“The Sky’s the Limit”: On the Impossible Promise of E-Learning in the Toronto District School Board

by

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Graduate Department of Geography and Planning
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Abstract

Under the banner “The Sky’s the Limit,” electronically delivered instruction (e-learning) in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) emerged as an approach that promised expanded opportunities for students to prepare for a competitive, globalized, and networked economy. In contrast, this year-long ethnographic study on e-learning in secondary day school programs in the TDSB reveals intensified inequalities that map geographically in areas divided by class and race, serving students in schools with greater learning opportunities. By this, I refer to the concentration of e-learning students in schools that are ranked highly on the TDSB’s Learning Opportunity Index (LOI). I also show how the TDSB leverages e-learning to facilitate private–public partnership with Canadian International School (CIS), Vietnam. It is a program that accredits Vietnamese students with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma so that they better qualify for university programs abroad. In the context of these results, I argue that that the promise made by e-learning is impossible to fulfil because it is a technology that reinforces merit-based schooling systems that tend to reproduce social and cultural hierarchy. Social scientists working on educational issues have long identified how inequality is spatialized, particularly as a dynamic of exclusionary processes and inclusionary activities that reproduce hierarchies. These hierarchies condition student identity and perpetuate systems of disadvantage and violence wrought by settler colonialism, anti-Black racism, gender discrimination, and
conceptions of disability within a global capitalist economy. Systems, however, are not static. Systems can be contested. While emphasizing the institutional nature of oppression, I hold schooling systems in tension with the insights of students, whose desire for a more inclusive society produces the force that makes progress possible. It is the responsibility of public education to realize this desire, for the benefit of all students. In a time of deepening cuts, education faces a crisis manufactured by social divestment, rising income inequality, and entrenchment of cultural hierarchies that discredit diversity as a value that can produce structural transformation and social justice. As an integral part of communities, schools must harness the power of people, rather than technology, to respond to this crisis.
Dedication

For Mahrokh.
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1 Chapter 1: The Impossible Promise of E-Learning

In this introduction, I describe this dissertation’s contemporary context and explain the relevance of this study to questions about the efficacy of e-learning, as it applies to publicly funded secondary schools in Ontario. I explain how my professional background as a teacher for e-learning in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) informs my research questions. Both my research findings and my experience underscore the limitation of e-learning as a privately developed technology that hinders access to an already compromised public education system.

Next, I review the literature and theoretical scope of my study. This review highlights the paucity of critical educational scholarship on K-12 e-learning; the inconsistency of e-learning programming across North America; and the need to interrogate networks of power, profit and privilege that produce educational inequality. I address this need by highlighting the logics of neoliberalism from which e-learning emerges as a governing rationality and an ideology that informs educational policy. I turn to scholarship on race and educational inequality to argue that e-learning is not outside of the social ordering of race and class; rather, it constitutes the mechanisms of this order geographically. I then explain the policy context within which e-learning in the TDSB emerges, and highlight the limitations of a globally pervasive logic that positions e-learning as a model for technological progress. Finally, I outline the theoretical scope, limitations of, and itinerary for this dissertation.

1.1 “Education that works for you”

On March 15, 2019, the Ministry of Education, under Doug Ford’s Ontario Progressive Conservative Party, announced plans to reform public education significantly. Promoted as “education that works for you,” these reforms included the prohibition of cellphone use during instructional time; changes to the Education Quality and Accountability Office, which serves as an authority of standardized testing; an increase in class sizes from grades 4 to 12; changes to hiring practices that diminished seniority considerations; and a revision of funding formulas that focus on “sustainable funding” to public education. Most significant to my research, was the inclusion of mandatory e-learning courses for high school students. This addition would replace secondary program enhancement grants providing per-school funding for arts, music, physical education, and outdoor education. Part of the announcement read:
Starting in 2020-21, the government will centralize the delivery of all e-learning courses to allow students greater access to programming and educational opportunities, no matter where they live in Ontario.

Secondary students will take a minimum of four e-learning credits out of the 30 credits needed to fulfill the requirements for achieving an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. That is equivalent to one credit per year, with exemptions for some students on an individualized basis. These changes will be phased in, starting in 2020-21.

With these additional modernizations, the secondary program enhancement grant will no longer be required. (Ontario 2019)

This mandate, which requires students to take a minimum of four e-learning credits to graduate, was not only unprecedented in the history of Canadian public education\(^1\) but also in the history of public education in North America. In the United States, for instance, only five states have an e-learning requirement to graduate—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia (Digital Learning Collaborative 2018)—and this is only to take one course.

Two days later, after requests from former teacher colleagues for my input, I tweeted about the announcement (Figure 1.1). My frustration was palpable. The scale and speed of the Ford government’s neoliberal reforms, of which e-learning was clearly a part, felt staggering. In addition to elementary and secondary education, reforms also targeted the health sector, postsecondary and training sector, the justice sector, and children’s and social services. Rather than focus on the revenue problem facing the province, which is the lowest per person in Canada, the government was focusing on cuts to public expenditure, the cost of which is lower than the national average per person (FAO 2019).

\(^1\) In 2013, the Ministry launched an “efficiencies and modernization” consultation strategy, citing that continued increases to investment in public education is no longer sustainable (Ontario 2014). In its Consultation Summary, released in 2014, the Ministry includes “e-books, e-learning, and technology” (7) as a target for efficiencies. Many participants consulted for that report warned that technology ought to improve student outcomes rather than cut costs: “To that end, [technology needs] to be selected carefully and used effectively” (7).
Less than a week after my post, the tweet earned 40,711 impressions and 1,208 engagements. Engagements reflected retweets from supportive stakeholders and commentary by a few users upset that I was casting e-learning in a bad light. My critique challenged narratives propagated by the educational technology industry (EdTech) of autonomous, consistent, and predictable technology that can fix structural problems such as inequality. It is upon such ideas that EdTech is dependent, and its expenditure in the US nearly doubled from $2.2 billion in 2010 to $4.9 billion in 2015 (Avila and Wilson 2011).

In Canada, EdTech is valued at $1 billion annually and represents one of the country’s fastest-growing startup sectors (Mindshare Learning Technology 2016; see also Alini 2012). Of particular concern are initiatives the industry presents as solutions to the apparent failures of public education.² For instance, in a report on market insights into K–12 education, MaRS

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² On May 24, 2019, teachers received an advisory notice from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation warning of attempts by Pricewaterhouse Coopers, a multinational corporation with subsidiaries such as InfoTech Solutions and Cinovate Cloud Innovate Inc., to collect data on course selection as part of an “anonymous” market survey. Pricewaterhouse Coopers confirmed the details of this notice in a subsequent news report (Press Progress 2019).
Discovery District (MaRS)\(^3\) identifies the divestment from public education as a driver of growth for entrepreneurs (Avila and Wilson 2012). In a section titled “opportunities for education ventures” (6-13) MaRS explains that “[s]chool boards struggle with the current model of government funding that can fail to keep up with inflation and rising costs. […] As a result, many schools rely on internal fundraising activities to pay for school supplies and special projects” (6). They then cite gross disparities in fundraising, between the wealthiest and poorest neighbourhoods in Toronto, as an example of an opportunity that entrepreneurs can capitalize from to gain a share of the $588.4 billion fundraising market in Ontario. These funds supplement provincial funding and are raised from parents in the school, the broader community, and grants offered by businesses and philanthropic organizations. This money finances technology, sports equipment, enrichment activities, charities, and supplementary classroom materials that afford students in wealthier districts greater advantages than peers living in low-income communities\(^4\).

Rather than frame this inequity as a problem, MaRS argues that the “radical efficiency” that accompanies divestment from public education results in better educational outcomes because private donors can determine the direction of investment. Implicit in this logic is an assumption that donors will direct their investment toward educational projects for schools that can afford it; for less-resourced schools this signifies a direction away from investment and will further exacerbate the gap in access to opportunity. It also suggests that EdTech market can identify educational inefficiencies while allaying, rather than entrenching, inequality.

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3 MaRS Discovery District is registered as a nonprofit corporation in Toronto that offers venture capital, networks, media and promotion, and market reports as well as other services to startups in Canada. Their express purpose is to build private–public partnerships.

4 A 2018 report on fundraising activity in Ontario by People for Education explains that even with fundraising guidelines imposed by the province (that stipulate that funds raised cannot replace public funding for learning materials, textbooks, staff training or administrative expenses) a quarter of elementary schools are raising $20,000 a year, and 87% of secondary schools have instituted school activity fees that can cost up to $300 per year. “This year’s survey results show that once again, the amount fundraised by school communities varies widely. In 2018, the top 10% of fundraising elementary schools raised 37 times the amount raised by the bottom 10%, with some schools reporting raising as much as $123,000. Among secondary schools, the top 5% of fundraising schools raised as much as the bottom 81% combined, with some schools reporting raising $150,000” (1-2).
Another related report on education markets is currently in the works. On May 16, 2019, Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) attempted to recruit Ontario educators and counsellors by requesting their thoughts on the current and future state of online education in Ontario. This move came nearly two months after the Ministry’s announcement about mandatory e-learning. PwC’s intention was to draw a sample large enough to publish a free expert market report. Their stated objective was to understand the behaviour of students selecting e-learning courses. This information would let them chart the “outlook for the market . . . over the foreseeable future—particularly in light of the recent provincial government announcement that online education will become compulsory starting in 2020” (OSSTF Memo, May 24, 2019a, cited with permission)

I reference these initiatives because they represent an ideology that views divestment from public education as an opportunity for profit. It is a neoliberal discourse that similarly played out during the unrolling in the 2000s of massive open online courses (MOOC), which promised “disruptive innovation.” Education scholars Natalia Kucirkova and Karen Littleton (2017) explain:

> In their early stages, MOOCs were heralded as a disruptive innovation in the higher education system . . . and a transformative educational force in education overall . . . . More recently, however, initial enthusiasm of MOOC providers has begun to wane . . . , with the retention rates on most courses below 10% . . . and the criticism that the current MOOC model is unlikely ‘to have a long and enduring impact’ . . . and reach students from disadvantaged backgrounds or developing countries . . .. (324).

The optimistic story told about MOOCs (i.e., edX, Coursera, and Udacity) in the media, which grew to prominence in Canada against the background of an economic recession (see Dumitricia 2017), is a story that runs parallel to the promise of e-learning today, which is being packaged as a democratic, accessible, and modern fix to tight budgets. However, MOOC’s effect of

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5 PwC is a multinational corporation with subsidiaries such as InfoTech Solutions and Cinovate Cloud Innovate Inc. that has investments in technology, media, telecommunications, government, and public services. Its gross earnings in 2018 totalled $41.280 million USD globally (PwC Global 2018). For participating in their survey, TDSB employees were offered a $50 gift card to Amazon or Tim Hortons. Upon receiving copies of this request, the Ontario Secondary School Teacher’s Federation (OSSTF) advised its members against participating in surveys that might potentially outsource and privatize the provision of mandatory e-learning (OSSTF Memo, May 24, 2019a).

6 2012 was the year of the MOOC (Pappano 2012), with numbers since declining. MOOCs intended to deliver courses to large, nonspecialist audiences. At the time of writing, the TDSB has phased out the use of MOOCs.
corporatizing the university in particular and its exacerbation of inequality more broadly reveal
the “embeddedness” of these e-learning phenomena “within existing networks of power, profit
and privilege” (Dumitricia 2017, 458; see also Reid, 2017).

1.2 Professional history

The research problem in this dissertation emerges from my career as a secondary school teacher.
In 2010, I was invited to participate in the TDSB e-learning day school program, which was
offered to senior high school students for one of four class periods each semester. Enrolments
took place on a first-come, first-served basis. In my initial years teaching English courses online,
I noticed that a significant number of students were concentrated in a handful of schools located
in wealthier, predominantly whiter areas of the city. I also observed that a disproportionate
number of courses were offered to students pursuing university course types that could be used
to gain entry into undergraduate degree programs.

In addition, I taught in a face-to-face credit recovery program. The program allowed students,
who failed more than one course, the opportunity to recover multiple credits simultaneously.
Students in this program required individualized instruction because each needed to meet unique
curriculum expectations across a diverse range of subjects. When the administration approached
our Student Success Team about the possibility of extending e-learning to students in the credit
recovery program, we unanimously declined. We declined even though e-learning was
theoretically an ideal solution to the thorny problem of producing multiple lesson plans for
students who were facing insurmountable barriers to academic achievement in the formal
schooling system. The team argued that students already struggling to meet the criteria of
academic achievement are not the type of learners who would succeed online. Indeed, we
observed that students taking e-learning had to demonstrate greater discipline and responsibility
on a platform that provides little in the way of a social safety net.

7 One exception was the offering of a half-credit grade 10 civics or careers course, which is no longer available
during the school year.

8 Students who failed with a final grade between 35 and 49 percent.
My experiences in the e-learning day school program and later in the e-summer program contradicted the early rationale of e-learning, which was intended to support rural and remote communities. Its stated aim was to “help these [rural] schools provide high quality, community-based education” (Ontario, 2005). After a year of consultation in 2004, the Ministry awarded a $4 million dollar grant to D2L, which currently provides access to the LMS used for the provision of e-learning provincially. While the stated aim was to address the geographic inequality between remote, rural and urban communities in the province, today, each of the sixty English-speaking and twelve French-speaking schools in Ontario offers e-learning, using the Ministry-licensed LMS with curriculum managed by the Ontario Educational Resource Bank (LaBonte and Barbour 2018, 604).

As part of my investigation, I wanted to examine e-learning in the context of growing inequality in the city and to understand the impact of e-learning on student identity, which I interrogate through students’ broader relationships with education. How does e-learning, as a spatial arrangement of schooling, reorganize geographies of education? How does this online spatial arrangement, as a practice that is relational and connected to face-to-face schooling, affect how students experience education? How does the experience of education impact dimensions of identity? This includes “ethnicity, gender, friendship circles, race, talents, language(s), social media involvement, expectations of self, aspirations, beliefs, spiritual beliefs, socio-economic situation, degree of self-awareness, passions and interests, sense of self-efficacy—in fact, all the factors that form the unique person in the classroom” (Ontario 2011, 2). In short, I wanted to understand how the practice of e-learning is impacting teaching and learning in the TDSB as well as the effect of technology on educational inequality on student identity.

1.3 Researching e-learning

In face-to-face classrooms, one can expect a predictable engagement with the classroom community. It is a community where students are legally compelled to attend until the age of 18, and each full-credit course requires 110-hours of instructional time. This time includes not only direct instruction but also inquiry-based or cooperative learning, which may consist of experiential components that connect students with their broader school community. E-learning,
on the other hand, lends itself to individualized surveilled data-driven learning, where engagement with collective curiosity and risk-taking that is integral to learning (see Biesta 2016, 2013) is discouraged by virtue of LMS design. In e-learning, students, spend considerably less time accessing course material than they might in a face-to-face class (see appendix 7.2). In the seven classrooms I observed, communication was text-heavy and presided over by the teacher. The lack of collaboration is due to a limitation of tools, where even synchronous classes, which are teacher-controlled, reflect poor attendance because students are not compelled to attend. Further, areas in the e-learning classroom where students can communicate both privately and publicly, such as discussion forums, email, and chat functions, are accessible by both teachers and administrators. To understand the impact of these emergent spatial and relational reconfigurations on the experience of public secondary school students, one must re-envision what learning looks like online, the limitations of this vision posed by software design, and how technology more broadly serves and is served by the social and cultural demands of our contemporary moment.

1.3.1 Research problem and arguments

“The Sky’s the Limit” was the first branding initiative by the Ministry of Education for e-learning. Although the brand is no longer in circulation, promises about what e-learning might offer (i.e., engaging, learning-focused and inclusive classrooms) still abound. The research problem considers the effect of e-learning in TDSB secondary schools on educational inequality and student identity formation. My study, conducted between the 2016–2017 school year, complicates the promise of e-learning in the context of its centralized provision in the TDSB. It takes place in the context of supplemental offerings in day schools under a capped-standard rather than continuous enrolment. It does not focus on the market-based model of summer school, which offers a vastly different structure for e-learning provision; blended learning, which is more widely accessed, but not tracked by the school board; or the e-Credit 18+

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9 For instance, there were roughly 500 students enrolled in the day school credit program per semester during the 2016–2017 school year, while e-Summer school, which runs in both July and August, enrolled 4,000+ students in each month.
program, which offers an alternative to adult learners who are not enrolled full-time. E-learning in day school enjoys low levels of attrition because students are self-selected and the course is integrated into their full-time funding, which means they have to complete it to stay enrolled in their school. The program also targets senior-level, university-bound students. This provision contrasts with summer school enrolment, which reflects a greater range of course types accompanied by very high rates of enrolment and attrition.10

Some questions that guided my research method and design were these:

1. How was e-learning accessed by students in the school board, and was the provision of this program equitable in a diverse urban setting?
2. How did students engage with e-learning, within the context of their broader schooling experience?
3. What are the possibilities and limitations of e-learning, as it applies to traditional models of schooling?

My dissertation draws mainly on qualitative methods, especially ethnography and interviews, but also draws on quantitative data to show where e-learners' schools are in Toronto. Using a critical ethnographic approach, I recruited twenty students from the seven classrooms I observed. 18 students completed the three-hour-long interviews. Most students possessed middle-class competencies, which reflected rigorous engagement with extra-curricular activities, aspirations for university and a desire for high-skilled work, and an egalitarian relationship to authority. While I interviewed thirty additional stakeholders (e.g., parents, administrators, teachers) to get a range of perspectives, I intentionally highlight the contributions of students in my work.

I argue that supplementary e-learning, which takes place entirely online, primarily serves high-achieving students for whom the platform offers an efficient means to accreditation. I also show how anti-Blackness manifests itself in education, arguing that e-learning, rather than being a

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10 While I have spent many years teaching e-learning during the summer, it is not the focus of my work.
space outside racial signification, reifies a colour-blind racism where oppression is positioned as naturally occurring. In sum, I argue that e-learning is consistent with the neoliberal shift towards markets in education and is a technology that tends to reproduce social and cultural hierarchies consistent with face-to-face classrooms.

Ethnographic approaches allowed me to get at the context and specificity of schooling. Rather than treat online instruction as an exceptional practice, I situate it along a trajectory of educational practices, which produce particular effects on students. Ethnography allows me to account for the social and political context within which culture emerges. Ethnography also reveals how social and political life discipline and exceed individual identity within and across cultures.

I will set out my theoretical influences and contributions below, before returning to give context on education policy in Ontario.

1.4 Literature review and theoretical scope

There is a lack of critical scholarship on e-learning, by which I refer to research that interrogates networks of power, profit, and privilege that condition the emergence and practice of e-learning, particularly in the context of publicly funded K-12 education. One reason for this is because the analysis of e-learning is dominated by few authors. Below, I draw on some of this material to illustrate the work yet to be done, especially in explaining how e-learning programs exacerbate educational inequalities. Research on educational inequality has long informed knowledge about how schooling, as a process that sorts, groups, and filters students into class categories, reproduces social relations (Apple 2012 [1982], 1982; Ball 2003; Becker 1964; Bourdieu 1977, 1986; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Davis and Moore 1945; Freire 2005 [1970]; Gaffield 1991; Lareau 2000; Parsons 1959; Schultz 1961; Sullivan 2001; Valenzuela 1999; Willis 1977). Geographers have drawn from and contributed to research on educational inequality. They turn attention to the spatial arrangement of schooling, particularly in the growing subfield of critical geographies of education, which has assumed definition and cohesion over the last decade (Helfenbein and Taylor 2009; Nguyen, Cohen and Huff 2017; McCreary, Basu and Godlewska
Below, I explore this literature, especially as it intersects with the logics of neoliberalism and the dynamics of social reproduction. These logics and dynamics affect the spatial arrangement of schooling and reflect geographies of class and race in Toronto.

### 1.4.1 K-12 e-learning literature

Part of the challenge of situating my research within K–12 e-learning literature is that the field is largely self-selected, generated by few authors, and focused on practitioner audiences. Of a total of five systematic reviews (Barbour and Reeves 2009; Cavanaugh et al. 2009; Rice 2006; Hasler-Waters, Barbour, and Menchaca 2014; Karen Arnesen et al. 2019) Michael K. Barbour is coauthor to the latest four. The most recent review, led by Karen Arnesen (2019), included an examination of “356 articles, written by 384 distinct authors” of which Barbour—with 57 articles—was the most widely cited (38). Seventy-two percent of authors only published one article on K–12 e-learning, over half of which were published from 2011–2016 (38), and in the last two years of their review, a significant majority were co-authored rather than single-authored studies, which calls into question the metrics by which one makes claims of authorship and authority to define a field. The scholarship is “scattered among many journals . . . making it more difficult to discern trends across the discipline,” (50) and a significant number comprise literature reviews, theoretical articles, or meta-analyses (45).

When the literature reviews filtered out audiences and limited the pool to “articles published in better journals, or at least journals that were better indexed and/or had been published for a

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11 In 2018 the Critical Geographies of Education Specialty Group (CGE-SG) was formalized as part of the American Association of Geographers by Dan Cohen, Alice Huff, and Nicole Nguyen. The mission of CGE-SG is “to promote, organize, and advance critical geographic explorations of education and schooling; to support the scholarly growth of critical geographers of education; and to contribute to social movements related to struggles over schooling” (CGE-SG 2019).

12 This is to say, how can one claim a particular author published the most number of articles, when the majority of them are co-authored? Are such claims useful when the assignation of co-authorship suggests shared ownership over a publication and shared credit when referenced?
longer period of time by more reputable or known academic organizations,” (Arnesen et al. 39) there were 22 journals, 80 articles, and 102 authors represented. Eleven authors comprised 72 percent of publications (39, 40). Themes were broad in scope and included online student readiness and retention; online teacher training and instructional strategies; and online learning policy, programming standards, and best practices. With a concentration of a field in the hands of so few authors, there is no literature around which e-learning coheres (see Gulosino and Miron 2017 for a similar argument). For this reason, I do not claim e-learning as a field of study. E-learning is an object of analysis, one to which I apply a geographical lens with a relational understanding of space to better understand the impact of technology on public education.

It is noteworthy that nonprofit organizations sponsor a significant amount of research on e-learning and that this research is frequently national or international in scope (e.g., Jimoyiannis, 2011; see Kennedy and Ferdig 2018 for Canadian context). Specifically, the annual “State of the Nation: K-12 E-Learning in Canada” report sponsored by the Canadian eLearning Network (CANeLearn) promises a comprehensive study using largely quantitative methods (surveys and policy analysis) coupled with follow-up qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., Barbour, 2010; Barbour and LaBonte, 2017; see also Cavanaugh et al., 2009). The annual reports reflect the dismal state of research in e-learning. The report’s 2018 survey had a response rate of only 11 percent in Ontario, and their figures conflate blended and supplemental e-learning delivery models rendering the statistical descriptors of e-learners in Ontario unreliable. For example, their report indicates that 29.6 percent of Ontario students are engaged in e-learning (8); however, in the TDSB (and I suspect in other boards) the figure does not capture actual use—73,000 students are automatically enrolled in an e-learning classroom, most of whom may never log in to their accounts. Such a figure runs the risk of grossly overrepresenting the number of students who actually use e-learning to access instruction. It also suggests we know more than we do about the access students have to this modality of learning. Drawing my data and sample from students in the TDSB, which comprise the largest population of K-12 students (250,000) in Ontario, I will therefore provide substantial insight into the state of e-learning, within the context of the city of Toronto.
1.4.2 K-12 e-learning programs

E-learning programs in North America are diverse in range and often inequitable in their provision. In the United States, one credit e-learning is mandated in five states, and managed mainly by private interests. The National Education Policy Centre, in a report authored by Gene Glass and Kevin Welner (2011) on online K–12 schooling in the US, report that (what they call) virtual schooling has grown mostly in the absence of supporting evidence:

Those making policy should be clear on this key point: there exists no evidence from research that full-time virtual schooling at the K–12 level is an adequate replacement for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. Yet to date, this lack of support appears to have exerted little or no influence on the proliferation of virtual K–12 schools. While existing research does not document harm, this evidentiary void raises cautions that should favor pilot programs and careful evaluations rather than largescale expansion of the sector. (5)

In their report, Glass and Welner call for the regulation of K–12 online learning services, which are driven by a handful of companies,13 many of whom are entangled with the state. For example, the state of Arkansas was awarded a $4 million grant to establish a charter school, the Arkansas Virtual Academy, the largest benefactor of which was K12 Inc., co-founded by William J. Bennett, who served as the former Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration (11). E-learning in the United States has also made headlines for its inequity. For instance, The Arizona Virtual Academy outsourced its labour to East Indian cybertutors before stopping the practice after media exposure (12). In Virginia’s Carroll County, one of the poorest in the state, weak legislation created the conditions within which most students are enrolled almost entirely outside of the county boundaries. A 2014 review of US online charter schools led by Lisa Hasler-Waters substantiates this report, explaining that results from “empirical studies, state audits, investigative reports, and dissertations have presented concerning evidence that

13 “The following six large companies account for much of the content and services sold to full-time virtual schools: K12 Inc., which entered the business originally as a provider of courses for home-schooled students; Educational Options Inc., which started as a provider of courses for credit recovery; Apex Learning, originally an online course provider for Advanced Placement courses; PLATO; A+LS, originally a provider of courses for accelerated learning and credit recovery; and Connections Education, which was recently acquired by Pearson PLC for $400 Million. These companies are now actively marketing a full range of courses and services to full-time virtual schools.” (Glass and Welner 2011, 10)
these schools are still troubled by (a) lack of oversight/accountability, (b) improper use of public funds, (c) failing grades, and (d) drop out rates that are higher than their traditional school counterparts” (Hasler-Waters, Menchaca, and Barbour 2014, 383; see Miron, Shank, and Davidson 2018 for a more recent treatment of performance ratings, which remain poor).

Michigan is the first state to mandate one credit of e-learning. However, supplemental course offerings by Michigan Virtual in partnership with local districts, received a failing grade for poor outcomes—reporting a 55 percent statewide pass rate (Freidhoff 2018; Laverly 2018). In reviewing its data, Michigan Virtual (2018) notes that only 27 percent of schools had a school-wide virtual pass rate of 90–100 percent: They explain “it’s no surprise that there is a disparity between the top-performing and lowest-performing schools in our state. Online learning is not free from the trends that haunt our education system” (Michigan Virtual 2018). Further, it explains that online learning is failing students in poverty: “Despite the fact that well over half (62 percent) of our virtual enrolments came from students in poverty, we see a gap of nearly 20 percentage points between the pass rates for students in poverty (48 percent) and students not in poverty (66 percent)” (Michigan Virtual 2018). Pass rates correlate with the number of courses students are taking. As such, students who enrolled in one or two courses had a pass rate of 73 percent (notwithstanding the gap between students in poverty), while students taking five or more courses had a 51 percent pass rate. The school environment also differed, with 51 percent of students arriving from a general education setting, while 42 percent were enrolled in alternative settings. While Michigan may appear to approximate what Ontario might offer, its diversity of school environment, socioeconomic context, lack of union protections for teachers, and influence from private industry perhaps offer a horizon of failure. If the Ministry is unsuccessful executing e-learning, students already struggling face-to-face will be further left behind.

In Canada, British Columbia (BC) serves as a model that Ontario might align toward because it is currently leading in e-learning activity. As a result, one can find more comprehensive legislation, policy, and guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education. Unlike the Ontario Education Act, which offers no reference to e-learning, BC’s School Act uses the term distributed learning to capture a range of configurations that “relies primarily on indirect
communication between students and teachers, including internet or other electronic-based delivery, teleconferencing or correspondence” (Ministry of Education BC, 2016). According to figures published by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (2019) approximately 10.8 percent of students are enrolled in distributed learning programs (at least twice Ontario’s figure). Almost all of these students are concentrated in publicly subsidized private independent schools, which reflects funding inequities that have come under considerable criticism for promoting a market-driven two tier-system (Ellis and Yoon 2019; Poole and Fallon 2015). As Figure 1.2 shows, these inequities extend into distributed or e-learning programs, which are captured primarily by private schools—twelve of which exclusively operate as fully private distributed learning schools. What these figures show is that, consistent with findings in my study, students who are self-selected are concentrated in schools that have greater resources – in this instance, private or independent schools. As Poole and Fallon (2015) explain, “Distributed learning is a manifestation of school and programme choice that has ratcheted up virtual mobility, funding volatility and competition between school districts.”

Figure 1.2 Student enrolment in distributed learning programs in British Columbia. Reproduced from the British Columbia Teacher’s Federation, 2019
1.4.3 Critical geographies of education

There is insufficient critical scholarship on e-learning. For this reason, I draw from the wider geographic literature on urban education that views space as a site of imagination, heterogeneity, and multiplicity as well as a “product of interrelations” (Massey 2005, 9). By centering space in my analysis, I take online learning as a site of interrelations not only with face-to-face environments and learning objects but also with lived experiences that are represented digitally. E-learning can only be understood as a place of instruction, a place from which space is materialized, when we account for the people within it. Grounding my orientation in place, I historicize and politicize learning, and counter the ahistorical and politically neutral technological determinism (i.e., space precedes people) that characterizes the public discourse of online education. Black geographers have also illustrated how the concept of place is central to the production of difference (Chari 2008; Gilmore 2002; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Peake 2005; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Smith and Vasudevan 2017).

My work contributes to a digital turn in geography that has been little acknowledged, despite the fact that the digital worlds have “become central to both the praxes and focus of contemporary geographical scholarship” (Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski 2018). Further, the leadership of geographers in developing theories of social reproduction, particularly in the context of education and the study of children, have been invaluable to my thinking (Aitken 2004; Butler and Hamnett 2007; Collins and Coleman 2008; Katz 2001; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2012; Thiem 2009; Waters 2006, 2012). More recently, these theories have expanded to include an anti-racist feminist framework (Camfield 2016; Ferguson 2008, 2016; Hopkins, 2015).

Critical geographical research on formal education has done much to identify the impact of material worlds in setting the parameters of the interrelations that produce space, particularly as processes of globalization have organized it (Helfenbein and Taylor 2009; Holloway, Brown,

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14 Also, see Rose 2016 for a call to map the complexities of digitally-mediated cultural production; Bingham 1996 to historicize digital geographies; and Smicek 2017 for critiques of platform capitalism as business logic.
and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; McCreary, Basu, and Godlewska 2013; Mills and Kraftl 2016; Theim 2009). As Tyler McCreary, Ranu Basu, and Anne Godlewska (2013) describe in their introduction to a special issue on critical geographies of education:

Geographical analysis necessarily includes critical social analysis: race, class, and gender are not fixed identities but ongoing social productions; the multi-scalar spaces in which such social production takes place are vitally important to understanding how our societies work and, most importantly, how we might improve our social processes, especially for the most marginalized in our society. As critical scholars of education have long argued, schools are sites of cultural and social reproduction that legitimize broader social stratifications. (255)

In researching e-learning, I was therefore interested in determining the scales of its production as well as its effects as a social process. To do this, I connect education to social inequality in Toronto, which, like many other cities, is experiencing increased income inequality and socio-spatial polarization (Hulchanski 2010a; see TDSB May 2010 for application to education). The generative potential between geography and education, referred to as “critical geographies of education,” engages across difference, privileges the voices of young people, and historicizes political, social, and cultural contestation. Nicole Nguyen, Dan Cohen, and Alice Huff highlight the socio-spatial politics of schooling as a site of community life, identity formation, and social reproduction. Education, they emphasize, is not only a “target of oppressive processes […] [but also] important sites of resistance” (3). The neoliberal remaking of schools, to which I will next turn, poses an urgent political problem of inequality that is both spatialized and racialized, and which unevenly determine student mobility, migration, access, and choice (4).

1.4.3.1 Logics of neoliberalism

I understand the term neoliberalism as political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) has explained it—a governing rationality that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms (17). This configuration does not merely extend capital into everyday life, but rather signifies everyday life and everyday people in terms of capital. Brown (2015) describes how “All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized” (Brown 2015, 10). What distinguishes classical liberalism from neoliberalism, she argues, is that the distinctly political character of democracy is converted into economic ones:
Neoliberalism . . . names a historically specific economic and political reaction against Keynesianism and democratic socialism, as well as a more generalized practice of “economizing” spheres and activities heretofore governed by other tables of value. Yet in its differential instantiations across countries, regions, and sectors, in its various intersections with extant cultures and political traditions, and above all, in its convergences with and uptakes of other discourses and developments, neoliberalism takes diverse shapes and spawns diverse content and normative details, even different idioms. It is globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself in space and over time.” (21)

Rather than applying global truths or making neoliberalism a “dark chapter in a steady march toward end times,” (Brown 2015, 21) Brown alerts readers to its inconsistency and contradictions of its expression, its diverse content, different idioms, and differential instantiations. For this reason, its application must be specific in terms of its geography and context of practice as it converges and perhaps contradicts broader discursive effects.

Where Brown approaches the discourses and governance structures of neoliberalism through a Foucauldian lens, David Harvey (2007) situates neoliberalism as a specifically political and economic practice. Neoliberalism emerged from a crisis in capitalist accumulation during the 1970s that generated a new international world order. This order, which emerged through institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund advanced a framework that includes an emphasis on “strong property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 2). While the development of neoliberalism was geographically uneven, its logic was most forcefully asserted in the 1990s through policies in the United States and Britain, both of which saw the deregulation of industry, divestment from and marketization of the public sector, and assaults on labour power. Indeed, Harvey (2007) wrote a great deal about the ideology these practices are premised upon—a virtue of competition—across which personal and individual “freedom” in the marketplace extend into the institutional spheres of welfare, education, and healthcare: “Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism)” (65–66). The assertion of freedom corresponded not only to deregulation, but also to a re-regulation of the state by capital witnessed
by the downloading and privatization of spheres corresponding to aspects of social reproduction such as education (Harvey 2014, 105).

Neoliberal educational reform, as Kenneth J. Saltman outlines, relies on a corporate school model whose aim is to replace public schools with “privately managed charter schools, voucher schemes, and tax credit scholarships for private schooling” (250). The need for private industry is produced by the “closure of neighbourhood schools and massive expansion of de-unionized, nonprofit, privately managed charter schools with short term contracts,” through which educational management organizations can “extract profit by cutting teacher pay and educational resources while relying on high teacher turnover and labor precarity” (251). In response to the question “does e-learning work,” I have shown technology to offer ripe opportunities for private investment particularly in the United States, whose various models of educational provision illustrate the failure of corporate reforms. Saltman substantiates this argument by highlighting the role of the for-profit company K12 Inc., the largest educational management organization and a provider of online learning in the United States, in this failure, which advances a view of knowledge that is not dialogical or related to questioning, but rather “an object of reverence to be transmitted” (253). The “creative destruction” of public education that Saltman surveys is a neoliberal agenda that compromises fundamental democratic values:

Terms such as failure, choice, and competition (as well as consumers, efficiency, and monopoly) are part of a broader long-standing neoliberal agenda that extends far beyond education: misrepresenting public goods as public consumables, replacing the collective purpose of general welfare with the misguided terminology of profit accumulation, portraying citizenship as consumerism, and alleging that public schools need to be allowed to fail just like businesses (we should suppose this “allowed to fail” logic does not apply to banking or automobile industries). The educational policy debates are now trapped in this framing, making it difficult to assert crucial democratic educational values including equality, fairness, justice, care, intellect, and the public good, to name a few (254).

Later, I situate e-learning in the context of Ontario’s neoliberal educational reform. Beginning in the 1990s, a divestment from public education reflects a historically consistent but specific shift in provincial politics. The neoliberal logic, under which this approach persists today, is economic in both its ends and its appeal to legitimacy. And this logic persists where “democratic state commitments to equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the
project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement” (Brown 2015, 26).

1.4.4 Social reproduction in education

Anthropologist James Collins (2009), in a review of the scholarship on social reproduction in classroom and schools, explains that while scholars may have differed in their theories, analytic scope, and methodology, work on social reproduction emerged after World War II during a time when concerns about inequality incited debates about the “central contradictions of these postwar societies” (34). These contradictions reflected public education’s reputation as a “meritocratic institution in which talent and effort alone predicted outcomes,” despite evidence indicating otherwise (34). Collins traces the decline of social reproduction as a theory that was traditionally referenced to explain mechanisms of educational inequality. Today, he argues, the ubiquity of postmodern thought in the 1990s turned inquiry away from the theory of social reproduction despite decades of research that empirically upheld its basic thesis. “Instead analysts have given priorities that emphasize individual or group initiative—’agency,’ ‘identity,’ ‘person,’ and ‘voice’—over the structural constraints of political economy or linguistic code” (Collins 2009, 42). Since the 1990s, Collins argues, work that attempts to expand the scope of inquiry has failed to provide a comprehensive account of class inequality, although there are two lessons he draws from the impasse: The first is that one must study the mechanisms of structural inequality at multiple social levels and, two, that a “macro-micro dichotomy of individual and society” is neither useful nor desirable in the analysis of inequality (43).

The results of my research cover 2016–2017 and reflect consistencies with a decade of educational research on the TDSB that highlights the nature of structural inequality (Brown 2008a, 2008b; Brown and Sinay, 2008; Brown and Parekh 2010, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernández 2010; Gaztambide-Fernandez and Guerrero 2011; Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh 2017; James and Samaroo 2017, Parekh 2013; Parekh and Gaztambide-Fernández 2017). In conversation with this research, I offer a theory to explain why e-learning programs, despite their intent to expand opportunities for students, have instead exacerbated inequality. In responding to Collins my approach is to examine the multiple social levels across which inequality emerges in e-learning by turning to the “interplay of classrooms, schools, and the wider society” (Collins
2009, 44). I also integrate the theory of social reproduction by referring to the concept of “concerted cultivation” (Lareau [2003] 2011). Annette Lareau draws from Bourdieu to develop this concept, which describes the cultural logic that produces differential advantages for middle-class children, who are cultivated to pursue their preferences and advocate for themselves within an institutional setting. Lareau’s ethnographic work with Black and white middle-class, working-class, and poor families illustrate that social class has a powerful impact on family life. By applying this concept, I argue that social power and cultural privilege play a more significant role in the reproduction of class and the encouragement of talent than the curriculum skills and capabilities learned in school. I expand on Lareau’s argument by foregrounding the differential experience of class for three Black students in my study. In doing so, I distinguish the material field of the ‘poor’ from the symbolic field of ‘poverty’ as well as the racial category of ‘white’ from the social and cultural category of ‘whiteness’ under which norms are universalized and expunged of historical context.

I approach the study of class and race as a means of explaining the logics that marginalize racialized people and position them underdeveloped and uncivilized (i.e., in need of modernization and development). This logic informs legal and political frameworks, which rationalize a set of relations under which structures of dominance and different modes of production emerge (Hall 1996). Hall uses the metaphor of articulation to describe the complex combination of variables that comprise the unity of an object and its relations of dominance, which are contingent and subject to change. What this means is that two elements that are connected do not inherently belong together and are forged because of ideological elements and historical conditions (Grossberg 1986). For this reason, it is imperative to situate e-learning within a contemporary, socially specific context, while tracing the historical trajectory that gives it ideological force. How does existing elements of schooling recombine to produce e-learning? Who is framing the discourse under which e-learning is understood as desirable or collectively good? And which voices are silenced or absent from this articulation? Research in education has

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15 See Goldberg 2002 for an exposition of the centrality of race to current formations of the nation-state and modern governance.
consistently examined the convergence and articulation of race and class to describe the “immense and continuing power of race as a defining marker of differentiation in the institutions of this society” (Apple 2009; see also (Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015; O’Connor et al. 2011; Patillo 2007, Roda and Wells 2013; Saporito and Lareau 1999). This power operates at a symbolic and largely invisible register (Bourdieu 1991) shaping the educational aspiration of students, many of whom must forego aspects of their identity to succeed in a marketized model of schooling.

1.4.5 Race and educational inequality

Scholarship on race and educational inequality—especially through the lens of critical race theory (CRT)—has demonstrated barriers stacking the deck against marginalized students. It reveals the relationship of schooling to prisons, as a continuum of discipline that governs brown and black bodies (Bhattacharjee 2003; Caton 2012; Gregory, Skiba and Noguera 2010; Maynard 2017; Tanner 2009); the colour-blind racism that neutralizes intersectional experiences of identity, rationalizes meritocratic competition, and perpetuates oppression in education (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Dixson, Anderson, and Donnor 2017; Gillborn 2015; also see Ledesma and Calderón 2015 for review of CRT in education); and how race intersects with families and the schooling market (Gulson 2011; Hunter 2019; Lipman 2011; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013).

The oppressive force of education cannot be resisted without understanding its mechanisms of racialization, embedded in the historical specificity of race (as a social phenomenon) and ethnicity (as a cultural phenomenon). In Canada, this context is embedded in colonial history and a multicultural promise across which race is signified and naturalized.

As I will show, systems of oppression are interconnected and emerge in the context of Toronto through the disproportionate makeup of Black students in applied streams and special education programs (James and Turner 2017; Schroeter and James 2015; Parekh, Killoran and Crawford 2011); the anti-Black policy of school resource police officers, which was finally abandoned in 2017 (Nasser 2017; TDSB 2017c); and low achievement gaps and low graduation rates among racialized students, which is differentiated by gender (TDSB 2011, 2018). Schools are failing
Black and Indigenous students, in particular. This study situates e-learning as an imperative of this failure. Students are turning to e-learning, not because it is their preferred modality, but because the formal schooling system is not meeting their needs. E-learning is not ‘outside’ of this formal system; it is constitutive of it. Moreover, e-learning exacerbates the conditions under which race is naturalized as “extra” curricular, relegated to expressions of (multi)culture during potlucks.

1.5 A word on ‘progress’

Ontario has a reputation for being one of the most progressive education systems in North America (Coughlan 2017) and Canada was more recently recognized as the most educated country in the world (Hess 2018). However, standardized tests set criteria for progress (see Hopfenbeck et al. 2017 for a critique) that collapses diversity, collaboration, and creativity under the rubric of capitalist investment. Resistance to this marketized rubric has been led by trade unions whose history of collective bargaining kept class sizes manageable and teachers fairly compensated for their work (Mildon and Fournier 2015). Ontario provincial governments, under Liberal leadership, claim an almost 20 percent increase in literacy and numeracy standards and a 14 percent increase in graduation rate over the last ten years, citing such figures as proof of progress (Ontario 2012). Yet, if we are to measure progress relative to a history of colonial violence in the late fifteenth century (inciting the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples) or even more formatively in the nineteenth century, under the constitution of Canada, we may have to reconsider the limits of our instruments. Pedagogically, the organization of space-time in the school day is mirrored in e-learning classrooms through the linear and standardized consumption of content—a logic of capitalism that is not only Eurocentric but also

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16 In light of these challenges, the TDSB has struck three standing committees and one permanent committee made up of trustees; two statutory committees, mandated by the province; and ten Community Advisory Committees (CAC), which not only communicate advice to standing committees but take on an advocacy role. Examining the (inconsistently published) publicly available agenda and minutes such as those on the Aboriginal CAC, Black Student Achievement CAC, Equity Policy CAC, Inner City CAC, and Special Education CAC points to the work yet to be done to address disparities in achievement. The Enhancing Equity Task Force, in particular, published a report in December 2017 that made headlines for its recommendations to review the impact of optional attendance policies, in which schools offer flexibility with school choice (Kunin 2016), and to phase out streaming in grades 9 & 10, which disproportionately affects Indigenous and Black students in the board.
universalist in its epistemology (see Dei 2000; Styres 2017; Wright 2015). This contrasts against knowledge as it is understood as a system to be culturally specific, relational, experiential, and contextual. In particular, meritocracy captures “quality” as an economy, such that our ability or inability to manage resources—as deficits, as surplus—determine our worth as individuals, rather than reflecting the worth of institutions and policies that impose the criteria for this value.

In this contemporary moment, global economic interdependency has reconfigured relations between the government, the private sector, and society as a “new modality of social engineering,” within which students “are targeted as a new desirable subject of autonomy and self-regulation” (Egea 2014, 268). The turn to e-learning as a tool for finding efficiencies in public education is consistent with strategies that have turned to information and communication technology (ICT) to restructure education on a global scale. These strategies are neoliberal prescriptions, propagated largely by multilateral organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, and UNESCO, to crises of a globalizing economy. Prescriptions include the need to adapt to a changing and uncertain information and knowledge society, as well as the need to develop twenty first century skills that are premised upon institutional modernization, and the self-production of the learner, whose education is measured in the language of stocks and free market economics: “productivity, efficiency, and profitability” (Egea 2014, 278).

1.5.1 The colonial project of education

The growth of inequality, of which e-learning is a part, reflects a pattern of educational provisions and practices, which are not only consistent with neoliberal educational policy as a global phenomenon (Basu 2004; Lakes and Carter 2011), but also a historical legacy of schooling in Ontario. The very constitution of publicly funded education in Canada is a colonial policy that continues to privilege, in law and practice, European social and cultural

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17 In the context of Canada, Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 guarantees provincial oversight of education law so long as it does not affect the rights of publicly funded denominational schools, which is expressly a protection for Protestant and Roman Catholic minorities. Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms further guarantees protection for English and French languages when they are minority, so long as there is sufficient demand.
systems upon which it was founded. The effects of this policy are evident in strategies of assimilation, which at its most coercive emerges as a legacy of residential schools (Manzer 1994; McCreary 2011; Watters 2007), as anti-Black racism (Codjoe 2001; James 1995), and as selective immigration policy, which privilege economic classes of skilled workers and business migrants (Ley and Hiebert 2000). This selective policy is coupled with an emphasis on self-sufficiency and integration, the stresses of which play out in schooling (see Abu-Laban 1998 on the contradiction of integration and immigration policies).

At its most optimistic, the institutionalized value of multiculturalism lessens the overvaluation of European social and cultural systems and redeems the story of Canada through the ideals of cultural pluralism. The practice of governance belies such optimism. As a constitutional monarchy, Canada presupposes white European national identity as heritage, as kinship, and as hierarchy and divine right (see James 2018, 1995; Lund and Carr 2015; Mitchell 2003; Walcott 1993, for critique of multicultural policy, race, and education). The naturalization of Canada’s story, as it is codified in law and socially transmitted in education, suppresses divergent cultural expression. It also informs the assumptions, values, and practices under which e-learning and technology broadly is conceived as outside of the cultural sphere; by situating e-learning as a product of culture, and by questioning the assumptions, values, and practices that inform this culture, one can envision the medium as subject to transformation.

