Narratives from Within: Black Women and Schooling in the Canadian Context

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This paper focuses on the educational experiences and narratives of women of African ancestry in Canada, and is based on a number of women who were interviewed over a two-month period. The literature review examines the ways in which today's experiences of formal education, which were shared by the women, are shaped and circumscribed by much broader historical social conditions. Overall, this paper recounts the participants' challenges and frustrations, as well as their joy and satisfaction in navigating the educational system in Canada from kindergarten through to post-secondary schooling. However, more work needs to be done to ensure that formal education and learning are meaningful for women of African ancestry and other systemically marginalized peoples in Canada. This research found that the women have a strong sense of self despite many negative educational experiences. While some of the findings support existing literature, the interviewees themselves also recommended ways in which the educational system could be improved. This work should encourage more women of African ancestry to share their stories, and for educators, school administrators and policymakers to take notice.

Cet article porte sur les expériences éducatives et les récits de femmes d'origine africaine vivant au Canada. Les données proviennent d'entrevues auprès de ces femmes et qui se sont déroulées sur une période de deux mois. L'analyse documentaire examine la mesure dans laquelle les expériences actuelles en éducation formelle, qu'ont partagées les femmes, sont façonnées et limitées par des conditions historiques et sociales bien plus vastes. Globalement, cet article raconte les défis et les frustrations, ainsi que la joie et la satisfaction de ces femmes alors qu'elles naviguent dans le système éducatif au Canada, de la maternelle aux études postsecondaires. Il faut toutefois plus de travail pour que l'éducation formelle et l'apprentissage offrent des expériences significatives aux femmes d'origine africaine et d'autres personnes qui sont systématiquement marginalisées au Canada. Cette recherche a trouvé que les femmes restent sures d'elles-mêmes malgré plusieurs expériences éducatives négatives. Si certains des résultats appuient la recherche existante, les femmes interviewées ont elles-mêmes proposé des façons d'améliorer le système d'éducation. Cette recherche devrait d'ailleurs inciter d'autres femmes d'origine africaine à partager leurs histoires, et encourager les enseignants, les administrateurs d'école et les décideurs d'en tenir compte.

Introduction

Black[1] Canadian female students and the dynamics that affect their educational experiences have seldom been the focus of existing studies. Of those studies that do focus on the alienation of Black students in the education system (Dei, et al., 1997; James, 1990; Solomon & Brown,

1998), only a few directly relate to the experiences of women. Moreover, the focal points of many previous existing studies are either on the marginalization of Black males and the reasons behind their being pushed out of school, or on comparisons between students of African ancestry and Euro-Canadian students regarding their academic performances (see Sewells, 1997; Gillborn, 2008; Klein, 2007). Kelly (1998) asserts that, although African females are not homogenous, they come from varying geographical and cultural backgrounds in Canada and hold many different worldviews, they nonetheless share the experiences of differential treatment in a Euro-dominated society.

This paper draws from ongoing data collection which began in 2007. It examines the narratives of women of African ancestry regarding their formal schooling experiences in Canadian institutions. It challenges the invisibility of Black female students in the Canadian educational context and provides a greater understanding of their lived realities. The paper uses a Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework as a critical lens through which one can understand the women's schooling experiences. Black Canadian feminist theory examines historical perspectives and their relationships to contemporary everyday experiences, and is therefore crucial and relevant to the unique perspectives of Black women in an education system dominated by Eurocentric views.

Making Sense of It All: Black Canadian Feminist Theory

I use a Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework to inform this work and to examine the everyday lived schooling experiences of the women who participated in this research. As noted by Amoah (2007), it is important to note that when speaking of Black Canadian feminist theory, one is speaking of a body of knowledge or "the practice of theorizing by and about Black women living in Canada" (p. 106). A central focus of Black Canadian feminism is to examine lives and experiences from historical contexts. A Black Canadian feminist theoretical approach is useful in challenging the assumptions of a Eurocentric school system, which is the backdrop of the struggles for many of the women in this work. This approach acknowledges the challenges of women who are often "othered" by the dominant culture as well as the varying forms of resistance employed by such women to help them get through the school system. Theory affords a way of situating Black women's history and current experiences in their efforts to fracture the structural mantles of various forms of oppression.

