared by dominant societal and school discursive practices and ideals. Once minoritized children attain certain standards of student normalcy, academic achievement, and educational excellence, they are then authorized full inclusive participation within all facets of school life. Thus, further minoritizing, oppressing, and shifting power away from minoritized children toward dominant non-minoritized groups. In describing special education classrooms as “special units,” Holt et al. asserted,

> Within the unit, processes of normalisation are intensified in an endeavour to rectify young people’s ‘deviant’ social expression to enable them to be ‘included’ within the mainstream school. The emphasis is upon normalising the deviant bodies of those [with disabilities and those] on the AS [autism spectrum], not expanding the norms reproduced in school spaces. (p. 2202)

Along with this critique, I acknowledge segregated classrooms are often filled with wealth of expertise, resources, and compassions, intending to serve minoritized children in a safe and accepting environment. However, these spaces are designed with goals of edifying minoritized children in hopes of inclusion within mainstream classrooms and one day social
inclusion as citizens, aligning inclusion with normalization of confined understandings of the typical child and student.

As some participants’ discourses demonstrated understandings of teachers’ conceptual repertoires toward minoritized children (i.e., student deficiency and lowering academic expectations and prospects) suggests exploring ways to revamp such deficient-based repertoires. One means of transforming understandings of students is examining and critiquing personal and political impressions, assumptions, and attitudes toward minoritized children. For example, contemplating one’s racial, cultural, societal, historical, and political positioning, interrogating their impact within educational institutions and how they may contribute to oppressive pedagogy, ideals, and power imbalances (Knight, 2008; Niesz, 2006; Young, 2007). Critical personal analysis may support teachers’ efforts in emancipating students from minority status groups, allowing opportunities for critical and transformative learning and teaching (e.g., critical multicultural education). Yet, confronting personal ideologies and practices in attempts to revolutionize school spaces, promoting social justice and equity, may also lead to confronting deeply established institutional discourses. Thus, expectations for teachers to assume responsibilities as effective inclusive change agents for revitalizing and renewing classrooms poses challenges, as it deviates conventional discourses and status quo of teachers’ roles within schools (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008c). Such resurgence, in which teachers also serve as inclusive leaders, requires primarily transformation within educational institutions (e.g., in-service and pre-service training emphasizing critical reflective practice pertaining to inclusion and diversity, leadership among school stakeholders, policies, etc.) (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008c; Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, 2003).
More specifically for example, from a policy level, one might examine why Canada has not followed in the footsteps of other countries (i.e., United States, Australia, and United Kingdom) and adopted a national disability policy. Such a policy may cohesively allow for strategic planning, developing of priority agendas, and creating disability research work groups. These may strengthen accountability on how Canada as a nation is supporting and improving the lives of children with disabilities who also come from diverse ethno-cultural and ethno-racial backgrounds. A national disability policy may also address the educational opportunities and rights of children with disabilities, as currently there are no Canadian federal legislations specifically directed toward public education for children with disabilities and matters of exclusion and inclusion within schools. Ontario’s inclusive education strategy (i.e., revised PPM 119) and policies regarding services for children with ASD (i.e., PPM 140) demonstrates positive efforts toward developing and implementing approaches for supporting the schooling experiences of minoritized students with disabilities from a provincial level. However, these policies may benefit from further clarification to account for systemic societal injustices and their enactments within schools, better serving minoritized children and their families.

Enhancing teacher preparation from within pre-service and in-service levels might include offering compulsory training focused on student diversity from critical theories, disabilities (including courses on autism and positive behavioural supports and interventions), intersections of differences, and debating notions of normality and abnormality in relation to minoritized students with intersecting differences. Within these preparatory courses, educators can examine how the current system impacts the schooling experiences of minoritized students, and generate ideas to strengthen inclusive education for
these students. Such mandatory learning may also present opportunities for deeply exploring teachers’ conceptual repertoires and personal attitudes and beliefs regarding minoritized children. Furthermore, this training may also investigate the significance of student-teacher relationships and how they contribute to minoritized students’ sense of school belonging. Recognizing teacher dilemmas surrounding inclusive education and curricula overload, accountability, and time constraints, I am not suggesting teachers take on additional roles of serving as behavioural therapists or occupational therapists, etc… within classrooms. However, the awareness and knowledge received from compulsory courses/training may greatly support teachers’ efforts in culturally and ability responsive teaching, ensuring the implementation of adaptations and accommodations for all children. According to media reports, commencing September 2015, all Ontario teachers’ colleges student-teachers will be embarking upon a new curriculum, which for the first time in Ontario, will require compulsory training in working with diverse student populations and those with disabilities (Brown, 2013); this is a notable step forward in attempts for Ontario schools to serve minoritized children.

