Parent Engagement and Schooling: Examining Black Parents’ Experiences in the Greater Toronto Area

By

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Abstract

Within the dominant discourse, Black parents have been positioned as disinterested in the school system, their involvement analyzed from a deficit approach, and barriers to their engagement not fully examined. This research utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) to examine the engagement of three Black parents in the Greater Toronto Area, their experiences navigating the school system, the challenges and tensions they experienced, and the strategies they employed. The study used a narrative inquiry approach to examine and explore their experiences. The findings reveal that Black parents, contrary to the dominant discourse, are advocates for their children. The study also highlights the significance of race in the relationship of Black parents with schools, and the ways in which this impacts their engagement. The findings of this study will be important to teachers, teacher education programs, school leaders, administrators and all stakeholders in education.
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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

Parent involvement has been shown to be a key indicator in student outcome and achievement (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Brandon & Brown, 2009; McGee & Spencer, 2015; McKay et al., 2003; Vincent et al., 2012). Over the years the literature on parent engagement has evolved (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). A new typology is articulated that includes different types of involvement of parents and community members in schools. Among these forms of engagement are schools providing more opportunities for parents to actively influence decision-making in the school (Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). Demographic shifts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have brought about seen greater diversity in schools. This has precipitated calls for new understandings related to parent engagement, particularly Black parents, in light of current research on the continued underachievement of Black students. New approaches, knowledge and understanding are needed among educational institutions with regards to parental engagement, and more specifically the engagement of Black parents. According to Scanlan and Johnson (2015) “efforts to engage parents, even when ostensibly seeking to empower those who have traditionally been marginalized, can effectively reinforce the power of the privileged” (p.167). Given this reality, it is important to examine the practices and approaches of schools as they engage with parents of colour. We cannot continue to blame parents of colour and from low socio-economic backgrounds for lack of engagement with schools, and even worse position them as disinterested. The voices of parents from marginalized communities are important and must be heard. The school engagement paradigm must be changed to one of empowerment, inclusion and access.

It has been widely acknowledged that the participation of families in the process of learning has a positive impact on student achievement and engagement (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Brandon
Parent engagement has long been as a factor in promoting academic achievement; however, there is not enough in the extant literature on the role of Black parents, and when included it is often presented from a deficit perspective. Improved student performance is linked to the involvement of parents, particularly in supporting their academic outcomes (Clark et al., 2012). This challenges long-standing views that parents need to be directed on how to be involved (Horsford & Clark, 2015). Horsford and Clarke (2015) reconceptualize parental involvement as “part and parcel of the democratic functioning of schools and the communities that host these schools are co-charting (with parents) pathways to educational equity for all students” (p. 75).

An emerging view of parent engagement argues for engaging parents to be in authentic partnerships. While education has opened doors to robust citizenship it has not done so as quickly for racially minoritized students (Horsford & Clark, 2015) and their parents. They face challenges with language barriers, literacy levels and work schedules. These challenges can present parents from marginalized communities with conflicting priorities. Parents who encounter these circumstances are forced to evaluate priorities and make difficult and uncomfortable decisions (Brandon & Brown, 2009). The most commonly cited explanations for students’ lack of achievement are located in traditional deficit discourses (Fine, 1995; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Deficit discourses in the realm of student achievement situate educational failing within the individual and the family in the absence of critiquing institutional practices and power dynamics (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007). There is a tendency to label differences in intellect, culture and language as deficit. This approach implies a clinical pathology in “need of a cure” as opposed to “alternative and legitimate ways of existing in the world” (Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007, p.8). Marchesi (1998) argues that within deficit discourse framings, the most commonly identified risk factors are low socioeconomics and ethnic minority status that
essentially are euphemisms for classism and racism. Valencia (1997) suggests, “a central feature of deficit discourses is the manner in which they maintain white middle-class privilege by leaving unspoken the way in which schooling is organized around the norms of this group … (p. 9)”. Towards that end diverse schools can easily fall prey to a defacto means of segregation along racial and class lines. The systematic disenfranchisement of Black parents operates in very much the same way. Deficit discourses are used as a means of rejecting social difference and constructing differences in culture, language, and immigrant status as outside of the norm. This perpetuates the notion of the Black parent as an outsider, one of the central underpinnings of deficit frameworks (Polakow, 1992), the implications of which are, negative parental perceptions, victim blaming and educational shortcomings (Portelli et al. 2007).

Structural and systemic flaws within the education system in Ontario that continue to marginalize Black and other minoritized students must be acknowledged. The need exists for more robust strategies and policies that address and effectively eliminate barriers in the engagement process for Black parents. A recent study by James and Turner (2017) found that racism is a significant contributor to the educational inequities of Black students in the GTA. More specifically, they concluded a perpetuation of school culture and climate that sustain anti-Black racism in relation to the differential treatment of Black students and their parents regarding behaviours and expectations of educational performance. They call for the greater visibility of Black parents and the Black community as a whole to advocate for more equitable outcomes for racialized and marginalized students in the Ontario Ministry of Education (OMOE) and local school boards. According to Fishkin (2011), when everyone is involved in the democratic systems and participate broadly in the operation of these systems their quality of life improves.
It is imperative for Black parents to become fully engaged in the education system and educative process. As Horsford and Clarke (2015) point out, a student’s educational performance is significantly increased by his or her parents’ civic involvement; and parents benefit positively as well. Fine (1993) suggests that parent involvement requires a three-way commitment that includes organizing parents, restructuring schools and an approach that includes difference and diversity. There must be respectful alliances between educators, families and communities that value relationship building, dialogue across difference, sharing of power in pursuit of socially just schools (Auerbach, 2012).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Black parents experience challenges initiating and maintaining interpersonal interactions with schools (Hill & Tyson, 2009; James & Turner, 2017). Within the discourse and research on parent involvement in schooling, there is a paucity of research on the specific experiences of Black parents (McKay et al., 2003; McGee & Spencer, 2015). Black parents have often been positioned as disengaged and not as involved in their children’s education (Brandon & Brown, 2009; McGee & Spencer, 2015). We know from experience that Black parents are just as interested in the educational outcomes of their children as others, however they experience challenges navigating the education system because as Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez (2013) argue, approaches used by schools often miss the multiple ways non-dominant parents participate in their children’s education. Anderson (1998) suggests that in socioeconomically diverse schools, those engaged in the schooling process tend to be middle-class and share the same socialization as school teachers and principals.

In Ontario, and in particular the GTA, the student population is becoming increasingly more diverse while the teaching staff and school administrators have remained predominantly White.
“The demographic divide between teachers and students in Ontario and the Toronto CMA is large. In Ontario, racial minorities represent 26% of the population, yet make up only 10% of secondary school teachers and 9% of elementary school and kindergarten teachers” (Turner, 2014, p.2). This has created a need for more proactive approaches to parent engagement within the Black community. School leaders and others must critically examine how power relations, race and other forms of social identity shape school partnerships and interactions. Auerbach (2012) argues that “despite the rhetoric of partnership, the literature suggests that many educators don’t want parents or community groups as equal partners with agency and voice” (p. 32). We see this reflected in the media in the GTA as parents from the Black community complain about the treatment of their kids in schools. For example, Gloria Small-Clarke, a Black parent joined other parents in protesting outside of a high school in Ajax, a town in Ontario and part of the Durham District School Board (DDSB) in December of 2014, with a placard that read “Racism hurts everyone” (Szekely, 2015). Black parents in DDSB felt that their children were being, especially their sons, were being racially profiled in local schools. The families contended that their children faced more discipline including suspensions than their peers, and lowered expectations academically (Szekely, 2015). Another incident that galvanized community outcry was the placing of a six-year girl at her school in Mississauga, in the Peel District School Board (PDSB) handcuffs by Peel Regional police (Cheung & Sienkiewicz, 2017). These examples and the many more that are not reported in the media points to the need for authentic engagement as Horsford and Clarke (2015) suggest between schools and Black parents. Changes must be made in the school system in Ontario to address these issues, and parent engagement that is respectful must be part of the solution. Systems and approaches must be developed to carefully listen and respectfully communicate with parents (Scanlan, 2008). This is particularly important to the Black community.
1.3 Purpose and Rationale

This study explores the narratives of three Black parents in the GTA and their experiences engaging with the public secondary school system. It also examines ways in which they are involved and engaged within schools. The main purposes of the study are to: 1) examine the experiences of Black parents as they navigate the school system; 2) explore the strategies that Black parents employ in their engagement with the school system as they advocate on behalf of their children. The findings of this research will hopefully impact educational polices in Ontario and support the goals of the Ontario Equity Action Plan (2017)\(^1\) which are to achieve the promise of equitable education for all students. This is important for Black students who continue to struggle in schools across the GTA. James and Turner (2017) suggest there is a need for educators to assume greater responsibility towards Black parental engagement in schools, while at the same time arguing that the Black community must unite in advocating for a more culturally responsive and or sustaining education system. According to James and Turner (2017) some Black parents believe that the education system in Ontario is designed to see Black students fail and profit on these losses, which in turn justifies the hiring of more police officers in schools and communities and having larger prison systems. They argue that a more unified, informed community is necessary to provide additional support for Black youth. James and Turner (2017) assert that Black parents must learn to better navigate the school system which includes understanding post-secondary options to support their children in making more informed decisions about their education. Minoritized parents who are not well versed in the Ontario secondary school system are more likely to assume that their children will be treated in the same manner as their White

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\(^1\) Ontario Equity Action Plan (2017) is an OMOE derived action plan for all schools in Ontario to continue to work towards ensuring that all students reach their goals both personally and academically regardless of background, identity or socioeconomic status. This is a follow up from its precursors, first in 2009, then followed in 2014.
peers (James & Turner, 2017). Black parents must be vigilant and policy makers and educators must be held accountable. Rapid changes in the Ontario’s racial and ethnic diversity provide opportunities for policymakers and educators to support the educational advancement of minority groups. Parents and students alike expect that they will be given the tools, strategies and opportunities to succeed (Lopez, 2016).

A study conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)\(^2\) (2011) revealed that Black and other racialized students were underachieving compared to their peers. A study of the grade 9-cohort in 2006 that examined the performance of students from grade 9 to grade 12 over a five-year period found that students who identified as Black had a dropout rate of 22%, the highest rate, compared to students identified as East Asian at 6% (the lowest). Similarly, Black students were most likely to not attend post-secondary education, recording a 47% non-application, second only to Latin American identified students at 51%. Twenty six percent of Black students were represented in Special Education Programs compared to 16% of White students; and 0.4% of Black students were in gifted programs compared to 4% of White students. In the same cohort, Black students were suspended at more than twice the rate of White students (48% compared to 18%). More recently, TDSB expulsion rate showed that Black students were almost five times as likely to be expelled compared to 10% of White students (James & Turner, 2017). Given this data, it is important to examine how Black students can be better supported to achieve their academic goals, and this must include removing barriers to greater involvement and engagement of parents.

Parent involvement is a key component in student success and academic achievement (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Vincent et al., 2012). Black parents continue to suffer from a deficit approach and

\(^2\) TDSB is the largest school board in the GTA and the only school board to collect and release race based data.
stereotyping by educators in the ways in which they choose to engage in education and their capacity to advocate for their children (McGee & Spencer, 2015). James and Turner (2017) argue that there is a belief among some educators that the plight of Black children in publicly funded schools would improve if Black parents became more of a visible force. Research however show that the lack of visibility is due more to structural barriers within the system rather than a lack of interest by Black parents. Brandon and Brown (2009) argue that these deficit perceptions of the role of Black families in education have done a disservice to Black students, and this has negatively impacted their engagement and achievement. Systemic and institutional aggressions have created adverse family-school relations among Black parents (James & Turner, 2017).

There is clearly a need for more research to be done that will inform the discourse on Black parent engagement. This research will explore the structural barriers that Black parents as they seek to engages with the schools that their children attend. The study will provide strategies that educators can employ in their daily practices, including: navigating socio-historical influences of existing curricular contexts and connecting theory to practice in more authentic ways. The findings of this study will support Black parents as they navigate the dichotomous nature of parent-school relations and the tensions inherent in educating students of colour. Shedding light on the experiences of Black parents in the school system, will support teacher candidates in initial teacher education programs to be more culturally responsive as they enter increasingly diverse schools. In-service teachers and principals will also benefit as they engage in professional development that focuses on meeting the needs of a growing diverse student population. Students in principal’s qualification programs will also benefit from identifying strategies that can be used in schools to support Black parents. The findings of this study will highlight counter-narratives of parent engagement from parents who are often excluded from or marginalized within the school engagement discourse.
1.4 Locating Myself

As a Black woman and educator from St. Lucia, my lived experiences have been greatly impacted by my racial identity and raced body. These experiences include my educational experiences as a student in St. Lucia and secondary school teacher in the Ontario school system.

I come from a tiny island nestled in the Caribbean, formally known as St. Lucia but known to us islanders as “Helen of the West” after the infamous “Helen of Troy”. Aptly named because this emerald isle exchanged hands no less than 14 times between the British and French colonialists, finally succumbing to British rule in the eighteenth century. The influences of both these colonizer nations can be seen in our dialect, economic structures, government, education and culture. St. Lucia is no stranger to the lasting effects of post-colonial structures and the impact is far-reaching. Corrupt government systems, Eurocentric model of education, significant economic disparity, the widespread adoption of North American culture and colorism, are just a few of the relics left over from British and French enslavement, colonization and imperialism.

When I was in primary school in the 1990s, school was a place that demoralized the majority population that was African descent, their culture, language and identity. English became the officially recognized language and displaced those who spoke creole, the local dialect which is a mixture of French and English, and is widely spoken in rural communities. Creole, the second most widely spoken language on the island, was and is still forbidden to be spoken in schools as it is deemed a characteristic of poorly educated individuals. My mother who was raised in a rural community, versed in both English and creole, was more comfortable speaking creole. Her decision to speak creole, impacted her children’s upbringing presented multiple barriers as she tried to educate three daughters. She did not have access to the school’s coveted parent advisory board; decisions about our education were made on her behalf (without her consent) because their
perceptions painted her realities as a woman of ignorance, incapable of making the best decisions for her children. The complexity of this reality and relationship as with so many mothers, with all the biases of the educators and the discrimination she experienced, she valued their judgements, because she saw them as more educated than herself. She wholly trusted that teachers would always make the best decisions in the best interest of her children’s’ education. The impact of this inequitable and oppressive school relationship impacted our understanding of self and our identities. My eldest sister spent most of her teenage years, insecure and not confident, because she was routinely labeled as lazy. She would learn much later in life that she was dyslexic.

