It Takes a Village:
Strengthening Parent Engagement for Racialized Youth

By

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Abstract

This research paper set out to explorer the barriers and challenges of communication between racially marginalized parents and high schools. The aim was to examine ways that could potentially contribute to strengthening those relationships through communication, which could then help to address the academic gap for black students. The main themes that emerged from this study relates to how parent engagement is viewed, the modes of two way communication and its effectiveness, along with the need for community collaboration in the education experience of children from racial and marginalized communities. Through several individual interviews with parents and school staff, a critical race analysis was used. It was discovered that the traditional framework of parent engagement leaves racial and marginalized families at a disadvantage, as they are often viewed as disengaged in relation to traditional parent engagement framework. A major barrier continues to exist from historical biases and assumptions of racialized parent. This paper will highlight the barriers and challenges both schools and parents face, and strategies that can help strengthen two-way communication to build relationships. Future research may consider creating a less informal framework that is geared to specific community's needs.

Foreword

In the beginning of my studies I wanted to learn about the barriers black youth with mental health faced. As I progressed through the MES program, my focus became academic parent engagement of racialized parents, and how their relationships with school staff could be strengthened to help address the academic gap of their children. I went into this process with a desire to obtain an in-depth understanding of how intersectionality of race gender and class affected black people and how racism plays into the continual inequitable disadvantages of black communities and their vulnerability to negative social determinants of health. My areas of concentration included barriers to communication, strategies to build collaboration, finding ways to encourage academic parent engagement of racialized parents, along with policies and practices of In/equitable engagement. My three components in my plan of study included Critical Race Theory, the educational experience of black youth in Toronto, and supports and possibilities for parent engagement of racial and marginalized families. With an increased understanding of Critical Race Theory, community development, systemic policy and education, which I gained through MES courses in Urban Education, Popular Education, Environment and Health, Community Development and Collaboration, Environmental Justice and Social Advocacy. I now have a solid comprehension of how institutional and system racism was planted, and how it moves throughout local, national and global societies. I am able to identify policies that continue to perpetuate inequities. Through the MES program I have also gained tremendous skills in qualitative research that has helped me to identify strategies and opportunities, that can be used for equitable parent, school, and community collaboration. Through this research my hope was to find ways to implement change, and I hope these finding can contribute to future research and positive change.

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To my friends and family: I really could not have done this without your support. but most of all, this is for my children Keshia, Michael, Kayla and Shona, my top four reasons for doing this. And also to Dr. Sarah Flicker, I would like to thank for you for your encouragement, support and patience.

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Introduction

"It takes a village to raise a child."

Even though the origin of this proverb remains a mystery, it is believed to have been originated by the Igbo and Yuruba, which are the two largest tribes in Nigeria (Taylor, 2018). It has been a phrase used throughout many African and Caribbean countries, and it has crossed many seas into many households in Canada. This proverb recognizes and encourages the belief that children need numerous supportive, caring and nurturing individuals along their path to adulthood in order to create a safe and secure foundation for their future. Parents cannot and should not bear sole responsibility for raising their children. When children reach adolescence, they require support from their families, schools, and communities. Youth spend a large portion of their day in school; educators and teachers have great potential to (positively and negatively) influence students.

Critical Race Theory & Education Reflexivity

I use a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to examine the educational experience of black students and their families. CRT challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism and shows how it intersects with sexism and classism. Critical Race Theory allows for the examination of the conscious and unconscious facets of racism. The theory acknowledges the concept of interest convergence, which "advances the interest of white elites and working class Caucasians" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pg.188).

The foundation of the relationship between black families and the education system is built on inequities. The system continues to cultivate these disparities, which for lower socio-

economic status (SES), racialized communities, has produced feelings of exclusion, disrespect, distrust, and devaluation of parental and community knowledge. Despite a plethora of academic literature on different approaches for working collaboratively with racialized families from lower SES backgrounds, these recommendations are rarely implemented. Policies, recommendations and strategies that are believed to help address the academic gap for black students and help build and strengthen the relationships of lower socio-economic status racialized students and their families, are often not adopted or practiced by educators.

One fundamental challenge remains the leadership and educators who are educating children. For successful partnerships between schools, families, and communities, educators need to possess the desire and ability to self-reflect. To work towards change, educators would have to adopt and incorporate a continuous reflective practice. This could potentially force policy makers, administrators, and educators to challenge their own biases and beliefs, and to deeply examine the roots of their biases and assumptions. It would require all of us to reflect on how actions and attitudes support the perpetuation of inequity towards racialized and marginalized students and their families.

Education is a profession that is entered by individuals who will remain working within the education sector in different capacities for many years, sometimes decades, often entire careers. Therefore it would only be beneficial for educators to engage in continuous self-reflection to achieve personal and professional growth. This approach would not only benefit the educator, but also those that they are educating (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, & Harry, 2017).

Numerous educators, scholars, and policy makers have worked and continue to work towards change. Too often, however, rather than examine the ways in which their institutions were designed to uphold deeply racist systems, administrators and educators shift the blame onto families for the poor achievement of black youth (Gillborn, 2015).

Critical Race Theory is committed to social justice; it strives for the eradication of racism throughout all systems that foster the perpetuation of inequities, particularly those that are racially motivated (Egbo, 2012). Examining the pedagogy of social change for teacher education, Egbo (2012) argues that there is an acknowledgement that pre-service and in-service teacher education for teachers includes "political and intellectual, as well as practical activities that occur within complex historical, economic, and social context" (Egbo, 2012, pg 247, 248). CRT argues for the importance of giving racialized individuals a voice to speak to the historical, political, economic and societal inequities that they have experienced (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Parent Engagement of Racialized Youth:

The concept of School Parent Involvement emerged from a traditional framework to address inequitable education. However, the term "parent involvement" predominantly refers to ideal behaviors of white middle class parents, as the term focuses on "group specific actions, beliefs and attitudes that serve as an operational factor in defining categorical differences among children (and their parents) from different racial-ethnic and economic backgrounds" (Bakker & Denessen, 2007, pg189). Therefore it does not acknowledge the various ways in which African Canadian parents engage and advocate for their children's education (Bower & Griffin, 2011). As this framework fails to include various activities, involvement and knowledge, and beliefs

that reflect racialized parents. CRT argues that not only is it necessary to use stories of lived experience, but that these stories also should be required in research about racialized people. Using the voices of black individuals for recommendations, strategies, policies and practices throughout educational research would increase cultural and social capital for black families and communities and would help to gain traction in closing the education gap (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

As policy makers, academics, and educators are pushing for change through education reform, educators are starting to change their views on the roles that parents, families, and communities should play in the education of their students and within the school environment. Language that is used to form parent involvement policy continues to be challenged. As parents, educators and administrators are beginning to move away from the term "parent involvement" and progressing towards the term "parent engagement", as the term is primarily structured by policy makers and implemented by schools, with the core focus on the school's agenda. The term "parent engagement" is believed to create stronger feelings of ownership because it focuses not just on activity, but involvement that allows for a more active and equal voice in how parents interact with educators within the system, while keeping the needs of the child at the core (Fenton et al., 2017). It is important within our diverse Canadian landscape that we are cognisant of how language is used, as social location and race contribute to interpretation and/or personalization.

Egbo (2012) suggests that racism takes a somewhat more complicated curve in Canada because of social attitudes that paint the picture of a more racially inclusive society compared to its neighbour, the United States. Egbo (2012) refers to Canada as having an "illusion of inclusion" because of a continuous progression of diversity throughout schools.

Yet somehow the teaching profession "remains predominantly homogenous white, middle-class and monolingual" (Egbo, 2012 pg25). Therefore, the majority of teachers view the world differently from the majority of their students and their families. This dynamic creates a disconnect which forces the need for critical exploration of how race plays out in social justice, and education is seen as a fundamental place to change Canadian discourse on inclusivity and diversity (Egbo, 2012). James (2012), states that the classroom is where equity begins, because the success of an underclass is mired within a middle class educational system. This puts those that are racialized, and linguistic minorities, at a higher disadvantage (C. James, 2012). As Canada continues to grow under a multicultural scope, educational environments need to be acknowledged as very complex spaces that should be approached with an understanding and commitment to creating progressive and sustainable outcomes for all stakeholders (Gillborn, 2015). To do so requires building the necessary relationships and partnerships with groups of diverse parents, families and organizations that hold social and cultural capital.