1.6 The conditions and context for e-learning in the TDSB

Unlike other nations, education in Canada is a provincial rather than a national responsibility. Premier of Ontario Mike Harris, who governed between 1995 and 2002, was considered to be the first premier of Ontario who actively promoted neoliberal policies. Harris’ era was preceded by the first and last provincial New Democratic Party (NDP) Government, led by Bob Rae, whose

18 Residential schools were government-sponsored highly regulated custodial schools established in 1880; their primary purpose was to assimilate Indigenous students into European Canadian culture. Through this process of assimilation, students were removed from their homes, separated from their families, isolated from their culture, and forced to abandon their traditions, which were disparaged by the institution. The last residential school closed in 1996.
failure to respond adequately to a historic recession\textsuperscript{19} resulted in a resistant, haphazard assumption of neoliberal policies that would set the stage upon which Harris would announce a platform that hinged on a promise to reduce personal taxes by 30 percent—the largest in Canadian history (see Sattler 2012; Fanelli and Thomas 2011 give a more expansive history of neoliberal ideology in Ontario). Harris’ campaign, which he phrased as the “Common Sense Revolution,” funded his proposed tax cuts by taking away taxation powers from school boards and centralizing financial control, the purpose of which was to bring down expenditures. Much of Harris’ policies mirrored restructuring brought about by the rise of New Right governments, such as Margaret Thatcher’s in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan’s in the United States, and more gradually in Canada through the successive Conservative and Liberal governments (Clark 2002; Keil 2002).

In Ontario, these interventions dramatically altered the geography of schooling in Toronto and undermined public programs and services. Reforms took place at a time when the international policy climate, spurred by the United States, was turning toward a “back to basics” curriculum and expanded standardized testing with the intent of fostering human capital and forging “stronger links between education programs and the economy” (Wallner 2014, 211). Parents exercised agency within this educational model under the movement of “school choice” where they were encouraged to see themselves as “consumers of education.” (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996).

1.6.1 Neoliberal educational reforms in Ontario

Neoliberal reform in education, as it is accounted for by a number of scholars (Anderson and Jafaar 2003; Basu 2004; Fanelli and Thomas 2011; Gidney 1999; Parekh, Killoran, and

\textsuperscript{19} While Rae campaigned on progressive policies, the government’s response to an economic recession set a course toward neoliberal reform, upon which Harris sprinted: “the NDP platform was far from neoliberal, advocating such measures as an increase in corporate taxes, succession duties on the wealthy, increased funding for education, and exemption of the poor from income taxes. Unfortunately for the Rae government, however, it was forced to reverse many policy positions due to a rapidly deteriorating provincial economic and fiscal situation. NDP measures, which proved to be very unpopular with voters, included raising taxes by an unprecedented $2 billion, tightening spending with a $4-billion cut to program spending, and the now infamous “Social Contract,” a $2-billion three-year salary freeze for public-sector workers” (Gattinger and St-Pierre 2010, citing MacDermid & Albo, 2001; Dyck, 1995).
emerges under the contradictory re-regulation by the Harris government of everyday life. As Ranu Basu (2004) and Stephen E. Anderson and Sonia Ben Jaafar (2003) outline in detail, a combination of economic and political restructuring included the following reforms to education:

- The Fewer School Boards Act (Bill 104), introduced in 1996, reduced the number of school boards from 124 to 72 and, as a consequence, the reduction of the number of school trustees from 1,900 to 700. These reforms preceded the amalgamation of Metropolitan Toronto with five municipalities in 1998, which formed the new City of Toronto and led to the establishment of the TDSB.

- Recommendations put forward by previous NDP governments through the Royal Commission of Learning (1993–1995) led to the creation of a regulating body, The Ontario College of Teachers (Bill 31), which took on responsibilities that were once in the jurisdiction of labour unions. This was accompanied by the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which administered and managed standardized testing (Bill 30).

- The Education Quality Improvement Act (Bill 160), which was the most contentious legislation, centralized educational funding. School boards could no longer collect a percentage of property taxes to fund their programs and services; all funding would be collected and distributed by the provincial government. It also made it illegal for boards to operate on a deficit. As a result, Harris “equalized” education funding, but to the lowest common denominator through a one-size-fits-all formula (see Mackenzie 2017 for key areas affected by funding cuts). Despite the potential to address funding disparities as a result of the property-tax system, Bill 160 centralized this system and cut funding across the education sector, the effect of which intensified school fundraising and encouraged privatization (Winton 2018). Bill 160 also fragmented collective bargaining: principals were separated from the teachers’ labour union, undermining their bargaining power.

These educational reforms, particularly those put forward in Bill 160, did not proceed without significant pushback from unions. Indeed, a number of proposals were not ratified because of
resistance; however, unions were unable to withstand the brunt of aggressive policy reforms put forward by the Harris government. In 2003, the Harris Conservative government was replaced by the more moderate Liberal Party, led by Dalton McGuinty, who continued (albeit covertly) neoliberal restructuring through to his reelection in 2007, the summer that marked the beginning of the global financial crisis and great recession in Canada (see Fanelli and Thomas 2011 for sustained analysis).

1.6.2 The development of information communication technology

The twenty-first century marks a conceptual starting point in education, signaled by a communications revolution, which has reorganized knowledge, social practices, and subjectivities across scales. Canada saw the convergence of information and communication technology (ICT) in the 1970s, and the introduction of mobile and internet communication in the 1980s. In 1994, a year preceding the dot-com boom, the Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC) was established by then Industry Minister John Manley, who cast the internet as a national resource (Dumitricia 2015). Comprising twenty-nine experts from the industry, and later expanded by another twenty-six experts, the mandate of the IHAC was to provide advice for the development of Canada’s information highway. Throughout the phases of this committee, 300 recommendations were drafted and a number of reports were published; the final one outlined the IHAC’s “vision of a knowledge-based society in the fields of author rights and intellectual property, including balance between competition and regulation, Canadian content on the internet, privacy and protection of information” (d’Haenens and Proulx 2000, 283, 284).

The federal government of Canada has therefore, since the beginning, taken an active role in the development of ICT, prioritizing it as a national interest. Though the development of policies and legislation to develop the internet, in particular, public resources were allocated toward infrastructure that would drive economic growth and help Canada become a global competitor in the market. Secondary to this aim, education, under provincial jurisdiction, was provided with resources to increase rural access to ICT applications. Access was meant to promote “affordability, user-friendliness and usability of the services on offer through kiosks in public places and libraries, for instance” (d’Haenens and Proulx 2000, 284).
According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), there is a considerable amount to accomplish before access is equitable. Building networks are expensive, and service providers do so unevenly, often leaving remote communities behind (FCM 2014, 8). Today, the Federal Government of Canada continues to invest in infrastructure that will improve internet access, promising a “digital backbone of high-speed internet networks” particularly for rural and remote communities (2019, May 24). Whether this infrastructure arrives in time for the mandatory rollout of e-learning remains to be seen. Since funding for the national high-speed Internet program rolls out over 13 years, beginning in 2019, it is unlikely that all communities will have reliable access to the internet.

1.6.3 Virtual school, 2000-2007

The 2000s saw standardization of WiFi, offering more reliable internet access, the proliferation of smart phones, and the early emergence of YouTube and social media. In the TDSB, it also marked the beginning of TDSB’s then-titled Virtual School in 2000–2001, which was open to all students in the greater Toronto Area (GTA). This not only included public nondenominational and Catholic schools in the amalgamated city of Toronto but also the four municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. To enrol in a virtual course, students were charged $20 and instruction was delivered through FirstClass, a collaborative software that has since been phased out. There was little record keeping, and the organizational structure was decentralized, consisting of a vice principal working out of their home school and teachers hired through the continuing education pool. The objective was to introduce students to a new mode of learning.

In 2007, TDSB’s Virtual School, which was proving to be very popular and profitable, was overhauled. It was separated administratively and offered exclusively for TDSB students, and an internal system of hiring was instituted. This coincided with the initiation of Ontario’s Ministry of Education Provincial e-learning strategy in 2006, which provided school boards access to Desire2Learn. Students can take e-learning from their own school board, from other school boards in the province, and from private schools. While the TDSB manages their own e-learning program, a number of smaller school boards have joined in a consortium to ensure an equitable distribution of students across boards, and classes in the consortium can range from one-time
supplemental enrolment to continuous or rolling enrolment. In the TDSB, my focus is on supplemental enrolment.

Then, 2008 marked the end of TDSB’s Virtual School and the formal beginning of e-learning in the TDSB. Today, e-learning offers blended learning, full-credit day school, summer school, and adult learning for those eighteen and older. A contingent of private-school students based out of Vietnam are also enrolled in the TDSB as international students; they are taking their coursework entirely online from The Canadian International School (CSI) Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City in partnership with the TDSB. This study takes e-learning full-credit day school, including CSI, Vietnam students, as its object of study.

1.6.4 Desire2Learn and the marketing of competency-based education

From its onset, e-learning was marketed as a competency-based education (CBE) solution by the company Desire2Learn (D2L), and provincially promoted under the banner “The Sky’s the Limit” (Ontario 2013). The program promised teachers the ability to better meet student needs, and students were promised more learning opportunities, access to high-quality e-learning courses, and the ability to recover credits they might need to graduate. A working definition of CBE from CompetencyWorks positions CBE as a design that organizes students by a demonstration of mastery rather than by grade and prioritizes assessments to monitor learning and provide ongoing feedback, with low or no grade value. The teacher’s role is to provide consistent and rapidly delivered differentiated support for students assisted by predictive analytics that use technology to anticipate student behaviour patterns from their user data. For instance, one can use a tool to report on low-engaged or low-performing students, as determined by the number of logins, time spent on content, and so on. Although D2L has drawn on the ideals of this working definition for its marketing, the application of e-learning in the TDSB does not reflect CBE because formative assessment cannot be compelled from students who rarely participate in activities that are not graded, nor do teachers use predictive analytics to

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20 CompetencyWorks is an American-based collaborative project led by the International Association for K–12 Learning and managed by MetisNet, an organization that provides philanthropic advising and strategic planning for foundations and individual donors.
differentiate support. This is largely because doing so requires a greater institutional investment in training. CBE emerges from postsecondary institutions, particularly in professional credentialing, as it applies to work training and skill development. For this reason, CBE is criticized for standardizing knowledge in the interests of employment. Education scholar Nancy Jackson (1994) notes that such competency frameworks impose a one-dimensional “narrow and shortsighted perspective on the definition of learning ‘needs,’ weighing in favour of those ‘objectives,’ which can be expressed in simplistic, often mechanical terms” (242, 243). As she warns, “beware of easy answers” (244).

Many educational researchers who have documented the evolution of CBE and its relationship to outcome based education have demonstrated that CBE is less revolutionary and more evolutionary, emerging out of the United States in the 1960s to reform teacher education and subsequently adult literacy and medical education (see Ford 2014; Jones and Olswang 2016; Malan 2000; and Nodine 2016 for comprehensive overviews). Today, it is characterized by the development of educational technology:

Based on the historical accounts of competency-based education (CBE) in the literature, one could reasonably argue that online learning, advances in learning analytics and adaptive learning technology, and the operationalization of direct assessment models to entire college degree programs (versus postsecondary vocational education) signaled an evolutionary shift toward a sixth generation of competency-based education models. (Ford 2014, 3)

While the province does not reference CBE in policy, it is the instructional approach informing the design of D2L’s LMS, which the province licenses. For this reason, many of the platform’s functions, such as the learning repository, competency structures, and activity libraries, gather proverbial dust; one can’t impose a top-down, one-size-fits-all LMS upon divergent methods of instruction.

1.7 Scope and limitations

**Diversity in programming:** This research does not capture the diversity of provision across the province, especially across underresourced and underrepresented school boards, nor does it compare jurisdictions across the province (see Howell and O’Donell 2017 for digital trends and initiatives in education); however, it does illustrate how the scale of centralization can affect an
e-learning program. For instance, centralization expands points of contact. From one end of contact (the Ministry of Education) to another end of contact (the parent and student) far extending organizational structures can often feel alienating and disengaging. There are e-learning programs that people will defend in this province, many of them smaller in scale, and I hope we make space for this defense so we can learn from best practice. My research is just one part of that conversation. It should not be taken to be representative of all programs, student or stakeholders, although it does provide a methodology by which one may evaluate the equity of provision in other programs. By definition, ethnographies provide a deep dive into a cultural moment, out of which we can ask better questions.

This research also focuses on **day school** programming, which is distinct from the market-based summer program that has no cap in class sizes and no limit to the number of courses on offer so long as there is demand and labour to teach. E-learning in day school enjoys low levels of attrition because it offers limited enrolment that is integrated into students’ full-time funding. This funding reflects the base allotment schools receive based on the number of students enrolled full-time. Further, day school e-learning is a program targeted to senior-level university-bound students, which is consistent with other mid- to large-sized boards in the province. This contrasts with summer school enrolment, which, in my experience as an e-learning summer school teacher, reflects a greater range of course types accompanied by very high rates of enrolment and attrition.

This study excludes the blended program, for which there is little data, and the 18+ program, which offers e-learning to adult students. Consistent with the details relayed in this interview, in the first semester of my study, the achievement average was at 87 percent across eighteen

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21 In an interview, a founding staff member of e-learning put the 18+ program in this context: “Most of our courses are [university stream]. Just a couple [open] level. The achievement level in [university stream] courses are amazing because [students are] fully dedicated. The [open] level isn’t as high, so we only offer two, maximum three. The achievement rate has been really good, except when we had Civics and Careers. I am comparing this to e-credit, which is a different program for eighteen years and older. There, the attrition rate and achievement rate is bad, but we want to leave it open to provide opportunity to those who want it, but in our experience it’s been disappointing because adults are often enrolling in large numbers and because of other commitments, by mid-term they drop out because they can’t keep up with the workload. This is why we had trimester; now as of this year, they’ve cut it down to two. It’s a waste of time, because enrolment dropped.”
courses; however, engagement is not reflected in achievement rates. While the TDSB does not recommend the number of hours one must spend on course content, Peel District School Board, the second largest district in Ontario, anticipates students will spend a minimum of fifty hours online per full-credit course. In the four courses I observed during my first semester, the average time spent on course content was twenty hours (see appendix 7.2). I observed students spend as few as nine hours online and earn a grade that meets the provincial standard, which raises the question: How is e-learning engaged with by students? High achievement often reflects a strategy used by high-achieving students to draw the greatest return on investment.

Like many studies of this scope, considerable data was left on the cutting room floor, which offers an opportunity to extend this project beyond its life as a dissertation. For instance, I spent an hour with each participant touring their online classroom, out of which themes about privacy and security emerged. Students were frequently shocked by the access teachers and administrators had to their data, including an impersonation function which, as the name suggests, enables their teacher and e-learning staff to access the entirety of students’ accounts, including their correspondence. While I do not address these details in the empirical chapters of the dissertation, I return to them in the conclusion.

My audience: I anticipate two audiences for this study. The first are academics working in the interest of social justice. My style, language, and citation practice reflect the norms of my discipline, which converges with diverse conversations about culture, education, and technology, within which e-learning is nascent. My second audience is educators and advocates who are fighting to maintain a public education system that exemplifies integrity and works in the service of all students. Rather than offering a false trade-off between technology and tradition, I show how technology is used to deliver traditional education, the assumptions for which have gone unquestioned in public discourse. Instead, I ask, what do we want from education? And how might e-learning be poised to deliver it? To suggest that e-learning prepares students for a technologically mediated future conceals the myriad ways students are already consuming technology. This includes a range of education technology that this study does not cover, but of which LMSs are a part. Technology such as mobile learning and bring your own device (BYOD); interactive whiteboards; tablets and notebooks, or eReaders; and assistive/adaptive
technology have been purposefully applied by educators to meet their expansive vision for schooling.

**My method:** While I include quantitative data, such as the distribution of e-learners in the TDSB or the makeup of students with special education needs, my contribution lies in the depth of analysis, not its breadth. As Kadriye Ercikan and Wolff-Michael Roth (2006) note:

The quantitative–qualitative dichotomy not only distorts the conception of education research but also is fallacious […] The approach of qualitative studies is to produce *thick descriptions* and, depending on the researcher, to generate a hierarchy of categories that summarize these descriptions. Because such hierarchies of categories are more economical than the descriptions, they constitute a form of theory that describes only the situation observed. The theory initially explains only the situation within which it is *grounded*. Some researchers only generate thick descriptions; others are more interested in the grounded theory. In this type of research, the level of inference is low. However, some level of interpretive inference is still required in order to bridge the gap between the sample of lived situation and the things that can be said about it. (14-15)

My research is experimental insofar as it applies ethnographic methods, which are typically conducted face-to-face, to research in the online classroom. While my findings highlight the exacerbation of inequality in the e-learning program at the scale of provision in the TDSB, they are also consistent with aforementioned studies that illustrate the mechanisms of social reproduction, raising questions that can be applied to the evaluation of e-learning programs elsewhere.

**Researching identity:** Because I did not direct students to identify themselves according to external categorizations of race, gender, class, I represent student identity on terms that emerge from our interviews. As a result, I rely on the language students possess to draw out the tension between personal experience of identity and the social circulation of identity informed by histories of collective struggle, whose dynamics are often internalized and inaccessible consciously. Race and racism came up frequently, particularly for Black students in my study, who were adept at making connections between their personal experience of identity and the impact of collective struggles against anti-Black racism. Sociologist Hasmita Ramji, in her work on researching race writes that “the way race is conceptualized will have important implications for the methods selected” (2009, 2). Drawing on cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2000), Ramji highlights the ways that race, as a political and social construct, naturalizes social and cultural
difference to legitimize racialized exclusion. By representing this impact, I illustrate precisely why racism is systemic:

We can think of the relations of production of capitalism articulating the classes in distinct ways at each of the levels or instances of the social formation - economic, political, ideological. These levels are the 'effects' of the structures of a capitalist mode of production. [...] The constitution of this class fraction as a class, and the class relations which inscribe it, function as race relations. The two are inseparable. Race is the modality in which class is lived. It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced. (Hall 1978, 394.)

This is to say that at the level of social formation education systems not only prepare students for capitalist modes of production, based on competition and individual enterprise, but also for race relations, which is naturalized as a product of market dynamics. The internal divisions of class – of winners and losers – require the structure of race to sustain its logic.

The lack of Indigenous representation is also a limitation of my study, particularly since there are fewer than 1,000 Indigenous students in the TDSB (TDSB 2011). More attention is needed here, not only in the city, but in rural and remote communities where e-learning is relied upon to deliver the core curriculum. I also do not incorporate an extensive analysis of gender into my study, despite collecting data that indicates, over a three-year period across all programs, young women comprised approximately 60 percent of enrolment. I could not extrapolate the rationale and, while 80 percent of my student-participants were young women, gender identity did not constitute a pattern in interviews, despite punctuating reflections on schooling. Often, these reflections were personal (i.e., intimate relationships) rather than disclosures of racial oppression and, in fewer instances, homophobia, in schooling—although these identities are intersectional. Reflections by students included an experience navigating gender identity in an arts program and an experience of racism in an intimate partnership.

I also attempted to shadow six of twenty students in their face-to-face environments to get a sense of social processes that might reflect the organization of gender in schools, but my application to do so, while accepted by the ethics board at the University of Toronto, was rejected by the TDSB because the face-to-face classroom was deemed more vulnerable than the online classroom.
Lastly, e-learning in the TDSB is just one example of many administrative configurations of the program in Ontario, Canada, and beyond; as such, the effects must not be generalized to other boards. However, future research ought to interrogate the neutrality under which access presents itself as well as the ways that schooling systems, in organizing and conditioning access, reproduce and reward middle-class culture. In the conclusion, I draw on interviews with administrators to consider what a more equitable provision might look like.

While the Ministry has licensed the learning management platform—the online classroom—it has not invested sufficiently in building capacity and research. Technology, applied purposefully, is transformative; it is not an end in itself. My interviews with stakeholders captured the effort of administrators, teachers, guidance counsellors, and support staff to support students and build responsive programming; however, the assumption that e-learning can serve students on a first-come, first-served basis contradicts the politics of access, from which inequality emerges. These politics are reflected in interviews with twenty students over the course of their semester, the most consequential of which is anti-Black racism, which is embedded in the structure of schooling.

1.8 Dissertation structure

In Chapter 2, “Research Methodology,” I introduce the literature on critical educational ethnography, highlighting the importance of evidence-based critique to affect social change. I then consider the application of ethnography to virtual worlds and expand on the experimental nature of this research. This chapter also illustrates the texture of research and learning online before moving to the substance of research design; data collection, analysis, and management; and digital research ethics. I conclude by reflecting on my positionality and the ethics of representation.

Chapter 3, “E-Learning and the Spatiality of Inequality,” is the first of three empirical chapters that situate my work in conversation with local research on educational inequality. Why does inequality persist, despite research that demonstrates its impact on health, education, and well-being? I describe the geographies of access for e-learners, who are concentrated in high achieving schools in the city, a disproportionate number of which are non-semestered. Mapping
this concentration against the spatiality of inequality in Toronto, I argue that technology is a tool leveraged by the most privileged families in society to secure advantages for their children. Drawing on sociologist Annette Lareau’s concept of concerted cultivation, I describe how three students in my study exercise the freedom to pursue their preferences and advocate for themselves in institutional settings. Freedom, as it is delimited by a meritocratic philosophy of schooling, is highlighted throughout the chapter.

Chapter 4, “Technology and the Promise of Post-Racial Futures,” begins by troubling the idea of diversity with which Toronto markets itself, highlighting the uneven experiences of difference, most acutely experienced by the Black community across all public sectors. I then turn to the theorization of race and online learning, which has until now been conceived of as colour-blind. The effect of colour-blind racism is that oppression becomes rationalized as naturally occurring and a product of market dynamics, particularly online, where embodiment is optional. I counter this effect by first situating the collective patterns of anti-Black racism theoretically and empirically in schooling. I argue that e-learning operates as a virtual reproduction of face-to-face instruction and, as such, perpetuates the continued displacement of blackness. Turning to a resource-based reading of three participants, I demonstrate how anti-Black racism still impacts students’ identities and learning online.

I conclude my empirical chapters with Chapter 5, “Local/Global Entanglements: The Case of the Canadian International School, Vietnam,” which begins by providing the context for international schooling in Canada before turning to the history of the partnership between the TDSB and CIS, emerging from a 2005 accreditation moratorium in Ontario. The effect of this partnership, I argue, intensifies inequalities by directing public resources to private education for a minority of Vietnamese students. I cite some of the controversies it has caused and discuss the ways that the organization of e-learning in Vietnam, which requires students to access courses in their home school with their teachers, is using technology to transform the spatial scales across which social reproduction is achieved.

The concluding chapter, “Education Otherwise,” returns to the intention of public education, the contradictions that have long since characterized its practice, and themes for future
consideration, including the privatization of schooling, income inequality, technology and privacy, and competency-based education. I also return to interviews with participants to offer practical strategies for program reform and more provocative appeals to the imagination for reforming our future.
2 Research Methodology

“Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison 2011 [2005], 5).

In the genre of critical educational ethnographies, the most iconic of which was published by sociologist and critic Paul Willis (1977), the researcher typically follows a small number of students, those most vulnerable, preferably, in an educational setting, and uses thick description to describe the culture that students and peer groups identify with or rebel against, giving the reader deep insight into worlds hitherto inaccessible. My ethnography purports to do no such thing; it is experimental in its ambition to provide a feel for the online classroom, to qualify its discrete spaces, and to provide insight into the rich world of individual students who entrusted me with their stories. I rely on critical ethnography as a method to study online education in the TDSB because it captures the everyday micro specificity of knowledge production and the agency of actors within an institutional macro context. Further, as a critical endeavor, it acknowledges the political terms on which social criticism shapes and is shaped by a lived domain. The tools ethnography offers, such as immersion, observation, interviews and quantitative data, allow for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding learning online as a phenomenon that is theoretically and empirically rich.

The goal of critical ethnography is to analyze cultural logics to understand the possibility for change. As the late education scholar Linda Brodkey (1987) explains, a critique of cultural dominance is an argument for social change grounded in theory and previous research: “the point of research is both to identify hegemonic practices and to articulate contradictions in the social system that would make those practices vulnerable” (69). What makes such critique compelling is its narrative, which frames the subject ethnographically, giving space to the complexity and contradictions of social and cultural life. I use the term narrative as Brodkey does, as a

22 Classical ethnographies whose roots are associated with the anthropological study of non-Western societies have undergone critique, particularly in the 1980s, for their Eurocentrism, fetishizing of the “tribal,” and claims to objectivity, which have rationalized the violence of colonial civilizing missions (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). Contemporary ethnography is now understood as an approach that can utilize a variety of strategies, depending on the context of study.
combination of story (the what) and discourse (the how) of an event (70). As a critical narrator, I assume the responsibility to represent experiences in complex relationship to dominant cultural stories; to confront my inability to entirely understand the experiences of others; to call attention to the multiple ways of seeing the world; and in doing so, to highlight opportunities for change (Brodkey 1987, 71–74).

Ethnographers increasingly engage with virtual or digital worlds. Tom Boellstroff et al. (2012), for instance, argue that virtual worlds not only make the ways people move through different roles and identities explicit, but that they also introduce spaces for play and experimentation, creating the possibilities for new cultures and practices (1). I draw on their argument that “ethnography is a flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergent phenomena and emergent research questions” (Boellstroff et al. 2012, 6). Virtual worlds, according to the authors, comprise a site distinct from the internet more broadly. They are places with a sense of “worldness.” Rather than operating as spatial representations, they are object-rich and enable interaction between participants. Virtual worlds are shared, multi-user social environments with synchronous communication, allowing for participants to embody themselves through avatars; they must continue to exist once users log off. Mark Bell (2008) notes that the term virtual world is contested, with early definitions limiting it to an environment that is self-contained or simply a simulation of physical worlds; like Boellstroff et al., Bell defines it as a “synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (2).

However, after observing seven e-learning courses over the 2016–2017 school year, I cannot claim that the classrooms I observed were, by this definition, virtual worlds. On one hand, opportunity for synchronous communication existed through Adobe Connect (AC) software, and students had a sense that the environment persisted with or without their participation; on the other hand, however, aside from poorly attended AC classes, shared multi-user social environments were rare, and embodiment through the use of avatars was not possible. This is not to say online classrooms do not have the potential to serve as virtual worlds. Indeed, the platform does provide the option for licensing gamification, though it is currently cost prohibitive to do so. Rather, I consider what it means to ethnographically account for educational spaces with little sense of worldness, aside from what is produced by text, and offer a provocation in considering
what it might mean to qualify online worlds through the experiences and histories of people behind the screen. I also turn an ethnographic lens to online space, which supposedly transcends markers of culture, to argue that ‘transcendence’ is itself an expression of a culture that denies the conditions of its own production.

Undertaking online ethnography online reorients the senses. Screens mediate physical presence, while mediation moderates vulnerability. Rather than observing variations in spoken speech and nonverbal signals such as facial expression, eye contact, body posture, and physical space between peers, instructors, and objects, the researcher examines the representation of physical presence through green dots accompanying a class list; unlike learning face-to-face, students can deactivate their status, and appear offline. I also observed learning analytics that provide data on how much time students spend in different areas of content, the topics visited, the login history, (including internet protocol addresses and the time and date of access), and the number of discussion threads authored and read. Field notes that descriptively capture layers of experience face-to-face have the potential to flatten life online, yet synchronous virtual classes, even when poorly attended, offer rich data with which to capture the emotional dynamics of learning online.

I also interpret 3091 discussion posts and responses, often engaged with derivatively or not at all by students, as a translation of apathy and silence in face-to-face classrooms. Discussions can therefore be analysed for what is absent as much as for what is present. While digital ethnography, in mediating the senses, may not deliver the thickest of descriptions, in the following section, I animate my narrative with clicking, scrolling, and typing, which provides a certain security from physical and emotional vulnerability. Narrative situates the banality of introduction and discussions on exploratory topics such as ethics in computer science, the qualities of a hero in English, and capitalism in the context of Indigenous history, from which students sometimes break from script—in the best instances, in debate—as well as posts that respond to more prescriptive questions about course content. Much of this takes place in the discussion forum; otherwise, it occurs in AC sessions, which is hosted live, recorded, and then posted by respective teachers weekly.
2.1 Roadmap

In the previous chapter, I set out the arc of this study, which interrogates the role of e-learning in educational inequality in the TDSB through the context of neoliberal policy changes initiated by the first provincial government in Ontario (1995–2003), now intensified by the populist conservative provincial government (2018–present). I drew on theories of social reproduction in education as it intersects with the production of racial hierarchy. While technology constitutes the field of this inquiry, its substance engages with themes of place, identity, and the politics of belonging. My contribution draws on ethnography as an approach to research that harnesses the power of story to give context to the diversity of experiences for students behind the screen, livening a largely text-based platform.

In this chapter, I proceed by taking the reader on a tour of the online classroom, setting it alongside a face-to-face interview. Then, I progress to research design, including the rationale behind choosing the TDSB’s e-learning as a site of inquiry, the sample size, strategies for recruitment, and selection of participants, followed by strategies for data collection, analysis, and management. I put my findings into context through policy analysis and an evaluation of promotional material, using critical discourse analysis, and through quantitative data on geographical patterns in enrolment. To make sense of what is an overwhelming amount of information in learning management systems, I used selective coding, the central theme for which was educational inequality. Selective coding reflects the final stage of data analysis; it abstracts core concepts identified in the initial stages of the interpretive process and generates empirically grounded theory to frame a narrative around which the research will coalesce (Matthew and Price 2012, 158–159).

After this, I pivot into the second movement of this chapter, on the ethical considerations in the study, and emphasize the work yet to be done on protocols of research ethics approval in educational spaces online. Then, I turn to my positionality as a means of contextualizing the social and political scenes that inform my identity as a queer woman of colour and former teacher in the TDSB to consider the potential and limitations of my personal and professional history in conducting geographical research in education. In doing so, I set the frame of interpretation.
2.2 A tour of e-learning

I began my second interview with each student by asking them to take me on a tour of their classroom. I was interested in understanding how they conceptually organize the online classroom, the language they use to narrate their movement through it, and its relationship to face-to-face schooling. My participant Reign, who had just turned eighteen years of age at the time we interviewed, was enrolled in *CGR4ME Environment and Resource Management*. Reign and I spoke face-to-face in one of the older non-semestered high schools in Toronto; built in Gothic Collegiate style, it had been a location for filming a number of horror movies. Having spent her elementary years in a small school of 200, Reign moved to her current school to attend its renowned gifted program, which she had been in since grade 9. Reign is vocal and passionate about climate change, but she finds school cumbersome and leverages her skills to strategize how to meet her parent’s expectations while pursuing her interests in the arts, which they do not support. Her father is a corporate lawyer and her mother works as a support staff member in the school; they both set high expectations for her success.

The room where we interviewed (Figure 2.1) was a throwback to nineteenth century England, a specter of colonial legacies otherwise implicit online. My lack of English cultural knowledge, much of which was a conscious rejection, presented me with a deficit of words to describe many objects in the scene. I observed high windows that permitted lots of sunlight, which fell against red currant-coloured walls. Along these walls, which matched the fabric of the office chairs

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23 Gifted students make up 2.6 percent of the entire 17.7 percent of students in special education, and of these, 1.7 percent are congregated into special education classes (Brown, Parekh, and Marmureanu, 2016). The Ministry of Education defines giftedness as: “An unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated” (Ontario 2017, A16).

While there is no common consensus in the literature about what constitutes giftedness or about the number of students who are twice-exceptional (i.e., gifted and with a learning disability), Parekh, Brown and Robson (2018) state that “white, male students whose parents had high occupation statuses had the highest probability of being identified as gifted. Female students were more likely to be high achievers. Compared to White students, it was only East Asian students who were more likely to be identified as gifted; yet South, Southeast and East Asian students were more likely to be very high achievers. Parental occupation was strongly related to both giftedness and very high achievement” (1).
surrounding a makeshift conference table, were potted plants and patterned curtains, whose effect were contradicted by a white board, fluorescent industrial ceiling fixtures, and exposed electrical conduits. I reached out to my friend, Ksenija Spasic, whose classical training in English literature provided me with a more precise description, reflecting the tapestry of a knight with a lance and plumed helmet; a painting of jack pines in the style of the Group of Seven, maybe a copy of A.J. Casson or A.Y. Jackson, tucking out from behind the white board; two weeping fig plants; and an 8.5 x 11” stained glass light-catcher hanging on the window that depicts a leaf with crimson and yellow segments on a navy blue background.

Figure 2. 1 Room where I interviewed Reign

This opulent room contrasted with the pixelated homepage of CGR4ME (Figure 2.2) that we were simultaneously navigating online during Reign’s tour, which she conducted while seated physically beside me. Evidence of our presence is captured by the untucked chairs in Figure 2.1. We recorded both the face-to-face and virtual exchange using the tools provided by Adobe Connect (AC), a synchronous web conferencing software licensed by the TDSB.
Figure 2. Course homepage for CGR4ME Environment and Resource Management.

The image is pixelated because it was a screen shot from a record of the tour. The screen is dominated by news of a field trip and the deadline for full disclosure, followed by a list of weekly work and a course calendar. The cursor is moving toward the content, which Reign describes as the most important part of the course.

Using “student view,” under my account, we began to role play: I was the student experiencing anxiety after a late enrolment into the class, while Reign played a peer who was about to take me through a crash course on D2L and the course functions. Reign begins the tour:

Reign: So the most important thing is to constantly be checking the content of the course because it keeps you . . . it has all the units in it. You go through Unit 1. It has links to the dropbox, and rubrics. This is where I spend most of my time. Otherwise, I don’t pay much attention to this website. It’s terrible. Up here [moves cursor] you get notifications and most of the time it’s email, and this one [moves cursor] is when you have an alert from the course home, which is the second place I think is important. It gives you news from the teacher. And this [moves cursor] is where you see your marks, which is pretty important. I mean it doesn’t update all that often, but it’s there. And here [moves cursor] is where you can connect to your classes [Adobe Connect], though I’ve only connected to one.

Interviewer: Live?

Reign: You can watch them live if you connect at 8 [p.m.], but I’ve only watched one live. But other than that, I mostly catch up after.
Interviewer: Do you watch it, though, after?

Reign: I do watch it, but most of the time it’s in the background while I’m doing work because most of the stuff has been stuff that I know, like the Climate Change unit. It’s like, yeah, I know. But most of the time, I play music in the background while doing homework. For the most part I don’t pay attention to it. I’ll have to watch all of it before the exam probably, but I don’t concern myself with that right now, which is probably bad. [Returns to tour] And then, this [moves cursor] is the dropbox, which is kind of useless if you go through the content, but you can see when you submitted a document, what you got, and the due date... And then [moves cursor] you have your class list, which I have not looked at all because I don’t really care, and the discussions, because sometimes you’ll have to post something there; there’s also a link for that in the content.

Beginning with the unit breakdown, Reign has taken me through the rubric, where assessments are outlined, the dropbox function, where assignments are submitted, followed by notifications for email, news from the teacher, marks, and AC. While students had contrasting priorities, most did not express an investment in learning online, evidenced by comments such as “I don’t pay much attention to this website” and “I don’t really care,” or descriptions of doing homework while instruction online is taking place. Like many students, she took the course as a buffer for her “top 6” courses, which refers to the six prerequisite courses determined by admissions that universities require for entrance into their programs. While Reign is passionate about the environment, she saw learning online as a means of gaining the technical knowledge she needed to supplement her experiential knowledge; for instance, she travelled to Antarctica in grade 10. Interestingly, she references online spaces as helpful for keeping connected with people she has travelled with, while delimiting e-learning as a nonrelational space that she sometimes forgets about: “I tend to lose track of the online stuff [...] when I’m in school and I have an assignment due, I write it down, and if it’s online, I’m like, it’s online, and then I forget about it.”

2.3 The texture of research and learning online

Researching e-learning presents similar challenges to learning online. Entering the class requires no more force of the body than a stroke of the finger, a gaze along the screen, scanning information. Rather than active and cooperative learning, which has broad support despite its diverse meanings (Markant et al. 2016; Prince 2004), learning online is more likely to be consumed passively unless the activity is attached to a grade. I therefore rarely observed
authentic student engagement in diagnostic or informal formative evaluation, which provides the teacher ongoing feedback before assigning a grade; instead, there were “low stake” grades attached to discussion posts, the prompts for which were often indistinguishable from written assignments. In a math class, the teacher disabled the discussion forum, which left me feeling a virtual absence, suggesting that these virtual gestures of discussion forums were important, even if poorly used or derivative. It was difficult to feel connected to people online even though I knew students were there. But even in the absence of an immersive experience, culture must be read. While I might have remembered many students face-to-face if I encountered them offline, they were represented online by a green light—or no light if the function was disabled. What does it mean to leave a learning or research environment without a memory of the people in it?

An absence of body heat and sound production compromises learning online and it accompanies a cacophony of other distractions, including simultaneous browsing habits, mobile technology, seemingly infinite notifications, and developments in a student’s face-to-face environment (e.g. people walking into a room). Presence online requires the management of face-to-face spaces, at desks or on laps, under screens, and interrupted by, in my case, screaming kids, dinner plans, digital eye strain, and the general stress of sitting at a computer for hours on end. Research, too, was exacerbated by the sheer amount of data available in the learning environment.

Notwithstanding the individual learning analytics of my twenty student participants, this includes 3,091 discussion threads and responses; 60 hours of recorded synchronous classes; and over 500 news posts.

Unlike the linear time across which face-to-face schooling proceeds, punctuated by the classroom bell, and the unified space under which instruction occurs, students learn online when and where they choose, provided they have access to technology, a reliable internet connection, and a safe place to learn; however, rather than frame this access as flexible or at a pace that meets the student’s need, Reign, like most others in my study, deprioritize e-learning when it is compared with face-to-face classes. In Ontario, a course requires 110 hours of face-to-face instruction. Online, learning analytics reflected a fraction if not less of that time. See Figure 2.3 for Reign’s example.
This does not account for time spent observing synchronous classes or time spent on discussion boards.

In PPZ3C – Health for Life, College Level, Grade 11, Semester 1, for instance, students spent on average four hours and accessed less than 50 percent of content. The longer they spent on the platform, the greater the percentage of access, generally. The only student to access 100 percent of course content in PPZ3C spent 18 hours, 10 minutes, and 45 seconds on the platform, with 312 logins. In a more technical course, like ICS4UE – Computer Science, University Level, Grade 12, Semester 2, students spent an average of 10 hours and accessed approximately 70 percent of content (see appendix 7.2). While one may think there is a correlation between grades and learning time, the dictum “work smarter, not harder” illustrates what I observed to be many students putting in as few hours as possible to earn a credit. Analyzing learning analytics was not in my purview; however, the amount of data generated about student movement and the expression of access through numerical data require further study: Is there a correlation between the time spent online and the learning quality, as expressed by grades? What do these learning analytics fail to capture? How do these patterns challenge the way we measure learning time face-to-face? What does the disparity in online vs. face-to-face access reflect about how learning takes place differently in different modalities?

I admit, like Reign, there were times when a lesson being taught by a teacher in an “empty” classroom played in the background as I browsed discussions, and my field notes often looked like play-by-plays of the class, intermittent with the depth one may observe when instructors go
off-script. These reflect the emotional life of teaching which, online, include frustration with technical difficulties and poor “live” classroom attendance, excitement over upcoming vacations or events taking place in an instructor’s face-to-face environment, and idiosyncrasies that capture the unique character of each teacher.

2.4 Research design

This study, which took place between September 2016 and June 2017, lasted ten months. I conducted sixty interviews with twenty students (hour-long interviews three times per semester) along with thirty hour-long interviews with stakeholders, including parents, senior administrators, teachers, and guidance counsellors. The identities of participants are protected by pseudonyms and the exclusion of information that may identify them, notwithstanding exceptional instances (such as senior roles) where such exclusion may be impossible. I used purposive sampling, which is to say that the students I recruited were strategically selected to represent the range of course options available. Figure 2.4 describes the distribution of course grades and types:

![Pie chart showing courses offered 2016-2017](image-url)
Figure 2.4 A breakdown of 33 e-learning courses offered 2016-2017 in the Toronto District School Board by course type. Only University and Mixed level courses are eligible for university admissions.

All courses offered were for senior-level students in grades 11 and 12, most of whom are taking courses that are eligible for their top 6. While many universities prescribe the kinds of courses students need to take to gain entry, all programs base admission on the average of the top six courses, including mandatory prerequisites. It is therefore noteworthy that 79 percent of courses offered to students (orange and green combined) are gateway courses that universities in Ontario require to calculate the grade for admissions. While one may argue that these courses are in higher demand, e-learning was initially a program that sought to fill the gap in face-to-face schooling; it is not intended to replace face-to-face programming. In most high schools, with a diverse range of learners, college- and essential-level courses are the first to dismantle because they require smaller class sizes and are often offered as single sections. It follows that these streams would be better reflected in e-learning course offerings. Could it be that there are not enough sections available? Compare the overrepresentation of university-level courses to 2012–2013 figures, when nearly twice as many courses were available. After that year, funded sections dropped by 45 percent because of declining enrolment in the TDSB.

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24 In a workload accord agreed upon by the Liberal Government under Dalton McGuinty and The Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, District 12, class size targets for 2019-2020 are: 31 in University and Mixed level classrooms (grades 11 and 12); 30 in Academic level classrooms (grades 9 and 10); 26 in College level classrooms (grades 11 and 12); 23 in Applied level classrooms (grades 9 and 10); and 18 in Essential level classrooms (for workplace pathways). There is up to 10% flexibility (to increase class sizes) in up to 10% of classes per school (OSSTF 2019b).
Figure 2. A breakdown of 60 e-learning courses offered 2012-2013 in the Toronto District School Board by course type. Essential level courses are workplace preparation courses or for apprenticeships and other training programs. Practical workplace skills are emphasised at this level.

Despite there being a couple of essential-level sections offered, which is a pathway that leads directly to the workforce or workplace training programs, mixed-level and university-level courses still comprise 71 percent of all courses offered. The inequity of this offering cannot be explained by the number of courses funded but, as I explain in the next chapter, by the delivery of e-learning as an opportunity primarily for university-bound students.

With the exception of one open-level course (a grade 12 course that would fulfill the requirements of the Ontario Literacy Test), all teachers agreed to host me in their classrooms and participate in the study. Below, I list the courses I observed, the data that I reviewed (in the form of AC sessions, discussion threads, and news items), and the number of students who participated in the study, as they were enrolled in respective classes. I tried to represent a diverse range of course options, from humanities to the social and natural sciences.
Table 2. A breakdown of courses observed by the hours of recorded synchronous classes, discussion threads and news items. The number of students in each course, who participated in the study, are also included.

Once I obtained permission to observe these classrooms, I posted text in all common areas—news feeds, content sections, and discussion forums—so students were aware of my presence. Teachers were supportive of this work and played a significant role in promoting the call for

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25 I had to expand into this second Grade 12 English classroom because I could not recruit a sufficient number of students during the second semester. Of twenty-four approved participants by the TDSB, I was able to recruit a total of twenty.
participants. This included providing space to speak with students live during orientation sessions and providing permission for me to post recruitment videos and send emails to the class to request participants. Students were asked to provide their contact information, home school, grade, date of birth, and contact for a legal guardian. They were also asked to explain why they were taking the course, whether they are taking e-learning for the first time, and to rate their level of interest in the study.

In all, twenty students committed to the study. Of these, eighteen students completed the minimum number of interviews requested for the study—three one-hour long interviews spread out over four months; the remaining students completed two interviews each. Only one student withdrew from their e-learning class, though they did not withdraw from the study; I explain these unusual patterns of retention in the following chapter, grounded in a network of support at their home school, such as special education teachers and guidance counsellors. Of these twenty students, 40 percent were taking e-learning for the first time, 40 percent of students also indicated that they took e-learning as a “mark boost” for their top 6, and 25 percent took the course due to a timetable conflict or because it provided an alternative method of instruction that better suited their needs. Sometimes, these reasons overlapped. Only 10 percent took the course because it was unavailable in their home school. I asked students who were taking e-learning for the first time to let me know if they were comfortable meeting face-to-face, and many were. Of those, I selected six students as case studies, based on their geographic locations in Toronto (the northern, southern, central (x 2), eastern, and western ends).

I provided information letters to all participants and asked interested stakeholders to sign consent documents (or, if under eighteen years of age, had legal guardians sign) that explained the purpose of the study, the research method, risks and benefits, information about the researcher and institution, and details about their right to withdraw, protocols for confidentiality. I also accounted for how information was collected and stored (papers and detachable media secured in a locked file cabinet; encrypted and password protected files). Prior to the study, I made every

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26 The last year I taught summer school, in 2018, the attrition was 42 percent. This is consistent with previous years teaching during the summer, which follows a market based (supply-demand) model of provision.
effort to speak with students’ legal guardians on the phone as another method of communicating the detail in the consent document, and throughout the study I reviewed pertinent parts of the protocol to obtain ongoing, informed consent. I collected forms for all students at their home school not only to establish a rapport, and therefore commitment, but also because I wanted to discern how they presented: seeing them provided me with insight into discourses of race, ethnicity, ability, and gender presentation that I might anticipate in their stories and which I read through the context of my positionality. Presentation is a signifier of identity, a physical form, whose interpretation takes place in context of interviews with participants, many of whom expressed tension between the limited social vocabulary of race and the more capacious experience of identity in their personal worlds. In other words, it mattered if students were white or non-white, if they were South Asian, East Asian, African or from the Black diaspora, and if they spoke Spanish, Polish, Tagalog, or Tigrinya. I entrusted students to explain how that mattered, if they felt it mattered enough to share. In designing the study, I have situated the presentation of identity, which has a limited range of interpretation, in context with the expression of identity by student-participants to illustrate this tension.

I interviewed most stakeholders face-to-face and most students online or on the phone; all interviews were recorded digitally, with consent. I visited my six case study students exclusively at their home schools. I was curious about whether the change in environment might incite richer content; contrary to my expectation, the richest insights came from conversations with students with whom I was working exclusively online. Students who are featured in the chapters of this dissertation—Telina, Tarin, Erin, Aaron, Alexa, Justice, and Marysa, to name a few—were all interviewed virtually or on the phone. I interviewed Azan, Reign, Phoebe, Rayne, Jordan, and Jena face-to-face in schools across the city, from Martingrove Collegiate Institute in the southwest, to AY Jackson Secondary School in the northeast, to Forest Hill Collegiate Institute in Toronto Centre. All students in my study expressed insight and trusted me with their stories when they felt comfortable. I did not ask students to claim an identity because I knew based on my positionality as a racially ambiguous queer woman that home, identity, and belonging is best articulated by the person embodying the experience; often, this yields greater data than asking students to identify their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on. Data on identity therefore
emerges through stories and memory rather than signifiers that require interpretation I am not prepared to give.