As a teacher in Ontario, having worked in several schools across the GTA, I now witness similar treatment of parents who are from low socio-economic backgrounds and racialized parents by some teachers. I have experienced marginalization and stereotyping, as some teachers suggest that although I am Black I “do not act like them”. Oftentimes, I am seen as the person to best deal with Black students, while my knowledge as a teacher in my content are of Math and Science are ignored. This is a complex space and reality that some Black teachers experience. It is these experiences that have drawn me to examine with greater focus the issue of Black parental engagement. As a student in St. Lucia, as a secondary school teacher in Toronto, and a volunteer in a non-governmental organization in the GTA, the majority of my time is spent with children. I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the positioning of Black parents in the school system as apathetic social actors. In all of these roles, I have witnessed countless ways in which perceptions of Black parents by teachers and administrators have negatively impacted their engagement, and in many ways, perpetuate the discourse of disengagement.
1.5 Significance of the Study

Black students are not achieving as well as they should in schools and continue to have the poorest outcomes with regards to health, education, income and overall wellness (Noguera, 2007). Practitioners and researchers alike argue that there is strong positive correlation between parental involvement, student engagement, achievement, student responsibility, and students’ social and emotional wellbeing (Brandon & Brown, 2009; Flessa, 2009; McKay et al., 2003). In research focused on math education, McGee and Spencer (2015) found that Black parents play a pivotal role in supporting high academic achievement and participation in mathematics among exceptional Black students. Such studies provide counter-narratives to deficit approaches and explanations about the engagement of Black parents. The often delegitimization of Black parents as allies in student engagement create adverse settings that becomes more difficult to navigate for racialized people (Brandon & Brown, 2009; McGee & Spencer, 2015). Through the narratives and experiences of Black parents, educators will gain deeper insights on ways to support their engagement with the school system. This will also have an impact on the policies and practices that perpetuate the educational disparities experienced by Black youths in the school system in Ontario. One of the major issues impacting Black youths in education is disengagement from physical spaces from which they have mentally checked out (Dei, 2008). This in part promotes high rates of youth dropout or ‘push out’ as Dei (2008) calls it. By acknowledging the role of Black parents as sources of support, mentors, advocates and allies, parents and the school can work together to improve the educational outcome for Black students.

This study has important implications for youth engagement both academically and socially by fostering strong partnerships with the external school structures. The external school structures refer specifically to structures outside of the school environment that influence students’ academic achievement. This notion extends from parents in the home to members of the local community.
forming authentic relations with schools to foster better outcomes for Black youth. The findings of this study will contribute to the literature on Black parental involvement in public schools in Ontario, and most importantly the GTA which has the largest concentration of Black students. Policymakers are increasingly examining programs that encourage parental involvement in schools and this could be a useful resource towards these endeavours. Through the narratives and experiences of Black parents, the findings of this study will illuminate hegemonic patterns in school cultures that serve to reduce their involvement and identify opportunities that will contribute to greater engagement.

Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander and Hernandez (2013) conceptualize as part of the “decolonial struggle” in education the inclusion of parents of non-dominant backgrounds into models of school systems that are currently based on White values and expectations. They suggest that there is the need to reframe Black parental engagement within the “decolonial struggle” for critical praxis that rejects deficit discourse of Black parental involvement. The impact of race and racism on how Black parents understand engagement is also significant in this study. This study highlights the need for educators to focus their efforts on critical praxis in order to bridge the cultural gap between parents and teachers in the Black communities.

In summary, by examining the issues Black parents in the GTA face as they engage with public schools, the hope is that this study will lead to sustained and relevant efforts that lead to their greater visibility in schools. Furthermore, it is my hope that this study will be used as a tool to inform the practices of teachers, school leaders and school administrators.
1.6 Organization of the Study

This study is organized along the following chapters. Chapter One outlined the purpose and rationale of the study, and articulated the significance of the study by exploring the gaps in the research with Black parental engagement.

Chapter Two, reviews the literature on parental involvement, including the examination of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) model of parental involvement that utilizes a psychological framework to understand parents’ motivation to become involved. In this chapter, the literature on the involvement of ethnic minority parents in schools is also explored, as well as the current literature on Black parent school involvement.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) that are employed to analyze the narratives of the study. This chapter examines the literature on CRT and CRP and ways that these frameworks support a greater understanding of the experiences of Black parents, and highlights ways in which race and racism play a role in the failure to reduce educational disparities in schools.

Chapter Four describes the methodological approach. This is a qualitative research, that utilizes narrative inquiry to examine Black parental engagement.

Chapter five analyzes the themes that emerge from the research while Chapter Six discusses the findings and implications for practice.

Chapter Seven presents concluding thoughts and makes recommendations for future research.
1.7 Definition of Key Terms

*African and Black:* The terms African and Black are used interchangeably to mean people of African descent.

*Parents* are defined as persons within a parental capacity and moral obligations to the development of a child, thus this also includes guardians.

*Parent Engagement* was defined as the school’s ability to actively include parents in supporting students’ academic achievement and personal development.

*Parent Involvement* was defined as the participation of parents in home, school and extra-curricular activities.

Notwithstanding, within the context of this thesis *parent engagement* and *parental involvement* are used interchangeably.

1.8 Conclusion

Very few research have focused on the experiences of Black parents and the ways in which racialized people engage with schools. The normalization of the stereotypes of Black people is so entrenched in education and deficit perspectives continue to be reinforced, that present greater risks and challenges for Black youth. Racism and race relations have historically characterized the relationship between Black parents and educators. By examining the perspectives of Black parents, it is my hope that knowledge will inform how educators interact with Black families. In the following chapter I discuss the literature review that informs this research.
Chapter 2 : Literature Review

This chapter explores the historical legacy of slavery on Black education as this provides insights into the struggles that Black parents experience in their contact with schools; conceptualization of parent involvement; psychology processes that impact parent involvement; and Black parents’ construction of parenting. The areas highlighted within the literature review grounds the thesis in historical contexts as well as the discourse within the field.

2.1 Historical Legacy of Slavery on Black Education

The collective identity of Black people is rooted in histories of education. Historical contexts are not only important for analysis, but history also provides support and strength to Black people as they seek better educational outcomes for their children. Black people were fully literate in their native languages before they were uprooted and taken out of Africa, to foreign lands where their education was outlawed. Following the abolition of slavery, former slaves faced insurmountable challenges including education. Historical accounts indicate that as Blacks fought for and founded their own schools, the credit for their actions was usually attributed to the White philanthropists who helped the cause financially and otherwise (McGhee & Spencer, 2015). Seeking full independence, Blacks began to mobilize their own schooling system but the financial constraints as well as systemic oppression made it near impossible which further hampered their prospects for intergenerational transmission of knowledge and wealth (McGhee & Spencer, 2015). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) White people legitimized slavery by the conversion of humans into physical property, and as such White people were consciously able to justify the absolute right to exclude based on the notion of inferiority of Black people. The absolute right to exclude continue to operate through the creation of streaming, gifted, and advance placement programs that see few Black students advancing to university. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) conclude
that the pervasive nature of this institutional racism is so entrenched, “that black students often come to the university in the role of intruders— who have been granted special permission to be there” (p.60).

This historical legacy has persisted throughout the years in less overt forms. Black parents continue to experience systemic racism in the underfunding of their own community schools (James, 2012). For this reason and considering the prevalence of racial discrimination, McGhee and Spencer (2015) posit that teachers’ perceptions of Black parents as disengaged represent a disconnect between historical and current realities. Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti (2009) assert the assumptions made about Black parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling are due in part to underreporting practices of their presence and participation. Parental involvement for Black low-income children can be characterized by rich culturally affirming academic values that are neither appreciated nor recognized, especially by White middle-class teachers (Sleeter, 2004). These culturally affirming values or “funds of knowledge” as Gonzalez et al., (2009) call them, are skills, habits and values that serve as bridge-builders between home and “community-linked knowledge”. These “funds of knowledge” exhibited in Black parental households contribute to maximizing school-based success. Perna and Titus (2005) suggest that deficit notions of Black parental school involvement is a result of White supremacist evaluation ideologies, who fail to understand the lack of cultural responsiveness of the Eurocentric school system that do not appreciate or recognize the cultural socialization and non-institutionalized educational strategies of ethnic minority families, and historical implications. What is often perceived as disengagement may in actual fact be a result of differences in practices and behaviours between White or middle-class households and the Black community and supports call for more studies to explore the positive impact of Black parents involved in education (McGhee & Spencer, 2015; Perry, Steel & Hilliard, 2003).
The history of Black education in Canada has also not been fully understood and explored. Only until recently, Ontario has made efforts to acknowledge the efforts of Black people in building the province’s infrastructure (James & Turner, 2017). Black people have been in Canada evidenced by the “Underground Railroad”, as African Americans escaping slavery in America, sought new lives in the socially White constructed nation of Canada (McLaren, 2004).

Experiences of marginalization and discrimination from social institutions formed part of the experiences of former African American slaves (The CRB Heritage Foundation, 1998). The experiences of African Canadians while are rooted in histories of enslavement, are also grounded in the rich history of African civilizations.

In Ontario, segregation from “common schools” was typical for Black people (McLaren, 2004). Although, the Schools Act of 1850, forbade segregation based on race, creed or other identities, experiences of marginalization and exclusion of African Canadians continued to shape the lived experiences for families of colour (McLaren, 2004). During the 1850’s and beyond articulations of evil of Black people as people to be feared was common and segregation was justified on the grounds of bad moral influence by Blacks, if Black children were integrated into White schools (McLaren, 2004). Although Toronto during that time did not experience segregation explicitly as elsewhere, racism was also a part of their experience. Black children allowed into White schools in Toronto were forced to occupy separate benches and teachers given the power to decline entry to Black students, because of fear that the White children would be withdrawn (McLaren, 2004).

In Canada, Whites drove hard campaigns to prevent integration of Blacks into their schools.

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3 “common schools” referred to publicly funded elementary schools
Many argue that the policies of the past continue to impact many aspects of education today in Ontario. In response to the continued achievement of Black students in publicly funded schools, Ontario’s first publicly funded Africentric school was formed. The Africentric Alternative School began operating in September 2009 in response to an initial community request for such a school in June 2007 to address a high dropout rate and achievement gap affecting students of African descent (TDSB, 2009). The establishment of the school faced many hurdles, including issues of equity in funding, under-resourced, and curricula designed within traditional school systems (Allen, 2010; Levine-Rasky, 2014). The need to have a school that African knowledge systems (Ani, 2007), was brought about through the advocacy of Black Canadians in Toronto continued, the achievement gap between White students and students of colour, and high dropout rate of Black youth (Bonoguore & Hammer, 2009). While the discussion on the role and need for an Africentric school is ongoing, a full discussion is outside the frame of this study.

2.2 Conceptualizing Parental Involvement

The issue of parent involvement in educational practice is a salient theme. Parental involvement refers to the commitment of parents to participate in school-related activities, e.g. attending meetings and volunteering in school activities (McKay et al., 2003). Scholars such as Epstein and Dauber (1991), Stone and McKay (2000) suggest that this definition is limiting in its operationalization of ethnic minority parents’ involvement. Influenced by a strong empirical and societal focus, research examining parental involvement has focused on parental involvement as a means of improving student outcomes and school success. Other researchers have highlighted parental involvement as a means of improving parent-staff relationships (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Chavkin (1993) offers a conceptualization of parental involvement that includes activities that are
directly related to children’s educational sphere including: a) providing and maintaining adequate school support; b) academic and personal well-being of children; c) acknowledging and recognizing overlooked practices in school parental-involvement domains.

Epstein and Lee (1995) posited six typologies of parental involvement that have largely shaped the field of parental engagement. These include:

1. Factors in the home that promote academic engagement
2. Factors that support additional learning at home
3. Maintaining communication between home and school
4. Assisting in formal and informal school activities
5. Involvement in the schools’ decision-making processes
6. Forming inclusive learning communities with other stakeholders for the purpose of strengthening relations that support overall school resilience.

While conceptually this model is useful in engaging parents more expansively, it presents a limited view of parent-school relationship that is centered on the school’s agenda (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). This model and others like it become problematic for Black parents when school goals and values are embedded in White middle-class systems. The model does not acknowledge the intersections of race, class and immigrant status that are relevant to, and shape the experiences of parents of colour (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis & George, 2004). Parent engagement frameworks embedded in White Eurocentric values contribute limited roles of Black parents in the education of their children. These approaches miss the multiple forms that parents from non-dominant backgrounds engage in education because parents’ ways of teaching do not correspond to normative ideologies of parental involvement (Barton et al., 2004). The other hidden narrative in these frameworks is the construction of parents from non-dominant backgrounds as passive,
complacent and apathetic social actors (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Fine, 1993; Galindo & Medina, 2009). Other similar typologies of parental involvement do very little to acknowledge the power relations between educational stakeholders and inherently perpetuate a deficit discourse on parental involvement (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013).

It is evident that parental involvement in schools is largely shaped by perceptions of parental backgrounds and the expectations inherent in normative notions outline what parent involvement looks like. Baquedano-Lopez et al., (2013) argue that although these perceptions affect all actors interacting within these institutions, these perceptions foster “negative equity outcomes” that disproportionately impact parents of colour (p. 150). This perpetuates a vicious cycle of parental helplessness as the deficit discourse constructs parents as lacking and therefore dependent on the very school goals that do not include them (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). More recently, Murray et al. (2014) suggest that parental involvement in education is the ability or the capacity of parents to devote time and resources to the schooling process of their children’s lives.

