

BLACK GIRLS NEED LOVE TOO: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Black girls in the French immersion program are silent scholars. They continue to remain under the radar, significantly under-researched and hidden behind the generalization of Black students without considerations for the intersectionality of race and gender. Using the narratives of four Black girls through semi-structured interviews, this thesis addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of four Black girls in Southern Ontario's French immersion programs. By thematically analyzing their experiences using Black Canadian feminism, raciolinguistics, and intersectionality, we can critically assess their experiences and provide strategies to counter colonial institutions and policies. The findings reveal insights into their identities, sense of belonging, representation, and treatment, and how these themes impact their educational experiences. The experiences of these Black girls highlight several key areas for improvement and offer opportunities to enhance educational experiences for Black girls by informing more equitable policies and practices in the French immersion program.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IV
LIST OF FIGURES.....	VII
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM.....	4
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	5
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	5
THESIS OUTLINE.....	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	9
THE COMMONALITY OF BLACK STUDENTS.....	9
THE FOCUS OF BLACK BOYS	10
BLACK GIRLS IN EDUCATION	11
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM.....	13
THE BLACK EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM	14
ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION.....	15
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	18
BLACK CANADIAN FEMINISM	18
RACIOLINGUISTICS	19
INTERSECTIONALITY	20
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES.....	24
RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY	24
PARTICIPANTS	26

DATA COLLECTION	27
INTERVIEW PROCEDURE.....	27
DATA ANALYSIS.....	28
LIMITATIONS	30
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	33
REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR.....	33
<i>Racial representation of teachers</i>	34
<i>Classroom Diversity</i>	36
<i>Diverse Representation in Curriculum & Planning</i>	38
ANCHORING OURSELVES	40
<i>Support Systems</i>	40
<i>Parental & class impact</i>	42
<i>Interactions</i>	44
<i>Sentiments about the FI program</i>	47
THE MASKS WE WEAR	48
<i>Racial and Linguistic Identity</i>	48
THE WEIGHT OF SILENCE	52
<i>Racial Discrimination</i>	53
BLACK GIRLS’ RECOMMENDATIONS	57
<i>Twee’s suggestions</i>	57
<i>Demeyah’s suggestions</i>	57
<i>Felicia’s suggestions</i>	58
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION	60
INTERPRETATIONS	60
IMPLICATIONS	65
<i>Teacher Diversity Gap</i>	65

<i>Anti-Black Racism Teacher Education</i>	66
LIMITATIONS & REFLECTIONS	67
<i>Geographical Region</i>	67
<i>Socioeconomic Factors & Family Support</i>	67
<i>Confidentiality</i>	68
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION	70
RESEARCHER’S RECOMMENDATION	70
FINAL THOUGHTS.....	73
REFERENCES	75
APPENDIX A	85
APPENDIX B	87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	22
Figure 2	26
Figure 3	29
Figure 4	31

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis project amplifies the voices of marginalized girls whose lived experiences are often ignored and silenced in a patriarchal system. In a society where girls are raised and boys are loved, the stereotypical personality qualities ascribed to women and girls, like being passive and nurturing, perpetuate inequalities and gender roles. These dominant cultural norms can be particularly harmful to those who do not conform, labelling them as unwomanly, mannish, or unfeminine. Terms that can be damaging to their identities and contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of their marginalization. Black women know these sexist remarks all too well. In an intersectional approach, the dominant cultural norms that are prescribed to women, do not apply to Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). In Canadian society, the construction of identity is associated with being White, and of European origin, typically British or French, the basis for which colonial imagery is perpetuated to enforce the racial, and cultural superiority (Madibbo, 2021). Through this racialist lens, Black women, the non-dominant group, are regarded as lesser than with “women” correlating solely to White women. This distinction means that the negative stereotypes for women who do not conform to the dominant norms are the normative stereotypes for Black woman regardless of conformity. In an attempt to evade negative labelling, Black women engage in code-switching to assimilate into the dominant White culture. In fear of being perceived or racially discriminated against, Black women have tendencies to conceal aspects of their personality and identity to avoid discrimination and unequal treatment. The same applies for Black girls who are enrolled in institutions that ascribe the same White supremacist ideologies through curriculum and staffing. Founded on Eurocentrism, “a sustained and intentional focus and valorization of cultural norms emanating from a European tradition” (Masson & Cote, 2024, p. 118), Black girls continue to suffer in a system that was not built for

them and continue to promote exclusionary practices. Therefore, Black girls experience “discrimination not only based on their race, but on their gender as well” (Newton, 2023, p. 164). They are left to bear the weight and endure the consequences of intersecting oppressions (McPherson, 2020).

My own experiences serve as inspiration for this research. My parent’s immigrated from Jamaica to Canada in the 1980s. I am a first-generation student with parents who did not attend post-secondary education. My educational journey began in French immersion in Scarborough, Ontario, from kindergarten through grade five, and continued in Hamilton from grades five to twelve. In Scarborough, a multicultural city, I was surrounded by a diverse student population, which allowed me to feel represented and understood. However, upon moving to Hamilton, I found myself in a predominantly White school, one of the two Black families in the entire school, alongside a friend who would later become my lifelong sister. Being one of few Black students in my classes or school, would follow me until my post-secondary. It wasn't until I entered my second degree, a Bachelor of Education at the University of Windsor, that I finally had a Black teacher. As I grew older, I began to realize how I had internalized many of the racial microaggressions I had encountered throughout my life, and I became increasingly aware of the lack of racial representation and Eurocentric curriculum that had shaped my educational experience. This reflection led me to question how the Shayna’s of today experience French immersion programs and whether things have changed. Since few literatures focuses on Black girls’ educational experiences, I sought to explore how the systemic inequities that I experienced continue to impact current Black girl students.

To understand their experience and the effect these systems have on Black girls, research is needed. The unique intersection of race and gender, however, is often overlooked and

categorized under general labelling of “Black students” as a homogenous group. In this educational landscape, curricula and policies that often fail to account for the needs of diverse learners, pose significant barriers to the success of Black girls. As noted by scholars like McPherson (2020) and George (2020), without a nuanced understanding of these students’ realities, educational strategies risk perpetuating systemic inequities. For example, in the context of French-as-a-second-language teaching, Black girls remain invisible. The French immersion (FI) program, once built for elite students (Kunna, 2020), is now “an integral part of Canada’s educational landscape” (Bourgoin, 2016, p.43). The program, aimed at fostering bilingualism and cultural competence among students, often reflect broader systemic issues of inequality and underrepresentation (Kunna, 2020; Davis, 2020). For Black girls, navigating the complexities of language acquisition in a predominantly White and Eurocentric educational system can exacerbate feelings of isolation and marginalization. Research on students in French immersion programs often overlooks the specific challenges faced by Black students, particularly Black girls. Instead, it tends to generalize experiences across racialized groups, failing to address the unique realities of any one group. Thus, the voices of Black girls and their unique experiences on equity and inclusion are often unheard. By employing the frameworks of Black Canadian feminism, raciolinguistics, and intersectionality, this thesis aims to explore how race, gender, class, and language intersect to influence the educational journeys of Black girls in FI. Specifically, this study seeks to address this critical gap by amplifying the lived experiences of four Black girls enrolled in French immersion programs in Southern Ontario. Through semi-structured interviews, this study examines Black girls’ sentiments about enrollment, belongingness, support and treatment, as well as the effects of systemic structures within the education system that shape their experiences.

Background of the Problem

In Ontario, there is a dearth of research on Black students. As Canada continues to expand with emerging diverse demographics, it is important that policies and curriculum are modelled to include all students for their success. As it stands, the lack of research that pays attention to intersectionality, systemic discrimination and Eurocentric curriculum has lasting effects on Black students. In society, girls are often overlooked because of their ability to be self-sufficient, they are regarded as being ok and thus, left out of the equation (George, 2020). From a Black Canadian feminist perspective, Black girl students altogether are ignored and left out of the data (George, 2020; McPherson 2020). As James (2021) found, Black girls tend to be less visible to teachers. The current policies that are created in the guise of anti-Black racism and equity, diversity, and inclusion are not accurate, nor do they represent the total population of students. Black girls have very different experiences than other races and sexes, and the inability to isolate data for Black girl students means that they remain excluded and underrepresented in the data. Without visible minority data, institutions are unable to identify and address the barriers of different groups and the systems and structures that create and sustain inequities (Smith, 2021). Existing research on “Black students” often focuses on males, neglecting the intersectionality of race and gender that shapes schooling experiences and outcomes (George, 2020). In addition, when looking at second language (L2) education, specifically the French immersion program, within Southern Ontario matters of inclusion become less viable. As Kunnas (2023) notes, White enrolment in the program is prevalent and known and yet there remain relatively few studies in which race is shown to intersect with French immersion (FI) indicating a gap and a demand for this study.

Purpose of the study

This study serves to address the gap in current education research by reporting on the experiences of Black girls. Currently, data continues to focus on non-Black students and where Black students are studied, Black boys remain the monolith for all Black students (Wane, 2013). Understanding the experiences of Black girls may aid in the improvement of their educational experiences and will contribute to countering the dearth in current scholarship. This research seeks to learn about the experiences of Black girls: how they feel being in the French immersion program, their belongingness, how supported they feel, and how they are being treated. What are the effects of the current education system on Black girls, specifically related to French-as-a-Second Language programs? How does anti-racism policy affect them? What more could be done?

Research questions

My central research question is:

1. What are the lived experiences of Black girls in French Immersion in Ontario?

My sub-questions include:

1. How do Black girls express their sentiments about being enrolled in the French immersion program, their belongingness, how supported they feel, and how they are being treated?
2. What are the effects of the current education system on Black girls, specifically related to French-as-a-Second Language programs?

Significance of the Study

This study is crucial for addressing the ongoing disparities faced by Black girls in educational settings, particularly within French immersion programs. By shedding light on their lived experiences, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how intersectionality—particularly the intersections of race, gender, class, and language—operate to influence educational outcomes. The findings highlight the urgent need for disaggregated race-based data. Marginalized persons, people of color, and other terms associated to visible minority are not representative of the experiences of Black students, specifically Black girls. There is a need for data to represent all individuals in FI to foster an inclusive environment that nurtures the unique identities of Black girls. Furthermore, this research has practical implications for educators and policymakers, who can use the insights to develop and implement more equitable educational practices that include intersectional outlooks. By amplifying the voices of Black girls, this study advocates for systemic changes that address racial inequities in education (McPherson, 2020). Finally, it opens avenues for future research into effective pedagogical strategies and supports that can further enhance the educational experiences of Black students in diverse learning environments.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis research project. It introduces the topic, the background of the problem, purpose of the study, and research question. It sets the tone, making way to amplify the marginalized voices of Black girls and addressing the gaps in current research.

Chapter 2 is a literature review that examines existing scholarship on Black students, Black boys, Black girls, the history of French immersion, the Black experience in French immersion, and anti-racist education, emphasizing the scarcity of research specifically on Black girls in French immersion. This chapter frames the gaps that currently exist discussing intersectionality, systemic racism, and educational inequality.

Chapter 3 describes the theoretical frameworks of Black Canadian feminism (Wane, 2013), raciolinguistics (Rosa & Flores, 2017), and intersectionality (Evans-Winter, 2021). It explains how these frameworks are applied to this research, providing a lens through which the experiences of Black girls in the French immersion program are analyzed. Black Canadian feminism offers insight into the intersection of race and gender, while raciolinguistics helps explore race and language-based discrimination.

Chapter 4 details the methodology and procedures used to conduct my research, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis techniques. It explains my phenomenological qualitative approach (Bliss, 2016) used to gather and interpret the lived experiences of Black girls in French immersion programs. It justifies why this approach is suitable for capturing the depth and complexity of their experiences.

Chapter 5 provides a thematic analysis of the key findings as of a result of data collected about participants' lived experiences. From their recounts, derived four themes: *(1) Reflection in the Mirror (2) Anchoring Ourselves (3) The Masks We Wear (4) The Weight of Silence*. These four

emerging themes accompanied by their recommendations, explore how Black girls perceive their representation in FI, their sense of belonging, their identities, and their (unequal) treatment.

Chapter 6 discusses and interprets the findings considering the theoretical frameworks and literature review. It draws on the connections between the lived experiences of the four Black girl participants in French immersion programs looking at the intersections of broader social and educational issues of race, gender, class, and language.

