GAP-TALK: HOW THE “ACHIEVEMENT GAP” REPRODUCES SETTLER COLONIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF RACE WITHIN THE ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how the discourse of “achievement gaps” operates within settler colonialism. This study approached critical policy analysis (CPA) through a settler colonial theoretical lens and Critical Race Theory. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which racism and settler colonialism operate within schools and education institutions. By using critical discourse analysis (CDA), I looked at documents from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) addressing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This analysis shows how these documents construct the notion of achievement as racialized in a way that upholds white settler property rights. The discourse of achievement gaps functions as a settler technology to include/exclude individuals simultaneously into the settler sector of the population. These findings have significant implications for those in educational policy research and practice interested in examining and addressing issues of power and inequality.
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Chapter 1: Achievement Gaps & School Policy

Education reflects the larger values and beliefs in a society as well as legitimizes certain categories of persons and bodies of knowledge at the expense of others (Lucas & Beresford, 2010; Meyer, 1977; Noguera, 2008). In settler-colonial nation states, such as the United States and Canada, the development of publicly funded education cannot be separated from the racist ideologies that have contributed to the hierarchies within these societies (Henry & Tator, 2010; Maynard, 2017; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Carter G. Woodson, in his publication, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), previously outlined the role of schools in (re)producing social inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

In recent years, interest in reducing or closing the achievement gaps has spiked within educational research. The premise of this discourse is that schools should provide racialized children in poor urban communities with equal opportunities to succeed within the education system that constitutes the more privileged white students as the norm (Cross, 2007; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Noguera, 2008). While the increased interest in achievement gaps suggests a new social problem (Cross, 2007), racial disparities in academic achievement have been endemic to public schooling since its beginnings. In the 19th and early 20th century, racial differences in school performance were associated with intellectual ability and attributed to genetic differences (Du Bois, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Woodson, 1933).

As the biological foundations of race began to be challenged, theories that focused on cultural differences were used to explain disparities in educational outcomes. These theories, such as the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis, propose a deficit view of intergenerational
poverty that draw on the notion of a "culture of poverty" and that hold the poor responsible for reproducing the norms that perpetuate poverty; culture, not biology, is the reason why poor children underachieve in school (Noguera, 2008).

The notion of “gaps in achievement” was first introduced through a report commissioned by the Chicago Board of Education in 1964. The Hauser report, which focused primarily on schools attended by African American students, concluded that increasing educational opportunities for these students would “result in a major closing of the achievement gap” (Horsford & Grosland, 2013, p. 155). Two years later, the release of Equality of Educational Opportunity by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare provided a comprehensive analysis of educational achievement disparities. Known as “the Coleman report,” the document described the achievement gap in terms of the academic disparities between white and racialized students (Banks, 2012; Horsford & Grosland, 2013).

Racialized narratives of academic ability, perpetuated by ahistorical interpretations of student performance data, have led to short-term solutions that do not address the legacies of racism and settler colonialism (Hernández, 2016; Horsford, 2017; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera, 2017; Welner & Carter, 2013). Over time, different measurements of academic performance – standardized scores, graduation rates, credit accumulation, assignment to special education, suspension and expulsion rates, and postsecondary pathways – have been used to compare the “achievements” of Indigenous and racialized students with those of white students (Banks, 2012; Lucas & Beresford, 2010). However, whatever measurements are used, the disparities measured are reflective of the historical, economic, and socio-political disadvantages experienced by racialized and Indigenous communities, and not something inherent to these students, families, communities, or cultures. In
other words, scholars have pointed out that what these “measures” of achievement really reflect are the gaps in opportunities between different communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013).

Despite this critique, neoliberal reforms narrowly focused on the achievement gap have resulted in policies addressing the issue through high-stakes accountability measures (Hernández, 2016; Horsford, 2017; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Leonardo, 2007; E. Taylor, 2006; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Welner & Carter, 2013). Rarely do these reforms address the opportunity or resource gap, or factors related to socioeconomic conditions that produce poverty and lead to significant differences in educational outcomes (Anyon, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonardo, 2007; Welner & Carter, 2013). Therefore, education scholars have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to show how policies perpetuate racial inequality (S. R. Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Horsford, 2017; Iverson, 2007; Johnson Jr, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 2003; Patel, 2015; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). In educational policy analysis, CRT has been a useful theoretical and analytical tool for deconstructing the underlying racist assumptions and ideologies of seemingly race-neutral educational policies, and how these contribute to racial disparities in educational outcomes.

In the United States, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was a national legislation that expanded the role of the federal government in regulating schools. The aim was to reduce the achievement gap by focusing on four groups of students – minority students, poor students, English language learners, and students with disabilities (Banks, 2012; Horsford, 2017; Leonardo, 2007; E. Taylor, 2006). In all these groups targeted, racialized students make up a significant portion. The focus of the NCLB is not the white, wealthy, and over-performing schools, but instead places additional pressures on high poverty, underperforming schools. In this
way, the NCLB perpetuates existing negative stereotypes about racialized students while at the same time reinforcing whiteness within a position of power (Horsford, 2017; Leonardo, 2007; E. Taylor, 2006).

Whether understood as a gap in outcomes or in the conditions that enable those outcomes, policy documents addressing the so called achievement gap rarely acknowledge the fact that inequalities are foundational to educational systems. Failing to recognize this aspect leads to solutions that do not really address how inequalities are reproduced within public school systems. Placing the notion of the achievement gap within the larger historical context draws attention to the way that education policies have contributed to processes of inclusion/exclusion within a settler state. In the next section, I focus primarily on the development of the education system in English-speaking Canada, and in Ontario more specifically, which, in recent years, has been praised internationally for its ability to achieve a strong balance between high-quality and high-equity education (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Rezai-Rashti, Segeren, & Martino, 2017). Despite this reputation, in this section I show that how educational policies have contributed historically to racial disparities in educational outcomes, and continue to do so.

**Canadian Settler Colonialism & School Inequality**

Across North America, the historical origins of mass public schooling can be traced to the imperial and colonial project of producing a ‘civilized state.’ For one, the existence and function of schools has depended upon the land rights conferred to these institutions by colonial governments (Knight, 2016; Willinsky, 1998). Additionally, education and literacy have functioned as white settler property by restricting access only to those with the right to own such property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patel, 2015; Prendergast, 2002). As a result, the
experiences of Indigenous and racialized students within state schooling have been deeply influenced by settler colonial ideologies.

In the case of Canada, Knight’s (2016) work illustrates the extent to which the connection between the state and schooling made exclusion a foundation to the state-run education system in Upper Canada (present-day Southern Ontario). Knight (2016) examines Egerton Ryerson’s documents including the *Report on a System of Public Elementary Instruction for Upper Canada* (1846), which preceded the Common School Act of 1846. These documents were to lay the foundation for creating segregated school systems for racialized students and students with disabilities, as well as the residential school system for Indigenous students. Knight (2016) argues that Ryerson constructed normative and non-normative categories of people in imagining his ‘common’ schools (p. 7). This foundational belief of categorizing students as normative and non-normative has marked the history of public education in Canada, from residential schools for Indigenous students to racial segregation for racialized students (Knight, 2016). In this way, the notion of a gap in achievement was foundational in how the schooling system was engineered, both in terms of how students were imagined, as well as in the outcome that were produced by that system.

In the case of Indigenous students, from the start, closing this “gap” required the virtual disappearance of Indigenous peoples, either through genocide or through assimilation. In the signing of treaties, “the Crown agreed that First Nations were full partners in the administration of education,” but “First Nations never delegated to the Crown any role in educating their people” (Henderson, 1995, pp. 247–249). Following the enactment of the Indian Act in 1876 and through further revisions, the federal government began to expand its role in the education of Indigenous children. As one of the goals of settler colonialism is to eliminate Indigenous
peoples’ claims to land, the education of Indigenous children by the state aimed at destroying the transfer of Indigenous identity, politics and culture between generations (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013).

Racialized students, on the other hand, were often denied admission to the state’s common schools. When it came to the education of Black communities in Upper Canada, Black students were denied access to common schools even before the Separate School Act of 1849. Following the Act, the courts refused Black children admission to ‘common’ schools, while schools organized by Black communities were heavily underfunded (H. Harper, 1997). It was not until 1964 that the statue that allowed for racially segregated schools was repealed in Ontario (Backhouse, 1994).

Changes to the Immigration Act and the introduction of a new point system in the 1960s opened the door to a large number of peoples from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America to immigrate and settle in Canada. Coupled with increasing public and international concern about the treatment of Indigenous peoples, immigration paved the way for official recognition of Canada’s cultural diversity through multiculturalism (Henry & Tator, 2010; Joshee, 2008). However, multiculturalism has failed to address the deeper issues of power, resource distribution, and colonial legacies (Coulthard, 2014; Dei, 2011; Haque, 2012; Pashby, Ingram, & Joshee, 2014; Walcott, 1993).

Multiculturalism emerged as a response to Quebec’s French nationalism. Initially, when the federal government established the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1969), the Commission found itself at the intersection of various struggles (Haque, 2012). One of them was the controversy over the 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy introduced by Jean Chrétien, then Minister of Indian Affairs, which sought to assimilate Indigenous communities by
abolishing their Indian Status. This provided a platform for political mobilization among Indigenous groups (Henry & Tator, 2010; Vowel, 2012). The politicization of Indigenous and minoritized ethnocultural groups against the notion of Canadian cultural duality resulted in some ground gained as the B and B Commission gave way to the policy of Bilingualism within a Multicultural Framework (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008; Ghosh & Galczynski, 2014; Haque, 2012; Winter, 2011). The B and B commission established a new bicultural form of Canadian white-settler nationalism by reinforcing English and French settlers as founders of the nation, while failing to address broader questions of colonialism, structural racism, social oppression, and marginalization affecting other groups, including Indigenous communities (Dei, 2011; Gagnon & St-Louis, 2013; Haque, 2012).

Walcott (1993) argues that the new multicultural policy and discourse did not significantly alter the colonial practices and power dynamics already in place. Masked as transformative and progressive politics, multicultural policies throughout the world tended to obscure the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the lives of racialized and Indigenous peoples. The Canadian Multicultural Act uses a set of white supremacist discourses that places the cultures of “Others” under the protectorate of the federal and provincial governments. Thus, the Act portraits the cultures of ‘others’ as static and in need of protection, only then can these groups contribute positively to the (White) nation (Walcott, 1993).

When it came to education, the B and B report established a hierarchy between official and non-official languages by recommending a systematic development of full educational opportunities in both official languages without granting the same degree of support to other languages. Furthermore, the report stated that learning a third language should not come at the expense of learning the second official language (Haque, 2012). As in the past, here a “gap” is
not only imagined between the achievements of groups that speak different languages, but the policy itself produces and in fact maintains that gap.

As the result of funding inequality, euro-centric curricula and pedagogy, as well as institutional practices and structures the needs of Indigenous and racialized students continue to be poorly served by the Canadian education system. In particular, education functions as a constituent of those who possess material wealth (Henry & Tator, 2010; James, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For instance, school funding can vary significantly depending on socio-economic variables and geographic location, and funding inequality exists between Indigenous students attending schools on reserves and non-Indigenous students attending provincial schools (Blatchford, 2016; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013; Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2016). Additionally, school-generated funds can lead to variation within a provincial district (Winsa, 2015).

Policies addressing issues of equity and diversity sometimes circumvent structural change, and can reinscribe the logics of white settler property rights (Ahmed, 2012; Patel, 2015; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017). In 2009, under the Ontario Liberal government, the Ministry of Education released the strategy and PPM No. 119, “Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools” (revised 2013) which replaced the previous 1993 memorandum: Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation. In an accompanying document, Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009), the Ministry of Education states the three core priorities for the new policy: high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly funded education (Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) 2009). In comparing these two equity policies, Rezai-Rashti, Segeren, and Martino (2017) trace
how the documents rearticulate the meaning of equity. The new policy frames closing the achievement gaps and ensuring equitable outcomes as necessary for increasing global economic competitiveness. The authors note the emergence of the gender achievement gap, particularly boys’ underachievement, as the object of policy. However, the category of boys is constructed as a homogeneous group without taking into account the intersectional influence of race and social class. In the 2009 policy, racialized students are replaced with the category “recent immigrant,” which masks the structural inequalities faced by particular groups of racialized students.

Rezai-Rashti, Segeren, and Martino (2017) argue that in the 2009 equity policy, the measures of equity based on student achievement data resulted in a narrow framing of equity that erases issues of race and social class from the public discourse. Additionally, redistributive policy mechanisms for enacting structural change are absent (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017). On the surface, the new reiteration of the equity policy appears as a progressive and inclusive initiative, however, by ignoring the intersectional and structural factors, the policy leaves intact the legacies and logics of white settler colonialism.

In an analysis of Canada’s largest and most diverse public education system, Parekh, Flessa, and Smaller (2016) describe some of the ongoing initiatives by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to ensure equitable outcomes for all students. Their findings show that despite efforts to achieve greater equity, racialized and historically marginalized communities continue to be affected disproportionately when it comes to their educational opportunities. Furthermore, enriched programs (e.g. specialized arts, gifted, French immersion) serve students that are disproportionately white and with greater access to social and economic resources, while racialized and poor students were overrepresented in special education and programs focused on
trades/skills (Parekh, 2013; Parekh, Flessa, & Smaller, 2016; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017).

The racialization of academic achievement has been documented extensively over the past decades. For almost half a century, the former Toronto board had a history of collecting student demographic data through the “Every Secondary Student Survey.” A key focus of the reports was the relationship between immigration, language, race, and class and academic pathways (Parekh et al., 2016). In the early 1990s, the reports released showed that a disproportionate number of Black, Portuguese, and Indigenous students were leaving school without graduating. Furthermore, in 1993, the provincial government established the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning. The Commission released its report, entitled “For the Love of Learning” two years later (OME, 1995). The report summarized the issues with racialized communities in terms of the “risk” of failing and leaving school without graduating, high number of students in special education, and in non-university streams.