For students who expressed significant issues with anxiety and mental wellness, board property also constituted a trigger for discomfort and, at times, unsafety. For instance, one student, Aaron, did not want to enter the school building because he experienced anxiety at the thought of facing his peers, and so his mother, Lindsay, drove him to the school parking lot, where I picked up his consent form. At the conclusion of the study, she characterized his turn to e-learning as one that offered harm-reduction from face-to-face schooling:

I guess [Aaron] has opened up to you about the anxiety and depression that he’s suffered. The e-learning helped him with that because he struggled not with school but with his mental health, and because of it he missed a lot of school in grades 9 and 10 until he saw a doctor that could help him through his issues and medicate him properly and get everything under control. So he lost a lot of opportunity for credits; he couldn’t manage. The school is okay; it’s the unstructured time. I think if there were someplace he could have gone at lunch, he would have been okay, but just wandering around, and the social anxiety, even though nobody picked on him, he just couldn’t manage the unstructured time—he feared people were watching him or whatever. So he struggled in 9 and 10 particularly. So the school was quite helpful. We did some homeschooling, which was helpful for him. And e-learning, because he’s nineteen, he wants to graduate and wanted to remain in his high school, and I did, too, because there were supports like guidance and once you lose that you’re on your own. You don’t have a structure that supports you. And he really wants to finish high school, so e-learning allowed him to take that credit—a university-level credit—and still learn and keep in touch with the high school. But there was no way for him to go into that school. Many of the kids are neighbours, so it helped maintain that relationship. Otherwise he’d have to go to an adult school and through his anxiety, he sees that as dropping out, and he didn’t want to do that. So we felt this was a good opportunity for him to get his credits. The only thing we made a mistake with was not knowing how difficult the online course would be because it’s a lot of independent work, and it kind of made it worse because he wasn’t in contact with anybody; there wasn’t social interaction. Had I known, he could have done a night school or dual credit and got social interaction. He’s very lonely.

In our interview, Lindsay not only describes the interventions she had taken to direct his life (i.e., home schooling, advocacy in the school), signaled in her use of the pronoun “we,” but also the ways that e-learning offered a fix for the harm Aaron experienced. Despite appreciating the opportunity the program offered, it came at the cost of relationships: “He’s very lonely.” This loneliness emerges, too, from the loss of supports offered face-to-face, such as formal guidance.
counselling: “Once you lose that you’re on your own.” Certainly, Aaron struggled to develop relationships at school; however, e-learning took him away from what little contact he had with caring adults and did not provide an antidote to the harm he experienced at school. It was merely a stopgap.

In another instance, Alexa was a nonattending student in a nonsemester school whose expressed reason for withdrawal was severe anxiety. Her mother, Stella, requested I pick up her consent forms from their home, which, while unusual, provided the richest moment of exchange in my study. Below are my field notes from that day:

April 18, 2017

After what was over a month of back and forth with [Alexa’s] mom, [Stella], I finally make it to their home to pick up consent forms. She could have scanned them, but I insisted on meeting in person. It was worth the 50 km drive (one way!). When I arrived [Alexa] was on the phone with her grandmother in Portugal, whose husband had died the year before. [Alexa’s] dad speaks with her every day. They are all from Azores, Portugal. Mom was born in Canada but Portuguese was her first language and she had difficulty transitioning to elementary school. She has 2 (or three) children. The youngest was home schooled until grade 9, I think? Anyway, she had a rough transition as well. Father came to chat for a while [he works in the construction industry] and while [Alexa] was on the phone Mom, Dad and I talked about culture. Where are you from? [Paraphrasing them] ‘Not that it matters. But you know, traditional people are attached to their culture. But young people don’t care.’ Mom told me about her sister who converted to born-again and how her mother was so disappointed. They learned a lot about my own background, about Ismailis and Sunni Muslims, which they didn’t know about. Her daughter gets off the phone and her and mom and I have a conversation about trauma in schooling, mom asked me if it’s the parent’s fault, re: Portuguese students who don’t do well. I tell her that individual accountability and systemic issues are in tension, but my responsibility is to hold systems accountable. . . . Their home was so… homely. We sat in the kitchen, there was food cooking on the stove. Amanda was cooking.

While I do not capture the visual detail of their home, my field notes reflect the content of our conversation, the details of which are punctuated by cooking and a phone call with grandma along with a reckoning of my own identity and the anticipation of the question I always dread: Where are you from? Positionality, as it is relational to place, I am reminded, matters not only because it informs interpretive frameworks but also because it provides an object for others to
claim and connect to. This work of claiming not only creates the conditions for cross-cultural (mis)understanding, but it also offers a symbolic field of identification, across which some participants can feel safer sharing their story.

2.5 Data collection, analysis, and management

Participant observation took place in the common areas of the discussion forum, recorded AC sessions, as well as the course homepage, where one gets a sense of the teacher’s presence and personality through their daily news posts. Other areas of the classroom, which are subject to less attention, are the FAQ sections, the calendar, and the course content. Data was collected regularly, though not at a routine time; built with flexibility, students are able to log in any time in the day or night, and, according to attendance logs, most watched the weekly synchronous sessions after they were recorded. To experience the online space as most of my participants did and to mitigate the discomfort of my presence, I watched AC sessions after teachers recorded the content and took copious field notes on my observations. Indeed, the challenge of digital ethnography lies in the excess of information available and the ease of capture; unlike traditional ethnography, where information must be quickly recorded before it disappears, data online is archival and retrievable in most instances after the study has concluded. As a result, field notes can accidentally fall into the work of transcription, rather than documentation that records and responds to the researcher’s impressions. Further, discussions—even live ones—are suspended in space-time, making it easily retrievable and reliable to document. As I proceeded, my observations often felt akin to those in face-to-face classes, where teachers struggle to break the silence that follows their questions, where the inertia of students colour the scene; the quality of social life isn’t necessarily richer offline, though it lacks the spontaneity and vulnerability of bodies sharing physical space, which qualifies silence with tension.

The analysis and insight provided by twenty students during interviews revitalized my reading of the online classroom. In total, I spent 3,619.62 minutes or 60 hours observing recorded AC sessions and dozens more observing online classrooms, where I primarily took field notes on content in news posts and discussion forums. I also aggregated learning analytics for each class to determine the average number of logins and time spent on the platform as well as the average number of discussion posts composed, read, and responded to in each class. These details were
combined with analysis of news media, TDSB and the Ontario Ministry of Education policy and procedures, promotional material, Ontario education law, and minutes from TDSB advisory committees. Further, I synthesized this with approximately ninety hours of interviews, and quantitative data from the TDSB on achievement, home school enrolment, gender distribution, and course allocation, to provide a frame of reference for learning online within the context of secondary schooling in the TDSB. I was provided with data from 2010–2017, although not all variables were reflected in the years ranging between 2010–2015.

I transcribed interviews with students in their entirety (with the exception of information that would identify the participants), including elisions and technical difficulties, of which there were many; interviews with parents, administrators, teachers, and support staff were transcribed in selected parts, using InqScribe transcription software. All data was organized using a filing and naming system, which I organized according to the type of document, classroom, and case study. Writing from this data, I selectively and hierarchically coded interviews using NVivo Pro 11, the organizing theme for which was educational inequality. Emerging from my analysis were symbolic orders of identity, central to which were class and race. I used critical discourse analysis as a method of interpreting these findings, particularly in how the workings of capitalism organize language as a relation to power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). Following Norma Fairclough (1995), this includes an analysis of discourse through three dimensions and their interrelations: text, ideologically invested discoursal practice or orders of discourse (i.e., text production, distribution, and consumption) and sociocultural practice (9, 74). Discourse analysis therefore explores the connections between “features of texts, [the] ways in which texts are put together and interpreted, and the nature of the social practice” (74). Because there is no discourse outside of power and ideology, I pay attention to the tension between reporting from students, administrators, and politicians as well as the language used in publications promoting e-learning against data that contradicts its substance. I also situate experiences of schooling within the

27 In NVivo 11 one can organize thematic “nodes,” using folders, hierarchies, and aggregation. Hierarchies in the language of NVivo are referenced technically by ‘parent’ and ‘child.’ I attributed educational inequality to the ‘parent’ and the descriptors of race and class to the ‘child’. By keeping nodes organized, one can code efficiently, thus generating new insights and connections between interviews. It is just one method of interpretation.
context of histories of oppression and privilege, which impact the opportunities afforded to students. In the following chapters, I represent these findings in narrative form and have taken great care to ensure, to the best of my ability, confidentiality and anonymity for participants.

2.5.1 (Digital) research ethics

When I initially submitted my external research application to the TDSB, which receives a high volume of research requests, I asked for access to twenty-four students during the school year and twenty stakeholders, such as administrators, teachers, guidance counsellors, IT personnel, and software developers to not only understand the material investments in online education, but also to understand the drivers and experiences of various actors. I included a request to conduct case studies on six of the twenty-four students, following their progress not only virtually but also in their face-to-face environments. Reign was one of twenty students who ultimately joined the study and was one of the six students intended to serve as case studies; however, while I thought interviewing students face-to-face would produce a richer encounter, I found that this was not the case. Most of the locations set aside for students I was interviewing physically were determined last-minute; these ranged from impressive meeting spaces such as the one described at the beginning of this chapter, to the offices of guidance counsellors who had departed for the day, to stuffy rooms behind the main office, which appeared as makeshift storage spaces. Students were scheduling interviews between classes, and were often cumbered by the institutional space, as expressed by a couple of requests to meet off school property. These were requests I was unable to meet because of conditions imposed by the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) at the TDSB, which superseded those of the University of Toronto.

Midway through the study, I requested an amendment to expand the number of stakeholder interviews from twenty to thirty and to shadow six students I had been interviewing face-to-face at their home schools for at least one day; this would involve observation of the learning environment in their home school. The rationale for the request specific to case studies was that information students provided during interviews, even in the context of learning online, were situated in their face-to-face learning experiences. The greater diversity of data, I argued, the greater insight I would gain into the specificity of student learning in my study. While the University of Toronto approved this request, the TDSB did not, citing concerns that it departed
from the original intent of the research as well as a lack of clarity on what I would be looking for and how online learning and home learning environments would be compared. I reference these limitations because the lack of access I had to observing the environment of students’ broader face-to-face schooling life was a product of institutional barriers rather than an oversight in research design.

Another unanticipated challenge of the ethics process was the lack of familiarity TDSB’s ERRC had with online learning spaces. Initial questions ranged from what participant observation would look like to why I would use video hosted by YouTube to recruit participants (see Figure 2.6). I responded by describing the process of data collection in public spaces as well as the importance of establishing presence and embodiment to recruit students who comprise a generation difficult to reach with traditional media. I wanted students to have access to my story so they would feel comfortable sharing their stories with me – not as a strategy but as an ethic of reciprocity. There were also legitimate concerns about privacy and access to student information, for which there were no clear answers. For instance, the LMS only provides roles for students, who have limited access to their classroom; teachers, who have complete access to their classroom; and administrators, who have access to all student files and classrooms, present and past. There was no protocol for researchers, who should only have access to the information of students participating; however, because I was also bound by the principles and ethics of the Ontario College of Teachers, I exercised professional judgment to place the appropriate limits on my own access in the context of criteria set out by the University of Toronto and TDSB Research Ethics Boards. Ironically, if this project were not online, an application to access participants in their home school—given their response to the amendment request—would likely have been denied. Even in this institutional formulation, learning online was understood to decrease vulnerability because of an absence of bodies such that even the extraordinary amount of data I had access to was not perceived to breach trust.
Figure 2. 6 Left: Screenshot of recruitment video, Semester 1, 2016, featuring my eldest child, who was four years of age. Right: Screenshot of recruitment video, Semester 2, 2017, featuring my run along a lake.

I designed this study partially based on my intuition of the terrain of the field. My experiences teaching online, collaborating with colleagues, attending professional development sessions, and reflecting on my perceived performance highlighted the benefits e-learning provided to learners who needed exceptional but important accommodations: gifted students, athletes, and students who were cognitively high performers but emotionally and behaviourally disengaged thrived online. Thriving, in the context of e-learning, however, largely measures cognitive engagement through summative assessments and learning analytics. While I was unable to infer behavioural and social life in the context of my participants’ face-to-face classrooms, I did get a sense of their emotional life—and the connection of this life to their schooling—through the stories they shared with me.

2.6 Positioning myself in the study

Performance studies scholar and anthropologist D. Soyini Madison (2011 [2005]) describes critical ethnography as beginning with the “ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (19). By ethics, Madison is referring to the duty and commitment that is founded on “moral principles of human freedom and well-being,” the conditions for which are not equally distributed (5). As part of their moral obligation
to effect change so that freedom and equity are more broadly experienced, the critical ethnographer must disrupt what is taken for granted by exposing the operation of power, thus producing truth. In doing so, the critical ethnographer is future oriented, moving from what is to what could be (Madison 2011 [2005], 5) Further, the politics of critical ethnography require self-reflection because how research is conceived of, conducted, represented, and circulated is informed by the power, privilege, and the value systems of the researcher. By identifying these variables, even partially, researchers can empirically ground their relation to participants.

The first step of a methodological sequence, such as critical ethnography, is therefore starting where you are:

Start where you are. The experiences in your life, both past and present, and who you are as a unique individual will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems about why things are the way they are. It is important to honor your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem, or topic—understanding that you may not always know exactly why or how you are being drawn in that direction. (Madison 2011 [2005], 19)

Interpreted psychoanalytically, I arrived at this study interested in questions that had emerged from a desire to orient myself to certain losses in my life: the loss of home resulting from immigration and consequent cultural dislocation; the loss of belonging as a queer person resulting from disidentification or a failure to see desirable identification; the loss of pleasure emerging from misogyny, in which women are denied access to sexuality specifically but mobility more broadly; and the loss of opportunity that is squarely connected to poverty, whose experience was formative during my adolescence. While I do not invoke desire theoretically in this study, elsewhere (Farhadi 2018) I trace how my personal history informs my pedagogy, particularly as an e-learning teacher in the TDSB:

To debate representation and authenticity, as I do in my classrooms, is to politicize the machination of culture. It is also to account for how I am embedded in that machination: My upbringing by immigrant working-class parents during my childhood; my dependence on the welfare state, upon the disintegration of my nuclear family, during my adolescence; and my subsequent navigation of the guilt and pleasures of social mobility in adulthood has profoundly shaped my relationship to material resources. I claim a third culture and queer identity, which is read against the exoticism of mixed ethnicity. In these social locations, I have learned a great deal about the operation of power, particularly through the discipline exerted on my identity. My personal experiences as a student, in which I experienced considerable alienation and violence, shaped my fear of exclusion.
In the classroom, this fear incites psychic defense mechanisms which protect my ego from this anxiety. As a teacher, it also positions me as an authority with the capacity to incite harm. (Farhadi 2018, 3)

My professional career as a teacher, the practice of which is informed by my personal history, orients me toward my research and the ethical responsibilities of representing the lives of my participants. The themes I pursue engage with identity, place, and belonging, from which my own knowledge is situated; my research paradigms privilege the margins that were formative to my development. Part of responding to the loss that accompanies the margins as a space that always falls short is that I am compelled to turn to language to represent it, to fill it, even if that loss is constitutive of desire as a libidinal energy that seeks satisfaction in its object. Yet loss is differentially experienced, and the limits of my insight emerge through the privilege of my lighter skin and racially ambiguous body, which has exoticized me, as well as the upward mobility I have experienced and, with it, access to language with which I can partially describe the contingency of truth in relationship to power.

2.6.1 Insider/outsider

As an outsider, qualitative interviews also allow me to gather data on the interpretive framework of students so I can better understand how their experiences have shaped their perspectives, knowledge, and worldviews. In this way, I view participants as actors in the production of knowledge while understanding they can only ever partially do so because of the power dynamics of interpersonal exchange in which I ultimately frame the narrative. I relied on semi-structured, open-ended questions to let student-participants direct their narratives of schooling, much of which were centered in experiences of anti-Black racism, struggles with mental health, and/or frustration with the contradictions of a merit-based system within which students, not structures, fail. In my interpretation, I am also cognizant of conceptual errors in the canon of Western epistemology that have contributed to the erasure of difference and diminished the agency of participants. This includes faulty generalizations, where “differences and distinctions become ignored and discounted”; circularity, where value is viewed as truth, rather than emerging from cultural traditions that render intellectual perspective “partial, idiosyncratic, and constructed”; inadequate paradigms that implicitly suggest universal application without explicitly rendering it so; and falsifying the status of knowledge, which has the effect of
overrepresenting particular intellectual paradigms (e.g., European art as standing in for art itself) (Madison 2011 [2005], 123–124). To anticipate these errors, I engage with research self-reflexively (while acknowledging that to do so only scratches the surface of consciousness), diversify my interpretive frame, take great care to theorize racial identity, and arrive at the study with a “genuine curiosity, sincere interest, and the courage to be ‘vulnerable’ to another at the risk of being ‘the register of some else’s power” (Madison 2011 [2005], 36).

While I am an outsider to the many experiences of students I interviewed, administratively I am an insider by virtue of my career teaching in the TDSB, particularly in the e-learning program, through which the object of my study emerged. Context is often difficult to discern in an organization as large as the TDSB, especially because insight into policies and procedures, program delivery, and departmental culture is apprehended over time. My experience working in the TDSB, which began formally in 2008, has therefore been invaluable. Having worked as an e-learning teacher in particular helped establish trust when I was reaching out to administrators to support this project as well as to teachers. I therefore chose the TDSB’s e-learning program not only because the board is the largest and one of the most diverse in Canada but also because the networks I’ve developed and the experiences I’ve amassed during my tenure as a teacher inform my academic training in social and cultural geography, which has prepared me to research and evaluate the relationship of online learning to educational inequality and to research the effect of online learning on student identity. At the time of writing, I am still an employee of the TDSB, though to conduct the study and write its results I have taken unpaid leaves of absence. When I applied to the TDSB’s External Research and Ethics Review committee to conduct a study on e-learning with young people, the board required the support of e-learning administrators, which I was able to acquire in large part because I have a history of teaching in the board but more specifically a history of teaching in the department. This was important because I possessed institutional memory and knowledge about the specificity of teaching online and would not

28 According to its website (2014), the TDSB serves more than 246,000 students in nearly 600 schools, employs more than 40,000 staff, and manages an annual budget of more than $3 billion. This includes, at the time of writing, twenty-eight superintendents distributed across four learning centres in the city, organized geographically. This is an effort to bring a more “local” feel to Canada’s largest school system.
require support from a department that was under-resourced relative to their face-to-face administrative counterparts.

2.6.2 Ethics of representation

I was reminded of the limits language and experience pose when speaking with Circe, the mother of Telina, one of my participants, during the recruitment phase of my study. I documented this exchange as one that incited me to critically reflect on my capacity as a researcher to cause harm to participants. While Circe was supportive of her daughter’s participation, she nonetheless asked pointed and important questions about my method:

Field notes, September 25, 2016:

Spoke with [Telina] and her mom, [Circe]. [Circe] had questions about the method. She expressed apprehension about the term ‘study’ as she felt it turned students into numbers and labeled them. Specifically, she was concerned about quantitative surveys which students had to check off. I felt she was less skeptical when I explained my ethnographic method, including asking questions beyond the surface. She wanted to know who would see the reports and seemed interested in getting a copy. She wants to make sure that the entire student is captured, not just a statistic. Sent consent documents - picking up this week.

This exchange left me feeling heavy with the responsibility that came with researching and representing young people who would later voice patterns of harm, particularly as it manifests as anti-Black racism, which students experienced in schooling. Telina, who I met briefly while picking up her consent form, was a petite Black student, wearing a plaid long-sleeved shirt, complemented by braces and glasses. She was part of the French Immersion Program and lived in an area of the city that was underfunded and stigmatized; this was reflected not only by my knowledge of the neighbourhood and the ranking of her school but also by the content of our conversation, the details of which I relate and analyse in Chapter 4. I interviewed Telina multiple times during the four-month long semester in e-learning and observed her in her online classroom, which included weekly synchronous classes on AC and participation during discussion. In recognition of the limitations of my own positionality, I have relied on
intersectional\textsuperscript{29} Black feminists as well as anti-racist and critical race scholars to develop interpretive frameworks and analytic strategies that situate students’ stories in historical, social, and cultural context.

In Chapter 4, I cast identity, particularly racial identity, as the effect of systemic practices that secure white supremacy through cultural reproduction while representing the diversity of responses to these constraints. This diversity captures the agency of students who still experience pleasure amidst the difficulty of learning. I owe post-structural thought a debt of gratitude in this regard, particularly for the language it provides to conceptualize power as a dynamic that is expressed spatially (Foucault 1980, 1977) and identity as a historical, psychic, social, and embodied process (Collins 2002, 2003; Hall 1997; Keleta-Mae 2012). I privilege agency, identity, person, and voice, along with structural constraints, because interviews with participants ethically call upon me to represent the multiplicity of ways that young women of colour survive the process of racialization, find pride in their identity, and negotiate an education in a system that alienates them from their power and obstructs the privilege of belonging. This approach draws on critical race theory (CRT) in education, and centres outsider, transgressive knowledges that counter the correlation between institutions that marginalize students and cultural deficiency (Yosso 2017). CRT values the lived experiences of marginalized students, challenges the ahistoricism that inform assumptions about meritocracy and neutrality in teaching (Gillborn 2015), and encourages interdisciplinary approaches to link educational and social inequality empirically, so as to resist and change the status quo (Zamudio, Russell, Rios 2011).

2.7 Conclusion

I began this chapter by setting my work within a trajectory of critical educational ethnographies and, later, virtual ethnographies. Despite using the tools of ethnography, such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a record of field notes, the narrative that emerges from my observations and stories from participants does not mirror traditional scholarship on

\textsuperscript{29} Critical race theorist and Law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term \textit{intersectionality} to describe the nexus of power that marginalizes Black women because gender and race are not experienced as “mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139; also see Crenshaw 1991).
education. In that regard, it is experimental in its design and ambition to give the reader a sense of the worldness of online environments. The extent to which this succeeds, I argue, says less about the potential of learning online and more about the current state of e-learning, which reflects the incommensurability of face-to-face and online instruction. This is most obviously reflected in the passive consumption of learning online, which Reign gives us insight into, but which I expand on in the following chapter.

I designed this research to reflect the state of education online in the TDSB but, more importantly, as a provocation to think about where it could be and to what extent technology might be used to get it there. I drew on my own experiences as a student and teacher in the TDSB, because these have shaped and have been shaped by my identity, to cast my interpretive framework critically. As a student, I did not see my interests represented as a young person; as an educator, particularly online, I have found it nearly impossible to reflect the interests of my learners, with whom I do not build rapport. Further, the effect of this research critiques the cultural dominance under which e-learning emerges. My method allows me to situate the online classroom as a cultural space, within which students are individualized to such an extent that peer groups, the very marker of student culture, is absent. Each one stands alone. Critical ethnography emerges from a trajectory of literature on schooling, the horizon for which is equity. To this end, I write for underrepresented students—those I didn’t interview and who never made it online—to critique the assumptions under which e-learning circulates, to which I now turn.
3 E-Learning and the Spatiality of Inequality

Why does inequality persist, despite research that reveals its impact on health, education, and general well-being? In this chapter, I argue that inequality persists because parents who accrue benefit from privilege organize to maintain its mechanisms, both in the public sphere and in the home. Further, this privilege aspires to whiteness such that even when marginalized students gain access, they do so at a cost that is reflected in strategies they use to negotiate their identity in schooling. Accessing technology, as I will show, is one way that students who are cultivated by their parents to reproduce inherited privilege strategize their schooling, the rationale for which is supported by a myth of meritocracy that values a European cultural aesthetic and rewards middle-class identity, the standard for which is codified as white and masculine.

This chapter stresses class dynamics, which intersect with race. The three students whose experiences I represent in this chapter — Jordan, Erin, and Reign — were selected because they demonstrated strength advocating for their self-interests, the strategies for which were cultivated by their parents and maintained through active participation in extra curricular activities. Jordan describes herself as a third-culture child; her parents emigrated from Korea in young adulthood. Neither Erin nor Reign referenced their race; however, based on my meeting with them I would describe both as white-presenting. It is worthy of note that none of the students who were white-presenting, with the exception of a Portuguese student, referenced their race or ethnicity.30 In the next chapter, I turn to narratives that illustrate the harm produced by the entitlement of privilege and the reach of anti-Black racism into e-learning, by representing the experiences of three Black students who frequently described how race shaped their experiences in school.

I align my study with findings not just broadly consistent in the sociology of education, but more specifically in the local context of the TDSB, whose specialized programming and discriminatory streaming practices contribute to the reproduction of inequality in the city. On

30 See “Portuguese-speaking Students in the TDSB: An Overview” by Amie Presley and Robert S. Brown (2011) for the immigration context that has resulted in marginalization specific to the Portuguese-speaking community.
December 13, 2017, the TDSB Enhancing Equity Task Force released their report and recommendations focusing on six areas, the most relevant of which was to ensure equitable access, experiences and opportunities for students and to provide professional learning on equity and anti-oppression for all. The report punctuated a year of damning studies on specialized programs in the TDSB, the most consequential of which highlighted the exclusion experienced by students, particularly in arts-focused schools that were not accessed equitably (Gaztambide-Fernandez and Parekh 2017; James and Turner 2017). In an interview with the Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) prior to the report’s release (Draaisma 2017) lead author Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández explained that students in specialized arts programs are “twice as likely to be white” and “come from the top third of the income hierarchy”.

Moreover, we found that the students actually don’t come from all over the city. In fact, roughly half of the students who enter grade nine at these schools come from 18 schools with eighth grades out of a possible 197 schools. One-quarter of the students come from only five schools. They are coming from schools that are equally homogenous. (Draaisma 2017)

“These are exclusive schools,” Gaztambide-Fernández concluded. Months after his interview, the task force released a draft report that included recommendations to restructure the current provision of specialized programming. Under a call for equitable educational experiences and opportunities for all students, in all schools, the draft report recommended that “[r]esources and supports be realigned so that all schools, at least every cluster of local schools, can offer a variety of specialty programs” (TDSB Oct 2017, 29).

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31 The following definition of equity was adopted: “The TDSB believes that equity of opportunity, and equity of access to our programs, services, and resources, are critical to the achievement of successful outcomes for our students, employees, and parent and community partners. The TDSB recognizes that certain groups in our society are treated inequitably because of individual and systemic biases related to race, colour, creed, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, disability, socio-economic class, age, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, religion, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, family status, and marital status. Similar biases have also impacted First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations […] The provision of opportunities for equality for all by responding to the needs of individuals. Equity of treatment is not the same as equal treatment because it includes acknowledging historical and present systemic discrimination against identified groups and removing barriers, eliminating discrimination and remedying the impact of past discrimination.” (TDSB 13 Dec 2017, 13).

32 As cited in the report, these programs in the TDSB include advanced placement, Africentric programs, arts programs, Cisco/Nortel systems, cyber arts, elite athletes/arts, integrated technology, international baccalaureate, leadership pathway, math, science and technology, and pre-advanced placement.
In anticipation of the final report, parents led by the School Council Co-Chairs at Earl Haig Secondary School were organizing against the possibility of changes to the specialized Claude Watson program. Earl Haig Secondary School is one of only four schools in Toronto with specialized arts programming, reflecting insufficient program offerings this report was attempting to redress. It is also a school where I am currently on a leave of absence from, and set to return to teach English in 2019. It is ranked 100 on the learning opportunity index, where 108 is the highest ranking and draws students from Willowdale East and Bayview Village, along with students who are enrolled outside of the catchment area for the Claude Watson program. After English, students speak Cantonese, followed by Korean and Farsi. The school is “coveted” among parents, who contribute to demand for housing—notably condos—in the area (CTV News 2013; Langschmidt, 2015; Sunshine, 2017).

The swift response of Earl Haig parents to the threat of change took place over three days, between October 20–23, 2017, and included the use of social media33 to spread misinformation about the content and purpose of the report and advocacy to news media to put formal pressure on the TDSB (see Javed 2017; Maharaj 2017) whose director, John Malloy, was called upon to respond to in less than a week. Aligned with the organizing of their parents, a student petition from Earl Haig was being circulated through the website Education4Excellence, which by October 25 had garnered over 2,133 comments and 7,000 signatures. Although the stories of Earl Haig alumni were featured, the website was not transparent about who organized the petition and circulated misinformation about the recommendations which include: “These new programs that would be implemented would either be worse in quality or require more funding” and “The reason the current programs are so successful is because of the passion and devotions that went

33 October 20, 2017: An inquiry about the proposed changes to the public group “TDSB School Council” was posted by Phi Than (2017) on Facebook in her capacity as co-chair to the Earl Haig SS School Council. Speaking to an audience of more than 2,000, Than pasted a communication sent by the TDSB to their council about the details of their recommendations, claiming they provided “little verifiable evidence to support its recommendations,” and insufficiently consulted with their school. She asked the audience to focus on the recommendation to eliminate disparities between schools. “If the recommendations were to get implemented, specialized programs like Claude Watson, International Baccalaureate, cyber arts, Math, Science & Technology programs like TOPS, MaCS, SATEC, etc. that draws students from across the city will cease to exist,” she wrote. Parents expressed confusion and concern in light of the content of this post.
into the creation of them.” When I advised the School Council co-chair in my capacity as a parent of a child in the school board to edit this content upon its public circulation on October 25, 2017, she politely thanked me for my feedback but made no changes to the website. By this time, the TDSB had responded to the pressure and extended the deadline for feedback. The implicit message was that they were backing off the recommendations.

What received less circulation in the media, amidst the battle cries of the Earl Haig School Council, was a part of the equity task force report that highlighted the impact of anti-Black racism on Black students—Black boys in particular, who continue to experience the greatest lack of access and opportunity at a systemic level. As John Malloy reported in his official response: “Key data show [Black] students are overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions and underrepresented in such areas as Gifted identification. As a group, they continue to experience a lack of access and opportunities” (TDSB 2018, 22). The subtext of the media circulations gave me pause. Given the concentration of racialized students in low-income communities, the concerns of which are not represented in mass media, whose interests were privileged in the city?

I begin with this story because it gets at the racial politics of privilege, which leverages technology to organize its power as a class. Strategies wielded by many well-meaning liberal parents in this exclusive arts school took place through the media and drew from the social capital of Earl Haig alumni and the student federation. This case illustrates the mechanisms of access, which lies at the heart of this chapter. It only took a few individuals to spread propaganda that eventually put pressure on the TDSB to retreat from action that might have made elite programing more widely accessible. However, these individuals—who represented a minority of parents in the city—were taken as speaking for the system, which has long been under pressure by organizations working for underrepresented marginalized youth to exercise greater justice and integrity in education.

34 These organizations include Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators (ONABSE), No One Is Illegal, Black Lives Matter, Toronto (and BLMTO Freedom School), Education not Incarceration, End Dress Codes, and Hispanic Mothers with Autistic and ADHD Children Ontario (HAACO), among many others.
Inequality persists in part because too many parents believe that privilege is earned. To redistribute resources at the cost of social, cultural, and economic capital that many parents insist they have earned is to therefore spread an illness of mediocrity from which privilege is considered immune. This ideology reflects the entitlement of middle-class identity and this entitlement is a racial question not only because whiteness is aspirational but also because Black students in Toronto disproportionately bear the brunt of the failures of institutions not designed to serve their needs; their identity as students is mired in the racism that characterizes the culture and colour of privilege. In this case, this privilege is coded in the media where parents of Earl Haig stand in for the universal narrative of all parents, while the concerns of parents of many Black students in Toronto are considered to be a culturally specific question, and thus ignored, rather than standing in for the interests of all students. This contradiction reflects the substance of anti-Black racism in schooling.

3.1 Geographies of access

Despite supporting nearly 1,212 day school students, e-learning is not so much a school\textsuperscript{35} as it is a technology whose relationship to exclusive programs reproduces the privileged class. Indeed, from 2010–2017, all four arts schools were overrepresented in e-learning. Such schools do not only filter talent, but more importantly they concentrate the social networks and cultural training needed to turn this talent into economic capital. In the context of urban education, equity is not just a matter of representing the interests of a region or economic class but also a social matter of race, citizenship status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, and language, among others. Equity in an urban context, where there is a concentration of competing interests, compels us to consider the diversity of learners but, more importantly, how we prioritize their interests. Such priorities are shaped by capitalist systems whose mechanisms of reproduction have always compromised the ideals that public education serves.

\textsuperscript{35} In 2016, e-learning fell under a STEM strategy, whose ten criteria for success include the integration of e-learning and blended technology (Sinay et al. 2016)
Following the first two chapters, in which I set out the political stakes, research problem, and theoretical scope; the context of the study at the level of provincial, municipal, and board level governance; and the ethnographic methods with which I proceed in my inquiry, I open this third chapter by signaling to local debates and organizing in response to recommendations by the TDSB’s Equity Task Force, the intention of which was to address educational inequality. E-learning, rather than offering a tool to alleviate inequality, is another method by which social relations are reproduced. It is therefore not revolutionary, but rather ordinary in its provision—a virtual reflection of traditional practices in education. In this chapter, I report on the distribution of e-learners in Toronto, noting disparities in access throughout schools in the city. I point to how a concentration of e-learners in such a small number of schools demonstrates the limitations of arguments for “equal opportunity,” particularly as they are leveraged to promote the expansion of the program. I highlight the institutional discourses, represented by staff that I interviewed, which rationalize the contradictions of this disparity. To explain this contradiction between access and concentrated consumption, I turn to sociologist Annette Lareau’s (2000; [2003] 2011) work on the concept of concerted cultivation, which illustrates the importance of social class and, in this case, the role of technology of reproducing class. I then apply this concept to three participants: Jordan, Erin, and Reign, all of whom reflect the individuation, advocacy, and intervention Lareau describes as strategies students use to extract advantages on their own behalf. These strategies, she shows, are directly connected to the active role parents take in fostering activities and opportunities for their children. I conclude by highlighting limitations of Lareau’s theory of cultural reproduction, which is a concept that downplays the significance of race. In so doing, I anticipate subsequent chapters, which illustrate the heterogeneity and complexity of ethnicity and race, especially as it occupies a diverse range of classed expressions and digital mediations.

3.1.1 Geographies of privilege and the distribution of e-learners

The most important determinant of a school’s performance is its surrounding neighbourhood. Considered relationally, neighbourhoods are composed of what sociologist J. David Hulchanski explains is a complex blend of “physical, social, and psychological attributes” (2010b, 3). What leads to changes in neighbourhoods he writes is a process of “collective action involving various social, political, and economic forces, both internal and external,” the most decisive variable for
which is housing (3). However, housing alone does not determine the conditions of a community. When Hulchanski conducted the first study on income polarization in Toronto (1970–2005), he described neighbourhoods as subjective entities, the boundaries for which are not always as clear as their formal borders. I draw on his study because it has shaped discourse on inequality in Toronto and shows that segregation in the city is neither inevitable nor irreversible. His documentation of visual disparities between neighbourhoods (see Figure 3.1) offered an exemplar that the TDSB used to map the distribution of learners in the city (TDSB 2015). In what follows, I will situate e-learners along these boundaries, contextualizing their distribution along the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI), which is published tri-annually by the TDSB to rank schools based on external challenges affecting student success. This also corrects for optional attendance because the data is linked to the postal code of students through School Information Systems.

36 Formal borders are determined by Statistics Canada as census tracts (CTs). Relatively static, they include roads, railway lines, or rivers (Hulchanski 2010b, 4). While the City of Toronto has officially recognized 140 neighbourhoods, each consisting of two to five CTs, Hulchanski’s research on the geographical distribution of income is organized by each of the 531 CTs, with an average of 4,700 people per CT, drawn from 2001 boundaries.
3.1.2 Toronto: A divided city

Hulchanski’s findings (2010b) illustrated a dramatic change since the early 1970s, with middle-income households, defined by an average income of $39,000, shrinking by 37 percent, while low-income households, which absorbed most of this displacement, increased by 34 percent. The organization of these disparities is mapped, illustrating three categories of stark polarization by income. Hulchanski refers to these categories as “three cities” within Toronto: city 1, located in the central region of Toronto and close to transit and services, has the highest incomes; city 3, located in the northwestern and northeastern edges of the city, has the lowest incomes and poor access to transit and services; and city 2, comprising residents with middle incomes, visually appears as a buffer between cities 1 and 3. While income is one defining characteristic of each category, race, composition of households, housing tenure, and access to employment are other...
characteristics. For example, city 1 is 82 percent white and has fewer persons per household. Residents were much more likely to own a home and have access to a university education, which makes them competitive for high income employment. Visible minorities are disproportionately found in city 3, which also has a high prevalence of renters. In city 3, you are half as likely to complete university and are more likely to travel farther to find employment. These findings are consistent with rising income polarization in other regions in Canada, which is now experiencing the fastest growth in inequality (Breau 2015). A trend update presented by Hulchanski in January 2018 to the Centre for Social Services Engineering projects increased sociospatial divisions and greater inequality between the three cities into 2025 (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3. 2 Projection of the three cities in Toronto 2025 (Neighbourhoodchange.ca)
These findings from Hulchanski and his team has informed TDSB’s research (Hulchanski has also presented to the TDSB, see Hulchanski 2010a and 2011). For example, Robert S. Brown, who was research coordinator for the TDSB at the time of his presentation on TDSB achievement patterns in 2010, drew on Hulchanski’s findings to better understand their relationship to outcomes for students in the school board. A summary of his presentation breaks the three cities into subcategories A, B and C. Brown (2010b) notes that, in general, the highest achievement is seen in elite census tracts (CTs) in city 1, which have always reflected higher-income earnings, followed by residents in the youngest suburbs in city 3 who are have a very high visible minority percentage, notably Chinese, and are characterized by home ownership and larger families. Students with the lowest achievement are concentrated in social housing in city 3. Residents of this part of city 3 have the lowest incomes, a disproportionately Black population, and a higher proportion of single parents. In November 2018, the Toronto Star drew on Hulchanski’s work to report on the segregation of Black people in Toronto (Figure 3.3) and, citing journalist/activist Desmond Cole, incited readers to consider the impact of discrimination, which produces these geographies, and “incorporate their needs into the notion of city building in 21st century Toronto” (quoted in Vincent 2018). In Chapter 4, I consider the needs of Black students in Toronto, not only as it encompasses lower-income communities but also as it reflects the impact of anti-Black racism on middle-class Black families in the city.

37 For Brown, CTs, which not only include work by Hulchanski but also designations of priority neighbourhoods and neighbourhood improvement areas by the city of Toronto, illustrate geographic patterns of inequality in Toronto; however, the connections of schools to CTs do not work in many cases because a) many students do not live in the CT of the school and b) CTs, like Toronto in general, often have huge within-geography ranges (e.g., extremely poor and extremely rich in the same CT). The dissemination area (DA), the smallest standard geographic area, is much better at capturing these differences but are too detailed for useful geographical patterns. Brown cautions that while we should draw from insight from the gap cited between the elite areas of the city and those areas with the lowest incomes, we should avoid collapsing all schools into CT patterns.
3.1.3 Mapping TDSB students: The Learning Opportunity Index

To date, the most accurate measure of disparities in opportunity between schools is the LOI, which the TDSB publishes tri-annually. According to the authors, “The LOI ranks each school [across two indices] based on measures of external challenges affecting student success. The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one and is described as highest on the index” (TDSB 2017, 2). Measures include factors such as income and poverty (e.g., median income and use of social assistance), level of education, and proportion of lone-parent families. These measures are then tested against indicators of student success such as Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessment results, the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), and credit achievement (3–4). In some instances, schools in the same neighbourhood have different LOI rankings because students may not live in the immediate area of the school. Students outside their catchment area are enrolled through optional attendance. Sometimes, admission is determined by a lottery system or through meeting the admission criteria if it is a specialized or alternative school (TDSB 2004). French immersion or
extended French programs are subject to their own catchment areas, beyond which students must also apply through optional attendance, or are admitted through a lottery. Optional attendance, which purportedly broadens school and program choices for students, has been subject to public debates, particularly with regards to school closures (see Brown, 2015; Kunin 2016; Rushdawy and Brown 2015) and the provision of specialized programs (Alphonso, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernandez and Parekh 2017; Whalen 2017b).

The most recent LOI, published in 2017, coincides with the conclusion of my study and for this reason, along with its refinement of CT boundaries, best reflects the geographic makeup of e-Learners (see Figure 3.4). There is a strong relationship between the LOI and student achievement, but student achievement is not a variable in the calculation of LOI rankings. Student achievement is also not a variable in my study, although my findings reflect higher rates of student achievement in e-learning than other schools for reasons I will outline in my findings.
Figure 3.4 Map of Learning Opportunity Index, 2014 (Brown, Tam and Marmureanu 2015). The spatial patterning of income change at the core of the city is characterized by the process of gentrification (see Walks, Dinca-Panaitescu, and Simone 2016).

3.2 Conferring advantage in e-learning

3.2.1 Mapping e-learners in the TDSB, 2010–2017

On the LOI, 108 represents the school with the greatest learning opportunity and 1 represents the school with the least learning opportunity. Table 3.1 shows that the majority of e-learners are concentrated in schools representing the top quarter of the LOI index (rankings of 81–108). Thus, 24 percent of e-learners are concentrated in only eight schools. Compare this figure with Table 3.2, where eight schools with the greatest need and lowest learning opportunities make up 1.7 percent of e-learners, which expands only to 5.7 percent if we expand the scope to fifteen schools. This not only illustrates the disparity of access between schools but also reflects a concentration of Black and Indigenous students and newcomers within schools with insufficient learning opportunities.

Table 3.1 reflects years exceeding the focus of my study. Between 2010–2017, there were 8,704 available spots in e-learning, of which 52 percent or 4,524 spots are listed on table 3.1. The school board offers a number of specialized programs, and I have indicated those represented on the chart. These include advanced placement (AP), international baccalaureate (IB), arts focused (AF) and integrated technology (IT). Afrocentric schools; cyber arts; elite athlete/arts programs; (media) arts; and math, science, and technology programs are not represented in the top quarter percentile of e-learners. I have also indicated the size of the school and whether it is semestered. These designations were valid in 2017 and do not capture changes in programming over the years. All four arts focused schools, whose controversy was documented in the first pages of this chapter, are represented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOI Ranking, 2017</th>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>Size of school as of December 2017 (TDSB)</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled in e-learning (2010–2017)</th>
<th>Percentage of 8,704 available spots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>101–108</td>
<td>North Toronto Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,265 (Non-S)</td>
<td>281</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lawrence Park Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,162 (Non-S)</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(AF) Etobicoke School of the Arts</td>
<td>921 (Non-S)</td>
<td>325</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northern Secondary School</td>
<td>1,776 (Non-S)</td>
<td>664</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humberside Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,027 (Non-S)</td>
<td>336</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(IT) Ursula Franklin Academy</td>
<td>501 (Non-S)</td>
<td>232</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80–99</td>
<td>Etobicoke Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,027 (Non-S)</td>
<td>314</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forest Hill Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(AF) Rosedale Heights School of the Arts</td>
<td>1,044 (Non-S)</td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richview Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>961 (Non-S)</td>
<td>245</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inglenook Community School</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Riverdale Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,181</td>
<td>242</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–79</td>
<td>(AP) Martingrove Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>1,177 (Non-S)</td>
<td>220</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woburn Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>944 (Non-S)</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vaughan Road Academy (formerly an IB school)</td>
<td>Closed Jun 30 2017</td>
<td>298</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(AF) Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>223</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,524</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Concentration of e-learning students, LOI 60–108, 2010–2017 (Non-S refers to non semestered schools)
## Concentration of e-learning students 2010–2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOI Ranking, 2017</th>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>Size of school as of December 2017 (TDSB)</th>
<th>Number of students enrolled in e-learning (2010–2017)</th>
<th>Percentage of 8,704 available spots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>Westview Centennial Secondary School</td>
<td>892</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Learning Centre East</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downsview Secondary School</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>York Humber High School</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frank Oke Secondary School</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emery Edvance Secondary School</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>George Harvey Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scarlett Heights Entrepreneurial Academy</td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-15</td>
<td>Kipling Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Runnymede Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weston Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>York Memorial Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contact Alternative School</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eastdale Collegiate Institute</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>510</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.9%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Concentration of e-learning students, LOI 1–15, 2010–2017
3.2.2 Rationalizing equity in e-learning

As Table 3.1 shows, there are inequities in the provision of e-learning that have remained consistent since its soft launch in 2010. These inequities are not only captured in the LOI of over half of the students in e-learning but also in their concentration in nonsemestered schools,\(^38\) a third of which are represented. Students I interviewed in nonsemestered schools often turned to semestered e-learning offerings because their schools offered no other options; in some cases, this resulted in a higher course load than their peers. E-learning does not offer nonsemestered credit options despite this overrepresentation.

Since 2010, there have been fluctuations in staffing allocation for e-learning courses because the department has not been considered an integral part of programming, despite the high demand for e-learning courses. For instance, between the 2012 and 2013 school year, e-learning sections were cut nearly in half (60 to 33) because of financial constraints on the board. I spoke with a founding staff member, Greg, about the demographic of students who had the means to advocate for e-learning courses as well as the effect of the cuts, specifically on the few courses that targeted students preparing for workplace or college pathways:

Greg: It was a beautiful thing for students who were like, “Oh, I’m going to take an online course and not worry about it in day school.” The problem is that all the high-end-type schools got those kids because they had the means, they know what’s out there, and they grab it. They grabbed hold of all the seats pretty much, leaving a lot of the more at-risk kids at a loss because it was too late for them to get in because the courses were already full. So that was a huge, huge issue around equity. It was kind of sad.

The other piece was with declining enrolment in the school board. Like, we could have increased staffing by 100 percent or double the number of teachers and sections because it was growing, kids liked it . . . [but] none of the schools promoted it because none of the schools wanted to lose kids. So the model didn’t really work from that point of view. By third year, we had grown so much [laughs] that they actually cut us.


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\(^{38}\) A student with a nonsemestered timetable is enrolled in all eight classes all year around (vs four and four over two semesters) with shorter class periods and one final exam season.
Greg: Yeah, and that’s because every school was being cut . . . Toronto always had a lower pupil–teacher ratio [compared to boards] across the province, and now the province said, “Okay, now it’s time to balance your books. Time to align yourself with the rest of the province,” so because of that, and because of the demographics of fewer kids coming into the system—it’s like a double whammy.