Crawford (2007) reminds us that Canada continues to live up to its image as a White settler society and that racism, whether individual or systemic, serves to reinforce "White" privilege. A Black Canadian feminist approach disrupts this notion of universalism of experiences. It offers a strong critique of the notion that Canada was an empty land before Europeans arrived and validates non-European cultures while taking into account the multiplicity of the insidious forms of oppressions and exclusions experienced by women of African ancestry and other marginalized groups. For Wane (2004):

> Black Canadian feminist thought is about theorizing using an interactive model to examine the ways in which power relations between intersecting systems of authorization normalize a hierarchy of privilege through racialized, sexualized, gendered, culturalized, and class positions originating from dominant ideological frames of social organization. (p. 147)

Inequities around race, class and gender, either directly or indirectly, operate in hideous

ways in the lives of women of African ancestry (Omni & Winant, 1993). Jean Powers (2007) emphasizes the point that in our daily lives the socio-psychological and institutionalized dimensions of race are closely linked. "The ways, in which people are treated across the broad spectra of societal endeavours, whether in educational, judicial, or corporate arenas, are rooted in racialized, gendered, and classist social practices" (p. 155).

April Few (2007) theorizes that Black women exist "within an intersection matrix, defined as a specific location where multiple systems of oppression simultaneously corroborate and subjugate to hide deliberate, marginalizing, ideological manoeuvres that define Otherness" (p. 454). Therefore, a Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework is fundamental to understanding how and why the experiences of women of African ancestry differ from those of women of European ancestry. Such a framework reveals African women's emergence as agents of knowledge and self-defined, self-reliant individuals who are confronting race, gender and class oppression (see Hill-Collins, 1999).

Wane (2002) notes the importance of the oppressed to document the legacies of slavery and colonialism and how they have shaped the realities of African and other marginalized women. The use of a Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework indicates an inherent commitment to equality and that the effort to promote inclusivity is driven by recognizing that the experiences and perspectives of all women must be represented because they are all of equal worth (Amoah, 2007). Through an examination of the historical context of institutions that have impacted the lives of women of African ancestry, Black Canadian feminist thought contributes towards reclaiming voices that have been distorted and undermined in Western education systems.

The interrelationship of racism, patriarchy and capitalism requires attention, as they are realities that continue to infiltrate the social, cultural and economic experiences and relationships of women of African descent and marginalized women in general. Wane (personal communication, March 15, 2004) states:

> It is both oral and written worldviews that theorize our experiences and can be applied to situate both the past and present experiences of Black and other marginalized women. At the same time, Black feminist thought acknowledges the complicated relationships of difference as important to the pedagogy of Black Canadian feminist theorizing that all forms and histories must be addressed

Willis and Merchant (2001) argue that epistemologies that acknowledge historic and contemporary manifestations of oppression and marginalization move ways of knowing and interpreting the world beyond simplistic notions of biological and racial inheritance (p. 14). Furthermore, Mathieson (2002) points out that there is the need to understand the way in which whiteness operates as a hegemonic force in the educational system to oppress, exclude and silence the knowledges, experiences and histories of Indigenous peoples and people of colour (p. 167). In using a Black Canadian feminist framework to understand the schooling experiences of women of African ancestry, it must be noted that the aim of Black Canadian feminism is not to homogenize the experiences of women of African ancestry. Rather, as Amoah (2007) reminds us, the goal is to show that different experiences of women happen in sufficiently close proximity that they can allow for sharing and exchange.

Although Black Canadian feminism emerged to understand the situation of women of African ancestry, it has developed as a theoretical approach that elucidates the situation of broader collectives of marginalized peoples in general due to some shared characteristics. In this

sense, Black Canadian feminist thought can be used as a framework for transforming Eurocentric pedagogical practices and stances in an educational system that impacts women of African ancestry and other groups marginalized through various forms of systemic oppression (Wane, 2007).

Literature Review

In addition to the paucity of research on females of African ancestry, many studies that are extant only address the educational achievements of African females through comparisons to European, middle-class females (Houston, 1996; and Diller, 1996). In any current examination of African females and the education system, and in order to understand salient antecedents, it is first necessary to begin with a general overview of some context of the educational system in regard to people of African ancestry in Canada. A review of general contemporary issues as they relate to people of African ancestry within a schooling context is provided.