Interestingly, the report also acknowledged that the issues identified were reoccurring, but were never addressed through changes in institutional practices. The report mentioned that in the examination of “historical trends and recent educational policy discussions and initiatives makes clear that some issues keep coming up in different forms in different eras, and are never fully resolved” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1995, n.p.). In a section on improving Ontario schools, the members of the commission conclude that if reforms are to be taken seriously, they must be thoughtfully planned, and “must respond to the dynamics of institutional and bureaucratic change” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1995, n.p.). Over twenty years ago, the racial disparities in academic achievement had already been identified at the level of the Board and the province. Although some progress was made, many of the same groups of students that
have been disadvantaged by the schooling system for 150 years continue to experience inequities within the education system.

In 2010, the TDSB established the Achievement Gap Task Force in response to “alarming” disparities in the achievement levels of different groups. It was comprised of TDSB staff including superintendents, principals, vice principals, and other TDSB central staff. The task force reviewed TDSB data and determined, as if it was a surprise, that an achievement gap existed for particular “racialized groups,” which a released draft goes on to name: “Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, Middle Eastern background” (TDSB, 2010, p. 3). It is worth highlighting that the category of “racialized groups” as it was used in the 2010 draft report lumps together students from diverse backgrounds in terms of language, race, immigration, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Without applying an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 2011a; Maynard, 2017), aggregating the data in this manner overemphasizes, whether it is intentionally or not, the differences between groups, while deemphasizing differences within groups (E. Taylor, 2006). This lack of differentiation, as I hope to show in this thesis, is a manifestation of assimilationist practices within a settler state, and function to protect achievement as white settler property.

Thesis Summary

This thesis explores how the racially defined achievement gap operates within the logic and structure of settler colonialism. To do this, I examine how racialized meanings are embedded in and reproduced through discursive representations, such as a school board’s official documents and policies. I focus on the ways in which the language of “gaps” perpetuates racial ordering, white supremacy, and settler colonial relations (Leonardo, 2007; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016;
Veracini, 2010), and how this ensures the continued enforcement of achievement as white settler property.

The focus of this research is to examine TDSB public documents produced to address the achievement or opportunity gaps that particular groups of students face within the Toronto education system. For this thesis, I focus on the groups of students that have been labelled as underachieving in Toronto schools. The following research questions guided the analysis presented in this thesis:

1. How is the achievement gap represented as a “problem” within these documents? What are some of the underlying assumptions of this representation of the problem?
2. How are ethno-racial differences constructed discursively within these documents?
3. How are settler ideologies embedded in these documents?

In the next chapter, I show how an approach to educational policy analysis informed by a settler colonial theoretical lens and Critical Race Theory aids in understanding how the discourse of the achievement gap operates within settler colonialism. Together, these theories provide the conceptual tools to explore how policies actively perpetuate racial ordering, white supremacy, and settler colonial relations. Chapter 3 will introduce a critical policy analysis methodology using critical discourse analysis as an analytic strategy. This critical approach to policy analysis is helpful for understanding the way language is used to construct policy issues in ways that reproduce social inequalities. In this chapter, I also provide an overview of the methods I used in data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the way that the notion of achievement is racialized to protect white settler property rights, and how the discourse of achievement gaps functions as a settler technology to simultaneously include/exclude individuals from the settler
sector of the population. Finally, the last chapter will summarize the main argument of this study, as well as point to some of the implications for educational policy and practice, and research.
Chapter 2: Analyzing Policy Discourse

Policies are central in the organization of contemporary liberal democratic societies (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Scheurich, 2001; Shore & Wright, 1997). In order to understand the processes surrounding the production and application of knowledge of and in policy, analysts have used a variety of approaches grounded in different epistemologies (Diem, Young, Welton, Mansfield, & Lee, 2014; Hoppe, 1999; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). Traditional (i.e positivist) approaches to policy analysis conceptualize policies “as rational, orderly, and capable of producing objective solutions to problems” (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 10). Policies are developed to create and maintain the social order – without questioning the liberal democratic order itself (Scheurich, 2001). From these perspectives, policy-making becomes a “problem-solving activity,” which presupposes that problems exist ‘out there’ to be recognized or identified (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 39).

Stephen Ball (2006) differentiates between policy as a text and policy as a discourse. By text, Ball (2006) refers to the policies themselves, the product of negotiation and contestation at various stages. When policies are created and implemented, they enter existing patterns of inequality (Ball, 2006). As discourses, policies exercise power through the production of knowledge about certain problems, and relations of power shape representations of the world, social relationships and social identities (Atwood & López, 2014; Ball, 2006; Joshee, 2007; S. Taylor, 2004). As a complex social practice, policy is a normative form of cultural production constituted by different actors across contexts (Joshee, 2007, 2008). Policy can be documented and codified, but can also manifest informally through institutional practices (Levinson et al., 2009).
A critical approach to policy analysis explores the ways that policy is not simply a mechanism for achieving incremental degrees of equity; it can also act as a way to preserve the status quo, and structuring racial inequality by extending the interests of those in power (Bacchi, 2000; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Ball, 2006; Levinson et al., 2009). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) argue against the view that policies are created to address particular problems, and instead propose that problems are created through policies (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

Through mechanisms of government, defined broadly to mean any activity aimed at shaping or guiding the behaviour of people, policy serves to maintain the order in a society, and through this, attempts to define reality (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Levinson et al., 2009). This is done mainly through the categorization and labelling of individuals according to statuses and roles, influencing “the way people construct themselves, their behaviour, and their social relations in accordance with a government’s model of social order” (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 5). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) describe the ways in which the creation of “subjects” and “objects” through policy intertwine with one another. The production of “subjects” as certain kinds of subjects requires them to go through a process of objectification, or “subjectification.” Thus, the pairing of “subjects” with certain concepts or categories becomes part of a governing practice.

In this thesis, I take up critical approach to policy analysis, in order to shed light on how educational policies reproduce racialization processes according to settler colonial logics. In order to highlight how the achievement gap produces racial objects, I will drawing on critical race theory, as an important framework that centers race within the analysis to expose the how racialized discourses serve to normalize particular institutional practices while marginalizing others (Harris, 1993; Iverson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Prendergast, 2002).
Critical Perspectives on Race

Contemporary critical perspectives on race emphasize the ways in which this concept is socially and culturally, rather than biologically constructed (Henry, 2010; Quraishi & Philburn, 2015; Twine, 2000). Language plays a central role in the social construction of race and racism (Quraishi & Philburn, 2015). Race as a discursive category utilizes loose and unspecified sets of physical characteristics as symbolic markers to differentiate, and categorize individuals, groups, and communities in society (Hall, 2006; Quraishi & Philburn, 2015).

Henry and Tator (2007) define racism as “based on a shared system of beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes that the dominant or white culture uses to render intelligible the workings of a capitalistic and highly stratified society. These belief systems or ideologies help organize, maintain, and regulate particular forms of power and dominance” (p. 117). In The Colour of Democracy, Henry and Tator (2010) further distinguish between three different levels in which racism operates and the way it manifests. Individual racism refers to the attitudes, beliefs, or opinions in one’s own racial group’s superiority, and the resulting behaviour of discrimination. Institutional racism occurs within collectivities and organizations, and promotes directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, discriminatory policies, practices and procedures. Related is systemic racism which refers to laws, rules, and norms in society that result in unequal distribution of economic, political, social and cultural resources. An overarching form of racism is cultural/ideological racism. It is deeply embedded in a society’s value system, and creates a “we/they” dichotomy of racial superiority (pp. 42-46).

Racial ideology creates and perpetuates structures of inequality and systems of domination based on race, and it is reproduced through institutions of social and cultural transmission, such as schools and universities. For Henry and Tator (2010), ideology provides
the conceptual framework for power structures and dominance in a society. It also influences the ways in which people understand and explain their world- the social, cultural, political, and economic systems and structures that constitute society, and it’s linked to their needs and desires (Henry & Tator, 2010). Ideologies function through discourses, and it is through discourse that the effects of ideology are manifested (Leonardo, 2003). As such, ideological formations are not static, but rather constantly evolve.

The process of racial formation – racialization- pervades structures in contemporary society including state, political, institutional, organizational, and legislative policies and practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2010; Quraishi & Philburn, 2015). It occurs simultaneously as one is categorized according to gender, sexuality, class, language, immigration status, ability, Indigeneity, and religion (Dei, 2013; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Yosso, 2017). Racialization is defined as the “processes by which meanings are attributed to particular objects, features, and processes, in such a way that the latter are given special significance and carry or are embodied with a set of additional meanings” (Miles, 1989, p. 70 as cited in Henry & Tator, 2010). The focus on meaning is crucial in understanding race and racism. Persons, attitudes, actions, and events are given particular meanings by particular groups for particular purposes. However, these meanings are not universal. Different meanings may operate simultaneously, sometimes competing. For example, racial categorization and othering has been construed as disempowering, whereas reflexive acts of self-racialization can become the basis for empowerment (Quraishi & Philburn, 2015).

**Critical Race Theory and Policy Analysis**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used to challenge the assumed rationality, neutrality and objectivity embedded in policies by showing how policy initiatives intended to serve historically
marginalized communities actually benefited middle and upper class white interests (Crenshaw, 2011b; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017; Harris, 1993; Iverson, 2007; Prendergast, 2002). CRT takes as its point of departure an understanding that race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity and thus in shaping public policy.

Although critical thinking about race had circulated in the academy for years, it was within the context of particular institutional and discursive struggles that CRT emerged in the 1970s as an intellectual movement seeking justice, liberation, and economic empowerment (Henry & Tator, 2010; Tate, 1997). Critical legal scholars such as Derick Bell (1980), Richard Delgado (1984), Charles R. Lawrence (1987), and Denise Carty-Bennia, among others, sought to challenge the liberal notions that informed legal discourse on racial progress (Crenshaw, 2011b).

CRT approaches have demonstrated the ways in which whiteness has been used as the normative standard for progress and success in a way that legitimize dominant (white) cultural norms and institutions (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017; Iverson, 2007; Ray, Randolph, Underhill, & Luke, 2017). In her influential article, “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris (1993) traces the way in which ideas about “whiteness” were central to the construction of “property” within the legal system of the United States. Furthermore, she shows how certain “subjects” went through a process of objectification through different reiterations of the concept of “property.” Citing numerous historical legal cases, Harris (1993) shows how the definition of property has been “contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race” (p. 1714). The emergence of “whiteness as property” is tied historically to the legal enshrinement of Black slaves as property and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. As the meaning of property has changed over time, “whiteness” and “property” still share “the right to exclude” as “a common premise” (p. 1714). The legal system has played a key role in instituting racial
hierarchies that privilege whiteness as the norm (Harris, 1993). Harris’ article has become a classic of CRT because her analysis shows how stratified property rights organized social relationships and upheld whiteness even as notions about property changed (Patel, 2015).

Critical Race Theory’s goal to challenge existing epistemological and ontological constructions of race and racism makes it a useful framework for inquiring about the racialized effects of educational policy (Parker, 2003). By challenging liberal notions of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy, CRT exposes how these are used to camouflage the self-interest of the dominant groups (Crenshaw, 2011b; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). Much of the CRT literature in education has addressed specific issues and policies. Parker (2003) provides examples of scholarship that has used CRT as a framework “to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintains the subordination of students of color” (p. 152). The examples include Solórzano’s (1998) analysis of seemingly race-neutral policies juxtaposed the counternarratives of Chicanx students, and Brady, Eatman, and Parker’s (2000) analysis of descriptive statistical data to examine funding inequalities in higher education.

Building on the work of Solórzano and Yosso (2002), Parker (2003) details the aspects of CRT as a framework: CRT places the intersection of race with other forms of oppression at the centre of research; challenges dominant scientific forms of objectivity and neutrality; it is concerned with social justice aims; makes experiential knowledge central to the research; and it is interdisciplinary in nature (Parker, 2003, p. 158). CRT takes on a revisionist approach to

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1 The “x” sign has recently been adopted by Latin American communities to be more representative of its members regardless of gender. It is meant to be more inclusive as it moves beyond the gender binary of Chicana/o.
history to scrutinize majoritarian interpretations of historical events to align them more accurately with the experiences of racialized communities (S. R. Harper et al., 2009).

A CRT approach in policy analysis acknowledges the prevalence of racism in policy discourses and challenges the deficit-based beliefs about racialized peoples/communities (Iverson, 2007). CRT also challenges the white racial experience as the standard for progress and success (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017; Iverson, 2007). Thus, a CRT perspective on policy interrogates the production of knowledge through policy by focusing on race and exposing the racialized discourses that normalize particular institutional practices while marginalizing others (Harris, 1993; Iverson, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Prendergast, 2002). In the next section, I draw on CRT’s understanding of whiteness as property to understand how educational policy might function to reinforce white settler property rights.

**Educational Policy as White Settler Property**

In the field of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solórzano (1998) introduced Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Iverson, 2007; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Since then, CRT has enabled education scholars to examine issues of racism and educational inequity. Reviewing the use of CRT in education over the past twenty years, Ledesma and Calderón (2015) and Howard and Navarro (2016) show how the literature has increasingly addressed issues within curriculum, pedagogy, teacher education and development, policy and schooling more generally.

