

Black Girls Clapback: Intersectionality, Black girlhood and inequity in the
Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

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Abstract

The diverse lives of Black girls within North America are deeply rooted in various histories of marginalization. They continue to face forms of oppression as a result of their intersectional identities, which produces consequences for their lived experiences. Literature focused on the lives of Black girls in the United States highlights and demonstrates the consistent resilience of Black girls as they struggle to resist the impacts of racism, sexism, and other barriers in their lives. Less available in scholarship, however, is data outlining and describing the circumstances that impact the social and educational realities of Black girls within a Canadian context. This qualitative study focuses on the school and social experiences of fourteen Black teenage girls living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Through the analysis of narratives collected from focus groups and interviews, the study draws connections between media's controlling images and the situations the study participants encounter at school. Using theories that centre Black girlhood, intersectionality, and Black feminist pedagogy, this research examines the thoughts and opinions of the participants as they illustrate the impact of academic streaming, teacher apathy, differing academic expectations on Black girls, teacher microaggressions, and media stereotypes, on their experiences in school. In addition, using analyses of representation, this study assists in explaining how normalized readings of historical and contemporary representations of Black female identity construct meaning for Black girls. The goal of this study is to highlight the voices of Black girls as they speak on their own experiences and to illuminate the need for practices such as safer spaces and pedagogical approaches focused on purposeful inclusion to support the development and well-being of Black girls in the GTA.

Keywords: Black girls; education; media representations; Great Toronto Area (GTA); safer spaces

Dedication

For my before, and my after, my mother Mavis and my daughter Zavia.

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Chapter One: Introduction

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.

—Audre Lorde

As a young Black girl,¹ I knew there was a difference between me—dark-skinned with kinky curls—and the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls who usually made up most of the student population in my co-ed class. Growing up in the 1980s in Scarborough, a Toronto suburb, I was always one of the few girls of colour in my class. Memorably, one year there were three of us, all sharing the same name—some spelling variation of “Kisha.” As a Black girl, I was conscious of the ways I differed physically from the White girls in my class, such as the colour of my skin and eyes, and the texture of my hair, but I had no idea how much these differences would factor into my own identity, self-concept, and understanding of what it means to be Black.

I am a second-generation Canadian, born to Jamaican parents who were part of the wave of Caribbean immigrants who came to Canada in the 1960s (Nurse, 2004). At home with my immigrant Jamaican family, I was raised with a culture and identity that made sense to me, and it provided a context for what it meant to be Black in Canada. Outside of the home, however, I encountered a vast Whiteness, and my status as a Black girl felt like a burden. These feelings had a lot to do with the representations of Blackness² that I encountered in media and popular culture. Throughout my childhood and youth, Blackness was always positioned as subservient,

¹ Black girls, here, reflects a wide, diverse group of people, of African descent, identifying as Black and female, between the ages of two and 19. For the purposes of the study, most references to Black girls refer to a culturally diverse group of girls between the ages of 13 and 19 years old, who identify as Black racially and culturally.

² Reference to Blackness throughout this study is associated with Black people as a racial group and Black culture within a North American context. In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Blackness is predominantly connected to the cultures and identities of people settling in the region coming from across the Caribbean and the continent of Africa.

less than, “othered,” and deviant in the media that I consumed. From television to film, to advertising, Blackness was differentiated from what was considered “normal” and depicted as something to be feared or reviled. These representations of Blackness—in large part created by non-Black people—were so ubiquitous and normalized that I too internalized them. I lived with a fear that these representations said something truthful about me. Being young, Black, and dark-skinned, I was unable to escape how I felt I was reflected in broader society (i.e., as ugly, undesirable, unnecessary, unwelcome), which impacted my own identity and my ability to love who I was. I preferred it when I just felt invisible. It seemed foreign to celebrate or proudly identify with my Blackness. Although my entire family was Black, for me, Blackness, as it was represented and positioned within the popular culture and media, created tensions and troubled my ability to belong, even to myself.

As far back as elementary school, I remember being treated differently but not knowing why. Teachers and administrators often forced me to participate in sports. I was usually one of the first to be selected for a team in gym class or during recess. I was pretty fast, and I could jump both high and far and throw a shot put a decent distance. I found eager acceptance among my classmates and teachers, who recognized and prized my physical skills, which only added to my fierce, Amazon-like persona. At 9, 10, 11 years old, I could not even begin to unpack why I received more attention than the other Black girls who were less physically or athletically inclined. I chalked it up to being good at everything. It took me years to start to question how the type of Black identity that I represented—being good at sports, tall, and physically capable—reflected common representations of Black girls and women in media and popular culture. How did these representations influence how I was treated in school?

It was not until high school that I started to become more aware of the reality of how Black identity was represented in popular culture and media, and what this might mean for me. I stopped playing sports, and as I began to pay more attention to what was going on around me, the ramifications of society's negative portrayals of Blackness became more conspicuous and unavoidable. I noticed and became more critical of how White students were treated differently from Black students. Because our high school was home to a community daycare centre that had a considerable number of Black children, some teachers assumed many of us Black female students were also mothers. How did they come to this conclusion? Well, Black girls are often depicted as teenage mothers in the media, not to mention as uneducated, athletic, and aggressive (Brown, 2009; Harris, 2015; Jacobs, 2016). I could see how the narrow depictions of Black girls in popular culture translated into a set of assumptions about who we were and the limited options we had in our lives. In those early years, I didn't engage much in any dialogue or action; I just took notice.

In school, I experienced and witnessed a number of what could be described as racial microaggressions, defined as "brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities" (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 326), based on race, and directed at me by teachers, administrators, and other students. White teachers sometimes associated aggressive behaviour or loudness with Black students, a common stereotype pervasive in popular culture. I recall teachers associating my being late or distracted in class with my Blackness, a common racist trope. One teacher—whom I will never forget—said to me, "You people are always late," the two times I was late to his geography class in Grade 11. That same year, I did an advanced unit on Shakespeare's *Othello*, whose title character is identified in the

play as a “Moor.” My English teacher looked directly at me, the single Black student in the class, and clearly stated, “That means he is Black.” As other students turned to stare at me, I remember feeling like an alien. After that incident, I can clearly recollect not wanting to contribute aloud in class. The racial microaggressions I experienced were often minor, but they were consistent, and I remember them all these years later.

In other ways, Blackness was simply negated and made invisible. I felt an unfamiliar eagerness when we learned about Emperor Haile Selassie in a Western civilization class in Grade 12. This lesson was one of the few times I can recall feeling visible in a classroom. The Ethiopian emperor even had a small but tangible connection to Jamaica, where my parents were born.³ One year away from graduating high school, I had seen very little evidence of Black or African contributions to history; in fact, it amazed me that Selassie was pertinent enough to be included in the Eurocentric curriculum. We spent a short time talking about the emperor’s visit to the League of Nations where he pleaded with leaders of Europe to protect the Ethiopian empire from a Mussolini-led Italian invasion (Mockler, 1984). The whole discussion took no longer than 20 minutes, yet it is one of only two lessons I can fully recall from my high school experience.

Curriculum centred on Eurocentric material and approaches (as all of our high school curriculum was) often does not adequately capture or cultivate the interest of non-White students; this can lead educators to assume these students are less capable or motivated to learn. I can only speculate on how limited representations of Black people in media and popular culture

³ The Rastafarians of Jamaica hold Emperor Haile Selassie in the highest regard. The Rastafarians have roots in Christianity and believe Selassie to be a direct descendent of King David (Chavannes, 1995). Given the problematic and often complicated accounts of Selassie’s position as Emperor of Ethiopia (1930–1974) (Legum, 1975), it is important to note that I was previously exposed to Selassie through the Rastafarian culture in Jamaica. This contributed to my attention and interest in this lecture.

also play a role in the perception of Blacks as capable students. Conventional media represents Black girls as defiant, aggressive, and combative, especially in school settings (George, 2015; Harris, 2015; Morris, 2016). Did these representations of Blackness impact my teachers' perception of the type of education and treatment I and other Black girls deserved? Did they factor into my teachers' judgment of me as a student? I do not know. What is clear to me, based on my experience, is that school can be an isolating place for Black girls. Some of the more common representations of Black girls, i.e., as loud, aggressive, and ratchet, can be implicated in sustaining the sorts of stereotypes that alienate Black girls in school. There are many factors that create barriers to success in school; these are only compounded when students have to deal with experiences of racism, classism, and sexism.

In fairness, I am sure that my high school was not the worst place for a Black girl, but the fact that it wasn't only demonstrates how challenging it can be to be young and Black and female in school. Stereotypes about Black youth are so effectively normalized in our society they are unavoidable, and in many ways, they undergirded my high school experience. Rather than being "White-washed" or assimilated into Whiteness, my Black peers and I found ourselves forced into an exaggerated identification with our Blackness; we opted to be "hyper-Black." But this identification also negated us. It denied us the opportunity to construct an identity based on our whole being and all of the many aspects of our identities; we were forced to silence the parts of ourselves that did not fit. As I transitioned into adulthood, my connection to my Black identity also changed as I came to resist the negative positioning of Blackness that I so often witnessed and experienced, but felt that I had no agency to change.

Today, I still sometimes struggle with feelings of inadequacy rooted in my concept of identity; however, I've developed a more critical lens that allows me to objectively analyze my feelings and put them in context of the representations and discourses that shape my lived reality. It is impossible to imagine what other directions my life might have taken if I had felt that I was a deserving and welcomed participant in my school and society, the way other non-Black people seemed to be. If I looked in the mirror as a teenager and did not fear the colour of my own skin, how might my life have been different? If stereotypes about my gender, which were compounded by the marginalization of my race, had not influenced my behaviour, what else could I have achieved? As a mother of a teenage Black girl, I feel compelled to delve deeper into the experiences that shaped my identity to adequately inform, educate, and prepare my daughter for some of what she might experience because of her race, gender, and age, among other aspects of her identity.

Times have changed, and we have made slow progress towards facilitating spaces for Black girls to articulate and negotiate their identity in this society; however, challenges remain. Over the last five years, I have been working with Black girls in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and in Jamaica, exploring concepts of identity and the struggles that Black girls face as they transition into adulthood. Through my community work, I've learned that Black girls still deal with the high levels of isolation and feelings of "otherness" that I experienced growing up decades ago. Racism and sexism, for example, confuse their understanding of themselves and their place in society. Being forced to contend with these issues and succeed despite them, however, has led Black girls to build their resilience. Resilience, often referenced as an essential requirement for racialized and oppressed people, is defined by Reynolds (1998) as "functional

competence in the presence of multiple risk factors such as poverty, stress, and low educational attainment” (p. 84). There has been waves of research and literature pointing to the intrinsic and vital function of resilience in Black communities (American Psychological Association, 2010; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Reynolds, 1998). Indeed, for Black girls, who must negotiate such oppressive factors as they construct their identity, resilience is a requirement.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit across from eight bright-eyed 11- and 12-year-old Black girls in an elementary school in Toronto. I was excited to share their space and talk. However, I was also sensitive to the fact that Black girls, regardless of age, still feel the consequences of both lack of representation and misrepresentation in various pervasive cultural forms and productions. With this in mind, I started this particular session with basic introductions, asking the girls to tell me their names and one thing that they loved about themselves. I stressed the word “love.” I was surprised at their responses; each of them said they loved the fact that they are Black. This was amazing to me. Growing up, I never could have imagined giving such a response to the question of what I loved about myself. For a moment, I was overcome with joy. I contemplated the possibilities of this contemporary expression of Black girl pride, including what it might mean given some of the harsh realities of being Black, but my joy was short-lived. As I listened to their accounts, it became increasingly clear that their concerns were similar to the ones I had growing up, and that these concerns remained unaddressed and even invisible, due to limited analysis of the lives and experiences of Black girls. In order to increase the visibility of Black girls and the concerns that shape their experiences, academic emphasis should be placed on the intersectionality of their identities.

Specific intersections of identity need to be examined to sufficiently account for the experiences of Black girls in school and within society at large. This dissertation begins with reviewing the racism experienced by Black people within White societies, like the GTA. Then, I contextualize this analysis of racism by considering the inequality associated with gender and class. A fair amount of research has been done that attempts to articulate this intersection of race, class, and gender, which is useful and provides a solid foundation for my analysis. However, these analyses do not consider age. Contextualizing age in relation to these discourses is essential as there is a powerlessness associated with the age of the girls in this study that further complicates the limits and inequities that result because of racism, sexism, and classism.

Critiquing Western feminism, in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw stated: “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (p. 1242). Concepts of identity as rooted in feminist discourses create a context for exploring how identity is constructed not only through lived experience, but also in direct parallel to one’s personal knowledge and understanding. But while feminism can be used to examine sexism, for example, it does not effectively account for other “intragroup” variations, such as age. Allan (2006) points to Patricia Hill Collins’s analysis of the impact of race, gender, and class, and how these factors influence knowledge. Collins argues that knowledge is most significant to social beings when validated. Therefore, the lack of attention paid to intersectional identities when exploring identity development and experiences of girls only serves to create a gap and delegitimize the significance of other aspects of their identity and experiences. This study seeks to assist in addressing this gap.

I began this study by reflecting on my experiences growing up because this seemed like a natural and important starting point for examining how representations of Blackness impact the experiences and well-being of Black girls. This study will focus not only on the effect representations in media and popular culture have on Black girls' personal identity development, but also on how Black girls' interpretations of these representations factor into the way they are treated in their community spaces. The influence that race, class, gender, and age have on the development of social identity forces us to consider how the framing of Blackness in the popular domain has both internal (for Black people) and external (for non-Black people) implications for lived experiences. While studies point to the continued marginalization of Black girls and how this influences the degree of equitable participation in society they experience compared to non-Black girls (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018; Jacobs, 2016), it is also important to recognize, and to some degree resolve, the effects that representation has on identity, participation, agency, and the overall potential of Black girls.

Reflecting on my own experience growing up Black and female in Toronto, I started to think about how best to theorize and examine this phenomenon. One part of the analysis must surely concern Black identity, as outlined and described by prominent race and cultural studies theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall, who initiated conversations about the realities and impact of Blackness in White society. Another equally significant part of the analysis, I reasoned, must employ a Black feminist lens, as positioned by scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Njoki Wane. However, even when bringing these discourses together, they failed to fully account for the experiences of Black girls. As school is a significant part of the growth and development experience of youth, education and pedagogy, and the ways they impact the

identity and well-being of Black girls, as positioned by Henry (1997; 1998), is also a significant theme in the experience of Black girls. In bringing these frameworks together, I discovered an opportunity to connect scholarship in these areas to further outline, describe, and account for the lived experiences of Black girls in the context of girls' studies.

I recognize my stake in conducting this and any other study that seeks to frame and emphasize the experiences of Black girls. I am a Black feminist woman and mother, born and raised in Toronto, so this topic and focus is somewhat personal. I am also an educator, scholar, and community advocate with over 15 years of experience developing and implementing various frameworks and programs to support Black youth and equitable education. My experiences have provided me with the opportunity to learn, listen, and apply various strategies to support Black youth. In 2009, I co-founded an organization, The Power to Be International, with which I am still involved, mandated to provide resources and opportunities for youth. Through the organization, I researched, developed, and implemented education-focused programs aimed at supporting children and youth. I've facilitated different evaluation methods to improve and strengthen my community work to maintain an effective position in the lives of the youth with whom I have been fortunate to work over the years.

In 2012, I started developing gender-specific programs for youth in Jamaica to provide safer spaces, within the organization's regular programming, where we could home in on issues that may impact development, while cultivating spaces where youth can learn from each other. The successful implementation of youth leadership programs in rural Jamaica led me to focus on programming for Black girls in the Greater Toronto Area. One of the benefits of being both an academic and a community developer is that I am readily equipped to recognize gaps within the

larger structures of society, i.e., the education system, that play a role in the realities of our lives. Working on the front line with community members, hearing their accounts, I also recognize some of the unique concerns in the lives of youth.

The many intricacies and overlapping circumstances in the lives of Black girls are too complex to be fit neatly into an analysis of Black youth or studies of girlhood, or even theories of Black womanhood. Studies from the United States documenting the experiences of Black girls in school and in the community continue to emerge; these are effectively positioned within the broader field of girls' studies. This research into Black girlhood provides insights into the diverse and unique experiences of Black teenage girls in the United States (Brown, 2009; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; French et al., 2012; Love, 2012; Weekes, 2003; Jacobs, 2016). However, studies on the lived experiences of Black girls in Canada are limited. In my initial literature scan for this study, I found two articles (Henry, 2017; Linton & McLean, 2017) that centred the voices of Black girls, capturing their thoughts and opinions in a Canadian context. Annette Henry's article, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogies: Possibilities and Challenges for African Canadian Children," is not completely focused on Black girls; however, it gives voice to their experiences. Rowena Linton and Lorna McLean's article, "I Am Not Loud, I'm Outspoken," focuses on data collected from the narratives of four Black girls of Jamaican descent who struggle to find their place and succeed in a Toronto school. Understanding Black girls' experiences in Canada is critical to fostering positive identity development, agency, and personal, academic, and professional success. While parallels can be made internationally, differences in social, cultural, and political dynamics significantly shape the construction of identities, and the barriers experienced as a result; therefore, more research and literature on Black girls in Canada is required.

Girls' studies focuses primarily on the experiences of White, middle-class girls. Studies on Black youth focus predominantly on Black boys, while Black feminist theories are about Black women and are advanced based on the need for social equality that goes beyond the experiences of White women. The question is, where in all of these disciplines do we locate and expand on the experiences of Black girls? Black girls are not just another group of girls within girls' studies, and they are certainly not just another group of youth to be referenced in studies on Black youth. Black girls are not fully reflected within Black feminism either—most Black girls spend much of their childhood being reminded that they are “not a woman yet.” The fact that Black girls have fallen in the gaps between these disciplines makes sense to me. Even as a Black girl, I struggled to find a language to articulate the disconnect that I felt. What I was feeling was not fully comprehensible, which speaks to something fundamental about the phenomenon of the Black girl experience.

Based on my extensive experiences working within youth communities, my experience as a Black woman, and my often-challenging experience as a mother, here is what I know for sure: Black girls need an area of study that more accurately captures their diversity. It is still unclear what we would call this field or subfield, or where it might find a suitable home in the contemporary world of academia, but what is evident, is that it is necessary. Black girls take up a unique position in society, and based on their experiences, they have developed a distinct way of knowing. Their own way of constructing their reality in the world they live in. What Black girls know determines what they feel capable of, and where they believe their futures can lead. To access this way of knowing—and ultimately support them—we must start by listening to them.

A number of Black female scholars have engaged in research and writing on Black women and girls, and they continue to advocate for and validate explicit exploration of the spaces that Black girls occupy in our society. We, Black girls and Black women, are listening, we are learning, and we are striving for access to humanity. So, this is where my work begins. Over the years, my concerns with the circumstances that impact and construct the realities of Black girls has only continued to grow. I am committed to and invested in the implementation and outcome of this study because I was once a Black girl in the GTA and I am now raising a Black girl in the same place, but in a different time. I acknowledge that because my research is focused on the Black girls who participated in this study, there will still be a vast number of voices and experiences that remain unaccounted for. It is my hope, however, that by highlighting the intersectionality of the Black girls I spoke to, this research will assist and contribute to the emerging literature that seeks to amplify the voices of Black girls to positively impact their lives.

Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, in Canadian society, any deviation from the dominant categories of identity (i.e., White, male, middle-class, adult) tends to manifest other forms of inequality. Growing up within White-dominated societies further complicates the identity development process for Black girls. Representations of race and stereotypes depicting racialized girls can influence how Black girls see themselves and understand their place in society, and often make their lived experiences more violent and limiting (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018).

Research conducted by the Canadian Women's Foundation (2018) outlines concern for Canadian girls in areas such as gender-based violence, media, self-esteem, sexualization, education, and career attainment. It also indicates significant disparities between racialized girls

and White girls in these areas. Racialized identities in this context refers to “groups of people that have been socially and politically constructed as ‘racially’ distinct... [They] have notable cultural dimensions, but they are primarily a manifestation of unequal power between groups” (Baum, 2006, p. 11). Racialization produces racial “Otherness” in context to White identities. These disparities negatively impact racialized girls’ participation in society and their overall quality of life. Addressing the impact of these disparities requires extensive research and documenting the experiences and voices of racialized girls of various groups, in this case, Black girls, to effectively account for intersectionality and understand the broader social, emotional, and psychological concerns that impact identity development and experiences.

Rationale and Aims

Where do we begin the painful process of starting to see people as whole human beings in societies that have historically denied their humanity? How do I, the researcher, community member, and former Black girl, pronounce and make abundantly clear the necessity of undoing and disrupting the sites of oppression that have created barriers to the positive, healthy development of Black girls?

Black girls are continually divided and diminished not through their own doing but through the vicious systems of oppression that are deeply ingrained in the structures that control all aspects of their lives and our society (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016). Put simply, Black girls must live and function in a system of White supremacy that inherently discriminates against them and denies them full personhood. The rationale for this project is to contribute to the effort to make Black girls’ lives and experiences matter, matter in ways that will provide them access to their humanity.

This study captures, describes, and interprets the lived experiences of high-school-aged Black girls in the Greater Toronto Area to identify some of the circumstances and factors that shape the conditions of their education, development, and well-being. The study also seeks to advance the understanding of intersectionality, contextualizing and making clear the various features of identity that have significant implications in the lives of Black girls in Canada. There are three broad questions that inform this study.

- 1) What challenges do Black girls face in school in the GTA?
- 2) How do common media perceptions of Black women and girls factor into how Black girls are treated in school?
- 3) What approaches and strategies do Black girls use to resist negative representations and the various forms of oppression they face?

In answering these three broad questions, this study has three main objectives: 1) to increase awareness of Black girls' understandings and lived experiences and the ways in which representations inform their Black identities and experiences in the GTA; 2) to contribute to a growing body of research and actions that seek to change the narratives and experiences that adversely impact the identity development of Black girls; and 3) to provide access to data that will assist community members and service providers (teachers, administrators, social service practitioners) in supporting Black girls throughout their development in Canada.

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Chapter two provides the theoretical framework for the study, outlining concepts and discourses surrounding Black feminist epistemology, gender, class, and intersectionality, along with race, media and representations. The literature review, in chapter three, addresses literature focused on girls' studies and Black

girlhood. This includes some of the literature available on Black girls and media representation, schooling in the GTA, and resistance and empowerment programs for Black girls. The following chapter, chapter four, outlines the qualitative research methodology and approaches used for data collection and data analysis to complete the study. Chapter five is the first data-reporting chapter and highlights the narratives of participants to focus on their experiences in school. The second data reporting chapter in the study, chapter six, continues with specific narratives of Black girls to focus on media access, their interpretation of media depictions, school, and their approaches to resistance. In chapter seven, I outline and discuss the findings reported in chapters five and six. The last chapter, chapter eight, is dedicated to my final thoughts on the study and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

If we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks.

—Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw

In undertaking research for this study, part of the challenge was finding theories that would effectively support the accounts and perspectives of the participants. Black girls take up an interesting space in society. Framing their position, as Black, female, teenage girls of varied socio-economic status, has only recently emerged within scholarship. Many of the theories used to analyze and describe their experiences are largely based on the experiences of Black women within the context of Black feminist theories. Although Black feminist theories, for example, are an effective and useful place to begin to deconstruct the experiences of Black girls, more specific attention needs to be placed on age and development in context with their intersectional identities and their contemporary girlhood experience. As Black girls are not adequately accounted for within the field of girls' studies, I have used a combination of Black feminist theories, while centring intersectionality, in an attempt to effectively cover as much ground as possible in the study of Black girls in the GTA.

I want to start by positioning Black identities and concepts related to race in Western society; although this study focuses on intersectionality, the constructions and perceptions of race are central in the lives of Black girls living within White society. To consider the role traditional constructions of race and, later, representations of Black identity through media played in shaping historical readings of Black identity, I will establish the concept of "othering" Black bodies using Frantz Fanon's work, and then employ Stuart Hall's theories to examine traditional media within a similar context. bell hooks provides a framework and context to

examine gender and race in traditional media, while Lisa Nakamura positions race and gender in new media. Together, these theories provide a strong theoretical grounding for discussing race, gender, and media within this study.

Annette Henry's Black feminist pedagogy interrogates educational practices and therefore naturally explores the experiences of Black girls in educational spaces. Henry's work contextualizes practices in education such as culturally relevant education and Black feminist scholarship, which, when reviewed together, articulate concerns for Black girls in relation to their school experiences. Henry's advancement of these theories also supports practical solutions to issues directly connected to the absence of cultural diversity and lack of accommodations for intersectionality in formal education.

My study is grounded on four distinct tenets. I start by positioning Fanon and Hall to discuss race, its connection to experiences in the Black diaspora, and the process of "othering" identities within these societies. Next, I use intersectionality to expound on the complexity of identity by examining more closely gender, age, and class, and their impact on lived experience. To do this, I reference Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as a starting point for exploring how various aspects of Black girls' identities impact their experiences. I examine Black representation in White society in old and new media using the theories of Hall (1990), hooks (1992), and Nakamura (2008). My study builds on Black feminist theories using various discourses within Black feminist epistemology and culturally relevant pedagogy to examine the function of education (Henry, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Lastly, I use Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) to further articulate an emphasis on legitimizing marginal voices

and creating safer spaces for Black girls within educational and community spaces, both as a form of resistance and a tool for transgressing unwanted circumstances.

Race and Identity

In the early 1950s, psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon theorized and discussed the experience of the Black man within a White-dominant society. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) highlighted the ways in which the racism and oppression experienced by Black men, within White society, resulted in the Black man's internalized inferiority. In the chapter entitled, "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon elaborates on the experience of being treated as an "Other" in a world where Whiteness is perceived as the epitome of power. Through a series of narratives, Fanon documents experiences and reflectively positions the occurrences that influence Black identity in White spaces. Fanon (1967) expounds:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my Blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin.'" (pp .84–85)

When we take into consideration the many ways in which the identity of an individual is constructed, maintained, and internalized, it is unsurprising that the outcome of racialization often produces severe implications for the "Other." The power that is assumed in the process of controlling the "Other," in this case, the Black "Other," allows for the complete and utter rejection of Black humanity. The manifestations of internalized inferiority also result in the continued enslavement of the Black psyche. The "Othering" of identity is maintained through

White structures of power (i.e., education, media) and the pervasive hegemonic constructions of Blackness and Black identity as “Other,” which continues to impact the lives of Black people. The “Othering,” as reflected in both internal and external perceptions of Blackness, as Fanon describes, began through the process of colonization.

Fanon’s writings theorize the experiences of the Black man living in a colonial society, and therefore have relevance to experiences of Blackness in Canada due to the country’s colonial past. His analysis sets a foundation for understanding Blackness in White colonial states, as Black identity is in large part constructed based on the shared histories and ancestry of Black people (Hall, 1990). According to Hall, this lens or “reading” and “Othering” of the Black experience has “played a crucial role in the post-colonial struggles which have profoundly reshaped our world” (p. 223). A central theme from Fanon’s work is the experience of Blackness within the power structures of White society. The experiences of Black women are not explicitly outlined in the context of his analysis. Fanon (1967) summarizes a reality that can be experienced by both Black men and women; however, gender adds complexities that intensify the experience of oppression for Black women and girls that Fanon’s work does not reference.

In his analysis of Fanon’s theory, Hall makes clear the consequences of “othering” in relation to power and representation. He notes that cultural identity “continues to be a very powerful in creative and emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalised peoples” (Hall, 1990, p. 223). For Black women and girls, gender creates yet another barrier, in addition to race, which often manifests through the limited tropes and problematic representations of Black women that are pervasive in popular culture.

Both Fanon's (1967) and Hall's (1990) analyses of race and representation of race offer a starting point for examining Black cultural identity in Western society; however, the absence of gender, class, and age analysis within these concepts create a space for more specific examination. Framing intersectionality, in addition to Fanon's and Hall's Black cultural studies analyses, provides a broader context for evaluating how identities intersect to create additional and more complex dynamics that have in some way led to invisibility and/or omission of voices in academic literature.

Gender, Class, and Intersectionality

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced a pivotal framework to situate the factors that influence one's identity and experience, particularly in White-dominant societies. Intersectionality directs attention towards aspects of identity that are considered marginal and, at times, ignored in broader conversations on the forms of oppression that impact one's experience. For example, Hall's work on cultural identity and diaspora (1990) set out to explore the problematic ways in which dominant structures in society fail to adequately address how race impacts the identity development of Black people. As compelling and important as this analysis is, it does not consider the dynamics of gender, age, or class, which drastically changes one's experience, especially in the context of White society. Neglecting to acknowledge and refer to their intersectionality expands barriers for Black women and girls. As Crenshaw (1989) posits:

If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community's needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy. (p. 166)

As well as gender and race, other essential aspects of identity such as class and age, and how they intersect, must be considered in an analysis of Black girls. An analysis of class, for example, means considering how the social and economic status associated with their parents impacts the lives of Black girls. Age, a critical element in any examination of the lives of Black girls, is often missing in general discourses focused on race, gender, and class. Intersectionality provides a framework in which marginalization, and its relationship to power, is framed around many factors that are central to understanding the ways in which identity both influences and affects the lived experiences of marginalized people.

In general, members of the Black community have very little structural power within the systems that create and maintain their oppression. For example, in Ontario, Black and Indigenous youth have the lowest rates of high school completion and highest growing rates of incarceration when compared to other groups (Anucha et al., 2018). Despite this, there have been few attempts to capture the voices of Black youth to account for and address their experiences in school, which surely factor into these disparities (The Black Experience Project, 2017; Anucha et al., 2018). Black women and girls face particularly acute challenges. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation (2018), racialized women are among the largest populations living in poverty in Ontario, a fact that supports the idea that race and gender intersect in ways that further isolate Black women and their children. This is particularly true for those who are living in poverty and/or are disempowered by other aspects of their identity.

There is a limited number of narratives available that reflect the voices of Black women. This makes finding and examining stories that capture their lived experience a difficult task. Feminist critiques, which address notions of exclusion among other things, mobilized responses

from Black feminists, who established dialogues on intersectionality and explored how multi-faceted identities impact women within the broader society. Many of these prominent Black feminist scholars (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Henry, 2005; hooks, 2001; Wane, 2004) called for the expansion of feminist theorizing to more effectively represent the experiences of Black women. As Crenshaw puts it, “Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-White women” (p. 166). These feminist epistemological conversations have been shaping international discourses on feminism for decades. As Henry (2005) notes, “Internationally, the activism and scholarship of Black woman has advanced theory by raising critical questions about the complex and simultaneous systems of oppression” (p. 91).

While these significant and essential additions to the feminist framework continue, it raises the question: How does scholarship that contextualizes the experiences of Black women position Black girls in the analysis? It is equally important to factor in and extend the analysis to include Black girls, as their experiences differ from Black women due to age. Henry (2005) connects Black feminist theory to a pedagogical practice, which can be used as a foundation for situating and supporting Black girls in both theory and practice. As Henry effectively puts it, “unmasking the often hidden dimensions of power and oppression in order to envision alternatives toward the well-being of all humanity” (p. 98) also needs to include Black girls.

Race, Media, and Representation

Hall (1990) examines Black diasporic identity and how identity commands power and transforms society. The concept of Blackness and Black cultural identity creates tensions as the project of “othering” Blackness requires Black identity to be “positioned at the margins” (p. 442) of White society. Hall unpacks what he means by “White society” in Britain, defining it as “a set

of quite specific political and cultural practices which regulated, governed and ‘normalized’ the representational and discursive spaces of English society” (Hall, 1990, pp. 442–443). This definition of the role of White society and power can be similarly applied in the Canadian context due to European control prior to Confederation. Identity is often understood as holding elements of the past (i.e., colonial legacies of Blackness, which have real consequences), while moving into the changing future (the making of new productions). “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall, 1990, p. 255). The past, which continues to impact identities, informs much of what Black identities continue to become as the cultural understanding and systems that control their representations and position within our society continue to shift. Hall (1990) clarifies:

Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, with discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’. (p. 225)

This understanding of cultural identities allows us to explore the sources that contribute to the formation of Black identities in White society. Hall’s analysis elaborates on the positioning of Black cultural identity in the diaspora: the White spaces with Eurocentric origins and histories where Black people live and assimilate.

Hall also draws attention to the meaning derived from media representations that are circulated and celebrated within the diaspora. Media representations can be extremely powerful as they influence how the identity of individuals and groups are constructed in the broader

society. Movies, for example, portray specific narratives that depict a version of Black life. These narratives can easily become common readings for Black culture and Black people. Hall's work provides context for understanding how Black representation in media is implicated in the continued "othering" and marginalization of Black people living in the diaspora.

This study asks: what meaning is derived from interpreting media messages? How do these meanings factor into the lived experiences of Black girls? Hall (1997) suggests, "It is by our use of things, and what we say, think, and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them" (p. 3). The meaning constructed from media representations of Black girlhood is often contested by the narratives of Black girls about their experiences. Hall's framework allows for the examining of "how language and representation produce meaning, but [also] how the knowledge which particular discourses produce connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied" (p. 6). From this standpoint, we can conclude that Black identities as commonly constructed and understood within White societies obscure the real identities and experiences of Black people within these spaces.

Media representations of Blackness operate within a complicated terrain for a number of reasons, but mainly due to the fact that within the popular domain, "Blacks have typically been objects, but rarely subjects of the practices of representation" (Hall, 1996, p. 443). Powerless within the pervasive media system, Black people maintain an object position across platforms, and this objectification is normalized through powerful and limiting representations. As Hall

(1996) notes, “there was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the Black experience but with its simplification and its stereotypical character” (p. 443). Even in contemporary media spaces, Black people have limited agency or control over the dominating images of Blackness that affect their experiences. In many cases, the only form of power Black people have over the impact of media representations is through their own gaze.