Orenstein's (1994) study on the self-esteem and education of girls of African ancestry in American context shows that, although all females report consistently lower self-esteem when compared to males, the severity and nature of diminished self-worth varies among ethnic groups. Orenstein also notes that African-American females maintain their self-esteem during adolescence more so than Euro-American females, thus preserving a stronger sense of personal and familial significance. African-American females are twice as likely to be "happy with the way I am" than females of other groups, and they report feeling good at nearly the rate of Euro-American males. Yet, it is significant to note that the one exception for African girls is their feeling about school. African girls are more pessimistic about both their teachers and their schoolwork than other girls.

Within the school settings, gender discrimination can take several forms that are played out in curricula, administrative structure, teaching practices, and teacher-student interaction (Irvine, 1990; Neegan, 2008). Further studies show that the ways in which teachers' interaction with students is influenced by the students' race and gender (Lafrance, 1991). Sadker and Sadker (1986) note that male students tend to interact more with teachers and establish their prominence in the classroom by initiating more positive, as well as negative, exchanges with teachers. Whichever the form of exchange, boys succeed in capturing a disproportionate amount of teacher attention regardless of the teacher's gender (Sadker & Sadker, 1986; Wood, 2011). This can have serious implications for female students in the classroom, and Black females in particular, who are often marginalized in school settings, rendering them invisible. Maxine Wood (2011) writes how little is known about how Black females experiences schooling and even less is known about the specific challenges they face on account of their gender. Moreover, Wood asserts that schools engage in gendering and racializing process that shape the experiences of students and that Black students experience gendered racism. For Black women, this presents them with limited life chances and stereotypical role deemed fit for Black women. Grant (1984) observed those Black girls' everyday schooling experiences seem more likely to nudge them toward stereotypical roles of Black women than toward other options.

Wane (2007) asserts that the history of African Canadian women and the history of African Canadians in general has been undermined. She writes that, "[o]urs is a forgotten past". Wane also notes that the "cleavage between oneself and one's history produces spiritual dislocation," adding that "separation from the past is directly connected to one's ability or inability to relate to the present" (p. 134). According to hooks (1992), "long before White supremacist ideologies

ever reached the shores of what we have come to know as the United States, constructed images of "Blackness" and African people upheld, and affirmed their (European) notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, and their will to dominate and enslave" (p. 2). Leiding (2006) sees the curriculum as focusing on the dominant culture while largely ignoring and distorting the histories and experiences of other cultural groups.

The hidden curriculum that is played out within the school system refers to the unspoken and unofficial norms, behaviours and values that students learn in schools (Sharp,, 2012. It has been argued that, regardless of intent, the hidden curriculum in schools reinforces gender roles (Fuller, 1980; Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001; Brym & Lie, 2012). Mirza (1993) reports that "schools were seen to play an important role in both situating and restricting Black female occupational expectations and aspirations" (p. 60), demonstrating that very little has changed. As a result, females of African ancestry are still often encouraged to become hairdressers, nurse's aides and other stereotypical jobs which they may not chose for themselves.. This differential treatment toward Black females has the potential for, and often succeeds in, diminishing both their self-esteem and academic performance (Neegan, 2008).

In the current Canadian education system, girls of African ancestry have to contend with the omission of the contributions of Africans in general and women of African ancestry in particular. Moreover, the patriarchal structure of the educational system hides, ignores or devalues the contributions of women. Despite this, Orenstein (1994) makes the point that, "they [Black girls] demonstrate resilience beyond that of White girls and have an ability to maintain their self-esteem" (p.44). Many scholars have echoed similar perspectives on the spirit of Black females and their ability to hold on to their sense of self despite systemic marginalization (see Robinson, 2012; Gosine 2007; Neegan 2008). Although racism and sexism are interwoven oppressions, many African women tend to view racism as the primary obstacle. Riley (1985) argues that while African girls are very much aware of the limits gender places on their career choices, they still feel that their school experiences are more adversely affected by racism (see also hooks, 1984, 1989). Thus, to be Black and female is to be doubly othered.