Alongside adding material resources (e.g., technology, smart boards, computer programs, PECS, etc…) within regular classrooms, incorporating more full-time special education paraprofessionals (i.e., ABA therapists, behavioural therapists, etc.) into classrooms may support inclusive classrooms and alleviate some burden placed upon teachers. Although ABA is deeply embedded in medical frameworks of “fixing” what are considered to be abnormal and deviant behaviours, I acknowledge that depending on the therapist and how they approach and employ the interventions, this form of therapy may greatly benefit children with ASD and other developmental disabilities, as they strengthen
capacities to communicate and socialize closer to societal ideals of what is normal. Yet, I still contend there must be room for flexibility within ABA, rethinking some of its principles and methods in so that they may align toward social models of disability; appreciating that deficiencies rest not within the child, but rather within society – thus, challenging boundaries of what may be perceived as developmentally appropriate, acceptable forms of communication and socialization, and normal behaviour.

As a breeding ground of societal injustices, schools are obligated to restructure ideals and practices allowing for positive respect and appreciation of all differences. This entails comprehensive institutional conceptual expansions of understandings related to inclusive education for children with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability. Conceptual expansions may occur within not only teacher education programming, school policies, and leadership initiatives, but also in terms of broadening notions and meanings of differences, normalcy (Holt et al., 2012), and oppression and marginalization, accounting for all children from historically minoritized groups, including those with intersecting differences (Blanchett et al., 2009). I agree with Holt et al.’s concession of the possibilities of normativity: “Norms in themselves are not problematic. Norms circumscribe, but they also enable. It is therefore pertinent to work to expand the norms of which lives are liveable” (p. 2202). For instance, confronting societal ideologies of normalcy and expanding definitions to ones in which increase opportunities for all minoritized children to fully participate within regularized educational spaces. Or, expanding schools’ willingness and academic standards to accommodate and adapt environments, materials, and instructions by whatever means, serving children from all oppressed groups. Broadening understandings of what it means to be different and what it
means to be normal may make it easier to re-conceptualize a fully accessible and welcoming school milieu, whereby it is structurally organized to account for extensive ranges of human differences.

Acknowledging that inclusive classrooms may take time to surface, special education classrooms may operate as a starting point to ameliorate and contest restrictive norms of minoritized students and diversity, promoting and propagating expansive conceptualizations of normativity in relation to minoritized children (Holt et al., 2012). As established throughout my research, minoritized children are experts of their experiences and knowledges, and as such should actively contribute to not only research concerning their lives, but also to education concerning their lives. As informants, minoritized children can aptly support restructuring educational institutions and evolving policies and practices, better supporting their learning and teaching, and potentially contributing to broadening perceptions of normalcy and differences. My participants demonstrated they have much to share about personal schooling experiences in relation to understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion. For example, participants expressed a sense of inclusion with (a) greater independence and autonomy within school spaces, (b) opportunities to voice ideas regarding school environments, (c) increasing school recognition of those in special education classes (e.g., distribution of school awards/achievements, graduation), (d) decreasing heavy school workloads and homework, (e) providing more opportunities for social interactions with all students throughout all school spaces, and (f) presenting engaging and active learning experiences and environments. Yet, I caution holding minoritized children responsible for enlightening non-minoritized groups on experiences of the Other and how to approach issues of differences within schools promoting educational social change. Assigning such
obligations to oppressed and underrepresented groups absolves non-minoritized groups from liability in learning, contemplating, and inciting reform regarding matters of diversity, marginalization, and inclusion, preserving dominant groups’ power and privilege by benefiting from the stories and experiences of the oppressed. As demonstrated throughout this study, gathering understandings from the voices of a group of minoritized children broaches many questions and dilemmas for schools and policy makers, whilst at the same time bridges understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion.

9.3 Researcher Considerations, Reflexivity, and Voice

Conducting research with children raises many dilemmas, difficulties, and ethical questions. Such matters escalate when researching with children from traditionally oppressed groups, due to complexities and sensitivities of topics and also challenges in accessing voices. Previously I mentioned within the methodology section of this paper suitable qualitative research techniques and considerations in conducting research with minoritized children, in keeping with the new sociology of childhood:

(a) The importance of utilizing a multi-method qualitative approach with creative mediums. Such an approach inclusively engaged participants of varying abilities within the research, ameliorated boredom and power imbalances between researcher and child, and deeply accessed more comprehensive understandings of the children’s experiences;

(b) Continuously tailoring and modifying research methods to suit participants’ abilities, development levels, and allowing full participation of all children;

(c) Ensuring the research moved beyond conventional research on children to co-research with children. This entailed consulting and informing child participants about the research, and presenting decision making opportunities throughout the
research process. For example, obtaining child assent, offering liberties to amend narratives (i.e., multiple re-presenting of data to participants), and developing “research kits” to establish participants’ authority and agency as co-researchers;

(d) Examining ways to create a safe, comfortable, and trusting research environment. In doing so, I deliberated the number of research sessions, formatting of these sessions, a suitable research venue and sample size, researcher flexibility to accommodate for the group climate, and positive behavioural supports (i.e., individualized reinforcing items for participants). These considerations supported a trusting space, with established rapport amongst each other, allowing participants to safely share personal schooling experiences.

