WE RISE TOGETHER

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for:

Peel District School Board

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"We Rise Together"

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The Office of the Director

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'But sir, you're supposed to give up your time for me.' … If you're going to be a teacher…you have to sacrifice for [students], that's the whole point of the job.

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INTRODUCTION

In response to ongoing concerns about the schooling process, academic performance, and educational outcomes of Black students within the Peel District School Board (PDSB), the *We Rise Together* Program was established in 2016 with an "Action Plan to support the achievement of Black males." The 3 Year Plan was specifically designed to address the fact that "Black male students feel excluded by their peers and teachers, and do not see positive representations of themselves in school." The *We Rise Together* document continues to make the point that

> Much of this can be attributed to ***anti-black racism*** where Black male students feel unwelcome, unwanted, undervalued and unable to perform academically or engaged meaningfully with their school.

> Now is the time to do what needs to be done to address anti-Black racism in public education. After all, 'the time is always right to do what is right.' (emphasis in original)

In what follows, we present findings from our study with Black students at schools in the PDSB where there are *We Rise Together* programs. The Report is organized around five major themes that emerged from the interviews. Each theme, and related subthemes, is presented and discussed in a separate section. The major themes are:

1. Experiences with teachers and other school personnel;
2. The place and role of significant others – parents;
3. The role of peers and friendship;
4. Resisting stereotypes of Black people and related hegemonic discourses; and,
5. Student suggestions for better schooling.

In the section "Challenges, resistance and strategies," we summarize the main findings, and in the process, attempt to capture the significant points made by the students. The bolded statements and phrases in the students' comments are intended to highlight the points which we suggest stand out.

Before discussing the themes, we present our data gathering and analytical methods used. These are informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) – the theoretical framework which informs the *We Rise Together* project. According to Howard (2008), CRT holds that peoples' experiences and opportunities are significantly shaped by their race, and that "any attempt to eradicate racial inequalities has to be centered on the socio-historical legacy of racism" which also means challenging the prevailing ideas of meritocracy, fairness, and objectivity that maintains the discriminatory and exclusionary practices in society (Gillborn 2008; Smith and Stovall 2008; Treviño et al. 2008). Further, CRT promotes voice, storytelling and counter-narrative (DeCuir-Gunby, Chapman & Schutz 2019, p. 20) that tell of the lived experiences of Black students as structured by individual, institutional and societal (also referred to as structural and systemic) racism and maintained by systems of whiteness, and related European universally-presumed norms, values and behaviours (James 2018). In this regard, curriculum materials, teaching practices, and pedagogical approaches are made relevant and responsive to the concerns, needs, interests and aspirations of Black students and parents.

The *We Rise Together* document states:

> **Anti-Black racism** operates within society to disadvantage, oppress and dehumanize Black people. Anti-Black racism is prejudice, attitudes, **beliefs**, stereotyping and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement (followed by colonization]. Anti-Black racism is deeply entrenched in Canadian institutions, policies and practices, such that anti-Black racism is either functionally **normalized** or rendered invisible to the larger white society. **Norms, values and beliefs** born out of anti-Black racism are operationalized at the institutional level. In the Education system, these anti-Black racism sociocultural norms, values and beliefs are inscribed within policies, practices, and procedures, as well as embedded in school cultures to further marginalize, and impede success for Black students, especially Black males (p. 4; emphasis in original).

SECTION 1:   Getting the students' stories and presenting who they are

During the months of May and June 2018, a total of four focus groups were conducted with both male and female Black students, from elementary, middle and secondary schools (N=44). One focus group was held at an elementary school (School A, 13 participants), one at a middle school (School B, 9 participants), and one at each of two high schools (School C, 9 participants, and School D, 13 participants). Two of the focus groups (Schools B and C) were exclusively Black males; whereas the other two focus groups (School A and D) included female participants – 7 and 4 respectively (see Table 1 below). Some students volunteered to participate in the focus groups, while others were invited to attend by their peers, teachers and/or administrators, or because they participated in *We Rise Together* workshops.

In focus groups conducted in each school, we asked students to tell us about their schooling, academic and athletic experiences with teachers, their peers, and their respective school administrators and staff. We also asked about their parents' experiences with their schools. Depending on their grade level, we asked participants about the middle school or high school they planned to attend, as well as their post-high school ambitions.

A total of 44 students participated in the study. They were from the three schooling levels, and ranged in age from 9 to 18 with most (about 50%) of them being high school students – mostly 17 years old (23%). While the study aimed to examine the experiences of males and the majority (32 of the 44) of the participants were males (as per the *We Rise Together* program), 11 females (4 at the primary school, and 7 at one high school) also participated in the focus groups. The students participated in four focus groups, one at each selected school. The focus groups were comprised of thirteen (13) primary school students (School A), 9 middle school students (School B), and 22 high school students (Schools C and D) (see Appendix 2).

Most of the students (23 of the 44) aspired to work in professional occupations or careers after completing high school. These include lawyer, nurse, teacher, psychologist, engineer, architect, veterinarian and police officer. Of these, the most frequently mentioned profession was law. In fact, 8 of the 23 students who aspired to become a professional indicated having careers in law; and of the eight, five students stated that they wanted to become lawyers while three aspired to careers in law enforcement – including being a military officer. One middle school student said that he aspired to become a lawyer "like my mother."

The next most frequently mentioned career aspiration was professional athlete; and of the six male students for whom this was their aspiration, the most common sports

mentioned were basketball (2) and soccer (2). Six students did not indicate their occupational aspirations or indicated that they had not yet decided on what they wanted to do as a job or career later in life. Five students mentioned that they wanted to pursue careers in entertainment – two mentioned becoming a singer or rapper, one a Youtuber, and another a career in film. Among the four students who mentioned careers in business or entrepreneurship, two of them cited working in sports – specifically, sports media and sports management. Only two out of the 44 students mentioned aspiring to careers in the trades – one wished to become an electrician and the other a chef.

Some gender differences were noted. The 11 females who participated in the focus groups provided an opportunity to observe the gendered differences in career aspirations and what this might say about the students' attention to their schooling programs – including the extent to which they tended to apply themselves to their academic, athletic and/or other educational activities in school.

When we look at aspirations by gender, we see that all the students who mentioned professional sports as a career were males. This is seemingly, as will be shown, an extension of the boys' current engagement in sports. They were members of sports teams in schools and/or in the community.

We also see that no female students mentioned going into business, whereas four male students did. The most common aspiration for both genders was going into a profession. However, compared to males, females were more likely to mention going into professional careers such as veterinarian, singer, detective, nurse, lawyer, psychologist, and dental hygienist. Males (5) were more likely than females (1) not to state a career aspiration or state that they were undecided. Looking at aspiration by school levels, we see that none of the high school students mentioned becoming a professional athlete as an aspiration. We can also see that only one of the high school students was either undecided or did not state a career aspiration.

SECTION 2: Relationships and experiences with Teachers in the schooling journey

Education literature points to the centrality of student-teacher relationships in the school journey of students (Hughes and Cavell 1999; Hughes et al. 2001; Murray and Malmgren 2005; Baker et al. 2008). Studies have shown that teachers' approaches to subject teaching were less important to students than their relationships with teachers (Garner 1995). In his study of excluded students, Pomeroy (1999) found that their relationship with teachers was a "most salien=t feature of the educational experience" (p. 468). In particular, students valued teachers who would "take time to talk with and listen to" them, had the ability to understand and relate to them, and showed a "willingness to provide students with the help and attention they need in order to learn" (Pomeroy 1999). So, it is understandable that most students who participated in our focus groups would have positive things to say about their teachers whom they perceived to have shown them these qualities.

"You can always tell when teachers are going above and beyond"

In their response to the question: "Do you feel that teachers in your school support you in your education?" participants in our study highlighted the following:

> B: **They want you to succeed**, that's probably the biggest thing. In the end, they want you to do good. The two teachers used to come up to me and be like: 'Hey, I know you can do better than this.' . . . So, **you can tell which teachers care about your success**, [and] they're not teaching just to teach.

Another student (A) from School C - a high school - noted:

> A: There [are] some teachers that actually act normal, and … **you feel like being around them, you're not an annoyance.** And so . . . you can go to them with your problems or issues.

Students from School B – a middle school – echoed the sentiments shared by the high school students:

> K.: My mom really likes my homeroom teacher and my history teacher, cause like those were the first two teachers who really **believed in me;** cause like they're always like: 'Oh, I know you can do better' and stuff like that. All my other teachers . . . they just really didn't care…

A.: Yeah, my homeroom teacher, my math teacher . . . they give us a lot of homework and they don't do it just for the sake of doing it, they do it to get us ready for high school.

Speaking to his teachers' willingness to help him, one student (J) said:

*J: Like say, if I got a mark that could have been way better [my teacher] won't just give me the mark, and …show you the mark and that's it. He'll talk to you and tell you: …'**This is how you could do better**.' And he won't just say how to study, he'll tell us how to organize your life so that you could have free time and study and have a balance.*

Another student (A) stated:

*A: Ms. T., she's my favorite teacher. The way she teaches, . . . she's [not] talking down to you… I don't know how to explain it, but **she teaches you in a different way as opposed to other teachers**; and you just retain more from the lesson, you listen to that and you build a stronger relationship with that teacher.*

One student (D) communicated that he felt most supported and appreciated when teachers went above and beyond to ensure his well-being and acted like a parental figure in his life. He shared a time when a teacher checked in on him and explained the impact that this had on him.