In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks (1992) discusses Black women spectatorship and the power of the “gaze.” She describes the “gaze” as a tool that can be used for cultivating and maintaining—but also, in the case of Black people, resisting—White supremacy through the examination of mediated texts. The “gaze,” as hooks explains it, refers to the way one looks at media, contextualizes what is seen, and then interprets it through the act of looking. According to hooks, “there is power in looking” (p. 115), and her analysis points to how Black women, and by extension, Black girls, can use the “gaze” as a form of “critical spectatorship” (p. 116); she calls this the “oppositional gaze.” In this way, even while subjugated by the power of White representations, i.e., the loud, aggressive, violent, sexually promiscuous Black woman seen in various media texts, which negate (hooks, 1992; Jacobs, 2016; Harris, 2015), Black women and girls have an opportunity to resist these representations. According to hooks (1992), the resistance is in the act of looking, but also in the rejecting. She asserts that when Black people look at film and television, “they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy” (p. 117).

At the time of hooks’s analysis, Black women and girls were rarely seen in media; when they were represented, they were almost always depicted stereotypically (hooks, 1992). As a result of this omission or misrepresentation, Black women did not look to media for validation of

their identity or place in society. hooks (1992) says, “most of the Black women I talked with were adamant that they never went to movies expecting to see compelling representations of Black femaleness” (p. 119). Black women are conscious of the racism in film and television representations, which normalizes and reproduces the “violent erasure of Black womanhood” (p. 119) through negative portrayals. To a certain degree, due to her limited power, the Black female spectator was forced to either look the other way, silently resist, or become complicit in the media representations that reduced her existence. Historically, the oppositional Black media gaze led to more formalized and deliberate sites of resistance and the creation of independent media forms, such as Black Cinema (hooks, 1992). In Black film and television, “Black looks, as they were constituted in the context of social movements for racial uplift, were interrogating gazes” (p. 119). “Black Cinema,” as it was called, was considered a revolutionary act that functioned as a site of resistance to traditional Black representations (hooks, 1992).

hooks’s media analysis was written on the verge of the Internet revolution. Lisa Nakamura’s (2008) research on race within online spaces builds on previous theories of media representation to include the implications of privileged online spaces and explore how “visual capital” maintains negative representations of Black bodies. According to Nakamura (2008), “the Internet [is] a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic visual images of racialized bodies” (p. 13). The racist ways the identities of Black bodies are constructed and then maintained through media representations become the common understanding, which in turn influences lived experiences of Black people. A lack of power within society, as a result of racial inequality, manifests a lack of power within online spaces as well. This is particularly evident in the experiences of Black women and girls as

research indicates racist representations are even more violent and limiting for racialized women (French, 2013; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

In her exploration of new media, which in this context refers to media and technologies that are advanced and accessible through the Internet, Nakamura (2008) situates race and gender in digital spaces. She states, “There is much at stake, however, in observing the ways that members of the Fourth World—women of color, members of linguistic and ethnic minority cultures, the global underclass—negotiate their identities as digital objects and in incremental ways move them toward digital subject-hood” (p. 20). Analysis of representations of race and gender can only partially address the digital “subject-hood” and its implications for Black girls. To discuss Black girlhood in contemporary society, in context with race, identity, intersectionality, and media representation, it is also necessary to frame Black feminisms to deconstruct and consider broader themes and implications.

Black Feminisms

Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) focuses on the “everyday experiences” of Black women and combines academic theoretical approaches to knowledge with the often-excluded voices of Black women. Collins’s framework for Black feminist thought allows for the positioning of the social reality of Black girls in the context of race, class, and gender to express how these aspects of identity impact the realities of Black women and girls. Black feminist epistemology is central to this study as it yields a strategy for deconstructing the manifestations of racial difference in relation to the everyday experiences of women. Although the “historically Black women’s group location in intersecting oppressions produce commonalities among

individual African-American women” (p. 28), it is also important to emphasize the individual uniqueness of one’s experience, even within one’s marginalized grouping.

The practice of examining the commonalities and “group location,” as Collins describes it, of Black women in America can effectively be extended to include Canadian women. Collins (2000) points out, “A Black women’s collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (p. 28). Although the experiences of Black women vary depending on a number of different circumstances, including geopolitical location, there are common themes related to marginalization and isolation that are consistent in the experiences of Black women and girls, particularly in Western societies (Brown, 2009; Linton & McLean, 2017; Rollock, 2007).

Black Canadian feminism, like Black feminism of other regions (Norwood, 2013), represents groups of diverse Black women; in the case of Black Canadian feminism, these women are all geopolitically connected to Canada. As noted by feminist scholar Njoki Wane (2009), “Communities of Black women consist of a number of groups, including those women whose ancestors have been in Canada for over 400 years as well as African-Caribbean, continental Africans, and Black Canadians from other parts of the world” (p. 146). Some of the historical and social differences that delineate the experiences of Black women in Canada and Black women in the United States call for a distinction between the two regions. As Wane (2009) puts it:

An emerging Black feminist theory is the convergence of journeys in a central place whereby people are differently located in terms of class, sexuality, language and ethnicity. Similar oppressions resulting from slavery, colonialism and racism, however,

makes it possible to speak of shared perspectives on Black Canadian feminist thought though it may differently defined. (p. 146)

Black women's experiences in Canada are marked by the complex manifestations of colonialism. Canadian Black experiences are also implicitly linked to immigration and settlement in the region, and therefore, diverse histories, and social, political, and economic realities of Black womanhood in Canada are foundational to its Black feminism. According to Norwood (2013), Canadian Black feminism functions "to transform structural inequities and resist multiple oppressions present in Canadian daily life" (p. 232). Some of the structural inequalities that Norwood describes as factors for Black women in Canada appear in the lives of Black girls as they transition into adulthood.

Canadian Black feminism is a starting place for creating "a space to acknowledge [Black women's] racialized experiences" (Wane, 2004, p. 161). In its collectivization of knowledge and experiences, Canadian Black feminism also gives rise to meaningful activism that supports the resistance and resilience that has become a common characteristic of both Black women and girls (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2014; Griffin & Allen, 2006; Reynolds, 1998). In institutional and community spaces such as schools, pedagogy and safer spaces are tools for cultivating the healthy well-being of Black girls.

Black Feminist Pedagogy and Safer Spaces

The experiences of Black girls do not completely overlap with those of Black women—most Black girls spend much of their childhood and youth being reminded that they are not a woman yet—and an analysis of the lives and identities of Black girls has not been completed or fully captured in theories of Black feminism. As the framing of Black girls within scholarship

continues to evolve, it is important to note the efforts of a number of Black feminist scholars who established and advanced frameworks that allow for more effective analysis of the circumstances of the complex lives of Black girls (Brown, 2009; Henry, 1998, 2017; Love, 2012).

As early as the mid-90s, when the field of girls' studies was beginning to take shape, Henry (1998) was delving into the lives of Black girls, outlining their experiences to describe and address the ways in which "schools shortchange Black girls" (p. 235). In her study documenting the voices of African Caribbean girls, Henry (1998) argues: "Black girls' schooling experiences and cultural constructions of femininity cannot be conflated with those of other cultures, their own voices need to be heard" (p. 238). Based on this, and other similar studies (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016), it is clear that Black feminist scholars have been making a clear argument for an expansive, intersectional approach to analyzing the lives of Black girls for some time.

The lives of Black girls expose often complex layers of identities that no single feminist theory can, on its own, effectively contextualize. Understanding this, Henry (1998) proposed a method of analysis based on adapting approaches to feminist action research. Based on a theory advanced by Mehreen Mirza, Henry (1995) describes the method of analysis as follows:

(a) It should address women's lives and experience in their own terms and ground theory in the actual experiences of women; **(b)** it should promote an interactional methodology in order to end the exploitation of women as research objects; **(c)** research on women should provide the women studied with explanations that could be used to improve their life situations, such that they do not become objectified; **(d)** the researcher is central to the research and her feelings should be central to the process. An intersectional analysis

is needed to describe and account for the multitude of identities which shape the experience of a Black girl. (p. 240)

Henry's work focuses primarily on the schooling and education of Black girls; further analysis must also acknowledge that the experiences of Black girls extend far beyond institutional walls. This includes contextualizing Black girls' experiences with media and the impact of representation through the lens of Black feminist epistemology.

Black feminist theories focus on exploring the experiences and commonalities of Black women; collecting this knowledge requires creating "safe(r) spaces" where women feel comfortable sharing their stories and accounting for their experiences. Through the sharing of narratives, "Black feminist epistemology then begins with 'connected knowers,' those who know from personal experience" (Collins, 2000, p. 277). The use of the term "safe(r) spaces" is meant to establish an ethic of care, compassion, and non-judgment outside of the White gaze. For Black girls navigating educational structures, these types of spaces are critical to their mental health and well-being. Traditionally, narratives of Black women were deemed invaluable, yet another way the experiences of Black women were isolated and invalidated (Collins, 2000). As Collins (2000) articulates, "By taking the core themes of Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black feminist thought can stimulate new consciousness, that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken for granted knowledge" (p. 111). Similarly, Black feminist thought can be applied to Black girls and their experiences to contribute to a new and deeper understanding of their complex identities and build on their knowledge of themselves in relation to the world they live in and the community spaces they occupy.

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), and other reimagined Black feminist tools, can be used for Black girls to express, through dialogue in safe(r) spaces, the ways in which race, class, and gender impact their realities. Examining the contemporary representations of Black girls and how these representations impact their lives requires the establishment of safer environments, outside of limiting structures of power, to allow Black girls to speak openly and freely about the circumstances of their oppressions. This process of chronicling the experiences of, and accounting for the commonly silenced voices of, Black women built around what Collins (2000) calls an ethics of caring. This “ethics of care” can also be applied to Black girls, as many of the circumstances that impact Black women often begin in childhood. Through this practice, the voices of Black girls, including their reflections and interpretations of their experiences, can be used to document and substantiate their realities.

Establishing safer environments requires acknowledging that it is impossible to guarantee the spaces we create will be completely safe for all individuals. In using this concept of “safe space,” I must also consider the systems and structures that exist and how they function to isolate and marginalize. The goal of this framework is to advance an understanding of the experiences of Black girls, to which their narratives are central. The aim overall is to create safer spaces in which Black women and girls feel free to express themselves while keeping in mind the limits that still exist based on the current structures of society.

In the next chapter, I review some of the literature and data that focuses on the history and contemporary discourses within feminism and girls’ studies, as well as scholarship related to media representation, Black girls in school, resistance, and approaches to Black girl empowerment.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.

—Maya Angelou

In the following literature review, I situate this study in the broader area of girls' studies.

I focus on demonstrating the need and the opportunity for more advanced and formal academic inquiry into the lives and experiences of Black girls in Canada. Most of the studies on Black girls cited here have been conducted in the United States. This literature review captures contemporary voices and experiences of Black girls in the United States and statistics on Black youth in Canada, to get a better understanding of some of the gaps in research on Black girls and the ways that this study can contribute to building resources to support the well-being of Black girls in Canada.

The literature review is divided into four sections. In the first section on *girls' studies and Black girls*, I briefly outline the history of girls' studies and the development of the field. Based on current limitations in the literature, I establish some of the gaps in research on Black girls, particularly within a Canadian context, in girls' studies. In the second section, *popular culture and media representation*, I examine literature focused on summarizing and deconstructing the popular perceptions of Black girls and representations that are pervasive in contemporary media. As this study is meant to outline some of the needs and concerns of Black girls in school settings, the third section, on *Black girls and school*, reviews some of the documents and initiatives developed to address educational inequity. Lastly, in an effort to move towards solutions, the fourth section reviews *empowerment programs focused on Black girls*. A significant portion of the data available on Black girls was collected and analyzed through the implementation of

empowerment programs, workshops, and other initiatives. The focus on empowerment programs and initiatives demonstrates how some data and research is being used to support the development and success of Black girls.

Girls' Studies and Black Girls

This study is located in the field of girls' studies, an interdisciplinary area that creates a forum for critical discussion in which researchers and scholars examine the complex experiences and overall development of girls (most commonly, in adolescence). According to Mary Celeste Kearney (2009), girls' studies rose out of feminist critiques in the 70s, which noted that youth research privileged the perspectives and experiences of boys. Usually situated in the fields of humanities or social sciences, girls' studies highlights and analyzes social and cultural aspects of girlhood through the lens of human development. Catherine Driscoll's (2008) book entitled *Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies* traces the history of girls' studies and the common conceptions and considerations around what it means to be a girl, particularly in Western societies.

Often assumed to be encapsulated within broader feminist discourses, an analysis of girls was noticeably absent within women's studies in the past (Harris, 2015). Much of the research on women was undertaken with a feminist lens, and in the research and work that emerged in that field, references to girls were peripheral (Kearney, 2009). Harris (2005) notes that "Michelle Fine was among the first to account for the discursive possibilities as well as safe(r) spaces in the lives of young women that make self-expression and autonomy imaginable" (p. xvii). Prior to Fine's 1988 article "Sexuality, Schooling and Adolescent Females," which "ushered a new era of investigation" (p. xvii) in the study of girls, much of the research centred on female youth

concentrated on understanding women, more than girls, with only a handful of academics—particularly, Angela McRobbie—demonstrating a constant commitment to examining girl culture (Kearny, 2009).

As popular ideas about girls circulated through various facets of society, hegemonic representations, which often control the circumstances of girls, were normalized (Driscoll, 2008). As Driscoll (2008) notes, “An expanding array of texts and associations specifically for girls disseminated knowledge about aspirational styles of girlhood and how they should be produced, many of them sponsored by organizations with specific rubrics for what kind of girl the modern girl should be” (p. 16). These texts emerged as early as the late 1800s and continue to be produced today in various forms, such as popular girl magazines and other popular culture texts (Driscoll, 2008). This girlhood “education” serves to create and maintain specific and limiting spaces for girls to come of age: “Rather than generating more and more ways for girls to ‘be’ in our society, this proliferation of discourse has limited possibilities for girls, trapping them within polar states which limit what they can say and do” (Pomerantz, 2010, p. 149). The marginalizing of girls’ lives and experiences connects to the oppression of women in general. Many feminist discourses and positions address the subjugation of women, but this subjugation begins in girlhood. Therefore the lack of accounting for the specific experiences of girls starts the trajectory of the oppression of women.

Understanding the dynamics of gender is essential to any study or discourse. The intersectionality of gender usually changes a person’s experience, and as a result, gender can also change any conclusion that can be drawn from an inquiry. Youth studies that don’t take into consideration intersectionality, for example, easily run the risk of generalizing and

approximating the experience of all youth, without clear focus on their differences (Kearny, 2009). This makes any supposition related to girls in the context of youth studies practically, if not completely, inaccurate. The exclusion of girls as distinct and unique subjects creates and further maintains “structural bias” within the field (Kearny, 2009). Further, as Driscoll (2008) explains, the modern girl is actively engaged in society, creating a unique perspective that needs contextualizing within all aspects of social, political, and emotional life.

Studies and projects focused on establishing a multidisciplinary field to explore girls and girlhood, specifically and deliberately, progressed through the 90s and early 2000s (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008). Today, the study of girls is categorized in a few different ways within scholarship: girlhood studies, girls studies, and girls’ studies. In the literature, these categories often seem to be used interchangeably. Some researchers define the field more narrowly than others, for example, as the study of girls through the lens of a historical, developmental perspective (Brown, 1992; Brown, 2008); however, the International Girls Studies Association outlines the area as including any work “on girls and girlhood in any part of the world and any discipline or interdisciplinary field” (<https://girls-studies.org/>). In large part, researchers in the field decide what term they prefer and how they wish to establish and classify their work.

The establishment of girls’ studies⁴ led to the centring of girl-focused research, allowing feminist researchers to build on significant critical inquiry to “see the girl, girl culture, and [provide context for] the analysis of girl culture” (Driscoll, 2008, p. 15) in modern life (Driscoll, 2008; Kearney, 2009). Lyn Mikel Brown (2008) speaks about her shift from studying and

⁴ This study fits best within the context of girls’ studies based on the description of the area of study provided by Lyn Mikel Brown (2008).

theorizing about girls and girlhood to incorporating the voices and experiences of the girls themselves, imbuing them with legitimacy and authority over their experiences. She notes, “For me, Girls’ studies is more about living, breathing girls than about the history of girlhood or popular and material culture” (p. 10). Girls’ studies captures the entire girl rather than compartmentalizing their experiences into several parts.

Traditionally, even within girls’ studies, the polarizing constructions of identity that factor into the everyday lived experience of girls are summarized and analyzed as a monolith. Even within the field, research, literature, and discourses accounting for the experiences of girls continues to exclude specific voices. Girls’ studies needs to continue to expand and deconstruct the experiences of girls to further establish different themes and discourses within the field. As it currently stands, documenting the social and cultural experiences of Black girls is in large part missing from the research and discourse (Jesús, 2019).

Given the lack of adequate analysis of the experience of Black girls and other marginalized groups, further advancements are needed in the field, and therefore, more comprehensive research with girls is also needed. Girls’ studies as a field has been criticized for not adequately accounting for specific girl voices. Griffin (2004) points out, “An important group of Black researchers argued that the lives of girls and young women of colour in and outside of First World contexts did not necessarily fit the Western Feminist perspectives on girlhood” (p. 30). This means scholarship on and about girls needs to not only consider the diverse identities of girls, but also their geographic location, which provides further context to their experiences.

Studying girls without explicit reference to intersectionality only maintains long-standing gaps in research. Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) point out, “Girls of African descent are at the bottom of the social totem pole in society; thus, there is an urgent need for a theoretical framework that serves to expose, confront and eradicate race, class and gender oppression in our families, communities, and schools” (p. 22). Research coming out of the United States on the contemporary experiences of Black girls points to similar conclusions regarding the overall need for more research and literature focused on Black girls and their experiences (French et al., 2013; Jacobs, 2016; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015; Love, 2012; Weekes, 2003).

Looking at the literature currently available on girlhood, studies focused on broader issues such as media representations, sexualization, and normative feminine constructs appear to be based on girls in general (Lemish, 2003; Pomerantz, 2009; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). These analyses do not consider the social and cultural differences that impact the lived reality of girls from diverse backgrounds. As Brown (2009) asserts in her book, *Black Girl Celebration*, “Black girls and women’s voices too often remain invisible and not valued when our bodies are most commodified, consumed and made hyper-visual in popular cultures” (p. 39). This hyper-visibility within popular culture often plays into the stereotypes that shape the daily experiences of Black girls. More advanced research and scholarship on Black girls continues to emerge from the United States. However, in Canada, marginalized Black girls’ voices and experiences are often generalized or excluded within formal inquiry and academic scholarship. This can render them invisible or suggest that perhaps academic emphasis on Black identity and how it impacts the daily experiences of Black girls is unnecessary.

Understanding Black girls' interpretation of their experiences and the factors that contribute to their concerns and challenges is the foundation of this study. A limited number of research studies in Canada describe and analyze the social and emotional experiences of Black girls in schools in Ontario. Considering the importance and centrality of schooling for girls, the experiences they have in school often play a significant role in their overall development and well-being. There is also limited data on the challenges of Black girls as described by them, even though several reports, including government policies and action plans, outline the disproportionate number of Black students, girls included, who are consistently falling behind their non-Black counterparts (Anucha et al., 2018; James, 2012; Kumsa et al., 2014; A Better Way Forward: Ontario's Anti-Racism Strategic Plan, 2017).

Most of the research available on Black youth education and well-being in Ontario has been geared towards analyzing and interpreting the experiences of Black boys and their declining achievement levels (James, 2012; Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017; McCready et al., 2014). These studies do not highlight the specific needs of Black girls. Much of research and data that does focus on girls is based on the general experience of girls. Again, this fails to account for the needs of Black girls explicitly. This lack of academic focus on Black girls has direct consequences, as Black girls tend to face additional challenges in the education system, which impacts their well-being and their participation in society (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016; Linton & McLean, 2017).

Many scholars engaged in Black feminist and Black girl research have called for the advancement of Black girl studies on its own terms, as its own field (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2005; French et al., 2013; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015; Love, 2012; Weekes, 2003). Weekes (2003)

argues that “constructs of Blackness often subsume the relevance of other social relations, including gender, sexuality, and class within overall concepts of race” (p. 50). Due to these various intersections, Black girls can be considered distinctly different from White girls within Western society. The Canadian Women’s Foundation (2018) reports that racialized and Indigenous girls deal with additional challenging circumstances, such as lack of access to educational resources due to economic barriers, housing concerns, and parental and family issues. Although these issues are not exclusive to Black and Indigenous girls, they are often caused and further compounded by racism. Furthermore, the varied experiences of Black girls speak to nuances of the cultural differences of the people and families living throughout urban centres in Canada, and these too have implications for education, and social and emotional well-being that go beyond race (Linton & McLean, 2017; Rollock, 2007). Racism and classism, among other sites of oppression, also impact Black girls’ ability to develop positive self-concept and a sense of belonging.

Lindsey-Dennis (2015) outlines the remarkable effort that has been made to broaden the scope of Black studies to focus on Black identity development in Black girls; however, she notes that “culturally relevant theories and research methodology to study African American girls have lagged behind the research in this area” (p. 508). Limited data continues to create problems for advancing research on identity and development of Black girls. For example, in a study conducted by Buckley and Carter (2005) on gender roles and racial identity and its impact on the self-esteem of Black girls, they concluded:

When working with adolescents, who are faced with the challenging task of forming a consolidated identity, practitioners might utilize an ecological

approach that considers the entire landscape of an individual's life. This type of exploration would be informed by gender, race, culture, socioeconomic status, religion and sexual identity among other reference group variables. (pp. 658–659)

As identity, self-esteem, and belonging play vital and transformative roles in the development of girls, it is necessary to acknowledge, within research, the various ways intersectionality impacts experiences. Given that youth today have to contend with not only the traditional structures of power, but advancements in technology that have only expanded the pervasiveness of media, more emphasis must be placed on accounting for the contemporary realities that connect and influence the ways identities intersect. The development and identity of Black girls, for example, is impacted by both the marginalization caused by being Black, and the limitations and expectations that have been associated with being a girl. Complicating matters further are notions of race and the stigmas around being Black that correlate it with low social and economic class. Representing the intersecting identities of Black girls more fully can influence popular perceptions and create circumstances that shape outcomes in their contemporary lives and as they transition into adulthood (Harris, 2015; Muhammed & McArthur, 2015).

Popular Culture and Media Representations of Black Women and Girls

Considering developments in the area of girls' studies, Kearney (2009) suggests that by talking to girls, and collaborating with them in research, we can discern circumstances that take place during the period of youth as well as aspects of girl culture that effectively capture and reflect their experience. This strategy is useful and increasingly important for engaging Black

girls who have essentially been omitted from the field. It has been previously established that the period of girlhood is a developmental stage that is generally marked by age; however, in view of Black identity, girlhood can be a little more complicated due to the impact of intersectionality and the contexts in which Blackness is understood in the broader society (Hall, 1997).

Blackness within popular society has consistently been positioned as negative and less than in relation to Whiteness. However, depending on various factors, Black girls may interpret their Blackness in myriad ways. It is true that the historical positioning of Black identity also impacts the general understanding that Black girls have about Blackness (hooks, 1992). Research on and with Black girls shows the various ways the Black girls themselves have internalized the oppression and negative perceptions of Black women and Black identity pervasive in the media (Jacobs, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

The current media environment has expanded the ways in which Black girls encounter specific types of representations, which influence not only their perceptions and understanding of Black identity, but also the ways they are treated based on how other people perceive and interpret representations of Black identity. As James and Turner (2017) note, “Media representations of Blacks as underachievers, athletic, violent, and not academically inclined operate to inform perceptions of Black students’ educational performance” (p. 64). The media therefore operates as a central force in establishing and maintaining the construction of Blackness in society (Hall, 1990).

Focusing on media, hooks’s earlier work in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994) locates the power of the “gaze” as a tool for cultivating and maintaining White supremacy through mediated media images. At the point of hooks’s media analysis, we were only on the

verge of the Internet revolution. Lisa Nakamura's (2008) research on race within online spaces builds on the theories of media representation to include the implications of privileged online spaces and ways in which "visual capital" maintains negative representations of racialized bodies. According to Nakamura (2008), "The Internet [is] a privileged and extremely rich site for the creation and distribution of hegemonic and counter hegemonic visual images of racialized bodies" (p. 13). The racist, hegemonic ways in which the identities of racialized bodies are constructed and maintained through media representations become what Collins (2000) calls "controlling images," which, in turn, influence the lived experiences of Black people. The lack of power within society manifests in online spaces and generally, the racialized "other" is the subject of representations they lack the power to create for themselves.

Based on the research that is available, it is abundantly clear that Black girls' lived realities are usually based on a series of stereotypes, i.e., Black girls are loud, aggressive, violent, sexually promiscuous, and uninterested in school (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; French, 2013; Jacobs, 2016). These tropes routinely remove Black girls from being included within the normalized constructs that frame girlhood and femininity, i.e., being pretty, submissive, delicate, and non-sexual, making this type of girlhood experience exclusive to White girls. This hegemonic femininity is of course problematic; however, the lack of visibility of, and dismissing, the experiences of Black girls further intensifies their isolation. Brown (2009) notes:

This erasure of the complexity of Black girlhood means that, though some of us have since engaged in the project of understanding the significance of race, class, gender, and sexuality on a target population that is perhaps most marginalized, including the communities of colour, spaces that exist for Black

girls to tell their story, listen to other stories, come together and be who they are individually are also necessary... Academically, we lack a viable framework created by Black girls' lived experiences to name and to critique the kinds of Black girl subjects they willfully resist. (p. 40)

Jacobs (2016) exposes some ways contemporary representations of Black girls in the media maintain popular stereotypes, noting the "Othered" status of Black girls typically present in the media they regularly consume. "Images of "Ratchet women," "Baby Mamas," and "Black Barbies" are ever-present in the various forms of media that flood the screens" (p. 226). These common scripts and stereotypes consistently played out and played up within media representations are accessed by youth and adults of all backgrounds. These powerful, controlling images amass dangerous implications. These narratives present challenges not only for Black girls' personal development and self-efficacy but they also directly relate to the lack of agency that Black women and girls experience. The hyper-visualization and hyper-sexualization of Black female bodies must be addressed based on constructions of power because "Black women's representations are often pornified by White and patriarchally-controlled media, and that while some women can resist and struggle against these violent depictions of Black women, other co-opt these exploitative vehicles and expand them for personal profit" (Noble, 2013, p. 4). Notably, the avenue by which one can profit from representations within contemporary culture is not available for all Black women and girls. Most of them must grapple with the impact of disempowering symbols which represent their identity and existence in society, without any form of compensation or benefit.

Interestingly, although Black girls' voices and experiences are not often contextualized or considered within scholarship, various aspects of their culture and identity are often commodified within popular culture. For example, empowerment and resistance within girls' studies demonstrated through examples such as Riot Grrrl, the "grrrl" in Riot Girls, is at least partially derived from young African American women's phrase of encouragement to each other in the late 1980's 'You go girl'" (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 33). The use of what is often considered Black girl vernacular is commonly co-opted in mainstream contemporary culture, where a lot of popular culture is largely Black culture (Jacobs, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

Aapola et al. (2005) also allude to the long-standing tradition of White subculture's connection to and appropriation of Black culture: "The girl power phenomenon is not unique in its cultural appropriation and re-articulation of images and discourses of Black women's strength, power, and agency to serve a mainly White middle-class young woman" (p. 33). This contradicts the notion that Black girls are excluded within scholarship based on the relevancy of their experience. As cultural productions within the sphere of popular culture continue to proliferate, there is growing evidence of the use of Black identity and culture within multiple representations. Many of these representations create and maintain stereotypes of Black girls. More importantly, tensions around cultural appropriation support the unequal manifestations often seen within society, which impact Black girls' very participation in society.

Black cultural representations and the various forms they take up within society is another topic that needs to be outlined in the context of this study. As noted above, the contradictions that exist for Black girls in relation to their cultural expressions, as well as the readings the expressions denote within society, can be problematic. Cultural appropriation

includes “occurrences as varied as 1) the representation of cultural practices or experiences by cultural ‘outsiders’ (sometimes called ‘voice appropriation’); 2) the use of artistic styles distinctive of cultural groups by non-members; and, 3) the procurement or continued possession of cultural objects by non-members or culturally distant institutions” (Matthes, 2016). As urban, Black culture becomes more and more accessible within the public domain, cultural appropriation has become yet another problematic area for Black girls.

There are many ways that Black girls work through representations of Black culture depicted through mediums over which Black people have little control or in which they lack a voice. The commodification and portrayal of Black identities, and the experiences Black girls have in their day-to-day lives as a result, create strain and impacts how they can freely and fairly participate in society. Dealing with perceived negative representations around sexual behaviour, attitude, and other stereotypes, Black girls are often required to perform their resistance to the labels that have been placed on them. Muhammad and McArthur (2015) found “that the ways the girls desired to be represented (as evident by their self-descriptions) were in opposition to the ways they felt society and media viewed them” (p. 138).

Research indicates that Black girls are constantly faced with the burden of resiliency, as a measure for dealing with the racism and sexism they experience. As Evan-Winters (2004) defines it, “Resiliency is the ability to recover from or adjust to problems, adversity, and stressors in life” (p. 23). In reference to school settings and experiences, resilience in Black girls has become synonymous with coping and adapting to the inequities that they regularly experience. According to Jacobs (2016), resiliency manifests in how “Black women in the U.S. learn to develop a particular way of seeing the world as a result of their interlocking oppressive

identities” (p. 226). Resiliency, in many ways, connects to common associations between Black women and strength (Romero, 2000). Wakefield and Hudley’s (2007) study suggests that “there is a strong belief that ethnic minority adolescents must develop a strong, positive ethnic and racial identity to protect themselves from prejudice, racism, and discrimination” (p. 150).

Resiliency is usually classified as a positive personal trait; however, the disproportional rate that Black women and girls require it in White-dominant societies is evidently inequitable. For Black girls, resiliency is necessary for survival, and those who fail to develop it in their daily lives can become completely unable to cope with what they face (French et al., 2013). In order to help build and maintain positive self-esteem through the various stages of development, Black girls must be able to form positive group associations (Romero et al., 2013) and be resilient, as they are sure to have negative experiences because of race and other factors.

Black Girls and School

Gaps in educational outcomes predominantly affecting Black youth require thorough examination. In-depth analysis may assist in accounting for how Black girls experience and negotiate their education in White, Eurocentric school spaces. For a long time, calls for multicultural and anti-racist education were ignored in Canada; “institutions operate on the premise that the education they provide is free of cultural bias – that there is no one ethnic group culture that is dominant or informs educational practices and content” (James, 1994 p. 31). Over the years, more data has been collected, outlining the educational experiences of Black youth in Ontario. Black students and the issues that they encounter are often treated as monolithic, resulting in a general failure to address education in light of intersectionality. That said, statistics

found in recent studies describe some troubling trends (Anucha et al., 2018; James & Turner, 2017).

The most recent studies on Black youth and educational outcomes are cited throughout this study. James and Turner's 2017 report entitled *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* provides a thorough examination of the current state of education for Black youth in the GTA. The authors' findings are placed in context of the historical and systemic factors that play a considerable role in the contemporary educational system and practices of educating Black children. The authors note disparities in educational outcomes and overall success of Black youth, such as low academic performance, disproportionate number of school suspensions and expulsions, and lower graduation rates, all of which demand immediate attention. The studies, however, do not disaggregate the data to account for specific identities within the category of Black youth (i.e., gender categories), and therefore do not account for the nuanced experiences of Black girls.

The limited research and data available on Black girls and schooling appears to be an issue across North America and has sparked concern. Speculating on the absence of research on Black girls in the United States, Evans-Winters (2005) states, "There are several reasons why Black female adolescents are absent from the literature. Compared to Black males, Black females have fewer behavior problems. African American girls' behavior is least likely to affect others; thus, research and the resulting reform efforts tend to focus on Black males" (pp. 9–10). In Canada, similar assumptions are made (Dei et al., 1997; James, 2012). Although the focus on Black boys is necessary, its consequence has been limited research and material that adequately represents the diverse needs and voices of Black girls in Canada (Linton & McLean, 2017).

Black girls, who, for the most part, seem to be faring far better than their Black male counterparts in school (Linton & McLean, 2017; Rollock, 2007), have issues that remain invisible and/or unaddressed, even by extensive approaches aimed at solving some of the broader concerns around Black youth and education (Henry, 2017; Milner IV, 2017; Rollock, 2007).

Evans-Winters's (2014) research on Black girls and educational programs also identifies the under-representation of Black students in gifted programs across school districts in the United States. According to Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), only 8.1% of Black girls participated in gifted programs compared to 35% of White girls (Evans-Winters, 2014, p. 22). According to Evans-Winters, the disproportional representation of Black males in gifted programs is evidenced in research; however, although the rates for Black girls in gifted programs is not far behind those of Black boys, their disproportionate participation is noted and discussed less frequently. Similar findings, pointing to inequities in educational programs and policies, are found in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). James and Turner's (2017) report argues:

White students are more likely than both Black and other racialized students to be identified as gifted. Of all White students in this cohort, 4% were identified as gifted compared with only 2% of other racialized students and 0.4% of Black students. This means that of the 5,679 TDSB Black high school students in the 2006–2011 cohort, only 23 had been identified as gifted. If Black students were identified as gifted at the same rate as their White counterparts (i.e., 4%), there would be 227 Black students in gifted programs in the TDSB. (p. 35)

The process to have a student identified as gifted requires a teacher to nominate or endorse the student's testing (James & Turner, 2017); therefore, the lack of Black students in gifted programs

is also an indication of racial bias on the part of teachers. Failure to recognize the educational capacity and potential of Black students impacts teachers' ability to support their proper education placement, based on needs.