CRT scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Prendergast (2002) built on Harris’ (1993) argument of whiteness as property to illustrate the way in which education is and represents white property. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) advanced the relation between
property and education through explicit ways such as school funding inequity. Additionally, the authors put forth the way in which property manifests through curriculum as representing a form of “intellectual property” (p. 54). They further argued that the existence of “enriched intellectual property” presupposed the availability of material resources, ‘real’ property. Finally, the authors use the intersection of race and property highlighted by CRT to expose some of the ways education systems privilege white, middle-class norms, values, and culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Prendergast (2002) establishes how education has been “a specifically racialized attribute” through historical examples of educational policies used to deny equal education to African Americans (p. 210). By analyzing landmark legal cases related to education, Prendergast (2002) shows how “ideologies of literacy” maintained education as white property in the United States by framing education in terms of equality of opportunity, instead of equality of outcomes (p. 209). The cases narrowly defined racism as intentional, and restricted it to segregation. The decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas constructed equal education as the opportunity to be educated among Whites, and gave no provisions for improving the conditions of underfunded schools for racialized students. Once segregated racialized groups were granted access to all-White schools, literacy standards were perceived to decline. Furthermore, the decisions in the other two cases did not account for how racism forms part of institutional practices; instead, they maintained that measurements of literacy standards were racially and culturally neutral, and, as result, reinforced the belief that Whites were more intelligent. In the end, the premise of equal opportunity did not challenge white supremacy, and instead had the effect of blaming individuals for the stratified outcomes that schooling actually facilitates.
In his critique of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*, Leonardo (2007) argues that through the federal legislation whiteness is ratified as part of nation building. In “a white-dominated country,” as are the United States and Canada, education policies represent an “instantiation of whiteness” (p. 262), where the white referent is invisible, but represents the standard to which other groups are held. Additionally, the policy deploys a discourse of colour-blindness that fails to acknowledge the link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society. Instead of providing additional resources, the NCLB threatens to take away funding from underperforming schools, many of them with higher populations of racialized students. As a result, the policy fails to locate the source of the problem, and provides “license to declare students of color failures under a presumed-to-be fair system” (p. 269).

The manner in which the process of racialization occurs is bound to time and space according to how systems of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy interlock (Arvin et al., 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Crenshaw, 2011b; Henry & Tator, 2010). The processes of racialization and colonialism have worked simultaneously to secure white dominance through time, property and notions of self (Byrd, 2011). However, while CRT focuses on race and racism, it does not address the experiences of colonization of Indigenous communities, and the specificity of their political and racialized subjectivity (Brayboy, 2005). Due to the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous peoples/land, Indigenous scholars, such as Jodi Byrd (2011), and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016), have warned against including Indigeneity as another racial category. The struggles of Indigenous communities are not about achieving formal equality within a settler state, but are about land and self-determination (Arvin et al., 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Carrillo Rowe & Tuck, 2017; Kauanui, 2016; Lawrence & Dua, 2005).
Using CRT together with a settler colonial theoretical lens provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding how different groups of people are located within a stratified society, particularly one structured by settler colonialism, as is the case of both the United States and Canada (Patel, 2015; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Understanding the settler colonial constructions of race brings to the foreground the relations between Indigenous erasure, anti-Blackness, and othering of racialized communities within the settler-colonial nation state (Haque, 2012; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). It also draws attention to the way in which different groups have been racialized differently throughout their histories on this land in accordance with the shifting needs of the nation.

A settler society is one in which settlers position themselves as superior, become the law, and attempt to supplant Indigenous laws and epistemologies (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Veracini, 2010). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) differentiate settlers from immigrants, since the latter must adhere to the laws and epistemologies of the land they migrate to. Settlers come to view the new territory as their homeland (Weitzer, 1990; Wolfe, 2006). The process of establishing a settler society is dependent upon Indigenous erasure through the disruption of Indigenous societies, economies, and governance, genocide, land theft, and dispossession (Arvin et al., 2013; Stasiulis & Yuval-Davis, 1995; Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

The formation of settler colonial states operates through logics of empire and use internal and external forms of colonization simultaneously. Relationships to Indigenous land are reduced to relations to property, while simultaneously persons are remade into property through the proprietary logic of slavery (Arvin et al., 2013; Harris, 1993; Sexton, 2016; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Wolfe, 2006). While the goal of settler colonialism is to erase Indigenous claims to land,
its economic structures necessitate the expansion of slave and cheap labour (Arvin et al., 2013; Carrillo Rowe & Tuck, 2017; Harris, 1993; Sexton, 2016; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016; Wolfe, 2006). Thus, disposessed peoples come to be on Indigenous land as the result of other colonial projects including enslavement, indentured labour, military recruitment, and displacement/migration (Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006).

According to Veracini (2010), a settler colonial project establishes a system of relations between the (European) settler coloniser, the Indigenous communities, and subaltern exogenous Others. The relationships between these categories are flexible and dynamic to allow the (European) settler coloniser to maintain control of the population economy with the aim of eventually superseding the settler colonial circumstance.

In a settler colonial situation, the settler is defined by its sovereign entitlement and is always represented as virtuous. The legitimacy of settler states depends on the belief that Indigenous lands were empty and based on the ideology of “Manifest Destiny,” rooted in ideals of white supremacy that propelled the expansion of the settler state. With the aid of their legal system and institutions, settlers maintain their rule over Indigenous peoples and lands (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). According to Comeau (2005), this is accompanied by a pastoral ethic and a sense of moral responsibility that has served to justify “the divinely ordained moral imperative to assimilate all others” (p. 10). At the same time as, settler colonialism seeks to conceal the violence inherent to the colonial relation (Calderón, 2014b; Foucault, 1982; Thobani, 2007). The relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples becomes one of guardian-ward, instead of the original nation to nation agreements, leading to narratives that the settler state is universal, inclusive and benevolent (Calderón, 2014b; Macoun & Strakosch, 2013). Settler normativity is established through its ambiguous location between Indigenous and exogenous
Others, as they can be considered to be Indigenous and exogenous simultaneously (Veracini, 2010).

Indigenous and exogenous Others can be represented as virtuous, or at least, having the potential to lead a regenerated lifestyle, but can also be represented as hopelessly ‘debased.’ Indigenous and exogenous subjectivities hold separate positions within the settler colonial population economy, since Indigenous presence undermines the legitimacy of the settler entity (Veracini, 2010). The logic of elimination requires the disruption of Indigenous communities and their claims to land and territory, but not through a particular method (Macoun & Strakosch, 2013; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 2006). In the case of exogenous Others, a process of selective inclusion permits some individuals to be recognized as “probationary settlers,” on condition that they embrace a settler colonial ethos (Veracini, 2010, p. 26).

The permanence of the settler state is ensured through ideologies, discourses and institutional practices (Calderón, 2014b; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The boundaries of the three entities are managed flexibly, and processes of inclusion and exclusion take place concurrently. The aim of settler colonialism is to eventually supersede its Indigenous and exogenous alterities (Veracini, 2010). Veracini (2010) provides a number of strategies employed within settler colonial formations to shift groups of people from one section of the population system to another. As one of these strategies, assimilation requires that Indigenous and exogenous Others conform to notions of settler racial, cultural or behavioural norms. Through the use of the language of ‘improving,’ ‘uplifting,’ and ‘progress,’ assimilation positions Indigenous and exogenous Others as only temporarily excluded, thus, legitimizing the claim of settler institutions to represent all sectors of the population.
The possibility of assimilation serves to undermine Indigenous autonomy (Veracini, 2010). The distinction between Indigenous peoples that have been transformed by contact, and those who maintained their traditional ways, leads to questioning the authenticity of their Indigeneity (St. Denis, 2004). Thus, they may be (mis)recognized or treated as exogenous Others – a move that undermines their political authority, and, at the same time, reinforces the legitimacy of the settler entity (Strakosch, 2015; Veracini, 2010). In this example, assimilation is coupled with racialization, another strategy, which seeks to replace Indigenous alterities with exogenous ones and reinforce settler normativity. In doing so, settler colonialism disappears behind other systems of oppression (Byrd, 2011; Veracini, 2010). As I hope to show in this thesis, assimilation is the central strategy that underlies the colonial logic of the achievement gap.

Settler states use social policies to manage their populations, and reinscribe colonial relations (Coulthard, 2014; Strakosch, 2015; Veracini, 2010). Policies recreate the image of the settler as sovereign, at the same time as they attempt to eliminate Indigenous political difference (Strakosch, 2015). Given the incompletion of the settler colonial project, this practice must be re-enacted constantly. Rather than being an exercise of political authority, collective political identities are constituted through policy. When policies use the language of Indigenous improvement and settler goodwill to describe settler-Indigenous relations, they reveal the ongoing colonial relations and the aim of assimilation. As such, policies represent a key site for contesting the completion of the settler colonial project (Strakosch, 2015).

In the case of Canada, Eve Haque (2012) draws from the work of Ronald Weitzer (1990) to show how the nation-state established itself through the three pillars of settler rule: control of the ‘Native population,’ autonomy from the metropole, and ensuring settler solidarity and social
The location of whiteness at the top of the racial hierarchy is founded upon the principles of colonialism, and more specifically settler colonialism in North America. Ideas about cultural and biological superiority of (white) settlers enabled a particular type of nationalism that excluded Indigenous and racialized communities (Calderón, 2014b, 2014a; Wolfe, 2006). The inscription of whiteness as the nation’s identity was legislated through state policies and practices, which privileged the English and French, and subsequently settlers from other parts of Europe (Haque, 2012; Thobani, 2007). Race as law became central in the process of national formation, and the Canadian legal system was implicated in the enforcement of racial inequality (Pashby et al., 2014; Thobani, 2007). The culture, norms, and values associated with racialized whiteness – including, in this case, the very idea of achievement – come to be viewed as normal and natural in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres of society. In this way, whiteness becomes the standard to which others are measured and often found to be inferior (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016).

Racialized immigrants are located between the settler and the Indigenous populations as the result of racial hierarchies organized through state policies. As immigrants have sought inclusion and recognition within the state, they have further contributed to the development of the settler society and exploitation of Indigenous communities/land (Thobani, 2007). Although not equal partners in colonial project, immigrants have (un)willingly become implicated in the colonial project and dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Thobani, 2007).

Formal education, as a settler institution, forms part of larger colonial discursive practices. Comeau (2005) argues that contemporary education policy continues to reproduce colonial power relations. The author compares education discourses in Canada during the late 1800s and early 1900s with contemporary educational reform. At the onset of public
schooling, Comeau (2005) illustrates how the formation of settler identity as normative and superior was contingent on the degeneracy of others, that is, it assume a “gap” in moral status. This sense of superiority fueled a moral responsibility to assimilates others – or to, “narrow the gap,” while those who were considered inadmissible into the settler body politic were excluded and segregated. Although approaches to education have changed, particularly with the introduction of multicultural policies and discourses, Comeau (2005) outlines how white middle and upper class settler identities continue to be positioned as normative, while constructing others as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘at-risk’ (p. 17).

A settler colonial theoretical lens complements the work of CRT in educational policy analysis by exposing the ways in which policies actively perpetuate white supremacy and settlerhood (Calderón, 2014b; Kelm, 1998; Milloy, 1999). Colonial hierarchies continue in a context of the nominal inclusion of Indigenous and racialized communities (Strakosch, 2015; Thobani, 2007). In the case of Indigenous peoples, acts of inclusion and recognition also serve to legitimize the authority of the settler state and ensure settler futurity since the land has not actually been returned, and institutions have not changed significantly (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Moreton-Robinson, 2011; Strakosch, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Furthermore, CRT in conjunction with theories of settler colonialism provide the analytical tools to understand how the language of “gaps” perpetuates racial ordering, white supremacy, and settler colonial relations. More specifically, this work seeks to understand how the racialization of achievement perpetuates white settler ideologies.

Drawing on these conceptual frameworks, in the rest of this thesis I show how the very idea of the achievement gap works as an assimilationist technology that works to include/exclude individuals into the settler sector of the population. I argue that the documents construe the
notion of achievement in a way that reinscribes white settler property rights. As a result, the proposed solutions do not address the problem that causes the racial disparities in achievement in the first place.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this thesis, I used a critical policy analysis (CPA) methodology drawing on critical discourse analysis as an analytic strategy. CPA is a methodology that allows for examining how policy problems are constituted given the uneven distribution of knowledge, power, and resources in a stratified society (Diem et al., 2014). This critical approach to policy analysis is helpful for understanding whose interests are represented through policies (Lester, Lochmiller, & Gabriel, 2016). The work in this thesis is based on an approach to critical policy analysis informed through the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Race Theory and theories of settler colonialism.

In order to answer my research questions, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the links among language and discourses in (re)producing racism, white supremacy, and settler colonial ideologies embedded within the discourse of achievement gaps. CDA is an approach to analysis that allows the researcher to illuminate the way language is used to construct policy issues in ways that uphold the status quo or challenge it. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methods I used in data collection and analysis.

As stated in the first chapter, I looked at public documents from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) as data for this thesis. The documents include: The Achievement Task Force Draft Report (2010) and Opportunity Gap Action Plan (OGAP) (2011), and the Draft Opportunity Gap Report (2011), a companion piece to OGAP that outlines how the action plan aligns with the TDSB’s Equity Policy Foundation Statement (1999). I chose these documents because I am interested in understanding how the “problem” of the achievement gap came to be defined racially. However, I also considered other documents for close analysis, including: the Equity Foundation Statement (1999) at the Board level, and Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive
Education Policy (2009), Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education (2008), and First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2007) at the provincial level.

The first of these documents to be released was the draft Achievement Gap Task Force Report (2010). The report was produced by TDSB staff, “superintendents of education, principals, vice principals, and central staff” (p. 3). The absence of parents, community members and organizations, and student leaders was not missed by the Board’s Equity Policy Advisory Committee (EPAC) who released a public critique of the report (McCaskell, n.d.). The draft report is divided in three main sections: the introduction, directions for considerations and appendices. The first section, the introduction, is divided into Context, Task Force Mandate, Process, and Assertions. The second section of the report contains nineteen directions for consideration. It begins with the System Challenge, and then goes on to list current Student Achievement Initiatives, Using Student Data, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Addressing Racism, Student Engagement, Schools of Opportunity, and Schools of Choice (for Indigenous and Black students), each with some action items. The last section of the report contains two appendices, the task force findings, which summarizes key findings, and a summary of the directions for consideration, which summarizes the 19 action items.