Positive parental attitudes are also seen as important in parental involvement with schools (Grodnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Hill and Tyson (2009) identified academic socialization as another type of parental involvement. Academic socialization refers to implicit and explicit interactions that serve to communicate parental academic expectations for purposes of shaping academic and career aspirations; making connections between curriculum and real-world events; and discussing strategies of learning with children (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Other notions of parental involvement conceptualize engagement through sustained involvement efforts of mothers with their children. For example, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) found that parental engagement allowed mothers to be more strongly involved and suggest that parental engagement underlies parental choice, which are parents’ implicit and explicit decisions to be
involved in the schooling process. To that end parents’ explicit decision to be involved are referenced by parents’ awareness, reflective processes and are actively and purposefully involved in the decision-making processes in their child’s education. On an implicit level, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) argue that implicit parental decisions are reflected in their response to external stimuli as well as “unevaluated demands from significant aspects of the environment” (p. 6). Other scholars, seeking to highlight the involvement of working class parents suggest that parental involvement should centre parents’ perceptions of their role in preparing for academic success (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Stone & McKay, 2000).

The notion that African-American parents are less likely to attend school events, and the belief that African American parents and other ethnic minority families lack interest in their children’s educational attainment are unsubstantiated (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Brandon & Brown, 2009, McKay et al., 2003, Vincent et al., 2012). Traditional theorizing on parental involvement purports a deficit perspective on Black parental involvement in schools (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; McGee & Spencer, 2015). According to McGee and Spencer (2015), research on parent involvement overlooks the myriad of structural and institutional barriers that mitigate Black parents’ navigation of education systems. Lack or perceived lack of involvement by Black parents could be attributed to feelings of exclusion, a sense of estrangement from the school and feelings of discrimination whether real or imagined (Brandon & Brown, 2009). On an implicit level, educators may perpetuate notions of Black parental involvement harbouring sentiments of indifference, apathy and a general lack of interest, which may serve to discourage parental efforts to being involved in school-based activities (Bloom, 2001). The discourse of apathy must be disrupted in favour of more authentic approaches to school involvement by Black parents.
2.3 Psychology Processes that Impact Parent involvement

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggest that psychological processes influence parents’ decision to become involved in education and suggest a model of parental involvement that evaluates three base-level constructs. These are: parents’ sense of self-efficacy, parents’ beliefs about their role, and school-initiated opportunities and demands. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) argue that demands and opportunities created by schools for parent involvement are generally unsuccessful unless schools are willing to examine issues central to parents’ role construction and sense of self-efficacy in helping their children succeed in school. They suggest further that parents’ role construction is the most influential in the decision-making process.

2.3.1 Parents' Sense of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy influences decisions to become involved as parents believe that their involvement in school positively influences children’s success in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents who have confidence in themselves, in their children and in their school, can make a difference in their children’s learning and achievement (Webcasts for Educators, 2012). When parents hold high expectations for their children, have concrete information on how to help them, everyone benefits. Positive self-efficacy involves the notion that parents’ time and effort resources related to school activities, are beneficial as it increases the potential for success in school. In some cases, parents’ sense of inefficacy is connected to lower education background. Lareau (2002) suggests that parents with ‘low-education’ background have more doubt in supporting their children, particularly at the elementary level and place greater trust in teachers to support their children.
Parents’ with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to be involved positively in their child’s developmental and educational outcomes. With the belief that they can be instrumental in the learning process; they believe they can overcome obstacles in the learning process and persevere when problems arise that could otherwise reduce their involvement or when faced with challenges of current school demands (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Eccles and Harold (1993) argue that parents’ efficacy is defined along three components; a) parents’ belief that they are capable of helping their child succeed by helping with school work; b) parents’ belief about their ability as the child progresses in school; and c) parents’ belief they can influence the school through school governance procedures. Clarke (1983) suggests that parents of high achieving high school students tend to believe that they are capable of helping with schoolwork, that their involvement improves academic achievement, and that their children will model the behaviours of their parents. As a consequence of these beliefs parents of higher-achieving students tend to assume more active roles in their children’s education.

### 2.3.2 Parents’ Beliefs About their Role

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) also posit that parents’ construction of their parental role in education is informed by beliefs of what parents are supposed to do with regards to their child’s education and academic progress. This notion of parent involvement is of particular importance as it directly influences the range of activities that parents might identify as important, necessary and allowable actions with and on the behalf of their child. These beliefs are informed by general guiding principles on the role of parents, beliefs on childrearing and development and beliefs on the necessity of additional educational supports to support the formal school environment. Although the influence of beliefs of parental role and school involvement have not been examined explicitly in the literature, Zhang and Bennet (2003) purported that the belief that parental
involvement should be determined by teachers rather than parents differs among ethnic groups. Across ethnic groups, parents examine or express interest in a variety of roles related to school involvement for example, audience, home-tutor and school program supporter.

2.3.3 School Initiated Opportunities and Demands

School initiated opportunities have been seen as having an effect on parent involvement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s (1997) argue that invitations to parents within schools and opportunities to participate are powerful motivators because of the power and authority of school in children’s lives. Parents’ decisions to become involved include deliberate affirmation and approval by children and an inclusive school culture which includes teachers’ behaviours, and attitudes that are facilitative and welcoming (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). General invitations may include a child’s desire to have their parents involved, which is significant as it is related to close personal relationship between parent and child as well as school initiated opportunities (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). While researchers recognize the strength of these factors, others suggest there are limitations which exclude the impact of social, political and economic variables on parental involvement (Drummond & Stipek, 2004; Fuligni, 2001). Instead some studies have focused on the socio-demographics of families and its influence on child educational attainment and achievement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994). For example, Epstein and Dauber (1991) explored the decline of parental involvement with age while Henderson and Berla (1994) examine the impact of single family parent status, low income and literacy level on parental involvement.
2.4 Black Parents’ Navigation of School Systems

While the literature covers various aspects of parent involvement and engagement it does not speak to Black parents’ or other marginalized groups’ experiences. The literature on Black parents navigating the school system is a complex one, with intersecting aspects of their identities such as class, socio economic factors, language and so on playing an important factor. One of the biggest challenges that Black parents report in North American schools is the conscious awareness and experience of the inequality of the education system (Vincent et al., 2012). Griffith (1998) suggests that African-American parents are more likely to experience greater forms of marginalization in schools as opposed to White parents, and that race may shape parental involvement in ethnic minority contexts whether perceived or verified. Lareau (2002) concluded that the experiences of Black parents navigating academic spaces translate differently, because of lack of access to the social and cultural capital of the dominant culture, and that parent involvement is a form of social capital in education that parents use to support their children’s advancement. Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1977) speaks to saliency of familiarity of the language and other practices in building successful relationships. Lareau (2002) extends this framework to the knowledge and familiarity to the existing school structures and suggests that this plays a major role in facilitating the involvement of White middle-class parents, whose values and culture are centered, while at the same time silencing working class and ethnic minority parents.

Parents’ awareness of racial bias and discrimination in their particular school environment may force parents to alter their parenting strategies to buffer their children against the effects of racism (Stevenson, 1994, 1995). This racial awareness is mitigated sometimes by other factors such as class. Vincent et al. (2012) argue that Black middle-class parents become fully involved in school-based, extra-curricular and home-based activities in order to protect against racism. They suggest that this approach is part of a neoliberal subjectivity which has been typically reserved for White
middle-class mothers, and by virtue of their status. They postulate that class and racialized identities intersect to shape parenting strategies that foster an intense level of engagement among Black middle-class mothers when navigating schools. Racialized parents intentionally created opportunities in and out of the school system for the continued social mobility of their children independent of school culture (Vincent et al., 2012). Black middle-class parents are sometimes essentialized within a context of “good middle-class parenting” and are represented as wholly involved in school activities and extra-curricular (Vincent et al., 2012). Howard and Reynolds (2008) found that middle-class Black mothers could not rely on their middle-class status when challenging schools. The protection afforded to White middle-class mothers did not extend to Black parents in times of contention.

Counter-intuitive to other negating factors, some evidence suggests that exclusionary practices between school and ethnic minority children may facilitate greater parental involvement, regardless of status in activities because parents fear how these messages will impact their children academically and emotionally (Abrams & Gibbs, 2003; Brandon & Brown, 2009). Stevenson (1994, 1995) noted that African American mothers were more likely to become involved in direct response to racism, White parents tend to be generally more involved in school and home-based related activities compared to Black and Latin American parents. A study by Wong and Hughes (2006) concluded that when more specific aspects of parental involvement are compared, the results are less agreeable. For example, both White and Black parents revealed higher levels of involvement than Latin American parents in school-based activities, and Black parents reported equal to or higher levels of involvement regarding home-based parental involvement (Wong & Hughes, 2006).
McKay et al. (2003) found that racism awareness, a factor of “racial socialization” was positively associated with at-home involvement and inversely associated with school involvement among a group of low-income African American parents. Racial socialization describes attitudes of Black parents who seek to bring awareness of racism and promote strong cultural pride among their own children (McKay et al., 2003). The study showed that families of low-income, ethnic minority status share a sense of agency in securing equitable outcomes both proactively and reactively. When schools meet the needs of minority parents they are more likely to be involved (Olivos, 2006).

The conceptualization of parental involvement amongst ethnic minority parents begins with the recognition of their as parents and construction of their cultural contexts (Eccles & Harold, 1995). James & Turner (2017) assert that it is not a lack of interest among ethnic minority families, but it is often times they do not know how to become involved. Lopez (2001) found that teachers and principals espouse lower level of expectations for ethnic minority parental involvement using the rationale, that ethnic minority parents place a lower value on academic attainment, have lower motivations to cooperate, and the demonstrate a general lack of interest for their child’s education. Although studies point to parents’ strong desire to be involved (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015), some studies also found that Black parents were more likely to assume that the school was responsible for creating opportunities for involvement (James & Turner, 2017), the assumption that it is the responsibility of the school to invoke a lower sense of involvement.

Some of the factors that discourage parents of ethnic minority backgrounds to be more involved are English proficiency, level of acculturation, differences in culture and dialect, familiarity of the school infrastructure, personal communication preferences, feelings of alienation from the school, and personal conflicts ranging from child care to transportation (Zhang & Bennett, 2003). These
factors are often positioned as deficits instead of assets. Zhang and Bennett (2003) suggest that when attempting to involve parents in the schooling process, communication should be individualized to accommodate the unique differences of families. Bennett, Zhang and Hojnar (1998) propose that interactions should take into account families’ level of education, level of acculturation, socioeconomic status, geographical locations and the level of support from the system. Harry (1992b) suggests that schools that exhibit cultural sensitivity, lack of sensitivity to religious beliefs and families’ traditions, tend to deny parental expertise on the subject matter and knowledge and harm parental involvement. The factors affecting ethnic minority families’ level of participation in schools are complex, interconnected and vary by context.

2.5 Conclusion

“Education is a triangle with three legs: parents, child, school; and if any of the legs fall, the triangle falls as well.” (Harris & Goodall, 2007, p. 2). Every parent has hopes that their children will be successful irrespective of economic status, educational level and cultural differences. Flessa (2010) found that children tend to internalize their parents own attitudes and behaviours towards school as parents are their primary influence in educational and social development. Thus, the power of parental attitudes becomes even more salient. Families espouse engagement through their own culturally relevant ways that reflect their own social norms and values (Copper, Riehl & Hasan, 2010). European ethnocentric perceptions and assumptions tend to de-value or negate methods of parental involvement that do not directly connect with dominant norms (LaRocque, Kleiman & Darling, 2011). Draper and Protheroe (2010) argue that the home educational culture was a more powerful predictor of academic learning compared to socio-economic variables as about half of the educational achievement happens outside of the classroom. The more progress that is made in bridging home-school relations, the greater the likelihood schools can encourage more productive learning conditions.
Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study draws on Critical Race Theory and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as theoretical frames. While there are divergences in areas of focus and ways that theory connects to practice, there are convergences that support the understanding of Black parent engagement of in terms of race, raising of critical consciousness, impact of culture and community and the role of the school.

3.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is founded in epistemologies of critical legal studies (CLS) which first made its appearance in the 1980s (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Critical legal studies borrowed from the Frankfurt School’s legal theory, where its proponents argued that the legal system was fraught with bias and discrimination (Ladson-Billings, 2009). At the same time, as more legal scholars of colour emerged they began to recognize the subversion of race in the legal discourse and initiated the separation of CRT from CLS which examines the primacy of race in promoting social inequity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This study is grounded in CRT (Harris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano et al., 2000). Critical race theorists argue that racism is entrenched and normalized in contemporary society, perhaps even integral to the functioning of social practices and institutions (Harris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Ladson-Billings (2009) articulated the following six tenets of CRT:

1. CRT recognizes race as a social construct constantly shaped by political forces as it works to eliminate racial subjugation. Socially constructed racial schemas support and maintain racialization, which refers to the attribution of “abilities, cultural values, morals, and behavior patterns” (James, 2012, p.469); through physiological characteristics such as skin colour to categorize different groups of people (Henry & Tator, 2010). The strategy is to
unmask and expose racism in its multiplicities in the interactions between educators and Black students and their families.

2. CRT contests liberal ideology, colour-blind interpretations of the law, and meritocracy. These are seen as precursors for white hegemonic control of the social and structural arrangements in society. The colour-blind approach is a strategy to homogenize the treatment of students, ignoring diversity of its members and essentially de-historicize their experiences (Harris, 2012). Liberal education authorities would have us believe that there exists zero tolerance to discrimination and bias in schools. However, neoliberal approaches including new forms of assessment, streaming and special education decisions continue to be legitimized and are reinforced by inequitable color-conscious school policies, rules, and practices (James, 2012).

3. Storytelling, counter-storytelling and narratives by racial minorities are given legitimacy in CRT to illuminate, explore, and counter experiences of racial oppression. The intergenerational transfer of knowledge among Black families use narratives as one of the ways in which Black families affirm strong cultural identities and make relevant their experiences (McGee & Spencer, 2015). The narratives or story-telling of participants in this study are important in resisting positivist authorities in academia and adds the necessary contexts that falls outside of notions of ‘objectivity’ in research.

4. The privileging of whiteness serves important psychic and material purposes. Because racism advances the interests of white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it. The patterned dilemma experienced in diverse settings is the privilege that is attached to Whiteness that goes largely unchecked and denied when confronted, evident both inside and outside of educational structures. A closer look at affirmative action policies in Ontario has done very
little to systemically address achievement disparities for Black students (James & Turner, 2017).

5. An intersectional approach is used to examine other areas of difference, including gender, sexuality, age, class, disability, nationality, and others. The intersection of numerous bases of inequity including race, culture and language in this context, plays a critical role in school-family relation dynamics. CRT has the flexibility of engaging the intersections of language, culture and immigration which are relevant to the experiences of Black parents.