In addition to the low concentration of Black students being tested and placed in gifted programs, teacher and administrator biases are also evident in the ways Black students are streamed within educational programs and practices. Data reported in the *Towards Race Equity in Education* report outlines:

Streaming—the grouping of students based on perceived ability and/or potential—was thought to explain a good deal of the school participation and educational outcomes of Black students in the data presented previously in this report. Participants observed that for Black students, streaming operates in ways that cause them to be placed in courses below their level of ability—a practice that reflects the lower expectations educators and other school staff have of them. The resulting over-representation of Black students in Applied and Essentials programs of study reflects the assumption that Black students do not have the capacity to succeed, or do not belong, in Academic courses. (James & Turner, 2017, p. 41)

The insidious racism, which continues to permeate the education system in Ontario, is one of the main factors leading to poor educational outcomes for Black students. Racial and class bias are two plausible explanations for why some Black students face educational barriers and low achievement levels. The data presented in these reports on the realities of education for Black youth clearly point to issues related to racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination within the school system.

The marginalization of Black girls, which is further problematized by the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, necessitates research aimed at examining exactly how Black girls are impacted by education systems. The research must also effectively outline how Black girls critically analyze, respond, and negate representations and discourses that maintain the inequalities they experience on various levels. Joseph et al.'s (2016) study on Black girls and racism in United States schools states, "Black adolescent girls are an important group that is often overlooked in schools due to colorblind approaches and complexities of multiple intersectional identities based on race and gender" (p. 5). It is essential that the issues of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression be addressed directly as these factors impact the quality and effectiveness of education. This is especially crucial as plans to address concerns about the disparities and achievement gaps experienced by Black students are being developed and implemented.

In the province of Ontario, there has been an effort, across government ministries, to address some of the concerns and challenges impacting the development and success of Black youth. Over the last decade, a series of plans and resources have been developed and released by the Ministries of Education, and Children and Youth Services, namely: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009); Stepping Stones: A Resource on Youth Development (2012); Ontario Youth Action Plan (2012); and more recently, Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan (2017) and the Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2017). These documents and action plans are considerable efforts to serve and support youth. Although most of these government plans take a general, inclusive approach, laying out frameworks to support all youth, they recognize the need for solutions that specifically focus on Black youth. However, given a clear

understanding of intersectionality—“an analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” (Collins, 2000, p. 299)—the question is, how well do these strategies account for the individual and nuanced issues of Black girls?

The Ontario Ministry of Education released Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan in 2017, which followed up on the aims and actions set out in the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009), implemented almost 10 years before. The 2017 education action plan promises to “continue to provide resources and support professional development to combat Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and transphobia” (p. 5). There is no mention of sexism or other forms of gender-based discrimination and violence that impact youth within the plan. Within the same time period, the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services released its Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (OBYAP), which focuses on the culturally specific needs of Black youth, proposing strategies and tools devised to address the disparities in educational attainment and achievement. OBYAP also does not consider or make any specific allowances for gender or other differences within the context of Black youth.

Implications for educational outcomes are evident in the varied experiences of Black girls. In certain situations, Black girls do not feel safe to report concerns or to explore solutions to the common issues they face in school (Joseph et al., 2016; McLean & Linton, 2017). Black girls consistently experience “structural and systemic barriers and the inability of schools to address them” (Milner IV, 2017, p. 4). The lack of an intersectional focus when addressing issues related to Black youth leads to missing histories and an absence of data that accounts for specific experiences that continue to impact the overall well-being of Black girls.

Popular readings of Black identity and Black girls add to stereotypes that negate their real identity, and in school, this allows teachers to see them as one singular type of student. Black girls face stereotypical responses based on common media portrayals of them as loud, aggressive, and uninterested in school, which can in turn lead to teacher microaggressions and other forms of discrimination (James & Turner, 2017). These circumstances in part explain evidence that suggests Black girls have feelings of inferiority within GTA schools. Their feelings of isolation are likely compounded by misrepresentations and the lack of culturally relevant material used in the classroom. Linton and McLean's (2017) study advances the narratives of four Black girls in Toronto and points to the continued isolation and disengagement of Black girls. Taking matters into their own hands, the participants narratives indicated three main themes in their experiences: "suffering injustices at school, substituting social capital and constructing resistive identity" (p. 77). Two of the themes outline the strategies used by these girls to combat the issues they faced due to racism and sexism and other forms of oppression they experienced in school, in order to succeed academically. Linton and McLean (2017) assert, "This misrepresentation and cultural irrelevance may explain why some Black students frequently skip class or acted out in school, yet these students were often branded as troublemakers and delinquents requiring disciplinary action" (p. 78). Although this study is small, the narratives about school experiences provided by the participants highlight some urgency. Conclusions about educational achievement in the province, impacting Black girls in Ontario, report outcomes with no evidence or suggestion of causality.

Microaggressions are one of the subtler forms of intersectional discrimination that Black girls face in school. According to Allen (2012), "microaggressions affect all marginalized groups

and are felt through environmental cues as well as verbal and nonverbal hidden messages that serve to invalidate one's experiential reality and perpetuate feelings of inferiority" (p. 175). The role of education is to ensure that students receive what is required to facilitate their learning and development; however, students are unlikely to feel safe in spaces where they are constantly confronted with verbal racial, gender, and class-based assaults. As Allen (2013) notes, "The entity of school serves as an environment that often communicates cues to students about their capabilities, the importance of their contributions, and their expected life outcomes based on who they are" (p. 118). As it relates to Black girls, schools across North America are consistently missing the mark on fostering healthy environments that support their well-being (Evans-Winters, 2005; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

Many education-based strategies and tools, advanced by scholars in various fields, can be effectively implemented to model, develop, and support the types of pedagogical and administrative practices that support effective education of Black girls. In Ontario's Education Equity Plan (2017), one of the outcomes/performance measures under the school and classroom practices is "strengthening inclusive and culturally responsive and relevant teaching, curriculum, assessment and resources" (p. 23). Following these recommendations for inclusive and responsive teaching would assist in reducing the concerns outlined by Black girls about their school experiences. However, a similar call to action was outlined in the Ontario's Ministry of Education, 2009 Equity and Inclusion Education Strategy. The document states: "We know that when students see themselves reflected in their studies, they are more likely to stay engaged and find school relevant" (p. 15). Ministry documents from 2009 to 2017 show that changes in

curriculum that could benefit marginalized groups like Black girls have clearly not been fully realized.

Education for Critical Consciousness—Youth Participation

Studies suggest that Black youth tend to disengage from critical issues around race and inequality (DeFreece, Jr., 2014; Hope & Jagers, 2014). DeFreece, Jr., (2014) notes that in the United States the burden of issues related to racial injustice in the post–Civil Rights era, and the personal pressure Black youth might feel as a result of victimization, can cause them to disconnect from the larger structural concerns that maintain racism. In the same study, the author suggests that there is a pervasiveness of colour-blind rhetoric within the US, which creates ambivalence around issues of race and racism. Although some evidence points to a segment of Black youth who avoid discourses wrought with negativity as a way to deal with the reality of the racism they face (Cosby & Pouissant, 2007; Nunnally, 2010), a significant amount of literature outlines expansive forms of Black youth participation and engagement taking place across North America (Hope et al., 2015; Muhammad et al., 2018).

As research continues to uncover and call out the racist and discriminatory practices that Black youth face in schools, it is not at all surprising that Black youth are developing advanced levels of critical analysis to assist them in recognizing and naming some of the inequities they experience. Hope et al. (2015) states, “Scholars have begun to investigate youth organizing efforts such as, youth participatory action (YPAR) programs as an opportunity that gives students the context to explore the ideas of discrimination and hegemony during out-of-school time” (p. 87). The practice of working with Black youth and providing space for them to discuss and analyze their concerns serves to buffer the effects of racial discrimination they experience in

school on an ongoing basis. In Ontario, tools and approaches used to support Black youth in school are increasingly important, as even when offences against Black students are clear, school systems continue to fail Black students (James & Turner, 2017).

In regards to youth participation, research shows how Black youth, for example, interpret social constructions of race and their impact on class. A study was conducted in Flint, Michigan, on youth perception of the water crisis that led to the poisoning of water systems in a region that is both low wealth and predominantly racialized. One Black female participant in the study stated, “I think that’s all a lie... I think it’s genocide,” to describe the circumstances that allowed the issue to remain unexamined. In the above quote, she attributes the water crisis to the intersection of race and class. “The youth [in the study] exhibit an awareness that the interpretation of Blackness in racially stratified society could serve as a justification for the continuation of their water” (Muhammad et al., 2018, p. 244).

This is one of several cases in literature exemplifying the critical socio-political analysis skills of contemporary youth. A number of examples show how Black youth interpret and challenge their social reality by critically analyzing and discussing relevant issues. As DeFreece, Jr., (2014) points out, “Their contributions have been made largely within a ‘racial identity’ framework—illuminated Black youth performativity as means of maintaining positive racial identities while navigating discriminatory and stigmatizing spaces” (p. 27). Based on some of the research on Black girls, it is also evident that Black girls have a keen interest and a broad understanding of the issues they face and see others encounter (Jacobs, 2016).

In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1973) provides an approach for cultivating and motivating critical awareness in youth. Within his framework, Freire outlines

three components that assist youth in developing “critical awareness of the structural inequality and oppression into their understanding” (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014, p. 1802). Focusing on critical reflection, socio-political efficacy, and critical action, educators and community workers can stimulate critical consciousness and motivate youth to become more informed participants within society: “Youth’s critical consciousness is important from a societal perspective, as it can play a central role in addressing unjust systems, challenging marginalization in society and promoting positive community development” (p. 1802). Many of the research and programs for Black youth, and for Black girls in particular, are aimed at developing and empowering active youth participation. The work that Black girls are doing in their communities also speaks to their level of consciousness and their desire to participate in changing some of the circumstances of their lives.

Resistance and Empowerment Programs

Research on Black girls consistently points to their feelings of loss and isolation when attending schools in spaces that are predominantly White (Ispa-Landa & Conwell, 2015; de Finney, 2010; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015; French et al., 2013; Love, 2012; Weekes, 2003). As previously discussed, racialization and its impacts require Black girls to develop levels of resiliency to cope with intersectional oppression. In an evaluation of a cultural program for African American girls, researchers found “cultural beliefs and values are viewed as resiliency factors...expected to directly or indirectly protect youth from internal and external stressors” (Belgrave et al., 2004, p. 340). Though not always considered positive—due to the overwhelming burden of overcoming adversities, like discrimination in school—for Black girls, resistance and perseverance under any circumstances is a valued form of resilience.

Ruth Nicole Brown's *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (2009) helped to illustrate how Black girlhood is the site of numerous challenges as well as beautiful possibilities. In the book, she outlines, describes, and reflects on the process of creating and delivering a program aimed at creating a safe space for Black girls where they are allowed to express themselves using creative writing and art. Although seemingly building on forms of youth programming commonly employed in low-income, racialized communities, Brown makes clear the problematic notion of "girl-saving" that is inherent in girls' empowerment programs. Still, these types of functional youth programming—creating and providing space and support for youth during challenging points of development—provide definite possibilities. Many programs are being designed and delivered for girls within communities and other social spaces to respond to the effects of being invisible and voiceless in society.

Rightfully, education often becomes a primary focus within these spaces. Understanding the harsh realities that Black girls face as they contend with racism and sexism, how best does one prepare Black girls to meet obstacles in their day-to-day lives? Coming back to a foundation that is the most appropriate and practical framework to explore and challenge the invisibility and voicelessness of Black women and girls, critical race feminism is the focal point of all discourses on programming relating to Black girls (Bay-Cheng et al., 2006; Brown, 2009; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; French, 2012; LeCroy, 2004; Weekes, 2003). Programs designed and delivered to Black girls can expand opportunities and empower Black girls to break through barriers if they use both Collin's (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*, which provides a platform for a more methodical validation of the voices and narratives that reflect the lived experience of Black

women, and a critical race feminism context, which helps to expose the systems that maintain oppression.

Programs that aim to empower and educate girls in various communities are not new strategies for addressing gender issues (Bay-Cheng et al., 2006; Brown, 2009; Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018; LeCroy, 2004). Brown (2009) clearly makes the case that Black girls need "power, not programs" to transform the circumstances that often plague and hinder their positive development. However, even without the emphasis on programs, using a Black feminist framework to underpin education places the focus on the specific factors that shape the lived reality of Black girls. In Canada, racialized, immigrant, and Aboriginal girls deal with circumstances that are compounded by racism and a history of injustice (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018). Considering the cultural differences, and all the factors outlined here, some implications racism exaggerate the need to focus specifically on these communities of girls. The concept of belonging further complicates the factors experienced by racialized girls (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018). As mentioned earlier, while all girls appear to struggle with developing a sense of self due to problematic representations of gender (American Psychological Association, 2010), racialized and immigrant girls' struggle to belong is intensified within societies that have not only marginalized women, but have also excluded groups based on race and ethnicity (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018). The "othering" of Black girls within diasporic spaces like Canada often has severe consequences for Black girls. The stereotypes depicting Black girls are often more violent and limiting, and therefore create additional barriers to positive development.

#BlackGirlMagic

Black girl magic is now a common contemporary term, perhaps better described as a cliché due to its extensive use in describing the power and ability of Black women/girls within the popular domain. In this trope, girls and women are often conflated. Black girl magic is used to describe the actions and capacities of both Black women and Black girls, and there is no clear age distinction coded within the use of the term. Therefore, stating that both Michelle Obama and her teenage daughter Sasha Obama, for example, are “Black girl magic” would not be unusual or uncommon.

Black girl magic as a concept is an empowerment tool, assisting Black girls in developing high levels of self-esteem and self-identification amidst negative constructions and representations of Black female identity. The term was coined as a hashtag on social media by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 “to celebrate the strength and perseverance of Black women” (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017 p. 464). Since then, the hashtag, and all it denotes, has gone viral, and the concept of Black girls being magic is a contemporary phenomenon, particularly within Black and urban cultural spaces.

#Blackgirlmagic was born of the “strong Black woman” narrative, which roots Black women in a historical context and describes them as both physically and mentally stronger than other women, and thus expects them to be more readily able to withstand the brunt of social realities related to intersectionality. This construction of Black women being strong has been reimagined with #Blackgirlmagic, which has taken shape on social media and other technological platforms used for cultural expression: “#Blackgirlmagic is an emerging social movement that provides a contemporary cultural archive as it documents and gives visibility to

the complex subjectivity and diverse expressions of young Black women and other women of color” (Hay et al., 2018, p. 1).

#Blackgirlmagic can also be envisioned as a form of resistance, amplifying and situating inherited resilience as a superpower only Black girls possess. Whether it is seen as empowering or healing, #Blackgirlmagic is clearly connected to Black women’s intersectionality in all areas of their cultural lives. As Hay et al. (2018) note, “Cultural practices that ground #BlackGirlMagic are diverse and the expressive culture coursing through the movement crosses a range of cultural forms including music, photography, film, poetry, visual art, dance, and literature” (p. 2). It is also clear that #Blackgirlmagic has a significant connection to Black feminism as it articulates a site of power for Black females within larger structures of society that deem them powerless.

Objectively speaking, however, #Blackgirlmagic can also be understood as putting Black girls at risk of further disenfranchisement. The overuse and limited context of this narrative can easily be misappropriated by both society and Black girls themselves, manifesting in problematic self-readings similar to the dangerous notions that often result from Black women internalizing the “strong Black woman” motif. Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia (2017) note that “Dr. Linda Chavers identified that #BlackGirlMagic has the same potential [as strong Black women] to overemphasize the strengths of Black women and preach an unreachable—albeit expected—level of womanhood that denies Black women the permission to be human” (p. 465). Both the potential and the limitations of #Blackgirlmagic as an approach or tool for the empowerment of Black girls must be underscored within this study.

Some more contemporary research studies capturing, describing, and theorizing about Black girls' experiences in school and in life have been cited throughout this review. By highlighting personal and shared narratives of Black girls' lived experiences within the GTA, this study seeks to engage with and report on the spaces Black girls occupy, and contribute to the discourses which implicate and impact them. The overall goal is to advance the voices and needs of Black girls, so that they can be accurately accounted for in both community and academic spaces (French et al., 2012; Jacobs, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

In this literature review, I have highlighted and summarized some of the available research and data focused on the circumstances and experiences of Black girls, which relate to education, intersectionality, media, and popular culture. The review of this literature provides context for this study on Black girls in the GTA. In the next chapter, I turn to my research methodology to outline and explain the process and implementation of the study.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

—Zora Neale Hurston

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology and methods for collecting and analyzing data for this study. The topic and focus of this study are personal, as I came to them through my own experiences; as a result, I take an engaged approach. I have chosen not to call myself “the researcher” while describing aspects of the process. Throughout this process, I felt like more than “the researcher,” as I shared space and talked with the study participants. Thus, I reference myself in the first person throughout the description of my research methodology and my analysis method for examining and discussing the data.

A qualitative methodology was used in this study to gain insights into the individual perspectives and experiences of Black high school girls living in the Greater Toronto Area.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative research as:

An interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena concerning the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials... that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (p. 4)

This qualitative study seeks to understand and describe how being a Black female youth in contemporary society impacts personal, educational, and social development. As a researcher examining a particular stage of life based on my own experience, I found that qualitative analysis provided the most suitable framework for engaging with my research questions. Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) argue that qualitative research “can also begin by thinking qualitatively

about an activity that one experiences” (p. 22). Although Blackness is not an “activity,” my experiences of being Black, along with other aspects of my identity (class, background, gender, sexuality), form part of the basis for this study and gave me a personal connection with this topic.

The qualitative method also allows for the examination of how Black girls interpret and negotiate their experiences. According to Hatch (2002), “qualitative research... is axiomatic in this view that individuals act on the world based not on some supposed objective reality but their perceptions of the realities around them” (p. 7). Understanding how Black girls perceive their reality is a crucial step in understanding the impact representations of Blackness, Black culture, and identity have on their lives. Therefore, by using qualitative methods and tools, such as focus groups and one-on-one interviews, this study helps to answer questions that rely on the reporting of personal experiences and feelings, including insights into the influence of Black culture and representations in society and the media play in forming and contextualizing participants’ understandings of themselves.

Finally, a qualitative method allows me “to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 1). Exploring the impact of representation and delving into factors such as class, race, age, and gender—which people may experience differently throughout their lives—requires that I capture nuances best examined through a rich and complex understanding of the issues. Such data could not be effectively collected through “statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17). This research is an effort to assist in breaking the silences of Black girls. To do this,

it must include personal narratives and colourful accounts of personal experiences that may be lost in an analysis centred on numbers.

Position of the Researcher

As I state in the introduction, and throughout this dissertation, I come to this study as a Black woman who was once a Black teenage girl, who attended high school in what was then the City of Scarborough in the Greater Toronto Area. Growing up, I struggled with aspects of my experiences that took me years to examine and then integrate into the process of my identity development. I believed that what I experienced in my daily life as a teenage girl had a lot to do with how I was perceived and what people thought of me without even knowing anything about me. I was impacted by the limited concepts of beauty normalized within Canadian society and by the deficient and substandard expectations of Black people. Media representations played a role in my prejudices of people from all backgrounds and groups; they also determined, to a remarkable degree, the way I treated people. Throughout high school, I did not have close friends who were not Black. This was not because I was raised in a predominantly Black neighbourhood, my school was noticeably diverse. I sought out Black friends because I was under the impression that as a Black girl, I should not have close relationships with non-Black people because they were not trustworthy. I learned not to trust non-Black people based on how Black people were treated in media. I was Black, and I felt a sense of solidarity with this identity; however, in reflection, I am not sure that solidarity was based on racial pride in the face of oppression. More realistically, it was probably because I could not hide being a dark-skinned Black girl. I had no choice but to own this identity.

Understanding and acknowledging how media representations affected how I treated and thought of others, I am equally confident that media and stereotypes about Blackness also impacted the way people perceived and treated me. In high school, I remember having a conversation with a guidance counsellor about teenage pregnancy during a session on college options. Would I have been exposed to her commentary about teenage pregnancy if I were a White student? Did I know how to interpret the discomfort I felt about the situation at the time? I am not sure, but I do know that it is precisely these experiences as a teenage Black girl in Toronto that brings me to this work today. I am now raising a Black girl, and I can see that some things have changed, but a lot of things remain the same. Putting aside my own context and personal experience as a Black teenage girl, I explore contemporary Black girls living in the GTA to examine and frame their lived experiences in the city, in the context of current realities of race and gender in today's society.

Today, I can better contextualize my experiences growing up through a deeper understanding of society. I have gained knowledge and experience over 15 years as an educator, scholar, and community advocate, developing and implementing frameworks and programs to support Black youth in the Greater Toronto Area. As a Black, feminist woman, my goal is to assist in the advancement of literature that aids in the positive development, education, and success of Black youth, and Black girls in particular.

Research Approach

My position as a Black feminist educator and my personal experiences of marginalization compelled me to utilize a collection and data analysis method that allowed me to effectively identify and describe the lived realities of the Black girls in this study. In this section, I outline

my approach to collecting and analyzing the study data. The complexity of the Black girl experience (including racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia) requires the inclusion of their voices before we even begin to attempt to analyze and discuss the contemporary experiences of Black girls accurately. This study investigates how Black girls interpret their school experience in relation to popular notions and media representations of Black women and girls, and Black identity in general. The aim is also to describe how participants negotiate and work through issues and tensions related to their lived experiences as Black girls in school and in their communities.

This study uses both qualitative research interviews and focus group methods to collect data on the research question. One-on-one, in-depth interviews provide a “deeper understanding of a social phenomenon”; interviews are most appropriate when detailed accounts, on a sensitive topic, are needed from the participants of the study (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). Discussing racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression can be sensitive and triggering. Interviews provided the space and environment necessary to explore and expand upon open-ended questioning. My understanding of the participants’ experiences deepened based on their responses and our interaction during the interview session. This form of data collection was particularly useful for developing a personal account of the participants’ experiences without the interruptions that often happen in focus group sessions.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, I used focus groups to create a supportive environment for participants to speak about their experiences. As this study of Black girls’ experiences sets out to frame and capture the diverse and intricate lives of the participants, focus groups allowed me to generate collective responses to help establish themes, patterns, and

differences based on the data (Morgan & Scannell, 1998). The focus groups were used in two instances, and in both, participants shared their experiences openly and engaged with the opinions and accounts of other girls. In both focus groups, there was an atmosphere of trust between me and the participants. In this study, both one-on-one interviews and focus groups provided suitable atmospheres for hearing the accounts of Black girls.

This study focuses on the power of controlling images, as well as the power of structures like education in the lives of Black girls. Recognizing the power of these systems, I use critical discourse analysis (CDA), and more specifically, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), as the approach to analyzing data collected in one-on-one interviews and focus groups. Using CDA to examine the discourses of the participants, I then apply critical social analysis to more effectively deconstruct the social and political structures that relate to the participants' experiences (Gee, 2004; Lazar, 2014).

According to Norman Fairclough (2013), critical social analysis functions within CDA as a method of “normative” and “explanatory” critique. Normative critique helps the researcher evaluate the conditions outlined in the data and contextualize them within standards that have been outlined for just and decent societies. Explanatory critique goes further than describing existing realities; this method helps to explain how specific experiences are connected to powerful structures within society. Reviewing the narratives of the girls who participated in the study—the data, its analysis, discussion, and conclusions—requires a critical, in-depth method to effectively contextualize their accounts in relation to the inequalities they experience. Normative and explanatory critiques are used in the analysis to help situate and discuss the accounts of the participants in relation to the complex structures of power that often create and maintain the

circumstances that they face. Forms of CDA, therefore, provide a more effective approach in this study for exploring and examining their discourses, associating structures of power with their experiences, as well as unpacking their understanding of how these factors influence their lives.

The participants' accounts reflect the nuances of their experiences with school and media; however, there are commonalities between them that provide a foundation for critically analyzing their discourses. The historical, political, and emotional themes exposed in the language of their narratives are also embedded in their tone, gestures, interaction, and engagement. Through sharing spaces, identities, culture, and experiences, many of the participants experience being a Black girl in the GTA as almost a product or process they naturally participate in. This observation speaks to Rebecca Rogers's (2004) assertion that "discourses are social practices, processes and products." Discourses function as the object of this study; therefore, what the participants share is the product being observed in this research. The discourses of the participants in this study, therefore, are used not only to reflect their experiences as Black girls, but also to make meaning of how they understand their experiences in relation to the institutions and structures that shape their lives.

James Gee (2004) points out that discourses are also multi-faceted, meaning that a number of elements need to be taken into consideration. Discourse includes language, thoughts, feelings, trauma, and other inherited ways of knowing and being. This is particularly useful as the analysis of this data requires that attention and focus be placed on the thinking, feeling, and believing of Black girls. Their discourses surrounding topics in media and education help to reveal some of the common perceptions, beliefs, and understandings that Black girls often share. What types of discourses are developed as a result of the intricate lives and experiences of Black

girls? This study seeks to answer this question, describing how Black girls interpret their worlds, as well as what themes are common and consistent in their experiences.

This study is grounded within Black feminist theoretical frameworks, pulling on the scholarship of Annette Henry, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ruth Nicole Brown, and Patricia Hill Collins to situate and interpret the experiences Black girls have in school and with media, within the context of Black feminisms. It, therefore, seems appropriate to take the CDA analysis method a step further and apply a feminist critical discourse analysis approach. FCDA utilizes feminist perspectives on gender and power structures in the critical analysis of discourses. FCDA is essentially an intersection of CDA and feminist studies (Lazar, 2014). As Michelle Lazar (2014) notes:

FCDA is a perspective that seeks to examine the complex, subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and power asymmetries get discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and contested in specific communities and discourse contexts. (p. 182)

Lazar's framing of FCDA shows why this approach is most appropriate for this study. Gender is one of the main factors influencing the intersectionality of Black girls. As I analyze the participants' narratives, I will try to establish how gender, coupled with race and other factors of identity, impact the experiences of Black girls.

Although FCDA as outlined by Lazar (2014) still, in my opinion, avoids specific attention to some issues much like traditional feminist discourses (lack of diversity in representation of all women), I use it here as a point of reference to apply the work of the Black feminist scholars listed above in my analysis. Utilizing the tenets of FCDA has allowed me to

employ a more suitable Black feminist lens to my analysis of the data to fill any gaps that might be overlooked.

Post-structural feminist discourse analysis like FCDA can also be used to carve out space within the context of critical discourse analysis for the coexistence of distinctively different voices and accounts (Baxter, 2008). Within my study, for example, the foundation for the analysis is built upon the narratives of Black girls who have different backgrounds and experiences. I also have a personal connection to the topic of the study, and FCDA allows me to insert my own experience and understanding as I analyze the data collected from the participants. It is also important to incorporate data and analysis of previous studies focused on Black girls to add further context and to expand the scholarship in the field. FCDA allows me to be specific about making space for Black girls and not confuse or conflate their concerns with other groups. I am deliberate in my approach to focus on intersectionality and Black feminisms to advance perspectives of Black girls; however, the varied experiences of Black girls coexist with, and can speak to, the experiences and analysis of other groups, i.e., Black women, and FCDA can be used to situate and include multiple perspectives.

The key principle of FCDA is to highlight and make clear the ways in which many social practices are inherently gendered, and therefore, unequal (Lazar, 2014). The concern FCDA seeks to address (besides the blatant inequality) is the normalized applications of institutional and structural practices that continue to reproduce gendered power and authority (Baxter, 2008; Lazar, 2014). FCDA's purpose as a data analysis method is to establish more open and transparent critiques, which "through the analysis of discourses that reveal the workings of power and ideology, sustain hierarchical gender relations" (Lazar, 2014, p. 184). CDA on its

own does not focus on gender specifically, but it does concentrate overall on the disempowering impact of the structures in society that marginalize specific groups of people (Fairclough, 2013). In this study, I use the discourses of the participants to critically position their marginality. Intersectionality theory establishes an imperative forcing researchers to deliberately account for gender in the analysis of experiences of Black girls (Crenshaw, 1989). In using FCDA, I can draw themes and conclusions from the analysis of the narratives collected through participant interviews and focus groups that position gender as a key factor of identity impacting the participants' interactions.

In the chapter entitled "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis," Lazar (2014) admits that even given the progressive development of contemporary feminist critique (i.e., intersectionality), feminist political positions are not concrete. This means there continues to be room to expand feminist critique to more effectively account for marginalized voices that are often not present or accommodated within approaches like CDA. Lazar (2014) points out, "The goal is toward constantly imagining and opening up ways of 'doing' and 'becoming' that are more socially inclusive and respectful of all persons" (p. 184). In reality, Black feminist discourses can examine the often-ambiguous characteristics of power structures that oppress all marginalized people; however, there will undoubtedly be intricacies that are overlooked and ignored. Black feminist epistemologies establish a foundation for understanding concepts like "safe spaces" and "ethic of care" (Collins, 2001), while contextualizing notions like the "strong Black woman" when examining discourses. They also concentrate on intersectionality and its impact on lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989), as well as manifestations of resilience in the lives of Black women and girls (Brown, 2009).

To provide further justification for the choice to combine FCDA with themes common in Black feminist theories, I provide an outline for framing the use of discourses in this study. For example, FCDA is best suited to discuss how, through language, a participant who describes a microaggression of a male teacher that is directed towards her perpetuates the normalizing of patriarchal structures and ideology within the school system. However, by including a Black feminist lens while applying FCDA to this example, a more detailed analysis can take place that also identifies how the participant's account of the situation reflects both sexism and racism in the teacher's remarks. This approach also allows me to consider and analyze the participant's resilience in this situation as a factor in her decision not to bring the microaggression she experienced to the attention of school administration.

The narratives of the girls reflect various situations in which multiple dynamics of power, i.e., racism, sexism, and classism, are manifested in both school settings as well as in their exposure and engagement with media. Using FCDA, I explore how the intersectionality of the identities of Black girls is evident in their discourses on these topics. The analysis method used here combines various tools, i.e., narratives, FCDA, Black feminisms, to capture and contextualize aspects of their lived experiences that are often hidden and left unchallenged.

When selecting girls to take part in the study, my central concerns were their intersectionality and the general openness needed for frank and engaged discussions. In the next section, I outline the recruitment process for selecting participants.

Participant Recruitment Process

The study used purposive sampling, selecting participants "according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 5). Rather than going

directly to the various school boards across the GTA, I worked with a community organization in which I am actively involved. The Power to Be International (PTBI) is a small local charity that implements a variety of programs for youth both locally and internationally. PTBI's youth program direction has led to a focus on centring girls of colour in local programs, including putting on events for girls of colour in the GTA. Participants were recruited from an event attendee pool of Black girls provided by PTBI.

Purposely selecting Black girls who participated in PTBI programming helped to establish the level of comfort and understanding needed to complete the data collection for the study. As Mack et al. (2005) outline, "Purposive sampling is, therefore, most successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with data collection" (p. 5). Once the sample of Black girls interested in participating from PTBI was narrowed, a total of 16 potential applicants were invited to join the study—only 14 of the 16 completed an interview or focus group.

The Power to Be International was founded in 2009 in Durham, Ontario. I was one of its co-founders and continue to support the organization by creating and delivering a variety of youth-focused programming. I have over 10 years' experience actively engaging in the activities of the organization. I use this platform to work with the community and other partners to deliver youth programs and initiatives. PTBI created the platform for me, as a researcher, to not only create programs but to use the evaluation and data from youth programming to inform future program development, research, and literature that supports the development of Black youth in various regional spaces. PTBI's work to support youth is directly aligned with the objective of this study. The focus and purpose of PTBI's programming for Black girls make the organization a reliable source for support for this study.

Through term funding granted to the organization by the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), an Ontario provincial funding body, PTBI implemented a two-year girls' leadership program called Engaging Girls Empowerment Leadership Development Action (EGELDA), in the Pickering/Ajax area. The program started in 2015 and ran through 2017. In addition to hosting weekly sessions, PTBI put on a number of supporting events for Black girls in the GTA as part of the program. Through my community involvement with PTBI, I was able to work with participants in the girls' program and hear from them as they reflected on their experiences and concerns.

The EGELDA program sprouted Akeelah's Room, an initiative to allow for the creation of media content and safer spaces for Black girls in the GTA. Akeelah's Room uses social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, as well as a central website, to publish content aimed at engaging Black girls in the GTA on topics and discussions that impact their lives. This content was created by program participants and other GTA Black girl contributors who wished to share their perspectives and bring discussions that were important to them to a wider audience. Upon completion of the EGELDA program in early 2018, the Akeelah's Room initiative remained active, and it continues to focus on creating safer spaces for Black girls and girls of colour to critically think, engage, and strengthen themselves and their communities. The online communities within these spaces are small but continue to grow. The focus of Akeelah's Room is less about gaining a large audience on these platforms, and more about creating and maintaining spaces where Black girls can resist some of the narratives and representations that can negatively affect their sense of self. Akeelah's Room also hosts events in the GTA, i.e.,

Town Hall Conversations and “mocktail” parties, to encourage in-person interactions and create physical spaces where Black girls can come to interact, share, and grow with each other.

The PTBI has a database of Black girls who attend PTBI programs and events. Attendees come from various Greater Toronto neighbourhoods and comprise a mix of different socio-economic backgrounds and cultures. This variety adds to the diversity of perspectives and experiences that are expressed and shared within the group of girls and at the events.

Basic contact information is collected from the girls who attend each PTBI program or event. PTBI agreed to extend the informed consent obtained alongside contact details to ensure that event attendees were aware that their contact details could be used to invite them to participate in a possible research study. In other words, when asked for contact information, the girls were also asked if they consented to having their contact details shared for research or programming.

Participant recruitment for the study took place through two different stages. Stage one involved a summer program implemented through PTBI’s Akeelah’s Room to create media content. This program involved a partnership with the Institute for Research on Digital Learning (IRDL) at York University and received funding through various sources. Recruitment for the summer participants took place through the following procedures:

First, PTBI event attendees who provided email addresses were contacted via email with details about a summer program (2018) being implemented through the Akeelah’s Room initiative at York University’s Keele Campus. The information/recruitment email with details on the program was sent to 41 email addresses of previous PTBI event attendees. Eight girls responded with interest in participating in the program. Eight girls were interviewed and from

the eight interviewed, a team of four Akeelah's Room content creators were selected based on availability, experience, and their expressed level of comfort with the direction of the summer activities. The four girls who were selected as content creators agreed to participate in this study.