*D.: The biggest difference between the teachers that we're cool with, and teachers who are just teaching is: **you can always tell when teachers are going above and beyond** what they're called to do. . . For example, Ms. C., every morning when I walk in class she asks me how I'm doing, or different things like that. It's like beyond just: 'oh you're my student.' It's somewhat – obviously we're not friends - but like it's one of those things that we have that -- I guess you can say parental kind of, you know, mom to son kind of relationship.*

Another student (P) mentions:

*P.: English is really hard, it was a struggle actually. I had a really hard time grasping stuff and whenever I tried to do the assignments, the teacher never really explained it to me in detail and then helped [me] out. After being with Ms. B., I understand [English] better; **she actually took the time to sit down with me**, have a one-on-one, have a talk, help me understand, break it down versus other teachers they would just like -- they do a half-ass job. And I think it's important when you're*

[teaching] students – you have to take the time to relate to – have a proper conversation and make sure they get it."

It appears that for at least the high school students, teacher support was seemingly taken to be sincere investment in their wellbeing both inside and beyond the classroom. The comments describe students' appreciation of teachers who actively tried to establish relationships with them, indicating to students that they are cared for and supported. Consistent with this sentiment is the following comment from another high school student.

*D: My biology teacher, she didn't just treat me as a student, she would ask me how I was doing in my personal life and if I ever wanted help or something… -- which I found was cool because she's **going that extra mile when she doesn't have to**.*

These students indicate that they are attracted to supportive teachers who "*see [their] potential*" and are interested in supporting their growth and development in the realization of their long-term goals. As one student put it:

*O: Mr. D, he was my teacher in middle school, and if I'm trying to think back, he was probably the only teacher that cared [about me] in middle school. He was the only one that [saw] my potential…. He cared beyond what was seen physically in the school or what I was doing right then. Because in grade 8, I think I failed, like three [or] four courses coming into high school… **that wasn't the best me but he could see past all of that**….*

He continued:

*O: Same thing with Ms. G, she already sees my potential. **She knows what I'm trying to do and she helps me work towards it**. And that's the thing, like most teachers, they know where I'm trying to go, they know what I'm trying to do with school, and yet still they don't want to help me succeed… It's not their job but Ms. G. sees it and she knows, right.*

"You should be treated the same as anyone else"

Most of the high school students in this study noted that teachers were often supportive of students who were not only engaged in the classroom – the "smarter" students – but also in the school community (those who participate in clubs and group activities e.g. sports). The observation is that engagement in school activities helped to shape relationships with teacher, administrators, and peers that would otherwise be non-existent. As such, students who felt unsupported were oftentimes those who were not

heavily involved in extracurricular activities. These sentiments are represented in the following exchanges.

> *L: Yeah,… I've noticed throughout classes **… teachers usually tend to favor and give more attention to the smarter kids in the class** and I don't know -- it's something unconscious but people -- I guess, I don't look like I'm one of the smartest people in the class. So up until around the first test-ish, they give off one kind of vibe, it's like: 'Yeah, I'm your teacher and whatnot.' But after they see that I'm intelligent; right, they'll start giving me more attention and start seeing if I understand the concepts; and start doing this, start doing that. And that shouldn't be the way it is, you know. I should get that treatment no matter how smart I am; no matter what – because it's like **your job is to educate**.*

> *A: I feel…like **because I'm involved, teachers know me;** so they see me, and they support me because of that. If you don't do stuff, if you're not involved, teachers don't see you as someone other than you just come here to come here.*

And there was the argument by students that they should not have to do anything extra – outside of their school work – in order for teachers to support and treat them as all students should be treated.

> *An: I don't feel supported…. And I feel like… you shouldn't have to go out and go out of your way to do all these [things] just to feel supported. **You should walk into the school and feel supported** based on how you are. And you should be looked at the same as anyone else and you should be treated the same as anyone else. You shouldn't have to worry yourself….*

"They should have more interest in us"

For many of the older students, a failed student-teacher relationship revolved around real or perceived lack of attention and interest by the teacher. A student (A.) at School C shared the following:

> *A: Every teacher is going to [say] come after school if you need help. That's their job, [and] they have to say that. But … a good percentage of them don't really want you [to]; or sometimes you feel like going to them after school is an annoyance. Like you're annoying them. You're not really positive towards going and **you don't feel like you're actually wanted**…*

Another student recalled:

> *O: I [asked] the teacher to open the weight room for me; I was trying to work out. And then he's like: 'I'm not going to give up my time.' I said: 'But sir, you're supposed to give up your time for me.' … **If you're going to be a teacher…you have to sacrifice for [the students], that's the whole point of the job**.*

Yet another added:

> *R: I feel like most teachers, they just go into the job thinking: 'I'm going to sit 30 [students] in a classroom, and I'm going to teach them this.' And…if they have a problem during the class, they can talk to me and that's it. But it's way more than that….75 minutes each day, you just sit and say a lesson. **You have to actually care and put in the time and emotion and actual work to help us**."*

The sentiment can be best summed up in a statement by a middle-schooler: "*They should have **more interest in us***."

"I just want the teachers to believe us"

Many of the students, particularly elementary and middle school students, believed that fair treatment by teachers toward students is demonstrated when teachers attend to the social and emotional needs of all students; particularly when students are subjected to name-calling and differential treatment. Hence, in response to the question: How can the school better support you or make you feel better?, students submitted:

> *J.: Like if someone calls you . . . inappropriate names, the teacher should [ask them] why did you say that? And **make them at least apologize** and say if you say that again, I'll give you detention because I get detention if I say it to them.*

> *G.: I think teachers should really do something because it isn't fair that Black people are getting yelled at way more than any more people. The White people are getting off easy...And the [South Asians]… are getting off easy too.*

The calls for assistance and support from teachers can be summed up in the following statement by one middle school students: *"**I just want the teachers to believe us** when we say someone [did something to us]."* Such belief requires that teachers intervene in students' disputes, for their perceived differential disciplinary responses, and more importantly, their de-valuing of students' complaints, operate to disparage or undermine students which ultimately make the teaching-learning processes difficult for students.

"That's kind of racist"

Students from all four schools mentioned that they experienced or witnessed differential treatment of students based on race. They saw such treatment – i.e. anti-Black racism – as manifested in disinterest or dislike of Black students, favouritism towards non-Black students, negative assumptions of Black students' academic abilities, and ignoring aggressions towards Black students.

In fact, to the question: "Do you think that if you experienced something negative in your school and you reported it, you will get support from teachers?", focus group participants, at School D – one of the secondary schools – shared that race played a role in their experiences and interactions with teachers and others.

> *T.: If it was Mr. A or Ms. T, we would be supported. They'd take action and do something about it. If it was any other teacher, no they wouldn't.*
>
> *D.: A girl in my class called me a nigga two; no, three times. I said to her…you need to stop saying that word and she was like 'oh this nigga keeps etc.' and I was like going to fight her. My teacher was like '[D];' and I was like: 'I'm not going to touch you just because I respect Ms. M…She's [South Asian]. Ms. M was like: 'Do you want to go talk to someone?' I was like: 'Okay, I'll go talk to Ms. Sunshine;' and Ms. Sunshine was like: 'You only have two years left, **you just got to ignore it**.' And I was like: 'Ignore what?'*

However, several students expressed that they were determined not to let their negative experiences, or lack of support from teachers, affect their learning. Accordingly, they resolved to use the racist attitudes of teachers and discriminatory practices as additional motivators to do well in school. Here is how one student expressed this idea.

> *X: I'll give an example without naming names. One of my teachers said – it was some years back – …there was a time when she felt intimidated and scared by the students walking through the hallways… -- I forget the words she used, but [it was] just the general area where the Black students hang out. She used to be intimidated. But I don't know if it's an unconscious bias. Something that she just has in her mind. But everyone has their own biases. They [Black students] **weren't necessarily doing anything, but they just intimidated her**. So, I think… that is preconceived bias, that thing in their minds, makes you weary of this individual. Yeah, he might be dangerous, and you might want to walk on this side of the road. That is there for Black kids and not necessarily for White kids….*

Elementary school students in School A shared how they were treated by teachers – particularly with regard to issues of racism.

> *M: People call [us] names like monkey.*
> *J: They call me Black African…*
> *M: **Teachers don't do nothing about it.** They're like: 'Okay, just don't call them that.' That's not going to help me.*
> Facilitator: So, do you guys tell the teachers when they say this stuff?
> *K: Yeah, they don't do anything.*
> *M: They're like: 'Okay just don't do it, that's not going to help me.*
> Facilitator: And how does that make you feel?
> *T: Mad!*
> *M: Mad! Like you're not doing anything about it… But if I called them something, the teacher will yell at me; that's a different thing. So, if I call someone, let's say, a White person; if I called them 'milk chocolate', I'm going to get yelled at. But if they call me, 'monkey;' they don't get yelled at.*

Another student (S) followed-up with:

> *S.: To add on to [the previous point], lots of teachers are different – are opposite of our skin color. Say you got into a fight or something, they wouldn't yell at the White person but they'll yell at the Black person -- that's kind of racist because they also -- **some of the white people – also start fights and it's not always Black people**. Just what you hear on the news doesn't mean that black people are bad. Some Black people are good. Even White people are bad, Black people don't think that they're bad just because you see them on the street.*

With reference to teachers' assumptions about the academic abilities of Black students, the elementary and middle school students with whom we spoke shared the following experiences.