The OGAP (2011) document was presented to the TDSB’s Programs and School Services Committee to be approved. The document is divided into different sections that include: the rationale for the action plan, the context, next steps, and finally the call to action with a year by year plan. The Rationale includes how the action plan fits with the board’s newly introduced Strategic Directions and Annual Operating Plan for 2011 to 2015. In setting the Context for the plan, OGAP (2011) framed poverty as the main factor affecting educational achievement, and discusses it extensively by providing statistics on child poverty in Toronto and the TDSB.
The Draft OGAP Report (2011) is mainly a reiteration of the TDSB’s Equity Policy (1999), but includes how OGAP will address each of the policy’s commitments (curriculum, equitable opportunities, parent and community partnerships etc.). The text is divided into three sections: a) Equity Foundation Statement, which is mostly about the Board and where the Board is positioned as an agent capable of doings things: valuing, recognizing, having commitments; b) the proposed actions of OGAP and how they address the Board’s commitments to equity, which included some initiatives already underway (e.g voluntary identification process for Indigenous students); c) questions about costs, timelines, youth involvement etc. and the answers.

Critical Policy Analysis

Although finding the underlying commonalities among ‘criticalists’ can become a ‘risky’ endeavor (Locke, 2004, p. 25), a critical approach incorporates a range of perspectives concerned with the intersection of power, oppression, and privilege (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011). According to Frost & Elichaoff (2014), critical theories provide qualitative researchers with the conceptual tools to explore how cultural dynamics interact to construct social systems and the resulting power relations that develop. Through them, the researcher is also required to engage with the notions of ethics and politics of research and scholarship (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014).

Cannella and Lincoln (2011) propose that a critical ethics would value and recognize the need to: expose the diversity of realities; engage with the webs of interactions that construct problems in ways that lead to power/privilege for particular groups; reposition problems and decisions towards social justice; and join in solidarity with the traditionally oppressed to create new ways of functioning (p. 83). Critical theories challenge the assumptions of universality of experience and behaviours advanced by traditional research approaches, which have been used to perpetuate relations of oppression and marginalization (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). For Cannella
and Lincoln (2011), critical perspectives reconceptualize the questions and practice of research by identifying with marginalized peoples and recognizing the “need to avoid forms of representation that maintain power in traditional locations” (p. 82).

Within the educational policy realm, Diem et al. (2014) outline five broad areas of study by scholars approaching policy analysis with a critical perspective. The first area involves the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality. The second area focuses on the emergence of a policy, and its development. The third area involves the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge. The fourth area is concerned with social stratification and the relationship between policy, inequality, and privilege. Finally, the fifth area focuses on how members of marginalized groups resist and assert their agency within schools (Diem et al., 2014).

The analysis presented in this thesis aims at exploring the ways in which the achievement gap has been defined racially. Given that the education system in Toronto was built on the principles of settler colonialism, educational policies are bound to reinforce existing racial hierarchies and power relations. In order to understand the mechanisms through which the discourse of achievement gaps reproduces the racial ordering of settler colonialism, I approached policy through CDA. The purpose is to bring to the foreground those colonial structures and discourses that shape educational policy with the hope of imagining new ways of relating to each other.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

CDA has been used widely within educational policy analysis. Policy analysts have used CDA through different aspects of the policy-making process – from the construction of a policy
problem through to the critique of existing policies. The sources of data have included mission statements, textbooks, transcripts of meetings, representations of policy in the media etc. (Lester, Lochmiller, & Gabriel, 2017; Rogers et al., 2016). CDA is particularly well suited for drawing attention to the ways in which circulating discourses shape the way issues are constructed and the responses that become available (Bacchi, 2000, p. 48).

There are many approaches to discourse analysis that draw from different theoretical traditions in social theory (Gee, 2011a; Lester et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2016; S. Taylor, 2004). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to explore “the relationship between language and other social processes and of how language works within power relations” (S. Taylor, 2004, p. 3). In describing his approach to discourse analysis, Paul Gee (2011) contends that “language has meaning only in and through social practices” (emphasis in the original p.12). These social practices involve ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, and valuing that form systems of meaning, produce subjects, and regulate behaviours (Gee, 2011a; MacLure, 2003).

Discourses are interwoven in social, cultural, institutional, political and economic relationships. They influence how individuals produce, reproduce, sustain and/or transform social practices. Unequal access to ‘mainstream’ discourses also lead to the unequal distribution of social, political, and economic benefits. These tend to be represented along particular lines of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, physical competence, and other forms of social differentiation. Thus, power becomes concentrated with particular groups at the expense of others, and discourses normalize these power relations and social inequalities. However, power also represents the productive set of relations from which subjectivity, agency, knowledge and action emerge. In this sense, discourses both enable and constrain solutions to educational and social problems (Gee, 2011a; MacLure, 2003).
For historical, social, political and economic reasons, the dominant discourses of schooling reward and sustain the cultural capital of white, middle-class homes. These particular discourses become ‘normalized’ and set to be the standard for all students. The dominant construction of what it means to be an ‘ideal student’ is constructed in a particular image, and is reinforced through policy and everyday classroom practices (Bacchi, 2000; Gee, 2011a). In the case of children who have not been socialized to follow a particular narrative, for example, their form of communication may be seen as ‘disorganized,’ or ‘exaggerating.’ The exclusion of alternative forms of discourse marginalizes particular knowledges, forms of expertise, and identities.

As an analytical strategy, CDA is a ‘situated political practice’ that provides a framework for systematic analysis (S. Taylor, 2004, pp. 2–3). In exploring how texts construct representations of social identities, relationships, and society, there is also an emphasis placed on how these practices and texts are shaped by relations of power. CDA serves to expose the ways in which power manifests in discourses, the formation of knowledge, and the marginalization of particular subjects (MacLure, 2003).

CDA is not without its critics. Henry Widdowson’s (2005; cited in Henry & Tator, 2007) contends that CDA confuses analysis with interpretation. According to Widdowson, instead of engaging in critical analysis, according to Widdowson, CDA results in a partial interpretation of the text based on ideology. However, as Fairclough contends, CDA acknowledges its own partiality, and is explicit in its political commitments. To attempt to have a purely “objective” stance would be to take for granted the ways in which discourse maintains relations of dominance. Michael Stubb (1997; as cited Henry & Tator, 2007), another of its critics argues that if ideology cannot be read of text because “there is not a one-to-one correspondence between
form and function” (p. 4; as cited Henry and Tator, 2007), then the meaning derives from the analyst’s own interests and knowledges – their opinions. Thus, it is an example of circularity.

Stubb also criticizes CDA methodology for lacking scientific rigidity. Although the CDA methodology is a rejection of the scientific paradigm, it does not mean it leads to faulty conclusions. Fairclough (1996) indicates that analysis represents the ‘reasonably systematic application of reasonably well defined procedures to a reasonably well defined body of data’ (p. 52; as cited in Henry & Tator, 2007). Henry and Tator (2007) also dismiss this criticism by stating that Stubb misunderstands the purpose of deconstruction in revealing layers of meaning through the use of specific linguistic features.

The links among language, ideology, and discourses play an important role in (re)producing racism and white supremacy in settler colonial societies (Henry & Tator, 2007; Leonardo, 2003). The exclusion and marginalization of racialized and Indigenous peoples is a function of white settler colonial ideology (Veracini, 2010). However, it is through discourse, that ideas about social relations of domination are transmitted. CDA provides an analytical tool to understand how racialized meanings are embedded and (re)produced through discursive presentations. In particular, I have chosen this approach to understand how these racialized groups are being constructed and represented through the discourse of the “achievement gap.”

Documents Analysis

This study looked at public documents from the TDSB as data, since these represent official, ongoing records related to the public education system in the city. Documents broadly defined refer to the range of written, visual, digital, and physical artifacts (Merriam, 2009). They are situated within “systems of reality” and their status as documents depend on the ways in which these objects are integrated to “networks of action” including particular structures and discourses
(Prior, 2003, p. 2). According to Lindsay Prior (2003), they “express and represent a set of discursive practices” and can be mobilized for different social, political, and cultural purposes” (p. 12). Documents are agents and are open to “manipulation by others” (p. 3). This method allows for addressing questions related to the intersections of power across systems and institutions in an unobtrusive manner (Esterberg, 2002). Instead of focusing on human beings as objects of data collection, social structures and institutions become the subject of my research (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011).

Data collection and analysis of documents is heavily dependent on the researcher. Prior (2003) contends that in social science research, the focus is often on the content of documents, but interpreting these documents required that I paid careful attention to the content, as well as the way that language was being used. I, as the researcher, find myself socially situated in the world, which simultaneously guides and constrains the work of this study. This study is guided by some broader questions stemming from my own experiences as a Latinx immigrant within Toronto’s education system and influenced by the reports released by the TDSB. As a researcher, my own social position is bound to influence which documents are chosen for data collection and analysis as well as which discourses receive greater attention (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). As such, reflexivity plays a crucial role in the research process. Reflexivity is “turning back” on ourselves, so that “we become accountable for our own research paradigms,” “positions of authority”, and “moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation” (Madison, 2012, p. 8).

I approached the texts using Paul Gee’s (2011) tools for analyzing discourse. His approach attends closely to the structure of language and how the structure informs meaning-making (Gee, 2011a, 2011b). I read and re-read the documents carefully asking different questions of the data each time. The first readings were broad to understand what was in the
documents (content), and how they were structured. In each subsequent reading, I looked at the different ways that language was being used. In particular, I was interested in knowing how these documents framed racialized and Indigenous students in relation to the achievement gap. As such, I looked for how the text described these students, and how they were positioned within the text; what kinds of relationships were being established through the use of vocabulary and grammar? How were words and grammar used to construct social goods, and how were they distributed or withheld from particular groups?

This analysis also required asking questions such as: what were some the assumptions made in the text, and what was taken for granted? How else could something have been written? A related question: Why was something written in a particular way and not another, what did that accomplish? Do the texts reference other ‘texts’? if so, how? What discourses was the text building or enacting? How did this shape what readers would take as relevant, and how did this replicate similar contexts?

I also asked specific questions about how grammar was being used in the texts: How was information being organized in terms of subjects and predicates? What was placed in the subject position and what was said about them? What were the topics and themes of sentences and clauses? Were there deviations from the usual (unmarked) choice? How did topics link to each other (or not) to provide coherence? How were clauses integrated into sentences or how were clauses turned into phrases? What information was left out, backgrounded, or made salient in the process? How were grammatical devices used to indicate relevance or lessen the significance of something? How were words and grammar used to establish the connection between things or ignored their relevance?
In this chapter, I introduced critical policy analysis as my methodology and described the steps I took to develop my analysis. Critical policy analysis allowed me to examine how the documents construed the problem of the achievement gap, and how the proposed solutions do not really address the way achievement is racialized. CDA enabled me to interpret the texts in a way that reveal how the discourse of the “achievement gap” reproduced racial hierarchies according to settler colonial logics. In the next chapter, I show how policies that seek to address issues of inequity still reproduce white settler property rights.
Chapter 4: Achievement as White Settler Property

In this chapter, I will show how the discourse of “achievement gaps” works as a technology of settler colonialism to include as well as exclude individuals into the settler collective. In order to do that, I first discuss how the texts establish the authority of the Board as a settler institution by framing it as a kind and “benevolent shepherd” drawing from a pastoral logic rooted in white settler supremacy and manifest destiny. This is followed by illustrating how the texts position racialized and Indigenous students as the problem by portraying them as damaged and dysfunctional. By implicitly framing achievement as white property, the texts’ proposed solutions position racialized and Indigenous students as having to become more like their white counterparts in order to achieve. In framing the problem this way, the texts protect notions of achievement as white settler property. Furthermore, focusing on the shortcomings of racialized and Indigenous students, the solutions to the problem do not require addressing the institutional practices that actually marginalize students in schools. In the last section, I discuss how the plan circumvents structural change by comparing some of the recommendations with the actual initiatives presented.

The Board – “Us”

First, it is important to understand how these policy documents express how the board understands itself as an agent and how they construe schools as benevolent institutions capable of uplifting marginalized students. The texts establish the legitimacy of the Board by presenting the actions already taken to address the achievement gaps:

There are several school improvement initiatives currently underway designed to address student achievement in the TDSB... These initiatives provide important approaches to improving student achievement in all schools. They will
collectively raise the achievement bar for all students, by building instructional capacity to enhance learning and improve schools. (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 5)

The focus of this section is primarily to show that the Board has already made the effort to intervene. In the subject/topic position are the “school improvement initiatives” already underway within the Board. What these initiatives actually accomplish, such as addressing student achievement or “building instructional capacity,” is given less significance in the text as this information appears in embedded clauses. The information that goes into subordinate or embedded clauses is backgrounded – it is information that readers are supposed to know already or take for granted (Gee, 2011b). Similarly, OGAP (2011) also underscores the Board’s efforts for improving the academic achievement of all students:

Through the Director’s Vision of Hope, a relentless and intentional focus on student achievement and ‘learning for all’ has resulted in notable achievement gains in grade 3, 6 and 9 provincial assessment and graduation rates, as well as improved external rankings by organizations such as the Fraser Institute. (TDSB, 2011d, p. 95–96,99)

The documents describe closing the achievement gap and meeting the needs of a “diverse urban community” as “not an easy task” and “a major and challenging mission” that “will require extraordinary measures” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010). The use of the adjective “relentless” in this sentence frames the Board as persevering against some adversary condition, and resulting from its efforts, there have been “notable achievement gains.” The Board as a benevolent agent reflects the pastoral ethic of an institution founded on Judeo-Christian values (Foucault, 1982). According to the document, “a call to action is our collective and moral responsibility” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 96,99). This moral responsibility positions the board as responsible for students’ well-being:
But our schools do have a moral responsibility to ensure the very best environments for learning for all students. That entails an enormous commitment to do everything possible to help the most vulnerable, the least engaged, and the least successful. (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 14).

The texts establish sovereign entitlement through the discourse of “moral responsibility” and manifest destiny (Calderón, 2014b; Comeau, 2005; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Veracini, 2010). This discourse represents an extension of the settler’s sense of moral superiority and has been used to justify assimilatory practices (Comeau, 2005). The text implicitly describes Indigenous and racialized students as being the “most vulnerable, the least engaged, and the least successful,” and positions them again as passive recipients of the Board’s generosity. This pastoral logic functions to disempower groups, while those who design the policies are construed as “holding power” (Bacchi, 2000, p. 54).