Henry (1998) notes that African females are practically non-existent both in research literature and in school curricula, adding that "living in a patriarchal society steers our attention to the needs of males over that of females, and likewise, the popularized discourse of the 'endangered Black male' mutes many concerns of Black girls" (p. 133).

With regards to gender concerns, a veteran teacher quoted in Irvine (1990) states that, "My concern was the Black male child in our society…. "I had not considered the implications of the female" (p. 135). Riche Richardson (1997) calls for an end to this bias: "Weighing oppression is unhealthy, and the narrow vision of what constitutes real pain and struggle among Blacks has turned deaf ears on the cries of my sisters. No healthy, progressive people can have a one-sided agenda… I refuse to endorse incomplete objectives" (p. 203).

The aim of Richardson, and the intent of this paper, is not to negate the fact that African males are indeed alienated by the school system, but rather to bring to the foreground the experiences of females of African ancestry. To ignore their realities is to reinforce their already limited life opportunities. Thus, it is critical that a Black female gender analysis must be inculcated in any framework that discusses the experiences of African students. Irvine (1990) emphasizes this importance:

> Any consideration of school experiences of Black children must take into account the gender of the
> students. It seems non-productive to posit that Black males are more at risk than Black females, or

vice versa. What is pertinent is that both groups, for different reasons, experience discrimination and isolation with a similar outcome of poor academic achievement. (p. 68)

Similarly, Cooper (2000) points out that gender is not and cannot be separate from one's race, or vice versa. "We are not a woman today and a genderless Black person tomorrow." (p. 40). Both components are integral to and inseparable parts of who we are. Thus, Irvine and others acknowledge two factors of oppression: gender bias and the marginalization of African women because of race or colour. Both remain systemic; both need to be dismantled.

Research Methods

Qualitative research approach. Data sources in qualitative research occur not in a laboratory, but in a natural setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The qualitative approach comprises both the meaning of what is discovered and the why behind the what (Silverman, 1993; Patton, 2002). It is an inquiry concerned with learning more about human beings (Gubrium & Holstein 2008). Therefore, qualitative research is concerned with describing, explaining and helping change the world in which we live. Kirby and McKenna, (1989) note that "Qualitative research seeks to understand how things happen, not only what happens" (36). This is particularly suitable for inquiries about the experiences and lived stories of women of African ancestry who share a history of colonization and oppression.

One important feature of qualitative research is face-to-face interaction (Glesne & Peshkin 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This study employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews in collecting data. Semi-structured interviews elicit reports of opinion, attitudes, values, beliefs or behaviours (Silverman, 1993, 2004, Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). They are conducted with an open framework that allows for focused, conversational, two-way communication. They can also be used to both give and receive information. This approach is flexible and unobtrusive. (Hatch, 2002).

According to Seidman, (2005) researchers interview because they are interested in other people's stories. That is, at the heart of interviewing is an interest in individual stories because they are of worth. Thus, research that includes interviewing is critical in bringing Black women's narratives to the forefront. The qualitative approach has both strengths and weaknesses, but it enables the researcher to understand the details of the women's experiences from their own standpoints (Seidman, 2005; Acker 2000). During the interviews, the women were encouraged to share and analyze their experiences. Validating and placing the women's lived experiences at the centre of analysis provides fresh insights into their worldviews.

Recruitment of participants. Recruiting participants and anticipating relationships between researcher and interviewees are vital aspects of designing a qualitative project. It was expected that developing relationships with participants would take time and energy. While the specifics could not be anticipated, general plans for building and maintaining rapport were important.

With the importance of consequent relationship building as a firm requisite in mind, I recruited by posting flyers within the community, and through snowballing; women known to me were asked to pass on the recruitment flyer to those who might be interested in participating in this project. As a result, participants were recruited from across Canada. Ultimately, 15 women between the ages of 18-40 were recruited. The main criterion for qualifying was the participant's being a woman who had attended a formal Canadian educational institution,

anytime from kindergarten to postsecondary education. All of the women attended a Canadian formal learning institution at some point. The recruiting process was challenging, as many of the women lead extremely busy lives working either part-time or full-time for pay, along with other commitments. Once participants were identified, each was comprehensively informed about the purpose of this research and what would be expected of them. Additionally, each was informed of her rights and responsibility regarding the project, including the right to withdraw at any time. They were informed that the interviews would, with their permission, be recorded. This explanation was consistent with Hatch's (2002) principle on the treatment of research participants: "When you ask someone to participate in a project at any level, you owe them respect, concern and consideration" (p. 55).