> *M: **My teachers pick favourites**. Like let's say, I'm sitting right here and there's a White person sitting right there. I have my hand up. I know the answer. Oh, let's say your name is Blake. Blake answer[s] the question. I had my hand up; he doesn't have his hand up. I'm just confused, she picks favourites.*
> Facilitator: Why do you think they didn't pick you? Why did they pick Blake instead of you?
> *M: **I feel like they [teachers] think White people are smarter than Black people**. Like they're like who wants to be the example, always the white people. We [Black students] don't ever get to be examples. I guess we're not a good example…*

Another elementary schooler (S) asserted:

> *S.: So, if there's a [South Asian] person in the class, and we have a [South Asian] teacher, the Black people are never going to get any say in anything. You don't get any notice.*

And yet, another affirmed:
> *J: At the end of the year, my teacher gave my mom a note and told her that I failed .... [It was]at the very end of the year…when I can't do anything to improve my grade.*

The conversations with the elementary and middle school participants in this study reveal that for Black students, 'race' emerges very early in their school life as a plausible explanation for incidents in their everyday lives. The students were able to name and explain their multiple experiences of anti-Black racism, demonstrating how significant and pervasive racism is in schools. These experiences leave an indelible mark on the students, and their 'memory' of school. One high school student recalled his middle school years, saying:

> *M: I remember in grade 7, we were at parent teacher interviews and my mark was like a 3+ and [the teacher] was like: 'Oh, he will never be a 4+ with the other kids because all he does is joke around in class. It was like all lies. **I swear she was a racist***.

"'Oh, it's not in the curriculum'"

In discussing the extent to which the presence and experiences of Black people were reflected in the curriculum and taught by their teachers, as to be expected, the students' responses were mixed. There were teachers who went out of the way to bring the experiences of these students into their classroom, and there were those who would say that they are going by the mandate of the curriculum:

> *M: We just sometimes, you know, when we're on a certain page and we see Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela or one of those, …we just start talking about them…. Talking about what they did; ...how they stopped racism; ...how Martin Luther King fought for our rights….*

One student who seemed impressed by his teacher's pedagogical approach stated:
> *A.: My teacher, he talks about it, ...like sometime…like most of the time…when we read about it or something that involves race.... Sometimes he'll bring up slavery*

or something that involves a different race, like he kind of focuses deep beyond that….

Although there were some engagements with Black histories and experiences, the students at School D shared that some of their teachers used the 'curriculum' as a scapegoat to not teach students about Black history. One student indicated when they would "bring up" having materials relating to Black people, teachers would respond with "***I would teach you that, but the curriculum told me I had to do this****.*" Another student concurred stating: "*It gives them a way out.*" While another pointed out:

> *M: It's not like you can change that, …or have a voice … They're not accountable… They're not responsible for teaching you it, because:* ***'Oh it's not in the curriculum,'*** *so they don't have to.*

For the most part, the students had similar experiences with teachers not being held accountable, or claiming that they are not responsible for deliberately failing to engage materials related to Black presence and experiences. Speaking to the salient idea that discussions of Black knowledge are often left out of school curricula, one student contended that teachers were afraid to be "wrong" – impelled by a fear of not knowing and consequently a fear of the implications of not knowing.

Teachers – "They're people too"

While the participants at all four schools were quite critical of student-teacher relationships, some of the high school students, engaging in a nuanced critique of the relationships, showed an understanding of the teachers' differential treatment of students, and in part, suggested that it is a consequence of the demanding role of teachers. This apparent sympathy toward teachers and these students' belief that it takes "two" to build a relationship (power relations was left out here), constructed a hopeful picture of how things might be improved with students' exercise of their agency. But as other students emphasized, teachers do not have to "know" all their students to make their classes welcoming and comfortable. Take, for instance, the following exchanges by students at School D.

> *D.: I wasn't really involved in Grade 9 and 10 and I hated this school. I was so ready to leave but as my involvement grew from grade 11 and especially in grade 12, I think it's just being involved in those things teachers see your face, they know who you are, and they're able to identify you. …I [also] get that you should be able to come into a place and feel welcomed but there's only so many teachers in a school and there's way more students than teachers.* ***There's only so much one***

teacher can do to connect with every single student. Half the time when students walk into the class like you're just another student that's passing through because they're going to have like three or four classes a day. So, they're seeing so many faces. So that expectation to have teachers -- I know we're trying to hold them to a higher standard, but that's a high standard for anyone really -- to try to build a relationship with every single person that they come cross [is demanding]. I say with any relationship it takes two people to build it up, and I think us as the student body, we need to go out of our way as well to maintain those relationships….

T.: I don't really agree with [D] and what he was saying because if you think about it, 30 students in a class, three class, like 90 right. It's cool, you don't have to know everyone, I know like one of my classes, I definitely don't know anyone. I won't know all their names and stuff, but do I like them as a person. Like when you say folks are not supportive, you can't expect teachers to know all the students, of course not, but they can still make someone feel welcomed and comforted without knowing who they are. Just the way I'll see someone say: 'What's up?', 'You good?', 'You look sad. What's going on?', 'You're blessed?' You don't necessarily need to know everybody – like she doesn't need to know where I'm from, my age, what I'm trying to do with my life to say, 'what's up, how you feeling?' and things like that; or to make you feel welcomed.

R.: It is kind of to what [T] and [O] was saying too, you know, it's true, you should be able to walk in a place and feel like you're welcomed and you're not alone. But I think that we as students tend to forget sometimes that teachers are also people too. Like, I'll see someone by themselves; and if I'm uncomfortable, I won't go out of my way to talk to them. And with teachers, I think that we forget that they're people too and teachers may be just as uncomfortable approaching us sometimes, as we are approaching them about things. …Sometimes, you know, I think they get so nervous that they come with the wrong approach or don't come at all, and we do the same thing.

The idea that teachers might not have the time and/or energy to deal with all their students was perceived by some high school students to be something with which they will have to contend when they attend university – hence, something for them to get accustomed to.

S: It only gets worse after high school. Right now, you're in a building with limited people but in university there's so many more people…so you have to be comfortable going out of your way to talk to teachers, to learn how to grow

past that because you don't grow when you stay by yourself. Growing happens when you go outside of your comfort zone.

Essentially, the discussion about teachers reveals that the crux of the students' critique is not necessarily (or is less) about lack of teacher support and perhaps more about feeling unwelcomed in the school and lacking a sense of belonging in these educational spaces. While the high school students were able to clearly articulate these feelings, it could be argued that the same sense of *un-belonging* was at the core of the elementary and middle school students' desire to be "believed" by their teachers, to be treated fairly, and to serve "as examples" in class. Further examination of Black students' sense of belonging in the educational space is warranted. To a large extent, our findings about teacher-student relations with these Black male students are similar to those of Pomeroy's (1999) respondents in that the also felt certain students "maintained the lowest position in the hierarchy, while other students enjoyed a more preferential status in relationship to the teachers" (p. 476). As Pomeroy writes:

Teachers are seen to hold a privileged position within a hierarchy. There was also a sense, for many young people, that certain students were higher in the school hierarchy than themselves. Inter-relationships in the school are framed by a hierarchy of worth. The hierarchy, as understood by the interviewees, consists of teachers at the top, themselves at the bottom, and 'more able' or 'better behaved' students between themselves and the teachers. The criteria for determining one's position in the hierarchy are entirely teacher – and school – defined. The recognised dimensions of importance are ability and/or knowledge, and behaviour (Pomeroy 1999, p. 476).

SECTION 3:   Parents' role in students' schooling and educational process

"My mom is constantly on my case about school"

Students spoke about their parents playing significant roles in their schooling experiences. A., a Jamaican-born student at School C, stressed that he worked hard in school because he did not want to disappoint his parents, or fall short of their expectations:

> *R: So back in Jamaica, that's where I'm from, we grew up from nothing to get to where we are [today] and I feel like **if I were to let my parents down, I don't know how I could live with myself**. Because we came from buying half of bread, half of saltfish, half of this, half of that. We had to survive off of literally nothing, had like 10 people in one house and stuff like that. So, coming from there, I know what I need to do in order to succeed so I can ensure that if I don't live good maybe my kids can do it, or maybe I can give that to someone else.*

As a first generation Canadian, A. believed that he needed to excel in school in order to ensure his parents' sacrifices were not in vain or wasted. His desire to succeed (understood as being financially secure) comes out of the limited economic means of his family experienced in Jamaica.

Parents were also understood to be important actors in supporting student emotional wellbeing and academic success. Students at School A spoke about building their knowledge and understanding of racism with help from their parents, which may explain the ability of these younger students to name and define their experiences of anti-Black racism. M. shared a time when her mom helped her to unpack a racist incident in a popular Black television show.