The second stage of recruitment took place in the latter part of the summer of 2018, and it involved recruitment of participants for one-on-one interviews. Recruitment for this stage took place through the following procedures:

PTBI event and program attendees who provided email addresses and other contact information were contacted and invited to participate in a paid research study. The information/recruitment email with details on the research study was sent to 53 email addresses of PTBI event and program attendees. Eleven girls (or their parents) responded to the research call expressing interest in participating. To help determine their suitability for the study, I asked each respondent, via email, their age and level of comfort with speaking on issues of race, education, and representation. Based on responses, arrangements were made with eight of the girls to participate in the study. Two of the respondents asked to bring a friend to the interview. As a result, I converted the first interview, which was to take place with two siblings, into a four-participant focus group (two siblings, plus one friend each).

From the two recruitment stages, a total of 14 girls voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The first recruitment stage produced four subjects who participated in a focus group in July 2018. One of the girls in this first stage approached me after the focus group with more specific things to say based on the questions. She agreed to be interviewed one-on-one at a later date. The second recruitment stage produced 10 participants. Two participants asked if a friend could join, turning the interview intended for siblings into a focus group with each sister

accompanied by a friend. Two of the 10 girls recruited in this stage did not complete the interview due to schedule changes and lack of availability.

Participation of girls recruited in either stage was entirely voluntary, and they were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Girls under 16 years of age who demonstrated an interest in participation were required to provide written consent from parents or guardians. Those 16 and over were able to sign their own consent forms to participate.

As a researcher who is also a trained and experienced teacher and youth service provider, I was aware that the topics we were discussing could be emotionally fraught. I consciously tried to reduce the emotional risk by gauging participants' responses and level of comfort throughout the research activities, being mindful of the histories and realities that make discussing issues regarding race and representation particularly sensitive for some Black girls. There were a few tears in one-on-one interviews; when this occurred, I provided support and ensured that all participants left their session feeling comfortable and calm.

As this study seeks to create a space for Black girls to speak freely and openly about their lived experiences and explore the impact on their identities, there are benefits in being able to share and discuss situations and feelings within spaces, with other Black girls, that participants may not have open and ready access to. For example, similar studies conducted in the United States have outlined the benefits of providing Black girls with inclusive spaces in which they can openly share and discuss a variety of topics, particularly their concerns (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; French et al., 2012; Jacobs, 2016). This was particularly true of participants in this study. Many of the participants remarked on how good it was for them to speak about these issues with someone who could identify with their concerns and experiences. The qualitative

methods and tools used in this study (focus groups and interviews) gave the participants opportunities to share stories and feelings individually and/or as part of a group with peers. This form of data collection using a qualitative methodology allowed for an “ethic of care” and the use of safer spaces that are embedded in Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000).

Study Participants

In total, 14 self-identified Black girls, between ages 13 and 19, living in the Greater Toronto Area, participated in this study. Three of the participants were post-secondary students, and the other 11 participants attended high school in the GTA.

Although 16 participants were invited to take part in the study, I was unable to complete interviews with two of the interested and selected participants. One of the potential participants had to cancel the scheduled interview due to school responsibilities, and the other did not confirm the specified time. There was no attempt made to reschedule these interviews.

Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The following is a list of participants and an overview of their demographics.

Pseudonym	Grade	Age	Data Collection Type
Sasha	12	18	Focus Group #1
Vanessa	Post Sec	19	Focus Group #1
Rochelle	Post Sec	19	Focus Group #1
Ivy	11	16	Focus Group #1/ Interview #6
Brianna	9	13	Focus Group #2

Deja	11	16	Focus Group #2
Sienna	9	14	Focus Group #2
Zara	11	17	Focus Group #2
Ebony	10	15	Interview #1
Jada	Post Sec	18	Interview #2
Nicole	12	17	Interview #3
Imani	12	17	Interview #4
Raven	10	15	Interview #5
Samara	12	17	Interview #7

Data Collection

This study consists of two different qualitative tools for data collection. The goal was to use both one-on-one interviews and focus groups to attain rich, detailed descriptions of the opinions and experiences of the Black girls participating in the study.

As Table 1 shows, one group of participants completed one-on-one, in-depth interviews, and another completed a focus group, which ranged from 40 to 90 minutes long. The individual interviews allowed me to get to know each participant on a more personal level as the discussions were meant to provide participants with the time and space needed to share their own stories and how they interpret them. According to Seidman (2006), “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and what they make of those experiences” (p. 9). The goal of this study is to focus on the experiences and development of Black girls, which requires examining the social and educational issues that they

experience as comprehensively as possible, and “interviewing becomes the basic mode of inquiry” (p. 8) to begin to collect the narratives of the participants effectively. As noted by Kvale (1996), there are no standardized procedures for conducting qualitative interviews. In many cases, qualitative inquiry expands through conversation with the participants.

The focus groups also provided rich discussions as participants were able to build on, support, or expand upon the points shared by other participants in the group. The first focus group explored participants’ interactions with media, and the perceptions and experiences associated with those interactions, querying how much they associate their understanding of their self-concept with the media they consume. Insights into their feelings about media and their experiences in school were also explored. Cohen et al. (2007) claim that such an approach allows for responses to emerge from the participants as opposed to from the study objectives:

“participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer, such that the views of the participants can emerge – the participants’ rather than the researcher’s agenda can predominate. It is from the interaction of the group that the data emerge” (p. 376). The focus group settings allowed for questions to be extended, providing a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Focus Group #1

The first focus group was held at York University and consisted of the four content creators who were working on the Akeelah’s Room initiative, creating online content and hosting events. Each of the participants signed the approved consent form for the study, and they were briefed on the details of the data collection. The focus group discussion was recorded and ran 62

minutes in length and focused on media representation. The following questions about media representations and resistance were asked in the first focus group:

1. What are some of the common media representations of Black girls?
2. How do you feel about how Black girls are represented in the media?
3. What happens to Black women/girls when they speak up and use their voice to address issues in their life and in the community?
4. What type of content will you create and what impact are you hoping to have on Black representation through your participation?

Interview Questions

Twelve questions, divided into subject themes, were used for the one-on-one interviews and the second focus group.

Table 2
Interview Questions

Black Identity

1. What does being Black mean in your school, or in Toronto/Canada in general?
 2. How does being Black impact your experiences?
-

Media Representation

3. What are some of the common media representations of Black girls?
 4. How do you feel about how Black girls are represented in the media?
-

School Experiences

5. What are some of the challenges/benefits Black girls have in school?
 6. How do media representations factor into Black girls' experiences in school?
 7. What are some of the factors that help facilitate positive experiences?
-

Intersectionality

-
8. What are some of the differences between concerns of Black girls and Black boys?
 9. What are some of the differences between the experiences of Black girls and non-Black girls?
-

Safer Spaces

10. What happens when you do not feel safe? At school? In the community?
 11. Do you believe that Black girls require safer spaces to talk and share opinions? If so, why or why not?
-

Voice

12. What happens to Black women/girls when they speak up and use their voice to address issues in their life and in the community?
-

These questions were designed to allow participants to share different points of view on Black experiences and to allow them to share narratives of their varied experiences. Considering the overall focus of the study, these questions provided participants several opportunities to speak on their perception, understanding, and feelings about Black identity, Black girlhood, representation, media, school experiences, and personal agency. By using different themes, the goal was to capture some of the dynamics that construct contemporary Black girlhood in the GTA.

Focus Group #2

The second focus group completed the full set of questions also used for the one-on-one interviews. The original intention was to interview two participants together (siblings). The mother of the siblings emailed me to ask if each of her daughters could bring a friend to the interview. I asked the new potential participants the same questions to determine their suitability for the study and agreed to have them in the session.

The 16- and 17-year-old participants Deja and Zara signed their consent forms, and the minors, Brianna and Sienna, signed minor assent forms and their parents signed parental consent forms provided.

Focus group #2 took place at the Pickering Central Library, in a meeting room. The session was recorded, and the focus group ran 83 minutes in length.

Interview #1

Ebony's interview took place after school in a small office at a community organization located in Ajax, Ontario. Ebony attended the interview alone. Ebony submitted her parental consent form already signed and completed a minor assent form, which was provided. The interview was recorded and was 43:38 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #2

Jada's interview took place in the evening in Jada's home. Jada signed a participant consent form, which was provided. The interview was recorded and was 51:26 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #3

Nicole's interview took place after school in a small office at a community organization located in Ajax, Ontario. Nicole attended the interview alone. Nicole completed a participant consent form, which was provided. The interview was recorded and was 38:37 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #4

Imani's interview took place after school in a small office at a community organization located in Ajax, Ontario. Imani completed a participant consent form. The interview was recorded and was 63:24 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #5

Raven's interview took place after school at a community organization located in Ajax, Ontario. Raven attended the interview with her mother, who waited outside the interview room. Raven's mother signed the parental consent form, and Raven completed a minor assent form. The interview was recorded and was 71:24 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #6

Ivy's interview took place in the evening in Ivy's home. Ivy previously participated in focus group #1 and signed a participant consent form. Due to limited responses in the focus group, I asked Ivy if she would expand on some of her points in an one-on-one interview. The interview was recorded and was 36:26 minutes in length. Brief handwritten notes on the question sheet were also completed.

Interview #7

Samara's interview took place in the evening at York University. Samara came early to a focus group event and agreed to be interviewed individually before the group started. The interview was recorded and was 41:12 minutes in length.

Field Notes

Field notes and observations were also taken throughout the study and in most of the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, as needed. These were made to provide additional context and note factors that might contribute to or expand upon a participant's response. For example, information related to the excitement and enthusiasm observed when discussing particular topics, as well as other emotions that were apparent and spoke to the participants' engagement and responses, were noted as part of the data collection.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using a combination of qualitative data analysis techniques, beginning with documentation of the data throughout the process of data collection, organizing the data into specific themes, and using a technological tool known as NVivo software to assist in the storing and sorting of the data collected. NVivo also assists in classifying and categorizing data, which helps the researcher make connections ("What is NVivo? | NVivo," 2018).

Feminist critical discourse analysis was conducted to observe patterns and compare trends in participant responses. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to identify codes emerging from the data. Descriptive data were organized into "nodes" to identify themes related to the research focus and questions of this study. I used six "nodes" to classify the narratives of the participants: academic streaming, different expectations, good teachers, bad teachers, media representation, and teacher microaggressions. Interview and focus group data was transcribed and saved as files to NVivo and I reviewed each of the files using the nodes to classify the data.

The data files from the transcripts were coded as “cases” within a larger Black girls file, naming each participant in the study with a pseudonym. Each “case” represents a study participant, coded indicating pseudonym, age, city, and grade.

I compared the data from interviews and focus group cases using the node classification to better understand the realistic/authentic lived experiences in the girls’ daily lives in the GTA. Taking into consideration the structures of power that intersect and impact them based on gender, race, class, etc., in the analysis of their narratives, I drew conclusions based on the commonalities and variances that could be identified. Their narratives also demonstrated their understanding of their experiences and how their experiences impacted personal and social development.

In analyzing the data, I focused on two overarching aspects in the participants’ narratives. The first aspect is based on their school experiences and the ways they interpret these experiences. The second aspect is based on their interactions with media and the way media representations and biases present as a controlling factor in their daily lives.

Research Limitations

According to Price and Murnan (2004), “A limitation of a study design or instrument is the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results” (p. 66). In examining the study, methods, and analysis employed, there are a few limitations to note. First, this study engages with conversations on complex issues related to race, gender, and poverty in the experience of Black girls. Many of the participants who expressed interest in the study may have already been keenly aware of these issues at the time of their interviews and thought extensively about issues surrounding their

identity in relation to Whiteness. Further research on the experiences of Black girls in the Greater Toronto Area should perhaps involve a more random selection of girls across a wider spectrum of experiences, for example, Black girls of direct African descent and Black girls who were not born in Canada.

Secondly, while the sample size of 14 Black girls is adequate for identifying themes and similarities in the experiences of the participants, the size of the sample could be expanded in future studies. A lack of established literature outlining the experiences of Black girls that might help to contextualize this data is a further limitation.

Chapter Five: Black Girls and School

The school system is sketchy. —Zara

Sixteen-year-old Ivy, a Black girl, walks through the halls of her predominately White, middle-class area high school in an Ontario suburb, when the vice-principal stops her. Ivy has natural kinky curly hair, coloured a bright purple tint. She wears thrift-style clothing and easily stands out, even among her Black girl peers. Ivy is carrying an unconventional water bottle which, to the vice-principal (VP), looks odd. The VP confiscates the bottle, citing its resemblance to a beer bottle as the issue and leaving Ivy without water for the day. The VP asks Ivy to collect the bottle from her office after school. When Ivy goes to retrieve the bottle, she is forced to sit in the office for 17 minutes and misses her bus, as the VP goes through her academic file. The VP then proceeds to lecture her about how the oddly shaped water bottle makes “her look bad” and ultimately may affect her ability to be a leader for her peers.

Sasha is a bright, outspoken 15-year-old Black girl in the 10th grade who attends a reasonably diverse Greater Toronto Area school. In her civics class, a conversation about voting begins. Her teacher outlines some key historical points for women and their right to vote. The teacher makes a statement suggesting that because of the suffrage movement, all women in North America could vote by 1920. Understanding the history of oppression in North America, Sasha is confused. She wonders how her teacher could make such a definitive statement without referencing other, marginalized, non-White women and their inability to readily participate in these processes. Sasha, however, stays silent, afraid of what might result from her directly challenging the teacher publicly in the classroom.

These are just two of the vast number of concerns that I heard from Black girls living in the Greater Toronto Area about their experiences in school. Some of these narratives reveal circumstances that factor into Black girls' academic achievement, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Limited data and literature are available on the specific educational experiences of Black girls. However, research on the vast disparities in education achievement between Black students in Ontario and their White counterparts show little improvement over several decades (James & Turner, 2017; Soloman, 1992). Educational outcomes of Black youth continue to lag behind other racial and ethnic groups (Anucha et al., 2018; James & Turner, 2017).

Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy framework (2017) acknowledges that "Black youth in Ontario continue to experience disproportionately negative outcomes, including unemployment, violence, and a lack of opportunity" (p. 39). These outcomes are connected to the anti-Black racism that Black youth face in education. Meerai et al. (2016) define anti-Black racism as: "a particular form of oppression and racism visited on Black/African individuals in all aspects of their lives" (p. 20). Some recent findings on disparities in achievement for Black youth in Ontario point to the structures and practices within education systems as factors that lead to harsh consequences for Black youth in the province (Anucha et al., 2018; James, 2012; Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy, 2017). Looking specifically at the impact of anti-Black racism, I can speculate why Black students are not registering in post-secondary programs at the same rate as non-Black peers and why Black youth have one of the highest youth incarceration rates in Ontario (Anucha et al., 2018). Studies on the experiences of Black students in Toronto schools, dating as far back as 1992, suggest failures to adequately accommodate Black students

in school are due to their cultural differences, language, and identity (James, 1995; Soloman, 1992).

According to Ontario's Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2017), Black children are more likely to be enrolled in lower academic streams, and although Black students make up only 12% of the students in the Toronto District School Board (the largest school board in Canada), they consisted of 31% of the school suspensions in 2010 (Anucha et al., 2018). Inadequate educational policies and practices continue to adversely affect the success and achievement of Black youth in schools and within the community. The data on Black youth, and the government acknowledgement of the issues Black youth face, speak to the anti-Black racism experienced by Black youth; however, there is a noticeable absence of gender or intersectional analysis, which would assist educators in explicitly outlining the experiences and requirements for accommodating the needs of Black girls. Specific educational considerations for Black girls are often overlooked within analyses of Black youth, but there is mounting concern for the unique and specific concerns affecting the well-being of Black girls. Research on Black girls in North America continues to highlight how these concerns result in serious, long-term consequences such as higher rates of school dropout and the fact that Black girls are one of the fastest growing youth groups coming into conflict with the law, often leading to incarceration (Morris, 2016).

Familiar, normalized stereotypes surround the identity and existence of Black girls both historically and contemporarily. Stigmas that suggest they are loud, aggressive, and not interested in school (Brown, 2009; Morris, 2016), together with the lack of culturally responsive accommodations in school settings, only maintain educational inequities, which shape the lives

of Black girls (Henry, 2017; Anucha et al., 2018). Research continues to document how these common stereotypes impact Black girls' interactions and day-to-day experiences.

Many of the policies and plans developed to address concerns surrounding Black students and their achievement in Ontario have outlined provisions for responding to the cultural needs of Black students (Anti-Black Racism Strategy, 2017; Durham Consortium for Black Students, 2018; Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009; Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan, 2017). Although Black girls fall into the category of Black youth, the intersectionality of their identities often creates additional barriers to their education. Therefore, outlining intersectionality effectively contextualizes gender, class, and other aspects of identity that factor into the circumstances of their lived experience (Crenshaw, 1989). After analyzing the accounts of the girls in this study, I find indications that the province's provisions, though useful to attempt, have fallen significantly short of meeting the educational needs of Black girls.

This chapter will contextualize and discuss the social, emotional, and pedagogical experiences that impact the education and the perception of the education system of the 14 Black girls in this study. Analysis of the data collected from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews indicates a number of common themes drawn from the school experiences of the participants that reflect salient examples of educational inequities. Their accounts highlight some of the circumstances that Black girls endure on a regular basis. Based on the narratives of participants, three distinct themes related to their experiences within Greater Toronto Area schools emerge. These themes have been divided as follows: teacher microaggressions, inequitable treatment and standards, and ineffective teaching practices.

What Is Blackness, Black Identity, and Black Culture?

In *Rhetorics of Blackness, Rhetorics of Belonging: The Politics of Representation in Black Canadian Expressive Culture* (1999), Rinaldo Walcott establishes some critical claims about Black identity in Canada. Due to Canada's colonial and political history, notions of "Otherness", difference, and exclusion are inherent to discourses relating to Canadian citizenship and central to aspects of multiculturalism and immigration. The Multiculturalism Act (1985) was established as policy in Canada to enhance and fortify the multicultural heritage of Canadian immigrants (James, 1995). Canada is a region where many groups of people of various ethnic backgrounds and cultures immigrate, settle, and live. To accommodate this diversity in people, the policy suggests that it is possible for people living in Canada to maintain their cultural and ethnic identity while fully participating within systems and structures of Canadian life. However, despite the policy and practice of multiculturalism, which was initiated to integrate diversity and inclusion into the fabric of Canadian society such that it might effectively represent all Canadian citizens, Black people in the country continue to struggle with belonging (Campbell, 2012; Chariandy, 2007; Walcott, 1999).

The concept of multiculturalism, as applied in Canada, has been criticized for its seemingly overall failure to shift racist policies, ideas, and perceptions that maintain the prejudice and discrimination that Black people face (Campbell, 2012). As Walcott opined, "In fact, state policies like multiculturalism and immigration policies skillfully move between discourses of heterogeneity and monolithic notions of otherness to assert various forms of coercive power" (p. 5). Asserting a monolithic Canadian identity through the legacy of Eurocentric control and White supremacy confuses claims of heterogeneity and multiculturalism

in post-colonial Canada. Even more difficult to reconcile is how to emphasize differences in Black Canadian identity when being Canadian requires one to fit into a European ideal. This makes it almost impossible to underline the diversity of Black Canada, as a single representation of Black identity in Canada has been normalized even within the context of multiculturalism (Walcott, 1997).

How does one frame Black identity and culture in Canada when Blackness represents many different groups, cultures, ethnicities, and understandings? Blackness in Canada is essentially multicultural in and of itself, making general, singular representations of Black people extremely problematic. The lack of uniformity among Black cultures in Canada also calls for, as Hall theorized, putting an end to the idea of Black identity as one essential subject (Hall, 1996). Among Black Canadians, it is important to note that there is a clear understanding of the nuances and differences that exist within various Black communities.

Taking Walcott's claims about Blackness in Canada into consideration, it is critical to establish the foundation for discussing race and Black identity in context of the participants' understanding. To do this, as Table 2, Question 1 indicates, the participants were asked to outline how they interpret concepts of Blackness and Black identity.

There was a common perception among the participants that Blackness, in a Canadian context, reflects a mix of ethnicities and nationalities, mainly from the Caribbean region and across Africa. Using the term "Black" references these communities. The participants related positively to their Black identities, which included various representations within an African and Caribbean context. They spoke about Black hair, features, skin, and various aspects of culture as being admirable aspects of Black identity which they celebrate.

Ebony (15)⁵: *I define Blackness as a part of who I am. There is also a culture; culture aspects a part of it too, like how you carry yourself and just who you are.*

Ivy (16): *The good being Black is that there's a lot of culture and a lot of interesting aspects to study and learn and be around. There is a lot of history. There is lots of history that is super fascinating and super interesting and maybe like some people might not even know. Just a lot of history in terms of what Blackness means and where it comes from.*

Raven (15): *When I think of Black people, I would think of skin just like features so would think typically like bigger nose, bigger lips, the hair would be either out natural or like maybe some box braids something like that, like that's typically what comes to mind when I think Black.*

Sasha (18): *I think Black culture is a misnomer because there's different, people have different ideas of Black culture. I think that, when we see Black culture, people are often talking about African American culture and African American culture from a specific income bracket. I think, I would say the Black culture in Toronto is probably more influenced by Jamaican vernacular and stuff like that. I see Black culture is very expressive as well as very colourful and not meek. Not very shy but very bold. I'm very in tuned. I read a lot of literature from across the diaspora, related to Black history and stuff like that. I feel that there is still a disconnect of what I believe Blackness to be and what other people think Blackness is. As someone that is, I don't want to toot my own horn, but is well read, knows the history and stuff like that. Blackness is so great like you've contributed so much and stuff like that. I feel like a lot of that is lost within Black youth and how they see themselves.*

Rochelle (19): *I think growing up, Black culture, especially in Toronto but I grew up in Durham, was very Caribbean. Like, Jamaican was the cool thing to be. Jamaican vernacular was our slang, all of that. That's just how it was and I always felt I didn't really fit into Black culture. I was African. So, there were certain things that just weren't part of my culture and that was a bit hard at times, having friends that were mostly Caribbean and never feeling Black. My idea of Blackness was different. Until now that I'm getting older, it's like, being African is cool now so there's Afro music and everybody wants to wear Dashiki and everyone is like, "Back to our roots" and all of that kind of stuff so that was an interesting shift, for me.*

⁵ The pseudonyms of the participants are bolded to highlight their narratives. As the name of each participant first appears in the dissertation, I include their age for additional context for their narratives.

The participants' opinions on Black culture, history, and identity reflect positive personal notions and associations with Blackness. It appears, based on these reflections, that Black identity in Canada exists within a general spectrum rooted within the Caribbean and African diasporas.

In contrast to their positive personal feelings and perceptions about Black identity, they all agreed that non-Black people easily adopt negative perceptions and understandings of Black identity and culture. That is, there is a common understanding that Black people and Black identity are not generally regarded positively within the public domain. Ivy states, "*Black people are seen as bad as I said before, we are a target in some cases, people kind of use Blackness against you. [People] use it to kind of judge your character and characterize who you'll be, or who you are.*" The "judging" that Ivy elucidates parallels, to some degree, Fanon's framing of Black "Otherness," which still plays a role in the reality that shapes the identity of Black people living within White-dominant spaces. Nicole, 17, had this to say about external perceptions of Black identity:

I just like categorize Blackness with a lot of like negative things and so like that's been like my own personal experience just for myself like when I think about like White people I think like White people are like rich, well off, feeling good about themselves kind of idea and then when I think about Black people it's almost like I think that we're just like not as happy or at our best as we could be. I don't really know if that's really the way I think but from my experience as a Black person I like being Black.

Not surprisingly, Nicole's sentiments echo the feelings of the other girls. Even though the commentary of the participants demonstrated various levels of positive self-identity and pride surrounding their own Black identity, they do not believe that society sees Black people positively. These often-negative associations stigmatizing Black people relate mainly to Black history, undesirable behaviours affiliated with Black people, and physical appearance.

Teacher Microaggressions

Deja, 16, is actively participating in her Grade 10 math class when a conversation about speed and velocity evolves into a discussion on fast cars. Deja's classmates begin listing off the cars they hope to drive when they get older. One White boy mentions a Range Rover, which Deja thinks is not fast at all. Another student jokes about wanting a Tesla, just for the look of it. Deja decides to chime in. She notes, with subdued excitement, her preference for a type of BMW, describing features down to the paint colour. As she smiles proudly, her male, White math teacher says to her, "No, you're going to need a van for the amount of kids you're going to have." Confused, Deja didn't understand why this teacher would make such an assumption about her future. She is struck by how calmly and openly he makes this humiliating comment. He seems to fear no consequences for being insolent and dismissive to a student he is employed to educate and support.

Racial microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). This study's theme of teacher microaggressions describes the racial slights and insults Black students endure from their educators. Deja's account goes beyond a simple "racial slight." What Deja experienced was a blatant act of verbal violence. The term "violence," as applied here, is not an exaggeration; these racist, sexist, and classist verbal communications are indeed acts of violence. This is an important distinction; as Keels et al. (2017) point out, "The subtlety of microaggressions and the belief that they are a normative aspect of cross race-ethnicity interactions has led to the popular misconception that microaggressions may offend but cause no

real harm to one's wellbeing" (p. 1321). It was surprising to me how many incidents the participants reported fell into the category of teacher microaggressions. Even more disheartening was the frequency with which these incidents targeted Black girls.

For example, 12 of the 15 girls who participated in the study were able to recall clear and specific personal violations that can be characterized as teacher microaggressions or verbal violence. While the other three could not specifically recollect any verbal assaults directed towards them personally, they were not the least bit surprised to hear the reports of other girls in the focus groups, or had witnessed microaggressions happen to their peers. Ivy, 16, said, "*It makes me sad, but it happens all the time.*" For Deja, being the object of microaggressions was a regular occurrence. She explains:

I'm an out-of-the-box learner. I can't learn, as I say, as everybody else. It takes me longer to understand certain things, so I am going to ask you a question 50 times until I get it. Some teachers will be like, "I just told you already. You don't get it. You're stupid. You're never going to amount to anything." I've gotten that.

Statements like the ones Deja details being made to, and about, Black girls is alarming, and in this case, the intersectionality of Deja's identity—being Black, female, and from a working-class family—compounds the impact of such statements. As Milner IV (2017) notes, "Race is constructed physically, contextually, socially, legally, and historically. And it is inextricably linked to patterns of prejudice and power structures" (p. 86). Due to pervasive systems of oppression, attitudes connected to racism and sexism, and in this case, classism, also create consequences for Black girls in the broader society. Circumstances related to the identity of Black girls are often generalized and misrepresented. The idea that Black girls are unable to perform well academically (Brown, 2009; Morris, 2015) is easily and harmfully projected on to Black girls as they endeavour to complete their education.

Zara is 17 years old and Deja's best friend; she also reflected on her experience with teacher microaggressions and verbal violence. Zara spoke of being labelled by her teachers in ways she perceived as stereotypically stigmatizing Black girls. She said:

I had a teacher come to me one day and another teacher who had never taught me before, never in my class, she's not even a real teacher, she works in the cafeteria. She came to her [my teacher] and she was like, "Oh, there's always two girls in the class and they are always singing and dancing, whatever, but that girl sure looks full of anger. That girl is so mad, she's not rude or anything but she just sits there, and she isn't doing anything. She's always angry all the time."

The stigma of "being angry all the time" is another common Black girl stereotype (French, 2013; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). This classification affected Zara, who describes herself as a "very nice person," but found that, for some reason, teachers did not see her this way. Zara continued, "*But I think first of all you don't know what's going on with me. You don't have any right to say that, and even if you think that, it shouldn't come out of your mouth to go to other people.*" Zara, like every other child, deserves to be educated in spaces where she can express herself, and be free of stereotypes and other people's projected ideas about who she is. In conversations with girls in this study, it became increasingly clear that Black girls are often not treated as individuals, unique people with personal characteristics. They are discriminated against based on negative stereotypes about Black girls depicted in media and in society.

Nicole, 17, attends a French immersion high school program. The type of microaggression she recounted is subtler and not as blatant as the microaggressions experienced by Deja and Zara. Nicole is socially connected in school and participates in many events. The teachers at her school know her, and the administration knows her family. With four older siblings, Nicole is not the first student in her family to be deeply engaged with school activities. Nicole spoke of a recent experience working with teachers on a yearly school activity:

Working with teachers to put on the Remembrance Day ceremony and the teachers want to focus on like the minorities that also participated in the war. Like this is like a small thing, but I just noticed like, they would talk about minorities and they'd say the Chinese people, the Japanese people, and the Blacks, Blacks were just Blacks like why don't you say Black people.

“This is like a small thing,” she notes, but it is still significant enough to have an impact on her.

Keels et al. (2017) outline a set of measures for evaluating the different types of microaggressions that are common within school environments. According to Keels et al. (2017), microaggressions, no matter how seemingly slight, “evoke powerful emotional reactions and increase perceived stress” (p. 1321). Any type of microaggression functions to dehumanize those who are impacted. Comments from teachers in this case may seem slight or unconscious, but they have the ability to hurt and harm Black students, particularly because of the history of marginalization that Black people have experienced in Canada.

Nicole talked a little about how this particular comment made her feel:

Well I don't know and it just, it was like they didn't even realize I was the only Black student. It just like a little slight thing but it just made me feel slightly uncomfortable and they don't realize that that's the language they're using and how it is affecting me.

Nicole's account reflects a form of microaggression because the teachers' omission of the word “people” when referring to Black people betrays, to some degree, an unconscious bias towards Black people, which directly impacts Nicole's sense of belonging in school activities.

Research on student outcomes regularly points to students' feelings of belonging and the ability to develop trusting relationships with teachers as indicators for success (Morganett, 1991; Russell et al., 2016). Comments that dehumanize students, like the one Nicole heard, impedes students' ability to feel belonging or develop trust for authority within school spaces.

Considering the frequency of racial microaggressions in our society, more attention needs to be

placed on uncovering and labelling the specific circumstances that often lead to Black students' general feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging within their school environments.

Raven, 15, described teacher microaggressions and the microaggressions of her peers as *“like just the small comments that I hear.”* Raven talked about a comment a teacher made to her after class in the hall:

“Is your dad still around?” you know like that... You have the audacity to ask me, like what? But is just like, those comments and misconceptions, the stuff that people don't realize, like that's not your right to just ask me that, you know what I mean? But they just assume like you're Black, like your dad probably left and I'm like, my dad is happily around, you know? My parents are married, they still live together, like you know what I mean? But people just like, they don't know and they don't realize the power of that stuff. They just came up to me and like “oh is your dad still around” like sorry, what?

Asking a student about their home situation may not necessarily be considered racist; however, a question about whether or not a father is present in the home, when directed towards a Black student, can be interpreted as stereotyping and possibly racist due to the common biased depictions of Black children as fatherless (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2015).

These “small comments,” microaggressions, and even more blatant forms of verbal violence directed towards Black girls have been normalized. Although the girls clearly identified the comments as unfair and discriminatory, only a small number of them felt they had the power to challenge the teachers when these incidents occurred. Many of the girls did not describe openly resisting or defending themselves against these microaggressions, and therefore, the incidents have become a tolerated part of their school experience.

Teacher microaggressions were also consistently found in pedagogy and approaches to teaching curriculum-related content. Three of the girls in the study spoke about their experience with one, very popular and controversial book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in

1960 under the author's pen name Harper Lee. The classic American novel set in a fictional Alabama town in 1933 tells the story of a widowed White lawyer and his two children. The story depicts events that arise when the lawyer defends a Black man who is accused of raping a White woman (Lee, 1960). Much of the controversy surrounding the use of the book in school is based on the plot and the particular use of the word "nigger," which is written in the novel 48 times (Saney, 2003). As a result of the language and events in the book, it has been removed from English reading lists across North America (Saney, 2003).

As the study participants spoke about incidents related to studying the book, their concern seemed primarily about their teachers' inability to teach the novel in a way that educated all students about racism, while supporting the Black students in the classroom. In their experience, using the book allowed for a stream of microaggressive comments, coming from both teachers and students. Of course, teachers can use controversial material in their lessons; however, they need to have effective, anti-oppressive teaching skills to be able to protect and support all students in the classroom while doing so.

Ebony, 15, described an experience in her Grade 10 English class, which was taught by a male teacher: "*We were reading To Kill a Mockingbird and he was trying to say how he faces stereotyping because when he was in high school, he was on the basketball team and he was a White guy. It is like, you cannot relate that to the actual racism. I think it just does not make sense.*" As in other situations where the girls described facing microaggressions, Ebony recalled feeling silenced and unable to speak out on this misuse of the term racism. She explained:

I did not say anything. I wish I did but I did not. I spoke to my mom about it and apparently, we were not even supposed to be doing To Kill a Mockingbird and I think he was a very lazy teacher. He did it because we already had the printed materials. We were not supposed to do that book anymore, he was not supposed to do it, and he did it

anyway. The book is no longer there anymore though.

Ebony did not appear to have any concerns about the book itself. She took issue with the way her teacher misappropriated the ideology of racism in response to it. Ebony was also one of only two Black students in the advanced English stream class, which contributed to her feelings of isolation and not wanting to call attention to herself.

Samara, 17, outlined a similar situation in which the teacher failed to provide effective and supportive instruction while using *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

We are supposed to be reading Death of a Salesman. We ended up reading To Kill a Mockingbird, which is littered with the N word, and we were not allowed to choose it in 11th grade to do like our book reports on because of the N word. But come 12th grade in a class there is six or seven non-Black kids who were allowed to just suddenly choose it. There is this particular group of Asian kids who are so excited to get their hands on a book with the N word in it, and they use it [nigger] throughout their entire presentation. When a lot of us called them out on it, we were like “yo, you didn’t have to throw it in your presentation that many times.” The teacher was like, “leave him alone, it is contextual and it makes sense.” But they did not need it, it’s weird, it’s really weird. It is just sometimes it feels like we are the adults in the room, they want every single avenue to deny that they are racist.