Data collection and analysis. For those participants in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), interviews were conducted in person at a location of their choice. For those outside the GTA, interviews were by telephone. During the interviews, the women were encouraged to share and analyze their experiences. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and were audio recorded and field noted. Following the interviews, a verbatim transcript of each interview tape was produced. The use of NVivo software enabled the coding of emerging themes that guided data analysis and interpretation. Additionally, observational field notes were checked to corroborate emerging themes (Hatch, 2002). Completed transcriptions were then printed and carefully read. Key words and phrases were pinpointed and written in the margins of the transcripts to serve as coding categories (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). Each transcript was then categorized and sequenced for presentation purposes.

Results: Telling our Stories

Some of the women encountered "curriculum marginalization". Many of them provided explicit accounts of the many instances when study material, particularly history texts/curriculum, either understated the impacts of colonialism or excised accounts of Black African cultures and the contributions made by members of those cultures. Curricular marginalization, another form of othering, is examined in this paper under the following sub-themes: colonialism, historical omissions and stereotypes, and alienation.

One participant noted early on as a student how the curriculum portrayed people of African ancestry in a negative manner:

> We were all taken into this classroom and the teacher put this film on. It showcased African people running around half-naked and dancing. I remember after that the White kids were laughing and saying, 'that's you. That's what you look like.' And I felt really bad. I really hated that. Now, today, I appreciate it, but back then I just hated the fact that they were showing this and the little White kids were making fun of me because those are my people. That was not a nice experience for me. (Yvonne)

In speaking of her experiences, another participant, Alberta, states: "My high school experiences were difficult, but I managed okay because I knew I had to. Looking back, I am not sure how I made it. I had some good times, but my overall experiences were worse than bad. The whole time I was in the different high schools I found it meaningless, irrelevant". Yvonne echoed a similar feeling. "I was not impressed or influenced really by school. I just glided by. You simply do what you have to do to get by".

Henry (1993) sees the Eurocentric curriculum as a barrier to the success of students of

African ancestry and other racialized students:

> Throughout my childhood, my lessons never enabled me to make sense of my Blackness in positive affirming ways. My teachers never taught in ways that helped me critically understand a larger Black community... As a young Black girl growing up in England and Canada, my school lessons were often acts of violence. (p. 298)

Irvine (1990) calls illustrations of systemic discrimination "acts of violence" (p. 46). Solomon and Brown (1998) further emphasize that some students of African ancestry show contempt for the curriculum because the content usually excludes them or portrays them negatively. For instance, Yvonne's appreciation of "her people" shows a connection to her African roots. While that is to be applauded, connecting to a documentary that shows African people running around naked is problematic as it indicates how strong colonization of the mind and distorted portrayals of African people continues to be.

Many students are often indoctrinated by Western notions of African people, and they need to debunk these existing stereotypes. Grinker and Steiner (1997) assert that "those who teach and study Africa today must learn to problematize the issue of representation in order to locate and unpack the economic, political, personal, or other motivations that might underlie any particular image of Africa" (pg. xxvi). They add that, "[a]nthropology can no longer makes claims of representing objective truths and mimetic reality" (p. xxv). What is evident from Yvonne's story of "African people running around half-naked and dancing," which she eventually came to "appreciate," is that unless information is appropriately and properly contextualized, cultural aspects of any group can be held up to ridicule through improper representation and lack of insightful explanation. Consequently, if the whole historical fabric is examined, as opposed to just one level or isolated patches, it is evident there are omissions and stereotypes in curricula that operate to ignore or denigrate African peoples and their histories. As Lacy states in regard to her grade-school experiences, "The teachers omitted our story. They omitted a lot of our history". One important step for teachers to keep in mind is that the first step to understand that race and gender are important factors that influence the identities, outlooks, experiences and opportunities of students (Henry,2010., p. 183)

Curriculum distortion. Women of African ancestry who faced oppression were and are not merely docile vessels waiting to be filled by an oppressor. Wane (2007) asserts that, despite exclusions on many levels, women of African ancestry women organized, resisted, and identified their struggle in opposition to racist, sexist, and Eurocentric oppression.