Chapter 7 concludes by providing a summary of the key points of the research. It demonstrates the significance of their unique experiences and how it can address and inform current education practices. It offers recommendations for policy and curriculum, particularly the need for intersectional data and promoting inclusivity and anti-racism in French immersion programs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review looks at the relevant scholarship on the experiences of Black girls in French Immersion (FI) programs in Southern Ontario. Despite the growing diversity in Canadian classrooms, there remains a significant gap in research specifically addressing the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within educational settings. This chapter focuses on several key areas: 1) the generalization of Black students; 2) the focus of research on Black boys; 3) Black girls in education; 4) the historical context of the French Immersion program; 5) the Black experience within the French Immersion program; 6) and Anti-Racist education. Each of these key areas points to understanding how systemic factors influence the schooling experiences of Black girls, ultimately highlighting the need for more nuanced research that acknowledges and amplifies their voices. This literature review aims to provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of Black girls' lived experiences in FI, advocating for equitable and inclusive education that recognizes and address their unique challenges and strengths.

The Commonality of Black Students

Black people are the third largest visible minority group in Canada and face significant social disadvantages due to race (Lalonde et. al, 2008). As it stands, in Canada, Black students continue to face racial disadvantages and discrimination that impact their schooling experiences, yet there remains a missing link (Linton & McLean, 2017). The issues Black students encounter is often treated as a monolith failing to consider the ways in which oppression intersects their lives (McPherson, 2020). The stereotype of Black students as underachievers occurs in the social context of schooling, teacher's attitudes and practices, and how Black youth view themselves, interpret and act on those interpretations (James, 2021). As George (2020) reports, the Greater

Toronto Area school boards' commitment to anti-Black racism falls short as it lacks substantive quantitative race and gender-based data. Reports on Black students often rely on data from focus groups that primarily focus on males. Intersectionality plays a fundamental role in the shaping of school experiences and outcomes, something not otherwise accounted for (George, 2020).

Intersectionality allows us to name racism while acknowledging that it is not the only contributing factor, but one actor among many (Harris & Leonardo, 2018). With these markers, educators cannot evade the question of diversity and its impact. The data gathered on their lived experiences in schools, based on race and ethnicity, will allude to more than a simple generalization to all Black students (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008).

The Focus of Black boys

Researchers have noted that the ongoing concern about the education of Black boy students has contributed to a dearth of scholarship relating to the experiences of Black girl students (James, 2021). The failure to examine the importance of intersectionality with race and gender leads to the oversimplification of theory and the perpetuation of bias in one area of identity (Howard, 2008). In educational contexts, Black female students are often silenced to focus on the most privileged group member, which is usually Black male students (George, 2020). For example, the policies in Ontario lack an intersectional perspective and do not directly reflect the experiences of all Black students (George, 2020; Diallo, 2016). Furthermore, the rhetoric of the 'endangered' Black male renders Black girls as less visible in comparison (Butler, 2018). Similarly, in the era of "Black lives Matter" or "BLM" the experiences of young women of colour are overshadowed by that of Black boys (Evans-Winter, 2017, p. 420).

Black Girls in Education

Black girls are often unfairly characterized as lacking morals and values and are considered an inherent threat (Evans-Winter, 2017). Negative stereotypes such as being loud or more mature for their age, feature implicit bias that subjects them to differential treatment (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017). Implicit or unconscious bias involves the recognition or construction of a social group, the association of a stereotype with that group, and lastly, a positive or negative association or attitude alongside the stereotype (Kahn, 2017). Non-Black individuals, unconsciously create ideas of Black girls without first getting to know them or their abilities. The social group most impacted by negative implicit bias are Black people (Kahn, 2017). These overlooked assumptions regarding Black female participation within Canada's education system reflect broader societal issues that shape educational experiences (James, 2021). Currently, there remains a limited number of research studies that analyze the experiences of Black girls in Ontario schools (McPherson, 2020; George, 2020). When considering the French Immersion context, the gap is even more pronounced, noting the need for research in this field.

Black girls occupy a unique position in society, facing multiple societal constructs of oppression—sexism as girls and racism as Black individuals, marking them differently from their peers, leading to multiple forms of oppression (Presiado & Frieson, 2021; McPherson, 2020). By applying intersectionality, to examine the experiences of Black girls, we can begin to address the systemic barriers including racial disadvantages and discrimination that affect their schooling experiences. As it stands, Black girls are not “checked for” in education: they are neither included in physical spaces nor are their perspectives presented in data (George, 2020; McPherson, 2020). This lack of visibility perpetuates policies and practices that fail to meet their

needs, leaving them marginalized within a Eurocentric Canadian educational framework (Choudhury, 2021).

Rollock (2007) notes that being female predisposes girls to being motivated, focused, and organized, and thus, subject to less monitoring and rendering them less visible in school environments. Black girls in comparison to their White counterparts are testing below average. However, in comparison to Black boys, they are seemingly achieving academic success. This reading success of race and gender over-emphasizes Black girls as successful with already low established expectations of Black students (Rollock, 2007). Black girls become ghosts in the shadows of White girls and Black boys; they are left to cope with their oppression on their own (McPherson, 2020).

Furthermore, Black girls are perceived as being more socially mature and self-reliant (Epstein et al., 2017). This process of viewing Black girls as less innocent of needing less protection (Epstein et al., 2017), and “as more mature than they are... [is the] process of adultification that leads to a disproportionate amount of discipline and punishment when compared to both their Black boy and white girl peers” (Bailey, 2021, p. 54). Educational staff carry these biases and make perceptions of Black girls that create an unsafe space. As a result, these unsafe spaces sustain an environment where Black girls diminish their abilities for fear of being cast alongside these stereotypes and that they may be subjugated to harsh punishments. In one example, McPherson (2020) found that her participants were fearful of being isolated or of receiving harsh criticism for speaking out and thus, preferred not to participate in class. Therefore, the adultification bias leads Black girls to be more culpable for their actions and may be a contributing factor to disproportionately negative treatment in schools (Epstein et al., 2017). This process negates the childhood of Black girls and can be seen in other public systems in which

systemic racism and similar inequities exist like the school-to-prison-pipeline that shows the disparities in suspension and expulsion in Black girls (Crenshaw, 2017). As a result, a distinction is made between the terms “Black girls” and “young Black woman” to clarify the language used when referring to young Black adolescents. Thus, throughout this thesis, female Black adolescents between the ages of 13 to 16 will be addressed as Black girls to counter the adultification bias. True intersectional analysis requires the decentering of not only Whiteness, but also males. This intersectional perspective is where we are failing, because in our current discourses that centre on Black Greater Toronto Area students, in our attempts to decentre Whiteness, we often fail to also decentre maleness. (George, 2020).

The Historical Context of the French Immersion Program

In 1965, the first bilingual class was created in Quebec to English-speaking protestants, thanks to devoted mothers who sought after bilingual education for their children (Jezer-Moton, 2020). Later, in 1969, the *Official Languages Act* (OLA) was enacted, declaring both English and French Canada's two official languages (Lecomte, 2021). For English-speaking Canadians, French has been considered an essential component of Canadian identity (Wernicke, 2022). Integration into Canadian society occurs through membership in one of two language groups. The history of these language groups, known as the Anglophones of British origin and Francophones of French origin, have extended in Canada to mean persons with English-language roots and persons with French-language roots (Wernicke, 2022). Since the OLA, FI was and continues to be offered in many English-language schools across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022).

There are three French-as-a-second language (FSL) programs offered in the English-language boards in Ontario. In core French, a mandatory program and typically beginning in the fourth grade, students learn French as a subject. Extended French, a step above core, students learn French as a subject and take at least one other subject where French is the language of instruction. Lastly, the French immersion program where students learn French as a subject and take two or more other subjects where French is the language of instruction (Government of Ontario, 2022). French immersion is intended for students whose first language (L1) is not French where the goal is for students to acquire FSL skills (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Across Canada, “FI programs have a generalized elite status within the public education system” (Kunnas, 2023, p. 47). Students in FI are often believed to be better students in terms of academics, attitude, and behaviour (Foster, 1998). Supportive families are more likely to be middle-class, making them more likely to achieve in the program than their lower-class peers (Kunnas, 2023). In addition, Ryan and Sinay (2020) report that most FSL students come from two-parent households, have parents with higher levels of education, and belong to a higher socio-economic status. Indeed, being in FI there is cultural and linguistic capital via registration through not only the English language group but the French language group as well (Kunnas, 2023). FI continues to be elitist and exclusionary where access to bilingual education is rarely guaranteed and if so, carries systemic and financial barriers (Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023).

The Black Experience Within the French Immersion Program

In French immersion education in Ontario, there remains a gap in literature that reflects the experiences of racialized students. Ontario has some of the largest multiracial communities and largest school boards in Canada, yet there is little research that examines the distinct experiences

of students in French immersion with attention to the intersection of race, gender, class, and language (Dei, 2000). With French immersion being a publicly funded program, there needs to be a plethora of literature, including attention to the intersection of these demographics, to better tailor the program to the needs of all the students (Kunnas, 2023). Davis (2023) writes that early research includes very few studies of multilingual students with a continued focus on English-speaking, White, middle-class students. In so far, the ratio for boys and girls in non-immersion programs are equal in all provinces whereas in FI, girls account for 3 out of 5 students in all provinces except for Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2004). With the lack of research on racialized students, and Black students in particular, it is difficult to determine the areas for improvements. With the emergence of various policies and documents in different public-school boards across Ontario that claim to be addressing anti-Black racism, and have year-long plans in place to do so, the question must be asked, who do they include? Literature focuses namely on multilingual students or the lack of data on racialized students. The learning and inclusion of racialized students remain unexamined in Canadian FI programs (Davis, 2023). Specifically, Black students remain severely under researched.

Anti-Racist Education

In 2016, the Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD) was re-established to lead the Ontario government's anti-racism initiatives, the aim of the program was to "eliminate systemic racism in government policies, decisions and programs" (Government of Ontario, 2016). It was only in 2017 that the Ontario government created anti-racism legislation, the *Anti-Racism Act, 2017*. This Act outlines the commitment, "to eliminating systemic racism and advancing racial equity." (Government of Ontario, 2015). In this act, it is a requirement for public sector organizations to

collect, analyze and report race-based data (Southern Ontario Universities' Network. n.d). It was also in 2017 that Ontario released a three-year Education Equity Action Plan to identify and eliminate inequities in the education system (Government of Ontario, 2020). In 2021, as a result of these initiatives, the Ministry of Education released a Board Improvement and Equity Plan (BIEP) tasked the school boards to collect voluntary student demographic data by Sept 2022 (People for Education, 2023). In the People for Education report of 2023, they noted that 40% of Ontario school boards have published anti-racism statements on their websites and 26% have equity policies that do not include or mention race or racism. George (2020) states, that despite the Ontario government's anti-Black racism strategies, they do not address the intersectionality's of Black men and women. As James (2020) states, educational policies include cultural differences while failing to acknowledge or address race and racism. The Eurocentrism bias remains and is evident in curriculum perpetuating Anglo-Canadian values and norms. This results in racialized students, including Black students, being categorized and represented as "other." The collection of disaggregated race-based data is a fundamental step in providing evidence on where gaps exist and where attention is needed (People for Education, 2023).

In conclusion, this literature review highlighted the critical issues surrounding the experiences of Black girls in FI, explaining the pervasive generalization of Black students, the lack of focus on Black girls in educational research, and the systemic barriers they face. This chapter serves as a foundational framework for addressing systemic inequalities that persist in education, emphasizing the need for disaggregated race-based data and culturally relevant pedagogies. Moving forward, chapter three will speak to the theoretical frameworks of Black Canadian feminism, raciolinguistics, and intersectionality, offering a lens through which to analyze the

lived experiences of Black girls in the French immersion program. By grounding the research in these frameworks, we can better understand and advocate for the unique needs of Black girls.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter describes three theoretical frameworks that frame this study: 1) Black Canadian feminism (Wane, 2013); 2) raciolinguistics (Rosa & Flores, 2017); and 3) intersectionality (Evans-Winter, 2021). I explain how these frameworks are applied to this research, providing a lens through which the experiences of Black girls in the French immersion program are analyzed. Black Canadian feminism offers insight into the intersection of race and gender, amplifying the voices of Black girls' experiences, while raciolinguistics helps explore race and language-based discrimination. These frameworks serve to highlight the necessity for more inclusive research regarding marginalized groups within French immersion (FI).

Black Canadian Feminism

Black girls are not being researched in education because they are disproportionately represented in education. They suffer from the realities of both racial and gender evasiveness and discrimination. Black girls are not included in research that features girl students nor are they presented in research for Black students. Black Canadian feminism seeks to disrupt the notion of Black boys as the monolith in Black student research and the lack of intersection of race, by addressing the difference of gender and including Black girls in the literature (Linton, 2017; Wane, 2013). The role of race is often overlooked in feminist theory when describing the experiences of women (Crenshaw, 1989).