Teachers are often the primary point of contact for parents when communication with the school is necessary (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Teachers, therefore, play a vital role in strengthening relationships with parents, and require the support of policy makers, principals and colleagues to do so (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). This could be viewed as a negative or a positive for teachers because of the weight and responsibility that it entails. However, if school communities aim to create equitable education, then it is important to provide teachers with strong, supportive and progressive leadership that will help them obtain and sustain the required skills to work within diverse elementary and secondary schools.

Barriers:

Parent engagement, if not implemented in elementary school becomes much more difficult in the high school years. For high school students, credit accumulation determines their path to post-secondary opportunities. High school educators need to create inclusive space for racialized and minority parents to feel welcome, heard, and valued. Parents need to be given opportunities to sit at tables with other stakeholders and contribute to the outcome of their children's education. Racialized and minority parents often feel judged and disregarded when communicating with school officials. Fenton (2017) believes that racial micro aggressions play a major role in how racialized parents are treated. This flows from unconscious attitudes and assumptions of white hierarchy that enforces black inferiority. Racialized parents then feel a need to be suspicious and guarded; they also feel the need to educate their children on the realities of macroaggressions within and throughout society, along with strategies of how to deal with such situations (Fenton et al., 2017). This makes it increasingly difficult for racialized parents to feel like they are partners in the education of their child. Conversations addressing racism and bias are often met with resistance. A critical race perspective attaches this unease to the ways in which race inequity and racism are structural traits of the educational system (Gillborn, 2005).

Canada's education system promotes individualism and meritocracy. Yet most racialized parents truly believe that it takes a village to raise a child. Nonetheless, racialized and marginalized parents are positioned as either the cause of poor educational outcomes for their child or as an adversary of the school (Fenton et al., 2017). Racialized parents have a great wealth of knowledge that school administrators and teachers could tap into to assist with some of the challenges that educators may face. High school teachers, administrators

and principals need to make parents feel welcome and valued by taking the lead to work towards constructing meaningful, equitable and sustainable collaboration, which would entail a change in thinking from the school regarding cultural and social capital and acknowledge the wealth of knowledge their parents hold. This would also help acknowledge and allow conversation about the rooted historical barriers that the power dynamic within these relationships produces (Fenton et al., 2017).

Academic Gap:

In a 2017 CBC report, it was reported that over $125 million was given to the TDSB school board for low-income schools; only $66 million was to be spent on the program that included parent engagement within schools. The rest of the money was found on other budget lines to offset the gap in federal funding to the board (Dunn, 2017). When we speak of low income schools, there is usually a high population of black and brown students. Meanwhile, the existing data place black Canadian students at a lower graduation rate, higher rates of streaming into non-academic programs and higher suspension rates than their white peers. These trends contribute to lower employment rates that would affect them long after their high school years (James, 2017). High school completion, achievement, and academic level determine access to post-secondary education, which is supposed to increase a student's access to higher paid jobs. However, inequities in Canada's education system contribute to the perpetuation of a vicious cycle of wealth and power in Canada that leaves black Canadians earning less in the labour force than their white peers (Egbo, 2012). As educators and academics continue to do research to collect data, their findings will continue to highlight the educational experiences of the black community to help address the academic gaps.

Parent engagement has been identified as a component to addressing these gaps. Yet many parent engagement models that are used within education can be counterproductive to creating diverse, collaborative and inclusive relationships concerning racialized parents and schools. With the support of schools, parents can challenge dominant discourses and traditional frameworks of parent engagement that can contribute to closing the achievement gap of black students (Dei, 2008).

Joyce Epstein's School- Family- Community Partnership model (Epstein, Sanders, & Bornstein, 2002) is the preferred framework for research on parent engagement. Studies have shown the effectiveness of the Epstein model to increase student academic achievement. As this model focuses on partnerships, it encourages schools, families and the community to design and implement activities that situates students' needs at the center. Epstein encourages creating opportunities to create strategies that will spark stronger engagement and motivation of students to succeed.

Epstein's model acknowledges the importance of the role and collaboration of the home, school, and community in a child's success. This model also acknowledges the need for the voice of parents and recognition of parental involvement in their child's education outside of the school. However there are some limits to this model, as it uses the traditional definition of parent engagement, where the school controls the practice of communication, involvement and decision making (Bower & Griffin, 2011).

This paper uses Critical Race Theory to interpret interviews conducted with racialized parents of high school students, high school teachers, a principal, a guidance counsellor, and a social worker. Interviews focused on their understandings of the purpose and value of

parent engagement, along with barriers to communication and how schools and racialized parents can begin to strengthen communication.

Methods:

The research design for this study was qualitative in nature, and grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT). Joyce Epstein's model of parent engagement was applied to study the area of communication between families and schools. The intent of this study was to collect and analyze data to identify barriers that contribute to communication issues between racialized parents and schools. The use of CRT in this study allowed participants to share and express their views and experiences through interviews. The research, conducted in Toronto, consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with racialized parents and high school staff. Once all data were collected, they were then analyzed using open coding methodology. A purposive sampling technique was applied to this study to obtain participants. Purposive sampling techniques where chosen to allow the researcher to deliberately select participants through professional contacts. I contacted participants initially by email and then by phone. Ultimately, I recruited six participants. The sample included:

- 2 female Toronto District School Board high school staff, from different high schools;
- 1 school social worker and 1 guidance counselor, who had also been a teacher for 20 years and was able to speak to roles of both guidance counsellor and teacher
- Self-identified black parents (3 female, 1 male) who, at the time of this study, had a child in high school or who had completed their high school experience. The study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee at FES, York University. The consent form created by the

researcher met university standards regarding the protection of human subjects in qualitative research studies. Before each interview the researcher shared a consent form with the participants, explaining the purpose of the study, their rights regarding participation and confidentiality of identity. All participants' names were omitted from transcripts, field notes, and final paper. All interviews were conducted using a digital recording device. A prepared list of semi- structured questions developed by the researcher was used. Interviews were scheduled for 45 minutes in a private setting that was convenient for the participant. Five interviews were conducted face to face; one interview was conducted over the phone.

The interview questions compiled for this research were influenced by previous research on parent engagement and Critical Race Theory. The questions were designed to explore the nature of communication between schools and racialized parents, along with examining the concept of formal parent engagement and the barriers lower SES families' face. Participants were asked about their modes of parent school communication, what supports were needed, and their view on biases and assumptions hindering communication. After completion of each interview, the recordings of the interview were transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data through a critical race theory lens to allow for patterns to emerge across data allowing the researcher to gain deeper understanding of the research area. Once transcriptions were completed, the text was colour coded to identify participants. I reviewed the transcripts. When clarification was needed, to practice rigor, I contacted participants by telephone with follow up questions. Transcripts were then re-read several times to identify any similarities or differences and to identify repeated words which were highlighted in order to identifying any pattern that may have occurred. As additional data came in, it became necessary to frequently rethink the

codes that were emerging. Once coding was complete, transcripts were broken down several times until six distinct but closely interrelated narrative themes emerged from the data analysis.

Results

A look at Engagement:

The first theme that emerged throughout the data is in relation to parent engagement. As the research literature mentions, parental school engagement is a key component to addressing the education gap for racialized children. This theme was divided onto the following 3 categories.

Communication: Participants strongly expressed the need for two way communication between parents and schools to create a partnering relationship. Participants were asked about the different methods by which parents and schools communicate progress, updates, or issues regarding students. Both parent and school staff participants acknowledged the same modes of communication such as phone, email, informal face to face meetings, and formal update events such as parent teacher and curriculum nights. School staff respondents also mentioned the website as parent participants did not.