A critical aspect in thoroughly monitoring and regulating my research approaches while ensuring child agency and voice within the study demanded researcher reflexivity on my part. I reflected upon the research after each session, asking questions of myself, participants, and the research process: How did the research proceed today? Did I maintain judgments, expectations, and assumptions throughout the session? My researcher memo after the first session clearly described apprehensions and presumptions I maintained of the research:

After the first session I felt fatigued and overwhelmed. I often questioned whether they [participants] understood some of my questions and requests. They would sometimes stare at me or not want to participate. I was re-directing to tasks sometimes, as they were not fully engaged/interested in some tasks. However, we managed to make it through the entire session with all students participating. I feel discouraged, unsure whether the data collected today will be useful...however, perhaps I need to re-shift my thinking, as from their perspective these responses are indeed useful. Although at times I wondered if they understood the questions or tasks, I acknowledge the validity of their
responses….Why do I assume that their answers are not “correct” responses? There is not a “right” or “wrong” answer…I am [assuming] what I think are “normal” and acceptable responses, but it is relative to their perspectives. (A. Ajodhia-Andrews, researcher memo, May 13, 2012)

Reflecting on my research methods, I questioned if a particular medium was unsuccessful in accessing participants’ voices, and if so, what action might I take to revise my approach, better inciting the children’s perspectives and stories? What techniques worked well, fully engaging all participants and their voices, and why? As stated, I continually modified methods to suit participants, revising techniques throughout sessions. For example, after a few research sessions I realized the importance of visual supports and delivery of verbal speech to further engage participants. Thus, I began preparing visual type outs of interview questions, developing brainstorming maps, providing PECS, and monitoring the speed, tone, and phrasing of my speech. Throughout sessions, I noticed the value of increasing probing to prompt responses among some participants, and the need for scribing responses for others. This flexibility also carried over to areas of scheduling and routine of sessions, accommodating for the group climate (i.e., appreciating time required for participants to complete journal writings, taking more breaks than expected, eliminating planned research activities for the day, etc…). I also quickly reverted to my arsenal of tools as a therapist for children with autism, employing many behavioural techniques to support participant contribution. I contemplated how I felt when sessions did not proceed as anticipated and what I might execute differently, ensuring to make efforts in amending my practice and method for the next session. I wondered about how to support all participants within group sessions, if one child did not want to participate or cooperate. After each session I also examined whether I did my utmost to access participants’ voices and views, and if I did my
best to present children’s narratives within the research upholding their dignity and agency as co-researchers. Phelan and Kinsella (2013) noted researcher reflexivity supports not only rigor in qualitative research, but also ethical research practices. In maintaining steady reflexivity throughout the study, and asking these kinds of questions of myself, I attempted to manage ethical issues of assent, voice and power, representation of participants within the data, and disclosure of truthfulness about the research process and data.

Accounting for my perspectives of children as autonomous social actors and capable conveyers of personal experiences, and acknowledging frequent silencing of voices among minoritized students, I retained a clear distinction between giving voice and accessing voice. Although perhaps deriving from emancipatory and liberating intent, giving voice to marginalized groups implies minoritized individuals do not already possess a voice, albeit due to systemic oppressions they are often refuted opportunities to express experiences. It became my task to decipher inclusive approaches in accessing minoritized children’s perspectives in a respectful and confiding milieu.

Due to participants’ communication challenges, some researchers and scholars may question and even doubt the origins and validity of participants’ responses, notably disputing voice (Ashby, 2011). Admittedly, participants occasionally refrained from voicing experiences and silences ensued (e.g., discussions of inclusive schooling experiences). However, understanding silence within qualitative research is not perpetually negative, I endeavoured to present the children with space and time during sessions, patiently resting in the silences, as in those silent moments participants may find their voice. Silence can sufficiently serve as voice, representing a form of resistance as “…a way to subvert systems of power that limit and marginalize” (Ashby, 2011, p. 10). Thus, choosing not to speak
reflects participants’ agency and power, rather than apathy, ignorance, and subjugation. Furthermore, participants may choose silence over voice, because they are accustomed to practices of not being heard, and presume it is simply not worth efforts in divulging personal experiences and knowledge (Ashby, 2011). Rationally, such impressions develop when considering historical contexts and conventional positioning of childhood, in which children are seen and not heard, and this is more so amongst children with disabilities.