> *T: When we were watching House of Payne, me and my mom. The Black people went to a fancy dinner place and it was full of White people. So then when the Black family went there, the White families were like: 'Oh you want me to go call Jerry Springer' – because Jerry Springer handles ghetto Black people and stuff. So, they were like: 'Oh you want me to go call Jerry Springer for you.' So, then the White person is like: 'Whatever! just sit down.' And he was giving him attitude. He was like -- because the Black guy gave him a tip because they wanted to sit down but they really never had any money on them. And so then the Black guys… go like: 'You're racist. Why are you being like that.' And the White guy was like: 'I'll just call Jerry Springer for you because you guys are ghetto.' Jerry Springer is White but ghetto. So, I'm like: 'Why I never knew it.' So, I'm like: 'Mom why does he need Jerry Springer or something.' And my mom is like: 'Because Jerry*

Springer handles ghetto Black people. And I'm like: 'Wow! that's rude.' So now I told my mom: 'They're thinking Black people can't afford anything. Yet, you see more White poor people on the street than Black people.'

Another elementary school student spoke of his mother's engagement with his school:

A: This one time this kid started yelling at me and then he pushed me. So, then I got super mad and I pushed him to the ground and the teacher saw the whole thing. Then the teacher went to the principal. She brought us both to the principal's office and then she told the principal all kinds of different stuff. And there was a bunch of witnesses who saw everything what happened. Like I was just playing, and this kid came out of nowhere and he started yelling at me and he just started making fun of me and calling me names. And the teacher saw the whole thing and when we went to the office, I got in trouble and the other kid didn't. And then the teacher was lying; she was telling a bunch of different stuff. The teacher is a different color. And then I went home to tell my mom; and then my mom said she was going to talk to the school.

Likewise, several middle and high school students spoke of the active role their mothers played in their educational decision-making – in the case of grade 8 students, in their decision regarding the high school they would attend. In the case of J., his mother was very deliberate in telling him which high school he must attend which was different from the one he wished to attend. His mother's preference had to do with the fact that his older sibling had attended that high school; she had a positive relationship with the school and was satisfied that J. would benefit from attending that school. Here is how J. reported the exchange with his mother, when he was asked about the high school he was "forced" to attend the following semester against his wishes.

Facilitator: Why are you going to [that] high school?
J: I'm being forced to
Facilitator: By whom?
J: My parents….
Facilitator: Where do you want to go?
J: To [Catholic School]
Facilitator: Why?
J: Cause it's a sports school; and I want a good team for basketball.
Facilitator: So, did you tell your mom?
J: Yes.
Facilitator: And how did she respond?
J: You're still going to [the school].

Other exchanges with these young men indicated parents' wide ranging and active involvement in most, if not all, aspects of their sons' schooling and educational lives. They talked of being "constantly" monitored or surveilled by their parents –

> About whether they had teacher-assigned homework:
> *T: Like **my mom is constantly on my case about school** ... Everyday all she does, is talk about school... So, if I were to ask to go somewhere, she'll be like; 'Oh, did you read a book? Did you do your homework?' And I'm like: 'Yeah...' If she sees me playing games, she'll be like: 'Turn off that! Go read a book; go do your homework….' And if I don't have homework, she go: 'Alright I'm going to call your teacher and ask….'*

> To ensure that they remain focused on their education:
> *M. My mom keeps me at this school even though she doesn't like it, because she knows if I went to a school with more Black people my focus probably won't be on my education. ...It would probably be on how I look and the girls, and all that kind of stuff."*

> Corroborating this sentiment, another agreed:
> *R: I was friends with people from those schools and when I'm with them I'm totally different than how I am when I'm at this school. Like I'm not focused on the same stuff. So yeah, my mom was right in sending me to this school.*

> Questioning them about lesions they might observe on their children's bodies.
> *M: My mom keeps asking me questions about school. 'What happened? What happened there? Why did you get hurt? Where did you get that cut from?'*

In addition, the students revealed that generally, their parents did not feel supported by their home schools. As one secondary school student, who was frequently in trouble, stated: "*I think that **my mom argues with this school on a regular basis**.*" Another student shared that *"**My mom has some serious beef with this school**."* Many of the participants indicated that their parents did not have an open, amicable and transparent relationship with the school their children attended, and these negative perceptions translated into difficult student-teacher relationships.

A salient observation that can be gleaned from the interviews is that the relationships that these students had with their parents, particularly their mothers, was that their schooling and education were to be their priority; and hence they were to apply themselves to their school work at all times. While most of the students alluded to the presence of their fathers in their lives, most of their references throughout the discussions were to their mothers who appeared to be much more engaged and active in their schooling lives.

SECTION 4: The Role of Peers and Friendships in the students' Schooling Experiences

Although the study did not explore peer relationships in detail, the theme arose in our discussions with students about their general school experience. While most students shared their desire for a diverse friendship circle at school, or indicated that they belonged to one, many of the stories around peer relationships tended to be mediated by the students' experiences with anti-Black racism.

"Black people are trash"

Several high school students at School A shared the following:

> *M: I have two things to talk about: …support in the school, as well as… how support is related to my story. This boy named A, everybody probably knows him…*
> *J: An Indian guy?*
> *M: Yes, Indian. J., G., all of them. So A. is disgusting.*
> *S: Very rude.*
> *M: And rude. He says 'Oh, you Black people are trash. You're trash, you're trash, you're trash!... Indian people, we could rule the world. We could rule the world. And I'm like: 'You can't rule nothing without education. It's not like you do your work and stuff. Without education you can't do anything.' Then he says: '…I don't want to listen to you. You're trash, I'm not listening to you.'*
> *T: Yeah! Like the Indians are always against the Black people but then Indians love white people.*
> *M.: And then G. was talking about inappropriate things in school and nasty dirty things; and I tell the teacher. She says: 'Oh why are you telling on people, why are you such a tattle-tale?'*

At School D, the following exchange transpired.

> *D: A girl in my class called me a nigga two or three times.... She's Indian, but she was looking at Ms. H. ...and looking at me. And I was like: 'Stop looking at me because I'll jump through both of you. Like you need to stop saying that word.*
> *S: Sometimes like maybe someone calls you the N word…. Like,* **countless times someone has called me the N word***....*
> Facilitator: At this school?
> *S: Oh yea!*
> *Other male students chimed in: Ohhhhhhh yessss*
> *S: Walk in the hallway ...in 2 minutes, you'll hear …*

M: All the time! 'You nig...hard R ..like slurred on there..

At yet another school, School B, the students had this to say.

A: Some people kind of treat us different sometimes
Facilitator: People like whom?
A: Like some people just start yelling at us for no reason
Facilitator: Are these students? teachers? principal?
A: Students, students….
J: Yeah, sometimes they're a little racist.
Facilitator: Why do you say that? How do you know?
J: Because sometimes… they talk about us….
*T: Sometimes they see a Black person walking; they're always say: 'Oh, they're bad news, stay away.' Or when we're making lots of noise, like laughing in the streets, **they think we're like gang members** or something…. Like sometimes when they see us walking around or wearing different types of clothes --*
O: …They make up words and then they change the meaning every time and it's always a dark color and then people call you that.
Facilitator: A dark colour you said?
T: Yeah, like some people call me dark chocolate.
O: And like dookie; and they made up the word and they call it poop….
T: Like in our class, they made up the word dookie
Facilitator: Who're they?
T: Our classmates; they made up the word dookie. Now they are walking around calling Black people dookie.
Facilitator: Are these Black classmates who are saying this?
T: Sometimes and some of them are White. Like there's this kid named G., he's White and he calls us dookie.
S: Also, …you know how Jamaicans talk different.… They have this --
J: Patois
O: Patois
S: Yeah, it's basically real. They talk this different accent from Canadians. And they like to make fun of your accent and say: 'How come you can't say neighborhood, you call it yard?' – and all that stuff.
Facilitator: And those are students as well?
S: Yes, most of them are students.
M: People are called names like monkey because you're dark like a monkey.
J: They call me Black African.
Facilitator: You're called monkey?
A: Yeah!
M: Monkey, they're like gorilla; stuff like that. Yeah! I don't like that….

Facilitator: So, these are students who are at your school?

M: Yeah! …teachers don't do nothing about it.

My problem is with people who …don't understand what it means to be Black.

In reflecting on how they are navigating their respective schooling environment as Black students, participants expressed reservations about having to deal with other ethnic group students appropriating elements of Black culture. Many of the participants saw this practice as disrespectful and distasteful. There was consensus that South Asian students, the group most often referenced, lacked an awareness of the implications of their actions; and that their sense of 'Blackness as cool' was without the embodied or lived experiences of having a Black identity. These sentiments are represented in the following comments.

M: …To be honest, the biggest problem I have with it [appropriation] is that they try to emulate the whole Black lifestyle.

R: They try to live a life that they don't have to live…. in Brampton and being from Brampton. My problem is how they carry themselves.

M: They try to live a life [pretending] they're from the hood and stuff.

M: My problem is with people who aren't Black, but like Black culture, yet don't understand what it means to be Black.

R: The problem I have is that they try to use slang and say the "n" word.

M: The culture that we live in, people are getting too comfortable with saying that [N-word].

M: I meet people for the first time in this school … and then: **'Yo! what up my n' and then they just go ahead and use it.**

M: I recall one time where I almost slapped him [for using the N-word]; but I was like: 'Nah! I'm not going to let this happen or let him disturb me like that.'

M: It's getting to the point where people who are not Black say it [the N-word] more than people who are Black.