> *Phone calls, emails or in person or sometimes.*

> *The email communication is probably the most consistent way*
> *we as teachers are contacting students' parents.*

So I would either have communication via phone, email, face to face with the teachers

They do have something called curriculum night so parents are invited, and they have a website that parents can go on, and they (also) do parent Interviews

When asked what and why they were communicating, the school staff participants spoke more to an institutional process, whereas the parents spoke to more personal reasons to communicate, expressing accountability of self and school as a primary factor.

I ensure that the classroom teacher has my email address has my phone number that I'm in constant communication with them and I think it's also about ensuring that I'm holding myself my child as well as the system for what it is that I am asking for.

Because I want to know what's going on with my child.

The next category that was identified was participant views of an engaged parent vs a disengaged parent. All respondents in both data sets acknowledged that it was difficult to determine the personal characteristics of what made a parent engaged vs disengaged. A majority of participants connected level of education and language to engagement. Five participants referred to historical, societal or parental capacity when speaking about disengaged parents. Two parent participants exhibited frustration in regards to the word engaged and questioned the reasons and times for engagement.

Disengaged Vs Engaged

School staff participant views of why a parent may appear disengaged:

There's different reasons for it, sometimes it could have to do with mental health, a parent could have anxiety and you know not want to come to school, sometimes it could be like hard to get to the school is too difficult or for whatever reason, or the parent feels really intimidated to come to the school or it could just be that the parent just really doesn't like the school, doesn't want to come. Or the parent really doesn't think their opinion matters anyway.

They possess an education themselves, they possess the language to Advocate and articulate what they want,"

Examples given by school staff of parents they considered disengaged and engaged.

She disengage from the school because she was so sick and tired of us calling her and complaining about her child, she got fed up right and she was another parent who needed parenting lessons because she was not disciplining her child at all and so she was disengaged because she just didn't want to deal with it anymore

She's got lots, lots of time. She's a well-off woman, she's got lots of time this is her like passion project right, but like if she was trying to make ends meet I don't think she'd be here setting up prom dresses

Parent participants explained their views of why a parent may appears engaged vs disengaged:

It could be so many things, disengage parents, it could be, I wouldn't say that there are actual qualities that I can name.

it could just be the fact it's easier to engage when there's no situations when there's no issues Then why not be engaged right no one's talking down to me, my kids not being problematic right so I find it easier to engage when there's really no issues to be put on the table

A system is able to generalize and to categorize disengage parents and the notion that I am disengaged, why? Am I disengaged because I actually can't get to the school because of the times that you guys have meeting I can't get to?

There's a plethora of reasons why a parent could be disengaged.

I think the disengaged parent as corny as the word is you know, is resilient you know and I think if the child comes around I think that that engagement would more come because there's nothing harder when you're going through school and you want more for your child but someone speaking down to you and telling you, well you know he's not coming to school.

Role and Responsibility: This category emerged as school participants expressed their role and responsibility to students and their families to communicate and engage them in their child's academic experience. Parent participants expressed that the initial responsibility was placed on the school, however also mentioned their own responsibility.

School Staff express their responsibilities, and feelings of why it is important for them to engage parents. Both the school social worker and guidance counsellor indicated that they had more access to student information and opportunities to engage with parents than teachers did. The role of the teacher was limited to progress reports and attendance issues. Student information or knowledge of personal issues that the school social worker and guidance counsellor may have is not always passed on to the teacher if the parent request confidentiality.

I'll give students a progress report every month to give them idea what their marks are like just so they can share that with their parents.

For me like looking at everyone marks, I get to see everyone marks right and so I'm the person who is like being concerned when a kid has three out of four classes or two out of four classes.

You know a part of my role is helping someone feel comfortable around being able to speak with me.

As a guidance counselor I have even more ability to speak with parents.

Parent Participants express their views around their responsibility to engage with their child's school. Even though parents acknowledged their role to reach out, also expressed strong feeling that is was also very important that the school reached out to them.

> *I think my role is to communicate with the school if I think there are any issues but I also think the role of the school is to communicate with me if there's any issue.*

One parent expressed the importance of engaging with the school and spoke about their reason to engage as also a form of advocacy for others.

> *Definitely on my priority list, because not only am I advocating for my child I think I'm also advocating for others who might not necessarily have access and opportunity to the school so it definitely is a part of my role and my responsibility.*

Challenges and Barriers of Engagement: In this category, all participants identified particular barriers and challenges they felt impeded two-way communication. Parent responses identified lack of equitable supports and staff attitudes as barriers. Five out of six participants mentioned language as a barrier along with parental duties and personal issues. All respondents expressed time as a major barrier to strengthening communication. School staff participants expressed lack of funding along with parental and mental capacity of the parent as barriers. Parent participants strongly expressed how their past experiences with schools create present barriers for two-way communication. Two parent participants used the words "shut out" when explaining how they felt at times when interacting with school staff.

The following examples were given by school staff participants, identifying barriers of two-way communication as time, administrative duties and parents past experience with school.

> *Honestly you know like we are so swamped with paperwork we are just like engaging whatever parent whatever issue come and then the next day we have a brand-new like fire to put out in a sense right so we're just trying to catch her breath.*
>
> *If I spend like even 2 minutes composing email for 30 kids, that's a lot of time. There goes all my prep time communicating with parents.*
>
> *We just don't have the Manpower or the time to like go and invest and make friendships in those communities.*

Example given by guidance counsellor to a parent they identified as hard to communicate with.

> *Mom who was expelled from school herself right, and now she's coming in to a space where, and she went to the school so she was expelled from the school and now she's coming back to deal with her own child*

The following examples given by parent participants, expressed how their past educational experiences may affect racialized parents ability or desire to communicate with their child's school.

> *Feeling like I was being talked down to opposed to like I was having a conversation.*

Parent participant speaking to a specific interaction with school secretary that left her upset and other interactions she experienced.

> Every time that I, my experience with the school or the system I felt as though I have been shut out" *I walked out the office and then I walked back into the office and when I walked back into the office what I said to her was that as a parent I found her tone rude, dismissive and if I am a parent and I found my interaction with her challenging I can only imagine how it is it*

that a student coming into the office feels unwelcome, unwanted and shut down.

Views of Effectiveness: This category emerged as participants were asked about how effective the methods being used to engage and communicate with parents were. School staff expressed that engaging racialized families at times could be difficult because of the reasons they were contacting them, which was usually connected to academic or discipline issues. All but two participants, one parent, one school staff spoke to the time a situation may occur as two to five months may go by before parents are contacted as a secondary issue. All parent participants felt there was a lack of inclusivity and also referred to the reasons behind the communication. One parent described interacting with their children's school as a "dance"; they said they felt the need to be cautious of their words and actions. They tried to avoid being viewed as a threat in order to ensure an acceptable outcome for their child.

> *Figuring out how we're going to do these dances right so we can all get what it is we want.*

Example given by school teacher to what they identified as the primary cause of frustration for racialized.

> *So the complaint has been that we overly discipline their child, or we didn't inform them of the students' needs fast enough right, so why did we wait a whole semester to tell them their student was academically failing, or why did we wait so long to tell them that their kid is skipping school right, and again I think that is part of the bias because there's teachers who will kind of expect the student to skip or expect the student to not do well because they have lower standards and then.*

How parents felt about the calls they received from the school.

By making that call you're basically saying "you're not doing what you have to do as a parent.

You're only engaging me to tell me that my kids not going to school, I know that, how about you engage me with some resources so that it can be a better life for the other kids at home.

The System

The second theme that emerged from the data was in the area of the education system and the influence it has on the educational experience of racialized students. Critical Race Theory argues that the education system was not built on equity for all, but rather to benefit the interest of whites. The theme pertaining to the system is divided into two categories.

Embedded in our Education: This category is connected to the historical context of the education system. All parent participants and one school participant described the role the system plays in the academic gap of black families and how it influences communication and engagement.

We've always been seen as a very accommodating place, a place that people want to go to and because of that history and because of that narrative, we haven't actually gotten to the challenges in which that we continue to face with race, with racism, with exclusion and so it's really about challenging what our historical narrative has always been.

You have a chapter on blacks within the Canadian context and it is demonizing because we came as, know from the States as either runaways or whatever the case might be and it's never a position of power.