Resulting from intermittent silences and conducting research with a population of children with communicative disabilities, other researchers may challenge data interpretations, as conceivably data obtained might be limited, and as such “…less data means a greater possibility of misinterpretation. With fewer supporting details there are many more blanks left to be filled in” (Ashby, 2011, p. 11). Such blanks frequently leave qualitative researchers with a yearning to scrutinize the data for coherency and consistency. In grounding findings exclusively within participants’ experiences, ideas, and stories, I resisted solely seeking perfectly aligning patterns and logical explanations in the narratives. I embraced contradictions of the data, and clearly reported these in the research findings. However, I concede bringing my own interpretations and perspectives to the children’s schooling experiences and understandings related to diversity and inclusion. Appreciating qualitative research may never be void of researcher interpretations infiltrating upon the data (Ashby, 2011), I sought approaches of fostering children’s agency within the research process: (a) Re-presenting narratives to participants on multiple occasions supported this resistance in search of clear and uncluttered stories, and guided my interpretations of the data; (b) Presenting multiple forms of data collection to access voice; and (c) Considering means of building a rapport-filled, trusting, and comfortable research environment.
Ultimately, I was not in search for truths or veracity of participants’ responses, I merely desired to accurately portray participants’ experiences and stories as they intended, exemplifying their meanings and interpretations.

9.4 Significance of the Study/ Contribution to Existing Body of Knowledge

This study demonstrates the importance of accessing and listening to the voices, views, and visions of minoritized children who experience intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability, incorporating these in educational research and reform. Underscoring personal experiences and understandings of diversity, minoritized children’s narratives may bridge disconnects between schools and children’s lives, expectations, dreams, and knowledge. Perceiving children as credible reporters of their lives and experiences, this research supports children’s learning, development of voice, and personal agency in schools and research processes. Furthermore, it lends insight into issues pertaining to the nature of minoritized children’s experiences of learning and diversity, enhancing inclusion within the Canadian educational system. From the perspectives of middle years minoritized children, this study contributes to better understandings of their experiences and views of differences, inclusion, and marginalization, exploring how these influence their learning and school life, and how this knowledge may be utilized to deconstruct stereotypes and inform conceptual repertoires of diversity and inclusion, opening gateways to inclusion for educators and educational authorities/stakeholders. It advances educational knowledge, practice, and research for children by highlighting perceived supports to strengthen inclusion in schools.

Exploring minoritized children’s experiences and understandings of differences and learning, to support inclusion contributes to schools existing as spheres of democracy,
embracing diversity and educational equity and rights for all children. Additionally, among
the middle years of schooling, minoritized children undergo compounding and complex
educational challenges resulting from (a) their difference(s), which often intersect, and (b) the
mismatch between academic learning and the middle years. Examining their conceptions of
differences, learning, and inclusion, and how these affect their everyday school life, middle
years minoritized children’s narratives contributes knowledge to areas of diversity, minority
education, childhood studies, inclusion, and equity and social justice in schools.

Hopefully this research sheds light onto the schooling experiences of middle years
minoritized children with intersecting differences of race, ethnicity, language, and disability.
I anticipate this study powerfully highlights the voices of minoritized children, as they are
generally excluded from educational research and reform, and most chiefly research
concerning their lives in relation to deliberations and affects of difference and inclusion. It is
also hoped participants’ understandings of differences, learning, and inclusion lends insights
into strengthening inclusive education principles, practices, and pedagogy for minoritized
Canadian children. Additionally, moving away from medical model perspectives, this study
negotiated between appropriate agency driven qualitative research methods for accessing
voices of minoritized children; methods re-imagining, re-shifting, and re-thinking ways in
which to conduct research with children, particularly those from marginalized groups, as they
competently contribute insights regarding educational matters; it is one of the few studies
accessing the voices of children with disabilities who also have various intersecting
differences. Listening to ideas and understandings of children from traditionally oppressed
groups may challenge, dismantle, and transform current debate, policy, practices, ideals, and
knowledges perpetuating stereotypical and essentializing notions of those who are different
within schools and society. In this manner, I advocate future research confronting deficit-based discourses deeply entrenched within educational landscapes managing matters of diversity and guiding school inclusion for minoritized students. Such research calls for examining not only complexities of intersections among race, ethnicity, language, and disability, but also exploring ways to expand conceptualizations of differences and normalcy, widening the margins in which minoritized students typically fall, in so they may boldly, proudly, and inclusively participate amid all aspects of school life, amid all school spaces.
CHAPTER TEN

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