The policy text embedded within the OGAP draft report (2011), particularly, uses the first person plural ‘we’ to refer to the Board. The texts portray the Board, an abstract entity, as an agent with the capacity to carry out actions such as providing, approving, making decisions, receiving, serving, recognizing, valuing, believing, ensuring etc. For example, the draft report (2011) begins by stating:

*The Toronto District School Board values the contribution of all members of our diverse community of students, staff, parents and community groups to our mission and goals. We believe that equity of opportunity and equity of access to our programs, services and resources are critical to the achievement of successful outcomes for all those whom we serve, and for those who serve our school system. (TDSB, 2011a, p. 1).*

The Board is described as a collective entity by using the pronoun ‘we.’ In these two sentences, which are reiterations of the Board’s Equity policy (1999), the Board is the
subject/topic. Here, the Board is described as carrying out an action using the transitive verbs
value and believe. In the first sentence, “the contribution of all members of our diverse
community…” is a nominalization of the clause “all members of our diverse community of
students, staff, parents and community groups contribute to our mission and goals.” In the
process of turning a clause into a phrase, information is often left out (Gee, 2011b). The
“members of our diverse community…” go from being agents to passive recipients of the
Board’s regard and esteem. This sentence construed the Board as autonomous, while
disempowering students, staff, parents and community groups.

In the texts, the collective includes (successful) schools and students (general) as part of
the school system. The Board staff is constituted as belonging to the “school family,” but this
sentiment is not extended to parents and community members. Implicitly, the text degrades all
other settings where marginalized students live; their families and communities are not seen as
being capable of providing them with the opportunities to develop particular sets of skills:

For marginalized students, the school provides the best opportunities for
developing healthy social relationships with peers and for participating in
cultural and recreational activities. It is also the only place available to them
where they can develop their leadership skills, their capacity to think critically
about their lives and to express their opinions about school and their lives outside
of school (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 11)

This paragraph is illustrative of how, on the one hand, the board imagines schools as
capable of benefitting all students, while on the other, positioning “marginalized students” as
incapable of advancing their own interests without the assistance of the schools. Although the
“school” is the subject/topic of the two sentences, the marked theme makes this short paragraph
about “marginalized students” and the deficits the school is supposed to help them overcome. As
in much of the text, the “school” is positioned as the agent, and the “marginalized students” are positioned as passive recipients of the school’s good will. The clause, “the school provides the best opportunities,” emphasizes this idea. In order to make such claims, the text ignores the schooling practices that actually marginalize students, and their effect on student achievement. The Achievement Gap report (2010), in its concluding remarks, provides a clearer view of how the role of parents and communities is understood:

_The way forward also lies in the responsibility that adult caregivers play in the personal and school lives of students. Parents and guardians must take responsibility for providing the structures and guidance necessary for students to be ready to learn and engage with their teachers and schools. Community members, community organizations and the public sector all have a role to play in working with parents, guardians and schools to support students who are experiencing challenges in their school and personal lives. (pp. 14–15)_

The conclusion attributes responsibility for students’ success to staff, teachers, school, and system leaders, as well as parents and community members and organizations. The text describes the role of parents as taking “responsibility for providing the structures and guidance.” Parents of students who are not successful in school are constituted as not providing the right kind of “structures and guidance.” In the case of community members and organizations, the text depicts their role as supporting “students who are experiencing challenges.” This sentiment runs counter to the view that “members of our diverse community” can contribute to the overall “mission and goals” of the Board (TDSB, 2011a, p. 1), in a way that contributes to higher levels of student engagement, achievement, and well-being (TDSB, 2011d, p. 102). This views about students’ parents and communities reinforce the idea that “the school provides the best opportunities” discussed in the previous page (p.47).
The texts present the Board as righteous and virtuous, and use different strategies to establish the normativity and sovereign entitlement of the white settler institution. Consistent with the historical exaltation of the settler subject, the exaltation of the Board in the text functions to conceal colonial violence (Thobani, 2007). Moreover, by positioning the board, the *we*, as both the granthers and the arbiters of what constitutes achievement as well as how to achieve, and racialized students, the *they*, as in need of achievement, the documents implicitly define achievement as the property of white institutions and, by extension, white students, whom racialized students presumably most emulate in order to achieve.

**Racialized and Indigenous Students – “Them”**

The texts present racialized and Indigenous students as outsiders to the collective that makes up the Board and, to a lesser extent, students disadvantaged by poverty and male students. However, references to the latter two appear only twice as part of OGAP (2011) and there were no references to either a wealth or a gender achievement gap in any of the documents. The texts use the third person plural to refer to racialized and Indigenous students. The texts use ‘they,’ ‘their’ and ‘them’ to refer these students. There is only one instance when the pronoun ‘you’ is used to address these students. In this case, the text is taken from a speech by former TDSB Director of Education, Chris Spence, while addressing a group of high school students at a conference. There was also one instance when the possessive ‘our’ was used to refer to the “most marginalized groups” – reflecting a power imbalance between the Board and these students (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 14). In contrast to how the documents depict the Board, Indigenous and racialized communities are presented as lacking agency – they do not appear as the subject of clauses, and the few instances when they do, the verb in the sentence is not an action verb.
In the documents, the category of “racialized” encompasses a wide range of the student population, and includes groups of students based on connections to geographical areas (e.g. Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and Middle East), language (e.g. Spanish, and Portuguese), and/or race (e.g. Black). This includes students whose families’ histories of immigration to Canada are recent, or whose families have been here for generations.

For the most part, the texts use the notion of “racialized” to describe students who do not identify as White. The Achievement Gap report (2010) stated that, “racialized students represent 70% of the TDSB student population” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 3), while TDSB data has shown that 30% of students identify as White (Yau & O’Reilly, 2007; Yau, Rosolen, & Archer, 2013). Portuguese-speaking students represent an exception as a group of students who may identify as “European,” “Southern European”, or “White” (Presley & Brown, 2011), but are also included in the category of “racialized.”

The texts present the different groups (i.e. Aboriginal, Hispanic/Latino, Portuguese etc.) as largely homogenous, and do not acknowledge how intersectionality, as a complex and dynamic arrangement of power relationships, yields different experiences for members of various groups (Crenshaw, 2011a). Instead, the texts represent the experiences of all racialized and Indigenous students as equivalent. The dynamism within settler colonialism reifies the legitimacy of white settler institutions to claim that they represent all sectors of the population. The flexible use of the category of “racialized” reveal one of the settler colonial mechanisms for managing alterities – it construes all exogenous Others as having equal opportunity to be admitted into the settler sector of the population (Veracini, 2010).
Indigenous & African/Black Students.

The terms African, Black and Caribbean are used interchangeably across the documents. In the draft Achievement Gap report (2010), the text begins by referring to Black (African) students, and then switches between the terms African and Black. The OGAP draft report (2011), and the final Action Plan (2011) use the term Black primarily, but on one occasion the text references Caribbean students. Thus, students who have connections to either the Caribbean or the African continent (even remotely) are incorporated into one category. This includes students whose families immigrated recently to Canada, but also includes students whose families have been in the country since the onset of settler colonialism. When the report was released, the Census Portrait (2011) for Black students showed that most Black students were born in Canada (77%). The percentage for students of Caribbean-born parents, 82%, was slightly higher than for those whose parents were born in East and West Africa, 70% and 64% respectively. Black students with Caribbean-born parents made more than half of all Black students (55%), followed by students whose parents were born in East Africa (25%). Students whose parents were born in Northern Africa, however, are subsumed within the category of “Middle Eastern” (Yau, O’Reilly, Rosolen, & Archer, 2011). This may be because people from this region are not normally racialized as Black.

The swapping of terms within the documents reflects some of the tensions that arise when one category is used to encompass a diverse set of experiences. At the same time, the careless substitution of these categories shows a lack of understanding of the different experiences. For one, these different groups have very different relationships to how they came to be on this land – their relationship to the transatlantic slave trade, and how they relate to the concept of “Blackness.” Being grouped together emphasizes the way that settler colonialism organizes the
population according to racial hierarchies, and in particular, the way in which anti-Black racism continues to operate. The Achievement Gap report (2010) brings attention to how Indigenous and Black/African students in particular are affected:

*The lowest achieving demographic groups of students in our schools are students of Aboriginal and African background. Students from these groups arguably experience the effects of racism to a greater degree than any other group.* (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 9)

*Aboriginal and Black students have the highest rates of school failure in the TDSB in terms of EQAO scores, credit accumulation at Grades 9 and 10, and the highest dropout rates.* (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 13).

Here, the text positions Indigenous and African/Black students as objects, as supposed to subjects with agency. When these students are positioned as subjects, as is the case in the second sentence, they are not construed as agents carrying out an action, instead they are described as possessing some negative characteristics. The use of “dropout” signals a passive process of student disengagement. Similarly, the language of ‘at-risk’ often refers to demographic factors that students have no control over, such as race, family income, gender, immigration status.

These terms have been criticized for obscuring the social structures in schools and society that contribute to student disengagement, and instead attributes it to students’ personal shortcomings (Dei, 1997; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). The OGAP draft report (2011) cited the works of Kugler and West-Burns (2010) and Pedro Noguera, who oppose the use of these terms. However, the report from the Task Force on Success of Somali Descent, addressing “achievement and opportunity gaps” of these students, describes “Somali-speaking” as being “at higher risk” of “dropping out” (TDSB, 2014, p. 98). The position of Somali immigrants within the settler population system as exogenous Others is determined, in part, by the intersection of
race, religion, and nationality; their discrimination and exclusion is shaped by Anti-Black racism as well as Islamophobia (Berns-McGown, 2013; Crenshaw, 2011a; Daniel & Cukier, 2015; James & Turner, 2017; Veracini, 2010). The use of these terms three years after the release of OGAP (2011) demonstrates a superficial engagement with the literature addressing the opportunity gap at the level of the Board.

When the text articulates the differential outcomes for groups of students, the mechanism within schooling that leads to those differential outcomes remains unchallenged. The text does not provide a context to explain why Indigenous and Black/African students in particular are most negatively affected. By presenting an ahistorical account, the text further conceals the ways in which the legacies of colonialism and anti-Black racism have been foundational to the settler state and part of schooling from its inception (Dion, Johnston, & Rice, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Maynard, 2017; Ray et al., 2017). Here, the reader is left to fill in that low achievement represents one of the (negative) effects of racism.

Following the definition of “racialized groups” in the introduction of the Achievement Gap report (2010), explicit references to Indigenous students disappear; instead the categories of “marginalized” or “racialized” are used. Although there are two explicit references, these depict Indigenous students from a deficit view, as shown on p. 52. For the most part, Indigenous students are subsumed within the category of “racialized.” The collapsing of these two categories implies that the needs of Indigenous students are to be dealt similarly to the needs of other racial, ethnic, or cultural groups, a move that undermines Indigenous political autonomy (Grande, 2015). The very presence of Indigenous peoples poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the settler state. Through the erasure of Indigenous Others and the degradation of the racialized Others, the texts establish settler normativity and construe the settler institution as capable of
managing the different sectors of the population (Veracini, 2010). Also, once again, by framing racialized and Indigenous students as unable to achieve, while leaving those who do achieve unnamed, the document implicitly assigns achievement as a property of whiteness and as something for which racialized and Indigenous students must strive. In the next section, I turn to how precisely the problem of the achievement gap is imagined.

**Achievement Gap – The Problem**

The three documents are concerned with addressing a singular and perhaps self-evident problem: the achievement gap within the Toronto District School Board. This “problem” is defined, as articulated above, in relation to the disparities in achievement between racialized and non-racialized students, although the latter are never actually named or described. The draft Achievement Gap Report (2010) states on its front cover that, “this Draft Report presents directions for consideration to close the school achievement gap for racialized groups in the TDSB relative to other groups” (p. 1). Who these “other students” are is not named, yet it is implicit that those who achieve are White, or at least non-racialized. This document also uses the term “racial achievement gap” twice (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 5,6), and, as explained in the previous section, the documents refer to Indigenous and specific groups of racialized students (e.g Black, Latinx, Roma, Middle Eastern, Portuguese-Speaking) several times. For Indigenous students, the disparities in achievement are in relation to non-Indigenous students (OME, 2007).

**How do these documents define achievement?**

The texts define and measure student achievement through narrow conceptions of learning stemming from a Eurocentric worldview (Dion et al., 2010), which again construes achievement
as white property. The draft Achievement Gap report (2010) focuses primarily on graduation rates, and is consistent with the provincial policy Student Success/Learning to 18 (SS/L18), which measures success primarily in terms of graduation rates (Dion et al., 2010; OME, 2012). The opening sentence of the report begins by stating: “The mission of the TDSB is to enable all students to achieve high levels of success” (p. 3).

Although success is not defined explicitly, the sentence that comes after links success to graduation rates. This document also uses standardized tests scores, “credit accumulation,” “dropout,” “school attendance” and “suspension rates” as measurements of achievement (p. 3). One of the goals expressed in the document is to reach the provincial target for graduation rates: “Reaching the provincial graduation target of 85% can only be achieved through significant progress in improving educational outcomes for racialized groups in our schools” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 3).

In this sentence, the Board’s ability to reach the provincial target is contingent on the educational outcomes for racialized students. The use of the general category “racialized groups” leaves the readers to assume that all racialized students need improvement on some level, particularly since the previous sentence stated that racialized students made up 70% of the student population. By locating the problem only with racialized and Indigenous students, the text implicitly privileges a white identity as the standard against which these students are being measured. The subject of this sentence, which is “reaching the provincial graduation target of 85%,” is a nominalization of the clause “someone/something reaches the provincial graduation target of 85%.” In the process of turning the clause into a noun phrase, the subject of that clause disappears. The readers are left to guess who is supposed to reach the target. Implicit in the text is the notion that the Board as a collective entity will be carrying out the action. This positions
the Board, and not the racialized students, as the one defining what achievement is, and thus, establishing its authority.