Because of life experience with education, how they've (Blacks) been treated, segregation in schools.

I don't necessarily think I can hold individuals responsible for those assumptions because it was a system that taught them those assumptions, so to say that it's a teacher, no it's a system

It's based on a particular narrative that doesn't include others, and when it does include others is demonizes who those quote on quote others are and in always places others in an inferior position.

Each and every day they walk into those schools and they spend seven to eight hours a day in those places and if that isn't a healthy space for them we can't expect healthy productive individuals to come out of those spaces.

You know if there are test scores showing that things are way lower for racialized communities I mean that's a problem, obviously that is a problem.

Well I think there needs to be, right, a changing in, first of all even in regards to something like curriculum

One parent and social worker participant comment on the aesthetics of high schools and how it was connected to race and SES. They spoke about the effects of a school or classroom that appears not be cared for, and the impact on students motivation to learn, their mental health and long term aspirations.

You know sometimes I know that it seems weird it's like why are these connected but they're very connected, even in terms of Aesthetics in the school could mean a lot, right so if you look at the Aesthetics of a school where there may be a high, where the majority are racialized students, you know how does that school look compared to the school where the majority is white, Caucasian students right so is it the same, does the field look the same, you know is the garbage picked up off the ground, like it's just, to me it's very connected.

Limited light limited color within the space, limited energy so I think it's important to understand that home and school is really tied and an understanding of the environment and not just individual homes but I think overall social environment in which that our young people are coming from is critical.

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Lack of Representation: This emerging category speaks to the lack of representation of racialized teachers administrators and policy makers in education. According to CRT, lack of racial representation in education is tightly connected to the continuation of inequitable practices throughout the education system. All participants emphasized the need for diverse representation of teachers within schools, pointing to bias and inequitable hiring practices.

> *Students may see the staff as well, diversity in staff in urban schools I think is really important for representing student population.*
>
> *We have a black principal and we have hall monitors that are black but I don't consider hall monitors part of the teaching staff even though they're part of the school team.*
>
> *Majority of them also where of European descent, yeah so I never think I came in contact with anybody that resembles my child or has the same ethnic background as my child.*
>
> *There are minority staffs here. As in terms of teachers there not very many.*
>
> *The teachers, no definitely not, the teachers are majority-white we have one black teacher, I've been here for 20 years right so even when we had two thousand students and we had a staff of 150 we only had one black teacher, She's still the only one and she's retiring this year.*
>
> *I never actually dealt with a black teacher when my son was going to high school, (my) daughter hasn't had one yet.*

Our Biases & Assumptions:

This theme is strongly connected to the institutional and individual barriers for racialized families. Biases and assumptions feed into the theory of colour blindness. When asked about

biases and assumptions, and the ways in which they playout within education, all participants were in agreement that biases and assumptions played a fundamental role to inequitable practices within schools, and throughout our society. Assumptions for racial and marginalized students were connected to athletic ability, lower academic expectations, and gender roles were described. One participant indicated the specific needs of racialized families are no different from those of other but are viewed as different only because of the role assumptions and biases play.

Lingering thoughts and stereotypes: This first category indicates how biases and assumptions are woven into our society. All participants were able to identify multiple assumptions and bias that either through research, media or individual attitudes has affected racialized and lower SES people. Two school participants and two parent participants made reference of not solely placing blame on individuals but on a larger system.

School Staff expressing their feelings about stereotypes specifically directed to racialized students

> *Apparently yeah the teachers have a bias and particularly towards um, black youth of being ahh, causing trouble when they're just having fun or assuming in particularly boys are misbehaving like I said when they're just joking around or having fun, um, or and again very commonly to, to misunderstand the expressions of a black girl with attitude where she's just like talking how she talks to everybody right, it's interpreted as rude.*

> *The biggest one, like the expectation piece, and you may have you know stereotypes of athleticism.*

Parent participant spoke in further detail around the assumption of athleticism connected to racialized students:

> *Accommodations that schools are willing to make are not necessarily beneficial to my child it's beneficial to them as an institution because you know your child can be seen as a star athlete and add value to an athletic team, but isn't necessarily adding value to my child.*

> *Man it's hard, like if a teacher is a horrible person that's a hard situation to uncover or to prove.*

Parent participants express how they feel about bias and assumptions.

> *They can buy into stereotypes, you know a lot of their information comes from the media, the rhetoric that you see on TV is counterproductive.*

> *I think based on where my child's school is located my position as a sole parent as well as my position as a woman of colour sometime, sometimes can present as I'm not engaged I want to challenge the system and I won't hold myself and or my child accountable in academic spaces.*

One parent explains how, because of biases, there is pressure on racialized parents to not want to come across as weak.

> *How do I speak to my challenges and identify my challenges so without feeling as though I'm falling into that narrative of, people of color are always in a position of need, people of color always in a position of they don't know how to.*

Perpetuated through Policy: This category highlights the ways in which the system uses inequitable policies and practices, which affect racial and marginalized communities. Parent participants spoke to the personal ramifications that biases and assumptions do to racialized communities, School staff participants referred to how they saw the effects of biases and

assumptions unfolds throughout the board. They identified the use of language in policies, and

also process to address issues as contributors.

> All school staff participants mentioned the need to involve the
> union to address issues among staff as a problem.

> *I have had numerous encounters this year of telling teachers
> how to better support and speak to their students, sometime
> you have to do what you have to do.*

> *This is where things get all tricky cause as a union of teachers
> we can't complain on each other unless our union member is
> there right.*

> *I can't complain about that teacher to the principal unless I go to
> the union first and I tell that racist teacher, hey racist teacher I'm
> complaining on you to the principal and your union rep should
> come and meet us. So like all this bureaucracy.*

The following examples are connected to how one parent participant and one school staff

participant thought the use of language is an issue

> *If you're from a certain socioeconomic background or if your
> ethnicity was such and such you were more at risk of not
> graduating now, it's like we look at kids who are in risk who are
> currently exhibiting the symptoms of not graduating as in like
> they fail, they're getting into trouble they haven't passed a
> literacy test as opposed to even though you're growing up in
> housing but you're still passing your classes like that still is not
> considered an in-risk, at risk anymore?*

> *In regards to standard language, that is used within the school
> system right. So there's this notion of throwing out acronyms
> right, and we throw out acronyms and sometimes it makes us
> as institutions feel good to say that they have acronyms and
> where we're speaking above people.*

> *Sometimes I feel as though you need a lawyer to be able to go
> through these policies and procedures and not only that, then
> the forms in which you have to sign right and who needs to sign
> off on it and by the time you finish it you realize that the school
> year has ended and you start all over again.*

Vicious Cycle: This final category emerged from the participants giving their personal views on racist institutional and systemic policies, practices and attitudes. All participants acknowledged that assumptions and biases exist. They were able to identified barriers and challenges when attempting to address issues of inequitable biases. Participants did not possess a strong belief that systemic change was being addressed adequately by the Ministry and Boards.. Participants expressed how individual self-reflection is required to move past our assumptions and biases.

> *It's encompassment of our overall education system, our overall education system itself right, it's not limited to Toronto schools is not limited to elementary, secondary, post-secondary schools, its encompassing of all of those levels, all of those different varying levels.*

> *The notion of inclusion, who's included is challenging the system? and so it's solely not based on the faces and having diverse faces, it's having diverse curriculum, it's challenging the curriculum that exist, it's changing the structure, the laws, the practices, the policies that have built our education system because that was based on exclusion.*

> *Don't be afraid right. So I just think it's teaching parents how to advocate for themselves particularly black parents who, and again parents in the lower socioeconomic level they may have had a bad experience in school themselves.*

> *Again it doesn't matter the job you have right, if we don't do the proper training and get the stereotypes out of the way, nothing changes.*

> *what is the school board doing to inform their staff about different demographics within the city of Toronto and how they educate their staff And making sure that they don't run into placing stereotypes on people*

<u>Anti-Racist Education:</u> This fourth theme is focused around the question "what does anti-racism education look like to you, and who should be the ones to receive it?" Data showed a strong connection between the training of pre-service teachers, and continuous training for in-service educators as requiring appropriate training from the Ministry of Education, in regards to understanding and delivering anti-racist education. Three categories emerged from this theme, where answers by participants referenced the delivery of curriculum, as well as language and its effectiveness. Even though anti-racist education is mandated throughout the Board, and encouraged to be implemented and practiced. All Participants strongly agreed that, was more about the individual person, their beliefs and openness to understanding others, than a framework for delivery and practice or anti-racist education.