6. Racism is endemic and typical, not aberrational. The pervasiveness and ordinariness of racism makes it difficult to address. As such critical race theorists argue that the ways in which racism is manifested changes but not the effect (Harris, 2012). The distinctive lack of the voices of Black parents in equity-minded educational policies does little to address systemic barriers in education. Thus, Black students and their families continue to harbour feelings of frustration, embitterment and isolation in schools (Solórzano et al., 2000) in Ontario.

CRT is employed in this study as it addresses the subjective context of minoritized people that confer subordinate status to the ideals of the dominant culture. This lens allows for the examination of racial inequalities in education, centers the discussion of inequality within the context of racism and serves as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, and neutrality in the education of racial minorities (Howard, 2008). The work of critical theorists supports the notion of intersectionality and that “others” in our communities include students with mental and physical disabilities, and persons who have been traditionally excluded based on race, culture, language, gender and sexual orientation (Solórzano et al., 2000). CRT allows for the introspection of behaviours and practices of schools that exclude those not of the dominant culture (Solórzano et al., 2000), where recommendations can be made that are
specific to Black parents. A CRT framework allows deeper understanding of constructions of race, culture and language supremacies in order to make explicit the behaviours, attitudes, practices and policies that schools operate through and the perpetuation of those privileges for some and marginalization of others (Cherkowski & Ragoonaden, 2016). Given the ordinariness and normalization of racism, the daily experiences of microaggressions can be hidden beneath a veneer of “just business as usual” practices for Black students and parents.

These tenets work together to produce a unique model within educational scholarship in public school because they focus explicitly on how race and racism shapes educational structures, policies, and discourses from the perspectives of those who have been subordinated (Solórzano et al., 2000). The approach in examining parental involvement in education requires acknowledging the existence of an unequal playing field that have created chronically disparaging racialized settings. CRT provides a framework to address the nuances in the cultural identities of Black people by legitimizing the narratives of Black families. As such, CRT affords a robust framing model for this study.

### 3.2 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Within a context of intersectionality, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) highlights the impact of race within school settings, including curricula, draws on “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) of families and their communities. Culturally responsive pedagogy was born out of an attempt to connect theory to practice by providing curricula interventions and pedagogical innovations as a form of resistance to deficit approaches in education (Paris, 2012). Culturally responsive pedagogy highlights the following: a.) all students can achieve success b.) students must be culturally competent, c.) students must develop critical consciousness that allows
them to challenge heteronormative, monocultural worldviews (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Educators who advocate for culturally responsive approaches argue that people learn differently across cultures and contexts, and for students to maximize their educational outcomes teachers and other must gain knowledge of the cultures and experiences of students. When culturally responsive approaches are embraced in schools, Black parents will be able to see themselves as active participants, where their experiences and knowledge are valued. Ladson-Billings (1995) theorized CRP as a framework of opposition, committed to collective and individual empowerment of students and their families. Culturally responsive pedagogy supports the acculturation of students that constructs new dynamics instead of assimilation that subsumes their identities to that of the dominant. Critical educators theorize schooling as part of struggle for democracy and social justice that not only highlights issues to be challenged, but engages in productive action and dialogue (Freire, 1998).

Culturally responsive pedagogy converges with CRT and offers a theoretical and conceptual framework that connects theory to practice. A culturally responsive approach promotes interaction across racial and ethnic boundaries and foster greater academic achievement for all students (Johnson, 2014). School reform initiatives such as *Ontario’s Equity Education Action Plan* (2017) that promises to address the disproportionate poorer outcomes of children of ethnic minorities are grounded in CRP. It is important that educators embrace practices that reduce the achievement gap for Black, Latino/a and Indigenous children and other students who have been traditionally marginalized in the school system (Lopez, 2015, 2016). Parent disengagement from the school system arises when the practices of teachers and others effectively serve as barriers to inclusion and ultimately create an unequal learning environment. Deficits in teacher thinking challenges children’s self-perception, motivation, and promote racial mistrust (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Proponents of CRP argue that students’ academic performance improves when the curriculum and
pedagogy validate their culture, language and ethnicities (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). Scholars such as (Algozzine, O'Shea, & Obiakor, 2009; McQuiston, O'Shea, & McCollin, 2008; O'Shea, McQuiston, & McCollin, 2009) have affirmed the effectiveness of culturally responsive approaches, particularly in urban communities.

A multi-level approach is needed to meet the challenges of a more diverse student population that are academically at risk as evidenced by the educational disparities in the schools in the TDSB, reported by James and Turner (2017). In response to increasingly diverse communities in Ontario, advocates of liberatory education have called for education that: is both culturally diverse and equitable; utilizes culturally responsive curriculum and practices; has equitable assessment opportunities and organizational structures that emphatically challenges institutional and systematic processes through explicit acts for the purpose of improving academic achievement of all students (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Culturally responsive approaches connect theory to school practices, foregrounds and legitimizes the experiences of Black people. CRP challenges all forms of oppression, offers practical strategies that practitioners can use in schools and highlights the impact of race and racism in the lives of Black people (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2008). The academic performance and engagement of students improve when the curriculum and pedagogy validate them historically, socially and politically, (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Lopez, 2015). In this regard, it is important for educators to be aware of the impact of racism and the impact of parental involvement (McKay et al., 2003).

McKay et al., (2003) argue that racism impacts parental involvement and in order to improve parental engagement in schooling, efforts must be focused on preparing teachers to understand how race is mitigated in their interactions with parents. CRP focuses on the cultural ways of being of students, while raising their understanding of the importance of social critique and all forms of
oppression (Gay, 2010). Ladson-Billings (1995) posits that a culturally responsive approach is one
that is committed to the empowerment of students and their communities. CRP connects theory to
action for educators as they seek to reconstruct more socially just schools and society, co-construct
new knowledge, and engage in reflexive practices (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive approaches
challenge us to critically examine societal structures, work for social change and must be embedded
in all school practices (Lopez, 2013, 2016). Lopez (2016) suggests that educators must learn from
those who exist at the margins if we are to move forward in reconstructing a socially just education
and society. Freire (1970) reminds us that victims of oppression should take matters in their own
hands if they want to create change and challenge systems and structures that oppress them. Critical
race theory and a culturally responsive approach converge in ways that create space for educators,
parents, communities and others to examine their practice, develop activism and agency and take
action that challenges racism and all forms of oppression.
Chapter 4 : Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological approach employed in this study. This is a qualitative study, that utilized narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of three Black parents in the GTA as they navigate the school system. The qualitative research design is discussed, followed by a description of participants, data collection, and analysis. Approval was received by the University of Toronto to conduct the research. Participants had the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. The anonymity of the participants will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms in the retelling of their stories. I am mindful of my voice as a researcher in retelling the stories of others and aim to act with the greatest integrity in this regard.

4.1 Research Setting and Context

This study was conducted with three parents all of whom at the time of study lived in the GTA, had children in the public school system in Ontario, and attended schools in the GTA, specifically Toronto. While the GTA consists of other regions with large Black populations such as the Region of Peel, the focus of the study was in the Toronto area because much of the issues with Black parents and students that have been reported and research that have been conducted have focused on school in Toronto.

The research employed narrative inquiry approach. Narrative inquiry supports the translation of the language and experiences of people (Lee, Rosenfeld, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 2004). Narrative inquiry has the ability to assist in giving meaning and identity to the humanistic experience (Lee et al., 2004), and allows researchers to interpret and analyze the subjective experiences and understand justifications and actions of the research participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narratives give meaning to experiences that stress individual agency and identity,
while other interpretations speak to the collective identity of a shared cultural group” (McGee & Spencer, 2015).

The study was focused in the GTA, as the largest proportion of Black Ontarians live in the GTA (James & Turner, 2017). The inclusion criteria for parent participants were self-identification as Black, with at least one child between grades 9-12 in a public high school in the GTA, Toronto. Using convenience sampling, I recruited participants through educational contacts that I gained through my work and school contexts. Using this approach, introductory letters (Appendix A) were emailed to eight parents. Four parents responded, however due to scheduling arrangements one parent was unable to participate in the study. In-depth interviews were conducted each lasting an hour and a half. The small sample size allowed for in-depth interviews and deeper probing for meaning as time was not a limiting factor. Small sample sizes work well with narrative inquiry, as it requires an in-depth study of human experiences (Creswell, 2003).

4.2 Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. What barriers do Black parents experience in their involvement with public secondary schools in Ontario?
2. What strategies do Black parents employ in their interactions with the school system to overcome these barriers and support their children’s education?

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data were collected over three months from August 2017 to November 2017.
Semi-structured interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013) were used in the data collection process. The interview protocol consisted of combination of a one-page set of demographic questions, which was completed at the start of the interview, followed by a series of semi-structured open-ended questions. The questions were augmented from a set of questions across the general themes that I wanted to examine. Each participant was asked a set of questions to capture the similarities and differences of responses across participants (Maykut & Morehouse, 2002). However, depending on the responses, I used probing questions to get a clearer understanding. Semi-structured interviews allow for probing and provide participants with flexibility to respond, while the researcher is still able to maintain structure with particular themes, issues or guiding questions (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews were an hour and a half in length, audiotaped and transcribed using the Google-voice capture tool. The themes that emerged from the data were member-checked. Member checking allowed for participants to affirm that the data analysis is congruent with the narratives that were shared during the interview (Creswell, 2009). Member checking improved the integrity of participants’ responses by allowing them to verify the plausibility, modify or provide feedback.

### 4.4 Participants

Three parents who self-identified as Black and who lived in Toronto participated in the study. All parents included in the sample were mothers. No fathers were interviewed in this study, not through intention, but none responded to the call to participate in the research. This does not impact the study as James (2010) argues mothers are most often involved in primary socialization of children and also more likely to be featured in parent-school activities. While only women participated in the study, a feminist approach is not used as the theoretical framework and lens of analysis in this study is primarily about Black parent engagement, regardless of gender of the parent. Nonetheless the intersections of race and gender and other forms of social identity are
acknowledged and important in the experiences and lives of racialized people. I am hopeful that future studies on this topic will include the voices and experiences of men. At the time of the study, two of the three parents had two children in public schools in the GTA, Toronto, and one had just completed secondary school waiting to graduate after dropping out for three years and then returning. In order to maintain confidentiality the names of the participants are pseudonyms and their country of origin has been changed. Demographic data for each participant is listed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Summary Profile of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Data</th>
<th>Rhonda</th>
<th>Tina</th>
<th>Karen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Female Guardian</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period in Canada (years)</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Language</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
<td>Somali and Swahili</td>
<td>Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Background</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(In process)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration History</td>
<td>Grew up in Apartheid South Africa, immigrated to Canada when she was six</td>
<td>Raised in a Kenya, immigrated to the U.S. as a teen and then moved to</td>
<td>Immigrated to Canada as a refugee with her family at the age of three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Data Analysis

The narratives expressed in the interviews were analyzed for recurring themes in relation to the research questions that focused on parents’ role in education involvement and personal experiences, cultural background, family structure, teachers, administrators and schools. The data were coded using open coding to identify broad themes relating to parent involvement. However, only the themes that directly responded to the research questions directly relating to the content of study were selected which included themes particularly linked to parent-school relationships that uncovered the nuances of parent-navigation strategies were selected for the purpose of this study. The following themes emerged from the data. The following themes emerged from the data: 1) personal experiences of systemic oppression and racism, 2) lack of trust, 3) Misapplication of parent engagement policies, 4) undervaluing of Black parents’ experiences, 5) advocacy and activism. The themes highlighted here are critical in understanding the hegemonic processes embedded in educational institutions that impact the involvement of Black parents. These themes are discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Perspectives of Black Parents

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the data that respond to the research questions. Each theme is discussed in detail below. The following themes emerged from the data: 1) personal experiences of systemic oppression and racism, 2) lack of trust, 3) Misapplication of parent engagement policies, 4) undervaluing of Black parents’ experiences, 5) advocacy and activism. The themes highlighted here are critical in understanding the hegemonic processes embedded in educational institutions that impact the involvement of Black parents. The themes give access to the subjective experiences that afford insight into the parents’ decision to become involved, recognizing that parental engagement is a political act.

Consistent with the tenets of CRT, this chapter features narratives of the participants experiences and provides context. The findings indicate that Black parents, regardless of status, are aware of the unequal playing field and adjust their parenting strategies accordingly. The data reveal that race and racism play an important role on the involvement of Black parents with schools and the school system. This involvement is characterized by conflict due to the various ways in which mistrust manifests itself in education settings. The findings are discussed below through the lens of CRT and CRP.

5.1 Personal Experiences of Systemic Oppression and Racism

Long histories of racial inequalities inform the experiences of all the participants in the study. Participants in the study reported having experienced racism during their formative years and/or later on during their adult lives. This impacted their approach to schooling. All participants expressed a direct link between their lived experiences and the way they navigated the schooling
process for themselves and their children. Their lived experiences were a significant motivator in getting involved in their children’s education. Rhonda recalled vivid memories of apartheid South Africa. She is from a middle-class family. Her father was a doctor and her mother was a social worker. She remembers experiences as a child, some of which she had not shared with her parents.

Rhonda recalls:

They probably don’t even realize how much we saw. We’d see people come into the house with somebody who’d been stabbed or they got shot and my father would be waking up at 1:00 am in the morning to help somebody. So very early on I became very aware that the way we lived didn't seem like it should be normal.

This experience impacted how Rhonda views the impact and role of community and the lens through which she understands her experiences in Canada. Culturally responsive approaches, as opposed to top down deficit approaches, in interactions with Black students and their parents support the development of critical consciousness within students, parents and educators (Paris, 2012). Understanding students and parents’ lived experiences is critical to cultivating student and parent engagement.

As a Black immigrant, Rhonda quickly realized that while her experiences in Canada were not as bad as apartheid South Africa, there are still significant challenges for Black people. She was surprised when racially charged language was directed towards her from another Black person.