Dana, a psychology major, spoke to the notion of European supremacy and issues of perceived African inferiority as they are manifested in the discipline of psychology by stating:

> There were many people who believed Whites were superior to Blacks. What all those 'Fathers' of psychology shared in common was that Whites were superior to Blacks. It was only in the 1900s that at least one psychologist stepped forward and said, 'We believe that Black people have as much potential as White people.' He was one that gave the first PhD to a Black student, and from then on they started to accept Black people in the American Psychological Association.

She added that, historically, the curriculum "was dominated by the White race in general, and so a lot of people – who were mostly White – in power at the time took praise for a lot of things. And what is written down in history is constantly repeated, being referenced and just

passed on. They are the only documents we are seeing."

Several of the women raised a central question: who is responsible for validating such a distorted curriculum? In highlighting issues with the conventional curriculum as it relates to people of African ancestry, DeFrantz (1995) states:

[t]he problem is many of the contributions to our body of knowledge have been ignored, discounted, and discredited or purged from the libraries. The result is that very few of these scholars are included in the required reading lists. There is a critical need to know that people of African ancestry are people with cultural and linguistic histories. (p. 54).

Many participants indicated disillusionment with their school curriculum, often viewing the ways in which materials are presented as one-sided. They described the curriculum as "boring" and "irrelevant," and said they were "not impressed" with it. Some said that the curriculum was, in some instances, derogatory and in others, simply did not speak to the realities of their experiences. Nevertheless, the women's resilience and purpose enabled them to persevere. As Alberta stated, she did so "because I knew I had to".

Leiding (2006) asserts that students learn best and are more highly motivated when the school curriculum is reflective of their cultures, experiences and perspectives. But another layer can be added to this, one that recognizes that students are not *only* motivated by a curriculum in which they see themselves represented. This is evident in Gloria's comment:

When I went to college they talked about immigration and also talked about the First Nations communities. A whole new world opened up. You could situate yourself in this new knowledge. My family came to Canada in the 1960s. The First Nations people are the original people, and you start to really get a sense of the world around you.

One of the women, Amanda, believes that once exposed to curricula about people of non-European ancestry, many students may be intrigued and "really enjoy it". Cross (1995) asserts that curriculum should be framed around one's whole experience and be reflective of multiple perspectives. Curriculum should be more than just controlling and passing on of certain types of knowledge, but should also empower students through their culture and the cultures of others. It must not consist of linear, static knowledge but reflect meaning and relevance to students' lives. In a recent conversation about Indigenous history with a student, the student remarked that although she is formally well-educated, this was the first time in her adult life she was learning about Indigenous history in Canada. She was shocked, and asked, "How did I miss this?"

For some of the women, such as Tara, their post-secondary education experiences were more favourable than those in high school. Tara noted that:

… university was amazing, especially when it came to gender. I had the autonomy to choose, and some universities are a lot more progressive. If some courses did not address gender issues, I would go to the professor and ask if I could talk about gender. So gender was always a variable in my papers. University addressed my identity as a woman, but not necessarily as a Black person, [although] from time to time race came up.

Tara was fortunate in that she found a teaching environment where she was able to work gender issues into her academic studies, thereby making the curriculum more relevant to her.

Pauline expressed satisfaction with having a high school history teacher who incorporated African history lectures on great civilizations of the world.

> The text made little mention of aspects of African ancestry; nonetheless the teacher made the choice to go beyond the text. I remember him telling us that one of the first universities was in Africa. Being the only Black student in the class, I felt so proud and so included. He did this throughout the year, too; it was not just a one-time deal.

The tendency to equate gender with girls in the mainstream has much to do with the role of patriarchy and the fact that males – especially white males – are the power elite and thus remain the unmarked, unproblematized, racialized and gendered norm. Patriarchy and sexism dictate that the educational issues of women and girls carry less importance (Henry 2010, p. 190).