<u>Sounds like a Good Thing:</u> In this category, participants expressed their understanding of anti-racism education and described their feelings around the practice. All participants made reference to the need for diversity in anti-racism education. The school guidance counsellor preferred the term anti-oppression education.

School staff participants express their thoughts of anti-racist education.

> *People have a very limited understanding of what it is, and then again when you don't have diversity in your staff, and you don't have a diversity of lived experience in your staff then, it's really going to be hard to manifest itself.*
>
> *There's a lot of little fuzzy concepts, what does it mean anti-racism? If I did one lesson on indigenous people, they think they check the box.*
>
> *What does it really look like right? and how do you do it in an authentic way?*
>
> *I think anti-racist education, again now the lingo is changing they call it anti- oppression education.*

Parent participants expressed their thoughts of anti-racist education.

> *I have no clue, I think it's a good word, I think that you know if we go by everything that's written on our Canadian Constitution we wouldn't have to put that in there.*

> *I think at the end of the day that's the biggest question that we have to ask yourself, if we're having anti-racial workshops and things like that then you know, I think that's very problematic considering that the majority of schools in Toronto you know (are) diverse.*

> *I'm mandated to be there, how am I being mandated? How are you telling me the place that I'm going has potential racism in it? That's pretty scary.*

> *What do you doing with that? Are you giving that to teachers now right so that they can look at themselves to say these are some of the baggage I walk in with, this is how it could hurt my population, it's so sad I think it's really sad when you have something as anti-racist (education) when your job is to service youth or teenagers from the city of Toronto no matter creed or race.*

Who needs it: In this category, participants identified who they thought needed training, who they felt is responsible for providing it, and what it may entail. Almost all participants spoke about the need for a diverse curriculum in pre-service teaching and educator training. Parent participants also expressed the need for anti-racist education, not just in education but across all sectors.

> *I think when you're looking at anti-racist, anti-racism frameworks it needs to include everyone. It needs to include those who feel as though that I'm victim of, and it needs to include those who might have privilege and not recognize that they have privilege.*

> *I think that the school board has to do a better job of educating teachers and pointing out those stereotypes and you know not being content with the same old numbers.*

Is it Really Working? This last category reflects the participants' personal feeling of anti-racism education and its (lack of) effectiveness. A lack of diversity in staff was expressed by almost all participants as a major component to ineffectiveness. Parent participants also spoke about the lack of inclusion of "the other" in the creation of this framework as a being a primary factor for its inability to be effectively sustained.

> *If someone is a forwardly racist person right and, they still are going to act within the boundaries of being a professional.*
>
> *But if you don't necessarily know that you're being belittled you just assume that you're being supported.*
>
> *They're putting together this education and it needs to include those who were not a part of the development of that curriculum within that. I think as Canadians, I think our challenge is that, we don't work well with conflict.*

Caring Adults

The fourth theme that emerged from the data pointed to the importance for young people to have caring adults in their lives to help them have a positive school experience. School staff participants explained how they communicated and interacted with racialized and marginalized families. They expressed a willingness to help all students from a place of care, openness, and understanding. Three parent participants talked about the need to advocate for their children. All parent participants openly expressed wanting positive outcomes for their child while inviting equitable, authentic, diverse support.

It's All about the Individual: Within this category school staff participants expressed care and empathy for racialized students. Both school staff participants expressed the need to support, encourage and respect students and their parents. Staff demonstrated caring attributes in their interviews. According to the website 4-H, whose services focus on professional and career development, a caring individual is someone who fosters a sense of belonging while acting as an advisor, guide and mentor. To young people, this caring adult would then be seen by the child/student as a supporter, friend and advocate. Attention was given to how school staff participants repeatedly communicated the need to self-reflect, and to challenge and include parents in decision making for their students.

Maybe that's because I'm a bit of a minority I have that fuel in me to go and do it, maybe somebody who was white wouldn't particularly care because it's work.

It doesn't really, you know phase me to go do a home visit for a parent if needed, or for (a) student.

To me that's really the biggest thing is listening and ensuring that their opinion is important.

It's about meeting parents where they're at.

When you see something that needs to be checked then you have to do what you have to do.

Each school should have the resources available to help that students succeed and that we have a good structure in place.

Racialized parents don't complain about us. So like they, they actually appreciate the help we give right, they understand that we're coming from for the most part a place of caring for their child.

Racialized parents will always trust in us to do the best thing for their child.

How Parents Feel: In this category all parent participants spoke to the necessity of respect, inclusivity, and support in order to challenge stereotypes, biases and assumptions.

> *You want more for your child*
>
> *I care about what happens to my child*
>
> *To get your kid to school could be like World War 3 right and the kid finally gets off the school where's that support for the parent.*
>
> *It isn't about taking him out of a regular classroom is about challenging him and how are we going to challenge him and how do we ensure that he has an individual is aware that he's being challenged.*
>
> *I've seen some crazy things that you know, kind of hurts me.*
>
> *At the end of the day they work in the schools but their job is also to serve a population of students right so it's like any other job if I'm servicing, your customer service person, know the population that you're working with.*

Need for Collaboration:

The sixth theme that was identified in the data was related to collaboration. Participants expressed the need for diverse collaboration, partnership and supports. Time was mentioned as a major barrier for both school staff and parent participants

Support: There was consensus across participants that it was not only important to support youth and parents, but also for schools and community organizations to be supported as well. Two parent participants pointed out how schools themselves are overwhelmed due to the sheer expectations put on individual roles such as principals, teachers, and support staff.

Several participants thought that it was necessary for community collaboration to strengthen relationship building to increase the sharing of knowledge, resources and funds.

Ideally it takes like a village to support a child right.

The one who isn't not passing is the one who's our concern And the other in risk I'm the one who's passing and risen above by like their own resiliency is like thank God, good luck.

I think it's really important to have community agencies involved in schools cause that's where the kids are kind of going after school a lot of the times so, you know I think it's a win-win to have agencies involved in school if possible.

Let's get some of these agencies into the schools so that we can engage some of these students which also alleviate some of your budget.

Parents are busy like I said working surviving taking care of their other children because it's hard if you are struggling.

If we understand that systems are stress, then it's about partnership right and it's for schools to be able to partner with other agencies other community resources that will be able to add to what is needed or what is lacking within the school system to be able to offer supports for parents where needed.

Maybe call the parent and see what support they may need and maybe try to connect with them with an agency in the community that can support.

I think that we also need more mentors and tutors doing activities with the students to again build friendships and give the kids alternate activities as opposed to running the streets or doing whatever they're doing.

We would certainly go to the community center, make friends (and) maybe go volunteer a little bit make do a little one two.

> *It can be challenging for other parents who don't necessarily understand the system don't understand their rights within the system it makes it difficult for them to challenge systems.*

Time to Talk: This category became evident as both school staff and parent participants stated that informal conversations are a good way to start building and strengthening relationships. Three parent and two school staff participants expressed how food was used informally as a way to bond and allow for opportunities to engage in authentic conversations. Data also indicate the need for cultural and gender specific resources and supports for racialized and marginalized families, as the male parent participant expressed paternal supports for black males seemed almost non-existent. He indicated that schools seem to provide more supports specifically for mothers, either through the board or community. He expressed that in his search for support for his children, he felt options were very limited, if not non-existent for fathers. The need for cultural diversity among school staff was identified throughout the data. Participants described the need for diversity in the positions of policy makers, educators, mentors, community workers and advocates. Two parents expressed that interacting with someone who was similarly racialized provided a sense of comfort and understanding. Verbal authentic communication was mentioned by school staff and parent participant as being a necessity in relationship building.