Schools were losing staff like never before, to the point in the last couple of years where we’ve been laying off teachers. We’ll never get back to that, either, because it’s demographically driven, among other things. But with e-learning, we lost half our staff, so that was a drag. But I also got the picture now that the model of the [e-learning] day school program is still hobbling along, but it only worked for the university-bound kids who are self-directed learners, who had initiative. We started wiping out the workplace courses, the locally developed courses. We wanted to have a wide range, equity-wise, but those kids didn’t have the means to do the work because there is nobody behind them. Eventually we just went to grade 11 and 12 U-level courses, very few college, and maybe the odd open, but no workplace, for sure.

In Chapter 2, I contrasted two charts of course offerings, comparing those between the 2012 and 2016 school year. While there was still a disproportionate number of university- and mixed-level courses in 2016 (Figure 2.5), the loss in staffing resulted in a 78 percent reduction (from fourteen to three sections) in course offerings targeted to students going to college or transitioning into the workforce. Greg describes the advocacy of schools to secure spots for high-achieving students; like their parents, staff in schools with higher learning opportunities exercise entitlement on behalf of their population and are unjustly rewarded by a first-come, first-served system. Yet Greg also points to the contradiction of the modality of e-learning, the day program for which reflects lower achievement rates for students who do not pursue a university stream and who “didn’t have the means to do the work because there is nobody behind them.” It seems that e-learning simultaneously serves those most privileged while failing those without the means, even when they have access.

3.2.3 In focus: 2016–2017

During the year of this study (2016–2017), 1,212 students were enrolled in e-learning; 78 of these spots were reserved for students attending CIS, Vietnam, which has a formal consultancy agreement with the TDSB (see Chapter 5). Enrolled formally through Greenwood Secondary School, which was a school for newcomers to Canada, CIS has sidestepped a provincially imposed moratorium on overseas accreditation by offering students the option to take all eight
grade 12 courses online through e-learning. At the time of my research, the site was set to close. It is now part of Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute. Students in Vietnam who complete their coursework online requirement receive an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, which most use to apply to postsecondary institutions abroad.

In total, the majority of e-learning students, 52 percent, are concentrated geographically in fourteen or 12.5 percent of TDSB schools, of which CIS, Vietnam students represent 6.4 percent.

| ENROLMENT: All e-learning students 2016–2017 (1212 persons) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| LOI Ranking, 2017              | Name of School                     | Size of school as of December 2017 (TDSB) | Number of students enrolled in e-learning (2016–2017) | Percentage of 1,212 available spots |
| 101–108                        | Lawrence Park C.I.                  | 1,162 (Non-S)                                 | 32                                           | 15.3%                          |
| (AF) Etobicoke School of the Arts | 921 (Non-S)                              | 43                                           |                                              |
| Northern Secondary School      | 1,776 (Non-S)                           | 52                                           |                                              |
| Humberside Collegiate Institute | 1,181 (Non-S)                           | 58                                           |                                              |
| 80–99                          | Etobicoke Collegiate Institute       | 1,027 (Non-S)                                 | 30                                           | 16.8%                          |
| (AF) Rosedale Heights School of the Arts | 1,044 (Non-S)                         | 31                                           |                                              |
| A.Y. Jackson Collegiate Institute | 1,055                                 | 44                                           |                                              |
| Sir John A Macdonald Collegiate Institute | 1,104 (Non-S)                         | 38                                           |                                              |
| (CA) Don Mills Collegiate Institute | 1,055                                 | 61                                           |                                              |
| 60–79                          | (IB) Monarch Park Collegiate Institute | 825                                         | 57                                           | 10.3%                          |
| (AP) Martingrove Collegiate Institute | 1,177 (Non-S)                         | 30                                           |                                              |
| Woburn Collegiate Institute    | 944 (Non-S)                              | 41                                           |                                              |
| 51                             | (IB) Parkdale Collegiate Institute    | 500                                         | 32                                           | 2.6%                           |
| 21                             | *Greenwood Secondary School*          | 217                                         | 78                                           | 6.4%                           |
| TOTAL STUDENTS                 |                                             | 627                                         | 52                                           |
Table 3. Schools with the highest enrolment of e-learners, 2016–2017. Findings are consistent with 2010–2017 figures, notwithstanding the enrolment of CIS, Vietnam students in Greenwood.

While most schools’ LOIs stay stable, both Monarch Park C.I. and Parkdale C.I. improved their LOI ranking considerably from 2009. Reasons for this are complex and must include consideration of specialized programs as well as the process of gentrification in Parkdale, which has been the subject of media coverage and resistance by working class people organizing against eviction through Parkdale Organize. Further, Monarch Park. C.I. and Parkdale C.I. are two of only six schools to offer an international baccalaureate diploma. Both schools have been authorized to provide this program since 2007. Two of four arts-focused schools in Toronto are also represented in this chart, and nine of the fourteen schools, or 64 percent, make up the top quarter of the LOI index. Almost all make up the top half of the LOI index. Non-semestered schools are, again, overrepresented.

What is notable about the distribution of e-learners during the year of my study is not only their access to learning opportunities but also the ways in which these opportunities can be mapped geographically (Figure 3.5.)
Figure 3.5 Concentration of e-learning students in the TDSB. This is a visual representation of Table 3.3. Data made available by the City of Toronto under the Open Data License (Image Credit: Nathan Stewart).

Mapped against the three cities in preceding sections, and correcting for the concentration of e-Learners in Guildwood SS, here are the concentration of e-Learners in schools as it aligns with Table 3.3. The blue section represents city 1, the beige is city 2, and the red is city 3. The concentration of e-learners in privileged communities is not only clear by their position on the LOI, but also against the three cities, whose data inform the ranking of schools in the TDSB (see figure 3.6).
3.2.4 Discrimination by design: On the politics of access

As I have shown, almost all e-learning courses target students in the university stream. E-learning was intended to respond to the shortcomings of face-to-face school. In the TDSB it is intended to specifically address insufficient course offerings, which are often college and workplace level courses with low student enrolment to run the course in the day school; e-learning could theoretically capture students across a number of schools to run a class. While

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39 My study is not meant to qualify achievement by a percentage grade, but because university-stream students in high-ranking schools participate in e-learning, the program enjoys high achievement rates. In 2016–2017, the achievement average was 83 percent in semester 1 and 87 percent in semester 2. Compare this to 2010–2011, where the achievement average was 67 percent in semester 1 and 64.3 percent in semester 2.
offering university-stream courses captures a significant number of students enrolled in the TDSB, university is not the only path that students choose, nor is it inherently more valuable than college or workplace streams. In Canada, 40 percent of postsecondary students are enrolled in Ontario. In 2014–2015, six in ten students in Ontario enrolled in universities and degree granting college. The remainder pursued enrolment in career, technical, or professional training programs at colleges (Canada 2016). A 2017 Environmental Scan published by Colleges of Ontario notes that 58 percent of entrants into postsecondary institutions went to a college; however, only 32 percent came directly from high school while 20 percent arrived with a delay between high school and college with no former postsecondary experience. This figure does not distinguish between degree-granting programs, which comprise half of credentials granted. These statistics establish (by a conservative estimate) that about a third of students do not require university-level courses to gain entry into postsecondary programs. The uneven distribution of e-learners is therefore not reflective of face-to-face realities but rather an outcome of strategy, in which the provision of e-learning, since its inception, has served students who have already experienced success in face-to-face environments. Despite its mandate to expand access to students in need of alternative learning environments and a broader range of courses, it operates as a specialized program by virtue of its design.

How did the organization of e-learning influence its provision? Senior administrators such as Greg, Addison, Doug, and Anthony, who were part of the first e-learning team, had insight on the early operation of the program. In interviews, I asked them to explain how e-learning transitioned from virtual school in 2008 to a pilot project in a school in Scarborough, which ran six to eight courses, to an expanded rollout to eight regional centres before being administered centrally. They explained that regional models were considered unsuccessful for three reasons. First, students could not sufficiently access the option to take a course online; often it would be tucked away as a generic e-learning option on their enrolment form without an attachment to any course, and, for most, the modality was an abstraction—students were not choosing it. Second, the administration of the program was largely dependent upon the regional centres, which had to spend time coordinating with guidance counsellors and support staff in the dozens of schools where students were enrolled to share e-learners on the Student Information System. Eventually, e-learning took on this administrative role, and all students taking a full-credit course in day
school were shared with the central e-learning administration rather than the schools delivering e-learning. This, however, brings us to the third point of contention, which persists to this day: that of who is successful in e-learning. Although e-learning is offered as part of regular day-school programming, there are differences in the perception and provision of the program.

Anthony, a senior administrator from central e-learning, explains as follows:

I think when we first started with day school and trickled into summer school, we had this distinct sign up model, and it was a very guidance-controlled process. As a student, I would have to go to someone to express an interest to do something. And to me, fundamentally, if we wanted students to drive interest in the program, we need them to be in the driver’s seat. So thankfully at the time, we had a supportive principal. We suggested letting students drive or initiate that process, and then, of course, there are approvals along the way: parents, guidance counsellors, etcetera. So we really put students in the driver’s seat. That was critical to giving students and parents a space to start and drive the process. For the most part, that has worked out very well. You get students and parents from some of our more affluent areas being higher adopters of online learning because of awareness. They’ve done the research; they’re their own self-advocates: “I’m not happy with whatever answer I’ve gotten from the school; what other options do we have?” There’s an exploration and self-advocacy. I don’t know why that is the case. Is it that they have more time? They work one job instead of two? They don’t have the time to research?

Anthony’s overview of the program, particularly in his reflection on mitigating factors to participation where he cites disproportionate access by more affluent families, points to a pattern among interviews with those administering the program past and present: the number of e-learners enrolled from schools with higher learning opportunities possess those opportunities because of advocacy.

Likewise, when Greg reflects back on his work of rolling out the first years of e-learning, he realized not every student would be successful the way they would have been taking the same course face-to-face. However, schools that participated in the initial years did so in response to declining enrolment because students taking e-learning from teachers at their school would form part of their head count. “That was the carrot,” he stated. While e-learning was framed as an option for students who couldn’t get a course face-to-face or for those who learned better in an online environment, this wasn’t the case:

In my time, if you had a course offered in the school, you couldn’t take it [in e-learning]. But everything is a rule, but not a hard-and-fast rule, so that didn’t always work out. All the high-end schools—the Humbersides, the Malverns, not Leaside as much, but Northern, Forest Hill—huge! The type of learners in those schools are the type that are
very successful in e-learning. And they usually find out about the program before the guidance counsellor does. “At what time in the morning is registration opening up?” And that’s always the sad part, I think. That the advantage of kids getting even more advantages as opposed to the kids who could still do it, but it’s a different school culture. It’s just different—and they didn’t get access, especially when we shrunk the number of sections.

These reflections substantiate what I’ve reported: that students who are already high-achieving with access to courses in their day school strategize e-learning in order to accrue advantage. Further, the ‘high-end’ schools Greg refers to are also those schools in neighbourhoods with a largely white demographic with the ‘type’ of learners that are very successful. While Greg was unlikely to have white students—or even students aspiring to whiteness as cultural competency—in mind, the privileges that privileged populations accrue simply by virtue of their positionality⁴⁰ undermine the promise of e-learning as an equitable modality of instruction.

The TDSB is a board with 112 secondary schools, which includes 20 alternative schools, 4 caring and safe schools programs, 4 adult quadmester programs, 2 native learning centres, and 6 schools dedicated to special education. Students across the board are allowed to take one e-learning course per semester, provided they are approved by their guidance counsellor and, if under eighteen years of age, a legal guardian. There were 1,212 e-learning spots available this year in 33 courses, almost all of which were targeted to university-bound students. Of the 110 schools in the TDSB, 75 percent or 83 schools had one or more student taking e-learning, Yet half of all the spots were taken by students concentrated in 14 schools. If more privileged students, as Anthony suggests, take the driver’s seat, the next section asks this question: What confers the advantage that prepares them to drive, let alone to take the driver’s seat?

⁴⁰ See Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010; and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010 for the role of race in producing the elite class, defined by the supremacy of whiteness. It is this ‘height’ toward which students in the Western education system aspire.
3.3 Concerted Cultivation

In sociologist Annette Lareau’s ([2003] 2011) study of 88 Black and white families41, the early phases of which were conducted in the 1990s, she makes an argument central to understanding the findings of my study: social class has a powerful impact on family life (8). Lareau came to this conclusion after following middle-class, working-class, and poor families in a small US Midwestern town of 25,000, which included observation in integrated public schools, including one in a large urban school district (286–287). What she observed was a pattern in which middle-class parents, through a process of what she calls concerted cultivation, produce differential advantages and a sense of entitlement that allow students to pursue their preferences and advocate for themselves within institutional settings. Institutions, she argues, operate under a limited cultural logic that not only stresses concerted cultivation over natural growth, but also rewards it. This includes an emphasis on reasoning, over directives, and intervening in and monitoring children’s schooling rather than relying on professionals (p. 13). Middle income, within the context of the 2005 three cities study, was $39,000; however, for Lareau, the category of class was broadly construed, including family composition and income, employment, housing value, and education. She determined these locations in dialogue with her participants, focusing largely on authority in the workplace and credential barriers. Lareau soon found that these social categories had internal variations, but she concluded that these differences did not have a significant effect on child-rearing methods. As such, my study considers class as a social and identity category which, like race, is culturally specific and interdependent. For this reason, I read class as cultural through the concept of concerted cultivation, noting the ways in which students, parents, and other stakeholders articulate value systems through which access is achieved.

41 Families broke down into the following categories: middle class (18 black and 18 white) families where “at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills”; working class (14 white and 12 black) families where “at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills”; and poor families, where parents do not participate regularly in the labor market (12 white and 14 black families) ([2003] 2011, 279)
For example, I interviewed a guidance counsellor, Paul, in one of the top five schools with e-learning enrolment. I asked why his school reflects such high enrolment, to which he offered an explanation that hypothesized that the larger size of the school might draw more applications, but also because he suspected many students wanted “extra padding” for their top 6 grades. I tested his theory about the student population against enrolment data and found that the majority of schools with the greatest population of students in the board (i.e., Marc Garneau C.I, Northview Heights S.S, Sir Wilfred Laurier C.I, Lester B. Pearson C.I., and Central Technical School) did not have a high concentration of e-learners, whereas three of the four specialized arts schools were overrepresented. During our interview, I asked Paul about his values related to education, to which he reflected cynicism for “edubabble” that had come and gone and the impact it has had in the system. When prompted to situate himself within a constantly changing ideological terrain, he responded as follows:

At the moment, economics is a big part of it. The economically disadvantaged don’t have the opportunities that are open to students who come from more economically advantaged situations. Even though you can look at a school with a lower LOI, they can produce fine students; students with higher LOI have different challenges, more drugs for example, because there is more money. I really do think a lot of it comes down to the individual and comes down to the parents at home, but I do really, honestly feel that people who come from a family that has a little more advantage economically do better. Family stability is important, too. This also means more opportunity. There are those who have learning disabilities, who feel they can’t do well for whatever reason, but hopefully maturation and experiences resolves that.

I note this exchange for two reasons. First, educators rationalize the production of “fine” students (and which schools produce them) through a limited cultural rubric; here, there is little dispute on what a “good” education looks like among education professionals (of whom I interviewed many), even if there is debate on how to get there. This includes valuing “greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts” (Lareau [2003] 2011, 5). Further, as Lareau notes in the quote below, middle-class parents are flexible in shifting with “edubabble” as it transitions from zero tolerance to progressive discipline; rote learning to conceptual, critical learning; and directives to reasoning and negotiation.

Counselors may disagree over whether a mother is being too protective of her child. Still, there is little dispute among professionals on the broad principles for promoting educational development in children through proper parenting. These standards include
the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children and teaching them to solve problems through negotiation rather than with physical force. Because these guidelines are so generally accepted, and because they focus on a set of practices concerning how parents should raise children, they form a dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised. This widespread agreement among professionals about the broad principles for child rearing permeates our society. A small number of experts thus potentially shape the behavior of a large number of parents (Lareau 2003, 4, original emphasis).

Lareau continues that, in public discourse, individualism informs these dominant sets of cultural repertoires: “Indeed, Americans are much more comfortable recognizing the power of individual initiative than recognizing the power of social class” (7). Paul and other stakeholders I interviewed, whose reflections are captured in this chapter, speak about social stratification (i.e., the “economically disadvantaged,” and differential access to opportunities) but what “it comes down to,” for almost every stakeholder I interviewed, was the individual student and their families: “I really do think a lot of it comes down to the individual and comes down to the parents at home, but I do really, honestly feel that people who come from a family that has a little more advantage economically do better.” The impact of this logic on racial formations is significant, since hierarchies of achievement are symbolically aligned with racial stratification (i.e., the association of blackness and indigeneity with deficit; or south and east Asians with achievement approximating whiteness) and rationalized through a discourse of individualism in which experts pathologize through child-rearing prescriptions and families are burdened with correcting systemic inequities within which their children are precluded access and opportunity. Students are required to demonstrate maturity and sustain harm as ‘experiences’ that will later build resilience, in relation to which they will relate survival stories and receive accolades for making more with so little.

What I want to challenge is not the suggestion that parents have an effect on the outcomes of their children; indeed, they do. Instead, I want to signal the cultural logic — and as I will later show, a racial logic — that makes such outcomes possible. As Lareau ([2003] 2011) has exhaustively explained, children who have more control over their free time, value experiences with extended family, have clear boundaries relative to their parents, and exercise greater constraint in relationship to authority are more likely to be distanced and distrustful of
institutions (3). This contrasts against students for whom leisure time is highly organized, institution-malleable, and authority-obliging. In what follows, I turn to three interviews with Jordan, Erin, and Reign, all of whom reflect concerted development through the right that they expressed to not only pursue their own advantages but also to manage interactions within the school. As I will show, they not only played by the “rules of the game”—they knew how to bend the rules to their favour (Lareau 6).

3.3.1 Jordan: “I want to be well above the expectation.”

My interview with Jordan began face-to-face in an overheated room, the walls along which were lined with two class sets of Romeo and Juliet. One of these sets was a version published by *No Fear Shakespeare*, which provides side-by-side translations of the Early Modern English version. I experience a flashback to my work teaching a Grade 10 English class, academic stream, for which I was compelled to teach Romeo and Juliet—a European cultural product—but also because the tradition of teaching Shakespeare, as an exemplar of literature itself, is so deeply woven into the fabric of English departments that disrupting it came at great social cost. Jordan describes herself as a third-culture kid, whose parents emigrated from Korea in early adulthood. Having grown up hearing Korean, English and Arabic, Jordan describes feeling overwhelmed by culture: “I didn’t know what to make of all these different tongues.” Jordan’s parents are linguists, and though she was born in Toronto, she lived in Azerbaijan for much of her life before moving to Chicago, where she lived for four years before returning to Toronto. When I asked her how many schools she had attended, she thought it was nine or ten, though her experience in Chicago during middle school produced the greatest culture shock. Home, for Jordan, is a feeling she doesn’t experience because of her transience: “I don’t ever feel completely comfortable anywhere.”

Jordan attends a high-ranking school in North York that has a largely white and East Asian population. She fast-tracked grade 11 and took e-learning to stay at home and to boost her top 6 grade 12 marks for entrance into university. Of all the students I interviewed, Jordan was the most strategic about how she played the game of schooling. School, for Jordan, is strictly educational. She resents an emphasis on group cohesion because of bullying she sustained in Chicago and saw e-learning as a way to escape having to involuntarily spend time with people.
Jordan also extends this strategy to securing high grades, which she reports are in the 90s. She frequently compares her grades to peers in her class and targets higher-achieving students to find out how they do it: “I don’t copy whatever they have, but just the standard—that’s all I need. And then once I see that standard, I’ll try to match it.” When I asked her how this particular strategy translates to e-learning, she responds by suggesting it’s not really possible “unless I’m going to be creepy, like, email these people individually, but I don’t know. How would you know? It’s not like face-to-face class. [Rhetorically] Which students get the hundred, right?”

Another strategy for getting a high grade is approaching her teachers with questions after class. Though her intent is not to be number one, Jordan wants to reach above expectations: “I always want to be above average. So I don’t need to be number one. But I want to be well above the expectation.”

Jordan also describes feeling disoriented learning online and referred to a strategy for test-taking for material that she finds overwhelming in variety. For example, quizzes online often have a knowledge component, which she describes as questions you can cut and paste into Google to get the answers; while she doesn’t admit to cheating, she says “other students do.” The significance of this shortcut is that she doesn’t have to study the content much if she’s already gone through the material, particularly because the rest of the questions are what Jordan describes as passive:

There’s no preparation really needed for the test, which I am not going to complain about. If I had to study for this class the way I study for the rest of my classes, I would be so stressed out. But in that way, it also doesn’t feel like a “real course,” it’s not the way I’m used to or comfortable doing things. And for that reason, there’s no incentive for me to truly learn the material because I’m not really tested on it. . . . It just feels like a checklist for me. A very tedious checklist.

For the privilege of securing access to a limited number of e-learning seats, which are often afforded to students in the know, Jordan is able to redirect her energies to “the rest of her classes,” what she refers to as her real courses; e-learning here becomes a tool through which she can check off the boxes and still earn the grades she desires.

My brief interview with Allison, her mother, provided some insight into how these strategies were cultivated during her youth. When I asked her to talk about her involvement in Jordan’s
schooling, she described practices that reflected concerted cultivation, which prepared Jordan with the “independence” she requires to win at the game of schooling:

Interviewer: What’s been your experience like connecting with school? Were you involved in her learning during particular moments?

Allison: We never missed parent-teacher conferences. She did volleyball, tennis …she’s always been involved socially and athletically, so we didn’t have a concern, except during those two years [in Chicago]. Yes, we were very involved when she was young. And when she got into high school, she became very, very independent.

The notion of independence assumes a self-advocacy through which Jordan (in her words) piled on extracurricular activities her senior year, because that is what universities wanted to see: “leadership skills, social skills.” Independence is presupposed by a horizon of competition. Her response to a competitive field of business admissions was to take six extracurricular activities, including Business Council, Peace without Borders, Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), book club, and music. Of the six, she’s most invested in DECA because it’s a competition that requires a lot of work: “I don’t like to fail. I had a partner, which I regret, who had no interest in business. . . . I was so stressed out. It does look good if you participated and succeeded. We made it to provincials [thanks to my work]. [DECA] was the most significant for me because the other clubs, I have to show up occasionally to stay in them, but we haven’t done anything.”

How are extracurricular activities rewarded within the cultural logic of public schooling? Jordan describes the application process for university, particularly one that requires the completion of a leadership profile, in which the applicant must detail five extracurricular activities that demonstrate “amazing leadership skills.” She says “I have none, but it’s important that I can put down something that has validity in [their] eyes. While Jordan had her sights set on business, she expressed confusion about her career choice. After our first interview, she related her mixed feelings to her mother Allison who then facilitated career counseling for Jordan, the details of which she shared in an interview:

I told my mom about it, and she just set it up. It’s basically like Myers Briggs in great detail. . . . I found out a few things about myself. Apparently, I’m a really structured person. I’m a lot more methodical than I thought, and I really do like structure in the class. . . . It just seems like, for this [online] course, it’s like, what do I do? What do I study? Print out fifty websites? Like, there are entire articles. It’s so disorganized, and
there doesn’t seem to be a cohesive pattern. It’s just tidbits of information. Because of that, the organized part of me, the path to success is a lot less clear. Maybe that’s why I’m struggling.

Jordan described the twenty-page report, which detailed careers she was well-suited for. Identified as an ISFJ (introverted, sensing, feeling, judging) the findings reflected her desire for a few friends rather than many; her preference for concrete rather than abstract details; and her preference for objective criteria and predictability, which she didn’t find reflected in the online classroom. Her strategies to respond to the limitations of schooling as they conflicted with her desires and preferences were, as I showed, cultivated by her parents; in adolescence, these skills were applied to the pursuit of e-learning to avoid having to interact with people in her school and to boost her grade. Navigating online spaces as a checklist also reflected a strategy to get the grade, and she strategizes evaluation methods in relationship to unpredictable course content. While Jordan might exercise independence, her story also shows the ways in which cultivation continues beyond the formative years, with parents providing pathways to access indirectly.

3.3.2 Erin: “They’re all special snowflakes.”

Erin was a participant enrolled in one of the fourteen schools with a high population of e-learners. Prior to Erin’s attending her current school, she was enrolled in a school for the arts. In grade 10, she fell ill with mononucleosis, the most debilitating symptom of which was fatigue. As a result, Erin took a year off between grades 10 and 11 to recover. E-learning was initially a means of her getting back into the groove of school; she took her first course during the summer before what was supposed to be her grade 12 year. Erin describes the experience as both strategic—a method of credit accumulation—as well as a way to help her build confidence to return. It was difficult to transition back into her arts school, not only because she was entering a grade a year younger than her friends, but also because it was difficult to catch up in a nonsemestered environment where she had to juggle eight courses at a time. She decided instead to attend a quadmestered school to accumulate credits, but it was too far away, and she was returning home exhausted. After consulting with her parents, she finally decided to attend her current school, a third choice, which was a ten-minute walk. I asked her about the transition:

Interviewer: How are you finding your school now?
Erin: I was nervous at first. My mom didn’t want me to go, though my brother did. Compared to [the arts school], which was upper middle class, a white school comparatively, students were very driven because everyone who is there is there because they had to audition. They all want to be there, and they’re all special snowflakes, and they’re doing 100 things all the time. And so, looking at my school now, it was like, “This is the sketchy school in that sketchy area with, like, all these kids who don’t have dreams, and what if you get stabbed” kind of thing, and so there was a lot of, you know, hesitancy, but it’s, like, a great school [laughs]. It’s not sketchy; everyone there is really nice. Right away, I got there, and it took a while to adjust because of my illness, and I met a group of people my very first day, and there was a girl from my arts school who was a grade lower than me who is now in my grade who happened to have switched over in the same year, and so we connected, and I connected with her group of friends, and now I have a boyfriend. It’s nice! I have a very solid group of people, and so it’s really good.

While I didn’t ask students to identify their class status, Erin’s accumulation of social capital at her former arts school allowed for a smooth transition at her current school. Further, the role her parents play, particularly her mother, in directing Erin’s considerations was made evident when it came time to select her courses for the following year. As a white student, Erin was the only one who made explicit reference to race in our interviews, particularly as a descriptor for the privilege she observed in the arts school she attended. In so doing, she echoes what researchers have long shown: the choice provided to students of specialized programs “produce homogenous school environments that contribute to the reproduction of structural inequality” (Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh 2017, 4; also see Warikoo 2016) by mobilizing discourses of talent to justify exclusion (Arráiz Matute 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer and Desai, 2013; and Krahe and Acuff 2013).

In what follows, Erin describes not only the rationale for selecting e-learning but also the challenges that required advocacy, particularly on the part of her mother, to resolve:

At the end of school last year for my timetable this year, I was called in [by the guidance department] because of a problem with my timetable and was told that for next year I only had four [of six] classes. Calculus was full, and I was on a waiting list, and they decided not to offer philosophy. One of the classes conflicted with another, so I was left with three classes. I talked to my math teacher and said, “I need to be in your class,” and he sent me to the vice principal, and I’m like, “I have to be in this class.” I talked to a whole line of people, and they’re like, “I can’t do anything.” I’m like, “I need to apply for engineering,” and they’re like, “Okay, you can take functions and calculus online,” and I’m like, “Oh no! I’m not going to do that!” [laughs] Indigenous studies is fine if you can read everything and just respond to it, but I’m not going to do the hardest math on the computer. So they said I could do night school, but you know, I still get tired by the end of the day, and I
don’t want to do night school, so I finally got my mom to call, and as soon as a parent calls it’s all fine, which is infuriating because I’m eighteen and need to deal with this on my own. So the reason I’m taking Indigenous studies is because it was a timetable conflict, and this seemed the most interesting.

Erin’s ability to advocate for herself and exercise comfort in approaching her administration and teachers to access a class she needed for university admissions was a skill instilled in her both by her progressive parents, from whom she sharpened her language to speak truth to power, and during her brief time at arts school, where she describes a largely supportive, feminist, queer space, where dialogue is both valued and encouraged. In this case, her advocacy produced frustration despite this comfort because her efforts didn’t produce immediate results. Her mother’s intervention on her behalf ultimately provided her with a recourse she was happy with and met her needs.

Erin’s decision to take e-learning was perhaps not so much a matter of choice than of circumstance; however, as she puts it, people take Indigenous studies for one of two reasons: because it’s perceived to be easier than other courses or because they are invested in social justice: “So if you’re taking it, you do either a really soft course, because you’re like, oh, I guess I’ll take that one. Or, you’re actually interested in the issues.” During our conversations, Erin centered her extracurricular activities as part of her schooling experience. Unlike Jordan, she saw these spaces not as a means to an end but as a space to have conversations that she couldn’t have in classrooms:

Most of the time, I’ve had conversations with my teacher and the class listened, but past the classroom setting, there haven’t been many [opportunities to engage with different perspectives]. I am head of the Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA), so we have discussions in there, and I’m also part of the Power Group, which is this feminist women’s group, so we have a lot of discussions there as well. And then my friends just started a club about global awareness, So, you know, [there are] discussions there as well, but it’s still a more closed environment with people who have the same opinions as you.

Erin also describes dialogue “at the dinner table,” with both her boyfriend’s parents, who are conservative (his father voted for Trump) as frustrating to engage with. Dinner with her parents mark a stark contrast, where she engages with affirming progressive conversation, although she wishes for a balance between the two. Family dinners, including one with a partner’s family, is a privilege not afforded to many students; it had a role to play, certainly, in her exceptional
command of academic English, which she used to describe, in great detail, the power dynamics that produce a differential engagement with dialogue in schools, first, in her reflection of how schools segregate students through specialized programing; second, in the development of “hard skills” in dialogue, which she depends on her parents for; and third, by the concentration of students who are “confident in their own voices,” in art schools much like the one she attended.

I think there’s lot of things that schooling overlooks, because you can learn how to do math, and you can learn how to do these things, right? But I think there are a lot of like, really hard, serious skills that end up being kind of pushed under the carpet or just kind of forgotten about, like, they’re meant to be integrated into lessons, but they’re never fully. I think being able to voice your opinion and being able to have a solid statement that makes sense, [one that] doesn’t take forever to get to. . . . There are students who go on and on and on after they say something, and, you know, I do that too, but just being able to voice your opinion, succinctly and intelligently. I think a lot of teachers wish their students could do [this], but [they’re] basically relying on the nurture of the student, like, how the student was raised, whether they have, you know, like, educated [parents] that will have discussions with them, right?

Confidence is of crucial importance to learning and feeling belonging at school. Students like Erin, who can “nurture” their soft (or what she refers to as serious) skills in dialogue with “educated” parents develop voice that is institutionally valued and recognized. Erin describes how educators attuned to developing student voice in specialized arts programming, which is one reason why parents clamour to access schools that offer arts and other specialized programing.

Erin enroled into her current school too late to join the international baccalaureate program but late enough to have accumulated the practice to lead classroom and school-wide discussions upon her transition: “I just remember being at [the arts school]. There was, like, a lot of discussion because there are a lot of students who are confident in their own voices. And even if they weren’t in the visual arts section, like, for example, the students had constant assignments where they had to explain their art piece . . . which I think gives people experience in how to talk in a way that I think most students don’t.” During our interview, she reflects that she’s very good at “winging presentations because I did improv,” and she connects this to the training she received in arts school. Her reflection on the impact of “nurture” on students, the differential advantages they experience in language, which then allow them to advocate for themselves, or communicate with parents who will advocate for their behalf, results in a confidence and strength in voice sought by progressive educators.
3.3.3 Reign: “The teachers seemed to respect us more.”

I return to Reign, who I introduced in the opulent meeting room at the beginning of Chapter 2, as my concluding example. As mentioned, Reign moved to her current school to attend its renowned gifted program whose discourse of surplus (rather than deficit) places the designation within a privileged space in special education. That is, gifted students are endowed rather than lacking in skill. Her program describes gifted education as a holistic approach, inspired by Joseph Renzulli (1978) who developed the three-ring conception of giftedness that included above average intellectual abilities, high level of task commitment, and intellectual curiosity. Renzulli’s model was originally rejected by journals in gifted education, but it’s since been cited thousands of times and constitutes a model that has influenced thinking about giftedness in education (see Renzulli 2016 for a reflection on changes in the field). Gifted students in the TDSB make up 2.6 percent of the entire 17.7 percent of students in special education, and of these, 1.7 percent are congregated, like Reign, into special education classes (Brown, Parekh and Marmureanu 2016).

During the year of my study, students with exceptionalities constituted a total of 20 percent of e-learning students, with 7.7 percent representing gifted students, nearly three times as many as the average in the TDSB (Table 3.4).

42 The Education Act defines the exceptional pupil as one “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program by a committee” (s.1.1). An exceptional pupil doesn’t become so until qualified by the authority of the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). This specificity is constituted in regulation 181/98, which establishes the mandate of the IPRC as well the roles and responsibilities of its members, which include not only identifying the exceptionality, as its title suggests, but also determining the placement and regular review of the student deemed exceptional. While a number of policies frame the programming of special education in Ontario, the primary resource document “Special Education: Kindergarten to Grade 12” (2017) provides the most comprehensive detailing of legislation and policy; funding; program planning; the identification, placement, and review process; the individual education plan; related programs and services; and related ministries. It is certainly the most important document for any teacher or administrator involved in the practice of special education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceptionality</th>
<th>Semester 1</th>
<th>Semester 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism(^{43})</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour(^{44})</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf and Hard of Hearing(^{45})</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted(^{46})</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Impairment(^{47})</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning Disability(^{48})</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild Intellectual Disability(^{49})</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. 4 Special education designations, e-learning 2016–2017

Students designated with an exceptionality are required by law to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) determined by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). An IEP is a written plan describing the special education services required and detailed plan to ensure students have the supports they need, including accommodations or modifications to help the student achieve learning expectations (Ontario 2017, E2–E6). Despite the fact that 20 percent of

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43 Autism: “A severe learning disorder that is characterized by: a. disturbances in: rate of educational development; ability to relate to the environment; mobility; perception, speech, and language; b. lack of the representational symbolic behaviour that precedes language” (Ontario 2017, A15).

44 Behaviour: “A learning disorder characterized by specific behaviour problems over such a period of time, and to such a marked degree, and of such a nature, as to adversely affect educational performance and that may be accompanied by one or more of the following: a. an inability to build or to maintain interpersonal relationships; b. excessive fears or anxieties; c. a tendency to compulsive reaction; d. an inability to learn that cannot be traced to intellectual, sensory, or other health factors, or any combination thereof” (Ontario 2017, A14).

45 Deaf and Hard of Hearing: “An impairment characterized by deficits in language and speech development because of a diminished or non-existent auditory response to sound” (Ontario 2017, A15).

46 Gifted: “An unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated” (Ontario 2017, A16).

47 Language Impairment: “A learning disorder characterized by an impairment in comprehension and/or the use of verbal communication or the written or other symbol system of communication, which may be associated with neurological, psychological, physical, or sensory factors” (Ontario 2017, A15).

48 Learning Disability: “One of a number of neurodevelopmental disorders that persistently and significantly has an impact on the ability to learn and use academic and other skills” (Ontario 2017, A15).

49 Mild Intellectual Disability: “A learning disorder characterized by: a. an ability to profit educationally within a regular class with the aid of considerable curriculum modification and support services; b. an inability to profit educationally within a regular class because of slow intellectual development; c. a potential for academic learning, independent social adjustment, and economic self-support” (Ontario 2017, A16).
e-learning students have an IEP in e-learning, the department at the time of writing was unable to gain access to students’ IEPs, so staff manually produce a report of students’ designations and link them to the online staffroom. I asked Greg, a senior administrator, about exceptional students in the board:

Interviewer: Do you all keep track of exceptionalities?

Greg: We’re not a big proponent of asking Spec. Ed. kids to provide their own IEP. It’s one of the weaknesses in our system. Students who [have] IEPs aren’t always strong at self-advocacy. They tend to want to hide it. I hope that in an online environment there is less of that stigma.

Interviewer: Who are your students with an IEP? What are the exceptionalities?

Greg: A lot of gifted, so a lot of the accommodations are extra time. To be honest, let’s say a kid has an IEP that’s behavioural—there’s not a lot we can do to address that. And I don’t want to ask them. I think that’s wrong. They’ll have to be able to give me access eventually. We can do 90 here, but not 900 in the summer because this takes me a good couple of weeks to do. It’s just as unfair in the summer to ask students to self-identify. It’s one of the ongoing discussions we’re having. We can’t say “I can’t do it.” We ask, ask, and ask.

While my study does not focus on summer school students, this interview highlights inequities that exist when delivering e-learning, particularly for students with an IEP who require accommodations or modifications beyond extra time. Advocacy in this instance presents even greater stakes because teachers would otherwise have access to this information without self-disclosure. While there is no common consensus in the literature about what constitutes giftedness nor on the number of students who are twice-exceptional (i.e., gifted and have a learning disability):

White, male students whose parents had high occupation statuses had the highest probability of being identified as gifted. Female students were more likely to be high achievers. Compared to White students, it was only East Asian students who were more likely to be identified as gifted; yet South, Southeast and East Asian students were more likely to be very high achievers. Parental occupation was strongly related to both giftedness and very high achievement. (Parekh, Brown and Robson 2018, 1).

When I spoke to Reign about the process of identification, she explained the following:

Interviewer: How did you find the process of being labeled as gifted?

Reign: I had no idea it existed until middle school.
Interviewer: You didn’t have a say?

Reign: Basically, we went into middle school, and they found out that giftedness was a thing. So me and one other kid, a boy I’m friends with, we were always ahead of my class, and we were very smart, and we were very bored, and we found that giftedness was a thing, and my parents were like, ‘Here is the answer to all of our questions!’ and so they got me privately tested. I didn’t really get a say in it, which was kind of annoying, but the actual testing process, and once I was in, I felt like I connected better with the gifted kids than I did—it was hard because they were all friends—but I feel like overall I connected better with them. I didn’t have a say, but I’m glad I did it.

Interviewer: How were things different in classes for gifted students?

Reign: They move much faster, and the classes were also bigger because there were only two of them and they had to split all the kids into the two classes, so they were a little bit bigger, but the teachers seemed to respect us more, which was cool. The work was more independent because of that.

Interviewer: What does that look like in terms of respect? How do you define that?

Reign: They treat us like we were more mature, not like we were—I feel like, in the academic stream in grade 7, they were treating us like we were toddlers, like, ‘let me spoon-feed you what we’re learning.’ When I switched over, you’re not a toddler, and we can do self-learning, and you can learn at a faster speed and do independent work, and I don’t need to watch over your shoulder every two seconds, which was cool.

Interviewer: How’s online learning, then, in that regard?

Reign: It’s even more freedom, which is awesome. I like to have the freedom to control how I’m learning and what I’m learning.

Interviewer: Do you get a sense of instruction in the class?

Reign: Other than “Do your assignments on time,” not really.

Interviewer: Have you attended Adobe Connect sessions?

Reign: I have tried, but it didn’t really work. I was introduced to the class two weeks late, so I missed the first two. And I was away for the third one, and then my computer didn’t work, and I was away again, so I’ve been seeing them after.

Interviewer: How’s that?

Reign: It’s okay—I get the information I need. They say they’re expecting you to attend, but they don’t monitor it. I don’t know how they would do that. I guess they can see
who’s logged in. My family does a lot of travelling, I do a lot of travelling and extracurriculars, and I’m usually not at home at 8:00 on Mondays when it runs.

In this exchange, Reign describes the private testing her father, a corporate lawyer, and mother, a support staff member in the school, pursued to get access to the gifted program where she is now enrolled. Despite not having a say in being enrolled in the gifted program, Reign enjoys the autonomy of learning and the respect she feels she receives from teachers who don’t need to look over her shoulder. Online, she uses the word “freedom” to describe her experience—freedom from having to engage with the formalities of classroom communities, freedom to move at a pace that works for her learning, and freedom to get the information she needs and move on to the travelling and extracurricular activities that take up so much of her time.

Interviewer: So, tell me about the things that take up your time outside of school.

Reign: So, I do a lot with the drama department. I do a lot of art, I do all their posters, I do all of their sets, so that takes up a lot of my time. [She talks about rehearsals, productions, and her schedule being all over the place.] We have been here till 10:00. I do that two days a week and sometimes on Saturdays. I also work, I have a job. I get paid [laughs]. I work at [a small privately owned school that teaches art to children and adults], and I work with kids from less than one year old to fifteen. It’s a flexible schedule—I work once a week, and I work parties. I teach them colour theory at a minimum level, and two parties a week, three hours per event.

E-learning can offer students an escape from the constraints of face-to-face instruction, which allows students like Reign to pursue her passions, which is also a privilege, one that can be added to her employment résumé as an extracurricular to round out her education, thereby increasing chances for admission into postsecondary programs. This does not diminish her struggle but rather points to the differential experience of struggle for students who are well resourced. Reign’s schooling has been far from idyllic. She struggles with fitting into a number of spaces as a young gay woman and feels frustrated by expectations placed on her by her parents, with whom she experiences a great deal of tension. This tension most acutely rises in the context of her schooling, where she experiences extraordinary pressure and intervention to earn high grades.

Reign: I feel like everyone stresses out over marks, because that’s how you’re taught: When you’re in elementary school, they’re prepping you for middle school. When you’re in middle school, they’re prepping you for high school, when you’re in high school, they’re prepping you for university, when you’re in university, they’re prepping you for
life! But I feel like there’s this pressure to get the marks so you don’t end up without a job and living in a box.

Interviewer: Do you feel that pressure?

Reign: I feel like a lot of people—I feel it. I have a lot of personal, mental—I have anxiety and am diagnosed with PTSD, so a lot of my marks—also depression, let me get that list down and all that out there. So, like, it’s weird because I get stressed out about marks, but I don’t have motivation to do anything because my anxiety is “Ahhhhhh, life!” and my depression is like, “Lie in bed and do nothing, nothing matters.” So . . . my perception of that is very different, but I feel like, especially for my parents, my parents are very mark-based: you’re in school to get good grades, so it doesn’t matter if you learn this stuff, but that you remember it for a test, and so . . . that was a huge tangent, I apologize.

Interviewer: The purpose of education, you’ve observed it to be—the goals are utilitarian: get a job, to get to X, to get to X.

Reign: It’s not—you’re not learning to learn, you’re learning to get a job so you can be perceived by society as a high-functioning citizen.

Under what conditions does Reign use the term “freedom” to describe her experiences in the gifted program and learning online? The effects of the pressure Reign is describing comprise the most common pattern among students I interviewed, the harm of which is captured not only in the ambivalence students feel about schooling, but in a number of cases, the diagnoses that characterize their experience, such as anxiety, PTSD, and depression. Parents, for Reign as well as other students I interviewed, often respond by reinforcing the school’s message: grades matter; with e-learning, only grades seem to matter. Her parents have high expectations; she describes their value system as one that aligns intelligence with grades. As a result, she strategizes about how she’s going to meet her parent’s expectations and pursue her interest in the arts without compromising her well-being entirely. In our conversation, she expressed a desire to move out of the house and attend a university, likely in Ottawa, and enrol in political science (because of her father’s direction) and environmental studies. Despite doing an extraordinary amount of work to support the arts scene in her school, she is discouraged from pursuing it formally. She plans on taking art courses as electives and possibly switching her focus a few years into her program.
I feature Reign’s story, among others in subsequent chapters, because she demonstrates how offline and online worlds organize her privilege; the challenges of school, which place undue pressure on developing adolescents; and the differential advantages—the strategizing and self-advocacy—students leverage to respond to these challenges, such as communicating with teachers, circumventing parental conflict, and accessing resources, such as travel or gifted and arts programming, to supplement the limitations of schooling. Reign possesses competencies to access e-learning as another resource to “get the grade,” and in so doing meets her learning objectives as she has described them: “You’re not learning to learn, you’re learning to get a job so you can be perceived by society as a high-functioning citizen.”

3.4 Conclusion: A race to the top

What does it mean to be perceived as a high-functioning citizen when function is only captured by grades and the reality of this perception belies its intent, as it is formally stated by the Ministry and school board? How do we understand the value of e-learning, which claims to provide learner-focused and inclusive classrooms, when students are framing it as a strategic response to the pressures of meritocracy or a reprieve from harm imposed by a social order, whereby order is hierarchically organized by “the rule of the talented” (Yair 2007)? I challenge the idea of meritocracy, the myth of which is sustained by the notion that some parents and students work harder than others. Instead, some parents and students seem to have access to the mechanisms that make the work more efficient: gifted programming, advanced placement classes, arts programs, career coaching, and funds for extracurricular activities, the time for which is saved by taking e-learning.

Greg, during our interview, stated: “Everything is a rule, but not a hard-and-fast rule” before describing how advocacy for access produces advantages for students who are already advantaged. While it is therefore not my intention to transpose Lareau’s study ([2003] 2011) onto my participants because their contexts are different, her insights into the cultural logic of child-rearing does provide explanatory power when observing patterns of access in the TDSB, which precedes the year of this study. It emphasizes the demands placed on parent(s), who are busy and financially taxed organizing extracurricular activities, curating language use in the home, and mediating interactions between the family and institutions, and it shows the demands
on students who are exhausted from the process of cultivation. Lareau’s theory of cultural reproduction positions this thesis in the space of the symbolic, in which culture comprises dispositions, cultural goods, and educational accreditation (Bourdieu, 1986). Further, Lareau’s work highlights the cost of individualism:

In a society less dominated by individualism than the United States, with more of an emphasis on the group, the sense of constraint displayed by working class and poor children might be interpreted as healthy and appropriate. But in this society, the strategies of the working-class and poor families are generally denigrated and seen as unhelpful or even harmful to children’s life chances. The benefits that accrue to middle-class children can be significant, but they are often invisible to them and to others. In popular language, middle-class children can be said to have been ‘born on third base but believe they hit a triple.’ ([2003] 2011, 13)

While Lareau’s study is based in the United States, Canadians similarly express an ideological and philosophical investment in middle-class parenting, which, according to Lynn Bosetti and Dianne Gereluk (2016), reveals normative assumptions about the aims and purposes of schooling. Indeed, Lareau’s study emerges from a historic specificity, where schools more starkly reflect the social and racial tensions in historically segregated neighbourhoods and where bureaucratic cultures differ considerably from one area of the city to the next. In Toronto, given its unique history of immigration, our geographic isolation, and our constitutional relationship to education, which presupposes a limited plurality and legal protections for multiculturalism, concerted cultivation, much like the debate on school choice, takes a different shape. In the following chapter, I illustrate the heterogeneity and complexity of ethnicity and race, especially as it occupies a diverse range of classed expressions and digital mediations.