The finalized OGAP (2011) also defined and measured achievement in relation to graduation rates and standardized tests. However, there is a change in language in regards to the Board’s mission. Instead of students achieving “high levels of success,” the Board’s obligation is to “create and sustain high levels of excellence for ‘all’ students” (p. 99). In this text, there are references to two meanings of the term excellence. The first meaning derives from an understanding of excellence in relation to a particular standard (Gillies, 2007). In this case, the standards include graduation rates and scores on provincial assessments. The second meaning can be derived from the way that achievement and opportunity gaps are defined. This is illustrated in the following sentence: “In this regard, a key priority of schools is to close the achievement and opportunity gaps: the gaps between where students are at any given time, and the highest levels that they can potentially achieve” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 99).

Both of these definitions of student achievement in relation to excellence have their limitations. Defining excellence in relation to a particular standard runs the risk of setting standards that do not take into account students’ well-being or future success. For example, OGAP (2011) measures student achievement in relation to graduation rates. Students can meet the requirements for graduation, but streaming practices in schools mean that not all students who graduate have the same opportunities. Racialized and Indigenous students are disproportionately streamed into lower tracks, which creates a barrier for accessing post-secondary education, and can have an impact on their lifelong outcomes (Parekh, 2013; Parekh et al., 2016; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017). In order for all students to achieve the highest of standards, excellence in education is contingent on a structural shift involving other
sectors of society including health care, housing, wealth distribution etc. (Gillies, 2007). Thus, this definition of excellence has embedded contradictions.

The second definition of excellence also presents some challenges. In a society structured hierarchically, this self-referencing form of universal excellence serves to reinforce the status quo (Gillies, 2007). Absent from the text is the relationship that excellence has to failure: the production of excellence occurs, and is dependent on the production of failure (Lucey & Reay, 2002). Excellence can be defined in relation to being better or superior to others, thus placing excellence at odds with values of equity. However, this contradiction is left unaddressed within the education system, where equity and excellence are assumed to “go hand in hand” (OME, 2008, p. 8). The omission of this understanding of excellence conceals the way that schooling is structured to categorize individuals according to performance hierarchies in a way that resemble those in society (Gillies, 2007; Meyer, 1977; Savage, 2011).

Unlike the other two documents, the OGAP draft report (2011) establishes a connection between equity and success. It states: “We believe that equity of opportunity and equity of access to our programs, services and resources are critical to the achievement of successful outcomes for all those whom we serve, and for those who serve our school system” (p. 1). This text, like much of the text in this document, is taken verbatim from the Board’s Equity Policy (1999). The text frames “equity of opportunity” and “equity of access” as a necessary condition for the “achievement of successful outcomes.” The relationship between these terms is emphasized through the use of the adjective “critical.” However, this is part of an embedded clause, and as such, this information is backgrounded. Although there is recognition in the text that inequalities exist in the school system and in society, the text does not challenge the existing structures including the “programs, services and resources” that are already in place. This reinforces the
authority of the Board to set the terms of engagement. As it has been shown earlier in the analysis, the texts define how achievement is to be measured, while the problem is construed as the underachievement of racialized and Indigenous students. The underlying logic is that all students desire the same outcomes (Joshee, 2007, 2008). In addition to construing success/failure as a racialized attribute, the ambivalence in the texts about the term “excellence” mean that the problem is not identified as being inherent to the system.

In order to resolve the tensions between the various definitions of excellence while protecting its own image as a benevolent entity committed to ensuring that every student “achieves,” the documents avoid taking responsibility for the problem. Instead of addressing the social structures in schools and society that contribute to student disengagement, the documents depict racialized and Indigenous students as coming into the education system already with deficiencies. Particularly in the draft Achievement Gap Report (2010), racialized and Indigenous students are described in terms of their deficiencies (e.g. lower skills in use of technology), their low academic performance (e.g. the lowest test scores), their lack of engagement (e.g. least likely to enjoy school), and as hopeless (e.g. the cycle of under-achievement). The only positive attribute included refers to the high academic achievement of East Asian students, but these students are not the focus of the documents. The elision allows the board to “save face,” confirming that they are not the problem because, after all, some racialized students do achieve.

When it comes to the factors that cause underachievement, the texts acknowledge racism and poverty as factors affecting student achievement, while references to colonialism are completely absent from the documents. Instead, settler colonialism disappears behind other forms of oppression. In framing the “challenge,” the draft Achievement Gap Report (2010), states that “many TDSB students of our diverse communities face many significant challenges in
their lives outside of school. This impacts their learning” (p. 5). In this way, the factors that must be addressed for “closing the achievement gap” are positioned as existing outside of the school (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010). There is no mention of how these factors contribute to positive outcomes for some students at the expense of others (e.g. policies, streaming, shrinking resources, school-generated funds, Eurocentric curricula etc.). By ignoring the inequalities within the education system; the text absolves the Board of responsibility for addressing them.

One way in which it does that is by acknowledging the persistence of disparities in achievement without accounting for how these are inherent to the ways that schools function, as discussed earlier in this thesis. The first of the documents to be released, the draft Achievement Gap Task Force Report (2010), stated that “the achievement gap for these groups has existed since the 1980’s” (p. 3). Similarly, OGAP (2011) states that “despite achievement gains reflecting a board “on the move,” disparities or ‘gaps’ in the achievement levels of different groups of students continues to be alarming” (pp. 96, 99). The first statement describes the state of affairs, concluding that the gap has existed for decades. The latter statement, although also concerned with the gap and its permanence, shifts focus to its magnitude, stating that the gap continues to be alarming.

When providing the definition of a racialized group, the text diminishes the responsibility of the education system as an institution that participates in the process of marginalization. The draft Achievement Gap Report (2010) states that a racialized group is “a group of people who may experience social inequities on the basis of their perceived common racial background, colour and/or ethnicity, and who may be subjected to differential treatment in the society and its institutions” (p. 3). The purpose of the main clause is to provide the reader with a definition of the term. The references to “social inequalities” and “differential treatment” appear as embedded
clauses. Furthermore, the text uses the passive “may be subjected” without explicitly stating by whom, thus also leaving the readers to interpret who/what is responsible for causing the differential treatment. The use of the auxiliary verb “may” expresses possibility or contingency, thus, leaving it to the readers to assume that there are certain conditions when these groups do not experience these “social inequalities” and/or “differential treatment.” Similarly, to the way the adverb “arguably” was used in the example discussed earlier (p. 52), the text positions the experiences of these students as questionable, and up for debate or argument. This ambiguity, in addition to framing the factors as working outside schools, absolve the Board from acknowledging that the problem is systemic and in fact inherent to the system.

This is important because, from its onset, schooling as a settler institution has positioned poor children as exogenous Others, who, through “improvement,” may be allowed admission to the settler sector of the population economy (Tomkins, 2008; Veracini, 2010). In setting the Context for the plan, OGAP (2011) framed poverty as the main factor affecting educational achievement, and discusses it extensively by providing statistics on child poverty in Toronto and the TDSB. The section discussing poverty begins with, “Poverty is a key socio-economic variable closely linked to educational achievement and lifetime health” (p. 96), and concludes with “the TDSB opportunity gap action plan sets forth to mitigate these consequences” [of poverty] (p. 97).

The section starts with a broad definition followed by bullet points on how children and families are affected including the challenges, and some statistics. Poor children are assumed to be dysfunctional. According to the document, poor children, from an early age, “come to school with multiple challenges” (emphasis in the text). These challenges include: “(i) physical health and well-being (ii) social knowledge and competence (iii) emotional health and maturity (iv)
language and cognitive development, (v) communication skills and general knowledge” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 97). The connection to health resembles earlier discourses that use the language of disease and infection to solidify distinctions based on race, immigration, and/or class (Kelm, 1998; Knight, 2016). Furthermore, this discussion relies on deficit views related to a “culture of poverty,” which attributes responsibility for failure to the poor and their “culture,” and posits that what needs to be “fixed” is their “culture.” This is important because it positions achievement as the property of those who have wealth – materially or symbolically. The texts, however, leave out how poverty/wealth is racialized.

In fact, references to racism are absent from the final Action Plan (2011) even though the OGAP draft report (2011) had referenced the work of Pedro Noguera on Critical Race Theory. The text includes a statistic on the change in the poverty rate for white and racialized families over a twenty year period: “From 1980-2000 in Toronto, the poverty rate for the white or Euro-Canada population fell by 28%, while the poverty rate for racialized families rose by 361%” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 96). The way that the statistic is presented highlights the fast growing inequality between racialized and white populations in the city. However, the statistic does not provide the reader with enough information to understand the present state of inequality. At the time, the 2006 Census showed that racialized persons were more than twice as likely to live in poverty (22%) compared to non-racialized persons (9%), and in the city of Toronto, 62% of all those living in poverty were from racialized groups (Government of Canada, 2013).

The way that white and racialized categories are used in the sentence also brings to attention the way that this document represents the relationship of these groups to the settler nation. The text describes the white population using a hyphenated category. Whereas the use of “Euro-Canada” denotes belonging to the settler nation, the racialized population is positioned
outside of the national collective. The simultaneous connection to Europe and Canada represents the unresolved tension inherent to settler colonialism. The settler collective positions itself at the seams of Indigenization and Europeanisation as a way to distinguish itself from both Indigenous and exogenous Others (Veracini, 2010).

There is another statistic that alludes to the intersection of race and poverty. This statistic describes the percentage of students attending an Inner City school. Unlike the other points, this statistic is not addressing poverty directly. Implicit in the text is that most students who attend an inner city school live in poverty, because, according to the text, “Approximately 60% of students in our inner city schools come from homes with three or more children” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 97).

The text also implicitly presents the association between racialized communities, larger families, and poverty. The Model School for Inner Cities (MSIC) Program is an initiative to address the impact of socio-economic disadvantage in TDSB elementary and middle schools by providing these schools with additional funding and resources. These schools also have large numbers of racialized students that attend them (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010). According to the Census Portraits (2011) released before the finalized OGAP (2011) document, Black/African, Middle Eastern (except Iranian), and Latin American students are described as coming from larger families, and the two lowest income groups. This last point also applies to Indigenous students (Yau et al., 2011). This contextual information, however, is missing from the text; as such it may be considered already known to the reader or not relevant. In any case, it actually conceals the way poverty/wealth is racialized.

Racism is addressed as a factor in the draft Achievement Gap Report (2010), but references disappear in subsequent documents. The text reflects the tensions between coming to terms with the reality of racism, while, at the same time, no fully abandoning a colorblind
position (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In this text, societal and systemic racism are used interchangeably. This further emphasizes that the process of marginalization takes place elsewhere in society, and not as part of schooling practices.

Systemic racism is framed as responsible for erecting the barriers for racialized groups, at the same time as it exists outside of the practices of individuals, groups and institutions such as schooling. For example, the text states that “for racialized groups, the negative effect of systemic racism continues to erect barriers to the full realization of their potential for success” (p. 9). This sentence is actually quite complex and is composed of several embedded clauses. Although the subject/topic of this sentence is “the negative effect of systemic racism,” the sentence has a marked theme as the subject/topic is preceded by “for racialized groups.” By making “for racialized groups” the theme, the text sets the context through which to interpret the meaning of the sentence. The use of the adjective “negative” sets up a dichotomy with the positive effects of systemic racism. Since success/failure is racialized, those who privilege from systemic racism are left unnamed in the text. For example, the subject/topic of the sentence contains the clause “systemic racism affects something/someone negatively.” In this case, nominalization turns a dynamic process into something abstract. Similarly, the noun “realization” is a nominalization of the verb “to realize.” In condensing the clause “racialized groups realize” into “realization,” “racialized groups” as the subject of the clause becomes the indirect object in the sentence (e.g, systemic racism continues to erect barriers for racialized groups), which actually reduces the perceived agency of racialized groups. The use of the verb to continue, expresses a permanence of the effects of systemic racism – it has been something that existed before, it is something that exists in the present, and has the potential to remain into the future. Completely absent from the text is any discussion of how racialization benefits those who are construed as “white,” once again pointing to how achievement is imaged as a property of whiteness.
The resistance to abandoning a colorblind position is most obvious when the draft Achievement Gap report (2010) uses the term “demographic framework” as a means to address the racial achievement gap. The term “demographic framework” is later replaced by an “equity lens” in the OGAP draft report (2011), and finalized plan (2011), even though, the draft Achievement Gap report (2010) had stated that anti-racism had not always been included as part of equity training: “staff across the system have participated extensively in equity training. However, antiracist education, as an aspect of equity in education, has not been given adequate focus as part of the professional development activities” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 10).

The text proceeds to state that “antiracist educational practices” must be included in order to create a “culturally responsive school system,” followed by a definition of antiracist education from the Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education policy (2009) (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 10). The references to antiracism in the Ministry’s policy are remnants of the earlier 1993 Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity policy. Having modelled the structure of the Ministry’s policy (1993), the TDSB’s Equity policy (1999) mandated a system-wide approach to racial equity in addition to other factors of discrimination, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, and (dis)ability (TDSB, 2000; Zine, 2001). This approach went beyond teacher training to include curriculum and learning materials, student assessment and placement, hiring and staffing, and race and community relations (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003; OME, 1993; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017).

In the excerpt above, the use of the passive tense, “has not been given,” leaves out who/what is responsible for the omission of an antiracist framework from the Board’s equity training. The implementation of the antiracist/equity policies in the 1990s and early 2000s was
severely limited by political decisions and lack of institutional support that reduced the education budget, and established rigid Ministry requirements among other actions (McCaskell, 2005). Without the appropriate supports, the result was an approach to equity that did not fully address the various systems of oppression (i.e. racism, heterosexism, ableism etc.).