Black Canadian Feminism is a theoretical tool to analyze the experiences of women who are not given representation in mainstream feminism and are therefore, ignored. Feminism, a political ideology, was first introduced in the late nineteenth century based on White middle-class, heterosexual women whose lived experiences are analyzed without interrogation of race or

colour, ability, religion, language, and other identifiers. (LeGates, 2001; Wane, 2013). The challenge lies in acknowledging women's diversity while simultaneously describing the oppression they experience as a group, and the failure of mainstream feminism to examine the complexities of race, class, and gender, as well as the oversimplifications of feminism and biases about women based on single areas of identity (LeGates, 2001; Howard, 2008). The lived experiences and historical and contemporary forces of African Canadians are not adequately reflected or addressed through Western feminist movements or mainstream feminism (Wane, 2013). Although the Black experience cannot be universalized, the systems of oppressions and systemic barriers can be felt nationally--albeit provincially. Through an active focus on Black women and by extension, Black girls in Canada, an understanding and analysis can occur to address the historical and current violence in the education systems. The experiences of Black girls and young women in school can be examined further by their intersecting marginalized identities (McPherson, 2020). Similarly, this exclusion from feminism is also present within FI. The continuity of systemic racism presents across both racial and linguistic lines. Using a Black Canadian Feminism lens to analyze FI contexts will highlight how these exclusionary practices present themselves and the effects they have on Black girls.

Raciolinguistics

Uniquely, the Canadian education system is rooted in its two official colonial languages, both of which are required subjects and languages of instruction depending on the province. Using a raciolinguistics perspective, means to understand the interplay of language and race within the historical context of colonialism and how these colonial distinctions continue to shape linguistic and racial formations (Rosa & Flores, 2017). Therefore, raciolinguistics (Rosa & Flores, 2020)

helps us understand the relationship between these two languages, English, and French, and what that means for Black girls in relation to the systems of colonialism and institutional racism.

When raciolinguistics are combined with Black Canadian feminism, what we can expect is an analysis of the systemic barriers, colonial education, and their consequences on the academic success of Black girls.

Black women and girls tend to be identified by their race and by extension are viewed as subhuman or inferior (Rosa & Flores, 2020). In these experiences, Black women are often compared to stigmatized ideologies of European colonialism, where colonial languages like English and French are upheld as superior and viewed through a raciolinguistic lens. Raciolinguistics asserts that racialized students or non-White students are viewed as linguistically deficient (Rosa & Flores, 2020) regardless of their language proficiency. These harmful stereotypes and biases further perpetuate White supremacist ideologies, as they assume that non-White individuals are uneducated and inferior. Speaking ‘standard’ colonial languages is associated with intelligence and status, while non-European or non-standard vernaculars are stigmatized and viewed as inferior. Therefore, in using what is considered historically and socially as only belonging to White Europeans, Black people are often applauded for speaking “properly” as opposed to using vernacular or lexifier languages. Raciolinguistic theories enable an understanding of how French immersion programs have historically been exclusionary, catering to the elite – namely White, middle-class students (Kunnas, 2023; Davis, 2023).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework used to understand the multifaceted ways that social categories – such as race, gender, class, and more – overlap and intersect shaping an

individual or group perspective (Evans-Winters, 2021). First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality was used to show the ways in which Black women's experiences were and are distinct from both White women and Black men. In this research, intersectionality allows for a deeper understanding of how the combination of racism and sexism affects Black girls in the French immersion program. Crenshaw's (1989) theory provides a lens through which to examine how Black girls navigate marginalization and how the intersection of their identities influences their experiences in a system shaped by colonialism.

The intersection is an important distinction to make because current scholarship on girls does not consider the intersection of race and gender and how that ties into Black girls' education. As Evans-Winters (2021) writes, "Black girls' schooling experiences unfold differently from that of White girls" (p. 2). Black girls do not experience differential treatment because they are Black, nor because they are girls, but because they are Black girls – an identity that is marginalized at multiple levels within the education institution that historically was designed for the privilege White, middle-class, male students (Wane, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). When Black girls do not match the standards of White femininity to which they are held, they are seen as deficient (Allen & Hilliard, 2022).

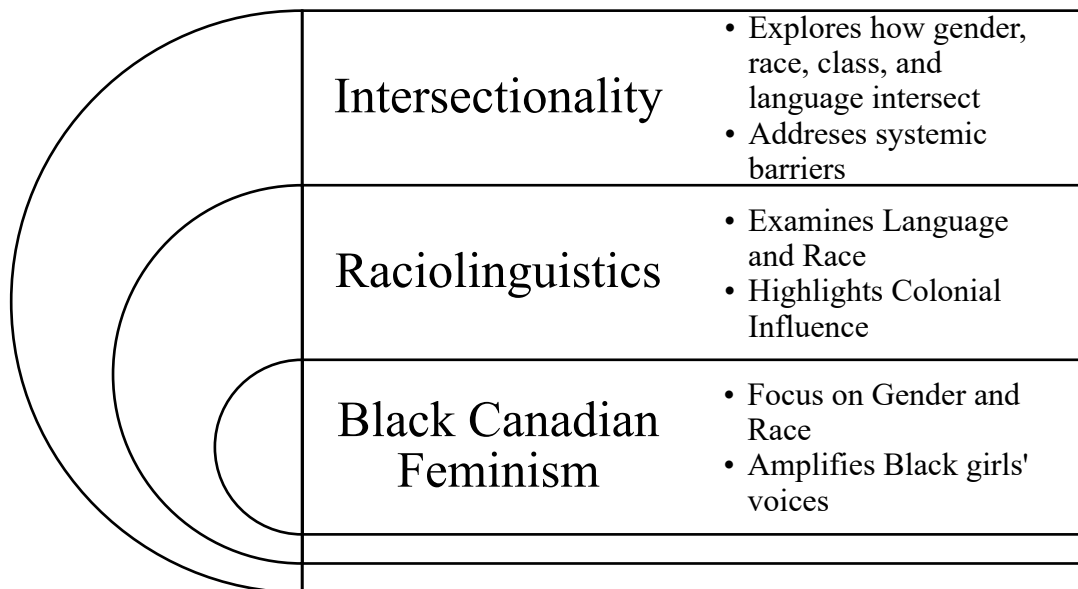
In their experiences, Black girls are ascribed racial stereotypes associated with their Blackness such as being linguistically deficient (Rosa & Flores, 2020), alongside gendered expectations that limit their opportunities in academic and social contexts. French immersion, a program historically designed for the elite and still marked by elitism, has largely excluded racialized students, including Black girls (Kunnas, 2023; Davis, 2023). Intersectionality highlights the power inequality within educational institutions, analyzing how it shapes Black girls' identities (Tefera, 2018). By applying an intersectional lens, we can better understand how these systemic

exclusions not only marginalize Black girls but also reinforce a hierarchy where their linguistic and cultural contributions are undervalued (Madibbo, 2021).

Intersectionality demonstrates how multiple identities intersect and interact to shape Black girls’ experiences in school, their interactions in school, their academic achievement, belongingness, and identity (Evans-Winter, 2021). This framework emphasizes that Black girls’ experiences cannot be fully understood by analyzing race or gender in isolation. Through the lens of intersectionality, it is possible to understand how Black girls in FI are highlighted to demonstrate that they are doubly marginalized by colonial institutions. It allows us to examine how these dual oppressions operate together to limit academic success, social belonging, and linguistic confidence for Black girls while simultaneously shedding light on their resilience and agency in navigating these intersecting challenges.

Figure 1

The relationship of theoretical frameworks



In conclusion, these three theoretical frameworks work together to inform and to better understand the experiences Black girls in FI. They are visually shown in Figure 1 to illustrate how their relationships tie together simultaneously to amplify Black girls' voices. Feminism was selected to highlight the girls who are often left out in favor of boys. Black Canadian feminism was further selected because in mainstream feminism Black girls are not accounted for and their experiences unnoticed. Black feminism, therefore, focuses on amplifying Black girls' voices. Through intersectionality we can further feminism by looking at the ways in which race and gender intersect to better understand their educational experiences. Lastly, raciolinguistics because these girls are enrolled in French immersion programs which is a program that has sustained, reinforced, and perpetuated its colonial structures since its inception. FI was built by and for White students and it is one of two colonial languages that are Canada's official languages. Raciolinguistics will help to understand how race and language move together in education and how that affects Black girls. When thinking of these three frameworks and the topic of my thesis, three things stood out to me, the variables of race – Black, gender – girls, and lastly, educational environment – French immersion program. These variables may influence or affect the following that will be discussed further in chapter five: findings and analysis, including belongingness, identity, unequal treatment, and representation.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This chapter outlines the research methodology and procedures employed in this study. To understand the experiences of Black girls in French immersion (FI), a phenomenological research approach (Bliss, 2016) was completed to understand the relationship between themselves and their education. Phenomenology, as defined by Bliss (2016), is a deep investigation that requires the “researcher to focus on peoples’ experiences of a phenomenon to obtain comprehensive details that provide a basis to for reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience” (p. 14). The design of this study is purposefully applied to sample the lived experiences of Black girls within the context of FI. The method of inquiry in this qualitative study was through interviews of the participants. By engaging in dialogue with Black girls, we gain a unique perspective that can illuminate the efficacy of current educational policies (Kvale, 2007). This knowledge sharing not only enriches our understanding but also seeks to fill the gaps in literature pertaining to the educational experiences of Black girls in FI.

Researcher Positionality

This study was influenced by my experience in education. As a Black girl, I was enrolled in the French immersion program in both the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) from senior kindergarten to grade five and the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) from grade five to grade twelfth. My mother felt the importance of learning French for assimilation into Canadian society and for better opportunities in my future. She’d received a pamphlet while researching schools and came across French immersion. My mother informed me that she called

the school to receive more information and figured that learning both official languages would be the best option for me.

Throughout my experience in the program, though mostly positive, I was not surrounded by student, teacher, or curriculum representation. In TDSB, I was surrounded by peers who looked like me and my class was diverse. However, when I moved and attended elementary school in HWDSB, I was lucky in that one of the children from the other Black family was my age and also enrolled in the FI program. We would become best friends for over 20 years. While my experience was mostly positive, there was still an overwhelming feeling of being different that shrouded me as a child. I was either the sole –or one of the very few— Black students in my classes and/or the entire school throughout my elementary and secondary experience. I did not have the privilege of experiencing a Black teacher until I pursued my Bachelor of Education degree. As I've reflected on my experiences as a student in FI K-12, I have thought about how different my experience might have been had I been exposed to same-race friends or seen Black people in positions of power. As a Black woman, I sit on the other side of education acknowledging that representations remain an issue today and that I was inspired by my experience in school to be the change that I wanted to see. I became a French teacher because I love the language, and it is what I experienced as a child. I want Black girls to be represented so I became the representational change I wanted to see as a student. I want Black girls to have positive experiences in school and life, and I don't want them to have to wait to have their first Black teacher during their post-graduate education - an opportunity that many students may not want or have the privilege of achieving. As the once little Black girl and now a Black woman, I want to contribute to the advancement of literature on Black youth in the French immersion

program. Specifically, I want Black girls included. I want their stories and experiences heard and for them and their experiences to be represented in the data.

Participants

Based on the nature and target of this project, the participants were required to be a Canadian citizen, have attended school in Canada since childhood, a cisgender girl (Cava, 2016), currently enrolled in a French immersion program in Southern Ontario, ages 13-18, and self-identify as Black; individuals who identify as and have Black ancestry such as African or Caribbean. Four girl participants were recruited Jaden, Demeyah, Twee, and Felicia (anonymized names). Jaden and Twee, 13 from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Durham District School Board (DDSB) respectively and Demeyah and Felicia, 16 also from the TDSB. I had three forms for participants to sign: an Assent Form – Participants under the age 16, a Consent Form - Participants 16-18, and Parental-Guardian Consent Forms. Jaden and Twee signed both the Assent and Parental-Guardian forms while Demeyah and Felicia submitted the consent forms for Participants 16-18. In figure 2, the table shows relevant demographics of the participants. Under the Age/Gender category, F stands for female.