> *I think that there's a vulnerability that comes with dealing with this system and sometimes it's about being able to say "I don't know how to deal with it.*
>
> *They're definitely those spaces that I think still need to be addressed and those spaces that include parents and how were including parents into those conversations.*

Some of the narrative isn't written it's not going to be found in the textbook it's not going to be found in 10 steps. It is actual communication, and that verbal communication.

Maybe some younger counselor's maybe some counsellors that reflect the diversity of the students that you're dealing with.

Being a male raising two females I try my best to put positive female role models in front of them.

Organizations and people who actually thrive on understanding the youth and trying to break down barriers so that the youth are more successful

I think it makes it hard sometimes for them to have a conversation because culturally the counselor may not understand culturally where the family is coming from or what the parent's requirement of their child so I think that kind of makes it difficult.

So they'll come and speak to me before they go speak to them and that's fine, but then again the white kids speak to them before they speak to me because again they have their lived experience, (cause) representation is important.

I think it's about connecting to agencies, advocacy groups that are doing some of this work because feeling alone is also a part of the history of colonization and segregation and all of that, that you're alone, you're the only one going through, this you're the only one experiencing this and that becomes overwhelming and I think daunting, so being able to connect with others who are experiencing similar if not the same is critical to be able to be engaging in an education system.

Moving Forward With no Strategies:

The last category that emerged from the data was how to move forward in the absence of effective strategies. Five participants said "I don't know" when asked "what strategies could be adopted by schools to addresses biases and assumption to help strengthen the relationship between racial and marginalized parents and high schools?" One parent indicated the need to

involve the youth in conversations. No other participants mentioned the potential role of youth in the collaboration process. Expressions of self-reflection were also found throughout this data set. All participants indicated the need to question and challenge themselves. Parent participants mentioned the need for parent engagement to be established at the beginning of a child's education experience, If not implemented early, it would be extremely difficult to begin engagement in high school.

> *It is also about involving the young people who are experiencing and engaging education system because if we as parents find it challenging how more so do the other people and we don't want to fall into a similar situation where we've been.*
>
> *Excluded from the conversation in regards to curriculum and content and engagement to exclude young people in the conversation because they're the ones, the benefactor of the work in which we're doing.*
>
> *I do think in elementary school there needs to be a bigger push on preparation for the next step.*
>
> *(In) social work even, sometimes you feel like you could take it personal a little bit, like at the parent doesn't engage but at the same time like am I looking at all the areas that I could really think of too and being creative as possible.*
>
> *It allows professionals who are professionally trained to deal with say mental health for youth because there's a difference between being trained to teach a subject but not be able to relate and understand the population you're dealing with.*
>
> *I think it's incumbent on organizations, advocacy groups to continually challenge, where they have privilege and opportunity to challenge a system.*

Discussion

Parent Engagement

The theme of parent engagement emerged, as parents explained their understanding of what engagement meant to them. When participants were asked about two-way engagement and communication, they all indicated that schools only reach out to them personally to inform them of negative behaviors or academic and attendance issues. Unfortunately, that approach does not encourage parental engagement. In fact, it may cause it to deteriorate. The goal should be to create a balance for parents. Joyce Epstein's model uses a partnership framework. It recognizes six components of parent engagement, and introduces the concept of overlapping sphere that includes school, families (Epstein et al., 2002). As Bower and Griffin (2011) explain, Epstein's model indicates the importance of not only negative information, but also communicating positive information that may help to empower, motivate, or encourage parents (Bower & Griffin, 2011). When schools are willing to structure authentic two-way communication with parents, levels of engagement will more likely increase. However, racialized and marginalized communities will require additional space and effort to create feeling of inclusivity, openness and trust to strengthen relationships.

Parent participants strongly indicated that it was the school's responsibility to actively engage them because schools had not always been welcoming spaces for black people. Gillborn (2015) explains the need to acknowledge schools as very complex spaces that requires partnering with diverse families and organizations. This may allow connections to be fostered towards creating a more welcoming space for parents to engage (Gillborn, 2015).

Through this study, the role of the principal was hardly mentioned. Only one participant made mention of the principal's involvement in parental engagement. As mentioned in the

literature review, school leadership plays a significant role in creating supportive and equitable parent engagement. Participants spoke to the amount of administrative work the principal's role entailed. A parent participant thought that it was important for parents to know that principals do not possess the level of power that they are believed to have, especially where staff and parents are concerned: their power seems limited.

The principal seemed to be viewed as a person who grants permission rather than someone who is actively able to engage on a deeper level. The principal's role is highly connected to the logistics of the school in terms of dealing with parent complaints, board issues, and "putting out fires" throughout their day. I wanted to connect with a principal, but despite my best efforts, it was challenging to connect. Three attempts were made. When a time was finally booked, the principal had to cancel at the last minute due to a pressing issue that day. We were never able to secure an alternative slot.

Teachers, support staff and administrators who feel as though they are constantly putting out fires may be left feeling discouraged with little time to take on sustainable roles within the school community. It is therefore important for teachers to collaborate not just with their school communities but also with other schools within their district in order to share knowledge, tools and resources as well as provide professional support for one another.

Therefore it is important for superintendents to support principals so they can have more influence among their staff. Unfortunately, superintendents may also have their own administrative or political fires to put out due to bureaucratic issues that also leave them trying to catch their breath. Encouraging community collaboration with schools on a district level may help alleviate some of that pressure on individuals and the institutions that they represent.

Parent participants and the school social worker expressed the need for honest, open conversations that are not limited to the school's agenda, but are expanded to have uncomfortable conversations around race. As CRT indicates, the relationship between black parents and the education system is fractured due to historical events. Delgado & Stefancic (2012) argue that using CRT allows for examination of conscious and unconscious characteristics of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). When asked about anti-racism education, several participants expressed confusion or hesitation. This manifested in the form of a long pause, or elongated ummms, or hmmms, while answering the question. As a researcher, I also experienced the uneasiness of the topic as I tried to reframe the questions with carefully selected wording. It is therefore important for all Board employees, policy makers, and parents to adopt continuous practices of self-reflection and be open to such uncomfortable conversations. Gillborn stated that "we must not shy away from naming the central role that racism continues to play (Gillborn 2015, pg 248). It appears that the education system does not see the urgency to address racist policies and practices, individuals must work together to persuade government officials to make space to address these issues. Individual change can push us to fight for change, not only on an institutional level, but also on a systemic level.

There appear to be limits to the Epstein model when looking at parent engagement for racialized parents, as collaboration is so strongly required. This model emphasizes the importance of a "school learning community" that should include educators, parents, students, and community partners. All aspects such as the coordination of activities, services, responsibilities, and access to those services and communication channels must be highly established, as they require long-term commitment from all stakeholders. As earlier stated as a

limitation for this study, the Epstein Model of parent engagement continues to use a traditional parent engagement framework where the goal of collaboration is to improve both student and school needs (Epstein 2004). New shifts in creating parent engagement policy through the Board that give school communities more freedom to develop family and community partnerships plans instead of rigid frameworks may be necessary. The Ministry of Education needs to perform environmental scans for each Board and school district. Funding should then be allotted to individual schools, who, along with their communities can then conduct a S.W.A.T analysis to identify their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This would allow superintendents to support principals, along with communities to invite and encourage relationship building, which would then strengthen parent participation. The Board should have a designated person in each school to assist with community collaboration. Their initial duty would be to review the completed district environmental scan and school S.W.A.T analysis. A needs assessment must then be completed in collaboration with community members and organizations, where measure targets and outcomes can be used for future research.

The System

The theme of the system emerged from finding key words used by the participants such as unions, policies, practices, funding and in/equity, diversity, and teachers college. This indicated the views that participants had towards the education system. Parents made mention to historical barriers for black families, which as one participant explains, "continues to plague our communities". A few participants highlighted that the process to make a complaint regarding a teacher who shows non-inclusive behaviour is opaque and challenging. Several unions represent different professional bodies within the education sector. This contributes to the red

tape and bureaucracy that discourages individuals from making complaints and calling out bad behaviour. As a result, poor behaviour continues unchecked. Unions should work together with management to create transparent (non-punitive) processes to make and address complaints without fear of reprisal.