It is important for students to see themselves in the curriculum. Cross (1995) points out the value and advantages of a holistic curriculum, questioning how a curriculum can engage students in their own community if students are not exposed to and study the people of their nation and world (p. 75). Throughout my own high school years women were never included in any part of the curriculum. I did not know that there were Black women writers and academics. I cried because I did not know, but also because of what I found out. It was from that time that I reached a critical consciousness and started my own decolonization process. Cooper (2000) reminds us of the linkages between race and gender in the lives of Black women, noting how Black women have come to analyze their experiences as created by "interlocking systems of oppression" in which gender, class and race stand at the centre (p. 39). These systems of power have played out in the lives of Black women not just in historical contexts, but also in all forms of institution across Canada, and are deeply structured within the dominant Western Eurocentric education system.

The participant's experiences show the value of a formal education that includes and validates cultures outside of what is considered the norm. Such a formal education can create a meaningful learning environment for students and develop in them a greater passion for learning.

Students' experiences with teachers. While sharing her experiences to me about a teacher, Janet recalled, "one teacher called me a cabbage head. I was in Grade 9. He was a pretty lousy teacher [and] had no proper teaching methods. I feel that he did not think much of me with his name-calling and insulting me in front of the class. It really hurt." Similarly, Janis noted that when she was in Grade 6, "The teacher never said anything racist, but I could tell he was. Sometimes he'd say stuff like 'you people.'"

These recollections reveal messages that they are inferior, and implicitly indicate to students of the dominant culture that they are the norm. Frideres and Gadacz (2012) reinforce this point. They note how "[w]hiteness operates by invisibility – so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative. Thus whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and realized" (p. 10).

Many studies indicate that students outside the dominant culture are often moved to lower levels of academic programs or placed into non-academic ones based on teacher assumptions about them (see Dei, 2005; Wane, 2007). Teachers' expectations of the students are thereby influenced by such assumptions. Streaming students based on biased assumptions has a detrimental impact on students that can affect their educational endeavours and, subsequently, their lives. Previous work on streaming supports the fact that streaming in lower levels can be

very devastating for students. As noted in Segedin (2012), streaming, or ability grouping, of students has been associated with many negative effects such as limiting future educational, employment and earning possibilities (see MacIver & MacIver 2009; Oakes, 2004). Hughes, Cavell, and Jackson (2001) reinforce the fact that in the classroom, the teacher/student relationship is crucial. The notion of "at risk" is a familiar appellation applied to these students. Cummins (1995) notes how studies that show "many learning disabilities are pedagogy that is motivated so that students categorized as 'at risk' frequently receive intensive instructions which confines them to a passive role and induces a form of learned helplessness" (p. 109).

Many of the women recollect that they were the objects of continuous messages that they are inferior, the racialized 'other.' Name-calling, being singled out and both subtle and direct discrimination were all real-life experiences as they tried to navigate Canada's various education systems. Foremost among these experiences are the low expectations that many of their teachers have of them.

What Expectations? Lorna offered another layer to the quandaries faced by marginalized students: low expectations. "The teachers did not challenge me. They didn't believe in me. If they believed in me, they would have challenged me". Her frustration with not being encouraged in school, a circumstance that added to her feelings of helplessness, was shared by some of the other women. The result for many of the participants, and for a great many students of African ancestry, is disillusionment with school.

Even when many Black women make it to university. There are those in positions of power who continue to stereotype Black women who make it to university as not being good enough to succeed academically. Lowered expectations were not uncommon experiences for the participants. As Tara noted: "I asked my supervisor in the master's level for a reference, and she told me that she would like to meet with me to discuss if that was the right choice for me. And she asked me if I really understood what it takes to do a PhD". Tara also revealed how sad and disappointed she was after having a similar conversation with another university instructor. "I was very hurt and upset. She felt that I don't have what it takes to be able to pursue my PhD. Imagine I couldn't count on her to help me get into a PhD program. I felt betrayed". This would be stronger if it were linked in some way to race and/or gender. Like, if the participant linked the lack of support to her racial or gendered locations.

Teachers are integral to the formation of students' attitudes and predispositions (Brittan & Maynard, 1985), and teachers' expectations greatly determine how well a student will learn. These expectations are often negative, which has serious implications for students of African ancestry. And as observed by Gay (2004), graduate students of colour have to function in an alien environment in which they are often taught by culturally insensitive and uncaring instructors. She states that "most graduate students of color exist on the periphery of the academy, and their career trajectories are not as unencumbered as many think" (p. 246).