These comments point to the fact that cross-racial relationships among peer contribute to the schooling climate, and as such the learning that we might expect from students. Of course, experiencing racial name calling, the use of racial epithets, and being a recipient of discriminatory behaviours – often throughout their schooling process, from elementary to high school – contribute to the emotional wellbeing of students and thus their ability to settle into their learning. The students' comments signaled that their teachers and school administrators were ill-equipped, ill-prepared or unwilling to address racism as exhibited in their classrooms and school. Teachers, school administrators, and all concerned with the schooling and education of students must be willing to address these incidents of racial violence when they occur, for the impact on Black students can be devastating.

SECTION 5: Resisting stereotypes of Black people and related hegemonic discourses

Navigating and negotiating the schooling system, for any student, is likely to have its challenges that anyone would certainly try to avoid if they can. For marginalized and racialized students in particular, the navigational challenges are even more great since the educational, cultural and social structure of schooling tends to be alienating and exclusionary. As Allen (2017) writes, schools

> are powerful but contested sites of cultural reproduction. . . . that, in addition to contributing to inequitable economic stratification, also reproduce dominant ideologies. . . . Specifically, schools and their institutional actors draw upon and contribute to dominant ideologies of black male identity by positioning them as culturally deficient, anti-intellectual, deviant, and intimidating (p. 269; see also James, 2012).

It is in such a context that we seek to find out how race operates in the schooling experiences of Black male students in this suburban area of the GTA. Do they, to frame Allen's (2017) argument as a question, "take up dominant assumptions of their identity or reposition themselves as a way to push back against dominant hegemonic discourses" (p. 270)? In what follows, we present the comments of the research participants noting the ways in which race operated to affect in their educational journey.

"It affected my whole life"

In our attempt to have participants reflect on the effects of race on their schooling, we asked the question: How does being Black affect your schooling experience?

> *M: It doesn't affect us daily, but in situations it does.*

> *D: **It affected my whole life**. In grade 8…. I was the only Black kid in the class for the longest time. S [teacher] would be like: 'It's okay D.; you can just divide the class.' And I was like: We had our table set like this... and I sat right in the middle; and she told me to sit right in the middle ... where the board is. 'You divide it [the class]; and I was like: 'Okay.'*

> *J: Well... you know it's kind of different when they talk in English class – especially when we are talking about social issues and kind of racist stuff. And I feel as though **some people don't have... the biggest spectrum for understanding things**. . . .*

*J: My friends are aware; and **they try to stay woke – but emphasis on the word 'try.'** It's like… they try to understand when I try to talk about things.... They try to understand, but you know when someone doesn't understand the full story – like [my] growing up and being the only Black person in the class and how that impacts you.*

*J: I remember when I was in grade one looking around the room and being like: 'Oh, it's just me;' and then grade two: 'Oh, it's just me;' up until, I think, grade seven, **I was the only Black person**. And it was really weird.*

"Just want a regular life."

Many of the students, for instance those attending School D, mentioned that racist stereotypes about Black people have the effect of misrepresenting Black communities – and hence them. It was clear that most of them were determined not to make the stereotypes define them.

*M: The main thing wrong with society [is that]... **they see us as gangsters** when all of us probably here [and/or] none of us want to be in a gang…. We're living proper lives, and probably just want a regular life; want to have a regular house;… get regular cheques. We don't want to have to shoot up ... your streets just to get what we want – or sell drugs.*

The differential treatment – and often punishment – that teachers gave to Black and non-Black students was a source of contention for the participants. For example, School B's participants observed that White students were often not reprimanded for poor behaviour in the classroom, whereas Black students tended to receive more reprimands and oftentimes more severe treatment even for similar behaviours. This "double standard" is represented in the following comments.

*K: So this happened in grade 7. So, I was in French class and I didn't have a pencil. So, I was asking my friend for a pencil and the teacher was just like: 'Why are you interrupting my class and study.' And I was just like: 'I wasn't interrupting, I was just asking my friend for a pencil.' And she just like: 'Get up and go sit over there by yourself….' And I was like: 'I was just asking for a pencil; what did I do?'….. I was just like: '…Why should I get up and move? I was just asking for a pencil' And she's just like: 'I want you to get up and go sit over there.' And I finally got up and went to go sit over there. And then like 5 minutes later, **my White friend did the same thing. But nothing happened to him**.*

> *M: **I got mad** because she gave one of my White friends a warning… 'cause he hit someone. And when I hit someone, she told me to do push-ups. And … my White friend [Name], she just gave him a warning and said don't do it again.*

> *M: Alllll the timeee.. [I get the N] slurred [directed at] ...me? I don't take offense. I'm just like: 'Okayy! I'm a NIGGER so what?'...But we can't say stuff like that... I'm telling you, if I went up to somebody..., say my friend [who is] a Muslim person [and] called them a terrorist..., **I'd get suspended on the spot.***

Students at School D also mentioned that Black students are vilified when they wear durags at school, whereas South Asian students who wear durags do not experience similar negative stereotypes. And as one high school participant jokingly stated with reference to teachers: "*They'll be nice to them [Brown students] 'cause they're like 'maybe they don't know what it is'."* The following was shared as another case of double standard.

> *M: I think the main issue…, **they have like a double standard** is, I guess, the stigma is: When you see you a Black person with a bandana, you automatically assume that they just aren't wearing it for style; they're wearing it to represent something. Whereas, a Brown person, you would think that they are wearing it for style and not really… to represent a group, or a gang, or something. But I guess for our case, it's most likely the opposite.*

"A Black teacher will…try to push me to do better"

In discussions about the place of race in the experiences of Black students, students at School C reflected on the place of Black teachers in their schooling lives. According to several of the participants they received much of the support they needed/wished for from Black teachers because as they claimed, Black teachers did not hold the negative views of black students like their White teachers.

> *D: I've had teachers look at me and think that I'm a bad student. So, like Ms. L., who is a Black teacher, will look at me and then she'll try to push me to do better instead of – another teacher, she would look at me and think I'm a bad student and then just drop me off…; leave me aside. **So, it's not just acting on it, it's how you act on it**. You can look at someone and think they're bad and push them to be good; or just say they're bad and then treat them like they're bad.*

"They will play one song from Bob Marley the whole month and call it Black History Month"

Students also shared that during Black History Month they would have *"Black performers and Black artists and people coming"* into their schools to "lecture" about… how they "could be successful;" and/or talk with them about the "need" for them to "better" themselves. And there were those students who were quite skeptical of their school recognition and/or staging of Black History Month activities. They saw the special activities at their school during the month of February as a reminder, as one participant cynically said: "*I'm like, its's Black History Month*" conveying the idea that the school has no real commitment to what the month stands for.

Participants also expressed concerns regarding the lack of efforts put into the planning of Black History Month, and as such the paucity of activities. According to one student (M.): "*They will play one song from Bob Marley the whole month and call it Black History Month and then play the same song over again…This year they played "Billy Jean" by Michael Jackson the whole time.*" Another student added: "*I don't see the hip hop and break dancing – stuff like that – anymore.*" He went on to say that "*They [teachers] want to integrate it with their dancing and just do straight hip hop and have it like that; or when they're doing dances, just have hip hop music or even soca.*" It was suggested by several students at School D that lack of efforts and cutback in events during Black History Month had to do with the school making space for South Asian cultural events.

"They just assumed . . . that I was living in a single parent household"

One student related an experience with a school staff when he started school in the fall. She presumed that he was a fatherless youth. This stereotyping is common to the experiences of Black youth – especially males – as discussed in the literature about them being "at risk" students (see Allan 2017 and James 2012). In telling of his experience M. said:

> *R: The first time I came to this school for the IB program, the Coordinator at the time took me on a tour around the school with my mother. When I came in September, they gave us office index cards, and, on the card, it said: '**Lives with mother**'. Like they just assumed I guess that I was living in a single parent household.*

"As a Black student, I…[have] to prove to them that we can do it"

Among the strategies that the students indicated that they employed to resist or push back against the "dominant assumptions of their identity" (Allen 2017) or the stereotype of them as "underachievers", was to "work twice as hard." For instance, students at School C talked of feeling the need to put extra efforts into their work to counter teachers' lowered expectations of them. As one student (P) said: *As a Black student, **I feel we have to work twice as hard** to prove to them that we can do it, and we're no different from others.*

In the case of the stereotype of them as athletes, or the dominant assumption that they have superior athletic abilities, some of the students were indifferent while others sought to navigate as best they could the paradoxical situations in which they found themselves. On the one hand, they understood the usefulness of being identified as athletic, since for them, playing sport had enabled them to cope with and navigate the inequitable and alienating structures of school, and gain recognition – if not respect – from their peers, teachers and administrators. On the other hand, they resent the fact that, as one participant (J) put it: ***"They just think that we all play basketball."*** What these youth wished for: is to be seen as students with the intellectual ability to academically succeed in school.

In essence, students were actively resisting the "negative things" said of them, seemingly holding on to hope that **"there's a lot of us… around…; they [teachers and peers] have to get used to us in their environment"** (TT).