Samara’s point illustrates the larger issue with using sensitive material. Teachers are not prepared to teach or guide students on topics such as race, and therefore, Black students are at risk in classrooms with teachers who do not have the knowledge or capacity to explore topics that might be controversial or triggering for students. As Keels et al. (2017) note, research on the impact of microaggressions on students “showed that racially ethnically hostile educational context are detrimental for students’ academic achievement and mental health” (p. 1337).

Teachers who lack the necessary skills to teach sensitive material ultimately contribute to unsafe, emotionally triggering educational environments for Black students. Considering the emotional

impact of racially hostile material, teachers who fail to teach or support students when teaching it contribute to Black students' isolation in school settings.

In Samara's situation, the teacher sanctioned the use of a racially offensive word without providing proper educational context for its use. Allowing students to repeat the word, whether in context or not, was offensive to a group of students in the classroom, and therefore, use of the full word should have been avoided completely. As in Ebony's account, Samara's teacher used material that should not have been used in instruction for justifiable reasons. However, rather than acting as an opportunity to learn about the insidious nature of racism and its contemporary manifestations, the use of the text only created space and opportunities for racist comments, verbal assaults, and microaggressions in an educational setting.

In other examples of teacher microaggressions, teachers invade the personal space of Black girls. Sienna, 14, described a time in elementary school when a teacher was physically inappropriate with her and Sienna did not feel comfortable expressing to the teacher how she really felt about her actions:

I used to always do my hair when I went to elementary school. I had my one Grade 5 or 6 teacher, she used to come up to me and sit behind me and just play with my hair and just turned their hands through my hair and then get up. Then I used to come to school obviously with different hairstyles because that's what we always do, so, many teachers used to, "Oh, a new hairstyle today. You look like a different person today. Oh, my gosh." They would touch my braids, they want to feel them, they want to put their hands in my scalp. I'm a non-confrontational kind of person so I would never be like, "Can you stop that. I don't like that." So I just feel like, okay, alright, and just keep moving on and she would eventually get it and just sit there and not kind of cause anything and kind of seem rude, because obviously there were others were at a point, I had nothing else to do so, "Okay, can you stop now." But I didn't want to seem disrespectful at the same time. So, it wouldn't be everyday but it would be frequently whenever my hair was in an afro. I just feel like, "Okay," laugh and then go to my next class.

These types of microaggressions are often not recognized as such. In Sienna's situation, the teacher may not have thought or understood why touching Sienna's hair and invading her space in this way was offensive. Consistently touching and commenting on her hair may have in fact been an effort on the part of her White teacher to connect with her. However, for Sienna, these incidents were unforgettable. In recalling this experience which took place years ago, Sienna still deems her teacher's actions as a minor form of assault.

Brianna, 13, Sienna's close friend, talked about microaggressions from her peers, including other Black students. The general association of Black people with poverty often leads to insensitive comments about various aspects of Black girls and their identity:

In my school when I have something nice like a pair of shoes for my birthday or something, people automatically think that, oh, those are fake, those aren't good shoes or something. Usually, when my hair was in braids you can't really see it they always look on and think that it's weave. It's not like people who should encourage me, it would be like the Black kids too, and they automatically think like, "Oh, your hair is weave." I'm like, "I'm not going to sit here and argue with you and if you don't believe me then you don't believe me." And when everyone is like, oh, those are not your shoes and stuff like that, and I'm like...yeah.

Here, Brianna describes insults and verbal slights that her peers inflict on her based on their perceptions of what Black people can afford and how Black girls style their hair. Class and race-based stereotypes that are connected to Black identity often manifest in microaggressions directed towards Black girls.

According to the study participants, racial microaggressions are common, normalized occurrences that are part of their everyday school experience. The circumstances that lead to microaggressions also reveal the racist attitudes and dispositions of many teachers (Soloman, 1992). Teachers have power in the classroom, and "as such, teachers' perceptions set the overall tone for the classroom climate and this climate can greatly affect students' experiences" (Allen et

al., 2013, p. 121). Black girls who are adversely affected by their teachers' racist, sexist, and classist perceptions do not have the power or ability to change these circumstances, and these factors unfairly influence their educational experience.

The impact of microaggressions can be severe. Researchers have made direct correlations between discrimination and anxiety, health challenges, and student performance (Keels et al., 2017; Milner IV, 2017). Creating a safe and caring environment is fundamental to supporting students in their learning (Russell et al., 2016). It is in large part the responsibility of school boards. The Black girls in this study do not trust (White) teachers who utter even casual racially based or otherwise offensive comments. In some circumstances, they are unable to establish relationships with these teachers. The unwelcoming and stressful climates created in classrooms due to microaggressions need to be examined and addressed, and recognized as a significant factor contributing to educational disparities between Black and non-Black students (James & Turner, 2017; Anucha et al., 2018). The education system, from the ministry to the community schools, must develop practices and policies that hold teachers accountable for offences that harm and demotivate students in school.

Behavioural/Academic and Classroom Standards

Ebony, 15, describes herself as being “*different than some of the Black girls in her school.*” She is not quite sure how to explain it, but she feels that there is a difference. She does not wear weave, false nails, or eyelashes, like some of the other Black girls she describes. She is even slightly different from what she terms as the “*average*” Black students who try to be “*low-key*” and typically do not get noticed. Ebony likes rock music along with the typical urban music most of her friends enjoy. She cannot effectively place herself into a category, but as she

gets older, she claims that she is getting used to just being comfortable with who she is. Ebony thinks being different does not matter at times because the “*teachers don’t care*” if you are different than who they perceive you to be. To them, Black students are all the same. They are the ones who “*like to smoke a little weed and drink alcohol. The ones who skip class and talk back,*” even though Ebony does none of those things. She recognizes that other students who are not Black engage in the same types of activities that teachers seem so concerned about, but non-Black students do not get harassed to the same degree. Ebony, at times, gets extra attention from teachers in the halls. There are always extra eyes “supervising” the areas that her and her friends hang out at school. She wonders why non-Black students get away with so much more, but she also claims to know exactly why. Non-Black kids are not constantly policed and surveyed; all the extra negative attention “*seems to be just for us.*”

Based on this and other accounts in the study, there seems to be different expectations for Black students in GTA schools. Each of the girls interviewed expressed concern over how they or their peers were treated in comparison to other, non-Black students in school. This continues to be an issue, as students across Toronto district schools speak of “being treated differently than their non-Black peers in the classrooms and hallways of their schools, and shared their wish to be treated like every other student” (James & Turner, 2017, p. 64). Many of the participants’ concerns about inequitable treatment related to how teachers responded to the needs of Black girls under various circumstances. These concerns are not new. James (1995) notes the lack of neutrality in Canadian schooling, especially for students who are classified as minorities. Structural inequities, which promote stratifying students based on race, economics, ethnicity, and other factors, produce different sets of standards for students based on identity. Joseph et al.’s

(2016) study of Black girls in school points to the normalized experiences of racism regularly endured by Black female students in American schools: “An alarming but not surprising finding of this study highlights that most instances of racism discussed by our participants focused on interactions, comments, and attitudes perpetuated by their White teachers” (p. 22). As evidenced by study participants’ narratives, teachers in GTA schools have a reputation for biased, unjustifiable, and unfair treatment of students. When asked, what are some of the differences between the experiences of Black girls and non-Black girls? Deja reported:

I feel like the White girls get some second chances. My assignment is late and the teacher tells us to tell her a week before if we are not going to finish the project. When it comes to the date and your project isn't done, they let White students come back next week and present it to the class. But other students, no. What did I tell you? It has to be done today. It's like, you just gave her. And then they are out for me.

Deja also mentioned the way teachers react if a student calls out these sort of inconsistencies:

I find that with lots of my teachers when this is their situation they always try to come up with an excuse for their lie. So, it's just like, no but she came to me last week. But I just heard you tell her that she didn't have the assignment. So, there is always I feel, a rebuttal for the lie that they are telling me instead of like being truthful. Like, yeah, okay. I just said she can do it next week. You, I want you to do it today, please and thank you. Like, that's it, and there is never a please and thank you. So, it's always like a demand out.

Deja’s example illuminates her direct experience of racial discrimination at the hands of her teacher. What appears to be accepted by some students is unaccepted for others. According to Deja and other girls in this study, the differences between what is and is not acceptable for certain students are, in some cases, clearly marked by a racial hierarchy. This is similar to accounts from participants in Joseph et al.’s 2016 study on Black girls in school. In both studies, all of the girls openly discussed racial discrimination as a regular circumstance they face or witness with their peers.

Ebony provided another example of discrimination in an anecdote about a teacher's unexplained negative attitude:

I had one teacher that I had a problem with. I do not know why, me and her we just did not get along at all. I am okay with all my teachers they all seem to like me. It was just this one teacher and she was like always calling me out, for no reason, just me specifically and like I don't know why she's always calling me out but I honestly think she was racist. Honestly, I think she was.

Due to the frequency of these experiences, Black girls learn to identify differences in the ways they are treated by their teachers. In Ebony's case, she recognized that sometimes students don't get along with teachers, but according to her, there is always an incident, something that explains why a teacher doesn't like you. When there is no incident, Black students are often compelled to speculate that their race is the reason. Racism leads to the stereotypes and the pressures that they regularly experience in school.

Ebony: *It is much easier if you are non-Black person; that is quite fine. I find like teachers see more, I think teachers see them more and it is way easier because there is not much pressure to be a certain way or wear certain things. It's just much easier compared to like someone who has society telling them, "oh you have to like look like this and dress like this."*

Black female students experience stress as they try to etch out their identity against the constant pressure and exposure of Black youth stereotypes. According to Ebony, the pressure to live up to or not fit into some of these negative stereotypes attributed to Black youth comes from both teachers and peers in school. The pressure to be seen and accepted takes a toll on Black girls, in ways that are not as common for non-Black students.

The stereotypes about Black girls not having strong academic ability (Brown, 2009; Morris, 2016) manifest in how certain Black girls are treated in the classroom. However, going beyond basic classroom experiences, a number of the girls in the study also reported deferential

treatment in their teacher's approach to academic streaming. There is a history of streaming practices within Ontario schools (Smaller, 2014). There are various ways the school system engages in streaming students, both formally and informally, based on factors such as interest, ability, language skills, etc. (Smaller, 2014). The academic streaming practice at issue for some of the girls in this study refers to academic placement in either academic, mixed ability, or applied subject streams for course delivery and high school credits. This is a well-established practice within the Ontario high school system (James, 1995; Parekh et al., 2011).

Academic courses are taught at the highest level, and academic-level credits are required for university admission. Mixed ability courses are taught at a lower level than academic courses, and mixed credits can provide entrance to some university and all college-level programs. Applied courses are one of the lowest level streams available, and students who take applied-level courses can only opt for college or vocational placements straight out of high school. Concerns around streaming practices are long-standing, as research shows that “poor, minority, and special education students were among those most likely to be streamed out of academic education and into lower performing, lower paying and precarious jobs” (Parekh et al., 2011, p. 254). Studies on the impact of streaming in Ontario schools (James & Turner, 2017; Smaller, 2014) include accounts by girls on the differential treatment they and their peers experience in relation to academic streaming in school. Black students are disproportionately placed in lower academic streams across the GTA (James & Turner, 2017), which inevitably shapes their academic and career outcomes.

Jada, one of the more soft-spoken girls in the study, talks about Black students not being motivated to achieve more in their classes:

I feel like they know what is expected and because of that they didn't feel like they're being motivated to do anything more for themselves. Then, they just stayed where they are. It's like, if you're in applied, like I'm just going to stay in applied. What's the point of me pushing myself to do more? Like if I'm in academic and like I'm not doing well, I'll just go to applied. It is because no one is trying to tell me like trying to help me do more. But we don't have teachers that were like, they would stay after school or who are like, telling us to come earlier than get help and stuff. Yeah.

In circumstances like the one Jada describes, teachers do not have to force students to move down to a lower stream. If they are not doing well, this happens automatically, and seems to be more encouraged, rather than questioned or challenged, by teachers and administrators. Many Black students are not inspired to strive towards reaching their full academic potential. To the girls, it appears that students are treated differently based on the perceived level of their potential. Black students are not treated as if they have the same level of potential as non-Black students.

In other cases, students are directly advised to go into applied courses. Ebony spoke about her experience and observations based on her school:

Ebony: *At school in many of my classes. We are in university classes now, Grade 11, and there is not a lot of Black people in some of my classes. I find the school's guidance kind of pushes Black students down to college level. I am going to be doing college math and my friends are already in college math pretty much. That's where a lot of the Black boys and girls are. In certain academic classes I have there is just a White majority.*

KM: So, you say, when you are taking the university classes there is not a lot of Black students in those classes?

Ebony: *I mean specifically with math. I went down to guidance one time and they recommended I go to applied. Which is lower than academic and that I do college level and stuff. I was actually considering applied for Grade 9 and 10 but I am going need to stay in academic and push through. I did stay in academic but many of my friends end up in applied because guidance recommends that. I find majority of the time in applied classes many Black kids are in there.*

Streaming is yet another example of how Black students are treated differently than other, non-Black students within the school system, as they are disproportionately placed in lower academic streams (James & Taylor, 2017; Smaller, 2014). As statistics on the achievement levels of Black students continue to point to unfavourable outcomes such as high incarceration rates and a lower number of Black students matriculating into post-secondary programs (Anucha et al., 2018; James & Turner, 2017), school practices, and how they contribute to some of these reported failures, need to be properly examined. As Livingstone and Weinfeld (2017) note, “Studies indicate that Black students in Canadian schools report fewer positive relationships with their teachers than White students, and believe that their group receives unfair disciplinary treatment and tougher penalties for transgressing the school’s behavioral rules” (p. 176).

Concerns surrounding streaming of Black students are documented within education studies. James and Turner’s (2017) report on equity in Toronto district schools outlines the ongoing issue with academic streaming:

Mention was repeatedly made of the ways in which teachers and guidance counsellors contribute to the schooling problems and educational performance of Black students—specifically, that teachers and guidance counsellors tended to discourage Black students from taking Academic courses and from applying to university; in doing so, teachers and counsellors consistently and actively undermined Black students’ academic and career ambitions. (p. 51)

Given these worrying statistics, like the lower number of Black students engaging in post-secondary programs, for example, why haven’t teacher and administrative practices in relation to streaming been explored as one of the reasons for student achievement gaps?

How often do Black students “speak up and speak out” (Henry, 1998) about school practices that are firmly established and systemically racist? When they do, what happens?

When asked about what happens to Black girls when they speak out or express concerns about inequitable treatment or issues they experience with their teachers or in school, Ivy spoke about stereotypes that often further stigmatize Black girls. Her account led to a conversation about academic streaming.

KM: So, is there a stigma for Black girls who speak up?

IVY: *Yes, we are just loud, we are ghetto... Yes, they are loud, they are ghetto, they do not know any better, they are disrespectful, they are rude, they need to be taught a lesson, they need to be disciplined, they are not smart, they should go in to apply for college courses because they cannot achieve academic.*

KM: Does that happen a lot? Do you find that Black students are streamed into lower classes?

IVY: *Yes, again that has never happened to me. The grades I have I would never have someone say, “maybe you should take applied” because I exceed the expectation. So, I cannot be getting a 95 and you tell me that I need to take college because that does not make any sense. Because I exceed the expectation of what they have for Black girls, they cannot tell me anything. But again with my friends... Like my friend would be getting 70s which is the Ontario standard, and they would be telling her that she should drop to applied because these kind of courses seem difficult for her or things like that. Like the recommendation doesn't really make sense or if she wanted to take STEM courses, they would tell her that she should probably stick to English or music or dance or art and things like that, which is a whole other issue like stigmatizing other career options, a whole other problem. But they would just recommend things that are not necessarily considered as difficult just because, yes, just because Black girls are expected to not be smart enough to do it. So I have seen people be streamed into college courses... But likely they will strongly recommend to you that you should not take university classes just because why would you, you are Black and you are getting 70s, why are you in university courses, just take applied, that kind of thing. So I do think they did that a lot and I have heard other experiences where it happens at a lot of other schools.*

Ivy's account supports the claim that regardless of how well Black girls do in school, the stigmas placed on them due to their race, gender, and social class are internalized, causing fear and

anxiety, which limits their ability to advocate or support themselves in school. Black girls experience circumstances differently, and this fear and anxiety did not impact all the participants in the same way. Jada, Deja, and Samara indicated that most of the time, they feel able to speak out if they feel that they are being treated unfairly. Deja, Samara, and Jada are the only three of the 15 participants who expressed confidence in their ability to call out their teachers when needed. When asked whether she feels fear when speaking up, Jada spoke about addressing situations in which she feels that she has been disrespected:

***Jada:** Talking I mean I've spoken to my vice-principal more than once and after a while I just kind of like, even though you're my vice-principal, if I feel disrespected by you, I'm going to talk to you about it. I don't feel like I should have to shy down from you because like you are authority, I get that I should I respect you, but like if you're coming up to me and like mocking me in a way or being rude to me, I'm going to say something. So, after a while I just kind of felt like it is what it is. If I got in trouble for it, then I got in trouble for speaking up for myself instead of just holding it in.*

The other participants said they preferred to remain silent, even when they knew a teacher was wrong in a situation. They felt that the risk of speaking up was too great, and many of them did not like to be placed in an uncomfortable situation that draws attention to them.

Even though the data unequivocally speaks to the issues Black girls face in school, and the troubling reality that most of them do not always feel they have the agency to address their concerns, a number of the participants indicated that Black boys still have more challenges when it comes to inequitable treatment and standards. Their opinions about their Black male counterparts suggest that the concerns for Black boys in education appear to be more dire. This is confirmed by research that indicates that a large portion of the Black youth impacted by

suspensions and expulsions are Black males (James, 2012; McCready et al., 2014). Jada spoke of her experience in her high school:

I don't feel like it's Black girls. I feel like it's more Black guys. Like a lot of my friends, I mean they didn't get themselves in trouble. I don't do stupid things but it's like every time they would be in the hallway or something. Like a teacher or principal will be like, "oh, what are you doing?" Assuming they were doing something bad. Like, I remember one time I was talking to...it was in June before I graduated and I was friends with a lot of the Grade 9s and 10s boys. I was outside talking to a few of them and my vice-principal comes out and starts yelling at them over nothing. And I was kind of like, Oh why are you upset? Like they just did their OSSLT⁶ and they all passed and they're like, they're doing well for themselves. Like, they're not in trouble anymore. And she just completely ignored me and was like, no, you're doing this wrong. You shouldn't be doing this and blah, blah, blah. Like she couldn't even accept the fact they're doing well in school. She had to go straight to the fact that they were like wearing a sweater outside and they should've been in uniform. But I'm trying to like appreciate the fact that they pass something that's really hard to do in Grade 9. It was insulting and she just like completely shut me down. And like for them [Black boys], I feel like they can't really speak up. But for me, because like I was leaving high school, I really don't care anymore. Like I'll say what I have to say.

Jada was not the only participant who raised concerns about how Black boys were treated.

Nicole, based on her experience in her high school, expressed similar sentiments:

I would say from speaking from my point of view it will be a little bit worse for the Black boys just because the way that they are portrayed and like by so many, like even me sometimes I am like guilty of this but like some of the stuff like for example you remember when I say there extra pair of eyes on the Black friend groups, so like if there was a guy friend Black friend group and there was a girl friend Black group I would think that there would be extra, extra eyes on the guy friend group because I think is just that maybe it's just like the male hormones I don't even know but there just more like energy and more negative things I see from that type of group, more fights goes on with that type of group compared to like the Black girl group, which still happens, but like more in the Black guys.

⁶ The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) measures whether students are meeting the minimum standard for literacy across all subjects up to the end of Grade 9. (<http://www.eqao.com/en/assessments/OSSLT>)

Nicole admits to having some stereotypical ideas about Black boys herself, and for this reason, she describes the extra attention that is often placed on the behaviour of Black boys.

In one of the focus groups, a few comments, though not specific to the inequitable treatment of Black boys, were raised about Black boys and their focus in today's society.

Deja: *So, what I feel about boys in this generation now, they're very caught up with keeping up with everybody else. They are not really worried about it, especially the Black ones. I feel they're not worried about school. It's more like where can I get the next Gucci belt? Where can I get red bottoms? Where can I get fast money? Their mentality isn't stuck on school. They are not focusing on school. It's more girls, money, shoes, video games. It's not school. I feel that's where some of the teachers, and some parents messed up in a sense because it's like yes, you're pushing them but once again parents obviously say I can only talk so much. I feel like instead of talking and field teach in a sense or, again speaking from experience with my brother, he's just not there. He just doesn't care. He just wants to play football and as much as he's good in football you have to worry about your academics. If you're not worried about your academic where are you going to go from football? So, it looks like you need a balance and I feel like there's not a balance at this point in time.*

KM: So, do you think that girls understand that more than boys at this point?

Deja: *Most definitely. I feel like girls know, I feel that the majority of us know what we want. We know that we don't want to be struggling. We want to strive. We want to go for the stars and I feel the ones that don't really have that motivation, there are other stuff going on in their life that are more important, I feel.*

Zara: *I think that guys also know what they want too but they're afraid to say it or like how people may react to what they might want to do.*

Interestingly, although all the participants in the focus groups and interviews made note of or agreed on the additional challenges Black boys face, not all of them agreed with the priority and focus that is often placed on Black boys and their issues, while leaving issues of Black girls unaddressed. Samara, 17, saw this attention on Black boys as a form of inequity towards Black girls:

It kind of sucks because when it comes to Black boys and whatever, they are like "oh we need to say it's Black boys and Black men and Black youth," like there is a social worker

and he has done a lot of those workshops as a Black man, talking like mothers of Black boys or whatever. Then you go to school and it is women's empowerment, like feminism that you go into a roomful of White women. Where do you go, you know, you cannot go to the Black boys' conference and you cannot sit with all those White women because neither of them understand? Yeah...

Samara's point highlights how the lack of intersectionality leads to the inequitable treatment of Black girls in school. She continued to make some very specific observations:

It is like it puts you in a really weird spot for extracurricular or even when staff want something. For Black History Month, the Black girls get summoned to do something right and then it's like, why don't you call me for women's history month? Why don't you call me for Halloween? Why did you call me for Christmas? I like regular stuff, you know, I like to party, I like to talk. So you have Nigerian and Somali people all in one school and there is a lot of trauma there. We are all the first-generation kids and then they want you to put your trauma on display for one month of February, and then you have to go back and you are not allowed. You are not invited to any of the parties or for Halloween or school spirit week, nobody asks the Black kids if they want to do school spirit. But you are going to do Black History Month because we need to learn something from you and Dr. King and whatever they want to do for that one month, and then it is over. That kind of sucks because it kind of says that you were only welcome when it's about pain.

Samara infers the importance of intersectionality in ways that teachers and administrators neglect to recognize. The perfunctory and often benevolent efforts to isolate Black History Month, for example, as the month for Black students inadvertently leaves them out of general school events, and sustains and heightens the levels of exclusion Black girls feel within school environments.

There is deferential treatment experienced in the classroom when teachers create different standards for what is acceptable from certain students, and not acceptable from others. What is clear from these narratives is that this deferential treatment has a number of contributing factors, most directly related to identity. All the girls indicated experiencing or witnessing discrimination based on race. Class discrimination appeared to be more subtle; however, some of the negative experiences the Black students had were the result of teachers linking race with poverty. James & Turner (2017) outline teachers' opinions on what they often perceive as a lack of engagement

among parents who do not come to parent–teacher meetings or school events. These opinions often fail to take into consideration various challenges such as shift work, multiple employment demands, or English-language ability, all of which can be directly related to working-class and immigrant families. Black families in Canada have long-standing associations with poverty (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2015), and some of the attitudes of teachers regarding class status and ability manifest in their treatment of Black students.

The participants’ accounts speak, to some degree, to the lack of motivation and support provided to Black students in school, which contribute to Black students being given lower academic standards and placed in lower academic streams. The issues the participants identified, and the interactions they described as occurring with teachers and administrators, confirm data reported in a larger study on the Black student experiences in the GTA (James & Turner, 2017). The list of school-related offences (i.e., Black students are aggressive) that teachers and school administrators place at the feet of Black girls is impacting their academic success and well-being, and continues to be a concern in Ontario schools. In the next theme, outlining ineffective teaching, participants provide accounts of teachers’ failure to support Black girls in school.

Ineffective Teaching Practices

Jada, 18, is confident and outspoken. She likes school and is well-adjusted in the school environment. Jada speaks of an experience that took place in her Grade 10 drama class. She has a vivid memory of the incident because it was the first time a fellow student called her “nigger” to her face. Describing her emotional turmoil, Jada recalls how her shock turned into embarrassment, and then her embarrassment turned into straight fury. “The teacher said nothing,” she explains. It was in the middle of class, and this student walks up to where she is

sitting and casually blurts out the “N word” as if it were her first name. Jada is surprised because this has never happened to her before, and the teacher’s lack of response makes the situation even more confusing. She asks if Jada is okay and tells the offending student to take a seat. That’s it? Take a seat. Puzzled, wondering if her teacher actually heard what the student called her, Jada decides that it is probably best to take a walk.

Jada’s story reflects a common theme in the narratives of the study participants. Most of the girls doubted that their teachers actually cared about them, or their education. As tensions related to sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination surfaced in their accounts, so did concerns about the level of support and effective pedagogy they received. Not surprisingly, “teacher effectiveness is a strong predictor of student achievement” (Munzo et al., 2013). Educating Black girls requires more than just ensuring they meet curriculum standards; it involves teaching them how to deal with the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that they are likely to experience throughout their lives, a difficult but essential task. It requires “encouraging girls to move through life with a clear and concise understanding of who they are” (Nyachae, 2016). The intersectionality of identity and the ways identities impact the experiences of Black girls necessitates a form of education that prepares them to deal with, as well as resist, oppression that is often systematically embedded in education and general pedagogical practices.

In analyzing the interviews and focus groups, I found a number of instances where the girls shared experiences about teachers who, in their estimation, were ineffective at motivating, supporting, and providing a safer environment to cultivate their learning. When asked about specific experiences with teachers who contribute positively to their sense of belonging in school, Deja pointed out:

I feel like the majority of the teachers don't care. They already have an assumption of what they think you're doing already. They don't care if you come from a good home. They already see your skin is Black. You dressed a certain way. There is also too the way you carry yourself, and instead of them taking the time to look into you and listen to you, they just look at the outside and say "okay that's your stereotype," done. That you're a drug dealer. You hang out with these people so okay you are that type of person instead of being like yes, I hang out with this group but I'm my own person. Yes, I dress this way but that's because my freedom of expression I want to dress this way. Not thinking there's more behind the story, you know what I mean? So, I feel like there's lots of that with the teachers. So, to me it depends on the teacher.

What DeJa outlines here falls under the theme of ineffective teaching because the teachers are not connecting with students on a personal level. When students are not recognized as individuals, teachers fail to provide support that is conducive to their unique needs: "Knowing as much as possible about a student's needs, pre-existing knowledge, and interests is just as important as knowing the curriculum content" (Segedin et al., 2018). Concepts of teaching that emphasize more holistic approaches to viewing and engaging with students should be prescribed at the school administration level. School boards must face the harsh reality that teachers who are unable to put aside their inherited biases and racist perceptions of students have no place within a system that aims to address inequities in education for all students.

Black students have a history of being negatively stereotyped in Toronto area schools (Soloman, 1992). Teachers (usually White) often assume the worst of Black students due to their internalized negative pathologies that associate Black students with crime and violence (Dei et al., 1997; James, 2012, Soloman, 1992). While talking about Black student stereotyping in one of the focus groups, two of the girls, Sienna and Zara, shared their opinion on the matter:

Sienna: *Yeah. I think that some people in my class aren't as most of the Black Grade 9s in our class are, like I'd say, rowdy as you'd expect. Anyway, so when the teachers kind of look at it and they are, they are not thinking that, they expected that they're going to be rowdy. They're waiting for them to act that way and act out so they're just sitting back and like, oh yeah I knew you were going to do.*

Zara: *Sometimes they'll do things to trigger that. They'll do things to kind of like push you and push you to that point and sometimes even when you try and walk away from they'll follow you and try to get that out of you. It's sad because the teachers that you would expect to have your back are the ones that are doing it to you. So, it's just like, how am I supposed to look up to you or look at you as an authoritative figure and you're doing stuff to make me come out of myself and you know that's not who I am as normal.*

One question that arises from these accounts is, how are Black girls supposed to develop positive relationships with their teachers if they do not believe that they personally matter in their classrooms? Trusting relationships, especially with students who have been consistently marginalized in the process of education, are required to produce positive educational outcomes (Henry, 1998; Nyachae, 2016). Participants spoke about not being able to develop trusting relationships with certain teachers due to their continuous targeting of Black girls in their schools. Nicole described an incident she witnessed happen to one of her peers in class:

And yesterday this Black girl that I know her from elementary school, she actually had an incident with the teacher where the teacher was just being rude to her and the teacher wouldn't acknowledge it. The girl was just like you don't understand that what you were saying was hurting me and you embarrassed me in front of the whole class without even acknowledging it, now, you are just threatening to call my mom and tell her that I am being bad, call the principal and have a meeting when you are not even acknowledging and understanding the impact that you had on me in front of all my other classmates... And so I just think there is a lack of understanding between students and teachers, specifically Black students and teachers.

This anecdote outlines a student's explicit attempt to be heard and validated. The Black girl in Nicole's story asks the teacher to reflect on the situation and how her ineffective approach, as the teacher of the class, has impacted her as the student. However, it appears that the teacher was unwilling to resolve the issue in a way that supported the student's assertion and claim. Here, an opportunity to build trust not only with the student who had the issue, but also with the other students observing the confrontation was unmistakably missed.

As in Nicole's account, Zara's lack of trust comes from what she interprets as consistent teacher apathy that regularly affects Black students in the classroom. Zara said, "*Their favourite line to say is whether you do the work or not I get paid anyway. They don't care. They're just there for the money. They don't care about helping you. As long as they write the lesson on the board and you copy it, or not, they are done.*" I would argue that teacher apathy and/or ineffective approaches impact quality education for all students; however, not all students consistently show up in statistics that point to this failure. The data and literature on educational outcomes suggest urgency is needed in addressing teaching practices and their significant effect on Black girls and other Black students.

Some of the participants' accounts that fall under the theme of ineffective teaching have little to do with actual teaching or curriculum. As the role of teachers in the classroom is authoritarian, they also hold power and influence. Within school spaces, relationships between teachers and students have a significant impact on students' experience in the classroom (Morganett, 1991; Nesteruk, 2018; Russell et al., 2016). As outlined throughout this chapter, the intersectionality of the marginal identities of Black girls often results in complicated experiences for them in school. Black girls, therefore, must work harder to succeed, pushing against the norms of a Eurocentric, White educational system that does not accommodate for their cultural and ancestral needs (Henry, 1998; James, 1995; Soloman, 1992).

Half of the girls in the study seemed to demonstrate distrust for White teachers in their narratives. As many teachers in GTA schools are White, this impacts their school experience in general. In one of the focus groups, this was highlighted. I asked, "Are these White teachers, how many of your teachers are White?" Deja responded, "Yes! About 90% White." All the other

girls interviewed in this study also confirmed the lack of diversity in the teaching staff in their respective schools. Imani, who attends a high school in the GTA, reported having a Black vice-principal but no Black teachers. When asked about the difference in her relationships with Black and White teachers, Ebony said, “*There’s a lot of Black students at my school, but not enough Black teachers.*” There are a limited number of Black teachers in Ontario schools (James & Turner, 2017). Three of the girls interviewed reported having more positive, supportive relationships with at least one of the few Blacks teachers in their school. The claim here is not that all White teachers are ineffective at teaching Black students. That would be a grossly exaggerated and false assertion. However, in order to be effective in providing a positive and healthy learning environment for Black girls, White teachers have to work harder at cultivating trusting relationships with Black female students due to their overwhelming presence and position of authority in Ontario schools.

Twenty-five years ago, Carl James’ study on multiculturalism and anti-racist education in Canada transparently established the issues faced by minority students in Canadian schools.

About racism, he made the claim:

The problem is not race but racism compounded by what Donna Langston (1992) referred to as “simultaneous oppression” due to, for example, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. Hence, insofar as the State sanctioned approach to education does not interrogate or challenge these inherent structural factors, then it is limited in the extent to which it will be able to meet the needs of students in general, minority students in particular. (James, 1994, p. 33)

In the context of this study, the “inherent structural factors” of racism, sexism, and general bias prevent teachers from developing positive relationships with Black students. The narratives of the participants highlight that ineffective teaching and racial microaggressions, coupled with a lack of culturally relevant curriculum, leads to a general lack of trust in the system and in the teachers. All three of these factors directly and specifically connect to racism; however, for these Black girls, intersectionality tends to compound the ways these issues manifest in their daily lives. Therefore, racism is not the only barrier related to their identity that needs to be factored into understanding their experiences.

Summary of Findings

The data collected in this study reflect some troubling realities for Black girls in GTA schools. Many of the narratives of the participants about their school experiences reflect similar concerns and outcomes. Four main summary points have been devised based on participant responses related to: education, intersectionality, and identity. These points represent common thoughts and ideas shared by the participants:

1. **Evidence of teacher microaggressions, deferential treatment, academic streaming practices, and ineffective teaching are undeniable.** According to the participants, these factors result in negative perceptions of the school system and those hired to work within it. There was a general consensus that teachers have little interest in the positive development and well-being of Black girls. This is not true for all teachers. Some girls mentioned teachers within the system with whom they have had positive experiences; however, these teachers seem to be few and

far between. The lack of positive and consistent involvement of teachers results in student disengagement from school.