Despite the reassuring and inclusive tone of government rhetoric, the equitable desires of black families remain largely unmet. racism is created, sustained and legitimized through racist policies and practices throughout government that appear to be natural, fixed and obvious (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT provides a framework for pointing to particular policies and practices that support the dominant paradigm that need to be changed, because they contribute to the perpetuation of inequities. However practices that support the dominant paradigm are often legitimized and blame is placed on racial and marginalized families instead (Tate & Ladson-Billings, 1997). We can look at the experience of one parent participant, who was given a parenting book to read by the school social worker; the parent, however, was unable to relate to the book. They expressed feeling disempowered and hopeless, internalizing that they were somehow the problem. We can also examine the concept of meritocracy which, as explained by Clycq, Nouwen and Vandenbroucke (2014), is an idea that the education system itself is not to blame, therefore blame is placed on the individual or subgroup for their lack of success. Stating "dominant meritocratic discourse frequently applies a deficit thinking perspective to frame educational success and failure, focusing on deficiencies originating outside of the school" (Clycq, Nouwen, & Vandenbroucke, 2014, pg 1)

Lewis Michaux, a Harlem bookstore owner who, alongside Malcolm X, carried a sign in the streets that read "the way to hide something from the black man is to put it in a book" (Reading Amanda, 2009). Michaux's insights were actually alarmingly accurate at the time.

Today, we can still find traces of the ways these racist nuggets are hidden in policy. As a parent participant mentioned, deficit rhetoric that is used to describe black and marginalized communities through curriculum, media, and research seems to place racialized individuals in a "constant position of inferiority" with an endless list of needs. This requires us to examine the use of language on a deeper level to unmask its true and intended purpose. The internalization of deficit language should create a more pressing need for the black community to educate its members and publically challenge and reject research that uses deficit models to explain the black population. We need to look at language as a silent oppressor that is entrenched in our views. By dissecting the words used in societal discourse and educational policies, the oppressive nature of language becomes evident. Participants in this study questioned the effectiveness of the current funding model that is used by the Ministry of Education. It does not allow for equitable distribution of resources and support for racially marginalized urban youth. The school guidance counsellor spoke about funding given to "at risk" high schools, called the Urban and Priority High School Fund. This funding is given to 37 schools throughout the city to develop programs and partnerships with the community. Yet, all participants spoke to the lack of partnerships and support for the students and their families. This makes it imperative for funders to hold the school Boards accountable for their spending and push for them to show bi-yearly accounting data of how funds are being (or not being) spent. Also, because the Boards are funded by the Ministry, a government watchdog group may need to be obtained to encourage honesty and transparency.

In their interviews, parents explained how initial contact with their children's teachers or other school staff was not always a pleasant one. They stated that sometimes minimum information was given until they asserted themselves or "geared the conversation." This form

of assertive (re-)steering was adopted to indicate to the teacher or administrator that the parent also holds some knowledge. They spoke about the resulting change of dynamics, tone of conversation and change in demeanors. One parent described their verbal communication with the vice principal as "just conversing" in comparison to a "meaningful conversation" she had with the superintendent.

A significant amount of data indicated pre-service teaching seems to be strongly connected to the perpetuation of biases and assumptions and attitudes of educators. The social worker stated *"courses in self-reflection and personal bias, you know that definitely needs to be in teachers college"*, therefore pre-service teacher pedagogy should incorporate components of social work, community organizing and communication. Paulo Freire (2005) argues that instructors need to "expose them to critical and cultural consciousness and relationship building strategies to help understand one's individual social location and the place of privilege it holds (Freire, 2005). Warren, Quntanar, Noftle and Gaily (2011), state that "understanding the correlation between effective teacher, family, and community relations and student success" is strongly needed within by teachers therefore it must be taught in pre-service training (Warren, Noftle, Ganley, & Quintanar, 2011). Epstein (2006) also believes that pre-services teacher programs should diligently work to ensure that "teacher credential candidates understand school, family, and community partnerships" (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). The pre-service window is therefore an ideal time to reflect (and plan) for how to build respectful and collaborative relationships with all adults that may influence children's lives and their learning.

Biases & Assumptions

According to the participants in the study, ideologies of preconceived assumptions that educators have towards racialized parents coincide with previous literature. Biased attitudes have an enormous impact on the type of relationships educators are able to or want form, as biases diminish the ability to create meaningful, authentic relationships that benefits the family, school, community and most of all, the child.

Unfortunately biases and assumptions may forever be part of our Canadian landscape. This study supports CRT's critique of colorblindness, which allows for biases to move silently through society. The education system, as argued above, is no exception. As one parent participant said, "we cannot blame individuals (be)cause we are all part of that system and [we need to] take accountability for our part that we play" (Parent participant).

Through policy and practices, macroaggressions are permitted to fester within the system. Two participants, felt resigned to the idea that racism, biases and assumptions are, and will forever be part of our society for generations to come. Both of these participants were unemployed. This could potentially speak to the level of disempowerment experienced by members of lower socio-economic groups. They did however agree that there were certain characteristics that more people needed to have, such as empathy and compassion to make life better for those that are oppressed.

It remains necessary for individuals to constantly self-reflect and challenge assumptions and biases and gain a deeper understanding of where and what they are rooted in. As one participant shared *"our children also fall into this trap that they become the assumption and they're not even aware that they are the assumption"*, sometimes the subtleties of bias makes it very easy to miss.

Deficit models feed biases; as Valencia (2010) points out, "deficit thinking is a pseudoscience founded on racial and class bias and it blames the victim" (Valencia, 2010, pg 2). A couple of participants found it important to educate their children at a young age around racial biases to ensure that they understood how the world perceived them. Interestingly enough, other participants thought that there was no need to address race until it either became problem or their child was old enough to critically think about the concept, which most agreed was between grade seven and nine. One parent stated that they didn't want their child to feel "different" at a young age because they will be presented with many lessons on race later in life. Unfortunately the "wait till needed" approach may also help fuel deficit thinking as it does not equip racialized children with the skills to recognize injustice or oppression until it's too late. As deficit thinking blames the oppressed for their own demise without examining the structure of education and how it impacts the learning of black students, it becomes important to teach children critical thinking from a young age (Valencia, 2010). Media is one of the main platforms that reinforce societal biases. Malcolm X warned us that, "the media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty, and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power, because they control the minds of the masses." (Crane, 2010, pg.1).

It is important to mention, that upon reflection, my own interview questions may have played into deficit thinking. Some of the language I used (e.g. engaged vs disengaged) may have exacerbated a binary that positioned one end as positive and the other as negative. If I were to do this project again, I would try and incorporate more strength-based models when doing research with minority groups. This may help to foster cultural and social capital that will inspire communities and individual to see their true value to society. Tuck (2009), encourages

communities to shift the discourse of their communities" from damaged to desire" (Tuck, 2009). If I could repeat this study, I would heed her call more carefully.

Anti-Racist Education

When participants discussed anti-racism education, many participants felt that the language and approach were not authentic and somewhat unclear. This leaves the door open for ineffective approaches to anti-racism education. According to Carr and Klassen (1997), the concept of race has been frequently manipulated by different groups and institutions to help them "create or reinforce political and ideological regimes and myths" (Klassen & Carr, 1996, pg. 68)

Several participants expressed the importance of addressing the issues of biases, to work towards more equitable and effective practices. Parent participants felt strongly that it was difficult to engage in anti-racism practices when the issue of race itself has never been addressed, particularly connected to Canada's historical context. Critical Race Theorist argue the concept of colour blindness creates a path for racial inequities, therefore we should use a CRT framework to examine oppressive aspects that are embedded within Canada's education system. Several parent participants asked the question "are they really trying to engage me?"