Figure 2

Demographics of Participants

Anonymized Names	Age/Gender	Mother Tongue	School Board	Enrolled in FI	Regional/Ethnic Background	Language Repertoire	Parents' Education
Jaden	13 F	English	DDSB	Grade 1	Mom – Barbadians, Dad – Jamaican	English, Patois, French	Mom – University, Dad – College

Demeyah	16 F	English	TDSB	Junior Kindergarten	Mom – Antiguan, Dad – Grenadian	English, French	Both – University
Twee	13 F	English	TDSB	Senior Kindergarten	Both – St. Lucian	English, Creole, French	Mom – High School, Dad – University
Felicia	16 F	English	TDSB	Senior Kindergarten	Mom – Antiguan, Dad – Nigerian	English, Patois, Igbo, French	Both – College

Data Collection

This phenomenological qualitative study (Bliss, 2016) was collected through one 60-minute semi-structured interview with four school-aged girls, ages 13 and 16 in Southern Ontario. Participants were recruited through email and poster campaigns, and social media using snowball sampling (Emerson, 2015). Each semi-structured interview occurred via Zoom after the collection of the forms and began with introductions and the outline of the interview before I recorded the session. I used the interview questions in Appendix A as a semi-structured guide for the interview, following-up with any additional questions or comments after the participants’ response.

Interview Procedure

During the interviews, Jaden was accompanied with her mother who was next to her slightly out of the frame, Demeyah was a passenger in a car with her family, conducting the interview while using headphones, Twee’s father began with her and left during the introductions closing her bedroom door, and lastly, Felicia was alone on school property. After I stopped the

recordings, I asked the participants what gift cards they wanted, Amazon or Tim Hortons, all four chose Amazon. Along with the gift card, I sent each participant a PDF of Mental Health Resources (Appendix B). Demeyah was the only participant to send a follow-up email with comments that she had forgotten to mention during the interview.

Data Analysis

The chosen analytical approach used for the findings is a thematic analysis process. This approach is suitable for the phenomenological study because it allows the researcher to categorize the data making it easier for the analysis especially when the information being analyzed is about the participant's experiences. The participant had a 60-minute time commitment for which the semi-structured interview took place Jaden, Twee, and Demeyah's interviews were approximately 15 to 20 minutes while Felicia's was an hour.

After the interviews, I transcribed the audio files with Otter.AI, a speech to text transcription web software. After the transcriptions were complete, I went through the document files while listening to the audios to make any edits to ensure its accuracy. Once I reviewed the transcriptions, I uploaded them to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software for coding. Because the data analyzed derived from interviews, a thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016) process allowed for the creation of inductive themes without any preconceptions. Instead, I read through and chose codes and themes that emerged from the data. When picking codes, I used the chosen theoretical frameworks as a guide and what made sense to me thematically. Therefore, I chose the code groups as shown in Figure 3, as they related to my research question and sub-questions, they are: intersectional experiences, raciolinguistic impact, challenges faced, feminist influence, belonging, and identifier. The last category 'identifier' was solely to track the

demographics of the participants. After creating my code groups, I read through each participant interview highlighting quotations and choosing a sub-code that best described their answer or experience under the code group. After reviewing all interviews and coding all documents, I went through and selected the sub-codes that were highlighted the most and what would speak to my research questions. There, I narrowed in on four themes based on the code groups and sub-codes that will be discussed further in chapter five.

Figure 3

Summary of Codes

Code Group	Sub-codes
Intersectional Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Race - Identity - Language Learning - Racial Inequalities - Language Learning Struggles - Support Systems - Diversity in Teachers - Educational Impact - Intersectionality - Linguistic Agency
Raciolinguistic Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language - Educational Experiences - Interactions - Language Impact - Educational Challenges - Identity Formation - Language Acquisition - Representation Among Teachers

Challenges Faced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of Support - Confusion - Inequality - Racism - Teacher Absenteeism - Unequal Treatment
Feminist Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representation - Perspective - Supportive Environment - Racial/Diverse Representation - Empowerment - Racial Equality - Self-awareness
Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belongingness - Lack of Representation - Support - Sentiments - Treatment - Positive Sentiments - No Problems
Identifier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ethnic Background - Languages Spoken at Home - Education Acquisition - Parental Languages

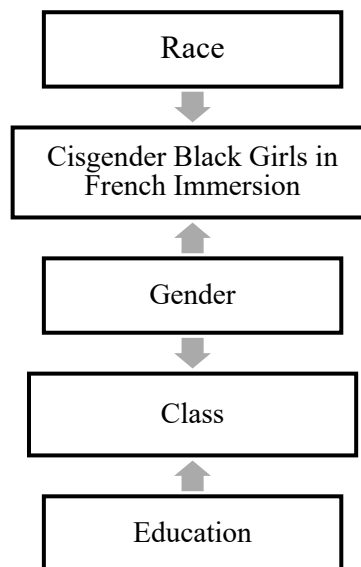
Limitations

In this study, the decision to focus on cisgender girls was made to center the experiences of Black girls within FI. While gender diversity is important, this research aims to explore the specific intersectionality of race, gender, and class that shapes the educational experiences of

Black girls, visualized in Figure 4. By limiting the scope to cisgender participants, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the systemic barriers that uniquely impact this demographic. Focusing on cisgender girls allows for an in-depth analysis of how their experiences differ from those of Black boys and other non-cisgender Black girls, especially given the historical and systemic discrimination they encounter. This research acknowledges that the intersectionality of race and gender is complex and multifaceted. While this study does not include trans girls; it recognizes the importance of their experiences and perspectives in broader gender and education discussions. Further research is needed to examine the complex and various experiences of all gender identities.

Figure 4

The intersections of race, gender, and education



To conclude, to understand what the lived experiences of Black girls in FI in Ontario are, these processes will help arrive at the findings, the answer to the research question. With the

findings, individuals working within education, educators, administration, policy analysts, etc., can use this research to inform how they equitably create curriculum and anti-racist policies for schools.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of the study is to investigate the lived experiences of Black girls in the French immersion programs. All four participants attend school in Southern Ontario, three in the TDSB, the largest school board in Canada with 238,000 students across 600 schools (Toronto District School Board, n.d.), and one from DDSB, a school board that is responsible for seven cities with 79,000 students across 135 schools (Durham District School Board, n.d.). In this chapter, I analyze the main findings, drawing on Black Canadian feminism, raciolinguistics, and intersectionality in response to the research questions and conducted interviews. The intersectionality of their experiences is emphasized through four themes from the participants lived experiences: (1) Reflection in the Mirror (2) Anchoring Ourselves (3) The Masks We Wear (4) The Weight of Silence. These themes will be discussed and analyzed thematically, to discuss how they impact educational experiences and sense of self.

Reflection in the Mirror

Race and gender are socially constructed, and certain tools reinforce societal ideas about these constructs such as representation. Historically, media has played a significant role in shaping stereotypes of Black women, often depicting them in ways that are harmful and reductive. Mainstream media has long positioned Black women as inferior to White women, portraying them in roles such as mummies or hypersexualized objects, reducing them to their bodies (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). These portrayals have enduring consequences. As bell hooks (1992) asserts, media representation "...determines how blackness and Black people are seen." It is no surprise, then, that these years of negative portrayals contribute to the adultification of Black girls in society and education. As Lei et al. (2021) argue, intersectional invisibility holds that

Whiteness and White womanhood become the prototype, rendering Black women—and, by extension, Black girls—marginalized and invisible. In education, this White supremacist ideology “translates into Eurocentric exclusionary practices through curriculum, language, pedagogy, and representation, where the construction of the other as inferior is reproduced” (Arslan, 2017, p. 137). The negative portrayal of Black people in mainstream media can have an impact on the attitudes of Black children toward themselves and others (Dei & James, 2002). It is then important for Black girls to have positive racial representation in positions of power.

Racial representation of teachers

In Jaden’s interview, she recounted having only one Black teacher in grade 3. Now 13 and in grade 9, Jaden has experienced only one Black teacher throughout her schooling. Demeyah, who is 16, noted having only two Black teachers in kindergarten to grade 5 (K-5) and one in grade 8. In high school, she has had no Black teachers. Demeyah reflected on the impact of the lack of representation, stating, “All my teachers have had an impact, whether they were Black or not, and they were impactful. So, I don’t think it would be [experience]. No, it wouldn’t be a big difference if they were more Black teachers.” Twee, on the other hand, had more Black teachers from kindergarten to grade 3 but noted a predominance of White teachers from grades 4 to 7. When asked about the racial representation in teachers, Twee expressed that having more Black teachers would have been beneficial, saying:

I feel like because I only had like White teachers from grade four to grade five, but every year before that, my teachers were Black. So, I feel like it would have been better if I had Black teachers. I feel like it would help me more. Like you know, I don’t really know but yeah.

When I asked if she could elaborate on how, it would have helped more, she answered with,

I feel like they would understand more, like they would like, because, like, I feel like they were just like, you know, like brush us under the rug like the White teachers like they wouldn't really go deep into like, explaining stuff like my previous teachers [Black] would do.

Black and ethnic minority teachers show a greater understanding of how Black students are often subject to differential treatment by other teachers (Dei, 2017). Felicia also encountered a lack of Black representation in teachers. She has yet to have a Black teacher although she mentioned she will be getting one in grade twelve and she's looking forward to that. Like Twee, Felicia also believed that having more Black teachers would have improved her educational experience. She states, "I feel like having Black teachers would have helped because they would understand my experience better than the White teachers did." She believes that Black teachers would have provided her with empathy and support, especially during culturally significant times like Black History Month where she experienced the most racial discrimination and inequalities. Her sentiments are valid, as research shows that non-Black teachers often hold lower expectations of Black students' academic potential compared to Black teachers (Vinopal & Holt, 2019). This bias highlights the importance of hiring Black educators in schools, especially in spaces with Black students. As Choudhury (2021) notes, seeing groups traditionally targeted by negative stereotypes in a positive light helps to reduce bias benefiting students of all races. A more diverse and inclusive staff could foster an environment where Black students feel seen and supported whereas without such representation many White teachers may struggle to address diverse perspectives. As bell hooks (1994) argues, they may even feel threatened by the viewpoints of Black students further reinforcing the barriers these students face. The absence of

culturally responsive teaching only amplifies the inequalities that students like Felicia encounter, particularly during moments when their cultural identities are most visible.

The absence of Black teachers and the lack of racial representation in schools has a clear impact on the educational experiences of Black students. While Jaden and Demeyah, felt that the race of their teachers has not and would not alter their experience, Twee, and Felicia, believe that having Black teachers would have offered deeper understanding, empathy, and support. Research consistently shows that Black and ethnic minority teachers bring a heightened awareness to the challenges Black students face, particularly in environments where systemic biases persist (Dei, 2017). Their lived experiences raise the importance of having educational staff that foster a learning environment that acknowledges, rather than overlooks, their identities. Therefore, diversifying school staff is not just a matter of racial representation but an essential step to creating a more equitable and inclusive school space where Black girls may thrive.

Classroom Diversity

Jaden stated that from K-5, she was amongst three Black students in her class, in grade 6 around 5 Black students, in grade 7 there were 10 Black students, and in grade 8, five Black students once again. Jaden observed varying levels of Black peers over the years, stating her schools, in general, had an overall low Black student population, there wasn't a difference between core French and FI Black student population. Jaden's sentiments about the lack of representation in the French Immersion program did not change anything for her academically only socially which will be discussed further in the next theme, Anchoring Ourselves. Demeyah, experienced more diversity in high school than in elementary school but was still amongst at most three Black students. She states that there are:

Very few. Like for example, 9 to 12 [grades], my history class and my drama class. Me, including one other Black girl, we're the only Black students in that class. So, I'd say that was very low. The average would be two or at most three.

However, unlike Jaden's experience, Demeyah mentioned noticing more Black students in the hall meaning that there were more Black core French students than in French immersion. "I saw more Black students in the hall, but once we got separated into our classes, it's really not much Black students in the classroom." Despite the low Black population, Demeyah felt that it had no effects on her schooling experience,

No, it didn't really affect me, It's just, like kind of eye opening. Like, you'll sit in class and then look around and realize, oh, there's not really much Black students in my class, but I don't think it really had an effect on my education.

Separately, when observing her classrooms, Twee noted, "they were pretty diverse. Yeah, it had, like, a lot of different ethnic cultures, such as backgrounds." In contrast to both Jaden and Demeyah, Twee noticed more Black students in FI compared to core French. Felicia observed that there were more Black students in her high school compared to elementary school. She mentioned that she was used to always being the only or amongst few in her class significantly outnumbered by her White peers. Unlike the other participants, Felicia noted feeling uncomfortable with this lack of representation as it reinforced her feelings of tokenization and pressure to represent her entire racial identity. The presence of more Black students in high school provided relief and positive emotions, the weight divided amongst several versus her. She still however, noted that while it eased the pressure, she still felt underrepresented.