SECTION 6:   Students' Suggestions: "For us education is a serious thing"

A significant contribution of the research participants were the suggestions the students made regarding what they perceived to be things that teachers and school administrators should be doing to make their experiences in school more responsive to their needs, interests, concerns and aspirations. We refer to them here as "Student Suggestions." The comments that follow capture the moments in the focus groups when students ruminated on what might be done in their school-communities to improve their experiences; what more could be implemented to ameliorate negative teacher-student relations, and the complications that might arise with some suggestions specific to the Black student populations. The suggestions the students conceptualized were designed to deal with and combat anti-Black racism, as well as help to create the context for improved student-teacher relationships. The themes that emerged were: (i) what more teachers could do to improve student-teacher relationships; (ii) the possibility of creating a Black student support group and the complications and tensions that arise with such a notion in a multicultural school community and (iii) addressing anti-blackness and racism at school.

"If there were more teachers that you could talk to. . ., it would make a huge difference"

The students offered much to consider on how to improve student-teacher relationships. Take for example, at School B, the middle school, when asked what kinds of supports students would want from their teachers, A. remarked:

> *A: I liked when the teachers let me stay late in their classroom especially when I needed more help with school work, because some of my teachers just tell me to leave. I'll ask to stay late, and then they say: '**I'm not free**.' But I have noticed that even when they are free,… they still don't let me stay.*

Another student insisted:

> *E: I think it's important when you're [teaching] students – **you have to take the time to relate to them** – have a proper conversation and make sure they get it [what is being taught].*

At School D, when students were asked the same question, they responded by saying that they wanted to be listened to, taken seriously, and cared for. Student M made the comment that they should have more teachers with whom they could relate.

> *M: **if there were more teachers that you could talk to about your problems, it would make a huge difference**. …It's just that I feel we need more teachers that can connect more with us – not necessarily Black, because I know there are a couple of White people, couple of Brown people. There's a lot of people that understand us for us; but mostly they will see us as something else.*

The students continued with this line of thinking when observing that the teachers with whom they interacted in their schools were not only difficult for them to relate to, but also that the teachers did not care about them, or their academic achievement and their well-being. On this point we again heard from M. He stated:

> *M: I feel **teachers need to understand the type of position we are in** as Black students. They choose the system; they just assume things about us, and that's just not okay. For example, it was the time of the year when teacher-parent interviews were on. Teachers requested to have parent interviews with other students who had the same mark as me, but they did not want to have my parents come in. I thought it was a good thing. But then my parents told me what that actually means: is that they don't care about you.*

Staying with parent teacher interviews, another student further suggested that having teachers meet all the parents of Black students is a way for teachers to truly understand the goals of students and their parents and guardians in order to more effectively meet the needs of students.

> *H.: I feel like when the teachers meet students' parents they understand the seriousness of why students are there, which is for their education. But when teachers only see students coming to class everyday they don't understand that **for us education is a serious thing**. Or they don't understand where we want to go in life.... So, I feel if the parents met the teachers then their focus would be more on getting students where they need to be.*

"We should start a group for all of us"

Above all others, the suggestion of creating a Black Students' Support space arose as a key or prominent suggestion which was evoked and revisited by students across the different schools. Take for example, the following comment:

> *C: We came back from a trip [and said]; 'Oh maybe **we should start a group for all of us** [Black students] and talk about the problems that go on around the school and how it affects us. The biggest problem with that is, since the majority of our*

school is Brown, [they might think] we have to deal with a bunch of Black kids who are trying to gang up against us.... So, the group itself would just lose the moral to its… its integrity

Interestingly, as they thought through initiating spaces and supportive programs for Black students, the focus group participants were already beginning to foresee prospective issues and problems. Nevertheless, they remained desirous for something to be done.

> *M: I would want them to actually **do something about problems instead of just listening** and not have anything done. You have the problem happening again, you call the teacher and still nothing will happen.*

And on the possibility of having Black specific supportive spaces in their school, M. offered the following:

> *M: I think that's a tough question to answer because I feel like if we do create [Black] support groups and have meetings like we're doing now, I feel **people would frown upon that**.*

In response to the notion of creating Black student spaces, another student, M., suggested: *It would be beneficial to us, but we'd be hated .... We'd be hated a lot.* D. added:

> *D: I feel some kids wouldn't want to join, because they're watching and would think: 'Oh, my friends are going to think da da da….' Now people get offended super quickly. [They'd say]: 'Oh, how come I can't come?' – because you're not Black.*

Also, M. wondered if Tamil or Sri Lankan students would want to attend Black student activities, when phenotypically, they may present as Black since they are darker than some Black students. M. went on to say: "*What would I say, you can't come because you're not African?"*

"Most of the problems are coming from people not having enough exposure to Black culture"

Having identified the omnipresence of anti-Black racism and observed that it is affecting their schooling experiences, students went on to suggest that it is likely a consequence of teachers' lack of exposure to Black people. They went on to suggest that antiblackness and racism are things that can be worked on and ameliorated in ways that would improve

schooling experiences for Black students specifically, and more generally all students and teachers. Take for example, J's hopeful comment.

> *In my opinion, most of the problems are coming from people not having enough exposure to Black culture. So,* ***if teachers and students had more exposure they would understand more****. They won't even come to you and say: 'Hey is this really how it is?' They won't even ask you that. They won't even ask you; they will just assume.*

Here J is identifying the absented presence of Black students like him in school. He continued:

> *They know you for you, and they ask you what are your aspirations? And what do you want to do? Where are you coming from? Stuff like that. Whereas some teachers we have problems with, they don't know or ask these things and they just assume from what they see in Black popular culture.*

What J is conveying here is the cavalier ways Black students are engaged by teachers – it is without serious consideration and without satisfactory/adequate depth. Students like Jo felt teachers are not deeply interested in their backgrounds, their cultures and perspectives. This is what we refer to as anti-blackness. Additionally, students also brought up the tensions that arose when they had various conversations about creating Black programs or Black spaces designed to serve the interests of Black students and facilitate student-teacher relationships. During the focus groups, Black students made the observations that other students and teachers perceived this specific suggestion as favouritism. They interpreted this charge of "favouritism" from other students and teachers, as hindering Black progress and re-inscribing anti-black racism.

"Talk and no action"

Having claimed that their schools were not doing enough to address their problems and concerns with name-calling, mistreatments and hurts – as part of racism – students went on to say that teachers and administrators engaged in lots of lip service which students believed was a strategy to, if not silence them, obscure their concerns. One student mentioned:

> *O: They're just doing more talking rather than doing anything. I'm not going to say I know what to do because everyone's experience is different. If I could find someone that experienced the same thing, I would know what to do, but there's so many ways to tackle this issue. People need to stop talking about it and just start*

doing things. **I can't tell you what it is to do, but I could tell you something needs to be done***.*

Further speaking to the inadequacies of talk and no action, K. contended:

> *K: Teachers can console you as much as they want, they can console you and talk about your problem, but the thing is* **words are not actions***…. Words will not help [when you] go to the next person and be like: 'Hey, I need you to stop doing this or else something will happen.'*

In sum, the suggestions that students made, speak to their specific contexts, with the overarching themes being the collaborative work that needs to be undertaken in order to improve student-teacher relations, initiating Black spaces and programs, and addressing the existence of anti-blackness and racism at their schools. The suggestions pointed toward the need for them to be genuinely listened to and taken very seriously. The manifestation of what these practices might look like was less of the focus. Instead, salient was the ability for teachers to be really responsive to the needs of Black students in a manner that will make them feel safe in their schools.

SECTION 7: Challenges, Resistance and Strategies – A Summary

Students across all four schools in the Board expressed several challenges they encountered in their journey through school. From the students we learned that teachers' lack of attention to their needs, interests, concerns and aspirations, and racial stereotyping and differential treatment by many of their non-Black teachers, not only fostered a schooling environment that made learning tough and challenging – hence, their lowered educational achievement, but also to problematic situations with their non-Black peers. Students also talked about various strategies they developed and used to contest and resist the problems they experienced in their schools. Understandably, the application of their strategies varied based on the age of the students, the schooling contexts, and the supports they received from teachers and administrators. For instance, many of the elementary school and middle students would either ignore the racial insults or inform their teachers about the incidents, while many of the high school students would go directly to their preferred teacher or to the school administrators.

Leadership emerged as area of discussion in the focus group – particularly among the middle and high school participants. This is understandable given that an element of the *We Rise Together* program is the promotion of leadership among Black males. So, it was instructive to learn what the students had to say about their participation in the leadership activities and what these have meant for the *We Rise Together* program. About half of the participants – especially middle and high school students – indicated that they were members of various clubs and sports teams at their school. According to some, they joined these clubs at school to meet different people and to develop leadership skills. While most of the youth used membership in the clubs as opportunities to enhance their visibility in the schools and to garner respect and recognition from their teachers, this was particularly pronounced for elementary school students.

Talk and no action was a concern that was repeatedly echoed in the focus group sessions. Students at all grade levels were aggrieved by the inaction of teachers and administrators in addressing the anti-Black racism in their schools. In the elementary and middle school, students frequently complained that teachers and administrators were not doing enough to address their concerns. Students complaints were often met with denial or mere warning for the offending students. In contrast, high school students felt their teachers and school administrators would verbally commit to make changes but, in the end, little or no actions were taken. This in turn caused many students to question educators' commitment to their welfare, and their sense of belonging at their respective schools.