This incredulity implies that racialized parents do not truly believe in the effectiveness of anti-racism education. As the social work participant explained, racialized parents face challenges because "not only do they feel they are not being understood, but in all reality, they really are not being understood". We can assume this is strongly connected to the lack of diversity and representation that all participants deemed important for engagement and collaboration. It is important for racialized individuals and groups to create allies to work towards reducing racism in our schools. Reynolds and Howard (2008), believe that "the lack of

a collected and unified voice has made it easy for teachers and administrators to dismiss parents as a valuable resource to change (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). In order to reconstruct empowering practice with parents, underlying meaning and purpose of parent engagement must be critically examined.

Caring Adults

This theme was created by words used by participants that described the act of care. Words, such as listen, compassion, understanding, together and empathy. All parent participants openly expressed wanting positive, outcomes for their child while inviting equitable, authentic, diverse support. Characteristics of caring staff appeared throughout the data. A caring individual that acts as an advisor, guide and mentor is seen by the child/student as a supporter, friend, and advocate. Parent participants also revealed their desires for their children's futures through their description of expectation. All participants felt strongly about attitudes of the individual who was interacting with the student/child was what mattered most. Did they hold biases that could possibly affect students in negative ways? Children who are presently deemed at risk by society standards, if they experience continuous exposure to bias and inequitable treatment, this could increase their vulnerability to negative social determinants of health outcomes. Even though, according to Egbo (2012), teachers who may mean well, some educators will claim that they do not see color and pride themselves on equitable treatment of all students (Egbo, 2012), a example of unintentional bias. Which would be hard as it is the one thing that easily categorizes individuals. There are many supportive adults in the education field that have children's best interests at heart. There are educational advocates who are constantly working to make it better. So it's those individuals that we must rely on to make change. That is why it is our responsibility to practice constant self-reflection

around our assumptions and beliefs towards what we may do as the other (Freire, 2000). Two parent participants spoke about wanting to have access to their child's school, and to be able to enter spaces like libraries and lunch rooms. The Ministry should consider incorporating family/parent and community partners resources rooms in each school. This will set the first step to flexible and self-initiating school engagement.

The Need For Collaboration

One major highlight that this study has confirmed once again, is the need for and importance of collaboration. School communities and parents need to work together in the interest of racialized and marginalized youth. One parent participant mentioned the passion of community workers that are dedicated to working with racialized and marginalized families. The Epstein model describes collaborating with community as the sixth component for successful engagement. Future research may consider a more inclusive framework, which can create opportunities for individual, institutional and local agencies and businesses to strengthen and build conscious, cultural and community capacity. As caring as school staff appeared, they seemed to also hold beliefs that were not reciprocated by parents. As school staff participants believed that parents felt they had their children's best interest at heart and have great trust school staff, no parent participant expressed this feeling. This could speak to individual desires to believe that they are seen as wanting only the best for all students. Or this could also contribute to their actual belief, which would then be inaccurate. Collaboration with diverse community organization members may help clarify assumptions.

Time seemed to be a factor for both parents and school staff: both groups expressed that there were many balls to juggle. Other competing priorities left little room to have successful formal gatherings. In some communities, a push for stronger effective collaboration may need

to be initiated by community organizations. As participants described the education system as a "stressed system" this may help alleviate some of that stress. The use of community-based approach models using CRT frameworks could allow racialized communities to work towards the same agenda. However, as all communities are unique in their own way, each communities should be allowed to create their own (or adapt) a tailored school, family, community engagement framework as it relates to their needs. Engagement cannot be considered in an entity without first building inclusive relationships where all partner feel respected and valued. Improving relationships will help create qualified leadership to strengthen community collaboration for all stakeholders. The presence of mentors and advocates could enhance the community's involvement in the development and delivery of services and success for racial and marginalized families. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory we must make sure to give respect to the community and parents we are serving and move away from deficit thinking to empower and strengthen them. Parents and community agencies need to be given meaningful decision making authority in schools, so parents can be provided with non-institutional organizations that can provide self-determined training and advocacy. Manning and Souto (2006) believes that *"They should create empowerment

strategies to utilize skills and talents in diverse and culturally responsive modes"* (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, pg 188).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must again ask, is the system really broken? I believe that, because the education system was built on homogeneous ideology, it is strategically functioning as it was, and is intended to function. So we cannot look to a system whose true underlining intention is

not to create systemic equity, but to use policies, practices, deficit discourse and negative narratives to, as CRT argues, promote interest divergence for the benefits of white elite and middle class individuals (Tate & Ladson-Billings, 1997). Therefore we must take somewhat of an individual approach when addressing inequitable practices throughout education. Individuals, institutions and communities must share accountability for the success of racial and marginalized children and youth. Parents must take responsibility for educating themselves pertaining to Board policies in order to gain knowledge of the education system. As a parent it is also necessary to address any mental health issues one may struggle with, and seek support in order to help your child have the best possible experience through their educational years. It is very difficult to identify multiple effective models, formula, frameworks, theories or research that have the impact required to make substantial, sustainable change. However individually we must commit to the changing of our mindset. We must embrace a desire for continuous self-reflective practices that will allow open honest conversations to emerge. Accepting accountability of this role would be the first steps to eliminating biases, assumptions, negative perceptions and fears. This individual effort in hopes will create a ripple effect from individual to allies.

There is strength in numbers, and with that strength we can work to create change. Parents, educators and community organizations that work with children and youth, all have an impact in the lives of children; advocating for change is not an easy thing to do separately, but easier in an inclusive and collaborative community. As schools embrace racial and marginalized communities, they will work towards building "a village" which will help their students' parents, peers and community organizers to strengthen capacity. Collaboration is extremely important for the success of children, not just black children but all children that are

viewed as the other. Educators must be mindful of their own biases and practice critical consciousness to promote respectful communication and interactions with these comminutes. As there is power in numbers, collaboration will help build bridges to share accountability, knowledge and provide needed supports.

Schools must create an environment where parents are viewed as partners, and embrace opportunities for open dialogue by adopting creative and innovative opportunities to gather, to promote effective communication. Offering flexible times for parents to meet with teacher and allowing for various modes of communication can help strengthen parent engagement of racialized and other marginalized children. Creating safe and welcoming spaces within high schools that allow for informal gathering may work best. Schools should incorporate family resource centres within their space that could help parents' access supports and strengthen capacity. Family resource rooms should reflect a welcoming space that insures comfortability, relaxation to lower triggers and encourages inclusive, open communication and model respect. Allowing community organizations to equally partner with schools may relieve some economic constraints that could be used for external supports for parents and students, educational and recreational opportunities for students, and community activities and events. Schools and access community organizations to use their youth work model for working youth.

It would be interesting to know how many educational strategist and policymakers, board members, directors and curriculum developers send their kids to public and private schools? There seems to be a battle between the education system and their racialized and marginalized students, with educators, parents and communities caught in the middle of a vicious cycle. Using words such as equity and anti-oppression seems futile without the elimination of deficit discourse and without proper training. The Ministry of Education needs to

acknowledge how inequitable educational policies and practices contribute to the social determinants of health, and also the mental health struggles of young people and their communities.

The Ministry suggests that a viable strategy to address racism within education was to implement an Afrocentric school, along with Black History month. However, Afrocentric education should be implemented throughout the curriculum to create inclusivity and equity. The funds required to promote Black history month could be used for such curriculum reform, therefore Black History month would no longer be necessary in the future. The federal government has a huge responsibility in developing a social infrastructure for black students to address inequities and barriers. Most weight falls on the system and policies that it has created throughout but more so responsible for the practices in which those policies are carried out because they allow the perpetuation of racism to continue in salient yet damaging forms. The ministry should provide anti-oppressive training for all board employees bi-yearly, that should be delivered by racialized individuals or groups. School employees should also be required to complete a certain amount of community activities per year. Also yearly school and teacher evaluation should be completed through an observation process by parents or an outside agency. Educators must also be provided support throughout the year when and if required. A mandatory course selection for pre-service teacher candidates should be implemented. This includes courses that explain the true history of education in Canada, critical analysis and reflective practices. In-service teachers working in marginalized areas, should be required to take a course in critical race theory. As one parent stated, "each and every day they walk into those schools and they spend seven to eight hours a day in those places, and if that isn't a healthy space, we can't expect healthy productive individuals to the come out of those space?

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