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50 See Davies and Aurini 2011 for the historic context of school choice and concerted cultivation in Canada.
4 Technology and the Promise of Post-Racial Futures

The coat of arms for the City of Toronto was commissioned after the 1997 amalgamation of Old Toronto (1834) with its surrounding boroughs: Etobicoke, York, North York, Scarborough, and the borough of East York. According to the City of Toronto, the coat of arms is an official symbol, but it was intended for ceremonial application only. The design was created by the Chief Herald of Canada and consists of eleven symbols, including a beaver, celebrating the City’s history of industry in fur trading; green grass, to symbolize parks and recreational activities; and an eagle, as “a symbol of our native background.” Its motto, which refers to the strength of the amalgamated municipalities, reads “Diversity Our Strength” (Toronto 1998). I start with Toronto’s coat of arms because the process of producing symbols not only reflects the codification of societal values and worldviews, but it also reflects contradictions in meaning, conceals divisions in collectives, and captures the often performative or passive gesture toward social justice in governance.

Notwithstanding the denials inherent in the production of a colonial city, which, in the case of Toronto, dispossessed the Mississaugas and compartmentalized the natural environment into designated green space, the interpretation of diversity by the City of Toronto referred to regional rather than urban differences. Urban differences reflect disparities in outcome for Black, Indigenous peoples, people of colour; women; sexual and religious minorities; and people with diverse abilities. If we are to understand discursive formations, understood through the scholarship of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) as a “general politics of truth” produced by “multiple forms of constraint” and “regular effects of power” (131), the official explanation of the motto must be set against its circulation as a brand or “token” of cosmopolitanism across which local, national, and global identities coalesce.

51 “During the council’s two-hour debate [on the coat of arms], Michael Prue moved that “Diversity Our Strength” be scrapped for “The Meeting Place,” Raymond Cho put forward “Home to the World,” Norm Kelly wanted “Civility Our Strength” and Doug Holyday asked his colleagues to support “The World’s Meeting Place” (Goldsbie 2014).
The “Diversity Our Strength” motto symbolizes the promise of Toronto, which one can then measure against the material realities of “living” one’s diversity in the city, especially for the more than 200,000 Black residents whose experience with systemic anti-Black racism is reflected in the uneven provision of family and community services, job and income supports, health care, education, and policing. These systems are interconnected. Scholars of education have long examined the relationship between the socioeconomic position of families, which provide cumulative advantage, and educational outcomes, which also serve as determinants of health. In Toronto, educational inequality is reflected in the disproportionate makeup of Black students in applied streams and special education programs (James and Turner 2017); the anti-Black policy of school resource police officers, which was finally scrapped in November 2017 after nearly a decade of pressure from activists; the ejection (or absenting) of Black students through punitive discipline. Extreme forms of this ejection are suspensions and expulsions (Zhang and De Jesus 2017); educational inequality is also reflected in achievement gaps and low graduation rates (TDSB 2011, 2018). These systemic mechanisms of streaming, community policing, discipline, and ejection coincide with broader cuts to social funding that target racialized youth, the eviction of families from low-income housing, and the racial profiling and the killing of Black and other marginalized people by the police.

4.1 Anti-Black racism in schooling

Certainly, anti-Black racism is just one lens through which one can analyze injustice in this city, a microcosm of which is reflected in schooling. Other forms of injustice include the erasure of the growing number and diversity of Indigenous peoples in Toronto, the violence and exclusion of transgender youth (of colour, in particular), and gender-based violence. This chapter is not intended to dismiss the intersections between these experiences or the specificity of systematic oppression; instead, itforegrounds the stories of three young Black women in my study, Marysa, Telina, and Justice, all of whom negotiate identity and belonging with the politics of race, of which e-learning and technology more broadly is a part.

In the previous chapter, I addressed the impact of e-learning as a component of the traditional schooling system on inequities in the TDSB, arguing that its current provision intensifies disparities in access, mapped in Toronto along lines of class and race. I drew on Annette
Lareau’s concept of concerted cultivation ([2003] 2011) to explain the mechanisms through which social class is reproduced through individualization, advocacy, and intervention; however, Lareau’s concept is limited as a generic class resource, which precludes an analysis of Black and ethnic minority middle classes, a number of whom are participants in my study. The application of ‘concerted cultivation’ to explain the concentration of high-achieving students in e-learning reflects an articulation of historically and socially specific elements: of neoliberal ideology that invests a meritocratic schooling system with power; of technology that makes this system more efficient, more marketized, in its exercise of power; a hierarchy of race from which whiteness gives power meaning or truth elements; and a dynamic of class oppression that requires marginalized students to aspire to whiteness and find meaning in a schooling system that devalues their voices and disorders feelings of belonging. The question of race, as a material and epistemological element from which class is experienced as whiteness, is the focus of my analysis. While a disproportionate number of people in the city experiencing economic poverty are racialized, this chapter asks how we might understand the experiences of Black students who access e-learning to leverage advantage in a schooling system that has harmed them. Discourses of progress, within which e-learning is embedded, I argue is not just about class mobility; it is also a racial logic which imbues whiteness with meaning. This meaning is articulated through the practices and experiences of students in an Ontario education system that is forged by a colonial history that precedes it, and a neoliberal present within which Black identity is negotiated.

In this chapter, I explore the dynamics of race and racism in schooling, where whiteness, as a “historical system of thought and action that affords undue structural, material and political privileges,” (Wallace 2018, 467, also see Wallace 2017 for extension of Bourdieu specifically) disadvantages Black and Indigenous students, and students of colour. I contest a singular framing of blackness, where a logics of deficiency forecloses the diverse expression of Black identities. Referring to research on the Black middle class (Rollock et al. 2015; Wallace 2018), I draw on Derron Wallace’s (2018) contributions to the concept of cultural capital to unfix the concept from whiteness, within which racialized populations are framed as working class. By incorporating these extensions of Lareau’s work (through Bourdieu) I will analyze the differential experience of class for Black students in my study as it permeates their experiences learning online. While students I interviewed operationalized e-learning as a means of extracting
cultural capital, anti-Black racism shaped their relationship to learning and impacted their levels of engagement in schooling more broadly.

Following the work of Black geographers, I argue that space and place are central to the production of difference (Chari 2008; Gilmore 2002; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; McKittrick and Peake 2005; Smith and Vasudevan 2017). To understand the production of difference in online classrooms, I will describe how discourses about technology reflect a fantasy of post-racial futures that masks the construction of race. I will explain how the provision of e-learning not just mirrors but comprises a mechanism of traditional schooling, within which Black students are disproportionately stigmatized, stereotyped, misdirected, pathologized, and disciplined; and finally, I turn to the experiences of three young Black women in my study, who illustrate complex identification with middle-class cultural spaces, of which e-learning is a part. I trace the ways that the program is leveraged—to avoid presentations, boost a grade for university admission, and as a response to a lack of face-to-face course options—and I frame their consumption of e-learning within a system of anti-Black racism that impacts their relationship with school and learning. The contribution of this chapter therefore lies not only in its resource-based reading of cultural capital, within which ethno-racial diversity is represented, but also in its theorizing of race and technology as a relationship that structures learning environments online.

4.2 Thinking “race” with technology

With the incitement of postmodernity, Stuart Hall (1998) was driven to think about his own identity as a migrant whose departure from his family in Jamaica for the UK marked a return, as an absent–present contestation with something other than the “real me”:

Who I am—the “real me”—was formed in relation to a whole set of other narratives. I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning, long before I understood any of this theoretically. Identity is formed at the unstable point where the “unspeakable” stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture. And since he/she is positioned in relation to cultured narratives which have been profoundly expropriated the colonized subject is always “somewhere else”: doubly marginalized, displaced, always other than where he or she is, or is able to speak from. (6)

I draw on Hall’s formulation of identity at this moment not only for the impact it has had on scholars working on critical race theory, but also for the geographical lens through which he
understood identity. For Kathrine McKittrick (2006; also see MccKittrick and Woods 2007), whose contributions to Black feminist thought and cultural geography are extensive, narratives of the past emerge and help make sense of the present. In the context of Canada, this requires a conceptual frame that brings “black Canada into view and, at the same time, discloses the racialized workings, and thus failures, of the nation-state and the attendant unmet democratic promises of modernity. This kind of frame situates black Canadian thought within the context of diaspora—the intellectual and creative and historic narratives that are always locally outer-national” (Hudson and McKittrick 2014, 236; see also McKittrick and Peake 2005).

How is race, as a variable of difference, co-constituted with technology in general and with e-learning in particular? In relation to my dissertation questions, identity emerges as a power relation that shape narratives, informed by the post-racial promise of technology and the negotiation of Black subjectivity, which experiences deferral or erasure in e-learning. Critical race scholar David Theo Goldberg describes the post-racial formation as one in which neoliberal formations of identity erase the conditions of racial reproduction through the denial of racism, particularly in official state policies of multiculturalism, which subsumes group identity into nationalist discourse and the production of commodity. The post-racial reflects a colour-blind gaze that denies racial experience: “The post-racial is the racial condition in denial of the structural” (2015, 34). The post-racial promise of technology individualizes blackness and represents Black identity online as a present absence and a conceptual escape from embodiment. The stress e-learning specifically places on self-enterprise and self-direction belie the ways in which systems shape black subjectivities and impose oppression onto psychic life. In studying systems, I look to the ways that power produces spatial unevenness in e-learning as well as to the opportunities made possible by or foreclosed to subjects whose worldviews, situated knowledge, and creative expression are disciplined by hierarchies imposed in formal schooling. This hierarchy not only reproduces class, but also a racialized social system that reinforces white privilege.

52 Eminent geographer Doreen Massey, who worked with Hall at Open University, had long been friends with Hall. Their relationship led to their cofounding of Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture.
4.2.1 Racial processes in schooling

What makes these racial processes in schooling so difficult to identify is that their successes are dependent upon making those who are marginalized believe that they are the perpetrators of their own oppression. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva ([2003] 2010) points out, this is a form of colour-blind racism, where the contemporary status of minorities is rationalized “as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitation” (2). This differs from racisms in previous eras, where the arguments hinged on biological and moral inferiority; instead, contemporary racism, expressed in the language of individualism, is “subtle, institutional, and apparently non-racial” (3). This is not to dismiss race as purely social, nor to reify its character as biological, but rather it captures race as an effect of a racial structure or a racialized social system that Bonilla-Silva ([2003] 2010) refers to as white supremacy: “I therefore conceive a society’s racial structure as \textit{the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege}” (9, original emphasis). What therefore makes the interviews with my three participants so compelling is that within a system that reinforces white privilege, Telina, Marysa, and Justice reflect its racial effects.

In the bigger picture of schooling, this chapter confronts the reality of anti-Black racism in the TDSB and explains why e-learning, which individualizes students and removes them from their immediate school communities, is not the solution to a systemic problem. I show a complicated picture of a promise made by e-learning to Black students, one which allows reprieve from the marginalizing experiences of face-to-face schooling, but which in no way mitigates the effect of institutional racism. In an informal exchange about my work online, a teacher responded thus to my assertion that e-learners are concentrated in high-achieving schools in the city: “But my students are so diverse!” I explained that while a disproportionate number of families in wealthy neighbourhoods are white, and economically poor families are disproportionately racialized, just over half of Toronto is composed of visible minorities (Whalen 2017a). Further, statistics do not dictate fate or provide the context of migration patterns; rather, they point to patterns in group experience, as it is broadly defined. It is therefore incumbent upon me not just to capture the concentration of racialized and immigrant populations in lower-income parts of the city, most of
whom are excluded from e-learning, but also to highlight the specificity of race in middle- and upper-class communities, for whom class is experienced differentially by Black students.

As outlined in Chapter 2, I picked up consent forms from all student participants in person. Referencing TDSB’s categories, 40 percent of students I interviewed comprised “other racialized students,” 40 percent were white53, and 20 percent were Black54. While a number of students who were non–white-passing did not centre the social dynamics of race as a central component of their experience, Telina, Marysa, and Justice did. In fact, their identity as Black students was formative in their schooling experience; this chapter reflects a response to their call to highlight the structural violence of schooling, within which e-learning is complicit, as well as the contingent, contradictory negotiation of identity, particularly as it is shaped by social class. As upwardly mobile, the stories these students present exceed discourses of deficit typically captured in statistics on Black youth. These statistics reflect an absence of Black representation and the racial stereotypes that produce low expectations on the part of educators; this institutional deficit compromises the confidence and voice of Black students, producing feelings of exclusion and racially differentiating students within and across class categories. In following McKittrick’s provocation that safe teaching and learning spaces comprise a harmful white fantasy (Hudson and McKittrick 2014, 237), I argue that the online classroom is a space that conceals this harm; as such, online learning alleviates the pain teachers and learners are ethically compelled to confront if learning and anticolonial thinking is to be possible at all.

53 According to the TDSB’s Census Portrait (June 2015) White students make up 29% of ethno-racial groups – the largest percentage in the board – but are least likely to see the need to learn about their culture (1). “Almost two thirds [64%] of the White students had both their parents born in Canada, 16% in Central/Eastern Europe, 8% in Northern/Western Europe, and 5% in Southern Europe. The remaining 6% had one or both parents born in other countries” (1).

54 Black students in the Toronto District School Board are diverse and identify their family birthplace across 70 countries, most of which are in Africa and the English Caribbean: “the largest proportion of Black students identified their family birthplace as Jamaica (41%), with the next largest proportion of Black students (15%) identifying Somalia as their place of origin. Thirteen percent identified another English Caribbean country as their family birthplace, 7% identified another East African country, and 6% identified a West African country” (James and Turner 2017, 27). These points of origins are further diversified by generation, reflecting a variation in migration patterns: “The largest proportion of those with a Jamaican family birthplace are second-generation Canadian (78%), while Somalia has the smallest proportion that are second-generation Canadian (48%)” (James and Turner 2017, 28).
4.2.2 Race as an absent presence

In her article on “Racialized Fantasies and the Internet,” Black studies scholar Christina Elizabeth Sharpe (1999) considers whether cyberspace can provide relief from the oppressive regulatory systems where “specific codes, norms, expectations, and fears” about race continue to inform virtual interactions (1090). She opens her article with a mediation on in/visibility by poet-activist Essex Hemphill who, as a Black gay man with AIDS, fantasizes about an imagined virtual community where “an invisible man can see his own reflection,” yet he is concerned about how real-life assumptions about sexuality and race might be extended into cyberspace (1090). Sharpe writes: “The virtuality of race in cyberspace begins to expose it as already a virtual construction in real life […] the community that [Hemphill] will carry into cyberspace is already constituted by that inability to see oneself reflected” (1090). In other words, the concept of race as it emerges online compels consideration of the normative assumptions that perpetuate blackness as an absent presence. McKittrick describes the absented presence of blackness as a spatial dilemma in which memory is embedded in forgetfulness and “painful places, worlds where black people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship.” (2006, 33). Erasure of blackness in social and culture space, she explains, is a geographic project reflecting “processes of displacement [which] erase histories and geographies, which are, in fact, present, legitimate, and experiential” (33). I extend this by suggesting that erasure is lived and continues to live online.

Racism persists in a neoliberal era through the absence of race as an institutional presence (Goldberg 2009). Bonilla-Silva ([2003] 2010) refers to this absence as “race without racists,” explaining that the narrowing of race as an individualized and attitudinal phenomenon obscures the structural (and as McKittrick would call it, geographical) operation of racial ideology. Our society avoids racial terminology, renders invisible the mechanisms through which racial inequality is reproduced, and effaces power from analysis. E-learning is a structure that intensifies the logic of face-to-face schooling (as standardized and individuated) spatially, online, by absenting race and abstracting identity. This reifies a universality that obscures the materiality and lived experience of race. To go further, in a schooling system that consistently disciplines blackness out of bodies, e-learning achieves its aim by disappearing it entirely.
I critique e-learning as a component of full-time day school programing, which is accessed unequally, for its exclusive pool of students; for the didactic imposition of curriculum, built with a one-size-fits-all design by Ontario Educational Resource Bank; and by the foreclosure of coproduction, particularly with Black students who rarely see their history and cultural diversity centered in learning. In subsequent sections, I explore race and identity through narrative inquiry, privileging memory as a question of black geography. I ask this: how can we recover “places and spaces of blackness . . . when they were formally identified as irrelevant and/or nonexistent”? It is through memory, as a space of “the actual and the possible” (McKittrick 2006, 32) that I attend to the sometimes painful but largely ambivalent experiences of schooling for three participants: Marysa, Telina, and Justice. In doing so, I confront their abstraction online, rendering their absence present here, within the context of structures that delimit their identity. Education institutions are, in this way, exposed for their centrality in foreclosing the expression of blackness in schooling.

4.3 Towards race equity in education

“Towards Race Equity in Education” (James and Turner 2017) was a collaborative project studying the schooling of Black students in the GTA between Dr. Carl James, Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora at York University; the African Canadian Legal Clinic; and the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators. This report explored the impact schools, homes, and communities had on the educational outcomes of Black students. The method comprised five consultation sessions with a total of 324 students, parents, educators, school administrators, trustees, and community members in the GTA, 80 percent of whom were members of the Black community. Black Canadians comprise 8.5 percent of the population in Toronto but 12 percent of the population in the TDSB 2006–2011 cohort. White students comprise 35 percent of the student population, followed by 19 percent East Asian and 19 percent South Asian. Indigenous students comprise 0.30 percent of the student population.

The James and Turner (2017) report was prepared at the juncture between increased attention to anti-Black racism by the provincial government (which has collapsed since the subsequent election of the Ford Conservatives in 2018) and the stagnation of improvement, despite over thirty years of government attention to unequal educational outcomes for Black students (see
pages 6–19). In particular, this report highlights the turn to race relations in Ontario, following the 1992 Yonge Street riot, which was a response to the systematic killing of Black men by the Toronto Police Service.\(^{55}\)

The report highlights the various educational concerns that Black students from Toronto and the surrounding regions shared during the consultations with [Stephen] Lewis: lack of racial diversity among teachers; Black people and Black history not reflected in the curriculum; tolerance of racist incidents in schools; harsher discipline of Black students; streaming of Black students into courses below their ability; and Black students being discouraged from attending university. (James and Turner 2017, 7)

Today, organizations such as Black Lives Matter, which offers children an entry point into the movement through their annual Freedom School; Education Not Incarceration; and Latinx, Afro-Latin-America, Abya Yala Education Network (LAEN) has shaped a collective response to contemporary race relations. To date, the provincial government does not mandate school boards to collect race-based data; however, the TDSB is one of the few school boards that does. In Table 4.1, I have reproduced the analysis of data featured in this collaborative project, provided by the TDSB to the Black Demographic Data Advisory Committee of the York Centre for Education and Community, York University. “The dataset combines four successive cohorts of students (the cohorts of 2003–2008, 2004–2009, 2005–2010, and 2006–2011) and includes data from the students who completed the 2006 Student Census as Grade 12, 11, 10, and 9 students, respectively” (James and Turner 2017, 26).

\(^{55}\) It is within this history of policing that the placement of school resource officers in secondary schools have been contested for over a decade, before trustees voted to end the practice in 2017.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black Students(^{56})</th>
<th>Other racialized students</th>
<th>White students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in an academic stream of study</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in applied stream of study</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in essentials stream of study</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rates after a 5-year period</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop out rate after a 5-year period</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied and accepted to an Ontario university</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied and accepted to an Ontario college</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not apply to postsecondary</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education identification (non-gifted)</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education identification (gifted)</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension rates (at least one suspension)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expulsion rates (2011–2012; 2015–2016)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. 1 Race Equity: An amalgamation from James and Turner (2017, 29-36) of figures 5 (program of study), 6 (graduation rates), 7 (5-year outcomes), 8 (confirmation in post-secondary education), 10 (special education identification), 11 (suspensions), and 12 (expulsions).

\(^{56}\) According to the dataset, 41 percent of students identified their family birthplace as Jamaican. While I did not ask students to identify their race, ethnicity, or nationality, Jamaica is bound to Telina, Marysa, and Justice’s stories in different ways. The content of their stories, much of which I am unable to represent in such a short space, reflect participants’ relationship to Jamaica, from which a significant number of Black Canadians have descended, and highlights the prevalence of anti-Black racism, the details of which were volunteered without prompting. Further, the context illustrates complex and contradictory identification with what Rinaldo Walcott (2003) calls the “politics and sensibility of diaspora” (14). Like McKittrick, Walcott’s attention to “diaspora networks and connectedness, as opposed to explicit national address,” offers a deterritorialized strategy for “writing blackness” (15). While Telina, Marysa, and Justice therefore experienced “Jamaica” in a multiplicity of ways (as belonging, ambivalence, and deferral) they all offer “diaspora moments” through which they articulate desire for recognition.
Despite disparities in achievement, discipline, and treatment of Black students, e-learning offers advantages that are leveraged by Black middle-class students to secure privilege, even when measures of advantage produce a double consciousness or internal cultural affiliation informed, in this case, by Western European and Jamaican cultures (see Gilroy 1993). In the next section, I situate theories of the Black middle-class before extending an analysis of cultural capital to the stories of Telina, Marysa, and Justice, whose identities I represent through a resource-based reading of revival, resilience, and resistance. How is Black identity revived, disciplined, or resisted in a colonial and violent schooling system? In what ways is technology leveraged within this system as a site of creativity, surveillance, and utility? By turning to these questions through the narratives of these three young Black women, I explore the relationship between place as it is virtually and physically grounded, identity as it is informed by a shared Black consciousness, and home as it is individually imagined and negotiated.

4.4 The Black middle-class

Annette Lareau ([2003] 2011) has been criticized for the limitations of “concerted cultivation” and “natural growth” as concepts that distinguish how parents from different social classes activate cultural capital (or fail to) through parenting. In her study (2003), she argues that while race has a significant impact on the daily life of middle-class African Americans, it does not appear to shape the cultural logic of child-rearing: “All the middle-class families engaged in extensive reasoning with their children, asking questions, probing assertions, and listening to answers” (133). Following criticisms that her work did not engage sufficiently with race (Pearce 2004, Wells 2005), Lareau doubled down in a subsequent interview conducted by Pooya Naderi and Carrie Wendel-Hummell at the University of Kansas (2010), citing how “thin” literature on the Black middle class is and how difficult it was to recruit middle class Black families: “They were a hard group to find and to interview” (7). She described combing through interviews for race-based patterns and finding evidence of blackness in such places as the segregation of kinship and religious systems as well as the celebration of African American history: “it wasn’t as if race wasn’t there” (8). In a second edition of the publication, she rationalizes why race was less powerful than she expected, projecting the likelihood that race would likely play a more
important role as children age. A white and Black child from the same economic class are more likely to have things in common, she asserts, than two Black children from contrasting classes.

In responding to these debates, I ask what it might mean to “look for” blackness as a cultural artefact and to point to convergences within the Black middle-class, whose identities cohere around claims to parental occupation, access to prestigious programming, place of residence, and expertise in code-switching. What might two Black children from the middle class have in common? What might it mean to look for blackness as a presence absented by whiteness? This is not, as educational sociologist Derron Wallace (2018) suggests, to render cultural capital synonymous to whiteness, but rather to “better understand the racialization of class differentiation, division, and domination,” by critiquing the “use of cultural capital as an exclusive expression of elite and middle-class whiteness” (467).

Cultural capital, then, is not the space of whiteness. While e-learning is offered in schools with a larger population of white students, it is also leveraged by Black and other underrepresented students to gain accreditation; however, my interviews with Black students online illustrates how the benefits of learning online are experienced differentially alongside their experiences with anti-Black racism in schooling. Wallace (2018, following Rollock et al. 2015), explains how Black families operationalize cultural capital to resist discourses of deficit that characterize so much of the experience of Black students. Wallace (2018) describes the multiple ways that Black Caribbean identities in British society, in particular, are foreclosed by “structured schemes of perception” (474) that normalize a “logics of deficiency” in which blackness is rendered “synonymous with material and cultural poverty” (467). Wallace continues: “What is more, even in a putatively pluralistic, post-racial context, blackness still functions as a somatic signifier of class disadvantage” (478).

In what remains, I interpret the controlling assumptions that undermine class variation among Black students to explore the complex relationship Telina, Marysa, and Justice have to blackness. This relationship is normalized as a logic of deficiency within a racialized social system that discursively fixes the relationship between Black identity and class disadvantage. I will demonstrate a) the ways e-learning confers cultural capital on each student, b) how racism
impedes advancement in spite of cultural capital, and c) the diversity of ways each student negotiates their identities within these constraints. As Wallace (2018) explains,

Black identities are constrained to a set of polemics, obfuscating their richness and variability. In this regard, the accumulating wealth of whiteness is not found in exclusive ownership of cultural capital, but in the lack of injustices endured through a racialised class determinism that affiliates Blacks and ethnic minorities with cultural and economic poverty and whiteness with cultural visibility and social class diversity. (480)

Without understanding the context of these constraints on Black identities, the successes Telina, Marysa, and Justice have had in accessing e-learning might demonstrate that the sky is indeed the limit for marginalized young people and that technology might perhaps serve as a way of decreasing the effects of streaming, identification, and policing on Black students; however, my time observing and interviewing these three students illustrated the exceptional nature of their access and the ways in which this access is bound up in the workings of institutional racism. These workings mark blackness as visible: as phenotype, as a discursive formation (as culturally homogenous and deviant) within which an “object” emerges, one that can be governed, policed and thus displaced. In its displacement, institutional racism constitutes a simultaneous erasure, where administrative and disciplinary practice ejects Black bodies from the space of schools and ejects the rich diversity of Black culture, politics, and consciousness from pedagogy and the content of curriculum. It is upon this double working of objectification and erasure, rationalized as a naturally occurring phenomena and a cultural limitation of blackness, that white supremacy (as a projected natural racial order) depends.

Rather than situating e-learning as an exceptional space, one in which presence can be asserted, I argue that e-learning is one strategy Black students with access to middle-class competencies employ to respond to structural oppression as well as a space within which blackness is further displaced. Stated differently, e-learning operates as a virtual reproduction of the face-to-face operation of schooling structures where Black identity is subsumed into a “neutral” colour-blind (i.e., white) interface. I will not further “absent” Telina, Marysa, and Justice from their presence in virtual environments or frame them within discourses of deficit. Instead, I will show their agency behind the screen as desiring subjects who wish to exert control over their learning and to see themselves reflected and represented in the practice of schooling. Even if this wish isn’t
fulfilled, it is the act of wishing, of projecting desire, that provides a space for hope and Black futures to occupy.

4.5 Cultural capital and e-learning

Like most (if not all) students in this study, Telina, Marysa, and Justice took e-learning as a strategy that allowed them to circumvent the limitations of face-to-face instruction. Telina, for instance, decided to pursue ENG4U, English, Grade 12 University, online because she disliked making presentations. When I pressed for details, she described her apprehension as rooted in a lack of confidence about the skills needed to present: “I think most of the presentation skills in my life are from watching other presentations.” Although she had previously taken e-learning during the summer, the idea of taking it during day school came from a friend, who was also avoiding presentations. Telina describes herself as ambivalent about the course: “English is just a course. I don’t particularly like it or dislike it, but I did find it less unnerving than the actual classroom because you can work at your own pace as long as you’re meeting all the deadlines, and there are no presentations, which gave me less anxiety.” This ambivalence extends to her schooling experience more generally.

Telina is a student enrolled in the TDSB’s French immersion program, which began in a handful of schools in the 1970s and has since grown to thirty-five sites (TDSB June 2017). Unlike many schools of choice, the French immersion program does not work on a first-come, first-served basis, nor is it based on demonstration of mastery; instead, all students who are eligible and apply on-time are guaranteed a spot, although enrolment in a preferred school is not guaranteed. While the program does not currently meet TDSB’s Integrated Equity Framework (2007) it is accessed by about one in twenty students in K–12 who are often from households

57 This comes after a shift from inequitable lottery-based admission processes: “Emotions run high when parents learn that the chosen program admits students by lottery. While most parents clearly understand the staffing, accommodation and other issues behind the practice of admission by lottery, none are willing to endure the process much longer. This report cannot value the input of participants without suggesting a process that will lead to the discontinuing of admission by lottery” (Gossling 2006, 11).

58 This includes equity of access and the inclusion of student voices in programming decisions.
with higher socioeconomic status, a two-parent family structure, and parents with high level of education (Sinay 2010).

Like e-learning, French immersion constitutes a form of cultural or linguistic capital (see Vanderveen 2015 for motivations and outcomes of secondary school immersion programs in the GTA). Telina’s participation in the program since elementary school has been a large part in the development of her social network: “Everyone knew who you were,” she reflected, and all her closest friends were in the program. It was through this network that she got involved with extracurricular activities and as such, acquired capital through her participation in The Black Student’s Association, volleyball, student council, and the Model United Nations. When I asked how it felt to be in classes with the same people every year, she responded, “I think it’s the best thing ever. It’s legitimately a family of people. We’re just together all the time, no matter what we did. We’d eat lunch together, we’d play outside together, have classes together. I feel like friendships in the French immersion program are stronger than the English program.” While Telina expressed enthusiasm about her friends, she expressed distrust of teachers, the reason for which I will explore in the subsequent section. For now, I position e-learning along a trajectory of choices Telina has made—in accessing French immersion and extracurricular activities—that has conferred cultural capital which she, like other students, will leverage as a privilege of their middle-class competencies.

Marysa was taking ENG4U online because she had a poor experience taking it face-to-face at her home school, earning a grade she describes as inconsistent with the high 80s and 90s in her other classes. At least, this is how she begins the story. The conditions under which she had timetabled grade 12 English and done poorly was a result of insufficient course selection, under which she decided to reach ahead in her grade 11 year; taking English a year early was exacerbated by a teacher who did not meet her learning needs. Like Telina, Marysa was intimidated by presentations, even describing her lack of participation in online discussions as a reflection of feeling self-conscious about articulating what’s on her mind. However, when I asked about the relationship between learning online and her broader schooling experience, Marysa described a harrowing experience with a grade 11 English teacher who publicly humiliated her in front of her peers by calling her a liar for allegedly plagiarizing, an act for which the teacher later apologized.
under pressure from administrators in the school. When recounting the experience, Marysa broke into tears as she described feeling terrified to go back to a class in front of which she had been humiliated. With feelings of disappointment consistent throughout her face-to-face experience schooling, Marysa connects her turn to e-learning as a strategy to avoid the fear of taking English in her home school.

Learning online was a pleasant surprise from what she had been dreading because the teacher was approachable, and she understood the material. Like almost all students, she was taking it to “get the grade” and didn’t consider it part of her day-to-day life at school, despite it being on her timetable. The biggest learning curve, as she described it, was logging in everyday: “Sometimes, I’m so busy with work from day school that I forget, and sometimes I fall asleep, and sometimes I wake up right before midnight and I freak out and log in on my phone.” During the time her e-learning is scheduled for synchronous sessions, she is usually travelling. Our conversations together encompassed a wide variety of topics, from her mother’s fear of her moving away to McMaster University, which she had gained early acceptance into (and subsequently rejected), to her love of K-Pop and cooking Japanese food. Marysa travels up to an hour to her current school to avoid the stigma of attending her catchment school with students who caused her harm and in a place she described as a disreputable area of the city: “I have had two brothers and an aunt that went there, and they say it’s horrible, and the majority of the kids I knew from middle school who bullied me went there, and I saw them from the first day, and that really intimidated me. I didn’t like the neighbourhood either.” The school she currently attends is uniformed, homogenously Black, with a specialized “Masters Program” comprised largely of white and South Asian students. Travel time is a barrier to participation in extracurricular activities, which she has not taken part in. I ask her to expand on the specialized program in her school:

Interviewer: Can you talk more about the programs in your school?

59 Attendance on e-learning is captured by logins. Even if a student logs in for seconds a day, they are considered present for class.

60 “Students wishing to apply to the program must complete an application package. This includes submitting a copy of their grade 7 final report card and a copy of their most recent report, writing an essay, and taking an entrance test. The entrance test will focus on critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students are welcome to submit photocopies of any additional information that would support their application” (TDSB, n.d.).
Marysa: Well, there’s the Master’s program, which is math, science, technology—basically advanced academic classes. To be honest, I could have been in the Master’s program, but the problem is you only get one elective, and I really like my electives, and I hate taking biology, which you’re forced to take. It would look good on university applications, but I’m just as fine without it. And I also hate how unfairly my school compares the Master’s to the rest of the kids. The Master’s kids get treated better—special trips to places. For example, in my calculus class, there’s a mixture of regular students and Master’s kids, and we had a quiz last week. The teacher, when she collected the quizzes, collected it from my side first, and when she came to the side with the Master’s kids, they were still writing, and she’s standing there in front of them, waiting for them to finish. That was so unfair! I could have had extra time to finish, and I know I messed up on a question that I could have corrected in two minutes. Even this one time, we had an assembly for talking about options after graduating from high school, and the guidance counsellor was using the Master’s students as an example, talking about how she was talking to the English teacher and how the English teacher said how it’s impossible for someone to achieve 100 in grade 12, but a student was able to achieve it. We all knew who she was talking about: You can do X if you be like this person.

Interviewer: How did that feel?

Marysa: I don’t like being compared to other people. Not everyone has the ability to achieve 100. Not everyone is aiming for 100. I don’t know. And being compared to so-called smarter kids makes me feel like I’m not as smart.

Interviewer: What is the relationship like, then, between the student populations?

Marysa: Everyone hates the Master’s kids.

Interviewer: What does that look like?

Marysa: I don’t know. It’s like, say, for example, there is an announcement for all the Master’s kids to bring in their trip forms for Wonderland, and everyone groans and are annoyed by the fact that they get special treatment. Or, even when we have assemblies, the administration asks us what we want, and we’re like, we want more trips, and they say they don’t have money, but they have money so that the Master’s kids can do it, so, I don’t know.

Interviewer: Are the trips funded by the schools?

Marysa: Yes.

Interviewer: And there’s a racial makeup of these students?

Marysa: They’re mostly Asian, white kids, and maybe a few Brown kids. There’s not a single Black person that I’ve seen in Master’s, in my grade at least.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on that?
Marysa: I don’t really—it makes it seem like they’re the ones who are academically up there, and the rest of us aren’t, race-wise.

Unlike Telina’s experience in French immersion, the opportunity for which is extended face-to-face to all students in the board, the Master’s program, as an effect of streaming, segregates students by race; for Marysa, this program codes success as racial: “You can do X if you be like this person,” and “It makes it seem like they’re the ones who are academically up there, and the rest of us aren’t, race-wise.” Race-wise is precisely the point at which e-learning reaches its limits because, as I will show in the next section, the middle-class is differentially inflected by race and racism. Yes, Marysa gained access to the benefits of learning online, but she had to reject the opportunity of leveraging the Master’s program because of racial exclusion. Yes, Marysa took advantage of “optional attendance” in the TDSB and in so doing exercised “school choice,” but only as a means of avoiding the racial stigma of her home school, which is also situated in an area that, like Telina, experiences similar media misrepresentations.

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and Gillian Parekh (2017) are two scholars of urban educational inequality whose research has concentrated on the inequities produced by specialized programming in the TDSB despite progressive efforts to integrate students. This research supports reports released by the TDSB, which point to the ways in which all specialized programming produces homogeneous groups (Brown 2008a, 2008b; Brown and Parekh 2010, 2013; Brown and Sinay 2008; Parekh 2013). In a 2017 article on new forms of segregation in Canadian schools, Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh describe the demographic trend “exploring who is often considered ‘able’ and who is perceived to be ‘less able’ continue to be largely reflective of historical patterns of inequality along lines of gender, racial and class divisions” (813–814). As Marysa recounts, this starkly distinguishes between Black and white students, resulting in feelings of exclusion, which is less entrenched in discourses of opportunity than belonging. Her decision not to join the program is supplemented by reflections on the ways Master’s students are treated, the division the program creates between students, and the discourses of ability it perpetuates. She cites examples of how students in the program receive preferential treatment and the everyday microaggressions that are institutional, largely based in biases that are racial and cultural. What success looks like, as Gaztambide-Fernández and Parekh (2017) explain, is linked to racial and classed perceptions of what it means to be talented. This is exemplified in
Marysa’s comment: “Not everyone has the ability to achieve 100. Not everyone is aiming for 100. . . . And being compared to so-called smarter kids makes me feel like I’m not as smart.”

However, Marysa finds little comfort in the prospect of attending her first program choice. A few months after our first interview, we talk about her visit to McMaster University, where she experienced racial exclusion.

Marysa: [Sighs] I went [to visit McMaster]. When I initially went room hunting with my mom and my sisters, I swear, we were there for a good five, six hours, and I only saw one Black person. And everyone else was white, and they were giving us looks like they’ve never seen a Black person before, and that honestly worries me, ’cause, I don’t know. Sometimes I feel kind of iffy going to certain places because I’m Black. For example, I love Korean culture, and I love Korean food, but if I want to go downtown to Korea town, and I walk into a restaurant alone, and it’s all Asians, I feel kind of outcasted.

Interviewer: I hear you.

Marysa: I’m kind of iffy going to McMaster. Most of the people I saw there were white or brown, maybe one or two Black people. It worries me.

In our final interview, I discover Marysa has rejected her offer for McMaster and that she will be attending Ryerson while living at home. I asked what had happened, and she explained that her boyfriend, who also attended McMaster, broke up with her and that her life was going downhill. Soon after, she described an open house event in which she was one of only two Black people. The confluence between intimacy, race, and education was made clear when she explained the impact of the breakup on her well-being and the face-to-face conversations that subsequently took place with her teachers, who either gave her what she felt was stock love advice or accommodations on her final evaluation. One of the variables in her breakup was that his mother did not want to meet her:

Marysa: It’s the fact that I’m Black. When he brought his other girlfriends, they were white, and she was more accepting, so yeah.

Interviewer: So his mom is . . . would you use the word racist?

Marysa: Yeah.

Interviewer: How do you navigate that?

Marysa: It’s not the first time, to be honest. But I was trying to stay positive because my boyfriend is like, so long as I’m a good person, then his mom will eventually come to
accept me for who I am. Because of that, the thought of meeting his mom would scare me. I don’t want to make a bad impression. In the end, I never met her. But one time, his mom mentioned that she wanted him to bring [fantasy] grandkids to her in the future so she can teach them their [Chinese] language and culture.

Unlike Justice and Telina, who did not discuss narratives of romantic intimacy in their experiences of schooling, Marysa’s navigation of anti-Black racism connected her experiences outside the school with those inside the school, where de facto racism in schooling is established as a structural disadvantage. Her refusal to attend McMaster seems in some ways reminiscent of her description of refusing to join the Master’s program; in both programs, she described the ways in which her Blackness stood out and was disciplined simply by being visible. Her consideration of McMaster was also connected to her romantic partnership, in which she experienced anti-Black racism, excluding her from imagining future cohesion that accompanies many narratives of early-stage relationships. For marginalized students in particular, these lessons in difference inform a worldview that connects their view of schooling, friendship, and romantic partnership with institutions that limit their mobility, both in the sense of social mobility, through which economic opportunity is made, as well as cultural mobility, through which belonging and freedom are fashioned. It also limits the practice of Blackness to a finite and narrow register.

Like Telina and Marysa, Justice was a student who attended a semestered high school with one of the highest rankings in the city. She was taking *NDW4ME: Indigenous Peoples: Issues in a Global Context* so it would count toward her top 6, which are comprised of university-level (U level) and mixed-level (M level) courses. While she found e-learning to be a lot of task-based work, being online provided her with a reprieve from what she describes as a reality of disappointing experiences in high school preceded by an even more difficult experience in middle school upon immigrating to Canada from the United Kingdom. These experiences were centred on her emerging Black identity, which, like all participants, was neither cohesive nor easy to articulate. While e-learning may seem unconnected to identity formation, each student described their relationship to learning online as one that is conditioned by their experiences learning in their home school. The contradictions between the two, which often emerge while students are unpacking the context of anti-Black racism animating their emotional life, is made evident in the following exchange with Justice during our first interview:
Interviewer: You have a situation like e-learning, and the experience of e-learning being one in which its very task-driven—if I’m paraphrasing you correctly.

Justice: You’re on point.

Interviewer: So that it’s task-oriented and feels like homework all the time, and not the kind of engagement in the face-to-face classroom where there’s a connection to lived experience, but then we have this disjuncture: This experience in high school, where you’re using language to talk about your understanding of learning as being one where you are exchanging with people in real time, whether it’s your teacher and students . . . but you’re also at home, in what you call your ideal work environment, though the extent to that is unclear because you talk about the tensions in your home between the you that you are living and the you that your parents want to see, and those things exist in the same house. So what would be an ideal situation? Does that make sense?

Justice: I sound like a hypocrite.

Interviewer: Well, I don’t know if I mean this about you, but more the conditions that exist to give you a particular learning experience, so what I’m trying to think about is what kind of conditions could exist that would make you feel like you were learning, because I sense you’re not interpreting learning as just receiving information.

Justice: That’s correct. And that’s not good. Because I need to be—I need to physically understand it.

Interviewer: And it’s something more, right? It’s about us trying to reconcile—there is no coherent experience . . . or life maybe is hypocrisy, right? And that’s okay. But I’m trying to understand what that reconciliation might look like. I hope that makes sense.

Justice: Everything I’m saying, you’re saying it again for me. It’s starting to make sense in my head.

I chose to represent this moment in this study because, on one hand, it methodologically illustrates the work of co-constructing meaning with participants. Although Justice affirmed the narrative or interpretation of her story, sometimes students would reject or reframe what I thought I heard. The ability to do this, I would argue, illustrates competency in academic English, for which middle-class students are often most prepared. In this case, I was trying to synthesize a number of trajectories: the experience of learning online as task-based; what an ideal learning environment might look like; the comfort of learning at home; and how learning is impeded by contradictions within identity (“you” outside vs. inside the home) as well as by the impact of anti-Black racism, which preceded this statement from Justice:
Obviously, this kind of area, when you came here, you must have seen that it’s one type of race. Obviously. And at first, I didn’t see colour whatsoever. I thought, it doesn’t even matter, you can be whoever you want to be, not just because of your skin colour, it doesn’t matter. But when I was getting a bit older, down to my hair, my clothes, even the way I talk—though British accents are cool—I felt different in every aspect. I never felt like I could fit in. I still don’t feel like I fit in. And that’s really a shame because school should be a place where it shouldn’t matter if different kids are from different places, we should all be able to live together. Honestly, this year, I’m seeing more kids of my colour come into grade 9, and I was thinking, why couldn’t I be in that generation? Why did I have to come in the one where I’m one of two Black girls in my school?

While I did not interrogate her home life, Justice lives in one of the more prestigious areas—whiter and wealthier—parts of the city. She illustrates the acute intersection between class privilege and racism in which perceptions of Black students, through social and cultural coding of difference, compromise Justice’s sense of belonging and class identity (if such an identity is to assume entitlement). “Obviously,” she states. “Obviously,” referencing my brief visit to collect her consent form (illustrating, also, the importance of that face-to-face contact, which has now become a point of reference). It’s as if to ask, “You see it, don’t you? I’m Black.” I remember, in moments like this, how important it is for students to feel heard and to feel seen, not only in the diversity of selves that they occupy, but also as racialized. If students are forced to see colour, educators must be forced to as well.

4.6 Unfixing race from the logics of deficiency

Research on the experiences of Black middle-class students are nascent (see Rollock et al. 2015 for one of the first full-length studies and Wallace 2018 for an overview), which is significant because Black middle-class students claimed class through occupational or educational histories, expressed through middle-class cultural competencies derived from parentage. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) expansion on forms of capital, this included high academic achievement on terms that were institutionally recognized; participation in extracurricular activities and enrolment in specialized programming, through which they also accrued social capital; and mastery, relative to their education, in dominant English, through which students reflected and conducted analyses of their own experiences in a language that was understood to me, the interviewer. What makes the experiences of Black students so distinct from their white and often
other racialized peers is the role of racism in discourses of advantage, within which e-learning circulates.

In *The Colour of Class: The Educational Strategies of Black Middle Classes*, Nicola Rollock, David Gillborn, Carol Vincent, and Stephen J. Ball (2015) argue that it is only within the “broader historical context of Black people in the U.K.” that we can understand the ways that advantage, as it is experienced by the middle-class, is “differentially inflected by race and racism.” (3). Particularly in the context of post-racial discourses, which I have cited early in this chapter,

> It is important to note that the racism with which the Black middle classes have to contend is nuanced, subtle, often covert. It is rarely the explicit, crude racism of far-right extremist groups. This quiet racism presents via ‘coded signifiers’ (Hylton 2009: 14) and racial micro-aggressions (Rollock 2012; Solorzano et al. 2000; Sue et al. 2008). It is characterised within our research by White people’s polite dismissal of the possibility that Black families can be intelligent, knowledgeable or achieve at the highest levels, by a refusal to treat Black families as equal or to regard their concerns as legitimate. Race is seldom explicitly named but the assumptions, beliefs and stereotypes upon which such interactions are based betray an underlying belief in racial difference. Black middle-class families are alert to the probability of such practices by Whites and work in careful and often highly strategic ways to avoid or minimise their engagement with these acts and to seek successful educational returns for their children. (Rollock et al. 2015, 171)

While my study is situated in Ontario, Canada, and does not interrogate the specificity of experience in Black middle-class families, I centre the Black middle-class in my analysis not only because of the networks and connectedness of Black (particularly Jamaican) experience as diaspora, but also because cultural capital has largely been deployed as always already fixed as white. Instead, I follow Derron Wallace (2018), for whom wealth is accumulated not exclusively through cultural capital but also in the “the lack of injustices endured through a racialised class determinism that affiliates Blacks and ethnic minorities with cultural and economic poverty and whiteness with cultural visibility and social class diversity” (480).

Wallace (2018) develops the concept of class imaging to describe the class perceptions of disadvantage that are associated with Black identities. What differentiates class imaging from racism as a term is that it captures the “quiet racism” and “coded signifiers” referenced by Gillborn, Vincent, and Ball (2015) and it foregrounds the ‘race’ of class, without displacing class identity out of the framework of race, and vice versa. In other words, class imaging offers a more
process focused means of reading identity, especially at the intersection of class and race, than does racism alone. The concept provides explanatory language for the experiences shared by Telina, Marysa, and Justice, all of whom benefited in some respects from access to cultural capital, as illustrated in the previous section.