Many of the youth talked of the significance of working twice as a hard to overcome some of the hurdles and barriers in their schools. They believed that demonstrating that they

were "exceptional" students would counter the stereotypes of their Black identification and gain the recognition and respect as students with the intellectual ability and discipline to be successful academically. For many of these students, the performance of exceptionality was also a form of empowerment in the absence of positive experiences.

In addition to citing their teachers for their racist practices, participants also mentioned those of their non-Black peers. Particularly poignant was the students' contention about their non-Black peers' appropriation of elements of Black culture – something they found to be disrespectful and distasteful. Seemingly expecting that their South Asians peers would have been more cognizant of how appropriation affects them as racialized youth, participants were unified in condemning these peers lack of awareness of the implications of their actions. That their South Asian peers would have a sense that 'blackness' is cool while not having the embodied experiences of Black youth was something that these youth felt was objectionable.

Despite the pervasive negative stigma attached to blackness, these students presented as resilient and hard working with a determination to transcend the stereotypes that attempt to weigh them down. They talked of being committed to working hard trying to prove their intelligence – something which is often left out of the conversation about their personhood. And for Black boys, especially, they worked hard to prove that they can "do good" – and by doing so, demonstrate that "failure" and "bad" behaviours are not inherent in blackness. Navigating school for these students was quite a trope that they rationalized was "just life" – something which they have "just deal with." In what follows are five summary points: leadership, anti-Black racism, "talk no action," resistance, and exceptionalism which represent what the youth talked about.

Leadership: Students shared that they joined school clubs for different reasons. Clubs enabled them to negotiate school, enhance their academic lives, try new things, and overall assisted in their skill development and improvement – sometimes assisted by the presentations of Black leaders invited to talk with them. "*It's useful," said B, "because we learn a lot of leadership skills, and all the people who came in – are really successful people – so they talked about what they had to go through to get there.*" Another student at School A explained, her participation in choir helped her to "improve" her writing. Further, participation in clubs inspired the students to continue to be in school with the understanding that this is critical in building a strong resume, and thus allowing for better employment prospects.

While clubs provided opportunities to gain a sense of belonging to and purpose in their school, as well as positively contributed to their educational experiences and wellbeing, some mentioned that they were unable to join clubs or engage in the activities because they did not have enough time in their schedules to commit to them. Others stated that

the clubs were not always accessible to everyone for as they explained, there were selection processes that made it difficult to gain access and there was the situation of students being chosen or invited to join the clubs on the basis of being known by teachers. M. admitted that he was able to join his club because he 'knew a teacher.' And he went on to rationalize that for the process to be otherwise is "*harder because they [teachers] don't know your name. So, I feel as though like them **knowing your name is a big advantage to choosing you for the leadership positions**.*"

In expressing their appreciation for the opportunities to join the clubs where they are able to develop their leadership skills and experience the challenges of leadership, a number of the elementary school students stated that it also offered them a chance as leaders to show that Black students are capable of being good leaders. According to T., she liked being a leader because her presence in the role served to contradict the construct of Black people as "nothing" and show that "***we can do stuff in life***."

Anti-Black racism: The students recurring discussion of the pervasiveness of racism has been mentioned. The use of chocolate – white, dark and regular – as descriptors, as well as references such as "trash" to describe Black youth were found to be insensitive and insulting to them as Black students. And referencing their South Asian peers, whom seemingly they expected, as students of colour, to be allies, T. said: '*The Indian are always against the Black people, but they love white people.*' Added to their experiences with peers were the differential treatment by teachers in that Black students were said to be more harshly disciplined than their White and Brown peers. For instance, it was suggested that White students at School B often received little to no discipline for disruptive behaviours in the classroom, whereas Black students tended to receive more severe reprimands even for similar behaviours. Also, there were teachers' and peers' construct of them as intellectually incompetent or deficient, but athletically gifted and superior.

Students felt the need to mobilize so that tangible changes might be attained in their school. Interestingly, some students observed that the inaction of school administrators was a direct reminder of the inequalities they face daily outside of school. They claimed that they were not being heard when they complained to teachers and administrators. And in those rare cases when they thought that they were heard, nothing was being done. Nevertheless, even in admitting the "*double standards*" and that there was much "*talk and no action*" by teachers, several students seemed to be holding on to their optimism and hope that if they continued to consistently complain and do their mobilizing/organizing eventually the changes they seek or desire would result.

Talk and no Action: In stressing that teachers *"should do something about the problems [students face] instead of just listening,"* the students are logically alluding to the fact that

"just words" is not enough for the entrenched institutional and structural problems they face as Black students. For in doing nothing – and without material action – the problems will continue. For these students, therefore, lack of action was a salient issue with which that they had to contend as they struggled to receive their education. Many students felt that not enough was being done for them. One student equated the inaction of school administrators and teachers to the behaviour of politicians – suggesting that teachers and administrators were probably listening to their concerns out of necessity, rather than attempting to address the issues with tangible changes. "***They do it all the time in politics just so people stop talking.***" Another student added: ***It's literally a mind game*** – *because when you feel you're getting heard and you feel like things are being done, nothing happens."*

But the students observed that these practices of educators did not apply to all students. In fact, citing the differential treatment of educators, one student noted that: *"If it was an Indian kid… you'll see action by the end of the week. But **for us, we have to go [to the teacher] multiple times**."* And like their senior peers, elementary school students expressed annoyance that teachers were not taking their concerns seriously. The inaction of teachers also caused students to feel undervalued by teachers and staff at the school. Some of the youth believed the teachers preconceived stereotype of Black people was causing them to treat all the Black students poorly.

Resistance: It is understandable that students would use resistance as a means to cope with and manage the anti-Black racism they experienced daily. At School B, resistance was often evident in the conversation when the "N word" and other anti-Black comments were referenced. Quite interesting was one student's remark about working hard to 'get out' of his present school where anti-Blackness was having a negative impact on their psyche.

> *M: You're working hard to leave as quickly as possible. Whereas in other schools, you're enjoying it so much that you're almost not even focused on leaving and you end up slacking a lot more…. Here you are counting down the days…**working hard just to make sure you get to leave.***

Some students appeared to have grown numb to the anti-Black discourse present in their schools. For example, one student suggested that she ignores insults, or pleads with the individual to stop. Yet, when those efforts were unsuccessful students would inform teachers about the insults, but nothing would be done. Students at School A, the elementary school, spoke about confronting their racist classmates. However, they also shared that they received inadequate support from teachers when trying to address racism in the classroom. One student shared that she sometimes yelled at the teacher because of this.

Exceptionalism: In saying: "***I know that there is a bunch of things stacked against me and I have to work twice as hard, so I do,***" this young man expressed what most of the participants admitted to be part of their resistance strategy, and what some scholars refer to as the "Black tax" (Ulysse 2015). Working in this way was expressed as a strategy to reduce teachers' bias toward Black students, and to prove that Black students, like their peers, aspired to be successful in their scholastic endeavours. The following comments represent the sentiments of many of the students who participated in the study.

> *P: As a Black student I feel we have to work twice as hard to prove to them that we can do it, and we're no different from others. As a Black student, I feel a lot of people look down on us. Well it's because of the way we look or the way we dress. **There is more to the person than just a cover or the look**, right. Like, they say don't judge a book by its cover, but they don't take the time to get to know us. So, you know a lot of us have a lot of potential. I feel as a Black student, a lot of them [non-Black people] will just put us down and say: 'You can't do this; you can't do that,' versus some of them who will take the time to understand you, and they don't see color or race. A lot of people just look at you [and say]: 'Oh, stay away from this guy, he's Black. He's a danger. He's going to blah blah blah blah.' Everyone just likes to look down on us because of the stereotypes, and I think that's unfair. I think everyone deserves an equal chance. To be honest, we're no different from anyone else. We're all human beings; we all have the same thing; but we all get looked down on. We're trying to prove something; we're trying to stick up; we're trying to show them we're not what you know.*

> *K: Yeah, so things like that I just have it in myself that no matter what people say about me I'm going to be me and I'm going to do good. I have no option but to do good. I don't even give myself the possibility of not doing good. So that's how I kind of react to those things.*

SECTION 8:   Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to capture and give voice to Black student experiences early in the We Rise Together program. Its findings are not intended to be either comprehensive or generalizable, but rather to set the stage for what further investigations (i.e., findings from student census data) may elucidate. The following observations are highlighted as particular areas of focus for further action and inquiry:

- Teachers who are identified as cultivating positive relationships with Black students – and more generally promote equity and inclusivity in their work with students – should be recognized by, for example by encouraging and facilitating nominations for internal and/or external awards.

- The engagement of Black parents in their school communities is critical and will require dedicated outreach, as well as the will and resources for schools to sustain these relationships over time. As such, efforts should be made to provide culturally relevant and responsive programs that will facilitate these parents' engagements in schools.

- All schools need to have greater commitment to and engagement with Black History Month. Black History should not be seen as something that is only relevant to Black students.

- Black students' voices should consistently be incorporated into the WRT program communications and professional development materials. In this regard, consideration needs to be given to how best to do so.

- Clubs provide important school engagement and leadership opportunities for students and should be continued and further expanded.

- There is a need for additional research on teacher perspectives on issues of equity, inclusivity and anti-Black racism to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and enablers to achieving the objectives of WRT.