The focus only on antiracist education, however, overlooks the specificity of colonialism and its relation to nation-building and formal schooling (Dion et al., 2010). The Decolonizing Our Schools (2010) report advocated incorporating the implications of colonialism for Indigenous students and their families, but also the relationship between Indigenous students and institutions of formal schooling, as well as teaching practices. Antiracist work, however, has not always taken up issues about land and colonialism that are central to Indigenous self-determination (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Disguising colonialism behind other forms of oppression frames Indigenous education as separate from issues of land and political autonomy. Similar to the way that Indigenous students were subsumed within the category of racialized, this is another way the documents displace Indigenous alterities, and seeks to replace them with exogenous ones (Veracini, 2010).

What this discussion shows is that by framing the problem of achievement gaps as relatively recent, the texts ignore the inequalities inherent within education systems. By locating the problem of achievement only with racialized and Indigenous students, the texts privilege a white identity, which reinforces the value of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Prendergast, 2002). In “closing” or “reducing” this “gap,” the text imagines “racialized students” becoming more like “non-racialized students,” and assumes Indigenous students will become more like “non-Indigenous students.” This constructs achievement as the property of (white) settlers, and the failure of racialized and Indigenous
students to achieve the standard is constructed as their personal shortcomings, and not the impossible location of the standard.

**Student Engagement.**

The explanation of how racism works presented in this text individualizes its effects at the same time as it pathologizes racialized and Indigenous communities:

*The literature is extensive on the impact of societal racism on the psyche, self-esteem and social functioning of racialized groups. Suffice it to say that systemic racism affects the readiness to learn of students of colour and ultimately limits their potential to achieve the highest outcomes in many areas of their lives.*

(Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 9)

The first sentence starts off making an authoritative claim – based on extensive research – that racism works to damage the inner lives of racialized students, including their “psyche,” “self-esteem,” “societal functioning,” and “readiness to learn,” which will eventually impair their ability to “achieve the highest outcomes.” Somewhat implicit in this part of the text, as this information is placed in an embedded clause, is that the reason why Indigenous and racialized students lag behind in their educational outcomes has to do with their “readiness to learn,” which is reflected on the proposed ways to address the problem. This idea was also present in the earlier example discussing the responsibilities of parents (p. 48). The use of the phrase “suffice it to say” at the beginning of the second sentence reinforces the authority of the Task Force, as representatives of the Board, to have the last word on the issue. Here, as in most of the text, racialized and Indigenous students are not positioned as agents, but instead, as passive recipients (McCaskell, n.d.).
As mentioned earlier, the text uses East Asian students as an example of the emotional and social effects of racism on individuals and their “psyche”:

_These barriers erected by racism not only affect academic outcomes, but their social and emotional outcomes as well. Students of East Asian descent for example, have relatively high rates of academic success. However, these students are subject to racial stereotyping which often takes the form of low expectation about their capacity to be assertive, confident and outspoken. In the Student Census of 2006, East Asian students, among all groups, are least likely to feel comfortable answering questions in class, least likely to rate their social skills as excellent, and least likely to rate their leadership skills as excellent. (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 9)_

This example reinforces the idea that racism, as an abstract force, has the ability to erect barriers independently from individuals, groups or institutions. The readers are left to fill in where this happens (e.g. inside or outside the school), and who does it (e.g. teachers, peers, administrators). In the text, the agency of these students is taken away by using the passive “are subject to racial stereotypes,” while at the same time leaving out who is doing the action.

Another way that systemic racism could have been described could have been by discussing suspension and expulsion rates, their disproportionate impact on Black students, and their effects on student engagement (Contenta & Rankin, 2009). However, recognizing that certain practices within schools contribute to student disengagement would require acknowledging the responsibility of schools for the gap in achievement.

Despite their achievements, all racialized and Indigenous groups are framed as having a deficiency as the result of racism. This reinforces the idea that all racialized and Indigenous students require some form of improvement. This characterizes the impossible position of many racialized communities within settler colonial order – not fully admitted, but not fully excluded
either. The selective inclusion to the settler entity is premised on settler entitlement to manage the population; it allows for individual exogenous Others to be considered for inclusion into the settler politic (Veracini, 2010).

This example also frames the way that student engagement is understood later in the text. Having established that the factors that affect academic achievement, such as racism and poverty, lie outside of the education system, and the problem lies within individual students and their “readiness to learn,” the text states:

*Student engagement also depends upon the extent to which students believe that they can make choices that can positively affect their future lives. Students need to learn and practice making positive choices in their study routines and habits, their behaviours, the values they adopt, their relationships with peers and adults, and in their goals and aspirations. (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 11)*

Although this text addresses students in general, earlier references to “marginalized students” imply that they remain the focus (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 11). Sometimes the text uses the category “marginalized” to include racialized students, while at other times these categories are exclusive. This text shows one of the few examples when “students” as a general category are positioned as agents capable of “making positive choices.” The use of the adjective “positive” creates a dichotomy with “negative.” Implicit in the text is that students who make positive choices will be successful, and students who make negative choices will be unsuccessful. These ideas are part of the discourse of meritocracy (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, 2003; Tate, 1997). The explanation for disparities in student achievement resides within individual students either because an external force, such as racism or poverty, has affected their “psyche,” “self-esteem,” “societal functioning,” and “readiness to learn,” or they have not made “positive choices.” This idea is
present at the beginning of Section B, when the text sets up the problem to be addressed in the System Challenge: “in these schools, many students of racialized groups continue to be disengaged academically, socially and emotionally from the learning process. For many of these students, school does not motivate them. As one student said, ‘School does not make sense’.” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 5)

In setting up the problem, the text frames racialized students as “disengaged” and not motivated by school without stating why or how that process happens. The use of the verb “continue to be disengaged” signifies that this has been an ongoing problem, and has the potential to frame racialized (and Indigenous) students as resistant to the Board’s interventions. The sentence that places the onus on the school to motivate students has the marked theme “for many of these students.” The readers have to interpret the main clause based on the information that came before. In doing so, the responsibility of schools to motivate all students is lessened by bringing to the forefront that the problem pertains only to racialized (and Indigenous) students.

What is the Solution?

Having established that the problem exists within individual students, as a result of external factors, such as racism and poverty, the text presents the following solution:

The school has the capacity to engage the student in ways which allow the student to feel that he or she has the power to make life changing choices. This is achievable if the student feels centred in the environment. Schools which use what the students know, experience and feel as opportunities for building self-esteem, self confidence will help students to understand how taking personal responsibility benefits them. (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 11)
The topic of this paragraph is the school and its role in educating (marginalized) students. The noun “school” is the subject/topic and the theme of the two complex sentences, and is positioned as an agent with the capacity of doing something and helping (marginalized) students take “personal responsibility.” According to the text, the role of the school is to provide (marginalized) students with opportunities “for building self-esteem” and “self-confidence” so that they will learn to take “personal responsibility” and will “make life changing choices.” This reinforces the idea describing the school as providing “the best opportunities” for marginalized students discussed at the beginning of this analysis (pp.47-48). Absent from the text are the ways that some practices within schools marginalize particular students (i.e racialized and Indigenous students) and contribute to student disengagement. Implicit in the text is that racialized and Indigenous students have not been making the right kind of choices because of their “lack of self-esteem” and “self-confidence.” In order to be considered successful, the documents imply that these students should be making the kinds of choices that will change their lives – as if there was something in their lives that requires some modification. By framing the problem as students’ shortcomings, the solutions to the problem do not require the practices that marginalize students in schools to be addressed, at the same time as it reinforces notions of achievement as white settler property.

This, again, reinforces the ambiguous location of Indigenous and exogenous Others within the settler population system. Indigenous and exogenous Others have the potential to lead a regenerated lifestyle, and be individually admitted into the settler politic on the condition that they embrace the settler colonial ethos, and make ‘the right kind of choices’ (Veracini, 2010). Both CRT and theories of settler colonialism critique such linear notions of progress, as those implicit in the very idea of an achievement gap. The notions of ‘improvement’ and ‘progress’ allow for the possibility of assimilation of Indigenous and racialized Others (Ray et al., 2017;
Veracini, 2010). Implicit in the text is that, through significant improvement, Indigenous and racialized students can eventually gain inclusion to the white settler politic; that is, they can “achieve.”

Yet, the board does not put the entire onus on students. Instead, it offers an approach to teaching and learning that educators can use within schools to engage students, CRRP. In the draft Achievement Gap report (2010), action items 6-12 are dedicated to it, significantly more than to any other point (McCaskell, n.d.). According to the text, “For marginalized students, this approach to teaching creates motivation to actively participate in their learning and to take pride in their accomplishments” (p. 8).

While this approach places some of the responsibility on teachers working in schools, in line with the text’s view of Indigenous and racialized students, the proposed solution positions the problem of academic underachievement within these students and their lack of “motivation,” and “confidence.” The marked theme “for marginalized students” indicates that culturally responsive teaching is beneficial to these students only, once again leaving white students (and how schools are always-already culturally relevant and responsive to their needs) unnamed. Implicit is the idea that racialized and Indigenous students possess ‘culture,’ whereas the white dominant group does not. Attributing ‘culture’ to some groups, but not others, conceals how mainstream approaches to teaching actually respond to the cultural needs of some students (i.e. middle and upper class, white), but not others (Bacchi, 2000; Gee, 2011a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Although there are references to race (e.g. Black students) and racism in the draft Achievement Gap report (2010), these reflected superficial understandings of the process of racialization. In the text, culture comes to stand in for race (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Noguera,
2008), particularly as references to racism disappear in the finalized plan (2011), and there is a tendency to advance a fixed notion of culture that focuses on the expectation of homogeneity, preservation and unchanging traditions (St. Denis, 2004). This conceals the way that racism, colonialism, and marginalization, more broadly, operate within the education system, and serves to uphold the way that white supremacy and settler colonialism operate.

The text frames CRRP as a way to mold racialized and Indigenous students to resemble a particular kind of student, mainly white students. Their educational success is contingent on approximating that ideal:

*When students are in environments which fully encourage and support their learning, they will be more receptive to guidance and words of advice, such as those offered to them by the Director of Education, Dr Chris Spence at a recent conference of high school students (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 11).*

Through “supportive relationships” with “caring adults,” racialized and Indigenous students are supposed to become “more receptive to guidance” and learn to “make positive choices” that will contribute to their success in school. In the second sentence, the pronoun “they” refers ambiguously to “students” leaving it up to the reader to interpret that the text is referring to ‘all’ students. However, at the top of the page, there are references to marginalized students more specifically. (Marginalized) students are positioned as the subject of the sentence, but they are not construed as agents carrying out an action. Instead, their becoming “more receptive to guidance” is in relation to assuming “personal responsibility” and making the right kind of choices, which appears earlier in the text. The text takes advantage of the focus of CRRP on personal relationships. Based on this text, the success (or failure) of students hinges on their “access to a supportive relationships.” This section locates the problem that needs to be fixed at the level of individual students and focuses primarily on teachers, and teacher development.
Implicit in the text is that student disengagement is the result, at least partially, of individual teachers, who have not been able to develop the culturally responsive attributes and skills. The text states:

Many teachers develop these attributes naturally as a reflection of their individual personality and passion for teaching. Others have to work harder at acquiring and demonstrating these attributes. The good news is that these attributes and skills can be mentored, coached, modeled, taught and learned (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 8).

The text includes the qualities of a culturally responsive teacher in bullet form, and states that the responsibility “also lies in our capacity to provide opportunities and possibly incentives to attract the most effective culturally responsive teachers to schools in the most disadvantaged and challenged areas” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 8).

The Board’s “goal of success for all students” is made contingent on teachers developing the culturally responsive teaching attributes and skills, in addition to the improvement of racialized and Indigenous students. Although students’ relationships to teachers are extremely important, the focus on the personal relationships distracts from the system-wide changes that are also required including: curriculum, school climate, leadership, parent and community relations etc. (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). The Achievement Gap report (2010) invokes the language of antiracist education, which requires a system-wide approach. However, the focus remains on providing staff with adequate training: “school leaders, teachers and support staff need opportunities to learn how racism acts to reinforce student disengagement from learning and limit their potential for success in school and in community life” (Achievement Gap Task Force, 2010, p. 10).
In this sentence, the school staff are the subject/topic and theme. They are construed as not knowing the way that racism works “to reinforce student disengagement.” Their need for “opportunities to learn” is foregrounded by being part of the main clause, while the effects of racism on student disengagement are placed in the background as part of the embedded clause. Although there is a brief recognition of the existence of racism within the school, the text frames the problem as a lack of awareness, one that will be solved through the new training, where staff will learn to recognize and address racism “in schools and communities” (p. 10). This way of framing the problem absolves the Board of responsibility for the persistence of the achievement gap in two ways. Framing the problem as an (unintentional) lack of awareness conceals the way that decisions taken at the different levels of governance have affected the educational outcomes for racialized and Indigenous students. Furthermore, the text ascribes the responsibility for the achievement gap on individual teachers, while disregarding declining resources, employment equity for Indigenous and racialized communities, student performance evaluation, classroom sizes etc. (McCaskell, n.d.).

By dissociating itself from inadequate teachers, and making a claim to ignorance (Mills, 2007), the text absolves the Board of responsibility. In this move toward innocence, the Board regains its status as virtuous/righteous, and in a settler state, also conceals the way that schooling functions as a sorting mechanism within the settler population system (Meyer, 1977; Veracini, 2010).

Some of the initiatives presented in the final plan addressed student engagement, but left the deep-seated roots of underachievement untouched. The plan presented a number of initiatives to engage different groups of students (e.g Indigenous, Caribbean, Roma, Portuguese, or incarcerated students). Most of the initiatives, however, did not differentiate between groups,
with the exception of the initiatives focusing on Indigenous students, which were presented on a different page. The final plan included Aboriginal education as a priority, possibly to be aligned with the Ministry’s *First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. Some of the initiatives proposed resembled those of the Ministry’s policy: developing a voluntary self-identification policy being one of them. To some extent, the Board’s legitimacy in the eye of the public also depends on its ability to incorporate feedback and criticism. I focus on OGAP’s calls to action to improve student success for Indigenous students as a specific example of how the plan incorporates feedback. I also briefly compare these initiatives to the recommendations of *the Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the TDSB (2010)* document, which was cited as part of the plan.