2. **Intersectionality is a consistent factor in how Black girls are treated in school.** The girls who reported living in a middle-class, economically stable environment seemed to witness the issues and concerns of Black girls rather than directly experience the microaggressions and ineffective teaching practices themselves. In some cases, gender discrimination was reflected in teacher responses to the girls. However, participant accounts attest to the fact that, regardless of class or family status, racism is the most consistent form of discrimination all the girls were consistently exposed to and experienced in school. As noted in Henry's (1998) study documenting the experiences of Black teachers in the classroom, "the experience of racial oppression knows no class boundaries" (p. 31). Classism represents one of the many ways intersectionality further complicates identity.
3. **Most participants in this study do not feel safe or supported within their various school environments.** Each discussion reflected a general lack of trust in the educational system. The girls who spoke about specific details of their school lives felt unsafe, and their mistrust manifested through their silences. Many of the girls indicated being a victim of discrimination or witnessing inequities of their peers. Not trusting the system and its representatives caused many of them to remain silent on issues due to the fear of being labelled or having to deal with

harsh consequences. As a result, many of the concerns they faced have been normalized.

4. **Black girls continue to be impacted by stereotypes that circulate in the media and public domain.** Each of the participants pointed to media as a significant influence on how they were viewed and treated by both peers and teachers in school. The girls in the study report discrimination and unjustifiable treatment that, based on their understanding, is largely influenced by common media depictions of Black girls and women that suggest that they are “less than” other people. Teachers expect Black girls to have an attitude, and to demonstrate anger and aggressive behaviour, and as result, often punish them even when these behaviours are not present. Black girls are at times stigmatized as having a lack of interest in school, resulting in what feels to them like lack of concern or attention from teachers.

The final summary point, relating to the impact of media and representation, is thoroughly explored in the next data chapter, which focuses on traditional and contemporary media forms and depictions and their impact on the lives of the participants.

Chapter Six: Black Girls, Black Girlhood, and Media Representation

I guess like me as a young person I am kind of lucky in the sense that social media has kind of allowed me to carve my own safe space. I know that if I roll my eyes at something that there are 15 other Black girls on Twitter who are also rolling their eyes. So, I am not crazy for being pissed off at what I am pissed off at.

—Samara

Imani, 17, rocks her hair in long braids with her edges neatly laid. Along with her bright and infectious smile, she likes wearing gold hoop earrings, comfortable tracksuits, and sneakers. Due to some difficult family situations, she decides to move in with her grandmother and transfer to another area high school. This is a difficult transition. She already feels like a “loner” who does not have many friends, and she does not know any of the students at this new school. Being a Black girl in a school with very few Black students seems to make Imani a target. Less than a month after transferring, she is the subject of a string of rumours and gossip that eventually lead to a confrontation with a White female student. Imani and Black girls like her are commonly stereotyped by media depictions as angry, aggressive, and confrontational Black girls, which, in Imani’s opinion, results in her teachers and administrators presuming her guilty of instigating the conflict. They casually accept the accounts of the White student without question. As the administrator prepares disciplinary action, Imani, outraged by the unfair and unjustifiable decision, encourages the school administration to review the tape of the incident, which was captured by school cameras. Upon review, the teachers and administrators are forced to apologize to Imani, as the video reveals the other student instigated the altercation.

Media is an effective tool for creating and maintaining common tropes about Black girls and women that stereotype and objectify them. From film, to television, to images in magazines, Black girls and women are commonly depicted as loud, aggressive, uneducated, drug addicted,

overly confrontational, and sexualized (French, 2013; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). These representations are all too recognizable, and they have real-world consequences. Under the guise of entertainment, they also create normalized notions of Black girls and their identities that, in turn, impact how people perceive and treat them within society (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). For decades, scholars have been theorizing and developing discourses on the power of media within the broader society (Hall, 1990; hooks, 1992; Nakamura, 2008). There is a need for more research that directly examines connections between media representations, stereotypes, and the real-life experiences that Black girls have in school and in their communities.

Prior to the proliferation of the Internet, concerns about the influence of media representations were isolated to film, television, and advertising texts (Hall, 2006; hooks, 1992; Livingstone, 2007; Pipher, 1994). In the absence of social media platforms, there were not many opportunities for the average person to engage with media, publish content, or resist normalized representations through making media themselves. Those with the power and privilege to own and control mass media outlets and networks also had the power to choose how people and groups were represented on their platforms. The Internet and social media have created an alternate social reality, allowing people to create their own messages and share ideas, perceptions, and representations of identities (boyd, 2014; Noble & Tynes, 2016). Now anyone with an Internet connection and a device can create their own representations and tailor their messages to either maintain or challenge normalized media representations (boyd, 2014; Tynes, Schuschke, & Noble, 2016). This would appear to have revolutionary potential, but the reality is more complicated: as Kang (2000) notes, the Internet holds within it both “redemptive and repressive potential” (as cited in Tynes, Schuschke, & Noble, 2016, p. 36).

On one hand, social media offers an opportunity to circulate a broader and more diverse range of images and messages to challenge traditional tropes characterizing Black girls and women. In some cases, Black women resist representations by creating counter-narratives such as #Blackgirlmagic (Anyangwe, 2018; Grace, 2017), to empower and promote resilience in Black women and girls. Although it can be difficult to break through and reach a large audience on social media, it is now, at the very least, possible—and in our global world, these messages can travel farther than ever, potentially increasing their impact. On the other hand, ideologies that support the racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that are experienced in society are so deeply entrenched and internalized that those forms of representation are easily and commonly replicated online. Sexist and racist media representations that dominated the pre-digital environment are now embraced in modern digital media forms, and racist, sexist, and discriminatory representations continue to reinforce the status quo. Maintenance of the status quo means that the powerful and destructive characterizations that have historically afflicted Black girls remain pervasive in media texts,⁷ therefore impacting their daily experiences.

Today, we are dealing with many more sites for representations that normalize constructions of power that affect Black girls in all stages of life. Platforms for social media and Internet sites provide unrestricted access to depictions of Black identity, which influence thoughts, ideas, and opinions of the public. With the rise of social media and other Internet platforms, more research is needed to expand discourses focused on how these representations

⁷ Media text refers to any media product—using images, words, sound, and graphics in print or electronic form for the general purpose of communicating a message to an audience. Examples of media text commonly referred to in this study are television programs such as *Love & Hip Hop*; books and films such as *The Hate You Give* (2017); as well as photographed images and short video clips circulated on Instagram.

are affecting the identity and social development of Black girls. Of particular interest in this study is the way Black girls interpret their experiences as being shaped by media-driven stereotypes. In keeping with the theme of Black girls and education, narratives of the participants reflect not only their own personal association with, and resistance to, media representations, but also outline how representations contribute to their experiences in school and other community spaces.

This chapter will summarize data from discussions on media and representations in the focus groups and one-on-one interviews with study participants. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of hooks (1992), Hall (1989;1990), and Nakamura (2008), and the Black feminist theory of Collins (2000), the goal is to analyze and situate Black representation, feminist practices, and girls' studies in relation to traditional and new media. Focusing on the topic of Black girls and media, I categorize data from the participants into two sections. The first section of this chapter, "Race, Gender, and the Power of Representations," summarizes themes captured in the data that describe how the participants view their experiences in school in relation to media representations and perceptions of power, race, and gender. The second section, "Resistance and Media Making," summarizes their agency and ability to resist the circumstances outlined in section one by contributing to and creating social media content and spaces for Black girls to critically engage with and negotiate their Black identity.

Media texts originating from the United States do not always reflect Black experience in Canada. As the participants noted in the beginning of the sessions, Black people in Canada mainly include people of African and Caribbean descent, while the media they accessed were mainly sources from the United States, which depicted African American culture. Still, there was

a general understanding that Blackness, and people's perception of it, encompasses a variety of interpretations, and a disproportionate number of stereotypes about Black people, regardless of background, are negative and demeaning. Many of the participants also made note that negative perceptions of Blackness were held by both Black and non-Black people.

In terms of gender, the discussions with the participants focused on hegemonic representations of women and girls of all ages, as commonly depicted in media. Many of the associations they related to Black women were seen to also relate to Black girls. References to girls in the data generally indicates females up to approximately 19 years old.

The girls noted most of the media texts they engaged with came primarily from American sources. Conversations about media representations touched on popular forms of media texts such as television shows like the reality program, *Love & Hip Hop*, or films such as *The Hate You Give* (2018). The girls discussed Internet sites like BuzzFeed and social media platforms like Instagram. Prior to the Internet, Black girls had very limited opportunities to create or circulate representations that reflected their diversity and nuanced experiences. Still, even though technological advancements are facilitating a shift in mass media that is allowing for more varied representations of Black girls, participant accounts reflect the many ways in which they feel trapped in the same consistent, dominant, and limited representations of Blackness.

The intersection of race, gender, and social class that are often implied in normalized constructions of Black women appears to be the most obvious concern of the girls. The power to create and circulate representations translates into the power to construct meaning in society that produces the circumstances in the lives of Black girls. The theme in the first section of this chapter outlines how the girls interpret representations of Black women and girls in the media

and the various ways in which stigmas surrounding race, age, and gender in the media impact their day-to-day experiences.

Race, Gender, and the Power of Representations

Sienna, 14, has a cool dark brown complexion. She wears her hair in natural curls that sit in a big thick afro puff on the top of her head. Sienna loves to read. She often revels in sci-fi and young adult fiction novels; however, she is often discouraged when book after book includes few characters whose descriptions reflect what she sees when she looks in the mirror. Then, *The Hate U Give* (2017) was released, a young adult novel that tells the story of a 16-year-old Black girl who witnesses the shooting death of her friend. Receiving critical acclaim, *The Hate U Give* quickly became a New York Times bestseller. Sienna loves it! Star, the book's main character, is clearly described in the pages as a Black girl, and she is illustrated with dark brown skin on the cover of the first edition. Star is exactly the type of character Sienna is so eager to read about. With the success of the book and announcement of the film, Sienna is excited to see the movie adaptation of the book, in which she imagines the main character will look like her. Upon the release of the film, Sienna and her friends are surprised to learn that a lighter-skinned, biracial actress has been cast as Star, who, by all accounts, is written as a dark-skinned Black girl in the book. Sienna wonders why television and films always seem to miss opportunities to cast and represent dark-skinned Black girls in lead roles. In this case, it was clear that Star is dark-skinned. Are we not even good enough to play roles that were written for us, Sienna wonders. After the release of the film, the cover of the book is changed to reflect Star as the biracial actress who plays her character in the popular film. The way Sienna imagined Star, her family, and her friends while reading the book is now distorted.

Sienna's story emphasizes the power of representations. As she points out, while reading the book, she was able to construct the main character in her own image, as a dark-skinned Black girl, similar to how the character is described in the book. This is an image that Black girls see very little of on media platforms. Once larger and more powerful media companies assume rights to reproduce the story for film, they have full control of how the characters are depicted. A number of Black girls may not have read the book. Perhaps the film is the first portrayal of the story that they experience. When this happens, the opportunity to advance meaningful representations of marginalized Black girls, to counter the norm, is lost. This is a long-standing issue with media representations (Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018; Harris, 2015).

Due to their varied media use and engagement, participants reported developing an increased understanding that different media products—including images, advertisements, television shows, and movies—contain messages about race and gender that are pervasive and important to recognize. Ivy clarified: *“Everything that’s published out into media or out to us has some sort of idea to it and it may not always be the best idea and I feel like it always relates to race or gender and it’s good to notice it.”* Among participants, there was a general understanding that while social media seems to be different and more contemporary than traditional mediums such as film and television, which they accessed less, many of the images portraying Black women and girls are consistent across mediums. Ivy continued making her point about what she notices in the media as it relates to race and beauty standards, *“The millions of White women that we see on television that aren’t super curvy or aren’t super skinny and they’re still seen as beautiful. But if it is a plain Black girl, like one of us, there is no reference to beauty.”* Although Ivy engages with social media more often, she sees beauty associated with Whiteness across all

media platforms. Based on common media associations, beauty, for many of the participants, is connected to a person's approximation to Whiteness.

In the focus groups, there were discussions about how the participants interpret some of the images and media texts that they access. Participants reported having greater awareness of how Black women are characterized in media and the many ways Black women are depicted as "less than" or inferior to all other races. Black women are also frequently positioned as less than men. Samara expressed her feelings on the issue:

Then there are movies where [Black women] are either prostitutes or side chicks or the mother of the children. There is no nuclear family with a regular just mom, who has a regular day job and comes home to her regular kids. There has to be, I feel like for Black girls there is either this big traumatic thing that has happened to them, like Lupita Nyong'o's character in 12 Years a Slave, or other characters in other shows. There has to be something like tragic or someone has to be killed by the police or something. They never lead normal lives. The flip side of that is that [the Black girl] is super slow, or she's not very smart, or she's just there for comedic effect.

All participants clearly identified issues with media portrayals of Black women and girls. None of the girls in the study expressed or alluded to being slightly satisfied or even neutral about contemporary representations of Black women and girls in the contemporary media. Media representations of Black women and girls are evidently disturbing for all participants in one way or another. In the focus group, when asked about Black girls and media, Deja and Zara expanded on the familiar tropes:

KM: What are some of the characters that we see Black girls play?

Deja: *They are always the distraught, wretched, low self-esteem, abused.*

Zara: *Fighting, strippers, naked or they grew up in the projects poor.*

Deja: *And it's very rare that you watch a movie and you see a dark-skinned person or Black in general that's like higher up unless it's a male. I find lots of males, they have that role where they are superior, and the girls are either like less than or they are trying*

to get to that point but they have to go through so much stuff before they can get to that point in their life like it's harder for them, for sure.

hooks (1992) reminds us that “to stare at the television or mainstream movies, to engage in its images, was to engage in negation of Black representation” (p. 118), and this continues to be the reality, especially in traditional media’s depiction of the Black experience. Today, we are seeing an increase of diverse characters that are written for Black actors and actresses. There is evidence that more people of colour are being cast in commercials, and there are active conversations within the popular domain about diversity and media (Zayani, 2011; Georgiou, 2010). Although most of the girls seemed unconvinced of this progress, Raven made note that media representation of Black women “*seems like it is getting better,*” suggesting that audiences can find a small number of media texts with less Black people playing stereotypical roles. However, the dominant readings of Black people remain universal, making the list of common stereotypes all too familiar for each of the participants.

In each interview, participants specified their perceptions about how Black women are seen on television, in films, and on the Internet. Social media appear to circulate more sexually suggestive images of Black girls, while television maintains the “*baddy*”⁸ Black girl image. In the interview with Jada, she discusses the normalized angry Black woman trope that is typical in television programming:

KM: I wanted to ask about common media representations of Black girls. What are some of the common ways that you see Black women and Black girls portrayed?

Jada: *It's either they're very loud or they're very like stubborn and saying things like 'no, this is what I'm going to do. Don't bother me about it again.' But whenever you see a White girl in the same show, and she's very like girly, like 'oh, it's okay I'll get over it.'*

⁸ Baddy—common urban slang used to describe a tough, aggressive female.

The angry one and the nice one. So I feel like they try to portray Black women as more angry and aggressive than everyone else that you would see on the show.

KM: Yeah. Is this common?

Jada: *Even in like Tyler Perry⁹ shows I've noticed more recently, like yeah, that's how he portrays Black women, which makes no sense to me. I sit there and watch them all at night and I'm doing my work. I'll sit there and watch House of Payne¹⁰ and more recently I'm seeing the stereotypical ways that you've used women and how he (Tyler Perry) makes the Black females act in the show. And I'm like, okay, like you can't do that.*

There appears to be less effort to move beyond the angry, loud Black woman depiction that is produced for television and films. Many reality television programs such as *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Love & Hip Hop* rely heavily on these narratives of Black women for higher ratings and popularity (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016; Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2018).

Even though they often find it painful to witness, Black women and girls do not always passively accept or regress when faced with troubling media depictions. In *Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* (1992), hooks suggests, “Most of the women I talked with felt that they consciously resisted identification with films” (p. 121). Jada seemed to resist specific representations by questioning the portrayal, separating herself from problematic characters, naming the specific shows, and clearly indicting the show’s creator for undermining and demeaning Black women in film and television. Not surprisingly, most of the girls engaged in similar forms of resistance to media portrayals on a regular basis. Samara and Deja, for example,

⁹ Tyler Perry is a popular film and television writer, director, and producer. His work is prominent in the Black community, and though he is very successful in the film and television industry, he is heavily criticized for his portrayal of Black characters (Patterson, 2011).

¹⁰ *House of Payne* (2006–) is a situation comedy about a Black family. The show airs on Black Entertainment Television (BET) Network and is part of the network’s regular programming.

consistently questioned what they saw and remained deeply critical of the many ways that negative representations of Black identity in media continue to fail the Black community.

Other participants, however, were slightly less critical about media representations and Black identity. Just before implying that media representations of Blackness are shifting, Raven talked about how the lack of positive representations of Black girls impacted her self-development:

Raven: *Okay in films typically I have notice for just Black people in general, I have notice in some of the horror movies you can see that they are the ones that gets killed first. They would be the one to make the dumb decisions to die off first like typically the ones to die first. Also like regarding Black females, they play the weaker roles sometimes in the background. I remember when I was growing up princesses were like my everything and before Tiana came out from The Princess and the Frog there was nothing. Black girls were not princesses. I was always thinking like that's what I have to be like a White girl and blonde hair to be a princess.*

KM: Princesses don't look like me.

Raven: *Exactly, and like now of course we getting better with different culture representations but before there was nothing really like that so I think they're starting to get better but typically that's what I would notice in the media. Also with the Disney thing is like it's values hitting me at a young age so I was growing up with that thought of I am not White but now I am at an age where I am starting to realize that I start to embrace myself. Being Black is okay, but growing up like I couldn't say the same thing I never felt like that.*

Raven believes there is a problem, but she has only recently been able to identify the sources of her discomfort with being Black while growing up. She demonstrates more pride in her identity, but “*that has taken some time,*” she notes, but she also believes media is doing a better job of diversifying representation. The limited representations that she grew up with seem to be expanding, offering more variety of representations today. Sasha, 18, and Vanessa, 19, interpreted contemporary media as more of a space for possibilities. Vanessa talked about how she uses newer images seen today to reinforce her own beauty: “*If I can look at this dark-skinned*

girl we see now and be like, oh she's beautiful, and even more so, why can't I tell myself I'm beautiful?" Vanessa went on to suggest, *"People are able to carry what they desire to see,"* alluding to the ownership that Black girls can take over newer forms of representation.

Creating bubbles or seeing positives in media representation does not seem to be easy for everyone. According to other participants, the negative and limited portrayals influence people's perception of them and other racialized youth. These repeated images have a subconscious effect that is often internalized, impacting the way people think and behave. Internalizing the subjugated positioning of Black girls in media texts can have an impact on how Black girls feel about themselves as well. Rochelle, 19, referred to representations that subconsciously become tools used in media messages: *"It's subliminal, they only show you certain kinds of people. So they're inadvertently telling you that, if you don't fit into this framework here, you're less than."* Feeling "less than" based on media constructions also shapes Black girls' understanding of themselves, causing incessant comparisons between themselves and identities and standards that they, in most cases, can never achieve.

Hall (1990) suggests that images and messages are used within our society for people to "make sense of things." As meanings for particular people and things are produced, circulated, and exchanged, it enables a "culture of shared understanding," and those represented in media texts likely use them to understand (or make sense of) the world and themselves. If, through the media, Black girls are constantly positioned as only one, often-negative thing, this easily becomes a dominant reading of Black girls' lives and experiences. In Raven's case, the lack of Black princesses in the media meant that Black girls are not princesses in the real world, and she must be someone else in order to realize her dreams.

The girls discussed how the media's representation of Black people gives others in society "false expectations" about who Black people are and how they will act. While describing an incident in which she was at risk of facing suspension, Imani expanded on how teachers and administrators made her feel by not giving her a chance to explain her side of the situation:

The thing that hurt me the most was that my principal herself who is also a Black individual looked at me as if I was the enemy, so I kind of felt hurt knowing that she was believing all those things that those people are saying based on the way I was dressing or just the way that I look and then when she realized that it wasn't who I was and that's when the steps were taken. So, like in that moment, I was like the enemy, So I think that today, like a lot of people believe what other people say about Black girls, based off stereotypes because they don't think, and that's all they know. So, like that's what kind of hurt me in that situation.

Black girls are regularly stereotyped by teachers, administrators, and peers at school (Jacobs, 2016). Although there is no concrete data to support the claim that teachers and peers responded to the participants based on media representations, all the girls shared similar observations about how they are often misrepresented and stigmatized at school. When asked if media representations factor into how Black girls are treated in school, Deja responded, "*One hundred percent! People are on media every single day. It's like a job. You sit there, and you scroll through your Instagram and say, "Okay, that person is doing that. Oh then they must be like that."*" All the girls appeared to believe that their teachers and school administrators characterized them largely based on many of the dominant, negative images and narratives that surround Black girls in the media.

Ebony associated an encounter with her vice-principal with media stereotypes:

One time, I had to go down to the office and I went to the washroom first, and this one secretary is just like, "oh, I didn't think you'd come." The VP was kind of rude and ready to attack because I think they assume Black girls coming down to the office with attitude I guess. I think it affects Black girls in the school, like media impacts them because how

they carry themselves and probably with how they look, They wear fake eyelashes and like long weaves just like how the people on Love & Hip Hop.

This points to some ways contemporary media, and common media representations of Black girls as loud, aggressive troublemakers, continue to impact the real, everyday lives of Black girls. The participants easily made connections between media representation and their experiences with teachers, school administrators, and peers. Nicole noted:

I think that what teachers see on social media is like those stereotypes and maybe the idea that Black girls don't really care about like school and whatnot. Black girls just want to focus on like boys and looking good, make sure their hair looks good, make sure they dress good. It's like the idea that they don't really care so why are we investing in them, kind of mindset. I also think that it plays into Black males and how they are disrespectful or like rowdy and stuff. I think they have that idea of women as well you know how it's like angry Black woman that kind of stereotype. Where they just don't think that we have like proper composure, if that's the right word, or proper behaviour.

In the interview with Imani, she came to a similar conclusion, stating:

I think the things that are in the media for young Black girls, I feel that they're mostly seen as people that are lazy, the kind who just go outside, hang out with their friends, smoke, don't really care about school, they skip a lot. I know like even in the TV shows I watched recently, most of them end up getting pregnant or going with some guy. So I feel like with the media now, the teachers and people watching it, they're going to see you a certain way because of what they see all the time. So they see if I dressed a certain way they're going to be like, she doesn't really care about school but she cares about her clothes because on media, that's the kind of things Black girls care about, they only care about the way they look, not really about education or anything like that.

The opinions of the girls demonstrate how they perceive themselves and aspects of their identity, and how they believe they are perceived in the eyes of their teachers. Black girls experience and witness discrimination. They often hear teachers and administrators characterize Black students without any justification. Differential standards for students are evident in school practices. For them, the reason for all this is obvious: media cultivates and maintains a dominant, normalized image of Black girls that is unfavourable. This results in negative correlations being drawn and

ultimately placed on them. Hall's (1990) interpretation of cultural identity and the concept of 'one true self' sheds some light on this, explaining how representations impact the collective understanding of all those belonging to the constructed category—in this case, Black. The dominant reading of Black girls (non-plural because Blackness most often represents one thing) that in large part circulates through narrow representations, causes teachers and administrators to see Black girls based a constricted set of constructed norms that do not serve their interests.

Going beyond the classroom, the participants recognized that there are larger implications for some of the ways the representations of Blackness shape experiences for Black people within society. Even though Black people often face discrimination due to representations as ghetto, aggressive, sexually promiscuous, etc., there are also some popular associations with Black identity that are, on the other hand, regularly coveted and emulated by non-Black people. As indicated from a dialogue in the focus group, Black girls find this positive association and appropriation both confusing and frustrating:

Deja: *I feel like now because society in a sense has made it okay for White people to, I guess, engulf our culture they think that they're African Americans. They try and move like they're African Americans.*

KM: How does that make you feel?

Deja: *It's irritating.*

Zara: *Yeah because if I'm driving on the road and I'm driving 120 and you're driving 140, I'm getting stopped and not you.*

Deja: *So, it's kind of irritating it's just like and it's so funny because those are the same things that you guys use to mock us about. So, why are you now trying to engulf my culture that is ugly or tell me my butt's too big.*

Zara: *And you are trying to get big lips.*

Deja: *Why are you trying to get lip implants or butt implants and breast implants? Why are you wearing weave and braids? I don't get it.*

Participants in both the focus groups and interviews discussed how the media responds to, and perpetuates, cultural appropriation—the adoption of an element of one culture by someone from another culture—pointing to the power that is inherent in identity. The girls understood the power of expression, but a few of them also referenced the power that certain groups have to claim and identify with particular representations when other groups are negatively perceived when expressing themselves in the same way.

Jada spoke about a form of stealing Black culture that is not really stealing, but still troubles her in a certain way. As the “coolness” of Black culture is often translated as urban culture, it seems to be openly accessible and available for public consumption.

Jada: *It's not like stealing like the culture, but it is kinda like stealing like. For example, you know that I find a lot of people have their hair braided in like box braids, cornrows or like the “boxer braids” as they call them. I had a Filipino friend and she would always like to braid hair, like she would braid everyone's hair. Like she knew how to braid. She braided this one guy, he's Indian I think. And the next day he came to school in a du-rag.¹¹ So all the Black kids are like “what are you wearing?” He's like, “I didn't want my braids to get messy.” And we're all just like kind of confused, like you know what a do-rag is? Like, that's not what it's meant for. But I mean it was whatever we all made fun of him.*

KM: I know guys wear do-rags to pronounce waves. Yeah.

Jada: *So, I'm like, I have never seen a Black person wear do-rags because they want to protect their braids. Just like that's what it is, you wear a scarf or you just, you take the braids out and you redo them.*

KM: But is that cultural appropriation, because he doesn't even know how to use it properly.

¹¹ The du-rag is a Black hair accessory that resembles a skull cap and has a flap for tying at the back. It is commonly used by Black males to assist in pronouncing and “spinning” waves in their low-cut hair.

Jada: *Yes! He had his hair braided and said, "I didn't want to mess up my braids," like that bothered me. And we all made fun of him for it. And I feel like making fun of him helps him to know.*

Interactions that Black girls have in school seem to make the various expressions of Black culture on non-Black bodies both baffling and disheartening. People appear to love and admire what is often considered and stereotyped to be a part of Black culture, but these same representations, when used by Black girls, for example, do not translate into power within society. However, Jada saw this form of emulation of Black culture as a minor indication of power that Black people have but do not fully realize:

I feel like when you see people acting, I don't want to use the word ghetto but like acting in that type of persona, they're trying to act Black. So, like, I feel like in a way people see Black people as like, not superior, but just like they look up to them and in ways that they think like, oh, like this Black guy is wearing this. Maybe I should wear that or Black girls doing this with hair. I want to do that. So, like I feel like it's people look at us and say like, oh, they're doing something cool, so I'm going to copy them. Like not appropriation, but like close.

Jada steers away from direct labelling the behaviour she outlines as cultural appropriation. She also seems less critical of peers who “copy” culture.

Samara, on the other hand, talked at length about how Black people control aspects of culture but generally lack of power within society:

Being Black is kind of like being in control of the culture. Everyone wants to use a lingo and whatnot. But then there's this kind of sad realization like that you're it, but really not it. People want to act like you, people want to dress like you, and people want to talk like you, but nobody wants to include you in the big practical decision making and it's like, wait, like you all want to look like me but you don't want to help me when it comes time to doing what needs to be done for me or showing up for me as an ally. It is such a crazy situation to be in, because I don't even know how to put it into words. It's frustrating because you look like me, but then you never really faced the challenges that I face. You sound like me but you never really face the challenges that someone who sounds like me

would. Because I feel sitting in class and there's a girl who kiss your teeth¹² or something that seemed culturally, communication-wise it that's a "Black thing." Then if I were to kiss my teeth, I'd be disrespectful. But the other girl who kisses her teeth was not Black. She does not come off as disrespectful. She is just following the crowd, and it can get really annoying because I get penalized for acting everywhere I come from and you get to just like ride with it. Being Black means kind of just being in control of broader culture trends but it's not real control.

Samara's powerful statement summarizes the enigma of cultural appropriation. Power, social position, and stigma are effectively coded within various forms of cultural and racial expression. Stereotypical readings of Black representations exist because mass media usually distributes representations without providing cultural perspective or background, and therefore, understandings of race, gender, and class, for example, are easily constructed outside of any clear context, making a collective, marginal interpretation of identities probable.

The girls struggled with their inability to address these concerns and explain to their teachers and peers how power and cultural appropriation impacts their personal experience. Ivy spoke about an activity that she participated in with her peers at school:

We did presentations in our school about social determinants of health and cultural appropriation and we got constant rebuttals and constant backlash and it wasn't even just a matter of having a debate, which is fine, but it's just not even listening and just getting super defensive. Telling us our experiences were not real or relevant. Because we are saying that wearing an Indigenous piece or wearing an Indigenous chief's headdress is not necessarily the best thing to wear to Coachella¹³ or things like that. But they don't want to hear it, people get mad and do not really listen, that happens a lot.

The denial in this situation further demonstrates the lack of power that Black girls have in school settings to, at the very least, be heard on issues related to their cultural identity. Situations like

¹² Described as a "Caribbean oral gesture" usually used to mark frustration and/or irritation, "which involves an inherently evaluative and inexplicit oral gesture with a sound-symbolic component, and a remarkably stable set of functions across the African Diaspora" (Figuera & Patrick, 2002).

¹³ Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival is a popular annual music and arts festival held in California. The festival usually includes popular headlining acts by chart-topping artists.

the one Ivy illustrates maintain feelings of isolation and “Otherness” that Black girls may struggle with, ultimately complicating their overall sense of belonging at school.

Two participants claimed not to be personally affected by negative media representations of Black girls and women. Sasha explained how safer spaces shield her from the potential effects of these representations:

Personally, it really doesn't affect me because I know to look for where that isn't. So, I know where to find people or places that girls like me can go and that's where we're supposed to be, where we can be represented. For girls that are younger than me or don't have that same type of knowledge and understanding, it would be really difficult for them.

Jada made similar statements about not being personally or emotionally affected by representations of Black people that might lead to prejudice. Jada used her knowledge to defend her position and her right to take up space in society. She recounted the events of a situation at the mall with her mom:

Like my mom and I at Bath and Body, we were in there and one of the workers was like watching me because I had a big bag. And I'm walking around, I'm looking, I see her looking at me and I'm very unapologetic, I'm going to stare back if you're going to stare at me. Like that's just so am staring back at her and I'm like, I'm not stealing anything. I'm with my mother. And from the corner of my eyes saw a Chinese lady in the corner. And you know those little scent things that you'd plug into the wall, she was like dropping them into her purse and I'm like, and you're sitting here pay attention to me when she's over there stealing. Like that was like the only time that I've ever felt like discriminated against.

Although Jada does speak about feeling discriminated against during this situation, she demonstrates confidence as she recalls how the situation took place. This was also the only time she claims to have felt discriminated against, which might indicate that she does not acknowledge discriminatory circumstances affect her on a personal level. Throughout the conversation with Jada and in the points made by Sasha in the focus group, I had an overall sense

that they see things as they are, and although they both recognized the negative impact of certain representations, they did not internalize them.

While dealing with the various inequitable ways representations of Black women and girls manifest into troubling realities, it is clear from participant accounts that Black girls continue to strengthen their resilience and find creative ways to resist identifications placed upon them based on their race, class, gender, and other aspects of their identity. The points outlined in the focus groups and interview sessions led to further conversation on agency and the ways Black girls could use contemporary media platforms, such as social media, as tools for combating some of the negative, unwanted representations that they discussed.

Forms of Resistance and Media Making

One form of resistance or strategy for coping that participants identified was sharing safer spaces with other Black girl peers. This concept of safer spaces is a foundation in Black feminist theory, as it allows Black women to cultivate caring, compassionate environments that affirm their identities (Collins, 2000). Safe spaces is positioned as strategy for dealing with oppression in educational contexts, the concept is also relevant to resisting negative media representations. In her interview, Ivy suggested that even when things “*spark up on social media or whatever, it good to have space to talk about it and hear other people’s opinions.*” Black girls are, of course, not the only group of teenagers in need of supportive spaces; however, the importance of safer spaces for Black girls is underscored based on their intersectionality. For example, Raven recalled a conversation that she had with a close White friend about braiding her hair:

I was just sitting with my White friend watching the basketball game and we were talking about hair because I’m getting my braid soon. So we’re talking I’m like, yes, you know like I got to get the hair for my braids and stuff like that. She is just like, “Sorry, I just can’t relate,” and I’m just like okay, you know, I guess I’ll talk to you about that stuff but

then but like I started to really think I was like, well, there's some stuff we just can't really relate to and that's just that's not our fault, but it's just that's what it is.

Raven describes a circumstance that many Black girls go through in predominantly White schools and environments. What is required to care for Black hair and skin, for example, can be very different than what is needed by non-Black girls. Considering the priority placed on belonging at this stage of youth development (Stepping Stones, 2012), having access to safer spaces, with peers who can relate, is vital to well-being and positive self-esteem. The narratives of the girls indicated the constant feeling of “Otherness” they experienced in their schools, and resisting these feelings requires Black girls to connect and learn from each other.

Deja and Sienna emphasized safer spaces for Black girls as a form of resistance:

Deja: *I feel like lots of us have been through a lot. We've been through a lot of stuff. I feel like some of us need that extra, that extra step, that extra person, that extra safe space for us to feel valuable and comfortable. I feel lots of us hold thousands of masks so we're facing it slowly one and off. Once again there is 100 personalities under that one you just pulled off. So, I feel that it takes us a long time if you've been through a lot of situations for us to get comfortable and really like let you see us for who we actually are, if that makes sense. I always say there's a thousand levels for everybody. You're never going to know someone truly, so I feel like it just takes us extra, extra long.*

Sienna: *I think that there are certain things that everybody gets frustrated about and being Black and being able to vent and just get everything out and not having to bottle it up inside of you just makes you feel more confident and more at ease to not have to pop off throughout the day and not want to feel like not want to be mad so you don't get the assumption that, “Oh, why are you so mad all the time?” Also, being able to disband is just good way to get confident.*

Resisting media representations, and how Black girls are treated as a result, is a constant struggle. How do you deal with the circulation of images and tropes that demean your identity? Negative readings of representations produce an enormous amount of stress, making it difficult for Black girls to just be themselves in public spaces. Resistance to the ongoing associations

made about them continues to be a necessary part of self-care and self-preservation for Black girls. These are considerations non-Black girls do not have to make.