In what remains, I will review two ways that race and racism impact the experience of advantage for Telina by expanding on the class imaging she had to contend with within the school and the broader social environment, a reality schools are not only ill-prepared to respond to but also complicit in. Alongside this, I outline strategies she drew on to respond to the realities that compromise learning for Black students, including turning to online resources for a legitimate fear of misrepresentation through class imaging. I then turn to Justice’s engagement with an online discussion forum on racism and contrast her experience with racism in her face-to-face environment, which includes strategies for surviving difference, such as physically altering one’s presentation. I conclude with an interview with Justice’s mom, Erica, who is alert to the “differences” her daughter encounters as a Black student in a white community.

4.6.1 Telina: A counter-education

Telina lives in Toronto’s former Ward 38, a demographic, according to the 2016 national census, with approximately 68,000 residents, 78 percent of whom are visible minorities. The average income is $33,000 less than Toronto’s average, and only half of residents have a postsecondary education. This is largely because the majority of immigrants here arrived after 1990 and are born outside of Canada; Jamaicans comprise 2 percent of this population, although the population of second-generation Jamaicans is significantly higher, with many first-generation immigrants arriving under special merit provisions and family reunification programs in the 1960s. Immigration of Caribbean populations, broadly, goes back to the early 1900s, to which we can trace the discourse and practice of anti-Blackness as economic subjugation, as social segregation, and through the practice of demographic selection, within racial rubrics (see Calliste

61 As of fall 2018, these wards have been redrawn. This refers to 2017 figures.
62 The average in Toronto according to Statistics Canada, 2011, is 36.8 percent
1993). This profile represents a coherent narrative, which is important for tracing systemic patterns of identity.

Where Telina lives comprises a significant part of her identity not only because of its ethno-racial composition but also because of the effect that class imaging—as a process that limits the definition of blackness—has had on her racial consciousness. During our interviews, Telina describes how racial consciousness is suppressed at school, and she outlines her response to this limitation: turning online, specifically to the microblogging and social networking website Tumblr, provided a counter-education with which she supplemented formal schooling. The following part of our interview emerges at a point of transition in our conversation in which we consider how experiences in school affect who we are and who we become. Approximately fifty minutes into our first interview, Telina talks about struggling with self-identity because she is unable to reconcile all the information that crosses her path. I ask her to cite an example, so she talks about her interest in social justice, which emerged after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Unable to understand why everyone was “making such a big deal about it,” Telina proceeded to open a Tumblr account, where she “fell on the social justice side” of the website:

And I just remember when the Michael Brown shooting happened, and I saw what I saw on Tumblr, I was like, wow, this makes a lot of sense. And me, being a Black girl, I relate to this on more than just—I saw it on the news, but I feel it because that could happen to my brother or my dad or my cousin at any time, and I was like, that’s so wrong. So I got into reading about racism and sexism and ableism and all the isms, basically, and I read more and more about it. And yeah, ever since that day, I was like, this stuff this needs to change.

“Ever since that day” marks a point in Telina’s education that interpolated her into the diaspora, the networks and connectedness through which her identity is shaped as a “Black girl,” but not only as a Black girl who “feels it” but also as one whose identity is connected to her Black community—her brother, dad, and cousin, who at any time could become Michael Brown. This moment, which incites Telina to proclaim, “this stuff needs to change,” captures the motivation, need, and movement for Black lives illustrating the ways in which education must broaden its scope to address the everyday lives of students who are trying to integrate abstracted information they receive from school with experiences outside school that inform their lived realities. Further, Telina’s use of technology to learn about the “social justice side” of things contrasts
with her use of e-learning to take English, which she describes as a utility, “as long as you’re meeting all the deadlines,” and approaches with ambivalence: “I don’t particularly like it or dislike it.”

Interested in how she experienced education beyond formal schooling, I ask her to expand on how learning took place on Tumblr.

Telina: When I was thirteen, I didn’t know any of that stuff. I always thought about the news as being the source of all the information that you’d ever need to know, and it really surprised me when I read that people are misrepresented in the news, and I thought that was interesting.

I don’t watch the news, but I look at how it portrays some things, and one thing that really hit me in my life was the area I live—I live in [this neighbourhood], and people tend to say [this neighbourhood] is a ghetto area, and I remember I Googled [the neighbourhood] for fun one day, and someone wrote that whenever there’s a shooting or a stabbing, they name the nearest intersection, but if something happens in [this neighbourhood] they say it happens in [this neighbourhood], not the intersection. That’s really terrible. When I tell people I’m from [this neighbourhood], they’re like, “Ooh! That’s terrible.” When I’m out with my friends, I tell them to say we’re from downtown.

The absenting of blackness from national discourse in which Jamaicans were discursively othered and the presence of blackness through media representation as “misrepresented” and “ghetto” countered Telina’s lived experience, from which she has situated knowledge of her community. She provides insight into the resistance, the inside joke, “our own joke”: “Yeah, we’re from [this neighbourhood], we can beat you up if we wanted to. Yeah, we’re from [this neighbourhood], we can do anything.” As her identification with Jamaica demonstrates, “blackness in Canada is situated on a continuum that runs from the invisible to the hyper-visible” (Walcott 2003, 44).

For Telina, despite attending the French immersion program where she experienced considerable belonging, the neighbourhood within which she is embedded in Toronto’s (former) Ward 38 shaped her identity, particularly as a response to the misrepresentation of her neighbourhood that informed class imaging, which not only takes place in the context of news media but also her peer groups.

Interviewer: Do you think being from [this neighbourhood] is part of your identity?
Telina: For sure. Growing up, my family is Jamaican, and a lot of my friends are of a Jamaican background, so I grew up around other Jamaicans, and Caribbean people in general, my entire life. I didn’t have that many white friends. The only friends I had were people of colour. And we all came from [this neighbourhood], and we all knew how people viewed [this neighbourhood], and I guess we kind of accepted it for ourselves. We just made it into our own joke: ‘Yeah, we’re from [this neighbourhood], we can beat you up if we wanted to. Yeah, we’re from [this neighbourhood], we can do anything.’ But growing up in middle school, people would call me Oreo because they’re like, she’s Black on the outside and white on the inside, and I’m like, what does that mean? I remember one day, I used a really big word I guess, and someone’s like, “Oh, she’s so white, look at her vocabulary, it’s so good.” And I’m like, what does that mean? . . . Then after a while, I got really sad, because apparently I’m not Black and that creates an identity conflict, so I need to figure this out, and [after] graduating from middle school and going into high school, I’m like, I am Black, I know I’m Black. Just because I have a good vocabulary doesn’t mean I’m white. Black people can be smart too. And I think that had a big influence on the person I am today because now, I tend not to—I’m very apathetic, I think. I’m like, I don’t see the purpose of caring about something if you can’t do anything about it.

In this statement, which is rich with complexity, Telina is negotiating her identity as Jamaican as it extends across the Caribbean more broadly, which is in conflict with the domination of class imaging that her friends and family had come to accept. This tension, which is best expressed in the rejection she experienced in middle school, which is so ubiquitous that it is almost a rite of passage for many young Black women, emerges as a double consciousness (Du Bois and Marable 2004 [1903])—not white enough, not Black enough.63 Yet her agency is exerted in rejecting this false choice upon which class imaging depends: “I am Black, I know I’m Black.” Black, as she describes it, is a political consciousness and a site to direct her learning, yet, cognizant of the class imaging that organizes teachers’ perceptions, Telina doesn’t want conversations about social justice brought into schools:

63 While double consciousness is not a focus of this dissertation, it is important to note that all three students expressed, at some point, conflicts between their identities as Black and their reception as white, which is a result of class imaging, within which blackness is defined through discourses of deficiency. For instance, I ask Marysa at one point in our interview, “What is your fear about being a young Black woman in a space where there isn’t diversity?” She responds, “I’m just worried they won’t take me seriously. I think they’ll be blinded by my skin colour and have those automatic stereotypes when they approach me. I don’t want to be judged until you give me a chance to show you who I really am. I’m not just some hoordrat, as some people may say. To be honest, my mom called me a white-wash because of the way I—well, actually, she called me in between a white woman and an Asian woman because of my obsession with K-Pop and Asian culture and also the food I cook because I can’t cook Jamaican food at all.”
Telina: It’s really important to me, but I feel like I’d rather not talk about it in educational settings. I wouldn’t want a teacher teaching me about it or writing an exam about it, because I know each teacher teaches differently, and even though I know teaching is supposed to be objective, at times it will include a teacher’s opinion. I don’t want to write an exam based on a teacher’s opinion about something I care about so strongly.

Interviewer: Do you find that when you write exams, you’re formulating it based on the teacher’s perception?

Telina: Oh, yes. Some teachers want you to write an essay like this, others like that. And you get confused about what’s right and wrong.

Interviewer: So you don’t want to be evaluated for things you’re passionate about.

Telina: I don’t mind debating it, but if I have to change what I believe just to get a good grade . . . I don’t want to do that.

Telina describes the impact of a teacher’s opinion getting in the way of something she strongly cares about as well as the ways that “getting the grade” constitutes a barrier to accessing conversations about social justice, which she fears will limit her speech and her curiosity about events that impact her sense of self as Black and the relationship of this impact on her understanding of others. This critique takes place along a long line of disappointments Telina experienced in her teachers, who have not provided sufficient support or seemed to care about her learning. She positions this in the context of stigma, which she previously referenced as having had an impact on her identity:

Interviewer: Can you talk more about your school? You’ve referenced it a couple of times. Can you talk about your relationship to it?

Telina: My school is, socially speaking, quote unquote, ranked not the best because, even before I got to my school, when I told them I go to [X] school, they’re like, “Oh, that sucks for you.” And I’m like, “Why?” And they tell me all these things that happened. A fire in the school, bomb threats, stabbings, a lot of things happen there. In this area there’s a lot of crime that seems to happen. Apparently. The fact that people consider my school, quote unquote, ghetto, no one really likes it. And with me, I don’t see a problem with the school itself, it’s just the people in it. Especially teachers. I don’t know all the teachers in my school, but the ones I have spoken to, a lot of them don’t care about anything except getting through their day. I can’t blame them because I’m sure being a teacher is very stressful, but at the end of the day, if you don’t care about your students, they’re not going to care about the work that you’re giving them or school in general. I think that’s what makes students at this school so opposed to learning and listening in the class. And I think also the status the school has. Even grade 9s, before they got here, didn’t want to come. It’s not necessarily true. The school does have its bad aspects, but at
the end of the day, it’s still a school, people still go to university, we still graduate. I know it’s not the best school.

Interviewer: You talk about how your school is perceived and how you’ve experienced it. What’s your feeling about it?

Telina: That’s actually kind of funny. One of my best friends, her mom, she and myself went to speak at an elementary school about how this school isn’t a bad place because so many people hear that it’s bad that they need speakers from the school to come in and say “Hey, this school isn’t so bad.” When she told me, I was like, I don’t want to lie to these children, they don’t deserve that. And it’s not that my school is terrible. But we—our textbooks, most of them in alright condition, but a lot are destroyed, and there’s graffiti with terrible stuff in them. And it’s not good for people to look at. And so many students skip classes, and teachers—and this is what bothers me the most—teachers don’t care at all. If students are fighting, teachers just walk right past the fight and go in their car and go home. They really do not care at all. So my high school experience hasn’t been terrible, but if I had the choice, I wouldn’t come back. I can’t say I enjoyed it.

Telina contrasts the racism she experienced at her home school, which circulates as a “bad place” with “bad students” and teachers who don’t care, with her teachers online:

Interviewer: So, this online course is your second one . . . your teachers are nicer online?

Telina: When you ask them a question, they’re always speaking through email, so you can’t hear their tone of voice, but I just feel like they’re not as condescending, for lack of a better word, they’re not as mean. When you ask them something, they actually answer you. And they don’t try to make you feel bad about asking the question. Especially this year with [X], I always have questions. I was afraid to ask previous teachers questions, but this time, I know for sure I can ask him any kind of questions, and I think they’re dumb, and he’s like “No, they’re not dumb, and I’m going to post it so others can see the question, too.” And I was like “Oh wow, I felt so unafraid.”

Interviewer: I’m sorry you’re not experiencing that in your day school.

Telina: You kind of get used to it. I just need to graduate and get out.

While Telina’s interview does not represent the sum of student experience in the school board, it does point to the effect teachers have on the learning of students, particularly Black students, who already expend a disproportionate amount of energy resisting class imaging. It is clear that, given Telina’s mistrust of teachers, she prefers accessing information that impacts her learning—information that represents the Black Lives Matters movement—on social media more than she does through school; though, if school as a microcosm of social life isn’t the place to have
conversations about what takes place outside its walls, where and when (and under what conditions) is the right place and time?

Teachers shape curriculum, and they model responses to and perpetuate injustices in the classroom. While my research does not take up the question of teacher training or curriculum development, educational researcher Murat Öztok (2013) examines the ways that the online learning environment itself can produce inequitable learning conditions, “when the context requires certain individuals to assimilate mainstream beliefs and values at the expense of their own identities” (iii). For Öztok, learning shapes subjectivities by mediating the personal and cultural as a process of education. Inequitable learning conditions, he argues, occur when groups of people compromise or are forced to forgo the development of their subjectivities to demonstrate their knowledge. With e-learning, knowledge is demonstrated textually, for the most part, and is reinforced through excessive text-based material and static curriculum, the effects of which compound the experience of blackness as an expression that is perceived through whiteness, which always already assumes whiteness as a standard against which language is measured.

4.6.2 Justice: Suppressing race

The irony of learning online is perhaps best exemplified in the offering of Indigenous Peoples: Issues in a Global Context, for which all coursework takes place without contact with the land or water and at a scale that elides the potential for depth in local contexts. For students’ final term assignment, the teacher for the course required them to post a summary of their issue analysis project and lead a discussion on their topic of choice; for the first time, the discussion would be evaluated for learning categories (e.g., application, thinking, and inquiry) rather than just completion. While most forums in this course averaged 25 threads and approximately 60 posts, this forum attracted 19 threads and 424 posts, making it the most lively discussion of the semester. Topics that garnered the highest number of views were “Poverty in North America” at 133 views, followed by “Natural Resource Exploitation in South America,” at 106 views, posted by a participant, Erin, and “Clean Water in North America,” posted by another participant, Justice. Justice also engaged in the greatest number of topics, having read 417 (almost twice the average of her peers) and replied to 38 posts. Two topics on race in Australia and North America
attracted 67 and 54 views, respectively. Leaders of the discussions asked students to prioritize which forms of discrimination needed the greatest action and awareness, and another asked what students can do to improve the issue for the next generation. These are heavy, complex questions, but the fact that the course is hosted online precludes the teacher from participating because the labour of responding to individual posts is disproportionately heavier than the work of facilitating face-to-face dialogue as a whole group.

I observed exchanges between students, paying particular attention to two topics on racism because anti-Black racism in particular has taken up a considerable space during my interviews with participants. Justice kicks off the first set of responses in this discussion on racism in Australia, calling out assumptions that cast characters as one-dimensional—either racist or not—and the importance of going beyond promotional videos that try to raise awareness about racism to advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous culture in everyday life. In another topic, Justice highlights the role of learning institutions in prioritizing Indigenous perspectives, citing the importance of historical context in addressing not only racism but also the effect racism has on the alleviation of poverty and access to employment and health care. In other words, she argues that asking which spaces of discrimination we ought to prioritize in our response (which was the discussion question) misrepresents the way that racism transcends any one space; it underlies the production of space itself.

Justice may not identify as Black online—through her avatar, her response to peers, or in her introductory post on the topic of “Getting to Know Me,” (Figure 4.1)—but Justice’s experience with anti-Black racism in schooling has inevitably shaped her insight into class imaging (which casts characters as one-dimensional) and her identity, which in turn shapes her responses to content online as well as her orientation to e-learning, which emerges from her experiences in school offline.
Unlike Telina, Justice attends one of the highest-ranking schools in the city, yet, despite having access to a wealth of cultural capital and earning exceptional grades, she expressed deep mental anguish as a result of racial exclusion in a school composed predominantly of white and East Asian students. This anguish is directly a result of lacking access to Black communities, which, as noted above, she explicitly references in looking back at her schooling experience: “Honestly, this year, I’m seeing more kids of my colour come into grade 9, and I was thinking, why couldn’t I be in that generation? Why did I have to come in the one where I’m one of two black girls in my school?”

The isolation Justice expresses as a result of the differential experience of race and racism is acutely reflected in a simultaneous turning away from and toward embodiment. For instance, she expresses a turn toward online spaces to “feel like a different person” and to escape reality:

I like to just go onto different types of apps to get away from how I am now. I think when I’m also online, I feel like a different person because, compared to my reality, I’m not a scary or antisocial girl. I don’t have to worry about my parents. I can just go online, have fun, and escape what I have.

When Justice attempts to get away from “how she is,” she precedes by reflecting on losing friendships and shores up stereotypes of the angry Black woman by relating instances in which she was told she looked “scary.” Justice expands on the mental space her friendships take up: “I’ve just kind of given up on it. I just stick with the people I know now. That’s it.”
that her family is worried about her social life and don’t think she can make it in university if she lives by herself because she’s “that anti-social.” The effect of being Black in a school where blackness is not represented compels her to deny her difference in order to prioritize belonging:

I used to love having my hair in braids and cornrows, and then I wanted to have hair like the other girls, so I had it straightened, and I still have it straightened. I just really tried to get away from blackness. I know there’s a term for that, for Black people like that: coconut. And that’s a really horrible term, but that’s probably what I am because I didn’t want to feel Black whatsoever. It’s really horrible because I should be proud of who I am, I should be proud of my heritage, but I’ve never felt that. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel that. My dad says when I go to university, it will be better. There will be more people like me, but I honestly can’t think of that for the moment, because they also said that when I got to high school and it didn’t happen. I’m trying not to raise my expectations again.

Unlike Telina, who was surrounded by Black family and friends and who had a Black Student’s Association within which she could merge her social and academic life, Justice, who also contends with double consciousness, is not able to access the representation and resources to feel proud about her heritage; blackness, here, becomes a wish that is future-oriented: “When I go to university, it will be better.” This is a wish conditioned by fear, a real object informed by her schooling experience, of which e-learning is a part.

Home, like school, is an environment where she feels unable to fully express herself. As technology and society specialist Sherry Turkle (2011) explains, in perhaps too determinist of terms, our dependence on technology is making us alone together. Although Turkle, who is also trained as a psychologist, does not account for histories of disenfranchisement that make it difficult to be “alone,” she does consider how people turn to technology to manage disappointment, vulnerability, and lack of control. What elides scrutiny, however, are systems that perpetually disappoint, leave populations vulnerable, and exacerbate histories of control over bodies, which have produced the conditions within which people turn to technology. She writes, “But if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family and friends—sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way. And with performance can come disorientation” (12).
Which fashion does she speak of? Which racial and cultural imagination fashions leisure in terms of playing Scrabble and family bonding over movies? And what of the disorientation of anti-Black racism, which leads students like Justice to turn to online spaces to turn away from harm? Justice explains that she’s never been pointed out as Black, but it’s not the individual act of racism that is the cause of harm here; instead, it is the structure of schooling, segregating students by their neighbourhood, which is further segregated by class and race, that produces harm for Justice. I asked how she learns about being Black in Canada:

Justice: In terms of Canada, even now, whenever we talk about Black experiences, and slavery and everything, obviously, we have to talk about that. I remember kids always looking at me; I know they’re just curious, I just felt like a fish out of water. I felt physically, emotionally, mentally, different. I didn’t think I belonged in that school. I remember I wanted to run out of class, I didn’t want to learn about it, I didn’t care about Black people. I was just thinking, why do I have to be Black? I just want to fit in. I don’t want to talk about this at all. So when they had announcements [about Black History Month] last year, I just tried to hide. I didn’t want to talk about it, and I shut it out completely. And I feel so embarrassed for thinking that because it basically means that I’m not even proud to be Black, and I feel like I should be, but I don’t think I had a chance to experience that. That’s why I go on social media, and I always try to follow Black people, just to see what I feel like I could have been, like, if maybe I was around more of my own people. And I know that’s a really bad thing. I think all of that together has made me the person I am today—to shut everything off, to get out of this place. It’s really horrible because I think high school is supposed to be a great experience; it’s supposed to be the place where kids can find themselves more and find who they are. I know it sounds really cheesy.

For Justice, online spaces are not just an escape, but unlike Turkle’s (2011) formulation, a space to be together, a space to learn about her identity, a space of belonging, and a space to experience embodiment otherwise. Rather than ask after technology as a monolith, one might pay attention to the specificity of its use, to the context of its misuse, and the conditions that produce feelings of exclusion and shame for students living online. This focus, I argue, would produce more useful information with which we can build better worlds offline.

4.7 Conclusion

I identified how diversity is often tokenized as a brand of cosmopolitanism, a value embedded in the city’s motto, against which we can measure the realities of living out one’s difference in the city. For Black residents in particular, daily life is ridden with explicit racism and class imaging
presented as coded signifiers and racial microaggressions aligning blackness with deficit. I focus on race because, if e-learning is promoted for its potential to level the playing field, and if the playing field one is trying to level is measured by access to class identity, what does this potential mean for Black middle-class students? Notwithstanding the failure of e-learning to provide equitable access across the board, those students taking courses in the minority of schools who participate in the program—Black students in particular—might be said to have gained the cultural capital with which to aspire to their career ambitions. However, as I showed, class is differentially experienced as racial for Telina, Marysa, and Justice, who have to contend with the effects of racial exclusion in their respective home schools. Whether one is enrolled in a more equitable program like French immersion, attending one’s school of choice (relatively determined), or attending one of the most highly ranked schools in the city, Black students are not experiencing learning like their white or other racialized peers. Many do not see themselves or the issues affecting their daily lives represented in online curriculum content, their experiences are often tokenized under the rubric of “Black history,” and their value is diminished by teachers and peers whose class perceptions limit the diverse expression of Black identities. I also showed the ways Telina, Marysa, and Justice exercise agency within a racist schooling system and pursue the cultural capital needed to move past their high school careers, which at times required the rejection of so-called opportunities to preserve their self-identity. Further, they draw on online resources independently to thrive as young Black women.

Following my interviews with Justice, I had an opportunity to interview her mother, Erica, who defined Justice’s experience in school as good: “she’s conscientious, she works hard, and as far as work goes, she’s fantastic.” I draw on this interview because of a subsequent “but,” which characterizes the schooling experience of many middle-class Black children: “But when it comes to actually going to that school, she’s not exactly happy with the way the school runs. In terms of the work, she’s happy.” When I asked about Erica’s experience with the school, she said she doesn’t interact with parents: “People around these neighbourhoods, they’re very picky, and they’re not used to people who don’t look like them, so they’re very insular in that sense.” Erica doesn’t mention it explicitly, but it is precisely in her description of Justice’s school and the demographic of the neighbourhood that the differential experience of class is expressed as embodied: “they’re not used to people who don’t look like them” describes a neighbourhood that
is resistant to shifts in the racial hierarchy, and this extends to Justice’s school, where students avoid integration. Her mother explains that Justice is hoping for more diversity when she goes to university: “We try to tell her, you know, at the end of the day, people are the way they are, you can’t change their mind—just try to identify people that are more like-minded.” Erica, like most parents, is providing Justice with assurances that change is possible, and it is on the horizon. The hope that Justice will experience identification with “people that are more like-minded,” speaks to the ways in which blackness, as much as it is experienced as embodied, is also a sense of “like-mindedness.” As a state of mind it is also a worldview and a resource for knowledge, which, like the provision of such courses within Indigenous studies, can’t be captured in the static, culturally embedded “hidden” curriculum that, online, renders difference datum.

Preliminary steps were complete: I had wrapped up recruitment, secured three classes for the first semester, and had access to course content. I proceeded with participant observation in the discussion forum for *ENG4U, Grade 12 English, University*, which was titled: “Getting to know you!” (Figure 5.1) The icon of two gender and racially neutral golden alien-like figures shaking hands through their respective screens, surrounded by a sea of virtual blue, dissolved all traces of difference.

![Introduce yourself!](image)

Post a brief biography about yourself, then read all posts to find 3 people with whom you have something in common and comment on their posts. Please use complete sentences to answer the following questions:

- Where were you born?
- What are your likes and dislikes?
- What are your goals, hopes or dreams?
- What is your favourite indoor/outdoor activity?
- If you could meet anyone, living or dead, who would you meet, and why?
- What inspired you to take an online course?
- What is your favourite novel or poem?
- Anything else we should know about you? A fun fact, or talent etc.

If you feel comfortable you may include a picture of yourself - school appropriate of course!

Looking forward to getting to know all of you!

Figure 5.1 “Getting to Know You!” topic description, ENG4U, Grade 12 English, University, hosted on Brightspace, licensed by the TDSB from the LMS provider D2L (formerly Desire2Learn) for CIS, Vietnam students.

While some introductions read as derivative, the posts gave me a better sense of the classroom community, even if students were performative. Most students were born and raised in Toronto, though a few were from China, Pakistan, India, and Uruguay. And whereas four students took e-learning because they wanted to avoid presentations, a number thought it would be easier and wanted to upgrade their marks, while a couple needed the course to free up time for organized activities like gymnastics and theatre. Only two chose it because it was their preferred modality.
As I started to move through each post, I noticed an unusual pattern in the birthplace of students:

Born in Seoul and having moved to Vietnam as a young child, their favourite activities are urban dancing and watching movies; once graduated, they will return to South Korea where they will pursue a career in the fashion industry: “I had to take online courses because it was the only choice to get an OSSD.”

Born North of Vietnam, they are seventeen years of age with a lot of struggles. They dream of eventually travelling to Europe, to leave everything behind and start again: “The reason why I took online courses is simply because our school does not offer regular classes for grade 12.”

Born and raised in Vietnam, they spend most of their free time playing video games. They describe themselves as indifferent and neutral about most things, except cockroaches: “I am taking an online course because my school doesn’t have in-class courses for grade 12.”

Born in Vietnam, they dream of studying abroad in Canada or Australia: “The inspiration to take e-learning is that I can stay in my hometown eating the foods I love, hanging out with friends, and spending time with my family.”

Born in Seoul, South Korea, they moved to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, at just six months of age. They don’t yet know what they’d like to pursue and often change their minds from psychiatry to law, to music therapy: “There was no inspiration that led me to take an online course. I am currently in Canadian International School in Vietnam, and our school is not a licenced/inspected school from the Ontario education department. Therefore, to earn an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, I had to take grade 12 in e-learning.

With thirty students enrolled in the class, there were clearly a disproportionate number born and/or living in Vietnam; they comprised a third of the class. These details posted in what was an otherwise unremarkable series of introductions not only revealed dreams situated in the “West,” a desire bound up in a global imaginary whose object is always beyond home, but also an entanglement with local students in Toronto, whose access to e-learning, as I have shown, is already inequitable. These posts revealed that, unlike students in Toronto who were limited to one e-learning section per semester, Grade 12 CIS, Vietnam students were taking a full course load of e-learning from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. As they explain, it was their “only choice” to earn an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), which provides each student the

64 I am using the gender-neutral pronoun they/their to reference students from CIS, Vietnam to protect their identities.
cultural capital—the accreditation—with which to apply internationally to schools that compete for students abroad.65

I have argued in preceding chapters that choice and access are conditioned by cultural competency, which is cultivated through parenting and leveraged to access resources, like e-learning, that help students more efficiently accumulate credits. In the TDSB, I demonstrated the ways that e-learning, as a technology that emerged under the banner “The Sky’s the Limit,” has intensified inequality both in the distribution of access and in its consumption by students, many of whom wanted to boost their grade or avoid the difficult work of learning face-to-face. This reality contradicts its promise, implicit in promotional material, to expand opportunities to students who most need it. Students with middle-class cultural competency, I argue, used technology to shore up their privilege. For the Black middle-class, in particular, I showed how privilege is differentially experienced because the “difficult work” of learning, much of which takes place in dialogue with curriculum content, is precluded by class imaging, or assumptions that render cultural capital synonymous with whiteness and blackness synonymous with a logic of material and cultural deficiency. Technology, as I show, can both obscure processes of racialization and, outside of e-learning, provide a space to explore and affirm Black identity.

In this chapter, I consider how technology is used by the TDSB to respond to austerity by exporting e-learning internationally. Consistent with Ontario’s neoliberal educational reforms, this provision of e-learning situates technology as a commodity that can be purchased abroad by families wealthy enough to afford an OSSD; divestment from public education subordinates democracy in the interest of economic growth locally while exacerbating competitive positioning globally. The effect, I will show, intensifies inequalities by directing public resources to private education for a minority of students Vietnam. This new spatial arrangement not only take up seats from TDSB students, but it also contributes to class disparities in Vietnam. If the global

65 Canada, in particular, has developed immigration and citizenship laws that tap into the resources of students abroad to forward the national interest and expand soft power: “For instance, education services are now Canada’s 11th largest export, and its single largest export to China. The spending of international students in Canada is greater than Canada’s export of unwrought aluminum, and even greater than the export value of helicopters, airplanes and spacecraft.” (Canada n.d., x)
increase in transnational education is any indication of future trends, this kind of private-public partnerships is poised to grow, especially since the current provincial government has announced deep cuts to public education, again. I use the term transnational education (TNE), as Phan Le-Ha does, to reference “any educational programs that enrol students from a country other than the one in which the awarding institution is based,” the modes of which include “distance education, partner-support delivery, and a branch campus” (73; ref. McBurnie and Ziguras 2006; Wilkins 2011).

The provision of e-learning falls for CIS, Vietnam under partner support delivery, the arrangement for which is only possible because TDSB licenses the learning management platform Brightspace for CIS, Vietnam students. Why Brightspace? The Master User Agreement between the Ministry of Education and the TDSB stipulates that Ministry-created content (uploaded to online classrooms) cannot be used for profit. Even though CIS, Vietnam students are technically Ontario students in the TDSB, they are not allowed to access Ministry produced content because they live outside the province. As a result, new content for Brightspace is created and taught by teachers, most of whom are informed of the arrangement only after they are hired to teach e-learning. These teachers are not technically allowed to use copyrighted material and sometimes have only days to prepare, which puts them in what some teachers characterize as an impossible situation. Later in this chapter, I will expand on this unique and problematic partnership between CIS, Vietnam and the TDSB, which facilitates the means to circumvent a moratorium on provincially accredited overseas schools.

5.1 Geographies of international education

This case study contributes to geographies of international education66 by showing, on one hand, how mobility conditions access (Findlay et al. 2012; Waters 2012) while, on the other hand, how

66 “The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) defines comprehensive international education as inbound, outbound, and internationalization at home. These activities consist of learning activities (curricular, cocurricular or extracurricular) which focus on other countries or cultures; and any educational activity (full degree or short term) which occurs outside the student’s home country” (CBIE 2015, 3). It is worth noting that in 2015, the CBIE signed a “memorandum of understanding” with Khoi Nguyen Education group (KNE)/Canadian International School System (CISS) Vietnam, which have invested over 800 million CAD into the Vietnamese education sector.
e-learning as an educational technology not only serves the economic interests of the host country but also presents an option through which students from sending countries can defer the often inevitable migration of studying abroad by taking their grade 12 year at home. TNE relies on “the disaggregation of various aspects of education delivery to an extent rarely seen elsewhere” (McBurnie and Ziguras 2006, 2). Technology is integral to understanding the “complex web of contractual relationships” (McBurnie and Ziguras 2006, 2) that comprise the partnership between TDSB and CIS, Vietnam and how this partnership marketizes schooling through a makeshift education abroad.

Within the context of higher education, where almost all scholarly attention has been paid, TNE is leading changes, the drivers of which are the global middle-class who have the resources to pay the exorbitant tuition fees charged (relative to what families with low or modest incomes can afford) to make such enterprises profitable. (McBurnie and Ziguras 20062). TNE 67 is therefore an attractive option to school campuses “affected by government funding reduction and financial shrinkage from other sources” (Le-Ha 2017, 20). Such arrangements reflect the neoliberalising of higher education where there is an increasing “reliance by universities on private and external sources of revenue” (Waters and Leung 2017, 234). This case study on CIS Vietnam suggests that secondary schools are embracing neoliberal restructuring consistent with post secondary institutions, where the marketization of educational services is precipitated by austerity and rationalized by discourses of progress, mobility, and economic advantage. In this case, the nationals of the host country (i.e., Vietnam) with resources to access private, exclusive schooling reproduce their social advantage through the acquisition of credentials managed by state actors abroad.

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The Ministry of Education uses the term “international schools” to refer to both international and offshore schools. There is variation in terminology between the nineteen schools, which are a mix of offshore and international schools (i.e., AFNORTH International School; Canadian College Italy; Caribbean International Academy). Since CIS, Vietnam is an unaccredited offshore school, I will be referring to it as an offshore school.

67 Anne Jelfs argues that “It is useful to make the distinction between transnational education and distance education. Distance education is the provision of courses and degrees at a distance, regardless of the students’ location.” (Jelfs 2008, 35). While I find both terms limiting, I wanted to point to debates taking place about the boundaries of each definition. When using each term, I will explain the context of reference.
Extending the critique of TNE to the context of secondary schools, whose social contract is predicated upon universal rather than selective access, is important but understudied, particularly as it is a process facilitated by technology. In the context of higher education, the procurement of educational technology has commodified academic labour and marketized learning (Hall 2013, 2015; see also Beckton 2012; Dumitirica 2017) and is playing an increasingly important role in the provision of TNE (see also Bannier 2016; Dunn and Wallace 2008; Ziguras 2001). These conversations are nascent in the K–12 sector, and the depth of scholarship “still relatively shallow,” especially outside of the United States (Arnesen et al. 2019). In what follows, I detail the policy contexts that allowed e-learning to extend its reach as a backdoor to official channels of offshore schooling as well as the impact of this reach on CIS students in Vietnam and teachers in the TDSB.

Technology has had a large part to play in the delivery of TNE, particularly in Australia, which pioneered TNE (Kosmützky and Putty 2016; Ziguras and McBurnie 2011; see also Naidoo 2009). However, TNE scholars have observed that the study of technology is typically limited to distance education, which is declining in Australia after decades of investment (Ziguras and McBurnie 2011). This narrow focus on fully online education conceals the demand for web supplemented or web dependent programming (OECD 2001, 7–8). E-learning falls under a model of web-dependent programming: TDSB students are limited to only one course per semester and are enrolled as full-time students in their home schools (which keeps attrition rates low) while students in CIS, Vietnam who are administratively registered in Toronto as international students and Vietnamese nationals in CIS, take their course load online from Toronto while physically present in CIS classrooms. These dual-registered students take a full grade 12 course load (four online courses per semester) and are scheduled to access these courses face-to-face with CIS teachers who are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT); however, the content is delivered and their work evaluated by an OCT-certified teacher in the TDSB. In this model, CIS teachers serve as supplementary face-to-face supports for students who are accessing their courses online.

I follow this brief overview on geographies of international education with the policy in Canada, in which international education was strategized and marketized as a national interest. How did
the provision of overseas schools by the state, both federally and provincially, comprise a uniquely Canadian strategy? I then turn to the history of education in Vietnam, focusing on its renovation and integration into a globalized educational system, the effect of which opened up Vietnam’s relationship to and influence from the West. These reforms made it possible for private schools like CIS, Vietnam to partner with the TDSB after its contract with the District School Board of Niagara expired. The intent of these partnerships was to circumvent the limitations of the province, which had placed a moratorium on overseas accreditation in 2005. Interviews with the team at central e-learning and staff at CIS, Vietnam illustrate the effects of this unique partnership on students as well as the fine line Ontario secondary teachers navigate in a makeshift education system. The inner workings of the program are, of course, not publicized in its entirety, and I am therefore only able to rely on consistencies in themes across a handful of interviews. Details about the historical moment within which CIS, Vietnam emerges in partnership with the TDSB are traced through news media, almost all of which were published in June 2014; the official website of the school; and public copies of presentations by administrators. I conclude with a turn toward the future of the partnership, particularly in light of reports that the school was procuring one hundred acres of land with proximity to Toronto to build a “school of the future.” Such claims raise the question about the future of a public education that is formally serving private interests and challenges the perception that technology will eradicate the space-time of schooling. On the contrary, I argue, private enterprise, as it is entrenched face-to-face, is not replaced by but rather is facilitated by technology. This follows predictions that transnational enrolments in international branch campuses will absorb considerable growth in the TNE sector (Ziguras and McBurnie 2011). The role technology will play in this growth is a question that should be considered in future scholarship.

68 In this chapter, I synthesize interviews with a teacher and administrator in CIS, Vietnam as well as three teachers and a number of administrators in the TDSB.
5.2 Fee for accreditation: A uniquely Canadian strategy

5.2.1 National and provincial international education strategies

On January 15, 2014, the then Federal Conservative government, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, launched a comprehensive International Education Strategy under its Global Markets Action Plan, which consisted not only of a plan to attract international students to Canada but also to build Canada’s capacity to export education abroad, particularly in the regions of Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and Vietnam. In a report released two years prior, in 2012, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade cited growing demand; positive economic growth; a growing, wealthy middle-class; and a government that has prioritized a skilled labour force, as reasons for promoting Canadian education in Vietnam. Indeed, they had identified 15 year olds as the fastest-growing market segment, particularly in Vietnam’s largest city, Ho Chi Minh (Canada 2012, 14). Rapid economic expansion, as this report makes plain, serves an urban middle-class rather than rural areas “where the majority of Vietnamese live” (Canada 2012, 36).

It is this urban middle-class that is targeted for import as international students through programs such as Student Direct Stream, which, as of 2018, fast-tracks eligible legal residents of China, India, the Philippines, or Vietnam for study permits in Canada. Such processes, while outside the purview of this study, capture a state effort to internationalize by positioning Canada as the destination of choice in a market saturated with competition between both host and sending countries. It is within this national policy context, which considers international education to be Canada’s competitive advantage and the “very heart of our current and future prosperity,” (Canada 2014, 4) that we can then turn to an alignment of strategies first at the provincial and then the local board level.

69 As of March 3, 2019, the website for Global Affairs Canada is still active, with targets markets, including Brazil. I was unable to locate a published rationale for targeting the Philippines. They are currently looking to expand into Kenya and Senegal to attract French-speaking students.

70 “The number of international students in Canada has increased by just under 120% between 2010 and 2017, and by 41% between 2015 and 2017 alone” (ICEF Monitor 2018).

71 As mentioned in the introduction, Canada is currently the only country in the world without a national education mandate; provinces are responsible for the provision of schooling, which can differ considerably.
In Ontario, then-Minister of Education, Liz Sandals, reported that almost half of international students who choose to study in Canada do so in the province, contributing over $4 billion to the economy and generating over 30,000 jobs (Ontario 2015). The Ministry considers it a point of pride that 126,000 students—representing half of all international student applicants to Canada—study from kindergarten to postsecondary in Ontario; of these, 19,000 students are in K–12 schools. The rationale, as outlined in their strategy for K–12 international education, is to prepare students for global citizenship: “It will reflect Canadian values of fairness and equity, embrace diversity, and promote Ontario’s education system at home and abroad” (Ontario 2015, 7). Yet, Ontario’s strategy is discursively bound up in the marketization of the sector: “Canada’s share of the global market has increased from 4.5 per cent to 5 per cent since 2004, while the United States has seen its share fall from 23 per cent to 16 per cent over the same period” (Ontario 2015, 10). Integration, in this equation, is a means to a greater share of the market, which, in a fascinating logic, positions public education as a competitive advantage:

Ontario’s share of international students has grown more slowly than might have been expected—from 38 per cent in 2000 to 43 per cent in 2013—in part because other provinces have expanded their international recruiting efforts. There is also increased competition from traditional sending countries such as China, Korea, and Vietnam, as their economic conditions improve and they seek to expand their own domestic and international education sectors. However, the availability of publicly funded education in both English and French continues to give Ontario a competitive advantage. Both the English and French-language systems allow international students to choose their language of instruction and develop their linguistic skills in English and in French. (Ontario 2015, 11)

An alignment with “Ontario’s vision for publicly funded education” does not reconcile the accumulation of private funds sourced from a growing urban middle-class in “emerging economies” fraught with local inequities abroad (Ontario 2015, 6–7). Instead, the Ministry offers a rather passive promotion of public education as a sphere of intercultural learning and well-being; the expansion of international students, they suggest, will enhance public confidence and extend the benefits of public education to students who are paying tuition for access (Ontario 2015, 6–7).
5.2.2 Exporting Ontario curriculum

In addition to this highly publicized population of international students who study in Ontario, there are the less-publicized nineteen overseas schools that offer credits toward the OSSD. In this model of TNE, the overseas school offers the Ontario Curriculum to students licenced by the Ministry of Education; approval is contingent on a formal inspection every two years by the Ministry to ensure the requirements for an OSSD are met. If the school passes Ministry inspection, the principal is authorized to grant credits toward the OSSD. The Ministry is not involved in the inspection of health, safety, or the supervision of students, nor does it oversee hiring practices or the day-to-day operation of the school. In the case of CIS, Vietnam, hiring practices are outsourced to the TDSB, with which they have a consultancy agreement.

For national students unwilling or unable to travel to the host country, offshore schooling offers a uniquely Canadian strategy for exporting education. The Asia Pacific Foundation, in conducting the first review of Canada’s K–12 international and offshore schools in the Asia-Pacific region, which comprises 77 percent of the potential market, cites the benefits of globalization as offering new “nodes of choice” for students abroad (see Ball 2003, 2012; Thiem 2009; Waters 2006, 2012 for critiques of school choice theory). Findings in the Foundation’s 2011 study reported that, alongside being the only government that “accredits, regulates, inspects and garners fees for the use of provincial curricula overseas . . . the student body engaged with Canadian curriculum overseas is larger than the majority of public school districts in British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba and over double the size of PEI’s total grade 1–12 cohort” (Cosco 3). The last ten years has seen an emerging infrastructure of consortiums, branding initiatives, trade missions, and explicit policy directions to take advantage of what Canada has identified as a priority market. The establishment of overseas schools abroad are one example of how these discourses are institutionalized; while not in the scope of this study, the movement of students from these schools to the broader postsecondary education market in Western countries—particularly the United States, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand—is connected to the network of discourses and institutional infrastructure that supports the extension of private capital into the public educational market.
One challenge with accrediting offshore and international schools is ensuring credits have integrity. On the heels of a second scandal in which then-Premier Kathleen Wynne was approached with petitions alleging corruption by two former students of Canadian International Academy in Hong Kong, the Ontario Citizen reported that penalties for offenses are no more than $500 in contexts where students in private offshore schools are paying between $5,000 and $20,000 in tuition fees (Helmer 2016). While Ontario was the first province in Canada to accredit overseas schools, a moratorium was placed by the province on the establishment of new schools in 2005. This contrasts with British Columbia (BC), which currently lists forty-three schools with publicly accessible inspection reports published on the ministry website. According to the Asia Pacific Foundation,

BC has developed a truly free-market model within the public K–12 structure, stripping levels of accountability for international education away from the government itself. School districts are not encouraged to share best practices nor offer support to one another in this type of engagement; cash-strapped school districts are instead competing for revenue. This has the potential to make BC’s public education vulnerable to the pressures and demands of the global education marketplace (Cosco, 10).

However, between the moratorium in Ontario and the free-market model, within which BC offshore schools are proliferating, is a case that illustrates how technology can be harnessed to work around not only the moratorium, which prevents offshore schools from granting students an OSSD, but the very category of “international student,” which one occupies when physically crossing their national border for the purpose of study. This is conceptually in tension with TNE because, in this instance, CIS, Vietnam students are enrolled as international students in a public school board and are assigned an Ontario Education Number.

The case of CIS, Vietnam, therefore, is unique. As a provincially unaccredited offshore school, its narrative, published on the official website, suggests otherwise:

Established and developed since 2009, CIS started its journey of education in cooperation with well-known and respected educational district school boards in Ontario: the District School Board of Niagara (DSBN) from 2009 to June 2014, and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) since July 2014. As the current largest school board in North America, TDSB has a long and profound experience in educating international students in the multicultural environment of Toronto—the center of commerce and finance in Canada. (CISS Vietnam, n.d.)
Under the heading “A World-Class Education at CIS-Vietnam,” its official website circulates the term “accreditation” as it applies to the hiring of leadership and trained academic staff and the provision of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program; however, students who do not qualify for an IB Diploma can choose to “finish Grade 12 at CIS in Vietnam to achieve the OSSD following a pathway to graduation approved by the Ontario Ministry of Education, or at a secondary school in a school board in Ontario” (CISS Vietnam, n.d.). This strategically worded and vague “pathway to graduation” in CIS, Vietnam requires students to take a full-credit load as e-learning credits from classrooms in Ontario, supervised by a teacher in Vietnam; otherwise, students must physically travel to the Toronto to complete their credits face-to-face with TDSB teachers in a local high school. In either case, students pay tuition both to the TDSB and CIS, Vietnam. This arrangement is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in Ontario.

5.3 Education reform in Vietnam

Vietnam is a country with a complex history of educational reform shaped by developmental history that intersects with Chinese occupation and continued cultural influence, forcible colonization by the French, invasion by Americans, and finally reunification in 1976, under which the Communist party changed Saigon’s name to Ho Chi Minh City. Today, Vietnam’s economic pathway, while “liberalizing” under a capitalist market economy like China’s, does not coincide with political reform (Gainsborough 2010). Educational restructuring took place under a system of doi moi, or “renovation,” which emerged in the late 1980s, when Communist state authority under the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union adopted economic reforms that regenerated their relationship to the West and the United States in particular. In 2001, Vietnam approved a ten-year master plan for educational development, an important element of which endorsed critical thinking and self-direction (Huong and Fry 2002, 137). Cultural reforms inevitably followed, particularly in education, where child-centered approaches to pedagogy positioned students as agents and active participants in their learning. Such approaches

72 This comes after an “American War,” whose by-product was “the destruction of most of any stability still existing in educational structures in both the North and South [Vietnam]” (Giacchino-Baker 2007, 171). In 1975 the two separate education systems in North and South Vietnam were unified under a national system (Duggan 2001, 194).
contrasted with the traditional upbringing and education of Vietnamese children, based on
Confucian ideals, in which

parents in Vietnam decide almost every aspect of their children’s lives and have a
significant influence on them . . . According to Confucianism a Vietnamese child is not
allowed to participate in adult talk and must be obedient. In schools children are expected
to offer their teachers the same respect as a ruler or father and criticising teachers or
parents is normally not accepted. (Phelps et al. 2012, 290)

Further, changes in education, while improving overall education attainment levels, are
disproportionately enjoyed by “influential and elite groups of the socialist era” (Korinek 2006,
55). As policy analyst Tuan D. Nguyen (2016) explains, based on more recent data, “In short, the
story of how educational attainment is associated with employment in urban Vietnam is not a
straightforward human capital story of education leading to employment, but rather, it depends
on the type of employment, the levels of education and the financial capital of one’s family”
(16–17).