Rhonda says,

When I came to Canada that awareness it just continued to grow. And I became very aware very early on, that Canada was packaged almost like this savior. And if you go to Canada it’s like this grand escape and life’s going to be perfect, everything there is just magic. (Laughs). My first few days of school another little girl called me the N-word and it was like whoa! Is this the place that is supposed to be this great country that we’ve come to? I remember asking these questions in my own mind. And so, I developed very critical awareness from an early age that I was able to grow and question the things that I saw in Canada. And interesting enough it wasn't until my adult life when I learned from somebody who was presenting a paper that in fact apartheid hadn't started in South Africa it started here in Canada.
Rhonda reflects on how her experiences in the school system also deepened her understanding of the inequities in the system for Black people. In junior high she struggled to fit in with the Black community and noted:

So, junior high was probably the worst time in my life because I was struggling to identify with the Black students. We had very little in common culturally, while I saw us as Africans they [Caribbean students] did not identify with me. They were sometimes even worse in terms of the name calling: “you’re from the jungle” … A lot of them but not all of them were the ones in the general program. They got streamed and so I would look at them like oh wow, they’re all in general and they just all seemed to have so much fun… in these classes…

Rhonda highlights the tensions that exist within the Black community. These tensions arose from the colonial and historical experiences of Black people. In South Africa people were segregated on the basis of race and similarly, Black families in Canada’s West province were segregated from social institutions including church and school (McLaren, 2004). According to McLaren (2004) the cycle of poor education, or worse no education, became the norm. This propagated the myth of ineducability of Black people, a myth that White people of the day were far too willing to accept. The egalitarian values that some of those White people held were not disrupted by this thinking because Blacks were classified as a subspecies of human beings (McLaren, 2004). Today, Canada is widely recognized as a model of multiculturalism and equitable education systems, a positioning that is challenged by some who argue that racism is still prevalent in Canadian society. As Rhonda remembers it, Black students were disproportionately located in lower academic streams. “Many of the Black students were placed in the general program. ⁴”

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⁴ General program referred to the lowest stream of high school, where students do not specialize in sciences or the languages.
CRT argues against liberal ideologies which deny the experiences of people of colour using colour-blind approaches to policies and practices (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These practices are promoted under the guise of multiculturalism in mainstream Canadian context and neoliberal political systems. Seeing how Black students were being streamed developed critical consciousness in Rhonda motivating her to become engaged in her children’s education. This developed of critical consciousness is those who argue for culturally responsive approaches must be intentional by schools. Rhonda focused her attention on what was happening in school, the curriculum, her overall experiences and what it meant to live in a multicultural society. Rhonda noted:

… I began to see the white supremacist complex mission that Canada was masquerading as this multicultural haven. The one place in the world that got it right and figured it out. Oh we live in such grand harmony. All these cultures and ethnicities is not quite what it appears. It’s a huge hoax. And so I think when I got to university I was able to start to then critically understand it or study it research it. I started having children after university and so that greatly informed my choices, my consciousness and what I wanted for my children in school. And sadly as hard I tried and searched and created things, things did not turn out the way I wanted.

Karen who emigrated from Somalia to Canada at the age of three had similar experiences to Rhonda. Karen said that the teachers in her school lacked empathy. She says, “growing up I went to school here from grade three until now and I can only remember two or three teachers of my whole education system that cared about my success”. This is not unique. Black students often express the feeling of lack of care by teachers. Karen wanted to make sure that her children did not have a similar experience and so she became very involved in their education. Black parents learn to question the education system based on their lived experiences of racism in their own schooling. Critical race theorists argue that one of the dilemmas endemic in racialized settings is the denial of racialization in all of its manifestations. The normalization of racism makes it difficult for it to be checked in White circles. Black parents are more likely to acknowledge its presence and denote pessimism about its elimination (Harris, 2008).
Tina, who was born in Kenya, emigrated to Toronto from the US almost eight years ago. She speaks of schools as politicized spaces where Black people consistently experience racial microaggressions. Regarding her experience in post-secondary education, Tina believes it has made her better able to acknowledge and address microaggressions in her life. Tina suggests that she is always a critical thinker and questions, “I was always a critical thinker…. In my life, I think I always used to be... I never take anyone’s word for it. I would always question and then when I did my undergrad in equity studies I developed more of that critical thinking….”. Tina takes this attitude in her interactions with the school. Flessa (2010) suggests that children tend to internalize their parents' attitudes and behaviours towards schools as parents are their first form of socialization. As a result, parental attitudes take on greater significance. Tina’s approach to her children’s school was to question the implicit biases towards Black children and their intellectual abilities. Tina discusses interactions with her daughter Sarah and the teacher:

One of the things I told my kids when they were young up till now, and I have ingrained this in their minds, is that we don't have any stupid blood running in our body… And the teacher may make a comment like: “oh Sarah we’re here again. You’re the number one in class, you’re the number one in your reading, you’re doing very well” and I know they [the teachers] think that she is not capable. She [Sarah] then passes a comment: “unfortunately teacher I don't have any stupid blood in me so whatever I do I have to excel in it.”

Critical race theorists argue that parents have an influential role to play in the schooling process and often bring awareness of racism to bear on these interactions. When culturally responsive approaches are practiced in schools, ways to challenge racism and other forms of oppression are embedded not only in the curriculum but school practices. This racial socialization describes the attitudes of Black parents who seek to bring awareness of racism and promote strong cultural pride among their Black youth (McKay et al., 2003). Parents lack of trust that center on suspicions of racism in schools and subsequently concern about the nature of the interactions between staff and their children, these rationales serve to foster racially motivated parental involvement (Stevenson,
1995). Critical race theorists also and culturally responsive educators recognize “implicit bias” and the unconscious racism agendas that are advanced through these biases (Harris, 2008, p. 16). Parents’ recognition of this unconscious racism creates more opportunities for subordination to be subverted by their children.

The participants while reflecting on their position in the world as racialized persons, also pass down messages of resistance to their children both through implicit and explicit interactions with their schools. Rhonda described her dialogic interactions with her son and noted:

I taught him to be a critical thinker …to watch what's going on, watch how the teacher treats other children. Does she treat you and the other children fairly? He ended up becoming a little activist at a very young age. He would just get punished because he was standing up for some other kid in the classroom when he saw the teacher not treating [another kid] fairly. And so it started to make him see the whole idea of racism and power and how teachers had the power to do whatever they want to do in the classroom.

James (2012) refers to the excessive use of power, particularly directed towards Black male students as the teacher’s expectation is one of underachiever, troublemaker, pervasively seen as more athletically oriented. Teachers’ tendencies to reprimand heavily, slightly inappropriate behaviours are seen as ways to continue this push out of Black kids out of mainstream education (Dei, 2008). Karen shared experiences of interactions with her son that she feels were racially motivated and the discipline excessive. This reinforces her views that education settings are spaces where race matters and that can significantly impact the learning and experiences of Black students. Karen recalls interactions between the teacher and her son:

I feel like because he's a young black male they will assume that he's sassy or that he will give them a hard time. He told me a few incidences with a teacher and if you know my son he's actually the most polite boy there is and the way the teacher reacted to him. He wore his hat accidentally to school or something like that and the teacher was hard on his case because he [the teacher] assumed that he'd give him a hard time.
Karen also makes reference to her son’s complaint about his teacher being heavy handed in handing of an issue. Karen explains that she felt that the teacher’s position on the minor infraction of wearing a cap to class was because the teacher feared retaliation from her son without any prior justification. Karen describes the conversation at home that followed the incident. Karen reflects,

I told him that people might perceive him to be a certain way and it's just a part of life and just listen to his teacher and just brush it off. Just listen to the teacher and he said: “Mom, he was kind of harsh on me”. I told him just so you know sometimes people will treat you a certain way, just ignore that and just be a good student and pay attention to your teacher. I said know that there are certain subjects that you're not going to do as well, that's going to be [difficult] for you. That means that you're may have to struggle for some things, everything doesn't come to everyone naturally. Like for me, mathematics. But that doesn't mean that you can't handle it, it doesn't mean that you don't have to try to figure it out better, that's all it is. I told him don't listen to them [math teacher] it happened to me when I was younger, so I know.

Ontario’s policy towards zero tolerance on discipline was repealed in 2008 by the Liberal government, however the residual effects of some schools operating within these parameters were still evident in the case of Black students being heavily disciplined for minor offences compared to their peers (James & Turner, 2017). According to James and Turner (2017), it is not that parents and their children lack understanding of the benefits of being involved. They conclude it is the capacity of the school culture and concomitantly the school climate that has powerful mediating effects on parental participation. Hence, we see the sporadic and or general absence of Black parents in schools. Experiences of anti-Black racism served to create school cultures that are simply not welcoming. As such participants suggest that these messages, however subtle have a direct impact on student behaviours based on the child’s evaluations of racially charged and culturally unsafe school environments. Rhonda reflects on her son’s recognition of the school climate that was racially hostile and the behavioural issues that ensues. Rhonda explains:

And so it started to just taint his whole idea of racism and power and how teachers had the power to do whatever they want to do in the classroom. If they didn't like you, if they didn't like your ideas, if they didn't like the fact that you are challenging them or whatever it was.
And so I think that he ended up experiencing being targeted. He had a science teacher who identified him as being gifted in science and he loved science. Math and science were his favourite subjects. And so he ended up becoming so discouraged by school because they knew he was really smart. He challenged them, all kinds of things and he got punished. And so he was basically sent to the office all the time because he wasn't doing his work and then it was then labeled as a behavioural issue.

From a psychological perspective, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) suggest that parents’ decision to be involved is minimally influenced by a parents’ assessment of the demands created, once parents’ role construction and sense of self-efficacy has been met. Evidence of racial bias and discrimination toward their children in school may create situations where parents are more motivated to be visible and involved (McKay et al., 2003). Tina surmises the dichotomous nature of parent-school interactions that there indeed exists a thin line when engaging in dialogue with teachers, where the parent feels confident in challenging the system. This type of engagement, Tina felt can operate conversely to the goal that she was trying to achieve, which was working together to educate her children. However, negotiating their boundaries at the very first opportunity, she felt there was more to gain than lose. Tina recalls:

Teachers have never really been challenged and once you start challenging them they feel intimidated. When they are challenged, there are then two results: either the teacher will be on your child's *** everyday nagging, riding or they will let the child do whatever they want so that you don't get involved. Teachers don't want to be blamed and that's the thing that I always try to avoid: I’m like you’re the teacher, I’m the parent. If she does anything wrong or he does anything, I am going to hold them accountable but on the other hand if I see you doing anything wrong I will hold you accountable.

The cultural deficits that exist between parents and teachers, together with socially constructed schemas of Black people, promote the stereotypes of aggression and the need to be fearful amongst non-Black members of the population (McGee & Spencer, 2015). Belief systems originating from these schemas contribute to the deficit notions that generalize and racialize Black parents and their children particularly, the narrative of race and gender bias that categorize Black mothers (McGee
&Spencer, 2015). The parent verbalizing her expectations can easily be misconstrued if understood outside of the context of a racialized and unequal playing field.

5.2 Lack of Trust

The “school to prison pipeline” is a connection that outlines the disproportionate numbers of Black youth from education into the prison system (James & Turner, 2017). Dei (2008) referred to youth disengagement as a precursor to youth drop out or push-out (push-out includes suspensions and expulsions). Drop out and push-out is the result of codes of bias and discrimination that Black youth are continuously subjected to through normalized means exacerbating what is now referred to as the school to prison pipeline (James & Turner, 2017). Critical race theorists such as Ladson-Billings (1998) reminds us that racism in all of its manifestations is endemic and typical and the normality assigned to racism makes it difficult to address, while Harris (2012) suggests that the methods of manifestation of racism changes but not the effect. Participants noted that that they felt that administrators and teachers reinforced the school to prison pipeline. Tina notes: “as Black people we don't really trust the system…it's always us against us...”.

The apparent disconnect between educators and Black families can be understood the historical experiences of educating Black people. The multiple manifestations of misguided applications of the welfare of Black children spanning centuries has done little to alleviate the suspicions of Black people. Rhonda expressed that her lack of trust with the school board meant that all communication needed to be formalized:

Well anybody who knows me can tell you... will tell you that I write...I write letters like crazy to the TDSB. They must have a file from here to the ceiling with communication from me. So that's how I communicate, I write. I write because it’s critical to have a record. They try to keep as much off paper as possible and so it's one of the strategies of the White
supremacist complex that there’s no paper trail. And so I create a paper trail because they know I don't trust them and they know that I don't like them in terms of how they operate systemically…

Lack of trust impacts the way in which Black parents get involved in the school system. It creates distancing between parents and schools. Distancing created psychological boundaries that parents felt even after schools accepted responsibility in situations involving their children. McKay et al. (2003) study of Black mothers found they adjusted their parenting strategies at home as a form of protection when suspicions of racism arose at school. Fear of racism by participants in the study is a common theme that influenced their desire to remain close to the school and get involved. Rhonda expresses her need to shield her son as a great motivation to become involved and engaged in school council and other school activities:

I was part of the school council for two years and I practically lived in the school, literally. The school was in such a deplorable condition that we literally had to monitor what was happening in the school. And I actually saw very early on that if I was really going to support my son in school, that it needed to be a full-time thing.

By getting involved the participants feel they can mitigate some of the negative effects on their children that often ‘push out” (Dei, 2008) Black kids out of school. They feel that it is necessary for their presence to be seen and felt. Tina also expressed similar accounts of hyper vigilance:

If I don't have class I usually like to go and see [the school] and if I don't have lunch, I just go sit there and watch. …Very few...you can literally count how many black students in the school and the ones that are there most of their parents don't volunteer. Several don't show themselves out at the school and at the end the day teachers jump to this notion that we are somehow lazy. Some have this notion that we don't want to be involved. And they notice me and me showing myself. I know the second if anything happens with my kids because I'm always there. Teachers know how to act when I’m around. And if I see the few black kids that I see there and I know their parents one-on-one, they too behave because I'm there. The teachers behave, the students behave because everybody know that I don't back down.