Following up on her story about talking about hair with her White friend, Raven was asked about the need for safer spaces with other Black girls:

Yes, honestly, I might have to like start something at school because that would be so amazing. I know like having that around like, would be so good, just to be able to you know, where to talk it out. It's so good talking to someone who understands, you know what I mean? And especially someone your age, you know, like same school same everything, you know, it's just yes, it's good and some people might like need that, you know, going through hard times and they just need to talk about things.

The girls were all in agreement about the necessity for safer spaces for Black girls. Some expressed having a need for spaces such as this in their schools; others spoke of the safer spaces they created for themselves, with their peers and family. After talking about her relationship, and experience creating safer spaces, with her mother and sisters, Nicole spoke about safe environments for Black students at her school:

I think that because a lot of the time we are surrounded by people that don't understand how they treat us, like how they unconsciously talk to us harsher than someone else, or just like embarrassing us in front of a group of people without acknowledging our experiences, or maybe if I haven't personally experienced it I know what it's like to be a Black person, or seen like my brother being treated a certain way, and so that is constantly playing in my head when you treat me a certain way and so I think it's really important for Black girls to like get together so that we can like talk to each other, feel comfortable with one another because we have a shared experience. And it makes things slightly easier when you are able to like talk about it and like people are like oh yes, I understand that you know so you can just feel like wow we connect on one level.

In many ways, calling for and creating safer spaces within the context of education falls into Soloman's (1992) theorizing of Black resistance in school. He contemplates, "Student subcultures, then, use oppositional behaviours to dismantle the social and instructional structures of schools and replace them with ones that are more compatible with their own needs and

desires” (p. 12). Even though these spaces are not used by study participants to completely dismantle or revolutionize their education, they, at the very least, allow for collective resistance to and critical analysis of the media representations that stigmatize them in school.

In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” bell hooks (1992) describes what she terms the “oppositional gaze” to illustrate how Black women resist dominant representations in media that negate their humanity. hooks outlines how the power of “looking” and interpreting representations can assist Black women in articulating their awareness of their subjugated positions within the public domain. Looking, according to hooks, functions as a form of resistance for Black women against dominant representations that devalue them (Jacobs, 2016). Using hooks’s theoretical framing, Jacobs’s (2016) study summarizes data drawn from a critical media pedagogy program aimed at promoting critical consciousness and positive gender and racial identity in Black teen girls. The results of this study point to the power of the “gaze” but also to the critical interpretation of representations that many Black girls are already aware of when entering conversations about media. This is also true of girls in this study. The accounts of all 14 girls interviewed demonstrate a form of “oppositional gaze,” which allows them, and in some ways forces them, to question representations that they regularly see in the media.

Media-viewing habits of the contemporary teenager reflect a concentration on new media (boyd, 2015). Participants spend a limited amount of time engaging with traditional media outlets such as television or print-based magazines. Their viewing choices, when they do watch television, are often determined by the popularity of these texts on social media. Although the participants believe that many of the stereotypes associated with Black girls (i.e., loud,

aggressive, promiscuous) are typical on television, any personal, active form of resistance or re-articulation of representations they engage in is distributed through social media platforms.

Participants in this study discussed the power that social media provides them in limiting their exposure to certain types of media messages that do not build their self-esteem and confidence. Vanessa, 19, outlined her strategy for engaging on social media:

So when I was able to have control of what I chose to view, me having that control allowed me to transfer my own view of what was beautiful and that's why I feel very comfortable with myself now. The content I view myself is in line with who I actually am and not who I'm trying to be.

Traditional media does not allow audiences to participate in content production, and therefore, the power to broadcast images and shape understandings of identity within the traditional, widely accessed media is completely out of their control. Sasha, 18, supported Vanessa's comment and added:

I think social media has really allowed Black people to take control over the narratives they want to create. Social media, like Instagram, they literally have pages of beautiful, Black people particularly dark-skinned people and with natural hair, 4C.¹⁴ Again, you have control of what you see so I think it's kind of reprogramming what you want Blackness to be.

Participating in the creation of one's image and identity provides Black girls with opportunities to rearticulate, through their own imagination, how they want to be seen and understood within society. They have opportunities to construct and depict their Black experience.

Jada, one of the few girls in the study who is currently in a post-secondary program, spoke about how this new way of looking and participating in new media translates to power.

¹⁴ 4C refers to the category of hair texture common to Black women. It describes the type of curl present in the texture of the hair.

Her example points to how the topic of media representation is explored in contemporary classrooms.

I did a paper for my course, Catullus for Change. The way we talked about television versus social media, social media acts as a counter-narrative. With television, the producers control content and they throw out content but the viewers can never give content back. Whereas social media, the producers produce content but the viewers can actually counter what's given to them. So, if we disagree, it allows for a conversation to happen.

As the participants have outlined television and film representations as key sources of the stereotypes that stigmatize them, the power to counter negating depictions using contemporary media has created a significant shift. However, not all of the participants were convinced the shift from traditional mass media like television to new media like social media has resulted in more positive representations of Black women and girls. Rochelle, 19, also a post-secondary student, offered a rebuttal:

I think I can agree to some extent, that yes there has been a pushback for the fact that before on TV, I would never see representations of beautiful dark-skinned women. And I see that on social media all the time. But I think we've also taken in what we've seen on TV and push that on our own platforms. Sometimes I think there's this dichotomy between what it means to be beautiful and Black. You're either the tall really skinny dark-skinned Lupita Nyong'o look or you're like Kim Kardashian but Black and super fit, but thick. And it's like there isn't much room for the little Black girl, that just looks like us, online.

Even given Rochelle's assertion that things are not as progressive as they may seem, there still seemed to be a consensus among the girls that social media provides more opportunities for agency than traditional media. However, some participants seemed more invested in using it strategically, by posting positive images and engaging in dialogue online, than others.

Ivy, Rochelle, Vanessa, and Sasha participated in the study as members of the content creator team for Akeelah's Room,¹⁵ a local initiative aimed at providing platforms for Black girls' media content and social gathering. Each of these participants openly discussed and produced content for the website/blog and social media platforms (Instagram) for the initiative. Using their own skills and understanding of social media, the content creator team engaged in team-inspired media making based on their own social media practices and network choices. Resources and literature outlining the benefits of using social media for building diversity and promoting inclusion within the public domain are increasing (Montgomery, 2018). Even though a lack of positive representations continues to be an issue for Black girls, social media sites like Instagram and Twitter have become spaces where it is possible to control the narrative. Girls can be purposeful with the types of messages they would like to see in their feed.

Social media allows media users to filter the media they access on sites like Instagram and YouTube. Vanessa expanded upon this:

I know where to find people or places that girls like me can go and that's where we're supposed to be, where we can be represented. For girls that are younger than me or don't have that same type of knowledge and understanding, it would be really difficult for them. I feel very comfortable in myself because I've created an atmosphere, an environment for myself to feed off energy. It's called the principle of auto suggestion. Meaning that your imagination can only create from what you put into it. What you hear, what you see.

Going into more depth about the impact of creating spaces to empower Black people online, Sasha asserted: *"I see Black women and Black people kind of counter that and creates those Black forums. I can never forget in Grade 12, I heard the Grade 9s talking about how much*

¹⁵ Akeelah's Room is an initiative for Black girls created by The Power to Be International, the small grassroots organization that provided contacts for girls who attended events for participant recruitment in this study. The goal of Akeelah's Room is to cultivate safer spaces for Black girls, online and face to face.

melanin they have. And they were going on and on about it. And these are Grade 9s so obviously, there's been a switch." Sasha's point speaks to some degree to the shift in understanding that can result in how people interpret identity when access to diverse and nuanced representations are more readily available and consumed.

Each of the participants who were actively engaged in content creating believed that Black girls creating and publishing their own media content is undeniably important. When asked why they felt it was important to create more diverse representations and why they chose to be involved in creating content for other Black girls, each of them weighed in:

Vanessa: *I am trying to address the regular Black girl or Black person. After you show a really beautiful Black woman but also trying to get the average people, they're walking and trying to navigate their life. As well as trying to highlight the work of different Black people...so it's just Black women that are doing well in science, literature, art and everything else.*

Sasha: *I really endorse independent thinking because I think the issue and the little pitfall we fall into is that, once we do create a platform for Black girls and women, it obviously has to fit the same, it obviously has to be the same or represent all the same thing when it shouldn't be. What we should be fighting for is for Black girls to individually and unapologetically be themselves.*

Rochelle: *Giving Black girls a space to think and come up with their own opinions is important. Whether it's body image or hair like a perspective that it hasn't been taken on so they can say, this is what I'm used to hearing. This is also another perspective. Where do I lie in this? So especially for Akeelah's Room I don't want it to be things that they hear all the time you just have to work out and get this kind of body. No. What do you want to do for yourself? Their own space to come up with their own opinions that works for them.*

Ivy: *I notice that there's not a lot of Black girls specifically in photography and film, especially at my age. For me, I guess it's just creating awareness for girls that might be into that. Into photography or independent filmmaking that don't really know where to start or don't know where to find people trying to do the same thing. So just creating that for them and kind of creating a small community of people that are interested in the same thing and are helping each other.*

All the participants in the study use Instagram for their personal use; however, only five of the fourteen girls discussed and described using Instagram or blog writing as content-creating tools to shift narratives and diversify Black representations online. These five participants included the four engaged in creating content for the online space for Black girls, and Nicole, who regularly writes poetry and publishes her work online.

Summary of Findings

Howard et al. (2016) tells us that “the ideological dimension of oppression that Black women navigate is perhaps the most pervasive and hardest to counteract” (p.759). Based on the analysis of the data, a number of broad themes and conclusions can be drawn from the critical responses of the participants. Undeniably, the participants are impacted by media representations of Black women and girls. It is also obvious that they perceive contemporary representations as the main reason for the unwanted circumstances that Black girls face in school. Five main summary points on media representation and resistance represent the common thoughts and ideas shared by the participants.

1. Limited narratives in media maintain inequality in school and society.

Limited narratives and images portraying Black people function to maintain inequality that is normalized within society. For school-age youth, larger concerns such as inequities in education practices that result in a lack of educational success can be connected to stereotypes commonly circulated within mainstream media. Most mainstream media texts are created and perpetuated by those with access to power and media ownership. Lack of fair and accurate representation

maintains larger systems of power, which constrict the daily lives of Black girls through racism, sexism, and other oppressive structures, which continue to persist.

2. **The power to control media representations is ultimately power over the people.** The participants in the study have clear interpretations of power and the ways in which power is often manifested through media's inclusion and/or omission of various narratives and representations. This results in a hierarchical arrangement of identity, making specific identities seem better and more superior, i.e., White, than others, i.e., Black, particularly dark-skinned Black. This can, in turn, be internalized in the psyche of Black girls and may limit the possibilities that they see for themselves. The lack of positive, complex representations, which would add depth to the Black girl experience, seems to make it difficult for people, particularly teachers, to see Black girls as more than one thing.
3. **Representations of cultural identity equal power in society.** According to the participants, media representations of race and culture have larger societal consequences that are also related to power and inequality. Encounters with cultural appropriation, and the acceptance of activities and expressions that are often considered to be Black culture by non-Black bodies, continue to confuse and frustrate Black girls. Consensus is that Black girls are often penalized for behaviour that is ignored or celebrated when performed by non-Black people. The participants see this as a general lack of power.
4. **Even though media representations appear to be changing, there is still a long way to go for equity.** Representations in all forms of media continue to

maintain hegemonic ideologies that support racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Although negative depictions are often resisted and contested by those misrepresented, demeaning narratives and associations with Blackness and Black identity prevail and are consistent on all platforms. As Nakamura (2008) points out, “The difference between old and new media is interactivity... blurring the lines between producers and consumers” (p. 18). Participants recognized that although digital spaces, such as social media, offer sites for transformation, the concerns surrounding Black representation first outlined within traditional media (i.e., film and television) by hooks (1994), among others (Hall, 1990), continue to be relevant within new media spaces. Negative characterizations and stereotypical representations continue to create limited ideas about the ability, position, and potential of Black women and girls in society.

5. Resistance is, at the very least, possible with advancements in social media.

Participants agreed that the power to represent various dimensions of their identities through social media gives them a sense of validation and a chance to speak for themselves. Though limited, social media provides an outlet to create narratives and images that empower and inform Black girls, resisting common tropes that may negatively impact their lives and well-being. Social media also provides more control to filter representations that are unwelcome and may negatively impact self-esteem.

Chapter Seven: Discussion—“Reading” Between Their Lines

I consider myself a crayon. I might not be your favorite color, but one day you're going to need me to complete your picture. – Lauryn Hill

In the introduction to this study, I outlined some of the reasons I settled on this topic for my doctoral research. As my daughter grew older, I found myself reflecting at each stage of her development on my experiences at her age. My teenage years were rife with insecurities that infused almost everything I took part in, from school, to sports, to my social activities. I remember having strong feelings about my educational experiences, including the courses I was told that I had to take and the way teachers would address me. I also remember feeling like an outsider and being unable to articulate my concerns about my education. As I reflected on my experience at school through the experiences of my daughter, I was inspired to formally investigate how much school experiences have changed for Black girls growing up in the Greater Toronto Area.

As a trained teacher working in education, I know there is more to the disparities that are often casually reported and cited about Black youth and education. These reports are regularly used as evidence of how well Black students are faring in formal education programs, but they are incomplete and overlook Black voices. Examining the causes of, and specific situations that lead to gaps in, educational outcomes is more important than the numbers and the degree of disparity. Black youth issues are diverse, and a lack of disaggregated data on education outcomes continues to marginalize Black youth who don't easily fit into general categories. Education systems and government programs are failing at addressing the circumstances that create and maintain educational barriers for Black youth in Ontario. They are falling short of providing specific accommodations to address the impediments outlined in governmental policies and

reports. It is also evident that these barriers in education are directly related to the success and general well-being of Black youth, and therefore, action on these concerns is needed immediately.

Representations of Black girls, intersectionality, and school experiences are the focus of my study because as a researcher, I wanted to go beyond reporting statistics that continually classify Black youth as one single entity. I wanted to contribute to the efforts of a community of Black scholars who are focusing on Black youth in their research, so that we can adequately reflect a broader range of opinions and highlight different narratives. This study, and others like it, are integral to addressing development and educational concerns that both surround and burden various Black youth groups. Using the data outlined here, the aim is to assist those responsible for the education, development, and well-being of Black youth by specifically examining the realities of Black girls' school and community environments.

When I established the parameters for this study, I thought intentionally about the sample of participants I wanted to interview. My previous work with Black girls helped to shape my understanding of some of the current circumstances that Black girls face in Ontario schools. While delivering programming and events with Black girls, we would speak at length about identity and the ways intersectionality caused oppression. While having these open discussions, I was struck by their level of analysis. Many of them were able to articulate how identity and intersectionality manifested into injustice and how representations factored into that process. These discussions confirmed for me how necessary it is to have Black girls speak for and represent themselves in literature. *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2000) establishes the practice of validating the voices of Black women, by having them tell their narratives. There is a

history of Black girls being dismissed and overlooked as experts on their own experiences (Edwards et al., 2016). Providing space for Black girls to speak their truth is an essential component to this research process. Black feminist thought requires that we rely on the accounts of Black women (and by extension, Black girls) in the unpacking and contextualizing of their experiences. Ruth Nicole Brown expanded this Black feminist practice of capturing the voices of Black girls in her program Saving Our Lives, Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT) for Black girls in Chicago. The initiative includes dance and other creative expressions to effectively connect with Black girls on the realities of their lives as a means of empowerment.

It takes a personal, emotional toll when I continually have to justify the need for programs and supports for Black girls within the school system. Even with the government funding the development and implementation of programs specifically for Black girls, which essentially support them through culturally relevant programming, I have faced a lot of pushback from school administrators and teachers. I have been told that Black girls are not interested in attending “these types of programs.” However, the engagement of PTBI program participants recruited through community outreach has demonstrated not only interest in having safer spaces and more supports for Black girls, but also the value of building community with Black girls and mentors. Due to resistance from the school system, I had to recruit participants for this study through various community programs and events. Lack of support from the schools that I contacted also created additional limitations to the study, in relation to sample size and demographics. However, this limitation also helps to establish and justify the need for more research that accounts for more Black girls in the GTA, to broaden the criteria and include additional viewpoints and perspectives of Black girls.

The participants in this study do an exceptional job at outlining and describing the circumstances of their lives. Stuart Hall's work in *Cultural Identity and the Diaspora* (1990) provides an ideal starting point for an analysis of their perspectives. He states:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, with the new cultural practices they represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (p. 222)

This approach to thinking through the process and production of representation assists in establishing a context for the experiences of Black girls in which they are read as both subjects and objects. It also creates a foundation to examine how constructions and representations of Blackness, gender, social class, and age form meaning in their everyday lives. The reflections of the participants, which illustrate their insight into their experiences, their interpretation of the events in their lives, and how these circumstances are often directly related to media representations of Black identity, are central to this study.

Black Identity

The perspectives on and feelings about Black identity were consistent among the participants. To the 14 girls in this study, Blackness relates to people of African and Caribbean descent in Canada, and African American people in the United States. They understood that there are variations in the cultural expressions of Black people from different parts of the world. Their responses indicate collective notions of Black culture within the GTA, which, at times, differ from cultural expressions commonly associated with Blackness in an American context (i.e., language, food, ethnicity). Considering the pervasive imagery of Black identity constructed by

and through sources from the United States, the participants made some distinctions between African American and Canadian Black culture. The similarities between all Black people, according to the girls, relate to skin, hair, physical appearance, and some general associations to specific behaviours (i.e., stereotypes of deviance). It is also clear to the girls that the common negative perceptions of Black people impact all Black people, regardless of ethnicity or differences in culture.

All the girls identified positively with their race and aspects of Black culture. However, this was not always the case for Raven, the only one of the participants who admitted to having negative feelings about being Black as she grew up. In her opinion, her negative feelings about being Black were related to limited positive representations of Black people and characters on television. She also grew up in a predominantly White community and wanted to be more like her White friends. This is a common concern for Black girls who grow up in neighbourhoods with limited Black people or other persons of colour. This demonstrates the the necessity for Black youth to associate and develop relationships with other Black youth as to develop healthy, non-stereotypical understandings of Black people when living in predominantly White communities.

Raven now has a healthier connection with her Black identity, much like the other girls. However, even though they had positive perceptions of themselves as Black girls, participants agreed that Black people were not seen positively within society in general. The participants confirmed the normalized stereotype of Black girls as loud, “ratchet,” aggressive, not good in school, and angry that is noted in a number of studies focused on Black girls and representations (Harris, 2015; Muhammad & McArthur, 2016). These tropes and representations were familiar

to the participants, and in some cases, consistently afflicted them. For example, Deja, Zara, Ebony, and Imani expressed regular frustration about the ways these stereotypes impacted how teachers treated them and pigeonholed Black girls, affecting relationships with their peers.

There is something to be said about the fact that in spite of the racism they experienced, these girls were still able to develop and maintain positive social identification with Blackness. Although I did not ask directly about how they maintain positive notions and associations with their race amidst all the stereotypes and negative affiliations, most of the girls spoke positively about strong family relationships and the racial empowerment that comes from mothers, fathers, their family dynamic, and peers. Considering the constant repetition of the deficit Black youth narrative, it is important to note that participants remain positive about their identity and their ability. Other studies that focus on Black youth and their group status point to similar conclusions (Defreese, 2014). In spite of the racial inequities they regularly experience, Black youth demonstrate strong group identification. How do Black youth develop and maintain positive self-esteem and healthy racial identity in predominantly White spaces? This is an area for further exploration and research.

For Black girls, the contemporary motif of #Blackgirlmagic might be considered one approach to developing and maintaining positive self-identification. The studies I consulted on #Blackgirlmagic simply outline the phenomenon and its discourse within popular and urban culture. However, the constant reminder that “Black girls are magic” can have a positive self-affirming effect that Black women admit to internalizing (Shelton, 2017). I did not explicitly explore this concept with the participants of this study to develop a better sense of their

perceptions of the narrative. In view of both its potential and its limitations, research on the impact of #Blackgirlmagic as an approach to positive racial and gender association is required.

Black Girls and School

The narratives of the girls in this study reflect some of the complications that research on Black girls in the United States and Canada (Anucha et al., 2018; French et al., 2013; Ispa-Landa & Conwell, 2015; James, 2012; Joseph et al., 2016; Lindsey-Dennis, 2015) cite as factors impacting achievement and success in school. From this, I conclude that the very systems and structures tasked to resolve the issues creating negative outcomes for Black girls maintain racial, gender, and other barriers they experience. Attempts to address educational disparities for Black youth continue to fail due to the lack of attention to, and accommodation for, intersectionality. The reflections of the participants also point to the serious implications of teacher behaviours and attitudes. The general lack of compassion demonstrated in teacher and administrator responses only maintain the gaps in educational achievement that continue to adversely affect the well-being and success of Black girls. The Black girls in this study acknowledged the need for more culturally inclusive and supportive environments to improve outcomes and foster their interest in education.

In examining participant accounts, a number of areas require intense interrogation. All the participants spoke about experiencing microaggressions—the acute racial insults that they frequently hear from both teachers and peers—and have been isolated and discriminated against based on race and other factors. Teacher comments asking a Black girl if her father is at home, or referencing other minority groups as “people” while referring to Black people as just “the Blacks,” are significant, blatant forms of racism that can create long-term, negative impacts on

the self-esteem of Black girls. As Allen et al. (2013) point out, “The entity of school serves as an environment that often communicates cues to students about their capabilities, the importance of their contributions, and their expected life outcomes based on who they are” (p. 118). The slights noted by Nicole and Raven seem to be minor compared to some of the verbal assaults detailed by other participants. Still, enduring any form of racist indignity at school comes at a student’s psychological and academic expense (Keels et al., 2017).

Although Nicole and Raven described recognizing and silently questioning the racial microaggressions that they experienced, other participants recounted direct verbal abuse by teachers in Ontario schools, who seemed to evade taking any responsibility for their actions, a baffling phenomenon. Deja, whose narratives are central throughout the study, spoke of the openly racist and sexist remarks made by her White, male teacher in math class. How do incidents like the ones Deja details go completely unchecked within a Toronto area high school? This question is particularly pertinent to the Durham District School Board (DDSB), which oversees a high concentration of Black students. In 2018, it released the *Compendium of Action for Black Student Success* to “put structures in place to remove barriers for Black students.” This colourful and graphically appealing document asks a question at the top of page two: “What can educators do to support the success of Black students?” Perhaps, school boards and administrators can start supporting Black students by cultivating environments that allow students to speak out when they encounter situations like the one Deja experienced, to hold teachers accountable for microaggressions and verbal violence exacted on Black girls in school.

If school boards are not successfully supporting Black girls by evaluating and monitoring teacher approaches and interactions with students, how can we honestly begin to reconcile the

achievement gaps for Black girls? Black girls' concerns are regularly dismissed, and when they speak out, they become associated with the regular list of stereotypical characters, furthering their marginalization. Most of these girls do not want to draw any attention to themselves at school. They also do not believe that anything they report will be addressed and changed, concluding, based on their own evidence, that their voices do not matter within the broader educational system.

Another reason most of the participants wanted to remain silent about microaggressions, ineffective teaching practices, and biased treatment is because they do not believe teachers or school systems care about their positive development and well-being. This lack of trust highlighted by the girls is also reflected in literature that provides accounts of Black students in Ontario schools (James & Turner, 2017). In Linton and McLean's 2016 study, the participants revealed similar distrust for the teachers and Toronto school system in general. In one of the focus group sessions, Deja spoke at some length about teacher apathy and the lack of support that all Black students in her school experience. Other participants, such as Ivy and Imani, have a general distrust of school authority because of their school's track record of not dealing with issues that affect Black students. Throughout most interviews, the participants portrayed a general feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness when it came to their positions in school. Although slightly more than half of the participants were in academic streams in high school and doing fairly well academically, an aura of despair surrounded all the points and discussions about Black identity, discrimination, and inequality.

When Black students, for example, are forced to take on the emotional labour of recounting their experiences to teach and inform people of how racist, sexist, and discriminatory

words and behaviour hurt and burden them, it quickly becomes an exhausting task that takes both a physical and psychological toll. Keels et al.'s (2017) analysis of microaggressions in schools shows “that racially ethnically hostile educational contexts are detrimental for students’ academic achievement and mental health” (p. 1337). The lack of attention paid to school-related issues affecting Black girls has everything to do with intersectionality. Issues related to race are compounded by discrimination and stigma connected to gender and class. To resolve matters related to microaggressions and ineffective teaching practices, there needs to be a focus on the best approaches for educating Black girls that considers intersectionality.

Microaggressions and inequitable standards also result in lower academic expectations and standards for Black girls. As Imani so honestly points out, some teachers of Black students “*don’t expect them to be smart.*” Ebony also spoke about the pressure that she and her peers receive to go down to lower streams if they have any issues in their academic classes. No support or resources are provided to help them to succeed within academic courses. The same time, energy, and patience that is afforded to non-Black students is often not offered to support and motivate Black students to achieve higher marks and reach their full potential academically. This is not uncommon, as James and Turner’s (2017) report on Toronto schools attests. The system of de-streaming, and the general lower expectations that some educators have for Black students, are normalized and long-held traditions within Ontario schools that continue with little scrutiny.

Black feminist theory used within a pedagogical framework for education is not a new concept or practice in the educating of Black students. In 1993, Barbara Omolade outlined Black feminist pedagogy as a model for educating and supporting Black women completing post-secondary studies. She writes, “The development of leadership skills requires that students [of

colour, especially Black women] learn differently with a liberatory classroom environment. Classroom instructors must be more like consultants to, rather than controllers of, the learning environment” (p. 38). Omolade’s practice included much of what is outlined in the culturally relevant pedagogy models suggested for K–12 schools. Black feminist pedagogy centres “Black women’s historical experiences with race/gender/class bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation” (p. 31) within material and instruction.

Another, more recognizable strategy is the use of culturally relevant pedagogy or CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which can assist teachers in addressing concerns around the education of non-White students within Eurocentric education systems. CRP essentially contextualizes a student’s cultural identity within their educational and classroom experience, as a method to promote their academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Since Ladson-Billings’s articulation of the concept, some educators and researchers have expanded the framework of CRP to better account for the wide range of accommodations that are needed to effectively educate students of diverse backgrounds. These educational accommodations could include anything from pedagogical approaches to administration and policies in schooling (Henry, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).

CRP changes traditional approaches to power and authority in the classroom by establishing nurturing environments and using culturally relevant material to bring the experiences of marginalized students within classroom teaching. As Henry (1998) argues, “We need paradigms for understanding teaching and learning in multilingual and multiracial urban context” (p. 9). Pedagogical practices such as CRP and Black feminist pedagogy should be carefully and intentionally embedded throughout students’ school experiences. These practices

can also function to prepare Black girls to face some of contemporary realities resulting from racism, sexism, silencing, and other forms of marginalization.

Using culturally relevant and gender-based approaches within school settings would also drastically reduce the number of microaggressions that are carelessly uttered by teachers in GTA schools. Effective implementation of CRP, for example, would encourage teachers to make use of more relevant and appropriate materials while educating students in their diverse classrooms. Teachers would completely avoid books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* unless they were using the text to teach students to dismantle racist constructions within the broader society. CRP can also be described as a more compassionate method of teaching. Applying its basic principles, such as teaching Black students to resist the status quo and viewing students as extended family members (Cooper, 2002), would likely eliminate teacher apathy and encourage more empathy within the classroom, which could lead to cultivating an educational community where Black girls feel a sense of belonging.

Another question related to pedagogy and culturally relevant education is whether Black girls, or Black students in general, require Black teachers to deliver on these approaches and to affirm their worthiness and sense of belonging within the school system. By all accounts, the presence of teachers and administrators who reflect the diversity of the student body is ideal. The limited number of Black teachers in GTA schools continues to cause concerns for Black families. James and Turner (2017) suggest:

Black teachers have more positive perceptions of Black students which affects their assessment of the student and goes on to suggest that Black teachers not only have a

different relationship with Black students, but also view Black students' approaches to learning, self-control, and other behaviours through a different lens. (p. 65)

Henry (1998) describes the impact of Black female teachers on Black students as a form of "other-mothering," which has cultural and historical significance within Black communities. African and Caribbean cultures often practice community parenting, with community members caring for, and even reprimanding, children who live in and share the community: "In traditional African societies, community other mothers accept a culturally based maternal responsibility which extends beyond one's own children to other children in the community" (Mogadime, 2000, p. 229). "These cooperative living arrangements, familiar to Black communities" (p. 28), are also adapted within schools by Black teachers teaching Black students.

In conversation with the participants, several referenced the support of Black teachers within their schools. Three of the girls (Jada, Nicole, and Ivy) spoke directly about the influence and impact that Black teachers have had on their experiences in school. Their comments, though brief, are evidence that cultural connections or even mere racial identification with teachers can be transformative for Black girls when those experiences are positive. Imani, on the other hand, spoke of her negative experience with her Black vice-principal who accused her of being the instigator of a conflict without hearing her account of the situation. Imani was deeply troubled and hurt by this encounter, and referenced how much more hurtful the situation was because it involved one of "*our own people*."

Due to the general lack of Black teachers in Ontario schools, many of the participants did not seem to have significant opinions on Black teachers and what they could potentially offer to enhance their experiences in school. However, it is important to recognize that of the four Black

girls who mentioned Black teachers in their interviews, three of those accounts referenced positive experiences with Black teachers or administrators.

Hiring more Black and ethnically diverse teachers is both a suitable and imperative recommendation to address achievement gaps for Black students. However, all students will, at several points in their education, be taught and impacted by non-Black or non-ethnically diverse teachers. Recognizing the need for more Black teachers should not absolve all teachers of their professional and ethical responsibility to treat students fairly and to utilize effective pedagogical practices in education. A large percentage of teachers who currently teach in Toronto area schools are non-Black. As Mogadime (2000) points out, bringing cultural perspectives and values and affirming Black students “does not mean that teachers have to be Black and feminist in order to deliver a curriculum which assists Black female youth in their development of empowered self-determinations and leadership” (p. 229). Black feminist and culturally relevant pedagogies, which share similar tenets and goals, do require all teachers to “openly learn and accept the knowledge base” of the practices, and more so, they demand that White teachers be informed by “Black women’s location” (p. 229).

Based on the narratives of the participants, White teachers and administrators missed a number of opportunities that could have used to attempt to build trust with their Black students. In the situation with Imani at her new school, given such a limited number of Black students, there was an opportunity to demonstrate the safety that Imani deserves at a new school. Samara’s accounts of organizing school activities reflect opportunities for her school, which happens to have a significant population of diverse students, to include Black students more effectively by engaging them in activities beyond those of Black History Month. In Nicole’s story about the

Black girl who had an altercation with a teacher in front of the class, the teacher could have used that moment to address the student compassionately and respectfully in the presence of other students. These, among other examples the participants provided, are everyday occasions that can and should be used to strengthen Black girls' sense of belonging within their school communities.

Patricia Cooper (2002) makes similar claims as she notes, "It is imperative for teacher education programs to recognize the importance of assistance and training for White teachers" (p. 425) to deliver culturally relevant teaching. Advocating and supporting Black students does not only require the hiring of Black teachers, it requires all teachers, those in and those seeking to enter the field, to embrace a more holistic, compassionate model for education that meets students where they are culturally, emotionally, and academically.

Black Girls and Black Boys

One question used in the interviews and focus groups related to Black boys. As intersectionality is a central facet in this study, I wanted to get a better sense of how the girls understood the dynamics of gender in relation to their school experiences. Much of the literature advocating for more studies on Black girls speaks to the contemporary academic focus on Black boys in scholarship (see: Blake et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2016; Evans-Winters, 2014), noting that Black girls are often positioned with the same lens as Black boys or that Black girls remain completely invisible in the analysis of Black youth and education. Based on their descriptions, the participants agreed that Black boys deal with worse circumstances than Black girls in their schools. They all pointed to examples where Black boys were overly policed in the halls and in the classrooms. They spoke about teacher apathy being often directed towards Black boys. Deja

and other girls in the focus group expressed notable concern for the development and education of Black boys. The boys, according to the participants, are concerned with fast money, not with grades and school. The girls in Deja's focus group agreed with this analysis, and this theme was echoed in individual interviews as well. Boys are not worried about school, and as a result, they face situations that seem to be more extreme than the circumstances that Black girls are encountering in school.

The care and concern that these Black girls show for Black boys and their education is fascinating. Deja, Zara, Ivy, and Nicole, among others interviewed, provide detailed evaluations of how they interpret the behaviours of Black boys, and evident in each of their accounts is compassion and empathy for Black boys. Raven talked about how she encourages her Black male classmates when she sees the disadvantageous way they are treated by their teachers. She spoke of a time when she tried to motivate one of her Black male classmates who seemed to have given up. She described how she felt it was important to remind him about his future and help him stay on track. This indication of the interest and personal involvement that Black girls demonstrate towards their Black male peers is reflective of the core principles and the foundation of Black feminist theory.

The participants, however, did not hear or feel the same level of support or concern for their positive development from their Black male peers. Deja spoke about how Black boys often make things worse for Black girls in school by upholding certain standards or stereotypes that stigmatize Black girls. Other participants, like Ebony, also speculated on the degree of affection that boys had for Black girls, citing some unrealistic and unfair positions Black girls are placed in when pitted against White girls in school, for example. Samara's analysis of the situation

between Black girls and Black boys was possibly the most advanced of all the participants. Samara clearly pointed to the contradictions and double standards that Black girls are forced to endure as a result of all the attention and resources for Black youth being focused on Black boys. She admitted that there is reason for concern for Black boys but believed this does not justify the continued isolation and marginalization of Black girls.