Diverse Representation in Curriculum & Planning

All girls referenced the inability to relate to the curriculum due to a Eurocentric focus. Jaden noted that from K-5, educational materials predominantly featured White students. However, she observed a change in representation after grade 6. Demeyah mentioned that, from kindergarten to grade eight the resources, including slides, images, and presentations, were moderately diverse. Stating that occasionally, there were different ethnic groups used in presentations. In grade nine, Demeyah recalls more lessons designated to various ethnic groups. She specified there were classes such as a prerequisite for grade 11s that included an English class focused primarily on First Nations culture and arts. She also notes extracurricular activities catered to groups like the Black History Everyday Club and the Asian Heritage Club. As for Twee, she recalled learning about Black history only during Black History Month, expressing frustration with the lack of integration.

So, like, the only time we ever, like, actually, like, learned about Black history and stuff like that was in February, Black History Month. Every other history class was about Indigenous history. And like, I feel like we should be learning about it like more. But after like, I've been learning this since like, grade three. So like, I feel like I know most things about Indigenous history. I feel like it was getting repetitive. We should learn about like, European like, we learn about European history, Indigenous history, Asian history, but we only have one month, and like, probably only one time in the week that we ever learn about Black history.

In their experiences, each Black girl highlighted the predominantly Eurocentric nature of the FI curriculum. Despite efforts to include more Black history or diversify the curriculum, it often felt disengaging, repetitive, or reduced to specific times, such as Black History Month. These efforts,

however, still vary depending on the school boards and individual teachers, which impacts their meaningful execution. This reinforces the notion of intersectional invisibility (Lei et al., 2021) and the marginalization of Black girls' identities. As Dei (1997) writes, the issue of Eurocentrism in schools shows a need for Black experiences and histories to create a curriculum oriented to represent all students. Felicia mentioned that up until high school she had not had the privilege of seeing diverse materials used in her FI classes unless it was for Black History Month. She recounts that in high school, there were moments of diversity in lessons, but they were referenced once or twice in preparation for a deeper dive happening for Black History Month. She mentioned that the last two years she felt that there were more attempts at diverse materials including a poem by a Black author, and a movie, *The Intouchables*, that she explains, "yeah, that was very surprising to see, but it also wasn't really a black story it wasn't really centered on Black struggle. It was just centered on two not supposed to be like—surprising friendships." The limited exposure to diverse materials and the lack of engagement with Black narratives in favor of European and Indigenous histories left her feeling marginalized at school. In alignment with Arslan (2017), the girls' reflections reveal how FSL education continues to be used as a colonizing tool by imposing its values through curriculum, content, visual representation, and staff, while erasing the realities and differences of minority students.

These experiences highlight the critical role of representation in shaping the educational experiences of Black girls in FI. With the impact of teacher demographics, it becomes evident that the absence of positive representation significantly affects the self-perception and academic engagement of these Black girls. The girls expressed varying sentiments regarding the need for Black educators, but all noted there was a noticeable lack of representation. Additionally, the analysis of curriculum diversity reveals a continued reliance on White Eurocentric narratives,

leaving Black girls in the wake of continued marginalization and disconnection from their cultural identities in educational settings. Overall, the findings note the significant need to diversify educational staff, curricula, and pedagogical materials to promote equitable educational environments where Black girls may thrive.

Anchoring Ourselves

A sense of belonging is crucial for students, serving as a foundation for their engagement and overall success. For Black girls in French immersion (FI), belonging is often cultivated by the quality of support they receive from educators, administrators, and their peers. The presence or absence of such support not only shapes their academic experience but also influences their sense of identity and self-worth. From early positive relationships with teachers to the challenges of teacher absenteeism, inconsistent support, and systemic racial disparities, the narratives reveal complexities of belonging in a predominantly White educational space. The participants' interactions impacted their academic journey shaping their identities and sense of belonging within the FI environment. Through their accounts, we uncover the significance of supportive environments in fostering or hindering a sense of community. Black girls' reflections illustrate the dual importance of nurturing both academic growth and emotional well-being.

Support Systems

Jaden generally enjoys FI and describes herself as an “average” student with “average” experiences. She notes that her teachers, staff, and administration were all supportive, making her feel comfortable approaching them if needed. This sense of support positively influences her engagement and enjoyment of the FI. Demeyah also had positive experiences with her teachers,

describing them as, “very supportive and open on giving support if you needed it.” Despite the challenges of connecting during the COVID-19 pandemic and online education, she still enjoys the program and has no negative comments regarding support. Like Jaden, Demeyah had positive experiences in FI and felt a sense of community, finding it easy to communicate and collaborate with peers. Twee experienced more support earlier on in FI but found that from grade four onward, the support declined. This was due to several factors including large class size, teacher absenteeism, and inconsistent teaching that negatively affected her learning. To her experience, Twee said:

I think it was overwhelming for the teacher I had because it was the same teacher in grade six, and she ended up missing, like a lot of work...And that put us like really behind in French, and the supply teachers didn't understand the work that she was leaving. Sometimes she wouldn't even leave work, and they ended up just putting us in different classes. I got put into, like, an English class, so I wasn't learning any French.

Twee faced difficulties due to a lack of stability and support in her education. She was the first among of the girls to note that the principal was not supportive, expressing disappointment over unmet promises. In contrast, she found the vice-principal to be the most understanding, empathizing with the challenges of large class sizes and the school environment. Notably, the principal was White male, while the vice-principal was a South Asian woman, highlighting intersections within the administration staff. Felicia mentioned throughout her interview that she did not have support from her teachers throughout her education. She found that her needs were often overlooked and dismissed. She mentioned the perception of her proficiency “fine” leaving her without additional support in lieu of students who needed it more. Instead, she relied on her peers to help her when she didn't understand French material. She mentioned that her most

recent, tenth grade, was the hardest and she lost trust in her teacher due to the number of times she was singled out and dismissed that she felt uncomfortable and gave up in trying to reach out for help.

Parental & class impact

As shown, in Figure 2 all participants had at least one parent who attended post-secondary education. Felicia was the only participant that was unsure if her parent's graduated from their programs but knows that they attended college. All participants shared their aspirations for continuing both French and their education, post-secondary. The impact of having their parents attend post-secondary may have contributed positively to their own educational achievements. Parents who attend post-secondary are more likely to affect their children's aspirations for education (Dubow et. al, 2009; Finnie & Mueller, 2008). They are better equipped to understanding the educational system and have deeper connections to education, understanding its importance. However, as Childs et al. (2017) suggests, that alone is not enough, a child must internalize their parent's values intrinsically. Based on the participant interviews, all girls showed intrinsic motivation as they expressed their interest in FI and its continuation. Though more research is needed to dissect the reason behind the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

In their school experiences, Twee mentioned the lack of French teachers and large class sizes. While her exact socioeconomic status is unknown, the lack of resources may be linked to the status of her school in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). If her school resides in a lower-economic area, this could mean that her school has fewer resources, including qualified teachers and smaller class sizes. Research has shown that schools in low-income neighbourhoods

often face resource shortages, which can impact the quality of education that students receive (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; People for Education, 2023).

In her interview, Demeyah mentioned that her parents immigrated to Canada at a very young age likely meaning they were educated within the Canadian educational system. Both her parents attended university as seen in Figure 2, offering them a better understanding of the cultural and educational norms within Canadian schools, including French Immersion programs. In contrast the other participants whose parents immigrated as adults, may face additional barriers in understanding the nuances of the Canadian educational system. Although evidently all participants' families navigated through those barriers because all of those who did attend post-secondary, attended in Canada.

Lastly, both Demeyah and Jaden mentioned they had predominantly White friends which might indicate that they were enrolled in schools located in predominantly White neighbourhoods. The lack of racial diversity in their schools may explain the challenges they faced in terms of representation and their belongingness. Socioeconomic privilege, including access to better schools, intersects with the marginalization these girls experience as Black girls in predominantly White environments. These predominantly White neighbourhoods often have more resources, including specialized programs like FI. Given all their parents attended post-secondary, the assumption is that they had the resources necessary to enroll their students, the participants, in FI. Demeyah acknowledges these challenges as she stated,

French immersion programs and schools are very competitive to get into and not as accessible to many students including Black students. Due to the low amount of French immersion schools they're often outside of your school zone making it harder to travel to

and accepted into which is why many students are wait listed. I believe this is another factor on why they're fewer Black French immersion girls in my school.

Demeyah's quote shows class issues that challenge Black students' admission in FI given the geographic region. These barriers reflect a larger issue within FI where access to these programs is often determined by socioeconomic status, school district area, and family resources.

Both parental involvement and socioeconomic status play an important role in shaping the educational journeys of these four Black girls. Their experiences clearly show how race, class, and gender intersect, affecting how they navigate their education and the types of systemic barriers they face. The findings reflect the importance of recognizing these intersections in education and how spaces like French immersion remain predominantly White, Eurocentric, and accessible primarily to middle- and upper-middle-class families.

Interactions

Jaden's interactions with her peers reflect an evolving sense of belonging linked to her racial identity. Until grade seven, her friends were predominantly White, which contributed to her feeling "different." She notes that "I think, like, sometimes I would feel different kind of but that's it, like there was no problems or anything. Didn't really change anything for me." When I asked if she could elaborate on what different meant to her, she explained:

Like maybe, just like, cultural ways kind of so, like because there was a low Black population, most of my friends would be White and like, there's a bunch of things we didn't really get, like in common, kind of that makes sense, like food wise and stuff.

As she grew older and began forming friendships with other Black students, it appears that sharing cultural norms and experiences became more significant to her belongingness.

Demeyah's experience reflects a more neutral stance. Despite being among a small number of Black students, Demeyah felt that it did not impact her academic performance or belonging within FI. She described not understanding if it made her feel sad or if it was only that it was eye-opening being one of few Black students in her class. Twee's experience underscores the critical role that peer interactions play in shaping belonging. Although she faced challenges due to a lack of support from teachers, her friendships provided essential stability. Her peers offered help with French work and emotional support, which helped her navigate the difficulties caused by teacher absenteeism and inconsistent instruction. The strong support network among her friends helped maintain a positive experience in FI, despite the challenges in the broader educational environment. Felicia's interactions in her educational experiences showed that she suffered from racial inequalities. In recognizing the way their lives are dually gendered and racialized, Black girls often seek guidance of additional socialization agents (Burnett et al., 2022), in Felicia's case she chose her friends to process her experiences and seek adaptive ways to cope and navigate school settings. The constant expectation that she would provide insight or be required to represent on behalf of her racial identity was uncomfortable and created a sense of pressure. Felicia explained,

...when it came time for presentations. I felt like there was a little bit of an unrealistic standard that I would do so much better than everyone else because I was Black, so I had to know what they were going through. Like, I remember I had to do a presentation on Lincoln Alexander and I remember, like, my teacher kept on asking me more leading questions, like, 'Oh, how do you think it felt for him to be a Black person?' And I always felt like annoyed when they would often look at me for that answer.

Her teachers' insensitivity and discrimination in the classroom was reflected in their singling Felicia out for answers as the only Black girl in the class. This reinforced an unrealistic expectation that she should inherently understand and represent the experiences of prominent Black figures, simply because of her race. The constant perpetuation of her "otherness" in a school environment that did not reflect her or her culture further contributed to her sense of isolation. Similarly, interactions with her classmates also played a vital role in her educational experience. Despite the change in racial representation, she still faced microaggressions regarding her hair and skin colour to be discussed in the final theme, *The Weight of Silence*. These interactions were often not explicitly racist but carried implicit bias, microaggressions, and lacked sensitivity, they marked the challenges she faced navigating her identity in a predominantly White institution. Early support from teachers fostered a sense of belonging, but issues such as large class sizes, absenteeism, and a lack of personalized engagement in later years created feelings of alienation. Their narratives revealed that Black girls experience educational environments differently than their White counterparts. For instance, the absence of Black teachers and culturally responsive pedagogies can exacerbate feelings of isolation and further marginalization something that White students may not experience because they are racially and culturally represented. White students may receive support that affirms their identities and experiences, while Black girls often navigate a system that overlooks their identity leaving them to search for comfort in other areas and increasing their sense of alienation. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges Black girls face in FI, educational institutions can further investigate how systemic racism contributes to a lack of support for Black girls. They can create anti-colonial pedagogy and culturally responsive pedagogy that equitably includes Black culture and essence.