One of the challenges of integrating into a globalized system within which the cultural primacy
of Western pedagogy set the standard of success was that Vietnamese education was under
pressure to transition from a system in which students were encouraged to conceptualize teachers
as authorities of knowledge rather than facilitators and knowledge as absolute rather than
contingent to more problem-posing models that prioritize critical thinking and self-direction. As
Brett, a Canadian upper secondary teacher in CIS, Vietnam put it during our interview,

The biggest thing as an Ontario teacher teaching abroad is that so many other countries
have more traditional education systems, where students are expected to memorize and
be taught by the teacher and regurgitate information and not question things, so a lot of
our kids come to our school from that education system, and, depending on how long
they’ve been in our school, some kids have been here since elementary school, and some
come in fresh from grade 9 and grade 10. It’s really difficult for them to adapt to the way
I’ve been trained to teach and what I think is good teaching, which is more facilitating,
student-led, student-centered, questioning everything, and teaching kids how to analyse
and critically think rather than just repeat facts and memorize information.

Although there are significant differences between discourses in education as it operates in
relation to the Western hegemony of a global cultural economy, I understand globalization as
geographical flows (Appadurai 1996) and wish to complicate some of Western misconceptions
that produce binaries that render space static. Approaches to learning in “Asia,” as it is broadly
articulated by Western educators, often conflate rote with repetition in learning, which implies that knowledge precedes understanding. Further, Western educators misapprehend conformity, the values for which are integral to the cohesion of cultural practices, particularly in a context where Western culture disproportionately influences education globally (Biggs 1998; Phuong-Mai, Nguyen, and Pilot 2005; Volet 1999). The distinction between us in Ontario versus them in Vietnam does not neatly map onto the notion that Asia is importing Western education inasmuch as it reflects the operation of power in which Western ideas about what constitutes a meaningful education is negotiated tenuously by countries that are trying to situate themselves within a global economic hegemony while maintaining their cultural integrity.

In the context of Vietnam, there is a “complex interplay of Confucian heritage beliefs and values that influence the socialisation of children, and the subsequent values of adults/teachers and children” (Phelps et al. 2012, 290; quoted in Biggs 1998 and Volet 1999). Even within Canada and across North America, there are vast differences in the application of socially progressive and consciousness-raising pedagogy, captured by Paulo Freire (2005 [1970]) and more recently by Henry Giroux (2006, 2015, 2007), for whom neoliberalism represents a real and credible threat to the future of education.

5.3.1 CIS, Vietnam, and the TDSB: A history of partnership

All secondary schools in Vietnam are divided into two levels: lower grades 6 to 9 and upper secondary grades 10 to 12 (see Figure 5.2, as published in Duggan 2001, 198). To transition between the two, students must complete entry exams; the higher the score, the more prestigious the school. For students who do not pass this exam, pursuing programming in expensive private international schools provides an option to move ahead with a world-class education. Vietnam achieved 98 percent enrolment in primary level, and 88 percent enrolment in lower secondary grades (UNESCO 2017); however, enrolment for upper secondary school drops drastically, such that in 2010 national targets were set to 50 percent (Nguyen and Nguyen 2008). In 2011, for instance, primary school enrolment was reported at 7,048,493, and 4,968,302 at the lower secondary level, which dropped to 2,835,025 by upper secondary. The reason cited for this drop is due to tuition fees that increase with each school year, which impacts rural areas, ethnic minorities, and female students (Canada 2012). The only sector exempt from collecting tuition is
at the primary level, which is universal. According to a report published by the Government of Canada (2012) international markets in Vietnam are tapped as opportunities for national growth in Canada. These markets emerge from inaccessibility to higher education, an ongoing concern about the cost of overseas study, as well as an increasing focus on internationalizing programming in private schools in Vietnam. Only 13–16 percent of students are enrolled in higher education (Canada 2012, 28). Canada is capitalizing off of Vietnam’s poverty.

![Diagram of education system structure](image)

Figure 5. 2 “National education system organizational structure as a result of Decree 90/CP, 24 November 1993” (Duggan 2001, 98)

According to the International Schools Database, twenty private international schools are listed for Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Most of these schools are American and British, with tuition fees averaging $25,000 per year. CIS, Vietnam serves ages four to eighteen and is the only school in the city that offers a Canadian curriculum. Tuition fees for 2018–2019 begin at approximately $13,000 CAD in kindergarten and rise to $29,610 by grade 12. As of August
2015, the school offers an International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, the tuition fees for which are $31,069 by grade 12. There are additional fees for assessment, admission, and boarding. According to the parent handbook (CIS Vietnam 2019) the first day of school at CIS, Vietnam begins in the second week of August, and classes run to mid-June. In addition to holidays in December, students have a week-long fall break in October and a spring break in May as well as a two-week break in the beginning of February for the Vietnamese New Year and Tet (festival) holiday. The school day begins at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 2:55 p.m., with four scheduled periods lasting approximately 75 minutes each. CIS, Vietnam also runs on a house system, a traditional feature of English schools (or, as the school puts it, similar to the Harry Potter movies) and participates in an international Global Issues Network, running an annual Terry Fox Run, and advocating for social justice issues such as animal rights, environmental sustainability, and gender equality.

CIS was founded in 2009\textsuperscript{73} and is owned by Vietnamese nationals; the school is governed by a board of directors, to which the elementary and secondary principals report. In 2014, CIS, Vietnam moved its campus to Ho Chi Minh’s exclusive District 7; its facilities reflect a $46 million investment by Khoi Nguyen Education Group,\textsuperscript{74} comprising 39,000 square meters of space.\textsuperscript{75} Under Decree No. 73/2012, if a school is foreign-owned, Vietnamese students cannot comprise more than 10 percent of the population; however, because CIS, Vietnam is owned by nationals,\textsuperscript{76} the majority of students are Vietnamese and are learning English as a second

\textsuperscript{73} According to one participant, the owners were formerly journalists who found Ontario’s curriculum appealing, particularly its focus on character education.

\textsuperscript{74} “[T]he group’s expenditure on constructing campuses for the education system [in Ho Chi Minh City] from kindergarten to senior high school levels, totaled VND1.5 trillion [approx. 800 million] inclusive of charges for renting land and constructing facilities” (Tam 2018).

\textsuperscript{75} According to the \textit{Saigon Times}, facilities include “a library with capacity of 700 students and nearly 13,500 books; cafeteria that can serve 2,000 students at the same time; grand swimming pool with international competition-standard size; 1,250-seat indoor sport stadium and competition flooring that meets the standards of FIBA (International Basketball Federation); two 2D and 3D cinemas, each with capacity of nearly 400 seats/cinema; Japan-standard seat systems in cinemas, indoor sport stadium, cafeteria, classrooms” (Hoang 2014).

\textsuperscript{76} Decree No. 73/2012 has been replaced with Decree No. 86/2018 (Fraser 2018). Under this new decree, released in August, 2018, foreign owned schools can enrol up to 50 percent of Vietnamese students; as a result, more local families will be able to enrol their children in international schools. While this doesn’t impact CIS, Vietnam, changes that accompanied this increase protect the public interests of Vietnam, under which educational programs
language. Most students come from an upper middle-class that is increasingly willing to invest in education. To gain admission, students must provide a previous year’s transcript and complete a test under the supervision of a Canadian teacher.

Three months after the CIS, Vietnam held its grand opening for its new campus in March 2014, it was announced that the TDSB signed a consultancy agreement with the Vietnamese private school, providing services to meet curriculum and staffing needs. According to the National Post (2014), this included twelve job postings for teachers and principals, who, if hired, would take a leave of absence from the board, provide support with programming and Ontario curriculum, help implement the international baccalaureate program, and enrol Vietnamese students who wanted to take grade 12 courses. It was reported that this consultancy agreement created tension between the TDSB and the previous consultant, the District School Board of Niagara, which was under the impression that it was renegotiating a five-year educational management services agreement, which was projected to bring in $300,000 in gross revenue (The National Post, 2014).

Further controversy was sparked when news of the consultancy was announced a month after the resignation of now former TDSB chair Chris Bolton, who had signed an offer of employment from CIS, Vietnam as chief executive officer, though at the time of reporting, he went on the record as stating he was unsure whether he was going to take up the position. The lack of transparency around the deal created mistrust because Bolton had led the TDSB’s deal with the controversial Confucius Institute, which was revoked due to public pressure over China’s influence on the curriculum and concerns over transparency; trustees were unclear over when the agreement was signed, who participated in the negotiations, and how an advance of $225,000 was used (Brown 2014; Howlett and Alphonso 2014). Trustees, who came to know of the TDSB–CIS, Vietnam partnership after its signing, raised concerns that, once again, there was no opportunity to oversee details about the deal. Prior to resigning, Bolton had visited CIS, Vietnam, the reasons for which were unclear. After my interviews with staff both in the TDSB

must “not negatively affect the cultures, ethics, and traditional customs of Vietnam” (Frasers 2018, 2). To this end, senior Vietnamese students in CIS must take classes in their own language and subjects, Saturday mornings, to ensure that they understand their cultural roots. This incurs approximately $1,000 in additional costs.
and CIS, Vietnam, it is still unclear how the deal came to fruition; however, I was able to gain insight into the ways that the deal provided a workaround to a ministry memorandum, a key detail left out of news reports.

## 5.4 A makeshift education

Enrolment data reported on in Chapter 3 details the home schools within which e-learners are enrolled. When analyzing the information, I noticed a disproportionate number of students’ home school was Greenwood, a senior high school designed specifically for newcomers. In fact, with seventy-eight students, it comprised the school with the highest enrolment. When I called the guidance department at Greenwood to recruit participants, they told me the school had no role in the arrangement and therefore could not provide insight. It was through my interviews with the team at central e-learning and CIS, Vietnam that I came to understand the details of the partnership. Below is my interview with a senior administrator, David, in which he explains the workings of the deal:

**Interviewer:** In one of the classrooms I’m in, and from the data I received that showed a number of students in Greenwood, I’m putting two and two together, and I saw the discussion posts with students posting from Vietnam. Can you speak a bit about when [the partnership] started? How that’s been involved in the strategy of e-learning?

**David:** It started three years ago between the Vietnam School, CIS, and it’s quite large. I don’t know if you remember, we used to have a chair named Chris Bolton. He quit, even though he never ended up there, and this is part of the reason; he was going to be there, as part of my understanding. I’m not sure if he never ended up there because the media got ahold of it. So they hired the principal from [a school in the board]. So she also retired quickly. They hired TDSB teachers and guidance counsellors, many of the [Vice Principals] are from here.

**Interviewer:** Is it a secondment?

**David:** They’re not paid the same. The teachers go on [a leave of absence], so you’re allowed to take a two-year leave from education and still have your position. And they get paid and have housing allowance. So it was a three-year agreement; this is final year of the agreement. They pay the board like visa students. And it’s Greenwood because we had to put them somewhere, and Greenwood seemed like a—we’ve used various schools in the past. It’s gone through various iterations, but this works well because they’re registered as visa students, they get their OEN numbers, they get their student numbers, they get their diplomas and report cards, and in the end, Greenwood gets funded for it. That’s how we sold it to Greenwood—you’re going to get ten kids and you have to do nothing other than put them into your rolls, because [students in Vietnam are] not here.
It’s caused some issues in terms of D2L. The province does not allow us to use the D2L learning management system for students outside of Toronto.

Interviewer: Do you know what the rationale is?

David: It’s part of their contract with Brightspace [developed by D2L] and their content, the OERB [Ontario Educational Resource Bank].

Interviewer: Intellectual property?

David: Basically, that’s what they said. I disagree, because you’re giving them an Ontario diploma, and they’re visa students, and it’s 2016, and it’s an ongoing LMS. I can’t speak eloquently to whether it’s the contract with Brightspace or their own internal rules. The Ministry is a monolithic beast unto itself. So what happened is three years ago, we did all the courses for them through Moodle, and then last year we started Brightspace because it’s very similar to D2L, but the problem is that on Brightspace you can’t take OERB content into it because it belongs to the province, so we have to hire teachers to produce the content.

Interviewer: But the content I’ve observed looks very similar to D2L… Oh, okay then.

David: So we pay for 500 licenses because we also have students from Toronto in the class. We have eleven kids from Vietnam, and they’re in it, but so are the other twenty-two kids from Toronto. We have to minimize how many classes CIS kids can take to six per semester, because they want one kid in every class and we’re like, you can’t. As a result, they don’t get choice with regards to the classes because the cost would be higher.

Interviewer: Is this something you see expanding?

David: The three years is up. I think there’s renegotiation to renew the agreement.

Interviewer: Who is involved in these negotiations?

David: The high-high ups are renegotiating the next term, the superintendents and the director. It’s an agreement between the board and that school. I think it’s the only one that currently exists.

Interviewer: Has the team been consulted about it?

David: Normally, every year, part of the agreement is some people from the board have to go to Vietnam to [indistinct], but we’ve never been invited.

Despite being in a position of responsibility, David did not know how much the board stood to make out of the deal, besides a lump sum being paid out alongside international student fees, nor did he express insight into the rationale for the program, which was an arrangement on the part
of CIS, Vietnam to work around the moratorium. It wasn’t until my conversation with a senior administrator in CIS, Vietnam that the stakes of the program, as a workaround to accreditation, became clear:

Interviewer: It’s been really interesting to think through the positioning of Canadian International Schools in accessing e-learning, and I wanted to get a bit more context about that. How did this partnership come to be?

Aly: The agreement that was struck between this board, which is called the Canadian International School, when it began in 2009—that agreement was between the board in Vietnam and the District of Niagara school board. That was their first consultancy agreement. We came into the equation when they moved from the District of Niagara School board to forge a consultancy agreement with the Toronto District School Board, and the promise that is made to families in Vietnam is that kids can graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. And the only way they can do that is to have their grade 12 credits issued by an Ontario school board. Because we’re not licensed in Ontario, even though I hear in the political arena and I’ve read policy position papers that suggest it’s going to change. Currently, there’s no signal to me that they’re going to the lift the moratorium on foreign licensed schools. I don’t understand why. It doesn’t make sense to me, when I see delegations from, for example, British Columbia has forty-two offshore schools and people working in parts of the Caribbean. . . . I understand everything about integrity and accountability; I just don’t understand why Ontario is so reluctant. . . . There’d be plenty of families that would pay the big tuition to an international school and live at home than send their fifteen year old to “big, bad downtown” Toronto. . . . So, it’s a political arena.

With interviews from high-ranking stakeholders in TDSB and CIS, Vietnam, I turned to the Ministry of Education. My interview with a representative, Patricia, comprised a third angle, verifying what I observed to be a systemic “willful ignorance” that allows this partnership to persist, despite its paradox, namely circumventing the moratorium. In the following excerpt of our hour-long interview, I ask Patricia about whether there was a strategy or conversation within the Ministry of Education to expand “students abroad accessing [resources in] Ontario,” which also afforded me the opportunity to glean insight into how the Ministry might see itself in this complicated network of actors:

Interviewer: [Does the Ministry] have a strategy or a conversation around the students abroad accessing [resources in] Ontario? I know there are students in Canadian International School, Vietnam in a couple classrooms I’ve observed.

77 I use the pronoun “they” to protect identity.
Patricia: So, at this point, the Master User Agreement [that structures the relationship] between the Ministry and the boards [stipulates that] course content that is Ministry-created cannot be used for profit. So when students are attending—that’s really the stipulation—so for international students who come to Ontario on visa have access to the learning management system like any other students would, at that school. Students that are international students that are out of residence—so they don’t come to Ontario, they actually live abroad—not Ontario citizens, not Ontario students, when they are accessing e-learning from public school boards, then they don’t access our material.

Interviewer: Is there a strategy moving forward with regards to engaging international students who—

Patricia: So Ontario has an international student strategy about engaging international students. There is a paragraph in there, and you can find that online, about online students. There is certainly is a direction and a will, but there’s been no movement.

In my review of the Ministry’s Strategy for K–12 International Education (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a), I was unable to find any references to online students, although there were three sentences included in a section on the “[o]verseas delivery of Ontario Curriculum,” including the possibility of reviewing agreements “with respect to the delivery of instruction” (13). In my interview with Patricia, it was clear that the Ministry didn’t see itself as responsible for the provision of e-learning where a partnership between school boards and unaccredited schools abroad are concerned. So long as school boards did not use the licence for D2L as a vehicle for delivery, it did not consider the arrangement to legally constitute a misuse of public funds.

What makes for a makeshift education? The Ministry, under what appears to be public pressure, places a moratorium on offshore schools; however, developments in learning management software have made it possible for CIS, Vietnam, a private school, to offer a remote option for accreditation, thus fulfilling the work that the moratorium was intended to prevent. The TDSB, a local school board, is hired, the effect of which circumvents Ministry limitations. Because the practice is not captured in writing (in policies or memorandums) and is carried out at a scale that is designed to be at arm’s length, the Ministry can deny responsibility for a partnership that is struck by what it claims are independent actors, despite the fact that profit from private sources (such as fundraising) is tightly regulated. Funds raised for school purposes, for example, “[s]hould not be used to replace public funding for education” nor should it be “used to support
items funded through provincial grants, such as classroom learning materials, textbooks and repairs or for capital projects that significantly increase operating costs” (Ontario 2012b, 1). How the private funds generated through this arrangement are being used were unclear, not only to me, but to stakeholders who are executing an important part of the partnership. The silence on the partnership was systemic: central e-learning is kept at arm’s length from the executive team at the school board, and e-learning keeps Greenwood in the dark, a position it willingly occupies, despite being paid for each student on its register; teachers who are informed about CIS, Vietnam students with little time and no compensation to prepare also stay quiet about the workload because the rewards outweigh the risk of having one course timetabled on Brightspace. Everyone, it seemed, kept their heads down, exercising strategic ignorance and ambiguity as a measure of protection from critique. Such an arrangement raises questions about the ways that Ontario’s structure of governance allows such an arrangement to persist and incentivizes educators in positions of responsibility to deflect accountability to superiors, such as the superintendent, who are said to know little about the inner workings of the e-learning program.

5.5 The impact on labour

E-learning is taught by full-time secondary teachers in the TDSB and, as such, is currently governed by the 2014–2019 collective agreement between the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, Bargaining Unit, and the TDSB. In the agreement, workload is negotiated based on traditional education models, in which school time is contained within a finite period and students are physically accounted for. In 2014, the OSSTF/FEESO pursued research on the impact of e-learning on student learning, staffing of schools, and member workload. The study was estimated to cost $20,000. The details of the final report were provided by OSSTF/FEESO’s Educational Services Department, the findings for which I have been given permission to share in this study. The scope of the study was quite broad, despite being modest in its investment: it consisted of a literature review and a survey of e-learning teachers, guidance counsellors, IT and clerical staff, youth workers, educational assistants, and non–e-learning teachers; 608 members across 32 districts in Ontario responded. The districts of Waterloo, Peel, and Toronto comprised the majority of respondents.
Relevant to this chapter, the findings reported that, while understanding what is supposed to happen in an e-learning classroom as well as the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, there was little insight into the provision and management of e-learning across districts. Further, the majority of teachers modify existing e-learning classes, with fewer than 15 percent developing material from scratch: “Half of those respondents who created an e-learning class from scratch received additional support or resources, such as a reduction in student load (17 percent), extra time to develop the course (30 percent) or technological assistance to help design the course (39 percent).” (OSSTF 2015, 24)

The study was too broad to apply to the TDSB directly because 45 percent of teachers who responded had classrooms composed of rolling enrolment, which means students continue to join classes after they have officially begun, which is not the case in my study. What I drew from these findings, however, was insight into the diversity of ways that e-learning is deployed across districts; this study is but one configuration of e-learning provision, and the details below reflect the experiences of teachers and administrators, past and present, who have been involved in the TDSB–CIS, Vietnam partnership.

The following brings five experiences with CIS, Vietnam into conversation with administrators: three TDSB teachers and two employees from CIS, Vietnam. I juxtapose their interviews to highlight the ways that labour is interpreted by stakeholders as well as the impact of the partnership on students. While I was unable to recruit students directly, the details suggest that the promise made by CIS, Vietnam to Vietnamese families contradict the reality that they face, in which students must make the option of travelling almost 14,000 km without the support of family and friends or take their entire course loads in front of a computer. The paradox of this arrangement is a pattern reflected in my interviews:

Interviewer: What has been your experience? So, I understand that the board had to license Brightspace because they were not able to use Ministry resources, which were only for students in Ontario.

Thomas: Right. Which is never something I fully understood, if I’m honest—I know that that’s the explanation I was given. Yeah, but the fact that you’re receiving TDSB credit in theory, it’s just a weird line that I know that people who are well above my pay grade, they know that that’s the line that can’t be crossed. Yeah, so we just play by that rule. And the hardest part was in not being able to use any of the [Ministry] material. . . . One
of the reasons why you can afford to do all of the website site maintenance and do the
different kinds of approaches in e-learning is because the material is already there. You
have, hopefully, a nicely stocked content section that has been made by people who are
professionals and has been vetted. It’s a good course, and it should be universally
 teachable. If you don’t have that, then you have to come up with your own stuff. And
there’s a freedom afforded by that. But at the same time, [uploading your own content
was the] major the major hurdle working with [students in CIS, Vietnam]. Because the
students were lovely, [but] their English was very, very trying. Most of them are not
speaking English as a first language. Some of them are speaking it as their third language.

In addition to the labour of producing new content, Thomas discussed having to modify his
approaches to evaluation in a context where a third of his students are English language learners
as well as his apprehension building material under the observation of the host teacher, who was
working with students face-to-face in Vietnam; however, he found his counterpart helpful,
particularly in coordinating timelines. Students had to work week by week because Thomas
received notice of his appointment to teach CIS students less than a week before he was
scheduled to begin: “I was at the [e-learning department] meeting where [teachers with CIS,
Vietnam students] were kind of a question mark. What’s going on here? Yeah, they didn’t tell us
about CIS at all.”

One e-learning teacher, Laura, in describing her experience working with Ministry content,
related her experience developing content for what I discovered were CIS, Vietnam students:

Laura: I’ve also had the experience where I had to make it myself from scratch. They’re
like, here’s an empty class. And go make [the content].

Interviewer: Is that attached to working with students from CIS?

Laura: Yeah, the only time I’ve done it is working with students from CIS because
they’re not allowed to use the Ministry content, which I feel is really weird. . . . It was the
last school year that I did it, and they don’t tell you that that’s what you’re doing. At my
interview, the only question that even remotely hinted towards anything that was related
to that was, “How would you work with our sister school overseas?” Calling it a sister
school implies that you’re just kind of doing some sharing, pen-pally kind of stuff. And
[the interview] was more about collaboration, and that’s not what’s happening at CIS. . . .
I know on their end teachers are timetabled, and they’ll have one or two kids, and they’re
literally just babysitting the kids while they’re on a computer.

Lisa had a contact from CIS, Vietnam and, as a result of her conversations with them, was aware
of the disparities in labour: on one end, a TDSB teacher was producing and delivering content
under tight guidelines to a classroom of thirty e-learning students while, on the other end, a CIS,
Vietnam teacher was, in the worst of cases, sitting at a desk while about a dozen students are at a computer working on content and, in the best of cases, supplementing lessons with face-to-face material to support students.

Lisa: It became very clear to me that literally [he’s] just there watching them being on the computer, right? And so that your role is really just to be somebody there to help on the other end of things. . . . From my perspective, having to write the curriculum—and to not tell teachers that—there’s a really big difference between like, if it’s you, and you’ve got a geography course, and it’s premade for you, and all you have to do is go in, tweak some assignments, pull out some activities that you like, maybe update some stats, and you’re good to go. Versus me, who has to write an entire course from scratch because I’m not allowed to use it. That really changes the workload for teachers.

Interviewer: You didn’t know that you had to do this until you got accepted?

Lisa: I didn’t know I had to do it until I went to the meeting before Labour Day that they called us all to. That was about a week before school started. I didn’t even know that I had a CIS course at that point. And I was told at that meeting that I have a CIS course and I was like, okay, whatever, I don’t know what that means, but fine. And then a teacher who I was working with there, and I knew her pretty well, we were chatting, and she was like, “Yeah, I have a CIS course. We have to write the curriculum.” And I was like, “Excuse me?!” And then she was like, “Yeah, we have to write it like from scratch.” I said, “What do you mean we have to write it from scratch?”

Lisa relayed her experience developing the course but highlighted the difficulty she faced accessing previous course material not only for her CIS course, but her courses generally:

Lisa: Even this year they gave me access to my previous courses the weekend before Labour Day. And we’re like, school starts on Tuesday. Yeah. So my Labour Day weekend was spent getting my class organized. So there’s a lot of workload issues that I think are very grey in e-learning, and I don’t think the union cares.

I spoke with another e-learning teacher, Allan, who described his experience teaching students from CIS, Vietnam as one that gave those students a leg-up, by virtue of having multiple instructors:

Interviewer: I’m just curious about, sort of, what’s been your experiences like with [the partnership] because it’s a very interesting configuration.

Allan: It is interesting. I’m not too sure how fond my superiors are with that arrangement, either. There doesn’t seem to be a lot of dialogue with that partnership. I don’t differentiate my instructions for them as I would with my TDSB students. They have a completely different support network there. So it seems like there’s a classroom and another instructor there—there’s a sort of support there. All the evaluations take place in a classroom in front of a computer, so it’s hard for me to determine whether or not I’m
the primary instructor or not. My impression is that I’m just giving them a list of what they need to do, and the instructor over there is then supporting them to ensure that it’s done quite well. They’re very strong academic students. Yeah, they communicate well, much better than with TDSB students. So there’s an inequality piece there, because they have—so there is an equivalent in Vietnam that I somewhat correspond with. And my TDSB students don’t have that. I’m their only instructor. It’s unique.

Interviewer: So if I’m hearing you correctly, it sounds like the inequity is around resources and having access to greater resources there, and specifically face-to-face.

Allan: That’s right. It’s a much more blended learning experience.

Allan’s account of this advantage, which seemed to lack contextual information about the frequency and intensity of students’ encounters online (i.e., taking full course loads) countered Thomas’s experience with students struggling with English, namely because their subject areas—math vs. English—were so distinct. Allan’s narrative also countered feedback from CIS senior administration, whose characterization of CIS, Vietnam students’ feedback is described below:

Aly: They hate it. They hate it. It’s that simple—they hate it. We get inspected every year by the consultancy board, and the teachers don’t like it, and the kids don’t like it. So, we just finished an inspection a week before last. Every time we have an inspection, I have the inspectors meet privately with students without the teachers and without administrators. And there are [now] nine kids in e-learning. Fifteen have gone to Toronto. Only one of those nine kids said, yeah, that would have been his preferred modality. They complain that their eyes are bothering them, that they’re hunched over a computer all day. And it’s high stakes for them. Its grade 12, they want those marks, lots of them are looking for scholarships. So it’s tough.

Brett, a CIS, Vietnam teacher, also defines success in relationship to grades, although his narrative, which is limited to the context of his own classroom, is not as stark as Aly’s:

Interviewer: Do you think students experienced success online, however you define it?

Brett: For students, it’s about grades, so I think they were satisfied. For me, a lot of them improved their literacy and writing skills, and that’s a big win.

Interviewer: And are students planning on attending a university in North America?

Brett: I think so. Of those ten, less than half are going to Canada. A couple in Vietnam, a couple in Korea, one in Australia, but all are going to postsecondary.

According to international higher education scholars Creso Sá and Emma Sabzalieva, there is a wide gap between the rhetoric and reality of international education. In the series of interviews I
drew from, I show how this gap reflects contradictions between the uniformity of institutional discourse, captured in policies, memorandums, and media releases which tout the benefits international students offer to Canada, and the “politics and specific context of each jurisdiction,” in which implementation “is anything but convergent” (Sá and Sabzalieva 2018, 244). This case study further illustrates a willful ignorance of the ethical questions the use of technology is raising, both in terms of democratic education and negotiations over workload, particularly in light of the obvious questions raised by some administrators and teachers.

5.6 Conclusion: Exporting cultural capital

Research on international education is responding to a number of forces, one of which is pressure to increase international admission as a response to neoliberal state restructuring. As international education scholar Graham Pike (2015) explains:

This is neoliberalism in education writ large: educational institutions with a desperate need for funds and, in many cases, a dwindling local population, selling the credentials demanded by a growing elite of wealthy students from beyond their national borders. As the market for educational credentials is largely unregulated and global in scope, it offers those students who can afford the fees a wide choice of education providers and thus sets up intense competition between educational institutions worldwide wishing to mine this rich seam of additional revenue. (16; see Dolby and Rahman 2008 for an account of this emerging juncture).

Similarly, Mary Hayden (2011) outlines the ways school-level education is becoming internationalized, citing the promotion of internationalization agendas, the currency of concepts such as “global citizenship education,” and the proliferation of both profit and nonprofit organizations, which operate as networks between national and international borders: “Indeed the only point of certainty is seemingly that what the curriculum is preparing young people for is NOT simply a future constrained by national boundaries and national issues” (212).

As geographer Johanna L. Waters has outlined78 in a number of articles (2006a, 2006b, 2012; see also Waters and Brooks, 2010; Waters and Leung 2013, 2017), the relationship between

78 In conversation with geographer Joanne Waters’ research on geographies of international education (2006; see also 2012), Tannock and Brown (2009) along with others (e.g., Collins 2012, 2008; Findlay, 2011, 2006; Findlay et al., 2012; Lysgård, Kjetil, and Angen 2017; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2015; Perkins and Neumayer 2014;
Educational choice has been transformed with the growth of the international education market, which reflects a multibillion-dollar industry, propelled by the allure of Western education for East-Asia’s middle-class (Waters 2006b, 180). In particular, she points to the ways that international education is transforming the spatial scales over which social reproduction [or the reproduction of inequality] is achieved . . . on the one hand, upper-middle-class populations in East Asia are able to secure their social status through the acquisition of a ‘Western education,’ thereby creating new geographies of social exclusion within ‘student-sending’ societies. On the other hand, primary and secondary schools in Canada are able to harness the benefits of internationalization to offset the negative effects of neoliberal educational reform, thereby facilitating local social reproduction. (Waters 2006, 1046)

In this chapter, I show how e-learning is used as a tool by CIS, Vietnam to serve a growing upper-middle-class in a country that, despite alleviating some poverty, is still classified as lower income; disparities between rural and urban populations are stark; and success, as students at CIS, Vietnam experience it, is out of reach to many locals. Success can only be understood within the context of a global imaginary, in which the English-speaking world offers a path away from home toward institutions in host countries that promise students the cultural capital they have competed their whole lives for. Technology, through this partnership between CIS, Vietnam and the TDSB therefore not only reproduces social stratification based on educational differentiation, it also reinscribes culture as Western in Vietnam. In recognition of this disproportionate influence, the Ministry of Education in Vietnam has produced directives that protect, to the extent to which they are able, excessive “outsider” cultural influence. This is significant because CIS, Vietnam is nationally owned, which means it can attract Vietnamese students who would otherwise be ineligible to attend a foreign owned school (Decree No. 73/2012).

Raghuram 2013; see Waters 2012 for a comprehensive review) concentrate on postsecondary institutions almost exclusively, especially when discussing TNE.
The future of the CIS, Vietnam partnership with TDSB, while uncertain, illustrates how technology is globally reconfiguring the provision of schooling, particularly as lines between state and corporate actors, and by extension the public and private, become more blurred. Although it is a stopgap to an otherwise stalled bureaucracy, the case illustrates how private demand for Ontario curriculum coupled with policies that divest from public investment produce what most participants agree are substandard learning environments and working conditions for teachers. During the time of this writing, there were preliminary talks to build a 100-acre private school campus in Georgina, Ontario, which is approximately a one-hour drive from Toronto. Information about this project, as it was reported by the *Georgina Advocate* (Riedner 2017), emerged from an update during the city’s council meeting on September 20, 2017, where Hugh McKeown, the project manager for CIS, informed an enthusiastic council about the intention of CIS, Vietnam, to expand its location into Ontario so international students can prepare for admissions into Canadian universities. It wasn’t clear that students who earn an OSSD would stay in Canada to earn their degrees, much less direct their tuition to public institutions.

In a 2012 article on international student mobility, a group of geographers (Findlay et al. 2012) explored whether private school education in the UK was associated with access to international education, the perception of these moves vis-a-vis a global hierarchy, and the link between international student mobility and life planning. Like other studies of its kind (Hayden 2011; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Thiem 2009; Waters and Brooks, 2010), Findlay et al. (2012) found that class is able to reproduce itself by providing differential advantages to students in private schools who are “more likely to gain access to university education in other countries” (128). Their study also describes the ways that discourse around “world-class” institutions “has resulted in a global hierarchy,” (119) concentrated in a handful of countries: “It appears that a ‘world-class’ education for some is embedded in a mobility culture that attaches symbolic capital to the very performance of international living and that aspires to engage in career trajectories that some might see as the hallmark of the transnational capitalist class” (128). Students in lower-income countries relative to “standard” measurements of wealth under the restructuring of national economies are, at an unprecedented rate, accessing what is deemed to be world-class education. Technology offers a means of accessing this world, only when such access provides a means of measuring the world in stocks.
6  Conclusion: Education Otherwise

To bring a spirit of study to learning that takes place both in and beyond classroom settings, learning must be understood as an experience that enriches life in its entirety. — bell hooks 2003, 42

This dissertation provokes more questions than answers about how e-learning in Ontario will unfold, especially in 2020 when all students will be required to take four credits online to graduate. I forwarded some of these questions in March, 2019, to Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) Marit Stiles for her presentation to the legislature, upon her request. Will the Ministry consider approaching any for-profit or non-profits corporations to expand e-learning services? Will e-learning teachers be members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation? What is the impact of this mandate on the current funding model? What supports will be embedded for students who need face-to-face supports? And how will the 110-hour per course requirement be met? Students spend a fraction of the time on learning management systems than they do in face-to-face classrooms.

What little research we have on e-learning suggests that the impact of mandating four credits online will cause great damage to an already vulnerable public education system compromised by the marketization and neoliberal restructuring of schooling. Consistent with findings on a diverse range of models for supplementary e-learning, my research highlights how e-learning has exacerbated inequality for students who already struggle face-to-face and the high risk of corporate influence on curriculum, instruction, and learning. Under the threat this mandate poses to the integrity of a fully-funded progressive public-education system, one that is limited in practice and a horizon worth holding onto, I proceed with this conclusion in three parts: the contradictions, pragmatics, and promise of public education.

79 MPP Stiles is the Critic of Education for the New Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP is the Official Opposition to the Ontario Provincial Conservatives.
First, I temper the promise of public education with the contradictions of its practice and situate my findings as consistent with these contradictions. Then, I explain the social injustice and inequality that emerges from the failures of this promise. Before pivoting to the second turn, I highlight a chapter that remains to be written on privacy, in hopes of inspiring further consideration toward this area of research. Next, I offer some suggestions, drawn from interviews with stakeholders, that could counter the mandate to centralize and force students to take e-learning. Instead, e-learning could be used as a tool to respond to locally specific needs and to develop best practices and innovation in teaching and learning online; this includes diminishing the role of grading in assessment. I take a final turn with a call for social justice, not as a lens or strategy, but as an ethic and responsibility that presupposes the promise of public education.

6.1 Started from the bottom

The establishment of secondary schools in Ontario during the late nineteenth century, for which Methodist minister and superintendent of education Egerton Ryerson is credited, was hailed for its progressive vision. His tenure oversaw the expansion of free schooling to impoverished families, and the instillation of teacher training and a common curriculum. Yet, as John Bullen (1989), in quoting Robert Stamp, notes:

The immediate goal was the inculcation of Christian values; the underlying aim was the prevention of deviant behaviour and crime. . . . Youngsters were taught to accept misfortune and to be thankful for God’s blessings. . . . Economics stressed the sacredness of private property, the wisdom of prudent investments, and the virtues of industry and frugality—but neglected to mention the trade union movement and labour-management conflicts. There was a glorification of motherhood and an acknowledgment of the vast influence of women in shaping the life of the home—but no thought of the woman pursuing her own career outside the home. (329; see also Davey 1975)

Indeed, not only did Ryerson’s vision of progress eject women, Black Canadians, and Indigenous peoples (Knight 2016) in favour of the normative white European man, its logic was linked to the reproduction of a Christian nation and shaped by the rise of industrial capitalism, which required a labour force of self-disciplined workers to uphold a “modern and efficient” economy (Bullen 1989, 330).
Today, Canada is considered to be one of the most educated countries in the world, and Ontario one of the most progressive jurisdictions, yet the measure of progress and its inherent racial logics have changed little since the late nineteenth century. Certainly, while Ontario enjoys higher graduation rates, particularly among women, and a more educated workforce relative to its heydays, the goals of schooling, which reproduce cultural and social hierarchies, remain unchanged. The means of reproduction, through Eurocentric curriculum, streaming, discipline, and accreditation, has continued to disadvantage underrepresented populations—particularly Black and Indigenous students.

Given that the substance of disadvantage lies in the reproduction of hierarchy as an effect of schooling, e-learning has less to do with a revolution but more with an evolution of reproduction; it is consistent with the expansion of global capital markets and the neoliberal restructuring of education, which have reinvigorated the historical entanglement of technology with knowledge-based economies. My study, in the context of this entanglement, evaluated the promise of e-learning as it is extended in the external marketing of competency-based education in the EdTech sector as well as in the internal promotion of the program as a modernization strategy that will expand opportunity for students.

Contrary to its promise, my findings showed the following:

(1) E-learning serves students with the greatest learning opportunities. For high-achieving students, the platform offered an efficient means to accreditation, and because of this, many enjoyed the freedom technology afforded, which meant freedom from the sacrifice of cooperative work, freedom from the vulnerability of dialogue and physical visibility, and freedom from perceived surveillance. The question of who is poised to enjoy freedom, on what terms freedom is leveraged, and to what ends freedom serve are questions that stakeholders must confront to conceive of and implement education otherwise.

(2) Students are ambivalent about e-learning. With the exception of students who were not attending school regularly, e-learning was referred to as an afterthought or a task that students attended to after face-to-face commitments. Students did not have knowledge of who shared the
online classroom space, and synchronous learning sessions, which were held weekly, were poorly attended. In the 3,091 discussion threads and responses I observed, passive engagement was routinely documented; higher levels of engagement were commensurate with the grades assigned. My analysis was substantiated by interviews with students and teachers as well as my observation of sixty hours of online classroom instruction. While cognitive engagement might be cited as a measure of success, success is also measured by the intangible emotional life of the classroom, of which there was little to observe.

(3) Anti-Black racism still impacts e-learning students. While e-learning may be conceived of as colour-blind and ahistorical, the program is a cultural product leveraged socially to reproduce privilege. In Chapter 4, I explored how discourses about technology reflect a fantasy of post-racial futures that mask the construction of race. Colour-blind racism frames the experience of racialized students as a product of market dynamics—naturally occurring—and as a cultural limitation that can be remedied through access to social mobility. That is, racism presumes a sort of poverty, not one that is produced in the social sphere, but a cultural poverty that can be overcome internally by accessing economic resources. However, the conditions of mobility are steeped in a tradition of European cultural dominance, within which diverse cultural expression is marginalized; as a result, cultural invalidations such as “acting white” threaten self-identity because it situates the target as inauthentic (Durkee al. 2019). The provision of e-learning, in other words, does not transcend race; instead, it comprises a mechanism of traditional schooling within which Black students are disproportionately stigmatized, stereotyped, misdirected, pathologized, and disciplined.

(4) E-learning is used by the school board to respond to austerity. During the year of my study, e-learning was used by the TDSB to deliver a full grade 12 course load to private school students in CIS, Vietnam. These courses were delivered on LMS software, Brightspace, developed by D2L and licensed by the TDSB. As opposed to a typical online class, which already has content uploaded, TDSB teachers had to produce original content for CIS, Vietnam students, sometimes with insufficient notice. As a result of this partnership, CIS, Vietnam was able to circumvent a provincial moratorium on international schools and offer students an OSSD without travelling
abroad. TNE, in this regard, represents the greatest leap toward marketization, and e-learning is being used as the technology to do it.

6.2 Marketization and privatization

Former liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty, whose government signed the first contract with the learning management software company Desire2Learn—currently the sole provider of e-learning software for K–12 in Ontario—resigned in 2012 to serve as a special advisor to its president, John Baker (D2L 2012). Eighteen months later, he officially registered as a lobbyist with the provincial government, which fell beyond the twelve-month waiting period needed post-resignation to register. At the time, D2L’s contract with the province was valued at $3 million. As of March 21, 2018, a “multi-year” contract for an undisclosed sum has been renewed (Ontario 2018).

What has prevented private technology companies like D2L from expanding is the public sector—the provincial government and unions that represent the interest of workers. For instance, in a transcript of the standing committee on finance and economic affairs (Ontario 2016) Ben Bergen, on behalf of the Council of Canadian Innovators (CCI), which represents tech companies, including D2L, presented on three areas that Ontario tech companies need support in: “access to customers, access to capital, and access to talent.” While venture capitalist firms such as MaRS Discovery District invest in start-ups, the CCI’s mission is to expand and scale up the market share of already successful companies like D2L. The content of his presentation criticizes the provincial government for failing to offer domestic contracts with which they can expand internationally and for the cumbersome procurement process. He also signals the future toward which e-learning is looking. This future, on the part of corporate interest, includes a desire for financial support in the form of low tax rates, direct investments, and advocacy to reach markets internationally (i.e., Ontario’s trade offices becoming points of contact for Ontario companies abroad).

Mr. Bergen’s presentation was followed by Fred Hahn, the president of CUPE, the largest union in the province. The content of Hahn’s presentation illustrates tensions in private–public models of service provision and the cost of embracing neoliberalism, in which government arbitrates
competing interests between corporations and workers. Criticizing the province’s alignment with corporate interests, shown by low corporate tax policy, Hahn implores them to “stop all forms of privatization, including the sale of public assets, reliance on inefficient and ineffective public-private partnerships, and the contracting out of services.”

P3s, or public–private partnerships, are a form of privatization that increase cost, diminish quality and undermine public policy goals by giving the private sector a great influence in the building of infrastructure and the delivery of services. P3s are regularly revealed to be a boon for business at the expense of the rest of us, verified time and again by our Auditor General. Contracting out undermines the quality of services. It undermines the government’s stated goal of improving the quality of jobs and protecting against precarity. There should be a general prohibition on any agency that receives provincial funds contracting out services. This would be a way that the government could start to meet its stated objectives in the Changing Workplace Review [whose aim is to create better workplaces in Ontario]. (Ontario 2016, F-138)

Indeed, in the postsecondary sector, which is publicly subsidized, public–private partnerships are ubiquitous and have been criticized for the exacerbation of education inequality (Ball 2007, 2016; Ball and Junemann 2012; Fallon and Poole 2016; Pykett 2009) as well as its effect on job security and academic stability (Polster 2016). British Columbia has seen increasing levels of privatization in public school districts and has widened the funding gap between schools and school districts “because their respective capacity for participating in a competitive education marketplace varies substantially. Furthermore, these inequities reproduce social injustices” (Poole and Fallon 2015).

6.3 Segregation in Toronto

On November 30, 2017, the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (CAS) released a statement that confirmed that “Toronto region remains the child poverty capital of the country,” in reference to a report published by Toronto CAS and community partners titled Unequal City. Among the report’s findings, Ontario’s CAS highlighted:

- Racialized families are twice as likely to be living in poverty compared to children in non-racialized families (25.3 percent compared to 11.4 percent).
- Indigenous families with children are experiencing a staggering poverty rate of 84 percent.
- More than one in four (26.3 percent) children under eighteen years of age lives in poverty in the City of Toronto—this is the highest rate among large urban areas in Canada.
- Poverty rates for children in Black families are almost three times that of children in non-racialized families.
- Almost half of children of West Asian (46.8 percent) and Arab (46.7 percent) background lives in poverty in the Toronto region. (from OACAS 2017)

Children who are Indigenous, racialized, or recent immigrants live with rates of higher poverty, and in a city that is becoming increasingly inaccessible and unaffordable (see Bunting, Walks, and Filion 2004; El-Geneidy et al. 2016; Lo et al. 2015; Moos et al. 2018), we can’t afford to fail young people. If trends continue, we can look forward to greater segregation along lines of race and class in Toronto.

Hulchanski’s account (Figure 3.1) of the variables that led to a dramatic shift in income during the 1990s included cutbacks in social programs by the Conservative provincial government, which I detailed in the introduction; federal cuts in social housing expenditure and social assistance rates; and the divestment from subsidies that supported social services delivered provincially. Further, poor access to transit, especially in the inner suburbs, falling real wages, and an inequitable housing policy that privileges condominium developers have all exacerbated the ability of Toronto to respond to staggering inequality (see also Moffatt 2019; Walks, Dinca-Panaitescu, and Simone 2015).

In the context of these social problems, within which schools, as parts of their community, are embedded, programming must be responsive to young people whose growing experience with poverty inevitably compromises their well being. Programs like e-learning, while serving students who are already high-achieving and who already possess a degree of privilege not shared by students in many areas of the city, should not be expanded until the platform has been meaningfully integrated into face-to-face classrooms. All young students need a caring adult, especially where there is an opportunity gap in communities; technology alone can not respond to that gap. Instead, we must employ educators who reflect the diversity of our student population, who speak truth to power in the classroom, and who centre the strength of marginalized students in instruction.
6.4 Privacy and security: “I’ve got nothing to hide!”