- The *We Rise Together* Advisory Committee is an important resource to the WRT program, and needs to do its work providing advice to the Board about the program. Having representation of community members, PDSB members, students, community and youth workers, and other suitable individuals should provide needed insights into issues pertaining Black students – including research that will inform the future of WRT. This Committee should also be a resource for the Staff Resource Team of staff that will resource to the school staff and student.

- A *We Rise Together* Staff Resource Team made up of a coordinator, curriculum resource, and student liaison worker should be established and working within the Board to be a resource and provide support to teachers and students in schools to advance the *We Rise Together* program. The Advisory Committee can provide information and support to this Team.

Even with the best intentions, *We Rise Together* will not succeed if Black students do not feel secure in their schools. In addition to the ongoing activities of WRT, this report also identifies a need to:

- Review the discipline policies and practices for peer to peer anti-Black behaviour to bring them in line with offences against other groups (e.g., homophobia, Islamophobia). There is a need to ensure that these policies are communicated to all students/staff/parents/ educators and consistently enforced.

- Reconsider whether texts such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* should continue to be taught at all.

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Appendix 1: Research on the Schooling and Education of Black youth in Peel Region

A key study which called attention to the schooling experiences of Black students in the Peel region was conducted in 2015 by the United Way of Peel Region's Black Community Advisory Council, in collaboration with the Social Planning Council of Peel, the Black Community Action Network, and the F.A.C.E.S. (Facilitating Access, Change and Equity in Systems) Collaborative.

The study examined the social well-being of Black youth in Peel Region using demographic and socio-economic data, as well as interview data from service providers, adults who work with youth, and Black youth themselves. The report, Fighting an Uphill Battle, reported that Black youth in Peel schools were dealing with: low expectations of teachers and administrators, stereotypes about their educational commitments and intellectual abilities, more severe discipline compared to their White peers, and feelings of exclusion from their school, as well as school programs, curricular materials, and a teacher population that are not reflective of them (James and Turner 2017).

The F.A.C.E.S. report concludes by saying:

> The experiences of Black youth in schools, in society, and their treatment by police tell of a group that is growing up with many difficulties. . . . The issues raised through the consultations with youth and key informants and the input provided by residents and service providers highlights one important fact—the challenges faced by Black youth in Peel Region are no different than those faced by Black youth in the City of Toronto. Life in the suburbs has not insulated Black youth from the challenges facing their counterparts in Toronto.

> What is different might be the extent to which the municipalities, school boards, and police service are willing to name the issues, collect the data needed to monitor change and hold themselves accountable, and their willingness to implement focused, funded, and lasting solutions.

> Without the needed leadership and courage to tackle the issues head-on, the systemic and societal forces will continue to marginalize and to marginalize many more Black youth. As such, the situation might even become worse than those presently facing Toronto.

During the 2015-16 school year, a series of focus groups were conducted with Black PDSB male students to better understand their schooling experiences noting issues of

poor educational performance and the practices and strategies that have (or may have) ameliorated the social, academic, and emotional experience and schooling outcomes for Black students. The resulting report, *Perspectives of Black Male Students in Secondary School: Understanding their Successes and Challenges* indicated that students were critical of their treatment and experiences in PDSB schools. They told of their experiences with racism, the poor perceptions their teachers had of them, and the discriminatory treatment they regularly received from their peers.

In Spring 2017, the report, *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area* was released. Based on consultations in the fall of 2016 with Black and other members of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) communities (including Peel), the report noted that

> In Peel Region, with the second largest Black student population outside of Toronto, participants welcomed the fact that the board had begun to focus on the educational outcomes for Black students, but shared their hesitations, concerns, and doubts as to whether the board's action plan would make systemic change to the education system (p. 38).

> Participants maintained that low academic achievement of Black students is evident throughout the education system — a system in which, as one person participating in the Peel Region session noted: "No one expects Black students to be successful" (p. 49).

The PDSB used the report's findings to develop an Action Plan to address the identified issues, *We Rise Together: The Peel District School Board Action Plan to Support Black Male Students* (October 2016). The action plan addresses four focus areas: community engagement; bias and anti-racism professional development; integrating the experiences of Black Canadians into the curriculum; and inspiring Black student leadership and engagement. PDSB also held consultations in December 2016 and January 2017 to gather input from the community into the Action Plan. Input was also sought from students and the Peel Association of African Canadian Educators. The input was considered and a final Action Plan to support Black male students in PDSB, submitted in March 2017. The action plan was said to be an intervention plan with clear, bold actions, defined outcomes, and community involvement; as well as an overarching purpose: to identify, understand, minimize and eliminate the marginalization experienced by black males in Peel schools.

With reference to the experiences of Black people, CRT, in accordance with anti-colonialism, anti-racism, feminism and other critical theories, insists on naming anti-Black racism (ARB) and in so doing formulate theory and pedagogy that work against anti-Black

racism and in doing so, recognize and challenge "the multicultural colourblind discourse that mask the specific ways that racism directed at Black people operate to limit their social, economic, and educational opportunities, possibilities, and successes (James 2018, 162). ABR discourse promotes:

- the examination of the specificity of Black people's experiences with racism – cognizant of the contextual realities of race as it intersects with gender, class, sexuality, citizenship and other identity markers;

- recognition of the agency that individuals exercise – such as working "twice as hard" as their white counterparts to "prove" that they are "good," or even "better than" them in order to be successful in what they do; and

- how active resistance and contestation of institutional (e.g. school) structures, policies and practices that hold in place the stereotypes that serve to pathologize Black people (James 2018, 162).

Ultimately, contesting the unfairness of the racist systems should be to make Black students enjoy access to the opportunities to which they are entitled like their White peers (James 2018).

Appendix 2: The Data Collection Process

Each focus group was conducted in a private room at the respective schools during the school day and at a period to which the principal and parents agreed (typically during the lunch hour). The focus groups were about 1 to 1.5 hours in length.

The schools were selected on the basis of their connection to the *We Rise Together* program, having a Leadership Program with Black male students, and given the interest of the principal. All four of the focus group sessions were conducted in schools located in the west end of Brampton. These schools can be considered a "family of schools," insofar as students typically go from the elementary to the middle to the high schools in the area.

After introducing ourselves to the students and asking them to tell us their names, grades, something about their ethnic/racial backgrounds, and their hobbies (like the sports they play), we asked them to tell us about their experiences in their respective schools – with teachers; their peers, principals/vice-principals, and other school staff. We also asked about their educational and occupational/career interests and aspirations and how well they are doing in getting to their goals. Other questions included:

- How are Black students perceived and understood in your school?

- How are members of your school talking about racial differences?

- Do you feel supported by your school?

- How can the school – teachers, principals and others – better support you?

- Are you involved in any groups or clubs at your school where you are able to learn about being a leader or how to become a leader?

- How do your parents/guardians feel about your schooling experiences? And what do they think of the supports they receive from your school?

- From previous focus groups, we have been hearing about peer groupings or friendships based on race—why do you think that students tend to group this way?

The Data Analysis

The focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the focus group facilitators/ research assistants (Beatrice Anane-Bediakoh and Andre Harriott; Carl James facilitated the first set of focus groups). The transcribed works were exchanged between Beatrice and Andre noting and filling the gaps in each other's transcriptions. The transcripts were then coded according to themes that emerged from the groups. The three of us then examined the themes identifying the initial themes and discussing themes that

might have been missing or did not necessarily have a strong showing. Our initial themes were:

1. Attitudes towards teachers

2. Role of parents

3. Black History Month

4. Aspirations – educational plans

5. Sports

6. Immigration

7. Navigating/Negotiating school

8. "All talk no action"

9. Anti-Black racism (ABR)

10. Resistance

11. Silencing

12. Leadership

13. Student Suggestions

In our discussion about the themes, we decided to work with a manageable number of themes and decided on 5 major themes which we identified, others were sub-themes. The following are the five major themes:

1. Experiences with teachers and other school personnel

2. The place and role of significant others -- parents

3. The role of peers and friendship

4. Navigating and negotiating school

5. Resisting stereotypes and other hegemonic discourses

6. Student suggestions

The data was then organized using the five major themes with attention to the school and communities of the students. Some of the sub-themes explored are students' leadership activities, their attitudes towards teachers, their resistance in the schooling and educational process and their experiences with anti-Black racism at school.

The Data

Table 1 provides a profile of the 44 participants noting their ages, grades and gender.

	School A	School B	School C	School D	Total (Col %)
Table 1: Demographics by School (N=44)					
Age					
9	3	0	0	0	3 (7%)
10	10	0	0	0	10 (23%)
12	0	4	0	0	4 (9%)
13	0	1	0	0	1 (2%)
14	0	4	0	0	4 (9%)
15	0	0	1	2	3 (7%)
16	0	0	1	5	6 (14%)
17	0	0	5	5	10 (23%)
18	0	0	2	1	3 (7%)
Grade					
4	11	0	0	0	11 (25%)
5	2	0	0	0	2 (5%)
6	0	2	0	0	2 (5%)
7	0	2	0	0	2 (5%)
8	0	5	0	0	5 (11%)
10	0	0	1	3	4 (9%)
11	0	0	2	7	9 (20%)
12	0	0	6	3	9 (20%)
Gender					
Female	7	0	0	3	12 (27%)
Male	6	9	9	10	32 (73%)
Total	13	9	9	13	44 (100%)