Sentiments about the FI program

A general consensus from all the girls were in support of French Immersion (FI) programs. Jaden's thoughts about FI were simple but concrete she states that, "it is a good program, and I would like continue it for a long time." Similarly, Twee's sentiments related more so to what was lacking from the program though she said that "French is good, like it is a really good thing to learn." She mentions looking forward to French opportunities in the future but overall, does not recommend the program if it looks like it does at her school. Demeyah stated that she really likes being in FI. She compared herself to those in core French and Extended French stating, "I feel very fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to learn another language that's very commonly spoken and once again, like it opens doors and opportunities for us [students in FI] in the future and like future jobs or things like that." She feels pride in knowing French and speaks to the benefit of knowing a second language especially both Canadian national languages. Felicia noted that she finds the program as highly social. That it creates bonds and has a collaborative space. She continues that it is because, "we're all trying to understand French to the best of our abilities", she stated that her community of FI students appreciated the French language. In all, the participants all had positive sentiments about being enrolled in the FI program whether those sentiments are a result of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations needs further research. They all enjoy being enrolled and all stated that they would recommend the French immersion program.

In this section, we learn the complexities of belonging and how important it is within the educational spheres. The support the girls receive from educators, administrators and their peers have an effect and influence their experience in school. In their accounts, all four participants' lived experiences indicated that their racial identities and the institutional support they received

were tied to their feelings of belonging. Their experiences revealed that supportive relationships and peers foster a positive sense of belonging while systemic barriers like the lack of racial representation in peers and teachers and unsupportive teachers hinder their ability to feel included further marginalizing them.

The Masks We Wear

Everyone has implicit bias that derives from various factors including education, family and social life, and as mentioned, media (Choudhury, 2021). These factors reinforce stereotypes and racial norms and biases that can be damaging. For many, they are unaware they carry this bias because it isn't covert. Because of these influences, even low-status groups like 'Black' and 'women' tend to unconsciously favour dominant groups like 'White' and 'men' (Choudhury, 2021). The concept of identity emerges as a fundamental aspect of the lived experiences of Black girls in French immersion. Their identities are shaped not only by their race and gender but also by the social and cultural dynamics within their educational environments. How the participants navigate their identities amidst the complexities of systemic biases and cultural expectations will be explored through their narratives. The exploration of identity and how Black girls anchor themselves is essential to acknowledging the diverse experiences of Black girls and recognizing the multifaceted challenges they face in their pursuit of academic and personal success.

Racial and Linguistic Identity

All four girls were born in Canada to Caribbean parents, half true for Felicia. Their parents immigrated to Canada from different countries in the Caribbean and Felicia's dad from Nigeria. Jaden's parents are Barbadian and Jamaican, Demeyah's parents are from Antigua and Grenada,

Twee's parent's ethnic background is St. Lucian, and Felicia's parents are from Jamaica and Nigeria. The first language (L1) and home language were the same for all girls, English. Jaden, Twee, and Felicia's parent(s) spoke a lexifier language of both English and French respectively. For Jaden, her dad spoke Patois, an English lexifier language, for Twee, her parents Creole, a French lexifier language, and Felicia's mom spoke Patois and her dad spoke Igbo, a native Nigerian language. Demeyah's parents were also familiar with French, having immigrated to Canada as children they learnt it in school but lost it after secondary education. When asked the reason why they were enrolled in FI, all girls mentioned that their parents enrolled them in French immersion because of what it could provide them. More specifically, Jaden said that "it can help me in the future, like getting a job opportunity, and it's just good to be bilingual." Demeyah agreed stating, "because we live in Canada, it's always good to extend your languages. So, because Canada speaks both English and French, it will help me in the future, especially with getting jobs or helping others. And it's also just something good to have while you're growing up... [I'm] Very happy that they had a young age because especially now when I'm surrounded by it, I'm able to understand which I think is very important and very helpful as well." For Twee, she mentions to, "learn a different language, learn something new, get more knowledge." Lastly, Felicia very clearly mentioned her parents saying, "well, it was a decision of my mom instead of myself because she had always wanted to learn French and she never got the opportunity to. And she read that it gives more benefits when you know another language, and since obviously Canada is more bilingual country when it comes to English and French, she thought it would be good for me and my sisters to have that." In all these examples, something is clear, the girls have a strong affinity for bilingualism in the Canadian context something their parents instilled in them from an early age. It is then no surprise that all girls have these sentiments, the parents

enrolled them all either in kindergarten or grade 1, like in Bourgoïn's (2016) research, "because they valued the importance of learning a second language and the benefits associated with bilingualism" (p. 51).

Both Jaden and Demeyah enjoy FI, have never thought of quitting, and hope to continue in post-secondary. Meanwhile, Twee has thought of quitting when she was in grade 3 during remote education due to the COVID-19 disruptions. During this time, it was hard for her to keep up with the requirements of FI and it was at this time that she had thoughts of quitting the program. Twee felt she was also falling behind in later grades not because of disruptions due to COVID-19 but rather due to teacher absenteeism and the lack of security in the classroom. She was constantly being rotated and despite being in FI was not learning French to curriculum standards due to a lack of teachers. Despite the challenges she faced, her enjoyment for FI and for being bilingual transcend the difficulties she's faced.

In Felicia's home, English was the L1 unless her mother was upset and used Patois. Felicia's dad spoke with relatives using Igbo but not with her as she is unfamiliar. Felicia was the only one to mention a strong familial tie to education. She mentioned that her mother stepped up in elementary school to host the Black History Month (BHM) stating that if she didn't, who would? She would later continue to host them after the school would reach out to her time and time again. Felicia mentioned that her mother didn't want them to grow up in an environment where they didn't know where they came from and without diverse representation. This was a way to protect her daughter and ensure there were some teachings related to her racial identity. To further, Felicia's mother's involvement during BHM indicates a higher level of engagement and investment in her education. Because parents in affluent communities are more likely to have the time and means to participate in school activities, parental involvement is often linked with

higher socioeconomic status. This implies that Felicia's family may have had the means to provide her with additional support, strengthening her bond with the school community.

In FI, Felicia faced challenges maintaining her French proficiency due to a lack of teacher's support for oral help in earlier grades. She said, "...I feel like I never really got the support they needed when it came to speaking." Felicia felt that her pronunciation issues were overlooked because teachers assumed that she was "fine" based on her performance in other areas, "they were just like, 'okay, you can pronounce fine, so you're fine.' But I feel like it kind of like affected me to now because my pronunciation is not the greatest." She also noted that she was not taken seriously last year by her homeroom French teacher which impacted her confidence and participation. Felicia stated,

I remember like at the start she [Grade 10 French teacher] would say... for you to reach out to her and I would keep on doing that but like once again like around December I was like there's no point with this woman, I'm not doing this anymore if I need help, I will ask someone else or I will fail, I really don't care because it was just so hard to get anything out of her.

The lack of support, dismissive attitudes, and assumptions about Felicia's linguistic abilities may stem from stereotypes about Black students' linguistic capabilities and underlying racial biases.

Felicia also mentioned that she felt targeted due to her heritage,

...all these people are just looking at me to answer or like when they try and bring up um French countries, everyone just goes to the European ones, someone has to bring up Africa; I'm usually the only person or one of the only people who actually know French African countries, and it just like gets to a point where everyone's, looking at me when they see that because they know I'm African or, or like it's Caribbean countries that are

French they know I'm Caribbean, it's like, where is like the culture at all, and it's just, like again, it's sad.

Felicia was often targeted under the assumption that because lessons featured Black individuals in history or culture, Felicia, being Black, must know everything, placing her in uncomfortable positions during class discussions. This tokenization places burden on the student to represent an entire culture.

Despite facing challenges, all girls share a sense of pride in being in FI. Historically, FI has been associated with more positive behaviours and motivations (Van der Keilen, 1995; MacFarlane & Wesche, 1995). They all share the same thoughts on the benefits and advantages of living in Canada and being bilingual in Canada's national languages. They believe it will aid in economic capital in their futures and enjoy the aspect of being able to recognize French in social settings and in the community.

The Weight of Silence

In the face of discrimination, Black girls often adopt strategies to cope and protect themselves from oppression (McPherson, 2020). In educational settings, these coping mechanisms can manifest in ways such as reduced class participation, downplaying their experiences as normative, distancing themselves from institutional spaces, limited outreach for support, and negative sentiments towards their identity (Perkins & Durkee, 2024). This retreat is often a response to exclusionary practices rooted in Eurocentric curricula and teachings, which may perpetuate the notion that Black girls are self-reliant. Black girls' unique experiences of oppression are correlated to gendered racial microaggressions, a tool of gendered racism (Newton, 2023). These microaggressions often get minimized, overlooked as less severe than

overt racism like racial slurs, for example. Nevertheless, they are still forms of racism that negatively impact the well-being and educational experiences of Black girls.

Racial Discrimination

All four girls revealed experiences of subtle or overt racism. Jaden recounted a racially insensitive comment from a teacher in grade 3,

My teacher was like, saying, like examples, and she would like use me as an example, because I was, like, the only Black student in my class, like the Black female student, so like, she would comment on my hair... she would be like, Oh, but you don't see, like when I had braids in, she would say, like oh, but I'm not asking Jaden how she washes her hair, like even though, when she has braids and stuff but that was it, for the most part.

Although Jaden felt uncomfortable at the time, she was so young she didn't really understand what was occurring until she later realized the deeper implications of these comments as she grew older. Jaden was singled out and marginalized in a space where she was meant to feel safe and included. In line with her feeling "different", this could suggest feelings of racial inequality where the school environment, the lack of representation for example, doesn't embrace or reflect her cultural and ethnic identity.

Demeyah, who believes that she was not personally subjected to racism, described an incident where Black girls were targeted by the boys in her class. She recounted, "...Apparently the boys made a list of like ranking the girls prettiest to, like, not the prettiest. One of the students mentioned. Oh, we should put all the Black girls at the bottom of the list." In this isolated experience, Demeyah and her peers were surprised and felt discomfort and disbelief, rather than receiving support or an apology. The explicit racial bias experienced by Black girls, was not

mentioned to teachers but the lack of empathy from peers indicates a broader issue of recognizing the impacts of racial discrimination. The incident highlights the need for more inclusionary practices to address and confront racism in school settings.

Despite Twee being in the most diverse school out of all four girls, she was the only one to report overt racism. Twee says, “I was walking with my friend, and then this Asian kid called us the N word...” Her and her friend immediately went to report the incident to the school principal who failed her and dismissed the incident without taking meaningful action. The principal dismissed the incident, claiming the perpetrator likely didn’t understand the meaning of the slur, while a Black office staff member attempted to advocate for Twee. The perpetuation of racism from administration creates unsafe exclusionary spaces. The voices of Black girls continue to be silenced. A report should have been made and an investigation to determine the appropriate consequences, one that would result in disciplinary actions for a hate crime (Ontario, n.d.). By reporting a serious crime, a student making a racial slur on school property, Twee should have been protected. She never heard about the incident again and her parents were never contacted. By excusing racism on school property, the administration staff is not only perpetuating White supremacy by allowing racist behavior to go unpunished but also increasing the likelihood of such incidents recurring and silencing the voices of Black girls. In this case, the principal reduced racism to a process of name-calling rather than seeing it as a wider systemic issue something he had the power to address and dismantle within the school environment (Dei, 1997).

Felicia’s experiences of microaggressions came from both staff and peers making it significantly uncomfortable. In her account, she mentioned that even her friends often gave microaggressions. She says, “we would take a picture, and it’d be very dark; these people would not put on the flash.” Here Felicia is insinuating that they made microaggressions towards her

skin tone, possibly “joking” that she couldn’t be seen due to her being Black and less visible in comparison to her non-Black peers in an unlit photo. Felicia mentioned that she experienced a vice-principal that was supportive from grades six to eight. The vice-principal addressed the effects of racism and racial slurs with the entire class, using metaphors. Felicia felt supported because she was not singled out but rather comforted and treated as one of the few non-Black students, ensuring she felt safe. She explains,

I remember one of the kids in my class actually had been called the n-word and she like went on this whole thing and like she tried to see like if I was comfortable but also doing it to other Black kids so I wasn’t feeling like I was being singled out and she like came and she showed everyone why it was negative like she did it in a way like she would crumple the paper, she’d like spread it out but you can see that it’s crumpled it never goes away and that’s the whole thing but I really liked it.