Participants felt that perceptions by teachers and administrators of their background, including language and narratives of racial stereotypes, influenced the way teachers interacted with their
children. When a society buy-into socially constructed schemas of bias and discrimination this forward the stereotypes and generalization that educators believe to characterize Black families and children. CRP demonstrate that by acknowledging the existence of students’ lived experiences reduces opportunities for educators to subscribe to deficit thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Vincent (2001) suggests that parental engagement in schools is strongly influenced by perceptions of parental backgrounds as well as by the school’s expectation of the role of parents in education. Tina recalls an experience with her daughter on a school project that motivated Tina to pursue higher education to reject the deficit notions that teachers held of Black, immigrant, and non-English speaking parents:

When my daughter was in grade 2 she did a project that she wanted to become an astronaut and the teacher said you can't be an astronaut... So I talked to the teacher the next day and asked the teacher what exactly happened? She said: “I just don’t want her dreams to be crushed, for her to have to later on be depressed. Because I know that she cannot become an astronaut.” Long pause. The teacher basically said I don’t want to dash her dreams so I told her to come with something that was reasonable for her to become. And I told the teacher if she were a White student would you have questioned it? And she’s like your child is an immigrant and all of you guys have a minimum high school education. So I’m like: “Are you're patronizing me? You’re putting me down because you think we can’t have more than a high school diploma? And you’re putting this to my child, because of what you think of me?” So I was like no, while you’re [the teacher] still alive I will make sure I go back to school.

The positioning of some students as outsiders is the central underpinning of deficit discourse (Dei, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez (2013) argue the deficit discourse serves as further reinforcement of White middle-class privilege leaving intact manners of oppression that disenfranchise ethnic minorities, low-income and students with learning disabilities. The powerful ramifications of such ideologies are schools as institutions that exist along class and racial lines. The distancing effect ensures that some students are discredited as suitable for mainstream education. The participants expressed their concerns for the labeling of Black students as troublemakers, special needs and directed into
applied streams. Tina explains her experience when her children in her mind were unjustifiably removed from the general classroom and placed into an English supplementary (English as a Second Learner, ESL) classroom:

They place my kids in ESL and the reason they place my kids in ESL is because [and they were born and raised in America] they have an accent… (Laughs). They speak English with an accent.

Participants claimed that the beliefs about their culture promoted a deficit notion of how their culture informs education. Subscribers to CRP, refer to the deficit approaches to teaching and learning that forward the incessant need for students to overcome languages, literacies, and cultural ways of knowing. Thus, learning was only in the context of the dominant language, literacies and culture (Paris, 2012). Rhonda offers other theories on why some Black children are unjustifiably mistreated in public school systems. She argues that the urban school districts have been experiencing a drop in school numbers as people are having fewer children overall in Canada. With the cost of living soaring in inner cities, parents have migrated to the more affordable suburbs of the city and other rural communities. Rhonda suggests:

…from 2012 I believe till now, look at the EQAO scores it's shocking. They went from being in the 80s and mind you those 80s were very controlled, manipulated situations, right to the point where what I heard even from some researchers was that even those with good standing that they had constructed it in such a way that certain children or others are pushed out or put in, basically repositioned so that their scores wouldn't count and wouldn't affect the overall. So even my son being pushed out was a part of that as far as I’m concerned.

Tina also expresses her concerns for parents within her Somali community and their lack of resistance in challenging teachers and administrators in mitigating such outcomes. “I see sometimes teachers that parents agree with everything with what the teacher says and then they go blame the child. In a sense that they will say, your child is not doing well in math or in English and we have to put him in this Special Ed program”. Rhonda recalled a different experience with her son following her return to Canada from South Africa with her son. The school at the time of
her return had employed an acting principal who was Black. Rhonda felt that was able to understand the situation with her son having recently emigrated from South Africa who was having difficulties socializing with other students in the class and was deemed as having behavioural issues:

…my son, remembers the issue with all this culture shock. Having challenges, making new friends and stuff. I worked with the acting black principal at that time and we ended up putting my son in what they now call Special Ed to help him socialize a little bit and to deal with the transition. And at the time I was very clear. I made it very clear that we're doing it for this particular reason and for no other reason. I want him out of it as soon as we see some progress. She got it and she agreed and he stayed in Special Ed. for a year…

James & Turner (2017) suggest that having teachers that you can identify with fosters a greater likelihood for success of their students. The reason being is the insignificance of cultural barriers results in a different relationship is different but more importantly, the teachers’ evaluation of the academic achievement, self-control and other behaviours operate through a different lens. A study by Johns Hopkins university found that for a Black student having at least one Black teacher in the early years show a greater likelihood of graduating high-school (Gershenson et al., 2017). One of the main reasons cited for the need to have Black teachers is that they espouse a higher level of expectation (Gershenson et al., 2017). Participants in the study discussed how these lower academic expectations for their children is related to the lack of trust by Black parents. Karen, who has a son in grade 10 in a public high school in Ontario noted: “It was an incident with the math teacher was telling him right off the bat he should go to Applied that really irritated me”. The racism of low expectations fueled by the pervasive nature of stereotypes teachers and school administration, leaves in its wake perceptions that Black students are not as academically inclined as their peers. These power of these stereotypes gets played out in guidance on course selection and streaming into lower streams (James & Turner, 2017).
5.3 Misapplication of Parent-Engagement Policy

Misapplication of parent-engagement policy refers to educational policy that identifies the need for better parent-engagement efforts, responds to the need for changes and is legislated at the provincial, board and school level, but denotes the failure of the policy to enact any real changes. Policies such as the “parent engagement policy” (2011) has done little to further engage Black parents in Ontario in schools. Antidiscrimination policies that do not include the voices of the marginalized cannot address issues that impact their lives (Harris, 2008). Gulson and Webb (2016) argue that “Education policy, when it has been transformed into a marketized form, is capable of enabling and constraining forms of change that produce new types of politics that place older politics beyond recognition.” (p.161), and racial agendas remain intact.

With parent outcry and calls for more culturally responsive education Ontario’s education system has taken some steps to improve parental engagement at a local, board wide and provincial level. In 2012, OMOE released its Parent Engagement monograph which was intended to be used as a tool to encourage educators and administrators in leadership effectiveness related to parent engagement strategies within Ontario schools. The article focused on schools taking a more proactive approach to parental involvement by fostering multiple opportunities for parent involvement as determined by parents themselves. Additionally, schools are encouraged to seek opportunities to build trust, by creating authentic opportunities for inclusive partnerships. The OMOE released similar iterations which appeared in the Parents in Partnership (2010): A parent engagement policy for Ontario that urged schools to foster parent engagement across multiple platforms as they make a difference irrespective of whether parents actually become involved and how they become involved. However, participants in the study expressed the opposite towards school’s outreach in parent-engagement. As Rhonda notes:
I think as someone who has a herstory [history] of challenging the TDSB, I guess where I find myself now is not really surprising in that context of me as an activist. And the fact that the TDSB has never wanted to really hear what parents like me have to say. So it has all this wonderful policy, in fact one of its pillars is parent engagement but what I’ve learnt is that they mirror, marginal, superficial involvement. That means you have a bake sale, you sell some cookies, you smile, everybody is happy and everybody gets along and you don’t make waves and it’s all good. And so, parents like myself, who come from apartheid, have a very different sense of what involvement is.

In fact, shifting the focus from parent-involvement that focuses on school-based parental involvement to home-based parental involvement, where Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) theorized that fifty-percent of student achievement takes place. Parent engagement suggests that re-aligning the focus creates authentic opportunities to understanding each other’s “worlds”. Participants felt that the school made no attempts to accommodate home based parental involvement. Parents felt that they were not equipped to engage in schoolwork support at the high school level and so had to personally seek additional help. On seeking out additional resources after learning of her son’s challenges with mathematics, Karen responds:

I found out from another parent that there was free tutoring outside of the school…it's very difficult to get free tutoring, that is also good quality. There was also a program in the community that helps kids in high school with certain subjects. These are like PhD holders and professors and really good people help them and it’s free and I sign them up for these. So that's one way I try to help them. I get them involved also with the homework program, I try to give them their little space to do whatever homework that they do need to do but that's about it.

Seeking parental input was a key strategy outlined by Ferlazzo (2011) who posited that educators should be leading with their ears. Ferlazzo (2011) determined that too often were schools leading with their mouths and missing key opportunities that center parents in the discussion on how they want to be involved (Parent Engagement Monograph, 2012). Parents like Karen suggests that while they want to be involved they just do not know how. Karen says: “I just I don't know how to get involved. I guess it's also time, it's like… it's more than likely will happen [during] after school tutoring, after school time”.
Parents like Rhonda felt that some parents were deliberately silenced in their attempt to dialogue with administrators and teachers. This theme echoes a few times over the course of the interview: “I guess where I find myself now is not really surprising in that context of me as an activist and the fact that the TDSB has never wanted to really hear what parents like me have to say”. Another example Rhonda discusses is around her involvement as chair of the student council. Rhonda felt because of her politicized position she was not chosen to comment on the results of a critical research project that was due for release by the TDSB. Rhonda as the Chair of the parent advisory board, felt instead they chose another parent who deemed to be not as threatening politically as herself. Rhonda recalls:

So she's [other parent] at the very beginning of the journey on being Black conscious and so we’re at very different places. They always used her because she always had nothing negative to say, and was like: “my son really loves this school, this is the best thing that ever happened”. And so now protocol wise, they should be getting an official statement from the Chair about this research. But they decided to totally sideline me and instead decided that now they're going to let this woman speak…

Critical race theorists argue that the privileging of whiteness serves important psychic and material benefits (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As culturally responsive educators seek to implement educational policies, the distinctive lack of the voices of Black parents in equity-minded educational policies does little to wholly address systemic issues in education, because marginalized groups have knowledge that cannot be understood through privilege minded efforts (Harris, 2008). A closer look at affirmative action policies in Ontario has done very little to systemically address achievement disparities for Black students (James & Turner, 2017). The voices of Black parents are not still being facilitated into school structures as easily and commonly as their White counterparts.
5.4 Parents Not Engaged with Structures of the Status Quo

The structures of the status quo refer to opportunities to be more involved in the school by parents such as the PTA (parent-teacher advisory), where the likelihood is that it is disproportionately represented by White parents even in schools in pre-dominantly Black areas (James, 2012). The reason for the lack of participation or representation was that Black families did not connect with this type of parent participation and their child’s development. Other structures include the parent-council. The participants of the study revealed that they saw these positions as a waste of time and did not want to commit to practices that were not represented in Black communities. According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997), when the situation was in agreement to their construction of their role of as parents they were more likely to be involved. The corollary is also true, parents who do not hold beliefs on the significance of these opportunities, will generally tend be absent in these spaces (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Participants felt that even when they did attempt to participate their voices were not validated and it was an inauthentic show of diversity. Parents in the study viewed school based parental activity as hegemonic structures that reproduced Eurocentric notions of parental involvement. None of the parents were actively involved in organizations where parents are actively involved in decisions that affect the student engagement and achievement. Rhonda responded:

I was involved school council, just minimally. Like there was a black community of parents who when I got to the school, who were already of course, there is always issues, but the black parents they had started to organize a little bit…. I think we did some trivial activities for the school. There was some kind of a meeting at one point where the parents of black and racialized children had raised some concerns and basically you know it was the same old same old. The white parents acted like they were so wounded or they just couldn't believe it because they're all such nice white people, they were just shocked that you know black parents felt this way …The area that was that it was in it was in a very middle-class bourgeois neighbourhood and so, so it was the bourgeois middle-class parents who really ran it. And so I don't think the space was really there for parents like myself to really be actively involved except to just kind of nicely make suggestions and support things but it was not a politicized school council in as far in it had any really concern and knowledge of the types of identity issues and anti-racism in education and all of that.
CRT tells us that the privileging of whiteness, is visible to only those that are afflicted (Harris, 2008). The ordinariness and pervasiveness of racial subordination makes it presence difficult to be acknowledged amongst White circles. Harris (2008) attribution of “collective denial” to reference societal acceptance of racial hierarchies without coercion. Rhonda discusses the politics of structures like the parent councils. She notes,

So politically, I found the parents they were so basking in their privilege. They were very threatened at the very notion that Black parents had our own issues and that we were then accusing them of being racist and they were all such Liberal White people, I was marginally involved. I went to meetings, made some friends, talked to parents. There were a group of White parents who you know I got to know and I was comfortable around and they would invite me to stuff but again it was great for as long as I wasn't challenging them.

Another facet of CRT positions race as a social construct constantly shaped by political forces as it seeks to disrupt racial inferiority. The strategy is to then bring to the light racism in its multiplicities carried through the everyday messages that Black students and their families are made to deal with. However, the constant daily messages of inferiority foster situations where parents become too weak to redress and yield to the status quo. Furthermore, she presented the type of parents that were beneficial to school boards in Toronto:

…the TDSB knows that there are parents who raise 40/50/100,000 dollars for their schools. Clearly those parents are engaged yes but they're engaged in their fundraising, so of course that's going to benefit the school…

Tina responded to her lack of engagement in school-based parental activities. With other challenges in her personal life she decided on which types of involvement would be most beneficial to her son:

…I really haven't been involved in any of their extracurricular activities. I try to get them volunteer positions to help them learn new things to excel in different ways and that's about it. I don't really go to their school field trips or anything like that. Actually, what he's really into is sports. For sure I always go to his games, so that's that.
With other personal challenges, participants have to negotiate trade-offs that do not necessarily follow the norms of the dominant society that they live in. From a psychological perspective, participation in any system has to take on some benefit, whether materially or psychically for it to be valued. In some cases, participants demonstrated remorse in not being able to participate in school-based activities from a material perspective. However, all the participants reframed school-based parental involvement in the context of their daily lives. If participation did not directly influence the wellbeing of their children, then participation in school-based activities was not prioritized.

5.5 Advocacy and Activism in School

In much of the extant literature on parent involvement, issues of equity in educational practice is a salient theme (Baquedano-Lopez, et al., 2013). As a minoritized community that recognized the unequal playing field in educational institutions, parents felt that it was necessary to challenge practices, assumptions and beliefs that unjustly discriminated against racialized groups. In this study, advocacy also included parents’ awareness of bias and discrimination and the multiple ways in which they challenged it. The activism role was most evident in parents that recalled racial disparities as part of their lived experiences. To this end Rhonda comments:

My other motivation of course is the realities of what we know and what we lived with. Institutions of education around the world and how they relate to us indigenous peoples. This whole long, long legacy of oppression, of brutality, of streaming of push-outs, of leading children to the prison pipeline. There is so much in education that we as parents have to be diligent about and the sad reality is that most of us as indigenous parents we don't even have the luxury of being able to be as involved as we should be because we're dealing with day-to-day survival issues and that's indigenous communities. Again because of legacies of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, capitalism and apartheid.