There is a chapter waiting to be written on privacy that fell by the wayside of this project. My second interview with all twenty students, as well as a number of interviews with other stakeholders, focused on privacy as we took a tour through the e-learning classroom. What emerged with students I interviewed were gaps in understanding between privacy and security, a common refrain for which was “I’ve got nothing to hide.” Law professor Daniel J. Solove (2007) describes this argument as one that characterizes the landscape of public discourse:

> In order to respond to the nothing to hide argument, it is imperative that we have a theory about what privacy is and why it is valuable. At its core, the nothing to hide argument emerges from a conception of privacy and its value. What exactly is “privacy?” How valuable is privacy and how do we assess its value? How do we weigh privacy against countervailing values? These questions have long plagued those seeking to develop a theory of privacy and justifications for its legal protection. (747)

I distinguish privacy as it is culturally defined from the organization and management of security from an institutional level. Solove (2011) explores the relationship between the two as a false tradeoff: “The debate between privacy and security has been framed incorrectly, with the tradeoff between these values understood as an all-or-nothing proposition. But protecting privacy need not be fatal to security measures; it merely demands oversight and regulation. We can’t progress in the debate between privacy and security because the debate itself is flawed” (2).

While Solove situates this debate within the context of national security, the balance that must be struck between the two in the context for e-learning warrants future study, particularly in light of interviews I conducted with administrators who a) did not know the purpose of or use for learning analytics; b) could not rationalize the off-the-shelf function of impersonation, which allowed teachers to access student accounts as if they were the student; and c) did not prioritize privacy for teachers and students, often conflating ubiquitous oversight with transparency. As one senior administrator put it: “I can’t speak to [the impersonation function]. I came in and it was always there. But what can they see that would be private?”

During my interview with students, one of the tasks I asked them to complete was to explore the class from the teacher’s perspective, with the exception that they could not explore any individual student other than their own file. Three instances where students consistently felt that
their privacy was compromised with respect to learning analytics, the collection of IP addresses, and the impersonation function:

Interviewer: How is it to have control [over my teacher account]?

Participant: This is really weird. [Goes to discussion] Oh, this is interesting, you can search for people here. You can see when they last accessed stuff. I was wondering how they keep track of attendance. [Goes to class list and clicks on her name, then I have her pull down menu options.] Oh, there is my email there, too. What is impersonate? [Reads prompt about what impersonate does]. Oh, boy. So, you can see all my stuff if you’re the teacher? Can you also see my emails? Oh, you can! I don’t know how I feel about that! [laughs] Okay. So, how do I stop this? [Presses the X button]

Interviewer: So, on the right [hand side] where it says grades received and progress, you can pull down tabs, which gives you more information.

Participant: Oh, Oh! [surprised] So you can see how long I’ve spent here, how many topics I’ve viewed [expands tabs]. Oh! It shows all the posts that I created, all the way back to February eighth! You can see my login history too!? Oh . . . [in a disappointed tone] [laughs] this is a lot of control. Is this the only thing that’s different?

Interviewer: You can actually view most of this in your own profile. [I take her to the login and point out IP addresses and times.]

Participant: That’s . . . unnerving. Is that . . . relevant to know?

Further to the surprise students consistently expressed about the oversight teachers and administrators had over their account, there were also security issues surrounding the communication of sensitive files. Administrators reported that an average of 20 percent of students had an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which guides teachers, support personnel, and parents to work to meet the needs of a student as a team. However, IEPs are not accessible to e-learning teachers, who would otherwise access it physically in a student’s OSR. How this impacts privacy protection has been outlined by Scott F. Graham in Professionally Speaking, published by the Ontario College of Teachers:

The Ontario Student Record (OSR) is a good place to start when considering how student information is to be treated. Each student’s OSR includes an office index card giving her or his name, student number, address, phone number, gender, birthdate, any enrolment and transfer dates, names of parents and guardians or both, and emergency contact numbers. The OSR also includes report cards and an official student transcript. Some of this information may be duplicated elsewhere or be available to teachers in another form, but the OSR itself—and all the information in it—is to be kept strictly confidential by school boards (2018).
Hard copies of the OSR, along with other privileged student records, must be secured under lock and key, while electronic copies must be stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed when no longer needed; however, many components of the OSR are not kept in electronic form, and IEPs, which is one component, require a manual transfer, which is a challenge when there are a greater number of students. These are questions stakeholders will have to address, particularly if e-learning is going to be rolled out exponentially. How will the Ministry keep student data safe?

6.5 The pragmatics of policy and regulation

Anthony, a senior administrator from central e-learning, describes the limitations of D2L, which was initially designed as a tool for postsecondary institutions that focused largely on content delivery rather than serving as a creation space within which students can collaborate. It is also a platform that is difficult to customize to meet local needs. He reflects,

We know if kids are engaged in their learning, they are going to achieve at higher levels than if they’re not. From that basic premise, how can e-learning assist with that? Some students are engaged with the technology itself and I think that’s a very low hanging fruit. A little return, but not a lot. How can I take the learning experience and hold their experience longer, what can we do there that we can’t do in a face-to-face classroom?

Stakeholders in senior roles, including Anthony, had a number of suggestions that would improve the provision of e-learning. These suggestions are consolidated below:

- Provide a clear option for e-learning on course selection sheets, which currently do not reflect e-learning as a day school option.
- Integrate collaborative technology more explicitly, through professional development, to address the limitations of the learning management platform.
- Encourage locally developed blended learning courses, which build the capacities of students to successfully participate in online education.
- Invest in an improved registration process. An improved system would not only better distribute access but also provide access to reports that can inform program design.
- Invest in developing competencies with teachers, who improve with practice, and students, who are supported face-to-face in accessing e-learning. E-learning is often
perceived to be a dumping ground for students who may have no other options on their timetable, which belies the intent of its development.

- Decentralize the program and provide home schools with a mandate to offer one e-learning course per semester. This ensures sustainable development in both culture and program growth.
- Track blended learning across home schools. Currently, all students and teachers are automatically enrolled in e-learning (this inflates statistics regarding access), but there is no mechanism that tracks feedback about the use and application, which are often locally specific.
- Treat e-learning as an equivalent to face-to-face instruction rather than a stopgap for face-to-face failures and focus on creating opportunities for students to succeed rather than precluding their participation based on perceptions of ability. In this way, support is directed to meet needs rather than restrict access.
- Equitably staff e-learning, which serves approximately 5,000 students every school year, including the summer months, with a shoestring budget compared to their face-to-face counterparts.
- Consider a lottery-based system for accessing seating. Currently, e-learning students access space on a first-come, first-served model that administrators acknowledge produces inequities.
- Invest resources in building relationships with stakeholders outside the board, such as the Ontario eLearning Consortium, to exchange best practices.

While the above suggestions provide concrete steps to more equitably distribute e-learning opportunities, it does not address the shortcomings of face-to-face education, which disproportionately impact marginalized, racialized students. Indeed, e-learning has not been offered as an equivalent to face-to-face education, but rather as a “piece of the puzzle” that can be helpful for some students. A senior administrator put it this way:

Not everyone’s going to be successful at it. I don’t see it as this is where we’re going to be in twenty years. I see it as a piece of the puzzle that can be helpful for some students. You can’t be a procrastinator, but you can’t be a procrastinator face-to-face either. You have to get the technology, but that’s being less of an issue, and you have to be able to rely on [technology to work] . . . . I am proud that we have an option for kids with mental
health issues, for example, who are sick—a lot of the elite athletes in Toronto take advantage of it.

In what follows, I pivot to the future e-learning might offer, set against a vision for social justice education that is inclusive and emancipatory. Could we imagine online education otherwise?

6.6 Teachers throwing out grades

With only a few weeks remaining in my field work, I received an invitation to attend a webinar on CBE hosted by EdSurge—a US-based resource for “all things Ed tech”—and sponsored by the D2L corporation, an educational technology company whose learning management platform comprised one component of my field of research. I attended the session curious to learn about how D2L was promoting CBE, which was the language used to rationalize the design of the platform. The three panelists on the webinar, Julia Freeland Fisher, Jonathan Vander Els, and Barbra Thoeming, began from the working definition of CBE cited in the introduction. Fisher noted that this five-step model organizes students by a demonstration of mastery rather than by grade; focuses on formative assessments to monitor learning and provide ongoing feedback, with low or no grade value; and provides consistent and rapidly delivered differentiated support for students, among other things. This model is normative, with the intention of defining a high-quality competency-based program—the gold standard. Admittedly, for Fisher, not many schools adhere to these dimensions because it requires a philosophical shift, one that engages the tension between a traditional and a competency-based system. Culture and vision, she argued, are crucial to the development of CBE in schools, who are often facing dated student information systems (this is very true of e-learning,) and market models that have yet to catch up to demand.

The ideas these principles represent, which fall under the organizational umbrella of outcome-based education (Malan 2000), are central to the vision and promise of the online classrooms I spent the 2016–2017 school year in; however, as I demonstrated, the vision and promise of e-learning are contradicted by its provision that conflates mastery and feedback with quantifiable outcomes—or grades. The practice of e-learning is therefore consistent with, not distinct from, everyday practices of schooling, which is a system presupposed by meritocratic political philosophy. The reason for this contradiction, as Julia points out, is largely tied to our attachments to grades as a measure of value. In March 2019, I joined a Facebook group titled
“Teachers Throwing Out Grades,” whose description describes a 9,300-member strong international group of education stakeholders who are dedicated to eliminating traditional grades. Moderated by Mark Barnes, Starr Sackstein, Jennifer Hurley, and Gwen Duralek, the group exchanges best practices for evaluating work, which include low-stakes grades with opportunities to resubmit; end-of-term reflections that identify the process, progress, and products that show the grade they deserve; and capacity building for peer review and revision. What was most interesting about my observations, however, was the purposeful application of technology to meet these needs. These included collaborative digital documents, and applications such as “Explain Everything,” “Book Creator,” and “Fresh Grade” as well as e-portfolios on LMSs such as D2L Brightspace. What stood out across these exchanges was that no single technology addressed all needs, yet technology has allowed teachers to move away from the object of grading that distracts students from learning.

In an interview with Thomas, who taught the capstone English course required for all students in the TDSB, he describes navigating face-to-face teachers who do not want to share curriculum they developed; his use of Google applications to meet needs that D2L cannot fulfill; and his cynicism over the ideals of CBL, the jargon for which he doesn’t employ. I cite his reflection because it captures the tension between philosophies encouraged by think tanks and scholars, the pragmatism of administrators, and the experience of teachers on the front line:

Interviewer: If you had a choice with changes to evaluation, what would you do?

Thomas: I don’t know how you could do this without putting too much at stake, but I would have the culminating be everything for marks. Everything else would be feedback. The trouble is, if you don’t issue marks for assignments, the students aren’t going to hand it in. That’s a very hard sell, to say “Do this because it’s good for you and it’s going to help you in the end.” . . . This year I used the [online] discussion forums more as a sharing ground, so as they’re handing something in [to the assignment folder], [also] put it into the discussion forum to share feedback with each other. Get some feedback, tweak it, so that someone else has looked at it before it comes to my desk. And that only worked in the culminating activity, and that was the only time I issued marks for it; otherwise it was one person, two people posting.

We talked about his desire to conduct assessment for the sake of learning rather than the sake of grades, but the way that an education structure, which, as he says, “trickles down from university,” prevents him from fostering value for this assessment because he is competing with
students who are trained to perform for this competition. He feels marks are inflated: “That average creep [up] is very real. So, if they want to get into university to their programs, they have to play that game. Yeah. And they’re not just taking my class, they’re taking five other classes, at least in grade 12. And so, if I’m asking them to contribute to a discussion post and doing [something] meaningful, but I’m not issuing marks, but they also have to study for the physics test?” Our exchange leads us into a conversation about what it means to educate in an online environment where where assessments for learning, and assessments as learning, are precluded by assessments of learning.

   Interviewer: What does it mean to educate?

   Thomas: Ideally, I would love to instil in students a love of learning. It’s the adage that the best teacher makes herself progressively unnecessary. I think, if we put ourselves out of a job, then we’ve probably done our job. But I don’t see how you do that so long as this false economy of marks is what’s driving them and making them make their decisions.

We laugh at his reflection that no student has ever questioned him on the informal assessment of learning skills:

   Thomas: I get questions every year about, ‘Why can’t I get my marker a little bit higher?’ Yeah, no one’s ever said, ‘Can you get collaboration [learning skills] bumped up from a [satisfactory] to a [good]? My parents really want to see [good collaboration].

   Interviewer: So what function do [the evaluation of learning skills] serve for you?

   Thomas: [pauses] None. None, really. I don’t think that they really have any impact on the student. And I could be wrong. But I’ve never had a single conversation where they’ve said, “What’s up with this satisfactory?” That’s never come up. Because that’s not the currency. The currency is the percentage.

6.7 The promise of social justice education

The pragmatics of education provision make it feel impossible to imagine education otherwise. Yet, as bell hooks so forcefully argues, “[e]ducation as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it’s about a liberatory practice in the classroom” (hooks 1994, 147). When I look back to my teaching training, I remember the importance that was placed on social justice education, which centered the development of a classroom community, strengthened by building rapport with students, and the importance of mentorship for young people, particularly those
without a caring adult in their lives. Today, I wonder what we envision technology can do for us to meet these ends?

Heather Hackman (2005) describes social justice education as a model for social change that “encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (103; see also Bialystok 2014; Hytte and Bettez 2011). When social justice education is successful, students feel empowered to make change, and they feel responsible for the outcome of others. The language of social justice teaches students to engage in meaningful dialogue across difference, to critically analyze power dynamics, and to participate in a democratic state. Can e-learning facilitate the components (Figure 6.1) needed to deliver a strong social justice education?

Figure 6. 1 Five essential components for social justice education (Hackman 2005, 104)

These components do not center on content mastery, which includes the communication of factual information, historical contextualization, and a macro- to micro-content analysis. Instead, an awareness of multicultural group dynamics determine the surrounding four components:

For example, in an all-white classroom situated in an all-white community, the content presented regarding racism and white privilege will be different than it would be in a classroom with diverse racial identities, which is different, again, from a classroom with all students of color. The form and type of content that the teacher presents, the attention to how these different class compositions affect dialogue and facilitation, and the amount of time spent on content versus process will differ for these three classrooms (Hackman 2005, 108).
If we are placing the dynamics that emerge from cultural identity at the center of our teaching, how can e-learning, which dramatically limits the expression of difference, and whose content is delivered as one-size-fits-all across a diverse range of learners meet the demands of social justice? By removing community from the classroom, not only is progressive education compromised—so is the learning process itself:

A classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence. Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and only concern themselves with the professor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated by pedagogical practices. (hooks 1994, 8).

Our government mandates attendance at public school, thereby upholding public policy supporting democratic education. But by rewarding advocacy by the middle-class rather than prioritizing the needs of those who are rendered unintelligible, public education better serves university-bound learners, who are encouraged to exercise the entitlement required to navigate the bureaucracy of education. For students whose desires lie elsewhere, learning can feel irrelevant and alienating from the “real world,” particularly at a time of deepening class and racial divisions.

Riley, a guidance counsellor at a nonsemestered school, likewise expressed cynicism over the promise of e-learning, citing the impact of investing in nontraditional programming that is experiential and cooperative: “I think that education is about the whole child, so far beyond achieving credits. It’s about growth and challenge and learning and adapting, and you learn some curriculum, but I think teaching and the building that we work in is about raising kids—and hoping that we learn things along the way.” While Riley described the benefits of e-learning as those that improve the outcomes for students who may not be able to physically attend, she describes the importance of face-to-face contact for students struggling with mental health: “The social-emotional [competent to learning] is inescapable. What happens with a child when they’re trying to learn, and there are mental health concerns—who gives a hoot about the math I need to do today? It’s a secondary concern at that point. And sometimes, you know, we want to make sure kids have . . . that space where they can be comfortable.”
An e-learning teacher, Ashley, also describes the gap between offline and online models of teaching, across which she struggles to build community:

Interviewer: You reference how easy it is to have communities develop organically without you doing a lot of intervention. What is it about face-to-face experience that makes it different?

Ashley: I think students have a natural tendency to talk. And they’ll talk to whoever is next to them. Sometimes helping students make friends when they’re new to the school, it’s just about picking the right person and having them sit next to them. They can be working on the same activity, and a conversation will start, and then suddenly a person has a friend. But online we don’t have that. So, I think, we are social animals. . . . The desire to speak really builds community, at least in my experience.

Interviewer: What do you see as the purpose of education?

Ashley: I think it’s to create a rich adult. Everyone uses the word “citizen,” but I don’t like that so much.

Interviewer: Why not citizen?

Ashley: I don’t like the idea that all that you learn is to give you a job so you can pay your taxes and vote for people. I think there’s more to life than your jobs. I think there’s more to life. I think to be at school is to discover who you are, what your passions are, and hopefully in high school that will eventually turn into a career, but it should be a career that you love, not a career that you’re suited for.

When I asked Ashley to share her final thoughts with me, she asked, “What do the kids want? I feel like I haven’t been able to figure that out with e-learning.” Ultimately, this is the question driving my study, and its findings echo decades of research on education that trace the harms of meritocratic schooling, the myth of mobility, and the false promise of a technologically mediated freedom. This means, among other things, that we need to get beyond the “quick fix” mentality that characterizes so much of what passes for school reform in today’s climate (Alexander 1997). Whether institutions will listen to this call and act on the suggestions that ask after introspection and responsibility will ultimately determine the value of this study.
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7 Appendices

7.1 Appendix A: LOI of students’ day school

In order to limit the potential for identification, I have separated the names of students (protected by pseudonyms) from their enrolment in respective homeschools. Below are Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) rankings for the 20 school students were enrolled in during my study. Two students were enrolled at York Mills C.I. With the exception of Lawrence Park, which has the highest LOI in the TDSB, and all schools students attended have limited optional attendance, which is another phrase to describe schools that accept students outside of their catchment area on a ‘case by case’ basis.

With the exception of Cedarbrae C.I. and Burnhamthorpe Collegiate Adult Learning Centre, students were enrolled in the top half of schools with the highest learning opportunity (LOI 54-108). A disproportionate number were enrolled in non semestered schools, which produces timetable conflicts for students doing too poorly in a course to submit results for university admissions; this also produces an inequitable workload as an e-learning course requires more labor for non-semestered students within one semester, compared to the same course spread over the school year.

I have related profiles of each student below, with details varying depending on the content of our interviews. Because questions were semi-structured, students didn’t maintain a consistent direction with conversations, although there were similar themes that emerged throughout. These included motivations to take e-learning, family, extra-curricular activities, and personal characteristics as it was expressed by them.

Lastly, I include consent documents directed specifically to students, although I amended details for other stakeholders. What is noteworthy is the option to participate in a focus group, which I attempted to run the first semester; however, due to low turnout in the first term and insufficient availability and engagement in the second semester, I did not complete this component of the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2017 LOI Ranking of home school</th>
<th>Name of participants’ home school</th>
<th>Size of school (number of students) as of December 2017 (TDSB)</th>
<th>Semestered (S) Non Semestered (NS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>Lawrence Park C.I.</td>
<td>1162</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>Northern Secondary School</td>
<td>1776</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>York Mills C.I.</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Forest Hill C.I.</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>AY Jackson Secondary School</td>
<td>1055</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>Silverthorn C.I.</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>Richview C.I.</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Harbord C.I.</td>
<td>1051</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>Delphi Secondary Alternative School</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Martingrove C.I.</td>
<td>1177</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Northview Heights Secondary School</td>
<td>1692</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>East York C.I.</td>
<td>972</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>SATEC @ W A Porter C.I.</td>
<td>1264</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>George S. Henry Academy</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute</td>
<td>917</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Parkdale C.I.</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Burnhamthorpe Collegiate Adult Learning Centre</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cedarbrae C.I.</td>
<td>1146</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.1 Profile of schools in which participant students were enrolled
7.2 Appendix B: Student Profiles

1. Students with an asterisk (*) signify that an interview with their mother was conducted.
2. (F2F) signifies that interviews were conducted face to face, rather than on the phone or online.
3. (IEP) signifies that the students disclosed an exceptionality that has either a formal or informal Individual Education Plan (IEP).

* Alexa is a grade 12 student who is enrolled in a non-semestered school with a moderately diverse school population; she is from a working-class Portuguese family and identifies strongly with her culture. Her father works in construction, and her mother describes an upbringing that was characterized by struggle. Alexa was raised by her maternal grandmother, who lives close to their family. She describes the transition into grade one as traumatic. Since elementary school, Alexa’s mother describes their relationship to schooling authority as tense and fraught, including the year of my study in which Alexa is unable to attend school due to debilitating anxiety. Managing her mental health has been challenging throughout her school career and Alexa found her senior years especially overwhelming. In particular, her examination period was difficult because she had to balance up to 8 courses at the same time. After a sustained period of truancy in her grade 11 year, she looked to e-learning as an option for credit accumulation while at home. She took her first e-learning course in e-summer school, English, Grade 11, and is now taking The Environment and Resource Management, Grade 12; both are university preparation courses.

Adrianna was born in Vancouver, Canada. Due to her father’s business commitments, she lived in South Africa and then Italy with her family for the first five years of her life. After this time she moved to Toronto for grade one. She visits Italy frequently, which is where her mother is from; her father is from New Delhi, India. She refers to herself ethnically as “mozzarella,” and describes difficulty integrating because ethnicities in her school were segregated and she didn’t feel belonging in homogenous ethnic groups. Adrianna attended a private school that transitioned her from Italian to English because her mother did not want her enrolled in ESL classes. She started public school in grade 3. Adrianna is taking English, grade
12 University in e-learning because she is trying to improve her ‘top 6’ average to get into university. She spends most of her time in the stables, with horses and works two-three times a week at a hospital. Adrianna was one of two students who did not complete their e-learning course. She dropped it because she had to prioritize biology, which needed more attention.

**Ashley** is enrolled in the French Immersion program at her school, which she describes as very competitive. She always wanted to try e-learning and took English, Grade 11, in the summer of 2016 because of anxiety, depression, and an obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), which was impacting her performance in the classroom. She really enjoyed e-learning and decided to take Grade 12 English online again in the fall, 2016. She is also enrolled in *Indigenous Peoples: Issues in a Global Context* second semester, 2017. Her anxiety prevents her from attending school regularly and she often feels debilitated by her conditions. Ashley works as a cashier at a hardware store and enjoys customer service, which she contrasts with the difficulty of coping with schooling pressure. She wants to work with kids with disabilities. Ashley lives in a single parent household, and her mother drives a streetcar for the Toronto Transit Commission. Ashley’s mother has been an advocate for her mental health since an early age. Ashley accesses therapy regularly and has a strong support system at school, including her guidance counsellors, school social workers, and administration. She has described taking on more advocacy for herself as years have progressed.

* **Aaron** describes himself as ‘technically in grade 14,’ and describes a rough start in high school, characterized by depression and anxiety, which he accesses help for in therapy. At this stage in his school career, Aaron can no longer physically enter the building. Prior to this, he was unable to attend school for weeks at a time. Aaron describes lunch time as being the most difficult part of his day, and the library as the safest space in his school. Aaron has four more credits until graduation. Despite describing technical issues, and the lack of connection he feels to his teacher and peers, Aaron likes the flexibility of e-learning, and finds it to offer relief from the failures of face-to-face schooling. Aaron is taking English, Grade 12, University. He lives with both his parents, and his mother has actively advocated for resources that have allowed Aaron to survive his schooling experience.
(F2F) Azan took Computer Science, Grade 12, in e-learning because he couldn’t fit it into his
day school timetable. He is one of two students who dropped the course, because he found it
too easy and was unable to engage with the content; he will take it face-to-face the following
year. Azan has ADHD which interfered with his e-learning class considerably, not only
because he experienced too many distractions (e.g., social media and YouTube) but also
because he often forgot to login and was unavailable for live synchronous classes. Azan works
at a telemarketing company three times a week, and spends a lot of time online on leisure
activities. He was born in Afghanistan, speaks Uzbek, and lives with his Mom, Dad, two
brothers and sister. Azan describes the difficulty he has communicating with his parents,
because he is less fluent in Uzbek since attending school. His mother has a stronger command
of English; however, his father did not have the opportunity to learn English formally because
he had to work. Azan’s family is unable to advocate for him; however, his doctor, who is also a
Professor at the University of Toronto, frequently checks in on his well-being, and develops
strategies to manage his ADHD, all of which are important to Azan. Azan as always struggled
at school, particularly with courses that require a greater workload at home. He will re-take his
courses next year, and apply to computer sciences at local universities.

Carley took e-learning for the first time during the summer (Grade 12 Advanced Functions in
July and Grade 12 Accounting in August), because she didn’t want to take it with the teachers
in day school. She lives close to York University. Carley experiences hearing loss and uses an
FM System in school, which improves the clarity of speech while reducing background noise.
In elementary school, she found the system cool and novel, but now she finds it exhausting. In
this regard, e-learning is more accessible because Carley can rewind the content if she misses
something. Carley is very active in extra-curricular activities: SEARS drama festival,
Yearbook Club, and North York Environmental Action Team. Her marks are better than she
expected given this activity. Specifically, she enjoys script writing. Carley applied to a variety
of colleges and universities in Toronto, and achieved early admission into York University.
Her older sister is her advocate and has influenced her university choices. She wanted to attend
a local university because she wishes to be close to family.
Cienna describes herself as an introvert and independent learner. She attends an alternative school, and has accepted early admission into Physics at Waterloo. Cienna is terrified of attending Waterloo because the majority of students are white. She took e-learning because of the convenience, although she wishes there were more interaction with the teacher and community with her peers. Her first job was in a volunteer run organic community garden. She describes a lot of tension between how she sees herself and how she is seen in the world. Cienna calls herself Canadian, but doesn’t see her experiences reflected in the curriculum. Identity has been a site of significant struggle since she was young. Family plays a huge role in her life because of their emphasis on education. For instance, her grandfather sent his girls to school at a time when it was discouraged; as a result, her aunt graduated from university with a degree in the sciences; her mother graduated with a degree in the arts and later pursued a Master’s degree in philosophy; and her sister recently graduated with a degree in electrical engineering.

Erin is an extraordinarily overscheduled student, who is currently in her last year of school. She’s applying for engineering at Queen’s University, Waterloo, McGill, and the University of Toronto, but wants to get out of the city. Erin has taken e-learning before. Her first course was Civics in Grade 10, in 2015, which she was compelled to take in order to transition back to school after a year of illness. Taking e-learning during the summer increased her confidence and established a routine. She used to attend a school for the arts, but did not return after her illness because she didn’t want to feel behind her peers. She describes taking e-learning during day school not so much as a decision but rather the only option she had when she couldn’t take the classes she wanted face-to-face.

(F2F) Jena is a fifteen-year-old student taking PPZ3C: Health for Life online for the first time. She feels pressure to plan for university, and wants to pursue kinesiology. Jena recalls enrolling in e-learning after her guidance counsellor had to change her timetable, and none of the face-to-face courses she preferred were available. She took e-learning because, as she puts it, she had no choice. Jena attends a non-semestered school, and has a part-time job. She finds e-learning confusing and not user-friendly. Online, Jena doesn’t feel like she has a class and often forgets to login for days at a time. She doesn’t feel like she learns anything. Otherwise,
she enjoys her face-to-face schooling experience. For Jena, the teacher determines whether she learns or not, because they have such an important impact on her motivation. She thinks her e-learning teacher is a nice, but that there isn’t anything new being taught during synchronous sessions. Jena doesn’t take extra-curricular activities in school, but she does engage in sports outside of school. She considers herself unusual compared to her peers online, which she observes as having sought out e-learning.

(F2F) *Jordan* is taking *Indigenous Peoples: Issues in a Global Context* online. She describes herself as a third-culture kid, whose parents emigrated from Korea in early adulthood. Having grown up hearing Korean, English and Arabic, Jordan describes being overwhelmed by culture. Jordan’s parents are linguists, and though she was born in Toronto, she lived in Azerbaijan for much of her life before moving to Chicago, where she lived for four years before returning to Toronto. Home, for Jordan, is a feeling she doesn’t experience because of her transience. Jordan currently attends a high-ranking school in North York that has a largely white and East Asian population. She fast-tracked grade 11 and took e-learning to stay at home and to boost her top 6 average for grade 12 in order to be competitive for university admissions.

*Justice* is a grade 12 student who emigrated from the United Kingdom with her family in elementary school. She is now bound for university and attends a semestered high school with one of the highest rankings in the city. Justice wants to take a course that will count toward her top 6 average for university admissions. She took e-learning because she didn’t like two courses on her timetable, Geography and Business. There weren’t sufficient course options face-to-face and she didn’t want to take a course in night school. Justice needs three courses on her timetable per semester in order to continue as a full-time student at the school. She also enrolled in a U level course on ‘Families in Canada’ in the second semester through e-Learning.

*Kiran* is a high-achieving grade 11 student who attends a non-semestered school with a reputation for high academic performance and a largely homogenous school population. He is enrolled in the extended French program, participates in four to five sport teams every year,
and is exceptionally active in his community both in and outside of school. Kiran wanted to
take Introduction to Computer Science, Grade 11 in school, but it was wait-listed. As a result,
he took the semester long e-Learning option, followed by Computer Science, Grade 12, both of
which are university preparation courses. This means he had to carry an additional course load
throughout the year. His mother is a teacher who places a lot of emphasis on academics, and
his father encourages him to aim for a future in politics. At a young age, he organizes for a
major Canadian electoral party.

Marysa took English, Grade 12, University Preparation as an online course because she had a
poor experience taking it face-to-face at her home school and there were insufficient courses
available face-to-face. She also wanted to avoid presentations that made her feel vulnerable
and self-conscious. Learning online was a pleasant surprise from what she had been dreading
because the teacher was approachable, and she understood the material. During the time her e-
learning is scheduled for synchronous sessions, she is usually travelling. Marysa travels up to
an hour to school to avoid the stigma of attending her catchment school. The school she
currently attends is uniformed, homogenously Black, with a specialized Masters Program
comprised largely of white and South Asian students. Travel time is a barrier to participation in
extracurricular activities, which she has not taken part in.

(F2F) Phoebe wants to pursue a career in environmental sciences and, as a result of
insufficient face-to-face course options, she chose an online course on Environment Resource
Management, Grade 12, University Preparation. She usually spends 30 minutes of her allotted
time online, and spends the rest of her time on face-to-face courses. In her school, access to
reliable WiFi is dependent upon where you are, and so she spends a great deal of time sitting in
front of her locker on the floor to access her course. Phoebe is hard of hearing and uses an FM
System in her day school. She feels motivated to learn when she is surrounded by friends. In e-
learning, because of poor attendance in synchronous classrooms, she finds it difficult to build
connections online. Phoebe spends a lot of time in her church with her family, and she is often
in charge of activities with young people. She was also a competitive speed skater who trained
four times a week; at the time of our interview, she was taking a year-long break from training.
Phoebe has been heavily scheduled in after school activities since a young age; these included
baseball, soccer, ballet, dance, and gymnastics. Her family places emphasis on education, and she plans on following the steps of her uncle and aunt, both of whom have master’s degrees, or another uncle who has a doctorate degree. Her mother works as a registered nurse.

Rayne (F2F) is a grade 12 student, who attends a semetered school with a reputation for very high academic performance and an almost entirely homogenous school population. In grade 9, she attended a private school with a small student population; she found her transition to grade 10 difficult socially. Rayne is taking English, Grade 12, University preparation on e-learning for the first time because she wanted to take a drama course face-to-face. Only one section of drama was available, causing a conflict with her then scheduled face-to-face English class. She is not aware of who she shares space with online, with the exception of Adrianna and Raymond, who coincidentally are part of this study. Rayne is involved in a number of clubs, and has taken on leadership roles within her school community. This includes a role as editor for her school’s newspaper, the co-president of her school’s Gay Student Alliance, and a rugby coach. She describes her family as very privileged and successful; “they haven’t had to work for anything.” The story Rayne shares about her family reflect political activism and historical trauma, grounded in the holocaust.

Raymond possesses extraordinary knowledge about computers for his age. Ever since he was young he was interested in calculus. He started studying computers formally at age 12 with a private tutor and learned basic languages in programming. Later, when he tried classes in computer science, he was too advanced. He currently feels bored and miserable in school and is often distracted because he requires quiet spaces to work. Raymond works at a computer lab at home, with five computers. He took e-learning to increase his grade in English, Grade 12, University Preparation. Raymond always lived in the suburbs and feels depressed going to school in suburban spaces. He considers himself an urban person and characterizes suburban spaces as a representation of homogeneity and nuclear families. E-learning has been better than his face-to-face classes because he gets to work at his own pace in a quiet environment. Raymond doesn’t share interests with other students in his school, which feels isolating. While he hasn’t felt challenged in class, Raymond has pursued leadership in extra-curricular activities. He also used to attend an alternative school in grade 11 because he wasn’t satisfied
with the typical learning experience, but then he moved because of tension with his parents. He now lives with his aunt.

(F2F) Reign moved from a small school (200) to a large school (2000) in order to attend the gifted program. She is vocal and passionate about climate change. Her father is a corporate lawyer and her mother works as support staff in the school. Reign has found schooling difficult; at home, she strategizes how to balance her parent’s expectations which are in conflict with her interests. She completes her e-learning work in the evening, and balances this with extra-curricular activities, including set design. Reign is taking life drawing, Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology, AP World History, AP Writer’s Craft, AP English and Data Management. Reign attends a non-semestered school and is inconsistent with her attendance.

Sabry first took e-learning in accounting as a summer school course. During this study, she took *Mathematics of Data Management, Grade 12, University Preparation*, as an e-learning course because she had a timetable conflict in her day school. Even though she prefers taking courses face-to-face, she enjoys the flexibility of a spare period that is technically scheduled as e-learning on her timetable. She will apply for medical radiation sciences at McMaster, the preparation for which requires considerable time management skills that Sabry has expressed strength in. During the evening, she volunteers at a hospital two times a week, and one time a week at her local library. Her parents place emphasis on academic success at home. Sabry is a daughter of immigrants: her mother has a university education, and her father doesn’t, which motivates her to earn a degree because it was an opportunity he was not afforded. She will be the first person in her family to attain a university degree in Canada.

Tarin took e-learning because there weren’t enough classes in her day school but she prefers face-to-face classes even though she appreciates the flexibility and perceived decrease in workload. Near the end of her e-learning course, Tarin found herself drifting away from class, although she continued to submit her assignments. Tarin is also very active in extra-curricular athletics. Although she has lived in the same area her whole life, she will attend Guelph University outside of Toronto, taking Landscape Architecture. She hopes to gain independence and determine her own path. Tarin works at a grocery store 20 hours a week because she wants
to earn money. She will likely take e-learning in university because, even though she does not perceive it to be as important as ‘real’ classes, it frees up time. What makes face-to-face learning important are the connections that are forged; when the teacher cares and Tarin feels connected to her learning environment, she cares about learning. Learning for Tarin also comes from travelling: she had an opportunity to go on an exchange to Paris, which was formative to her schooling experience.

* Telina is preparing for admissions into a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. The semester we interviewed, she was taking MHF4U, Advanced Functions; HSB4M, Challenge and Change in Society; and MDM4U, Data Management, in addition to ENG4U, English, in E-Learning. She had taken e-Learning once during the summer, before she started grade 11. She decided to pursue a ENG4U online because she disliked presentations. Telina identifies a lot of anxiety when having to determine a teacher’s expectations, and then changing how she demonstrates her learning to meet inconsistent or unclear criteria. She describes herself as a person who struggles with self-identity, particularly as a young Black woman, because the “world is messy” and it is difficult to situate herself relative to the knowledge she’s acquiring online, independent of formal schooling, on social justice.
7.3 Appendix C: Parent/Student Consent Information and Forms

Interview Consent Information

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study: The intent of this research is to document the role e-learning is playing in the changing practices of students, teachers, and other stakeholders and how these changes are connected to the broader social, political, and economic world.

Who is participating in the study: Administrators, teachers, students (and their guardians), guidance counsellors and technical support personnel employed by the Toronto District School Board, in addition to employees licensed by the board.

Who is conducting this study? Beyhan Farhadi, a doctoral student at the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto.

What is the research method? Participant-observation is a research method that allows the researcher to systematically describe the events, behaviours and objects in the study. It may include, but is not limited to, any combination of the following: field notes, audio recordings, reflectivity journals, autobiography, unstructured/semi-structured interviews, and screen captures of the environment. You will be encouraged to participate actively in conversations with the researcher asking open-ended questions and by demonstrating attentive-listening skills. This will develop holistically in relation to your unique response.

Participation in this study: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any of the questions asked. You may stop or end the interview at any time. You have the right to withdraw your responses from the study within two weeks of the initial interview.

Data Collected: Data about the student, which is part of their learning progress, will be collected. This includes the time spent online, the distribution of this time in different
sections of the course, as well as their participation in public discussion forums. This information will not be used to qualify achievement in the course; rather, it’s meant to understand when and how students use the space of the classroom online.

**Risks and Benefits:** There exist minimal risks because you will not be asked to share personal information that you do not wish to share. Participants may benefit from the resulting information by sharing critical reflections about their own experiences and by helping contribute to publicly accessible knowledge about e-learning in the TDSB.

**Confidentiality:** Any information that may identify participants will be protected by a pseudonym; you will remain anonymous. All information collected will be kept secure on password-protected devices and locked filing cabinets accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings will be erased once transcribed. You may choose to have the interview transcript destroyed within five years of project completion by providing a request in writing.

I provide students with a limited guarantee of anonymity. These limits include incidents, disclosures, or suspicions of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and/or exposure to family violence or neglect. I have a legal duty to report any such incidents, disclosures or suspicions. All information collected will be kept secure on password-protected devices and locked filing cabinets accessible only to the researcher.

The research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

**Distribution of results:** The results of this study will be used in a doctoral dissertation. Results will be provided to the TDSB and schools where the study is based. Results may also be published in scholarly journals or books. A report summary will be distributed to all participants who request them and to interested staff of the TDSB.
Recording: With your permission, interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. You can request that the recording be stopped at any time during the interview, either permanently or temporarily.

Who to contact if you have questions about the study:

Principal Investigator: Beyhan Farhadi  
Research Supervisor: Dr. Mark Hunter
Email: beyhan.farhadi@mail.utoronto.ca  
Email: mark.hunter@utoronto.ca

Who to contact about your rights as a research participant in this study:

Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto
Email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca
Phone: 416-946-3273
Dear [Insert Parent Name]

I am a researcher from the University of Toronto studying how e-learning is changing the practice of education and student learning. I am interested in determining how online classrooms, as a new ‘place’ of learning, changes the behaviours of teachers, students and administrators and how these changes are connected to the broader social, political, and economic world.

This study has been approved by the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto and the External Research Review Committee of the Toronto District School Board. I will also obtain the support of the school principal to carry out this study.

This study will be conducted primarily in the online classroom for the duration of this semester. I will be collecting data using methods of participant-observation which may include: field notes, audio recordings, reflectivity journals, autobiography, unstructured/semi-structured interviews, and screen captures of your son’s online environment.

Your son will be asked to participate in 3-4 interviews online, using Adobe Connect software licensed by the board or on the phone. Each interview will last 1 hour and will take place at a time convenient for your child. Interviews will take up themes that include their experiences with curriculum delivery, learning software, and data collection; as well as their development of learning skills and interpersonal relationships in the online classroom. Questions may include information about their background (e.g., place of birth), educational history (e.g., learning exceptionalities), and opinions about e-learning. With consent, interviews will be recorded either using digital software or audio taping to ensure accuracy. At the end of the semester, your child may also be asked to participate in a more detailed focus group with 8-12 students which will be conducted at the end of the exam period. This would last approximately 20 minutes.
As a parent, you may be asked to complete a brief phone interview, lasting approximately 20 minutes, at the end of the semester.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect your son’s attendance in class or his evaluation by the school. All information collected will be strictly confidential. After all data have been collected, the students will not be identified individually. Students will have up to two weeks after the start of the study to withdraw their participation.

Please indicate on the attached form whether you permit your son to take part in this study. Your cooperation will be very much appreciated and will contribute to our understanding of how online classrooms are changing the field of education. Do not hesitate to contact me at beyhan.farhadi@mail.utoronto.ca (or [phone number]) if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,

Beyhan Farhadi

(Page 1 of 2, please see reverse)
PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

YES, I agree to allow my child ___________________________ to participate in

(son/son’s name)

☐ (a) Observation by and interviews with the researcher

☐ (b) The focus group interview

NO, I do not wish my child ___________________________ to participate in

(son/son’s name)

☐ (a) Observation by and interviews with the researcher

☐ (b) The focus group interview

Parent’s Guardian’s signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Would you consent to an approximately 20 minute conversation, on the phone, about your thoughts on e-Learning at the end of the semester? This interview, with your consent, would also be recorded for accurate transcription. All information collected will be kept confidential and you will not be identified.

☐ YES, I agree to an interview with the researcher

☐ NO, I do not agree to an interview with the researcher.

If YES, please include the best way to reach you by email (if available) and phone:

Name:_____________________________________________

Email address: ______________________________________

Phone number: ______________________________________
Interview Consent Form

[Student]

This interview is part of a project called “Learners in a Digital Age: An Ethnographic Study of e-Learning in the Toronto District School Board.” The project is being conducted by Beyhan Farhadi from the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto. This project examines the role of e-learning in the practice of education; it focuses specifically on the changing nature of student learning. Beyhan is interested in determining how online classrooms, as a new ‘place’ of learning, changes the behaviour of teachers, students, service providers and administrators and how these changes are connected to broader social, political, and economic worlds. Topics for discussion include experiences taking e-learning courses, more general experiences with schooling, and perspectives on the relationship between these experiences and social, political and economic worlds.

I understand that, as a participant of this study, I will be taking part in an interview in which I will be asked to respond to questions about my experiences using the online classroom, including curriculum delivery, learning software, and data collection; as well as the development of learning skills such as self-direction, teamwork, and organization. I will be asked to discuss my social experiences, my personal background, my educational history, and opinions about e-learning. I understand that I am not required to participate in the interview, and that I will not be penalized if I decide not to participate. I understand that I may withdraw at any time during the interview and up to two weeks following the first interview. I understand that I am free to respond to questions in whatever way I choose.

I understand that the method of study is participant-observation, which means that the researcher will not only participate in my learning environment, but that she will also observe me in the classroom. These observations may be captured as data using field notes, digital/ audio recordings, reflectivity journals, autobiography, unstructured/semi-structured interviews, and screen captures of my online environment. I understand that the researcher will collect data available from my user progress online to understand when and how I use the online classroom.

I understand that the interviews will inform a study about e-learning and education in the Toronto District School Board and that the results will be used in a doctoral dissertation, and may be
published in scholarly journals or books. I understand that the interviews will inform a report to the TDSB and employees contracted by the TDSB about the strengths and challenges facing e-learning.

I understand that there will be 3-4 interviews and that each interview will take about an hour. I understand that interviews will be confidential and that my identity will remain anonymous. With consent, the interviews will be recorded so that the information can be later transcribed. All information will be stored securely and hard copies will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the researcher. No information gathered during interviews will be traceable to anonymous participants. I understand I may choose for transcripts to be destroyed five years after completion of this study, once all data has been transferred to electronic form.

(Page 1 of 2, please see reverse)
I have read and understood the conditions under which I will participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form and I agree to participate.

Name (please print) _____ Date _____

Signature

Optional: In addition to agreeing to participate in this study, I have read and understood the conditions under which this interview will be electronically/digitally recorded and transcribed. I agree to the digital and audio-recording of this interview for research purposes outlined in the consent form.

Name (please print) _____ Date _____

Signature

Optional: Contact Information, to be used only for providing a copy of the summary report or to request clarification on my remarks during the interview.

Email

Mailing Address

(Please 2 of 2)
7.4 Appendix D: Students: Interview Questions

Questions related to educational and personal history

a. Can you describe what your experience at school has been like? (further prompting will ask students to use adjectives)

b. How would your friends describe you?

c. How would your teachers describe you?

d. If you need help in school, who/where do you usually go to for help? Why?

e. How do you usually spend your time outside of school?

Questions related to pedagogy

a. How did you learn about e-learning?

b. Can you tell me about what you imagined learning online would be like before you started? Have you ever talked with others who had experienced it before?

c. What have been your first impressions working online?

d. Where do you usually access your course material? When? How has that been working for you?

e. Student conducts a guided-tour of their classroom (asking guided grand-tour and task-related questions)

Questions related to governance

a. Can you tell me a little about your teachers this semester?

b. Tell me about your relationship with your: guidance counselors; special education teachers; administrators

c. What would you consider ‘private information’ at School? Home? Online?
d. How do you maintain your privacy at: Home? School? Online?

e. Is privacy important to you?

f. What can get students into trouble in the classroom? (expand to online classroom)

i. How do (teachers, administrators, peers, caregivers) respond when…
7.5 Appendix E: Interview Guide, Additional Stakeholders

7.5.1.1 Key questions for administrators

1. How did you become involved with e-learning at the TDSB? What experiences did you bring to this position and what experiences have you gained since you started?

2. What challenges have you faced, both professionally and personally, with this position?

3. What potential do you see e-learning having in helping students succeed compared to face-to-face classrooms? How do you define success, personally?

4. What qualities do you think successful e-learners share? What common struggles do you observe?

5. Ideally, how would you envision a ‘caring and safe school,’ and what role does ‘education’ as it is formally defined play in fostering this environment?

7.5.1.2 Key questions for teachers

1. How did you get involved in e-learning?

2. Can you describe the transition between teaching face-to-face and teaching online? What were some challenges and successes you faced?

3. What sort of training did you receive to teach online? Did you think this was sufficient? Explain.

4. How would you describe your teaching philosophy? What role does technology play in this?

5. What challenges/successes did you observe your students having? How do you accommodate/modify curriculum & teaching strategies for students with exceptionalities and English Language Learners?
7.5.1.3 **Key questions for guidance counselors**

1. How do students apply for e-learning and how are they approved?

2. How has having e-learning as an option for students hindered and/or benefitted your practice as a counselor?

3. Administratively, what have been some of the successes and challenges in the implementation of e-learning?

4. Are there procedures in place for students requiring an accommodation or modification? Could you describe them? What are some areas of improvement?

7.5.1.4 **Key questions for technical personnel**

1. Can you describe the process of producing and maintaining this software?

2. What are typical questions you have to field in your work?

3. Who usually asks these questions?

4. How has the nature of inquiries & volume of calls since you started working changed?
## 7.6 Appendix F: Aggregated Learning Analytics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Code</th>
<th># of Logins</th>
<th>Average Time Spent on Content (HRS)</th>
<th>% of topics reviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENG4U - SEM1 (CIS, Vietnam Students)</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPZ3C - SEM1</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
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<td>ENG4UE - SEM 2</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDM4U - SEM 2 (CIS, Vietnam Students)</td>
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<td>55%</td>
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<td>NDW4ME - SEM1</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2 Aggregated learning analytics by course code.