In high school, however, she felt that she received racial discrimination from a male teacher she had, naming him a racist. She explained frustration over an incident that occurred during Black History Month during a culturally responsive lesson where he referenced Black people as negroes including Felicia. The class looked uncomfortable but remained silent. Felicia was the only one to speak out saying that she didn’t feel it was appropriate and felt uncomfortable. Instead, the teacher was defensive and stated that he’d received approval from the vice-principal and to check with him but what he’s presenting is fair and fine. The teacher’s dismissal of an offensive term no longer relevant in today’s climate highlights a systemic issue. The longer Black girls experience marginalization, the more psychologically vulnerable they become to negative beliefs about what they are capable of (Choudhury, 2021). This environment of exclusion and devaluation not only impacts their self-esteem but can also trigger stereotype

threat, where the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about their racial group leads to additional anxiety and diminished academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). It is harmful and restricts Black girls' perception of who they are perceived to be versus how they see themselves (Choudhury, 2021).

The narratives presented reveal a layered and multifaceted understanding of the experiences of Black girls in French immersion. Across the four themes—Reflection in the Mirror, The Masks We Wear, Anchoring Ourselves, and The Weight of Silence—the interconnected struggles of representation, identity, belongingness, and treatment become apparent. In Reflection in the Mirror, Black girls' experiences explained the importance of representation, emphasizing how the absence of Black teachers, students and culturally responsive curricula only reinforces feelings of invisibility and marginalization. Isolation leads into, The Masks in We Wear, where Black girls must present different selves depending on the circumstances—meeting the expectations of predominantly white institutions by downplaying their cultural identities or choosing to blend in to avoid negative attention. Anchoring Ourselves highlights the critical role that support systems and community play in building a sense of belonging for Black girls. Through some experienced supportive relationships with teachers and peers, others found the instability of teacher support and systemic barriers contributed to their feelings of isolation.

Lastly, The Weight of Silence further builds on the challenges by exposing long standing impact of racial microaggressions and overt discrimination. The silencing of Black girl voices is evident not only in the lack of teacher support or administrative action but also in the emotional toll these experiences have on their sense of self-worth and engagement in the classroom. Together, these four themes illustrate the complex interplay of systemic inequities, cultural representation, and interpersonal dynamics that shape the educative experiences of Black girls. It

becomes evident that without intentional support, diverse representation, and systemic changes, Black girls are left to navigate these barriers largely on their own. The findings show the need for educational institutions to make significant changes in representation, curriculum, and support systems to create a more inclusive and affirming environment where Black girls are seen, heard, and empowered in their education.

Black Girls' Recommendations

As underlined in the interview questions, all girls were asked to provide suggestions for French Immersion (FI) programs, Jaden was the only girl not to provide any. In asking directly what they would like to see improved and what they wish they had the opportunity for, we get a clearer picture of how they view themselves and their education. Below are their suggestions for the improvement of the program.

Twee's suggestions

1. FI shouldn't be the only class in the whole school.
2. In addition, the FI class should have reduced class sizes to better accommodate different learning stages.
3. Schools need more French teachers, not necessarily Black.

Demeyah's suggestions

1. More cultural excursions specifically for FI like to Quebec or Paris, to have a chance at traveling and using French; a good opportunity to enhance our French.

Felicia's suggestions

1. More Black literature/culture beginning in earlier high school grades. With less repetitive relevant Black icons such as Viola Desmond and Lincoln Alexander.
 - a. Black authors
 - b. Black French celebrities
2. More Black French teachers.
3. Sensitivity training for teachers.
4. Support for Black students not with a focus on academic bias but to have a support system they trust.
5. More supportive teachers that make it a point to contact parents prior to parent-teacher interviews. Opening lines of communication to improve parent-teacher relations to the student's benefit.
6. White teachers' responsibility to bridge the gap with Black students.

The participant's recommendations reflect their lived journeys and challenges in the French immersion (FI) program. While all the girls suggested the FI program there were still challenges they faced that, if addressed, it could improve their educational environment. Two participants recommended more French teachers, whether Black or not, which emphasizes the need for representation and the need for improving educational quality. These recommendations arose from their experiences as being marginalized and underrepresented indicating that the FI program is lacking in providing basic necessities such as French teachers and appropriate class sizes. In line with this, Demeyah seeks more French excursions to enhance the relevance and

outcomes of being in the FI program. Her recommendation shows a want to connect to French culture outside of school. The recommendations from the Black girls evidently show that there are systemic issues within the educational institution as Felicia called for more Black literature showing her desire for culturally relevant curriculum. Additionally, she called for better support for students including herself through sensitivity training, an important systemic change within the institution's educational practices. Implementing these recommendations can lead to a more inclusive environment that supports and creates safe spaces for Black girls' identities. It is a guide for educators and policymakers to consider these insights and recognize that creating space for equitable education in FI goes beyond matters of diversity; it is vital for their success and overall well-being of Black girls.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the lived experience of Black girls in the French Immersion (FI) programs in Ontario, focusing on their sentiments about enrollment, their belongingness, how supported they feel, how they are being treated, and the effects of the current education system on them, specifically relating to French-as-a Second Language (FSL) programs. To investigate current practices and incite change, the lived experiences of Black girls are needed otherwise strategies and frameworks will continue to not accommodate their needs (McPherson, 2020). The findings revealed that participants faced challenges related to representation, belongingness, identity, and unfair treatment, which are influenced by systemic factors within the educational system. This chapter interprets and analyzes the findings of the study in relation to the lived experiences of Black girls in FI using the frameworks of Black Canadian feminism, raciolinguistics, and intersectionality. The analysis reveals that these barriers are not only part of individual experiences but reflect broader societal and institutional norms that uphold racial, gender, and class biases. By examining the four themes identified in chapter five—Reflection in the Mirror, Anchoring Ourselves, The Masks We Wear, and The Weight of Silence—the central research questions and sub-questions will be addressed exploring the implications of the findings, and reflecting on the limitations of the study.

Interpretations

The analysis supports the theory that Black women and by extension Black girls are not represented in mainstream feminism. The lack of existing literature of Black girls in FI is telling to how marginalized and oppressed this group is. By giving Black girls a voice, we can see how exclusionary practices present themselves and the effects, that they continue to face many

challenges. Drawing on Black Canadian feminism, it becomes evident that racial representation in education is crucial for validating the identities of marginalized groups. The shortage of Black teachers in the educational system serves to reinforce the historical underrepresentation of Black voices in education, a reflection of a larger societal pattern that devalues Black experiences and contributions. It is the discriminatory policies and practices that operate to inform racist conceptions, a reminder of marginalized groups who are excluded from accessing these roles (Abawi, 2021). As the participants articulated, the lack of racial representation among educators leads to feelings of alienation and diminishes the potential for empathetic connections. Thus, if educators had a deeper understanding of the cultural identities of their students, there would be fewer misunderstandings, more compassion, and more communication between teachers and their students (Allen & Hilliard, 2022).

Government anti-discrimination policies do not offer an accountability and transparency process for documenting the unique discrimination that Black girls encounter (Evans-Winters, 2021). Black Canadian feminism emphasizes the importance of recognizing and dismantling the structural barriers that perpetuate inequities, calling for a critical examination of how race and gender intersect to create unique challenges for Black girls.

The experiences of racial discrimination and microaggressions reported by the participants illustrate how institutional policies often fail to address the needs of marginalized students. Raciolinguistics allows us to understand how linguistic and racial identities are intertwined, shaping the interactions and expectations that Black students encounter. Through microaggressions occurs the erasure of the Black girls' being, a form of invalidation and reflective of the colonial subjugated position placed on them societally (Newton, 2023). Felicia's experiences underscore how assumptions about her linguistic capabilities were informed by

racial stereotypes, perpetuating a cycle of bias that ultimately hindered her academic progress. It made her lack confidence in her teacher, someone she grew not to trust. In line with Allen & Hilliard (2022), “the narratives of Black girls exposes that the lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity allows school professionals to perform microaggressions and criminalize Black girls” (p. 68). This highlights the necessity of diversifying teaching staff and curricular content to provide a more inclusive and affirming educational environment.

The findings suggest that while some participants felt supported by teachers and peers, others experienced significant barriers to building meaningful connections within their educational settings. Intersectionality serves as a critical lens here, revealing how the compounded effects of race and gender shape individual experiences of belonging. By focusing on confronting implicit bias and a commitment to equality, strengthening teacher-student relationships may assist in reducing unequal treatment by increasing Black girls’ sense of belonging in school (Blake et. al, 2011). For instance, Twee's struggles with inconsistent teaching, illustrate how systemic issues can erode students' sense of belonging, particularly in environments marked by teacher absenteeism. Conversely, Jaden and Demeyah's positive experiences highlight how supportive educators can mitigate feelings of isolation and foster resilience. Like Kempf (2020), implicit race bias goes beyond the individual, connecting to broader historical mechanisms of race and racism at the structural, institutional and systemic levels including the understandings of settler colonialism, coloniality, and White supremacy. Policies and strategies developed in response to increasing incidents of anti-Black racism are undermined by the absence of data. Without incorporating narratives and intersectionality, these actions fail to address the needs of the intended audience effectively.

In addition, the findings revealed that the participants' educational experiences were influenced by their parental backgrounds further highlighting the intersections of race, gender, and class. All participants had parents who attended post-secondary education, which is an advantage in fostering positive attitudes towards education. However, while having educated parents provides a foundation of support and guidance, it does not completely shield Black girls from the realities of navigating a predominantly White, Eurocentric educational landscape. All Black girl participants despite their differing levels of support experienced the realities of systemic racism and the cultural gaps that remain in FI. As demonstrated by Twee's experiences with large class sizes and inconsistent teaching, the socioeconomic status of the schools the participants attended is a crucial factor in their educational experience. Schools in lower-income neighborhoods, are often under-resourced, resulting in larger class sizes, fewer qualified teachers, and a lack of adequate support for students. This is particularly true in areas where Black students are the majority, and it often reflects broader issues in the educational system that perpetuate inequities based on race and class. Felicia's experience, for example, underscores how parental involvement can empower and create a sense of belonging in school environments but also points to the ongoing challenges of navigating an educational system that fails to recognize or support the cultural and racial identities of its students.

In colonial institutions riddled with Eurocentric curriculum, the erasure of the Black experience nullifies the Black body. Black students then question the significance of their skin, features, hair, and fundamentally their bodies in a system where they are continuously presented as the "other" (Cooper, 2021). The participants' experiences reveal how they often felt pressured to represent their entire racial identities, leading to feelings of tokenization and discomfiture. Raciolinguistics provides insight into how language and identity are socially constructed,

informing the expectations placed on Black girls in academic settings. It also raises questions about varieties in French and how power and status may be—or become, intertwined with Whiteness in French programs. As Masson et al. (2022) suggest, an anti-biased, anti-racist (ABAR) FSL education would require teachers and students to critically engage with the colonialism – past and present – of French, expanding notions of French languages and culture beyond a White Eurocentric frame of reference, and creating a space for resistance and change (p. 387). This highlights how the experiences of Black girls in FI are influenced not only by their racial identity but also by the colonial history that shapes the language itself.

In Felicia's reflections on being perceived as a spokesperson for her culture, she highlights the burdens placed on people who belong to marginalized groups. This perspective reinforces the notion of intersectional invisibility, where Black girls are often overlooked or misrepresented in educational narratives. On the other hand, they also experience hypervisibility when they are microaggressed, insulted when they speak up for themselves (Newton, 2022), tokenized as the only Black student in the class, or asked to “represent” all Black people. The strategies they adopt to cope with these pressures—such as downplaying their experiences or withdrawing from classroom discussions—demonstrate the detrimental effects of systemic inequities on their self-esteem and engagement. As Burnett et al. (2022) reports, being silent and disengagement is a common theme and survival strategy in school when dealing with discriminatory encounters as well as racist teachers and students.

The participants' accounts of encountering subtle and overt racism, alongside inadequate institutional responses, highlight the urgent need for schools to implement comprehensive anti-racism training and create policies that actively promote equity and inclusion. As demonstrated by Twee's experience with the principal's dismissive attitude toward her report of racism, the

failure of educational institutions to take such incidents seriously perpetuates a culture of silence and inaction, further marginalizing Black girls and their experiences. While Felicia attempted to guide her teacher away from historically racist terms and was met with defensiveness. White supremacy allows for White individuals to engage with race and racism by burdening marginalized groups instead of interrogating inward (Kempf, 2020). Intersectionality unveiled how forms of racial violence played out in educational settings to uniquely impact Black girls who exist at the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression (Evans-Winters, 2021).