Karen referred to her attempts at getting parents at another school to challenge a principal that parents themselves internally felt could not connect with the students because of the lack of cultural
awareness and responsiveness. As a Somali community, they felt somehow powerless in a stratified school system, where they were in fact the majority. Karen discusses the issue:

There’s a school where my kids don't go...although its’ in our neighbourhood. But at that school the principal dictates what children should do or what the children should be taught. Five, six years since I’ve known that school, the principal never changed. All the parents feared her. So my friend was on the board as part of the parent council for the school and I said to her, you’re a mother, you have to go to talk to Toronto school board and make sure this principal is not there anymore. And she said: I can’t do it. So in a sense I had to campaign and beg the other parents to bring their complaints and that whatever they say it is going to be private, nobody is going to talk about it. I told them you have to support this parent on the council, you have to. And then I went back to her and said you have to go to the Toronto school board with these complaints. Tell them [TDSB] this is an immigrant school. They have to bring principal to that school who understands the children and their parents and now what living in this neighbourhood is like. This neighbourhood has poverty and violence. They need a principal who has gone through that or who can relate to it and maybe there will be a change. Finally, that principal is not there this year. I see it’s another principal, a male, Black principal. I'm hoping things will change. But that will tell you: this lady had been a principal for the last 17 years. How many children has she ruined in that process and for what? These kids are just being pushed and they’re not doing well in EQAO. She’s just pushing them, just for them to finish. And some are in grade 7 and don’t even know how to read and be living in Canada. Some were born and raised in Canada, isn’t that sad?

As a well-educated Black woman Karen was seen as a representative for matters on navigating schools in Toronto. She referred to an experience that involved a recent immigrant, a father and his child to Canada. She explained that the passiveness experienced by schools pertains to parents’ fears of unfamiliarity with a social system that might justify them as unfit parents and take their children away:

…. luckily I just saw the father and the father said: “I’m just bothered with these teachers and I don’t know what they want to do with my child...can you come?” I said OK. I went to the meeting and the teachers, all of them never gave the child an opportunity to develop and they all had these folders of notes. He doesn’t respond, he doesn’t do this, he doesn’t do that. I listened and then I turned around and talked to the kid. I had fruits, I brought fruits on purpose. I asked the kid what is this pointing to the banana and he said it in Somali “this is a banana” and “this is apple” and so on. I showed him some things on the computer, because he reads the Koran. So I pull up a reading in the Koran and he was reading it. I then told the teachers: “Just because he doesn’t speak English and he doesn't understand you guys want to assume the worst of him. But because of his age you have placed him in a class that he is not ready for. So all of you need to go back and rearrange yourselves and
re-structure yourselves as a child who has never gone to school until he is 12 years old. You have to develop a program according to the child.” And they were all shocked because they had a psychiatrist there... they all wanted the parent to sign for the psychiatrist to evaluate the child and all of that. They had a social worker there and to an immigrant family that really becomes intimidating.

Rhonda discussed experiences with her son and the challenges of getting the school to treat him equally to other kids:

My son, one of the things that he was told was that he was too polite. He was too polite and as a result he had a hard time making friends. Anywhere you go, do you ever hear something like that: He’s too polite? So the messages were: “oh if you're too nice then people don't like you”. So you need to rough yourself up a little bit (laughs). So he was dealing with that kind of peer pressure of trying to fit in. And then academically he was also trying to fit in. And at the time he went to a school, a really interesting school because it was part of it was a mainstream school and the other half of the school was a deaf school and so he learned to sign and he was really good at signing. But unfortunately, with mainstream school a lot of issues on how they deal with racialized children and that was the usual thing. I had to constantly challenge the teachers around, how they were engaging him, how he was learning. He ended up becoming really frustrated with education in its entirety. I remember when he was in grade three he came home one day and he said mom it doesn't pay to be black and smart.

In some cases, where parents felt that the racism of differential treatment would not be resolved removed their children from the schools. Rhonda reported about her son being a part of a school that felt systematically becoming too overwhelming that she changed her son’s schools: “So eventually we ended up, my son ended up having such horrible experiences at that school, I ended up taking him to the Indigenous school, the First Nations School”. She describes her current challenges with the school as she attempts to make them accountable for the unequivocal treatment of her son:

The school board actually has policy have you read it? Do you know the policy? You are ignoring the policy and telling us that you think it's a better idea for a child to be entrusted to his eight-year-old own sense of maturity? I’ll meet you in court.

The positioning of Black parents as complacent and apathetic social actors was a strong theme throughout the data, that were both explicitly stated and implied. Parents believed that these
perceptions were entrenched in the stratification of assumptions and beliefs inherent in their identities. For example, Tina reflects: “I don't think they have an imagination. They have this image of what an immigrant is supposed to look like and how they think and what they should do.” Tina further responds to the misconceptions that govern teachers’ perceptions of immigrants and the outcome of these challenges. To that end Tina notes:

And most of them feel intimidated especially if they see a Black woman or an immigrant woman who is educated, who speaks fluent English. And they don’t accept, they don’t. And they feel that we’re submissive to whatever they say. They’ve never faced that challenge and once you start challenging them they feel intimidated.

In the hierarchy of languages, English becomes “the” currency and English becomes a measure of how much cultural capital that you bring to the classroom and justification for marginalizing immigrant children and their parents. Lareau (2002) cites language as a form of social capital in education, noting that immigrant parents under the circumstances, have sought to ensure their children’s advancement by prioritizing English language over their native tongues. This supports social capital theory which Bourdieu (1977) explains as the familiarity of the language and practices most valued by the dominant culture. Tina comments on the hierarchal positioning of English as a dominant language:

And there is this notion for you to be educated you have to speak English. And this is the notion that we as an immigrant or we as a society have to get rid of. English is not education or it's not knowledge increase. It is just a language as any other language. It is just another form of communication in Ontario or Canada, one of many languages. Because we do have a lot of people that are very qualified but they don't speak English and in their eyes they’re seen as they’re nothing.

Participants suggested many of their interactions between school and themselves as oppositional. They believed that intentional racist agendas systematically designed to either silence and continue pervasive notions of apathy or to all together effect the disenfranchisement and subsequent push
out of the said school. Tina reported on teachers’ perceptions of her position in setting the agenda for parent-school from the offset:

And from the first day I lay the ground rules you are here for my child, I'm here for my child, what can we do to make this thing work. And most of them feel intimidated especially if they see a black woman or an immigrant woman who is educated, who speaks fluent English.

In their study, James & Turner (2017) reference the normalization of poor outcomes for students of colour and the racism of low expectations. Parents who understood the education system showed awareness of the pervasive nature of stereotypes and how it can shape the way teachers show support for students’ academic goals and career aspirations. Tina reflects on an earlier response of being a non-native speaker of English where she felt her immigrant status made teachers limit the educability of her children at school. She continues to reflect on an a previous story of her daughter presented an astronaut as her career aspirations:

And she [the teacher] said you cannot be an astronaut because you come from an immigrant family. And she [the teacher] said, “Who's going to do the other jobs?” So I then said to the teacher: “Can you please explain Sarah’s project grade did to me?” She did it well but she give my daughter a “B with help” (and the only thing that I helped my daughter with was the cargo for her to put her astronaut in. But she wrote her [own] things. I did edit some little things but it was so sad because she had the first draft...she took it to the teacher the teacher corrected it... she brought it back the second draft, the third draft until the final draft and she presented it. There were never any complaints or negative feedback until the final assigned grade.

Parents’ openly cited racist agendas that are particularly reserved for non-Black parents. Rhonda reported an incident with the principal involving her eight-year-old son, where safety procedures were not being followed with regards to supervision. Rhonda shares her thoughts on the matter “A principal would never tell a White parent any garbage like that, right? But it's because it's us Black parents and because we’re just supposed to do whatever this man says, because he's the expert that he thinks it's a good idea for …to be dropped off on his own”. In other cases, parents reported differential treatment in the lack of contact by school staff citing inexcusable reasons for
not initiating and maintaining contact especially with time-sensitive issues. Tina reported on her experience with the principal after her son had failed a course:

The principal never contacted me actually. When I got the report card I had to contact the school. So I never spoke to them until the marks were already assigned and could not be changed. I contacted the school and asked to see the principal right away. The principal apologized and I feel like the system failed my son but he knew and he apologized. But that guy [the principal] knew it was too late. How is this child skipping [class] every day and how is he missing so many classes and I’m not informed? The principal then said: “I’m so sorry but he really went under our radar” and that was their reasoning. Nothing more.

The normalization of poor outcomes for their children was one of the major themes cited by the participants in being motivated to be involved in school-based activities. The subtle messages that the children and the parents receive, particularly messages of failure and the indifference towards it incited parents to take action to reverse these perceptions. These actions extended from seeking external supplements and in extreme cases removal from the school altogether. In the latter case, the processes that led to this “pushed-out” (Dei, 2008) have been criticized as deliberate motivations operating through unconscious mechanisms to suppress the Black community (Ladson-Billings, 1998).
Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications for Practice

This chapter discusses implications of the findings of the research for practitioners including teachers, teacher leaders and administrators and ways they can proactively engage Black students and their parents using CRP and CRT. I examine the themes and its implications for teaching and learning. The participants in this study communicated their experiences navigating schools in the GTA, specifically Toronto which they felt were racially skewed against people of colour. Acts of racism fostered a critical lens in navigating family-school relations. The findings show that a lack of trust was a motivator for engaging parental involvement. However, upon examining school systems, structures aligned with the status quo including perceptions on the roles of ethnic minority parents, had the opposite effect in engaging school-based parental involvement. In most cases, parents described antagonistic family-school relations because they frequently had to challenge deficit perceptions of families of colour. CRP provide the necessary grounding for Black parents and their children to be successful (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in schools.

The lived experiences of people of people of colour is embedded in their racialized histories. In particular, the efforts of imperialist nations and colonization have created long standing tensions where Black people continue to resist multiple manifestations of racial subjugation. Black histories have been plagued with systemic oppression and racialized pursuits where Whites have perversely attempted to dominate Black people. From slavery to apartheid, one does not have to reach far to engage in such racialized paradigms. Continental Africans and Black people in the Diaspora are familiar with histories of overt systemic oppression and racism either through intergenerational transmission or having experienced it. Contemporary society is reeling from the effects of social oppression, though disguised in more subtle and covert forms (Harris, 2008). For example the “school to prison pipeline” — which maintains its existence by the 40 % of Canadian Black youth
that it houses (Dei, 2008). The prison system, and judicial system are massively subsidized by the incarceration of Black youth. As a result, there will be no real incentive to address claims that prisons operate within covertly racialized paradigms. According to Dei (2008) within the context of intersectional antiracism, race must be used as an ‘entry point’ through which we gain insight into inequalities of class, gender, ability and sexuality and how these sources of oppression intersect with race (Dei, 2008, p.89).

With such powerful experiences operating in the lives of Black people, these experiences are their realities and as such it will inform their behaviours, motives, thoughts and ideologies. According to Flessa (2010), parents are the first form of primary socialization and therefore the greater the likelihood that children will assume the positionality of their parents particularly in their earlier years of schooling. This was very evident with the participants, citing their own experiences with racism and subsequently their children also reflecting much of this same critical lens and in some instances activism. This has the potential to be a critical entry point for educators who are interested in engaging Black students and concomitantly their parents. When race and other forms of oppression are not addressed and neoliberal practices disguise as culturally responsive approaches in the classroom, essentializing of culture occurs, and substitutes culture for political analysis of inequalities (Sleeter, 2012).

Myths of the histories of Black people and the confluence of stereotypes have resulted in the subscription to belief systems that contribute to deficit notions that generalize and racialize Black parents and their children. Particularly, the narrative of race and gender bias that categorize Black mothers (McGee & Spencer, 2015). The cultural deficits that exist between parents and teachers, together with socially constructed schemas of Black people, promote the stereotypes of aggression and the need to be fearful amongst non-Black members of the population.
Hence in bridging the gap towards engagement and achievement of Black youth and their parents, educators must be well versed in the diverse cultural possibilities that might relate to Black students (Sleeter, 2012). Too often Black history begins in 1619, on a plantation in West Virginia, yet Africa is the most ancient of civilizations, that was flourishing well before 1619 (Johnson, 2016). In contemporary, neoliberal Canada, the maltreatment, dehumanization, oppression and the onslaught of social, economic, and political injustices are more difficult to eliminate when Africans and other races begin the story of Black people as a story of the desolate “slave” and not a story of the mothers and fathers of humanity, as science and history has already shown us (Johnson, 2012).

The ability to bridge this cultural deficit in the classroom will open up more opportunities to improve the scant engagement of Black parents (James & Turner, 2017). This is important for both teachers and school leaders. Educators working within culturally responsive paradigms must ensure an understanding of how one’s lived experiences inform knowledge. In the case of Black students in classrooms, their most recent histories, re-told through their parents are important funds of knowledge that shed light on Black parental households. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that Black youth are most successful when there is a continuity between school and home life. In this current climate of over-policing, demoralization and villainizing of Black youth throughout North America, realities of racial bias and discrimination paint the current picture for Black youth. CRP allow for spaces that can begin with these conversations in mind and thus foster critical consciousness where students can challenge heteronormative assumptions. When educators are culturally responsive to how the lives of Black students and their families are impacted by race, this can reduce cultural misconceptions and bridge the gap between schools and Black students and their families.
Black parents lack of trust is a by-product of parents’ assessment of school structures that continue to be inequitable. As such, parents remain hypervigilant and challenge racialized paradigms both explicitly and implicitly. McGee and Spencer (2015) theorize that this pervasive lack of trust is rooted in the histories of educating Black people. Black people have had a long-documented history of push out and exclusion, ever since they were uprooted from Africa. In the more recent past, experiences of educational tracking, segregation, and biased grading, once characterized the educational institutions in North America (James, 2012). The elimination of these racialized practices has been replaced by the newer forms of discrimination in the form of assessment, particularly, streaming and special education decisions. Neoliberal approaches produce and reproduce inequitable schools which further feed into the societal expectations of Black youth as underachievers (James, 2012). Without oversimplifying the complexity of the relationship between Black parents and schools, part of the mistrust stems from the perceptions that educational policies and practices in Ontario schools are racially informed where Black, Latin American and Aboriginal youth are over-represented in special education, lower academic streams, and show high drop-out rates (James & Turner, 2017). The corollary is also true with low representation of Black youth in post-secondary institutions (James & Turner, 2017). Although parents show awareness of policies in Ontario that were designed to redress issues of discrimination and bias for particularly Black students, Black parents hold little faith that any good will result.