It was encouraging, throughout the discussions on Black boys and boys in general, to hear the way the participants were able to fully articulate what they experience in relation to their male counterparts, and how they feel about the various situations they encounter. Although the situations Black youth face in school are both difficult and discouraging, Black girls continue to demonstrate critical awareness, resilience, and compassion in ways they are most often not credited for. None of the Black girls who participated in this study showed any indication of disengagement. They expressed frustration and, in some cases, overall fatigue from dealing with these concerns; however, they all had and expressed opinions that were not only critical, but informed.

In *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973), Freire describes the impetus for citizens to create change in situations marked by injustice. To do this requires an ability to “read” that goes beyond the function of traditional literacy—reading and writing. The ability to “read” in Freire’s context means to deconstruct and interpret the social conditions observed in one’s environment. The participants demonstrated the characteristics of critical consciousness, which they seem to have developed on their own based on their experiences. The capacity to “critically reflect and act upon one’s sociopolitical environment” (Diemer et al., 2006), which Freire specifies, appears to be some sort of organically developed aptitude that participants developed

based on the circumstances of racism and sexism that surround their lives. The open discourses on race and sexism that Black girls are exposed to today assists them in cultivating their contemporary critical consciousness, which they use to better understand their experiences within White society. These girls were not just critical about the issues that impact their lives, they were also acutely aware of how oppression works in the lives of other people as well.

Education is one structure in which Black girls experience powerlessness, and therefore, it is clear that they require specific attention and accommodations if they are to succeed within the system. This study provides access to data that can be used to initiate the process of including Black girls or build on the research of other scholars in the region; however, it is limited in that it highlights the voices of a very small contingent of Black girls in the GTA. It is also noteworthy that the participants used in this study agreed to participate based on some of their established concerns with the school system. Therefore, they may represent a population of Black girls who are more equipped to name and describe issues as they relate to their identity. Recognizing the advanced analytical skills of a number of the participants in the study, I submit that the voices of girls who are aware and able to effectively articulate the inequities, racism, and issues with representations they experience are equally as important as the voices of Black girls who may not have the language or critical skills to engage in these discourses.

Representation and Media

Given the ever-changing landscape of media and information technologies, explicating how Black girls engage with media, as well as how they navigate and interpret its representations, is an important way to learn from, and about, Black girls. Their intersectional identities complicate any attempt to generalize their experiences within the broader analyses of

girls, or even Black women. Prevailing media stereotypes, which suggest that Black girls are all loud, aggressive, sexually promiscuous, and uninterested in school (French, 2013; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015), have created a pathology that significantly impacts the day-to-day lives of Black girls. According to the study participants, the marginalization of Black girls in media, including within contemporary online spaces, limits their position and value within society. When considering the experiences of Black girls and the weight of media representation, age, race, class, gender, and other aspects of identity need to be taken into consideration in order to effectively frame Black girls within the discourse and field of girls' studies.

Over the last 15 years, there has been a rapid and steady increase in the development and use of online applications and tools (boyd, 2014). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which barely existed 12 years ago, are now significant sources of information for users (boyd, 2014). As young people participated in the technological shift from television media to mobile technologies, they discovered opportunities to use online media to engage with and perhaps resist powerful and persistent representations of Black girls. Online platforms can be used as a means of educating and empowering girls to meet some of the identified challenges they face with racism, sexism, ageism, and classism in their daily lives.

Each of the participants was clear about how they felt about media representations and their impact on the public perception of Black girls. In their view, media continues to be the number one influence on how Black girls' identities are seen and in turn, how they are treated. There is no evidence that I can cite that confirms that teachers discriminate and stereotype Black girls based off media representations. Nevertheless, the aim of this study is to capture Black girls' perspectives on their experiences, and therefore, whether their conclusions on the sources

of the stigma they experience are true is of little importance. What is most significant are the circumstances that led to their interpretations and the way they feel in general. As all the girls were able to delineate and connect their experiences in school with normalized tropes of the Black experience, to them, there was no uncertainty as to where these commonly held beliefs about Black girls derived from and how they are maintained.

Many of the narratives of the girls in the study can be placed in the context of common readings of Black women and girls. As outlined throughout this study, some of the normalized stereotypes that stigmatize Black girls include: aptitude towards aggression and violence, baby mommas, sexually promiscuous, angry Black women, “bad bitch,” and “ratchet girls.” Media consistently presents Black youth in general as underachievers, not academically inclined, and uninterested in school. Below, I’ve summarized the narratives of a few participants to indicate how their experiences can be easily placed in context of these media readings of their identities.

Table 3
Common Media Readings of Black Girls

Participant	Narrative	Associated Black girl/women media stereotype or “reading”
Deja	Deja reflects on an encounter with her math teacher who assumes that she will likely have too many children for a sports car. (p. 98)	Baby momma Sexually promiscuous
Zara	Zara reflects on an encounter with a school employee who classifies her as being “mad all the time” and apparently aggressive to her teacher although the employee has no past interaction or association with Zara. (p. 100)	Aggressive Angry Black woman
Ivy	Ivy reflects on her interaction with her high school VP who upon learning of an unrelated incident, reviews her academic record. Once confirming that she is a “good” student, the VP informs her that her appearance interferes with her leadership. (p. 91)	Assumed not to be academically inclined

Imani	Imani reflects on being falsely accused of instigating an incident with a White student and being assumed guilty before her side of the story is heard. (p. 130)	Violent Aggressive
Raven	Raven reflects on her teacher's question about whether her father lives at home with her family. (p. 102)	Black families as broken or single-parent homes
Sasha	Sasha reflects on her teacher providing inaccurate historical details. Teachers can fail to prepare because they do not believe that Black students care about details enough to challenge them. (pp. 91-92)	Underachievers Uninterested in school

Connection between media-related stereotypes and select narratives of girls in this study—narratives indicated with page numbers.

Without specific research aimed at understanding how each of the school employees in the narratives came to their conclusions about the participants, I cannot say for sure that their stereotyping of the participants is based on media representations. What is clear, however, is the undeniable connection between these narratives and common media readings of Black women and girls that are normalized within the popular domain. It is also evident from discussions with the girls that they themselves believe media representations to be the source of the prevailing stigmas that shape their experiences.

The reports from the girls in this study outlining their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about these issues are not surprising. For years, literature on Black girls has outlined how dominant readings of Black stereotypes affect education, self-esteem, and well-being of Black girls (Brown, 2009; Harris, 2015). Television, film, and other forms of traditional media have historically been the main sources for mediated images and representations; however, the contemporary media landscape and the proliferation of the Internet have drastically increased the accessibility of media in all forms. Considering the age of the girls, not one of them can speak of

a time “before the Internet.” They are living in an age in which the Internet is all they know. However, mass media has, from its inception, always been used to propagate and maintain inequality through the normalizing of racist, sexist, and oppressive narratives on all platforms. In *Race After the Internet* (2013), Nakumara and Chow-White confirm, “The visual turn and technological turn are converging as images migrate and proliferate as well on to digital platforms” (p. 5), suggesting that advancements in media and communication technologies may change the language or medium while not changing the messages and ideologies that are both implicit and explicit in problematic representations.

Cultural Appropriation

Ivy talked about her experience facilitating a workshop focused on issues related to representation at her high school. Her example points to one of the ways cultural power and significance is often denied by her White peers in school. Black culture is seen as “cool” and is accessible by all; however, general conversations about the systematic marginalization of the people to whom many of these representations belong are uncomfortable and avoided. Six of the girls spoke directly about cultural appropriation and the various ways that it is manifested in GTA schools. Non-Black youth wearing du-rags, cornrows, and braids, twerking and rapping over hip-hop lyrics, has become a trend in local schools, creating another confusing and frustrating circumstance for Black girls to contend with. Some of these revelations draw compelling parallels to the colour-blind, post-racial propaganda that appears in education literature (Hope et al., 2015). True cultural value and exchange is not a problem for the participants; the issue for them is the double standard. A White girl who wears braids and twerks

in the hall is just a White girl wearing braids and twerking. Yet, a Black girl expressing her own culture in a similar way may face an entirely different set of outcomes.

The appropriation and essentially re-coding of culture that the participants described expounds some common instances of cultural appropriation that are symptomatic of representations of Black identity. Creating a context for which cultural productions have no ownership justifies continued exploitation of marginalized groups. This is even more common outside of school spaces. Within contemporary popular culture, Rodriquez (2006), discusses the colour-blind ideology and cultural appropriation of hip hop, stating: “Color-blindness is a sufficiently flexible and strong ideological framework that...[establishes] a discursive repertoire to plausibly replace the message of black emancipation with one of universal emancipation. Indeed, taking the blackness out of hip-hop and replacing it with color-blindness” (p. 661). In light of the overall profitability of Black and hip-hop culture, this erasure is mere theft and should be part of broader conversations in schools as students commonly engage and bond with each other based on their admiration and affinity for contemporary urban culture.

A considerable number of participants feared reprisal for speaking up in school. Although school officials cannot stop students from appropriating or misrepresenting culture, they can promote a better understanding of diversity and inclusion, much like what Ivy was attempting to do in her presentation. Shutting down or shutting out discourses about race and culture strengthens any cultural barrier that exists within the school environment. It also allows ignorance about identity and intersectionality to continue. The fear of speaking about their isolation that some Black girls experience is a form of silencing that creates further obstacles for Black girls to participate in changing the narratives that stigmatize their experiences.

Media representations have power. They have the power to construct and make meaning of identities within the broader society, but they also, as the theme of cultural appropriation suggests, create opportunities for further disempowerment by encouraging the co-opting of culture of marginalized people. Black girls are faced with the reality of discrimination based on incomplete and inaccurate representations of their identities in the media. In addition, they are forced to contend with the power that other groups have in the misuse of cultural expressions that continue to marginalize them.

One of my main concerns throughout the interviews and focus groups was the overwhelming similarities in the accounts and reflections of the participants. The sample, though small, is diverse enough to expect some differences in thoughts and opinions on the position of Black women, girls, and men and boys as well as the reality of Black identity within the public domain. Fourteen girls between 13 and 19 years old, attending high schools and post-secondary programs within the GTA, from a mix of backgrounds from areas within the Caribbean region and parts of Africa, all had a similar story to tell. Although there was a spectrum of ideas and reflections on personal influence and internalization, they all agreed that access and exposure to negative representations of Black women and girls leads to a number of issues, discrimination, and tension in their everyday lives. All the participants implicated contemporary and historical representations of Black identity in the media as the main reason for the stereotypes and attitudes that affect their day-to-day experiences.

This study also seeks to describe how participants negotiate and work through any issues and tensions related to their lived experiences as Black girls in school and their communities. In the theme of resilience, it is important to highlight that “Black women have consistently and

courageously engaged in literary practices that have yielded remarkable rewards for themselves and others” (Howard et al., 2016, p. 759). What is most important for Black girls is the ability to cultivate or source safer spaces where they can express themselves and collectively resist the narratives that negatively shape their experiences. Clearly, the girls in this study are able to critically think about the various day-to-day occurrences and representations that affect their experiences. They can name and identify the sources that, in their opinion, create tensions and influence how they are perceived in school and community spaces. Working through these realities together removes feelings of isolation and is necessary for healthy development.

Understanding that their racialized and gendered identities create disadvantages for them within society, Black girls would benefit from attention and discussions within their schools focused on race, gender, and other manifestations of inequity. Inclusive spaces will assist with building their trust and helping them to feel supported and able to meet challenges. When teachers and students engage in activities that reproduce and validate their African, African Canadian, and African Caribbean heritages, it generates factual and intellectual knowledge and also helps to protect Black self-representation (Henry, 1998 pp. 126–127); this type of educational space reflects a Black feminist pedagogical approach to education.

Programs that create safer environments for Black girls to speak and be themselves encourage their positive development and enhance their school experiences (Brown, 2009). However, these programs are consistently underfunded and are not directly supported by school boards (James & Turner, 2017; Vaught, 2009). As such, the girls reported not having a formal outlet to share their concerns about their school experiences. Some of the girls interviewed talked about creating their own spaces of resistance where Black students gather to be outside of the

White administration's gaze. However, not all the participants reported having access to spaces like this. Without the provision of safer spaces for Black girls and their unique needs, Black girls continue to feel isolated in their experiences, and for some, this also translates into a feeling of voicelessness and powerlessness.

Moving Forward

Two of the participants (Jada and Sasha) seemed to place less significance on the impact of media representations in their own lives. Although many of Jada's accounts and reflections point to issues of inequity in her school, there was a general feeling of things just being the way they are. Jada, of all the girls interviewed, seemed less bothered by racism, sexism, and the discrimination of teachers and peers. This was particularly clear in the various ways she described dealing with any incident that would arise. She tackles issues head-on, speaks up, and makes herself seen. I draw a parallel between Jada and Sasha because Sasha demonstrated the same type of attitude in her focus group session. Of the four girls in the focus group, she was least impacted by negative associations with Blackness in the media. She also appeared to be the most optimistic about how changes in media and shifts in representations of Black identity are impacting her personally.

Although she does not suggest that she is completely unaffected by media, Raven seems to be the most hopeful about media and does not see the current landscape of media and its representations in the same way that some of the other participants do. It is true. A significant amount of evidence demonstrates notable changes in television and film representations. Turn on the television today, and there is all sorts of dialogue about race, gender bias, and poverty in popular programs—stories and images that were extremely rare years ago. There are more

diverse characters, played by people who represent a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and communities, and audiences are witnessing an increase of this diversification in the television and film industry.

Beyond mere images and representations, examining recent television and film network controversies, one might also believe that holding people accountable for racist, sexist, or misogynistic behaviour is quickly becoming a new normal in the industry as well. In 2018, Roseanne Barr was fired from her own ABC sitcom, titled with her name, for a racist tweet that she posted. In that same year, Netflix removed Kevin Spacey from the hit drama *House of Cards*, in which he starred and was executive producer, based on a series of sexual assault allegations. These cases are significant because historically little to no action was taken to address this type of behaviour by power players in the industry. A number of comparable examples demonstrate a shift in the way media, as a structure in society, are being forced to change representations and advance equitable solutions to address concerns about media and its limited and problematic structures.

But what does this do for Black girls? For Raven, it gives her hope that Black girls growing up today will see more images that reflect their identity. For other participants, like Ivy who is an independent filmmaker, these changes are also a source of inspiration. She believes she can one day participate in changing representations by producing narratives that accurately represent her experience and the experiences of girls like her.

After analyzing the voices of the girls captured with this study, I believe a combination of approaches that meets Black girls where they are at, i.e., online, while fostering more expansive opportunities for learning and participating in schools presents the most appropriate starting

point. In the conclusion of this study, I elaborate on specific recommendations to support Black girls in schools and within their communities.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion—Black Girls Are Not Magic

It is much easier if you are non-Black person. I think teachers see [non-Black people] more and it is way easier as there is not much of a pressure for them to be a certain way, or wear certain things. It's just much easier compared to Black girls who has society telling them, you have to like look like this, and dress like this. – Ebony

As mentioned in the introduction, I embarked on this study to develop a better sense of some of the factors that shape the contemporary lives of Black girls. Prior to sitting and mapping out the direction for this study, I had not purposely or intentionally reflected on my experience growing up in Toronto. As my daughter grew older, I could not help but remember my past experiences with media and school, and I wondered how her Black, female, Caribbean identity would influence her development and well-being within the Greater Toronto Area today.

Facing some of the conclusions that I came to through my reflections was difficult because I couldn't help but wish that I knew more or that I had the language at the time to articulate what was taking place. I contemplated whether those teacher microaggressions that were directed towards me impacted my studies and the direction of my career. I wondered if the racism I experienced and witnessed led to my overall distrust of the systems that I later had to navigate as an adult. In my reflection on the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that I had as a teenage Black girl, I will never know how much of what I went through and continue to experience as a Black woman is a direct result of my school experiences. Examining the experiences of Black girls in high school today, it is both striking and unfortunate to contemplate the similarities.

The focus here, however, is not my school experiences or my life as a result. After working in the community and engaging with Black girls prior to the start of the study, I cannot say that what the girls revealed through their narratives was overwhelmingly surprising. As disappointing, clearly unfair, and even ridiculous as some of the accounts may seem, I've been

hearing similar stories in school, at home, and in their communities for years. Taking an academic approach to analyzing their accounts was distressing. Hearing about these types of situations in passing did not have the same impact as the process of thematically categorizing and describing so many individual but often similar circumstances that Black girls so regularly experience.

In Henry's 1998 study *Taking Back Control: African Canadian Women Teachers' Lives and Practice*, she asks three questions: "How much agony and torment can a child bear in silence? How does a young Black girl develop a healthy self-identity in such environments? How often does it happen in school that a Black child is reprimanded for her response to what may be a series of racial incidents?" (p. 16). These questions remain unanswered and are, therefore, still relevant in the contemporary lives of Black girls in the Greater Toronto Area.

The lack of belonging and the insecurities that Black girls feel coming of age in the GTA are perpetuated through a vicious cycle. In school today, Black girls must confront an ubiquitous media environment that has been further expanded with the Internet and social media. Media, as hooks (1992) and Hall (1997) have shown us, have always been the source for creating and maintaining stereotypes that negatively shape the lives of Black people. The influences that certain types of representations have on people's lives seem to shift as society changes. Although we are seeing more diversity and variety in contemporary media, Black girls continue to live with bias and discrimination resulting from dominant anti-Black, sexist, and classist portrayals of Black women and girls. These depictions not only impact them on a social level with peers, but they also play a significant role in shaping their experiences at school with teachers and administrators.

Quality, responsive education is a key factor in the success of students in school, regardless of race, gender, social status, or other factors. Realizing this, educators have a responsibility to examine the power and control the educational system asserts in the lives of youth, particularly youth who have been historically marginalized through education. The way students respond to and engage with the curriculum and educators responsible for teaching and interacting with them is essential to their successful experiences in school. For some, it also determines whether they are able to complete educational requirements needed to transition into post-secondary programs. Based on the accounts shared by the 14 participants in this study, it is clear that more effort needs to be made to transform the educational environment in order to reduce the discriminatory practices, teacher microaggressions, and general teacher apathy that Black girls regularly experience in GTA schools.

Black girls encounter barriers at all stages and in all areas of their social lives. They are forced to deal with stigma and the effects of intersectionality (race, gender, class, and age). Participant accounts affirm some of the data that has been reported in studies on Black students and education (Brown, 2009; Cooper, 2003; Henry, 2017; James & Turner, 2017; Milner IV, 2017). Teachers and administrators, regardless of their identity, hold biases and prejudices that are easily and commonly directed towards Black girls. Black girls' experiences, particularly in the context of education, are essential to the analysis, as they demonstrate, to some degree, reasons for the disparities in educational outcomes reported for Black youth (James & Turner, 2017; Anucha et al., 2018). How are Black youth, in this case, Black girls, expected to achieve similar outcomes to their non-Black counterparts when their experiences, both in and out of the

classroom, are riddled with discrimination and isolation? The answer: a significant number of them cannot.

Black girls continue to exist on the margins of society, and as a result, they remain in an endless state of personal inquisition. In situations that feel unjust, Black girls go through a series of questions or thoughts to assist them in making sense of their encounters. Is what I am experiencing because of my race? Perhaps this issue is because of my gender; maybe it's due to my family status or stereotypes that have been associated with girls who look like me. Any tension, negative experience, or outcome brings questions about whether their identities and intersectionality should be implicated. These often-unanswered questions confirm the lack of power that they have over their own lives and over the structures that they must depend on.

In the introduction I outlined three broad questions that I used as the basis of this study. Here, I revisit these questions to summarize and conclude in light of my findings. I also make some final recommendations on strategies to transgress the discrimination and inequity discussed throughout the study.

Question One

What challenges do Black girls face in school in the GTA?

From teacher microaggressions, to inequitable treatment in schools, to the racism and sexism expressed by peers, Black girls deal with an enormous number of limiting circumstances pertaining mainly to their identity. Intersectionality forces these girls to meet challenges and other obstacles related to Blackness, age, gender, class, as well as other factors. Black girls are placed in positions where they must deal with stereotypes and discrimination throughout their educational experiences while still being expected to meet the same standards as peers who do

not face the same issues. Black girls often feel targeted, and because they do not believe the school system supports their well-being in general, they often do nothing to address their individual concerns and situations.

The dialogue of the participants that led to these conclusions was captured in spaces where the girls felt safe to speak and express themselves. It is clear that safety is a challenge for these girls. There was a general sense of distrust of the school system. Without feeling safe and supported within the system, the Black girls in this study believe that they must resolve any issues related to the school system, their teachers, or the curriculum on their own. They do not believe reporting issues to administration is helpful, and they do not approach teachers who insult or stereotype them. Many of the girls do not believe that concerns about teacher microaggressions, discrimination, or ineffective teachers will be heard and addressed at a structural level.

Being a Black girl is not a static cultural circumstance; therefore, schools must account for the needs of Black girls within their specific communities. Implementing clear provincial standards for supporting Black girls in Ontario schools is an appropriate measure, considering the diversity seen within GTA classrooms, especially in urban centres within the province (Durham Compendium of Action for Black Students, 2018). Given provincial standards for equity in schools, schools have a responsibility to respond to the specific needs of girls in their school community. For example, schools with a high concentration of Muslim Black students will need to have different accommodations and considerations than a school without such a concentration.

Examining several education-based resource documents (Anti-Black Racism Strategy, 2017; Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, 2009; Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan, 2017), it is not evident why such elaborate educational plans for equitable education do not adequately account for intersectionality to support the unique and nuanced needs of Black girls. More collaboration between various structures within education, i.e., classroom teaching, school policies, school environment, are needed to examine how pedagogical and administration practices can be used to boost the achievement and success of Black girls more effectively. Both teachers and administrators need to be held accountable for implementing measures to address the education of Black girls, within the context of personally established needs and the needs of their communities.

Ontario's efforts to improve the lives of Black youth is, at the very least, commendable. Nevertheless, without an explicit plan for accountability, there is no way to measure the outcomes of all the elaborate and colourful documents outlining equity strategies that are released by school boards and provincial ministries. The effectiveness of these action plans relies in large part on the amount of pressure placed on institutions to make and sustain changes. There needs to be a deliberate and uncompromising effort to educate those who directly and indirectly work with and influence Black girls at various levels of education.

The girls in this study consistently referenced microaggressions and discriminatory teacher practices among other experiences in school. In order to accommodate Black girls in the classroom, teachers must be trained to make inclusion and cultural responsiveness an active element in their practice. There is no excuse for verbal assaults or biased policies, especially considering that equity and accessibility are vital elements to effectively educate all students.

School systems need to take responsibility for the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that students face at the hands of their teachers and school administrators. Policies that promote the use of CRP, particularly in urban classrooms with high concentrations of diverse students are not sufficiently addressing concerns in schools. Policies need to go further by implementing mandatory training and evaluation for all teachers, to ensure that all students belong in their educational spaces and are given a fair chance at success.

Although tools like CRP, as well as other measures outlined in equity and diversity plans, have been recommended as useful strategies for improving the school experience of Black girls, the reality is that there has been slow progress towards training and implementing them within schools. Henry (1998) warns of the potential for educators and school systems to feel as if they “have done their part by providing ‘culturally relevant’ texts or books with female protagonists” (p. 248) to meet the requirements outlined in policies. However, Henry continues by reminding us of the “complexity of social locations – language, socioeconomic background, gender, races and national origin” as well as “how they are configured and implicated in our identities and our ideas in far reaching ways” (p. 248). From this, I submit that the project of freeing Black girls from the grip of inequitable education will require far more than books with Black characters or Black History Month events each year.

Reviewing the accounts and data from educational researchers who have been outlining concerns about the education of Black students for decades (James & Turner, 2017; Henry, 1998; Milner IV, 2017; Muhammad, 2012), there is little evidence of transformation or change within school systems in the GTA. Black girls consistently suffer under oppressive school policies and practices. Clearly, racism, in addition to sexism and classism, is a normalized and accepted part

of the systemic policies that essentially allow the inequities common across schools in North America to continue.

Question Two

How do common media perceptions of Black women and girls factor into how Black girls are treated in school?

Given common associations of Black girls with loud, aggressive behaviour and lack of attention in school, the participants had very little doubt that pervasive media narratives of Black girls as less than, unattractive, and unworthy shape the ways average, everyday Black girls are perceived and treated within society. These findings further support literature that points to the same abject narrative of Black girls and women (Jacobs, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2016). These Black girls continue to be stereotyped and discriminated against in all areas of their lives, and they believe that these experiences are directly related to media representations of Black women and girls.

All 14 girls in this study came to the conclusion that media representations shape their daily experiences, in school and in the community. For some of the girls, media representations of Black women and girls had more impact on how they see themselves and what they see for their future. The all-consuming media, both traditional and more contemporary forms, are affecting the lives of Black girls in very concrete ways. A number of the situations that participants describe occurring at school can be directly connected to the limiting media representations and controlling images circulated of Black women and girls. The perception of Black identities that are often based on media readings and representations manifests in how Black girls are treated in school and society.

Research indicates that the interconnectivity of our society and current media environment impacts the majority of teenagers, regardless of race, class, or gender (boyd, 2014). However, bringing attention back to the impact of intersectionality, it is evident from the accounts in this study that any stigma that affects the “normal,” “average” teenager (i.e., White teenage boy) has the potential to create much more compounding, often-negative challenges for Black girls. This reality provides a compelling argument for deeper examination of media and its relationship to the education and academic success of Black girls. Media should be included as a factor in educational outcomes. Common readings of Black girls, for example, should be effectively included in training and development strategies created for teachers and administrators to address equity, diversity, and inclusion in Ontario schools. Understanding these stereotypes and the ways in which they are regularly perpetuated in teacher and school-based practices is fundamental to addressing the general issues experienced by Black girls.

Question Three

What approaches and strategies do Black girls use to resist negative representations and the various forms of oppression they face?

As Cooper (2002), so eloquently states, “Black girls find each other as means to survive” (p. 117). Safer spaces also help Black girls feel confident about their ability to work through and solve their own problems. Black girls, even while encountering issues, have the capacity to problem-solve and face individual adversities if given proper tools and language. Accessing spaces in which they feel safe to speak on and explore options with their peers increases Black girls’ positive development and self-efficacy (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016). The contemporary landscape of youth and young adult life requires that safer spaces be both physical and online.

Using some of their own perspectives, the girls who create positive messages that affirm and support the growth and development of Black girls seemed to think positively about motivating girls to participate in online spaces. Creating messages also provides a better alternative as they are able to engage with more suitable, self-affirming images online and with content created by people who share similar identities and histories. Some of the changes that need to happen on a broader level, i.e., shift in teacher attitudes and biases, may not be realized through social media; however, social media can reverse some of the damage caused by Black girls' internalizing harmful mainstream portrayals of Black identity. Creating environments similar to what Collins (2000) describes as "safe(r) spaces," where Black girls can express themselves and learn from each other, would not only help Black girls resist disempowering representations but also help to build resiliency when faced with negating images. Safer spaces, both online and physical, help marginalized Black girls cultivate the types of settings needed to transgress their common experiences with racism, sexism, and all forms of oppression, away from the White gaze.

Safer spaces are a key feature in Black feminist theory as Collins (2000) highlights, "By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, these safer spaces help Black women resist dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American institutions" (p. 111). Advancing and supporting the development of safer spaces helps to cultivate a community of safety in which Black girls can freely speak about their experiences. Black girls find various coping and resolution strategies to deal with the effects of school discriminations on their own, but creating and promoting safer spaces for Black girls

within schools provides an environment that can reduce the consequences of isolation within White school systems.

Like the construction of Black media, which hooks (1992) summarizes as a space for resisting and creating broader, more inclusive representations of Black identities and cultures, Black girls can develop and maintain their own spaces to represent themselves. Today, as mass media continues to evolve and take on new forms, Black girls can utilize more contemporary media formats to resist and engage. New media has created the potential for everyday media consumers to occupy avenues in media production as a means of promoting social justice. In Ispa-Landa and Conwell's (2015) study, which looks at the racialization of academic achievement, they suggest, "Blacks who seek bonds of solidarity with other Blacks are more likely to engage in positive collective action on behalf of the group, and that Black group solidarity should be accepted as a desirable cultural norm leading to positive economic, social, political development" (pp. 16–17). This demonstrates to some degree that supporting Black group cohesion produces advanced academic achievement for Black students.

The Black girls in this study were able to reconcile the representations that often maintain negative stereotypes about Blackness and other identities. Through active engagement with media texts online, when given a space and context for understanding oppression and power, Black girls can provide useful responses to some of the harmful depictions that continue to perpetuate the racial and gender inequality that factors into their realities.

By shifting the focus to the impact of oppressive narratives and texts online, girls' programs and online spaces like The Power to Be International's Akeelah's Room can assist Black girls to engage as producers in the online spaces that they occupy. Through the Internet,

particularly social media, it is possible to participate within digital spaces in ways that were never possible with traditional media like television and advertising. The structures of power that control representations are still in place within digital media; however, there are more opportunities to share and disseminate alternative narratives, which challenge racist, sexist, and other oppressive ideologies, in online environments.

While it is important to acknowledge the possibilities that social media offers to the masses to resist specific narratives, one must also note the challenges of having any real impact. As the girls in this study indicated, the normalized reading of Black girl identity is reproduced and circulated on all media platforms, and many of the experiences they have in school and within the community are based on these pervasive negating representations. Having ideas and images that resist traditional representation be seen by many people is still quite difficult. Resistance also takes both an emotional and physical toll on Black girls as they are constantly placed in positions that they need to resist or defend themselves against specific types of representations. Black girls need spaces not only to deal with the racist and sexist issues they deal with in school, but also to unpack and critically assess representations that commonly circulate online.

Social media, from Instagram to YouTube, to blogging sites like Tumblr, provide a space for Black girls to express and position their identity, the way they see themselves, and the way they would like others to see them as well. These can become safer spaces (as there is no such thing as a completely safe space). Black girls engaging online can also make specific and deliberate choices about their network and who they follow, filtering content creators who do not support positive representation and reducing their exposure to images that they believe to be

harmful and distracting. Power within online spaces is still contained and controlled at a high level, in many cases by the same people and companies that controlled more traditional mass mediums like television and film; however, there seems to be more agency available through social media.

Black girls continue to find spaces, physical, face-to-face, and online, to actively resist the powerful and pervasive messaging that Black women and girls have been historically subjected to through specific and limited media representations.

They Are Only Human

Listening to the reflections on the real experiences of these girls, it is interesting how some of the more normalized, negative themes framing Black girls are juxtaposed with the concept of Black girls being “magic” (Bond, 2018; Thomas, 2015). “Black girl magic” has become a recognizable, contemporary Black female empowerment cliché (Anyangwe, 2018; Grace, 2017). In spite of these now-familiar tropes of Black girlhood that circulate in the media, the girls I met through this study do not have supernatural powers that are innate to their identity as Black girls. There isn’t some form of magical elixir that Black girls can drink to allow them to avoid or overcome the circumstances of racism, sexism, and classism in their daily lives. Education systems should pay attention to the narratives that outline often-troubling experiences with the system.

The #Blackgirlmagic discourse and others that are used to empower Black women and girls cannot productively assist Black girls with outright racism. #Blackgirlmagic is not a tool that can be leveraged within educational systems to deal with ineffective practices and pedagogies, demotivated teachers, and lack of support within their school settings. The ability to

be successful in school does not lie solely in one's ability to deal with the adversity that comes with racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Education is one of the structures in which Black girls experience powerlessness, and therefore, they require specific attention and accommodations if they are to succeed within the system. The concept of Black girl magic as an empowerment narrative has its place in Black girls' studies. When thinking of the term as more than a hashtag, it implies an inherent resilience in the face of oppression (Thomas, 2016). However, the danger of this narrative is in its use to justify rather than directly address the racism, discrimination, and sexism that Black girls experience in school. Most concerning, Black girls may come to feel that struggle is a natural part of their lives and their experience when the discourses of #Blackgirlmagic are internalized or seen as a type of armour against the issues they face in school.

It is important that we all acknowledge that Black girls are not innately magical, especially in context of their ability to succeed academically or face racist representations. Black girls deal with a significant number of obstacles within their everyday lives. Understandably, considering the histories of assaults on various groups of Black women and girls, this narrative of being "magic" is important to creating change, uplifting, and empowering them through difficult circumstances. This framing of Black girls as magic is often used within empowerment programs across North America as a tool to attend to the historical negative position of Black girls. Still, this theme of "magic" does not absolve education systems and communities of their responsibility to educate and support Black girls. Black feminist theory and practice, including safer spaces and dialogue, can support individuals and service providers in bridging the gaps that lead to the disparities reported about and explicated by Black girls. It also helps to support

critical consciousness and open dialogue (Freire, 1973), so that Black girls' voices can be heard, acknowledged, and validated when addressing situations that directly involve them. More research and data that comprehensively reflect the voices of marginalized Black girls from various communities will also help their educators, community leaders, and community members with their roles of supporting Black girls as they work through some of the issues that impact their development, well-being, and success. More studies of this kind, moreover, will help to better demonstrate the pervasiveness of oppression that young Black women face in schools, in public, and online.

To conclude, I assert that this study is not about the deficient, abject position of Black girls. In fact, one of the main summations that I draw from this experience of talking and listening to Black girls is that they are smart, critical, and very capable. They understand the issues they face and the circumstances that create and maintain them. The purpose of this study is not to save Black girls. It is about addressing the realities of their experiences and considering what is fair and what is just. Regardless of whether Black girls continue to face and, in many situations, beat the odds created by racism, sexism, etc., the fact is they continue to be left to survive inequitable systems that they must depend on without adequate support. Ontario and Canada in general must deal with the concerns and issues that are consistent for Black girls, that in many ways have remained unchanged for decades

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