Implications

Teacher Diversity Gap

Despite the lack of racial representation, two participants noted that it did not matter and that all teachers were supportive, even Jaden who experienced microaggressions in grade 3. The resilience of Black girls points to a strong sense of self not uncommon in FI. However, the fact of the matter is that despite their positive interactions all Black girls experienced gender and racial inequality. It is the responsibility of the teachers and administration of the school to question how their policies and environment can both positively and negatively affect Black girls (Allen & Hilliard, 2022). The racial representation of teachers cannot be isolated from the hiring practices that solidify the correlation between White administrators hiring predominately White teachers (Abawi, 2021). More research is needed to explore both the correlation and causation behind the racial disparities in education and teacher hiring practices, particularly within teacher education.

Anti-Black Racism Teacher Education

Teacher education now includes some level of ABAR training, new teachers have more exposure to anticolonial teachings versus veteran teachers. Depending on the school board and school, outside of professional development days where teachers undergo workshops, veteran teachers are left to take a self-reflexive approach something that is optional. Otherwise, there are other options such as the Anti-Black Racism three-part additional qualification courses that may be a financial barrier due its high cost and the time commitment required. In thinking about ABAR as it relates to FSL there are no courses recognized by Ontario College of Teachers. Given the already heavy workload of teachers, working outside of school hours, and the critical need for them to use summer breaks to decompress and recharge, the timing of such courses can become an additional barrier. Balancing these demands with personal well-being is a significant concern for many educators. Why should teachers, who have already invested so much, invest more due to the lack of ABAR education training?

Additionally, veteran teachers, especially those who have not engaged in ABAR education, may not be self-aware, potentially perpetuating their biases through blindness. This issue combined with the fact that there is no guarantee that teacher candidates themselves are being taught ABAR. This raises another concern: who is holding teachers and teacher candidates accountable for their lack of ABAR training, and how is systemic racism being addressed within education? As Masson et. al suggests, “within the FSL TEPs [teacher education programs], if TC [teacher candidates] are not explicitly trained in how to counter White supremacy in their French classes, it is likely they will continue to reinforce it” (p. 388). There remains a lot of additional gaps on anti-bias, anti-racist education for teachers.

Limitations & Reflections

Geographical Region

The results of the study vary because of the geographic limitations of the participants that may not reflect other Black girls in the province. All participants are from Southern Ontario, which do not reflect all Black girls across Ontario but a small sample size where generalizations cannot be the foundation but an introduction to their lived experiences. The research focuses on participants from only two of the 31 English public-school boards in Ontario: the TDSB and the DDSB (Gordon, Rahbari, & Stephenson, 2023).

Socioeconomic Factors & Family Support

All girls had an affinity for education and mentioned wanting to attend post-secondary. The challenges they faced in school did not interfere with their determination; this was not a focus of the research. The study was centered on understanding the lived experiences of Black girls in French immersion programs, specifically focusing on how they perceive their school environment, their sense of belonging, and the support they receive. Why are these Black girls so invested in their French education despite experiencing racism and/or racial discrimination? In line with Burnett et al.'s (2022) study where Black girls were highly motivated to resist stereotypes, the four Black girl participants were focused on proving the stereotypes wrong. Exploring why these Black girls were so invested in their French education despite experiencing barriers could have led to valuable insights, a limitation of this study. However, asking young Black girls about their family life could potentially introduce emotional risks. For this reason, the focus remained on the girls themselves. While there were some nuances of parental involvement, like Felicia's mother's involvement in her elementary school's Black History Month events,

parental influence was not directly addressed. It is important to note that parents who enroll their children in FI may have stronger ties or expectations, which could influence their children's experiences (Foster, 1998).

Confidentiality

There is something to be said about the level of comfort of the girls during the interviews. Two of the girls, Twee, 13, and Felicia, 16, had interviews that were closer to an hour in length, elaborating beyond one-worded answers and longer than Jaden and Demeyah's interviews. Both Twee and Felicia did their interviews alone, unaccompanied by family members. It is then a question of if the girls who had privacy during their interview felt more comfortable in being vulnerable and sharing their experiences than those accompanied by family, or if they simply had more to share. This is a variable not explored in the study.

In chapter six, the theoretical frameworks were applied to the findings to analyze how the intersection of race, gender, class, and language shape the realities of the four Black girls. The findings disappointing but not shocking considering the current scholarship on Black girl students, showed the challenges these Black girls face daily in their schooling. Despite some positive experiences, the persistent challenges of representation, identity, belongingness, and unequal treatment continue to overshadow their education.

The findings indicate that the Shaynas of today continue to experience systemic inequities in French immersion programs. The FI programs, need to evolve to reflect the social, cultural and demographic changes of the students enrolled. This research contributes to the lack of literature that seeks to dismantle oppressive structures to bring greater equity to FI. The journey continues

towards equity, inclusion, and decolonization, but this study provides some insight into where educators and policy makers may begin to lay the groundwork to improve the quality of education Black girls are currently faced with. By prioritizing marginalized groups, together those in education can work towards dismantling the systemic barriers that have long silenced Black girl voices and stifled their potential in the French immersion program.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This research aimed to learn the experiences of Black girls in French immersion programs in Ontario. Using a thematic analysis, the narratives of four Black girls were analyzed. Their personal accounts of their experiences in French immersion (FI) revealed how little the intersections of race, gender, language, and class are addressed in the existing research. Their educational experiences provide an insight into the complexities and discriminatory practices they encountered. Although the FI programs are seen as a way to access economic opportunities and upward mobility, they continue to exclude Black and working-class students due to systemic inequities. All Black girls attended different schools and had generally different personal accounts; however, one thing remained true, they all, at some point, experienced a form of anti-Black racism. The themes discussed in chapter five demonstrate how Black girls continue to face marginalization and must navigate discriminatory practices they encounter in school while maintaining their sense of self. By amplifying the voices of Black girls, this research addresses the critical gaps in understanding their lived experiences, aiming to challenge Eurocentric, colonial, and White-dominant ideologies that continue to exist and be perpetuated within FI educational systems.

Researcher's Recommendation

Low Black student participation in FI does not warrant a lack of research. For the individuals who are currently enrolled, what would that mean to them? It is always important that all groups be represented especially in institutions created for the purpose of education. This study demonstrates that the education system could benefit from anti-colonial prescriptions for the betterment of Black girls' psychological and academic development. While participants may

have reported some positive well-being in the present, differential treatment and racist incidents may have lasting effects on their psyche as they continue their education journey. It is then recommended that all groups, especially marginalized groups such as Black girls, be studied and represented.

In these Eurocentric institutions, the findings suggest that by improving Black presence in schools and by offering Black student support it will improve the belongingness of Black girls. All Black students noted an issue with teacher diversity gap whether it affected them directly or not. Abawi & Eizadirad (2020) argued that the gap was evident especially among permanent teachers and educational leaders. They furthered that while bias-free hiring is a positive approach, an unrealistic one as one cannot be completely divorced of their biases. It omits the necessity of acknowledging and challenging the centrality of race in teacher hiring processes.

To address these systemic issues, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Promote Black Teacher Enrolment in Bachelor of Education Programs

To address the disparity in teacher diversity, it is crucial to actively promote the enrollment of Black individuals in Bachelor of Education programs. This could be achieved through scholarship opportunities, mentorship programs, and outreach initiatives that specifically target Black communities. Elevating Black teachers to positions of authority will help bridge the representation gap and provide Black students, including Black girls, with role models who may later understand and empathize with their experiences.

2. Inclusive and Equitable Outreach of French Immersion Programs

French immersion programs need to be marketed. Second, they need to be more inclusive and equitable, particularly to underrepresented groups including those from low-income

neighbourhoods and newcomers to Canada. Providing accessible resources about French immersion programs, allows families the choice of enrollment and will ensure that these programs are not perceived as only accessible to certain demographics.

3. Collection and Use of Disaggregated Race-Based Data

The collection and use of disaggregated race-based data is critical for understanding and supporting Black girls in FI. Disaggregated data allows educators, administrators, and policymakers to see the specific challenges that Black girls face and allocate resources appropriately to address disparities. Without such data, systemic issues will remain invisible, perpetuating inequities that can be addressed with evidence-based intervention.

4. Accountability System for Racism and Teacher Training

Establishing an accountability system to address racism is vital. Teachers and school administrators should receive training on both overt and covert racism to better understand its complexities and the impact of their actions and attitudes on marginalized students.

Implementing zero-tolerance policies for racial discrimination and naming racism in policies, accompanied by clear guidelines and consequences, will help create a safer and more inclusive learning environment for Black girls.

5. Updating Curriculum to Reflect Positive Contributions of Black Canadians

Implementing a curriculum that acknowledges the positive contributions of Black Canadians and utilizes diverse teaching materials is crucial for fostering an inclusive learning environment. By celebrating the experiences and histories of Black individuals, Black students can enhance their sense of belonging, academic engagement, and overall well-being.

Black Canadians have a long history in Canada and by providing a curriculum that represents

all students, it can create an atmosphere where Black girls feel validated and understood, especially when the focus is on positive contributions.

Moreover, a more equitable and inclusive educational system benefit all students. When students see themselves reflected in the curriculum and classroom materials, they are more likely to feel motivated and engaged. Additionally, a diverse teaching staff can provide students with a variety of perspectives and experiences, helping them to develop a broader understanding of the world. A more inclusive curriculum may foster a more positive environment that encourages Black students to remain engaged in FI until after secondary education and perhaps onwards. This inclusivity might also inspire them to pursue careers in education, particularly as FI teachers, and become the change they wish to see. Like my own experience, creating an inclusive educational space might motivate future generations of Black students to contribute to French immersion programs, helping to diversify the teaching profession and address representation gaps within it.

Final Thoughts

The researcher's recommendations reflect the participants' reported lived experiences. Encouraging Black teacher enrolment in education programs and actively promoting French immersion programs to diverse communities are steps towards a more equitable educational system. In addition, the collecting of disaggregated race-based data and implementing accountability measures for education staff to address systemic racism can enhance the support offered to Black girls in FI.

The current education system creates various difficulties for Black girls. The lack of diversity among teachers and curriculum reinforces systemic barriers. These barriers disproportionately

impact racialized and working-class students, including Black girls, further excluding them from opportunities that FI programs are intended to provide. Additionally, for some, encountering microaggressions and discriminatory practices has an influence on their academic achievement and their psychological well-being. Overall, these experiences highlight the need for a more inclusive and representative educational frameworks that recognize and values the unique identities of Black girls in FI. This research is the first step in a long-term effort to improve Black girls' education.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Identifier

1. How old are you and what grade are you in?
2. What is your ethnic background (Mother/Father)? In what country were you born?
3. What is your school board?
4. In what grade did you enroll in the French Immersion program?
5. What were the reasons you were enrolled?
 - a. Guiding: parents, French background, economic capital

Family Life

6. What is the highest level of education from your parent/guardian?
7. Do any of your parents speak French?
 - a. Was learning French difficult because your parents didn't speak it?
8. What language(s) do you speak at home?

School Experience

9. What were your experiences like in the French Immersion program in K-5? What were your experiences like in the French Immersion program in 6-8? What were your experiences like in the French Immersion program in 9-12?
 - a. Were any of your teachers Black?
 - b. What problems did you face, if any?
10. Do you think having Black teachers would change your experience in FSL? Why or why not?

11. Were there times when you wanted to quit French? Why?

School Support

10. Did you have teacher's support?

a. How would or wouldn't you have wanted your teacher's support?

11. How do you feel about teacher/staff/administrative support?

Anti-Black Racist Education

12. Did you experience any racism or bias in your school?

13. How was the diversity in your school and classes? Did you notice?

14. Were diverse materials used in any of your classes

Suggestions/Sentiments

15. Do you have anything that you'd like to see done differently? Or do you have any suggestions for the future of the French immersion program?

16. Would you recommend the French immersion program?

17. Overall, final thoughts on how you feel about being in the French immersion program?

Appendix B

Resources

For “Black Girls Need Love Too: An Intersectional Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Black Girls in the French Immersion Program” Project

1. [Black Youth Helpline](#): 1-833-294-8650
2. [Children’s Mental Health Ontario \(CMHO\)](#)
 - a. [One Stop Talk](#): Youth (17 and under) with free mental health support
3. [BounceBack](#): 1-866-345-0224
Guided mental health self-help supports for those above age 15.
4. [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario \(YWHO\)](#) (12-25)
5. School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO-SMSO) Resources for Children and Youth
 - a. [Self-Care 101 for Students](#)
 - b. [Mental Health Literacy and Anxiety Management Social Media Bundles](#)
 - c. [No Problem is Too Big or Too Small: student seeking resource](#)