Parental engagement should be made a priority in schools and not viewed as an extra bonus feature (Harris & Goodall, 2007). Parental engagement strategies of minoritized groups must be explicitly embedded in teaching and learning policies, and school reform practices, so that parents are seen as an integral part of the student learning process. It is important for school leaders to create more transparency and accountability in school measures. This ranges from collecting and reporting race-based data to the guidance of Black students into post-secondary opportunities. Creating
authentic opportunities to involve the Black community, listening to how Black parents want to be involved, making more permanent Black identities in the curriculum are all ways in which teachers and school leaders can begin to bridge that historical gap between Black parents and teachers. Policies that govern how schools operated are as good as those responsible for its application. In Ontario, the alternative schools program, that was first positioned as a “progressive” policy, is now a firm fixture of the neoliberal system (Gulson & Webb, 2016). The original idea was that neoliberalism is capable of restructuring what were primarily liberal notions, including the notion of anti-racism (Goldberg, 2009). However, neoliberalism have been criticized for “its unevenness, its’ lack of self-identity, its spatial and temporal variability, and above all, its reconfiguration” (Brown, 2015, p. 21). In as much as parent’s pessimism surrounding parent engagement policies including issues of its’ ability to address parental engagement and its’ applicability in diverse contexts, the bigger picture is the wrapping of policies within neoliberal framings.

Ontario’s Ministry of Education has inarguably made strides to reduce the level of discrimination and bias in schools and to improve parental engagement of the minoritized. Policies such as Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan, (2017) seek to promote zero tolerance to differential treatment based on race, gender, class and other socially constructed identities. However, little has been done to address the neo-deficit forms of disenfranchisement: including how new forms of assessment “continue to be legitimized and reinforced by inequitable color-conscious school policies, rules, and practices” (James, 2012, p.469). Participants felt that systemically very few changes had been made that serve to reduce the educational disparities including, the lack of diversity of educators; school systems that did not include Black voices; the racialization of low expectations by teachers and guidance counsellors. Greater efforts must be made in Ontario to diversify the teaching pool and have more Black administrators in schools.
The participants of the study critiqued current educational policies by asking questions about the limits of current policies in achieving greater equity. The top down deficit approach of policy aimed at leveling the playing field has fostered systems that are unable to address the fluidity of human interactions, especially those that do not account for the power dynamics that exists between educational stakeholders (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Participants do not believe that their input is valued, so they do not seek opportunities to engage in feedback, except when they had to challenge educational authorities. Policy development according to Sockbeson (2011) is akin to basketry, where the vision of policy direction resides in the minds of the policymaker and the community for which and with which he or she works, and must rely on connection to the people, and knowledge of who they are. We must continue to advocate for polices that have positively impacted the engagement of parents from marginalized communities, and in particular the Black community. It is necessary for teachers and school leaders to engage in individual and collective reflection on the ways in which the school system misses multiple opportunities to engage with parents because traditional Eurocentric ways of representation do not include them. It is also powerful in recognizing the role of “othering” through educational policies that intentionally marginalize non-English or non-French parents.

The findings of the study reveal acts of resistance by Black parents against deficit, hegemonic beliefs and practices. Parents in the study made the decision to be involved, acknowledged their engagement as a tool to buffer discrimination and bias against their children and act as agents who can motivate, resist and advocate on their children’s behalf. Teachers and school administrators must acknowledge the intersections of race, class and immigrant status and the impact on parental engagement. Without the legitimization of these strategies of parental engagement and the acknowledgement of a system that favours the dominant culture, we will continue to “reinforce the school to prison-pipeline” (James & Turner, 2017, p.51).
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The findings of the study are supported by other research studies on Black student achievement in Ontario schools. For example, James & Turner (2017) call on Black community members to be more visible if they want to have any authority with regards to their children’s educational outcomes. One of the participants in the study echoed similar sentiments. Tina suggests that some parents are not as involved as they should be,

… I have seen parents that are not that involved in their children's education. They never come to meet and greet the teachers. If there’s a meeting in school, they’re never there. And the decisions are made. Once they see the decisions and the impact of these decisions they cry…

Rhonda also explained the need for Black parents to get more involved. She adds:

…we have seen throughout these legacies our communities get the worst types of education, are neglected, they’re bullies, they’re terrorized, we’re over policed or criminalized and this is within education. So I think as parents we have to do our best at least to protect our children and what I’ve seen is so much spirit injury that we carry as people who survived these education systems and these imperialist nations. So we're always working against the hegemonic reality where we live and centuries later we’re still at the bottom of the barrel. And so that still translates to whether our children are even allowed to succeed or not.

Karen, too believed that notwithstanding the challenges it is important for Black parents to be engaged with schools. Karen explains,

I've learned that last year, [being visible] makes a huge difference. Not leaving it to the system and for me to just assume that he will do well in classes. It does make a huge difference when I know what they do in the classroom, or what's going to happen. I never took that seriously…

Zhang and Bennett (2003) suggest that in many cases parents of ethnic minority do not understand the system enough to take advantage of it. More recently James and Turner (2017), suggested that Black parents need to better learn the system in order to more effectively navigate it.
The narratives that emerge from this study are useful for school leaders, and teachers seeking to bridge the gap between the Black students and their peers in Ontario schools and classrooms. Paris (2012) argues for culturally sustaining approaches that embody more explicit resistance to cultural deficit frameworks. The narratives of participants highlight their role as advocates and their activism. This study shows that Black parents proactively seek equitable outcomes for their children in education. Black parents are not only keen to invest in their children, they challenge inequities both through explicit and implicit means. Participants in the study sought opportunities to engage in racial socialization through dialogue that involves developing positive Black cultural identity. Some participants openly challenged administrators and teachers when confronted with situations that placed their child in positions of inferiority. Finally participants became knowledgeable and sought ways to seek external opportunities when school itself could not equitably meet these expectations. Participants attempted to do so regardless of socioeconomic status.

Parents commonly referenced their racial identities and immigrant status when questioned about their experiences navigating secondary schools. Additionally, the majority of the interactions between school and parents involved an antagonistic relationship characterized by mistrust among parents and racialized expectations by educational institutions. Administrators and teachers utilizing a culturally responsive approach can cultivate school cultures that value and promote a culture of respect. School leaders are uniquely positioned in their capacity to identify the multiple manifestations of deficit approaches and to direct a school climate that meaningfully values pluralism of its’ student body and their families.

Calabrese et al., (2004) suggest that an ecological perspective towards parent engagement that attends to dynamics of power, sees parents as authors, values their involvement as dynamic and
interactive, and draws on the multiple experiences and resources. Schools that are successful at engaging parents, particularly those traditionally marginalized, hold themselves accountable to engaging with and meeting the needs of parents across a variety of spaces (Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). Findings from this study suggest that building collaborative and respectful relationships with Black parents will improve their engagement, support their activism and build trust and ultimately support the retention, engagement and achievement of Black youth in schools.

7.1 Limitations of the Study

While deep in-depth narratives provide insights and understandings, it is not the intention to generalize the findings. This study was limited by the number of participants. Furthermore all the participants were female and so paternal perspectives could not be accounted for. Finally, all the participants were African so the experiences of other Black families including Caribbean and African Canadian lacked representation in this study.

7.2 Recommendations for Future Research

As a first step, research should begin by asking questions about what can educational stakeholders learn from the approaches of the parents in this study. It is vital that research resist framing questions that implicitly reduce Black parental involvement. More research is needed to understand how other axes of oppression intersect with race when engaging Black parents in school. My study involved three parents from continental Africa. However, it did not address specifically the experiences of Black and female and or Muslim for example. Similarly, a future study could involve examining culturally-specific ways that Black parents engage their children in education. The African community is a heterogeneous group and so examining between and within cultural variations could further support cultural responsive approaches in the classroom.
Finally, further work is needed to understand the power dynamics that characterize Black parents engagement with schools. In some cases parents were able to challenge explicitly the differential treatment of their children. The majority of the models of parental engagement do not account for the power dynamics that exist between educational stakeholders.

In conclusion, in order for these recommendations to be advanced, researchers and practitioners at all educational levels must first recognize the racialized settings that disadvantage Black parents’ commitment to school-based parental involvement. Notwithstanding, opportunities exist for educational institutions to focus on building trust between Black families and their schools. This includes having more racially diverse staff, securing opportunities for authentic engagement and cognizance in the way Black children are treated overall in particular interactions involving discipline. Similarly, teacher education programs should also re-evaluate their programs in order to bridge this cultural deficit as even academic discourse are not immune to peddling racialized perceptions that increase the daily challenges and risks for being Black.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Part A: Demographics

1. Which of the following are you?
   A. Mother/ Female Guardian
   B. Father/ Male Guardian

2. What ethnicity would you identify as?
   A. African
   B. African Canadian
   C. Black Caribbean
   D. Other

3. How many years have you lived in Canada?
   A. All my life
   B. Part of my life ______ years

4. What is your first language?
   (the first one you learned to speak?) ________________________________

5. What is your age group?
   A. 20-29
   B. 30-39
   C. 40-49
   D. 50+

6. What would you state as you highest educational achievement?
A. University Degree
   I.B.A./B.Sc.
   II. Masters
   III. PhD.

B. College Diploma

C. High School Diploma

D. Other:

7. What is your professional background? Ex. Education, Business, Medical, Technical, Finance, Administration, Clerical, Home-maker, Other__________________.

Parent’s Decision to be involved

To what extent would you say you are involved in your child’s education?

Can you describe particular ways in which you are involved?
   • Curricular
   • Extracurricular

Would you like to be more involved than you are now? How so?

What are some of the personal challenges that you experience or have experienced in attempting to be involved in school-based activities?

Parents’ Perceptions on School Structures and Practices

What are your thoughts on the quality of education that children receive in Canada?

How satisfied have you been with the manner and frequency of communication with the school?

What provisions have the school made to accommodate your personal circumstances (e.g. shift schedule, language barriers)?
Tell me about your experiences when you have had to initiate contact on your child’s behalf.

From these perspectives:

- Administrative Leaders
- Teachers
Appendix B

Introductory Information Letter to Parent Participants

RE: Parent Engagement and Schooling: Examining Black Parents’ Experiences in the Greater Toronto Area – Master’s Thesis Research Project

Dear participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study as part of my Master’s Degree of this researcher. The project has been approved by the University of Toronto, Research Ethics Board. It is my hope that you would be willing to take part in an interview as part of my Master's research. This research project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Ann Lopez, a faculty member at the University of Toronto. My research is looking at the experiences of Black parents and the role of school in facilitating that involvement. This research will help illustrate how Black parents navigate public school systems, where it is believed that the school has negated their involvement. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must have at least one child in grades 9-12 at a public secondary school in the GTA and identify as African or Black.

This research is important as this will be the first study dedicated to Black Canadian parents as a heterogeneous group in Ontario exploring their barriers and motivations as it relates to involvement in school. This information is useful in fostering greater involvement of parents in schools in Ontario and empower more Black parents to contribute to the formal schooling community. The information could also help to encourage policy-makers in mandating and increasing accountability policies geared towards facilitating parental involvement in public schools across Ontario.
The interviews with you will be completed in-person and in English, at a time and place at your convenience, to discuss your own experience interacting with schools. If English is not your preferred language of communication, you may have a translator present. Interviews will take place in June and early August and last approximately one hour. The number of interviews will depend on your availability and the rapport established between yourself and me. However, it is anticipated to be no more than two interviews in total. The interview topics will include descriptions of the experiences as it relates to your teenager(s)” school as it relates to your participation. A list of the interview topics will be provided to you prior to the start of the interview.

There are no known risks to you for assisting with this project. Benefits of participation include receiving a summary of the results upon completion of the study. The interviews will be recorded and stored electronically on a secured server accessible only by myself and my thesis supervisor and will be destroyed once the interviews are transcribed. If interested, you have the option to review the transcript of your interview for further comment and correction. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and you may decline to answer certain questions or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The responses, however, will help provide a more complete understanding how you attempt to be involved and the school’s role in that process. As a token of appreciation, you will be compensated with a $10 gift card from Tim Hortons which is given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the study before completion.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please feel free to contact me at the address below, by email or telephone. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ann Lopez. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your participation is much appreciated in this research.

Sincerely,

Desiree Sylvestre
M.Ed. Student – Educational Leadership & Policy

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)

University of Toronto

252 Bloor Street West

Toronto, ON M5S 1V6
Appendix C

Information and Consent Letter

RE: Parent Engagement and Schooling: Examining Black Parents’ Experiences in the Greater Toronto Area – Master’s Thesis Research Project

You have received this information and consent letter because you indicated a willingness to participate in an interview regarding your experience in interacting with a public secondary as a result of your teenager(s)’ attendance at that school. We are interested in interviewing Black parents who have experienced some form of alienation with regards to interacting with that school. The interviews will include questions about your background and specific experiences as a parent involved or trying to be involved in teenager(s)’ school, the outcome as a result of that experience, the role of the school in facilitating your involvement and the steps if any that you have taken to build a relationship with the school as a result of your teenager(s)’ attendance.

We anticipate a total of no more than two interviews, each of which will take no more than two hours to complete. There are no known risks or benefits to your for assisting with this project. As participants in this study, you will at no time be judged or evaluated and at no time will be at risk of harm. Also, no value judgments will be placed on your responses. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time during the interview, without negative consequences. You may decline to answer any question(s) during the interview. Notes will be taken during the interview, and an audio recording will be made with your permission. If English is not your preferred language of communication, you may have a translator present. Notes and recordings will be stored in a secured office controlled by the researcher, and will be destroyed at the end of the research project. As a token of appreciation, you will be compensated with a $10 gift card from Tim Horton’s which is given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the study before completion. You will be provided a copy of this information and consent letter.
For quality assurance purposes, this research study may be subjected to a review to ensure that the required participant protection procedures are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) will be granted access to study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review process. Confidential access of the information by HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

If you have any questions or are interested in participating, please feel free to contact me at the address below, by email or telephone. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ann Lopez. If you have any questions related to your rights as a participant in this study or if you have any complaints or concerns about how you have been treated as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto, ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

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Dr. Ann Lopez.
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