The *Decolonizing Our Schools* (2010) report identified the following barriers to the well-being and success of Indigenous students: the colonial legacy, a lack of knowledge, understanding, and support on the part of school staff, school and Board policies, curriculum expectations, and racism. This report also advocated using broader criteria to measure student success and well-being beyond literacy and numeracy skills and credit accumulation. The finalized plan (2011) purports to want to increase the levels of student engagement, achievement and well-being, however, student achievement and success continued to be measured through standardized tests and graduation rates, and did not change from the draft Achievement Gap report (2010).

The recommendations in the *Decolonizing Our Schools* report (2010) were system-wide, whereas some of the plan’s initiatives were restricted to specific sites. For example, the report recommended changing the physical and social environment to reflect Indigenous presence across schools. The finalized plan (2011), on the other hand, proposed completing “a feasibility
study to relocate or significantly improve the physical site of the elementary First Nations School,” developing “an East Region secondary Native Learning Centre in partnership with the Native Learning Centre” as well as developing “an Aboriginal Education pathways at specified TDSB secondary schools” (p. 100), as ways to provide equitable opportunities and removing institutional barriers. Although important, these initiatives did not address the barriers to equitable opportunities identified in the report (2010).

With regards to curriculum, the report articulated the need to include Indigenous content “across the curriculum for all students” (Dion et al., 2010, p. 75). One way to accomplish this, according to the report, was to ensure access to appropriate resources through the training of teacher librarians. The report also mentioned prioritizing the development and implementation of Native studies courses. These were changes meant to take place across schools. This is in contrast to the curriculum changes proposed in the plan, which proposed developing “an on line E-tech high school offering Aboriginal Education course content and all compulsory subjects” (TDSB, 2011d, p. 100). Online courses provide students with access to opportunities not offered at their school, as well as some flexibility with scheduling (OME, 2010), however, this is not a substitution for integrating Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum in all schools at all grade levels.

The report placed teachers in a central role, and stated that the project of decolonization requires a large shift in teacher perspective and preparation, which also includes their responsibility for teaching about Canada’s history of colonization and the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as being respectful and supportive of Indigenous students (Dion et al., 2010). There are a few initiatives, like Achievement Zone schools, Leadership Academies, Professional Learning Days, that focus on teachers more generally, but
the text did not establish how these were connected to antiracist and decolonial education. The plan also included Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) training, which in the earlier Achievement Gap report (2010) connected it to antiracist education. By eliminating the references to racism from the text, the implementation of antiracist educational practices becomes uncertain. Furthermore, the documents never mention colonialism, thus decolonization is never conceived as an actual solution.

The Decolonizing Our Schools report (2010) outlined some of the challenges experienced by Indigenous teachers committed to Indigenous education. While working in a non-Indigenous institution, the staff shared experiencing exhaustion from having to justify and explain the significance of their work, and confronting resistance within “an institutional structure that operates as if colonialism never happened” (p. 86). The report made recommendations such as increasing the number of Indigenous educators and staff as well as recognition of their work including Indigenous practices, protocols and ways of being. The finalized plan (2011) stated that in its first year, it would “ensure stable staffing for the Aboriginal Education Office, including a Program Coordinator, Student Success Teachers, Social Worker and Tutor/ Mentorship Program Facilitator,” but left the “staff-identified” recommendations and actions to be resourced and implemented in the last year (p. 100).

The documents coincide that parents and community groups have a role to play in improving student achievement, but how this is framed varies significantly. The Decolonizing Our Schools (2010) report states that their expertise must be valued, and recommended cultivating respectful relationships with Indigenous parents and community members. The report proposes establishing community liaisons between schools and external agencies, but also invites Board staff to support the initiatives and activities of community agencies. In the plan (2011), the
initiatives that are listed as providing equitable opportunities for parents and community groups to work with staff included raising “awareness of Aboriginal Education needs” and parent academies (p. 100). Parent academies as the plan’s main approach to parent engagement reflect the Board’s top-down approach based on a deficit view of Indigenous and racialized parents and communities.

This comparison between the recommendations put forth by the *Decolonizing Our Schools* (2010) report, and OGAP’s (2011) approach is by no means a comprehensive one. Instead, the comparison illustrates how these documents circumvent the structural change needed to actually address the “opportunity gap” that Indigenous students face within the education system. Furthermore, the way that the documents absolve the Board of the responsibility for the inherent mechanisms of marginalization within the system means that these do not have to be addressed. The ambivalence around what it means to achieve and the way that racialized and Indigenous students are framed as the problem leaves white privilege unmarked. As a result, the texts conceal the way in which achievement has been construed as the property of the white settler.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a close reading of the documents in order to show: first, how the Board presents itself as a benevolent shepherd capable of uplifting marginalized students. Second, how the documents frame marginalized students as damaged and dysfunctional, while also disregarding those who achieve in a way that sets up whiteness as the standard for achievement. Third, how the documents frame the problem of the achievement gap, and show that the texts’ proposed solutions positions racialized and Indigenous students as having to
become more like their white counterparts; and fourth, discuss the various solutions offered in the document.

This last point is important because the proposed solutions do not really address the problem that causes the disparities in achievement along racial lines. The analysis in this chapter shows that the ambiguity around achievement reinscribe the logics of white settler property rights. In doing so, the discourse of “achievement gaps” works to include/exclude individuals into the settler collective. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this analysis for educational policy and practice.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

From its inception, and despite meritocratic ideals, schooling has been structured on the basis of social, cultural, and economic differences, and expected to yield differential outcomes, which means that achievement gaps that mirror social hierarchies are inherent to schooling. The resulting racial disparities in academic achievement, thus, are the result of the historical, economic, and socio-political disadvantages experienced by racialized and Indigenous communities. Therefore, drawing attention to the achievement gaps without taking into consideration how schools reproduce those social hierarchies does not yield solutions that address the issue. Furthermore, ignoring these dynamics can serve to reinscribe colonial relations through the progressive erasure of Indigenous political authority and the degradation of the exogenous (racialized) Other in order to establish settler sovereignty (Veracini, 2010).

An approach to educational policy analysis informed by a settler colonial theoretical lens and Critical Race Theory provides a view of policies as sites for contesting the assertions of settler political authority, and challenging whiteness as the standard for progress and success. The purpose of this thesis was to explore the way in which the discourse of the “achievement gap” operates within settler colonialism. This research relied on official documents from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), including both formal and informal documents addressing the “racial achievement gap.”

The TDSB’s documents frame the problem of achievement gaps as relatively recent. By ignoring the historical inequalities inherent within education systems, the text absolves the Board of responsibility for addressing them. Instead, the documents reflect a pastoral logic by presenting schools as benevolent institutions capable of uplifting marginalized students. The
texts draw on discourses of moral responsibility and manifest destiny rooted in white supremacy to establish the Board’s goodwill.

Following a racist and settler colonial logic, the texts also depict racialized and Indigenous students as dysfunctional. Although the texts name racism and poverty as factors affecting student achievement, such forces are framed as existing outside of the practices of individuals, groups, and institutions such as schooling. According to the document, racialized and Indigenous students’ decision making is impaired by racism and poverty. This frames achievement as the outcome of individuals’ good decision making, which relies on conceptions of a “culture of poverty” that present those who fail to achieve as victims of their own cultural practices.

By framing the problem as students’ shortcomings, the solutions to the problem do not require addressing the practices that actually marginalize students in schools. Instead, one of the solutions to the problem, Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP), is framed as teaching students to take personal responsibility, and to learn to make “positive choices.” The sole focus on the personal relationships between students and teachers leaves out system-wide changes, including: curriculum, school climate, leadership, parent and community relations etc. (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). Furthermore, the emphasis on training ascribes the responsibility for the achievement gap to individual teachers and frames the problem as a lack of awareness, which further conceals the way that decisions at the different levels of governance have affected the differential outcomes for racialized and Indigenous students.

By locating the problem of achievement only with racialized and Indigenous students, the text constructs achievement as white property. In ‘closing’ or ‘reducing’ this ‘gap,’ the texts imagines racialized and Indigenous students becoming more like white students. This constructs
achievement as racialized. As a result, the discourse of “achievement gaps” works as a technology of settler colonialism to include/exclude individuals into the settler collective.

Yet, references to colonialism are completely absent from the documents, and as such, settler colonialism is concealed behind other forms of oppression. The existence of settler sovereignty is established by denying the political authority of Indigenous communities. By erasing Indigenous political difference, and seeking to treat them as exogenous Others, the documents re-enact settler sovereign entitlement (Strakosch, 2015; Veracini, 2010). For Indigenous peoples, as long as issues of land are not addressed and institutions have not changed significantly, acts of inclusion and recognition legitimize the authority of the settler state and ensure settler futurity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; Moreton-Robinson, 2011; Strakosch, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In short, for Indigenous communities the problem is not about achieving a white standard, the problem is about land and self-determination.

In this final chapter, I discuss some of the limitations of this study as well as point to its implications for educational policy, practice, and research. I begin by considering some of the constraints of relying on documents as the primary source of data, particularly given that these texts were not produced solely for research purposes. In this section, I also acknowledge the role of different actors at different stages of the policy-making process and implementation. I conclude by arguing that these texts represent particular sets of discursive practices, and policy makers, practitioners, and researchers should consider how the use of language shapes how these documents are read, interpreted, and implemented.
Limitations

The analysis in this thesis was limited to documents that had been released publicly in order to understand how the discourse of the “achievement gap” was being taken up officially. This study did not investigate decision making processes or the process of implementation. Thus, the roles of various stakeholders, interest groups, and policy actors at each of the stages were left unexplored.

Initially, the Achievement Gap Task Force included only TDSB staff (i.e. superintendents, principals, vice principals, and other TDSB central staff), who held a one day consultation with parents, community members, staff and students. This was highly criticized and members of the Board’s Equity Policy Advisory Committee (EPAC) released a public critique of the report. Following a number of consultations, various committees provided their feedback (TDSB, 2011c). In the meetings for the Inner City Advisory Committee, for example, members raised questions about how achievement was being defined, and expressed their concerns about using standardized tests (TDSB, 2011b, 2011c). This analysis did not examine how the interests of different parties were negotiated in the process of drafting these documents (Levinson et al., 2009). Additionally, the person leading the Task Force retired in the period between the release of the Achievement Gap Report (2010), and the presentation and approval of the finalized OGAP (2011) at the Board’s program and school services committee (TDSB, 2011c). The scope of this thesis did not allow for following up with the individuals working on these documents to learn how they made meaning of the problem of academic disparities; how they integrated the feedback provided by community members; or how their understandings reflected onto the language used in the documents.
The “lived effects” of discourse on students’ educational experiences were also outside of the scope of my analysis (Bacchi, 2000; MacLure, 2003). Following the approval of the plan, for example, some members expressed their concerns at an EPAC meeting about the implementation of some of the initiatives given the Board’s budget shortfall for that academic year (TDSB, 2012). However, this study did not focus on whether the initiatives were implemented or how they were taken up by various actors (Levinson et al., 2009). Other scholars, however, have taken up this line of inquiry. For instance, the work of Guerrero, Shahnazarian, and Brown (2016) has examined how CRRP was taken up in the TDSB as part of the “Engaging All Students” initiative. In their discussion of the initiative, the authors discuss how CRRP was conceptualized as a tool that could “fix” students seen as “broken,” and address the problem of underachievement and disengagement in relation to racialized students. In their work, Guerrero, Shahnazarian, and Brown (2016) share how, as participants and facilitators, they appropriated the elements of CRRP to critique essentialist understandings of culture with the participants of their professional learning communities (Guerrero, Shahnazarian, & Brown, 2016). This element of policy as the practice of power (Levinson et al., 2009), however, was not addressed in my study.

Implications

Despite the limitations outlined above, through this study, I was able to provide a glimpse into how the discourse of the “achievement gaps” perpetuates the existing racial ordering of settler colonialism. These findings can inform educational policy and practice, and formulate directions for possible future research.

In an attempt to address the “racial achievement gap,” the documents invoked a deficit view of racialized and Indigenous students. Additionally, the representation of these students as
lacking agency has the potential to also limit how they are understood as policy actors. The language used in the documents is reflective of the views held by many within the Board. As the work of Guerrero, Shahnazarian, and Brown (2016) illustrates, deficit discourses were prevalent among teachers interested in working with CRRP two years after OGAP (2011) was approved. Although change does not take place overnight, the language of the documents reinforced those deficit views rather than challenge them. Even when the problem was reframed as an “opportunity gap,” the documents did not address the systemic barriers that lead to inequalities in educational outcomes. The documents cite the works of Kugler and West-Burns (2010) and Pedro Noguera (n.d), but do not include initiatives that would contribute to long term systemic change as part of the plan. The comparison between the recommendations of the Decolonizing Our Schools (2010) report and the initiatives for Indigenous education provide an example of how the proposed solutions circumvent the structural change needed to actually address the “opportunity gap” that Indigenous students face within the education system.

Through the narrow definition of achievement, the documents advance the assumption that improving test scores or graduation rates will solve the problem without considering how these measures are not racially or culturally neutral. In overlooking the relationship that excellence and achievement have to failure, the documents obscure the school mechanisms that categorize individuals according to performance hierarchies that mirror social stratification. Perhaps if schools and other educational institutions are to take up the challenge of enabling Indigenous and racialized students to succeed, they must also be ready to dismantle the mechanisms inherent to schooling that leads to their marginalization. This involves recognizing the ways in which racism and colonialism operate as part of school policies and practices. My hope is that drawing attention to the use of language in these documents will inform how educational researchers, policy makers, school leaders, teachers, parents, and community groups
approach education so that achievement is not racialized to privilege some students.

Furthermore, I hope to contribute to rethinking formal education in a way that acknowledges the political authority of the Indigenous communities of this land, and works towards establishing decolonial forms of relating to both land and to each other.
References