My own experiences have shown that students are usually encouraged by family, friends and society in general to pursue post-secondary education. It is generally assumed that students who attend post-secondary institutions are smart and hardworking, and that they have made it this far as a result of being smart. For the women in this study, however, their successes in education do not dispel the notion that they are not capable; there are still assumptions and notions that they are incapable of going further. Lorna recalls when she discovered one of her university professors had low expectations for her:

I liked her. I thought she was pretty cool. But at the same time, I realize how racism plays a role. I

worked so hard on my essay. The teaching assistant gave me 65 per cent. And the professor said, "That's a pretty good mark, for you." And I was like 'wow,' what is that supposed to mean?

Milner (1983) affirms that the students who are expected by teachers to perform well in class and during examinations in fact do so. While Dei et al. (1997) note that, "[s]ome teachers were able to recognize how negative stereotypes influenced their expectations of Black students. These low expectations on the part of teachers, all of whom may not be consciously aware of them, translate into diminished opportunities for Black students who are bound to these stigmas" (p. 122).

Teachers and guidance counsellors, when faced with students of African ancestry who talk about pursuing higher education, find it difficult to hide their scepticism. Solomon and Brown (1998) and Codjoe (1997) have reported that students of African ancestry are often seen by their teachers as being far too ambitious. Such attitudes from adults in educational positions of authority can deflate dreams, diminish ambitions, and lead to poor academic performance. On the other hand, in my experience I found that teachers' negative attitudes toward me in school pushed me to prove that I can do it and be successful in my endeavours. Similarly, Tara commented:

> I think sometimes the courses are not what you expect. Some just don't make any sense. The content is not practical. It doesn't relate to anything you are doing. Another thing is grading. Sometimes the effort that you put in doesn't necessarily reflect the grades you get. For the students who are overachievers like myself, it's detrimental to get a grade like a C+ or a C−.

According to Segedin (2012), previous studies indicate that teachers' expectations limit student success in schools. And lowered expectations of students in the lower streams often lead to lack of encouragement and diminish the likelihood of these students finding success in school (see Good & Brophy, 2000; Lyche, 2010). This can result in devastating effects for the women as they make their way in the world. What's more, regarding the American context, Hammer (2001) points to the fact that sexism and racism have contributed to Black women's dismal experiences in the historical and contemporary labour market.

Marginalization of students by teachers often occurs even when students are not directly told they will not succeed. Educators have many subtle ways of "keeping students in their place". This can take the form of discrediting or undermining their experiences and classroom assignments, ignoring them even when they have their hands up to provide answers or by discounting their contributions to the point where students may become afraid to contribute, fearing they will be told they are wrong. Diminished expectations by teachers can become inculcated in the students themselves, transforming student's interest in learning into self-doubt about their abilities to learn and excel. For example, Eva's recollection of one of her experiences offers a view into the manifestation of self-doubt as well as her teacher's reactions:

> The teacher that really stands out for me is my orchestra teacher. I always felt she had these feelings that I could not possibly succeed, that I couldn't possibly be good. Although I was playing instruments, I got a vibe from her, and I remember writing in my journal when I was younger that 'she doesn't like me and I think it's because I'm Black.' And that was when I was 12. It was just a gut feeling, you know, the way she looked at me, the way she grimaced when she looked at me.

The behaviour of this teacher, and others who conduct themselves similarly, magnifies the

necessity for inclusive pedagogical practices within the school system. According to Grant (1984), even when the combined effects of race and gender on schooling have been explored, Black females have often received less attention than other groups.

The failure of some teachers to look within themselves and reconstruct their behaviours accordingly and positively results in a continuous psychological and academic devastation of those students who do not fit their perceptions. For many students, a Eurocentric education that does not include other ways of explaining reality serves to undermine the various experiences that students bring to the classroom based on race, class, gender and other social locations. This serves two purposes. First, it may indoctrinate students into adopting worldviews that are deemed the "right" or "best" way of thinking about the world. Second, it ruptures the relationship between students and their cultural and gender identity, effectively fostering, to various degrees, cultural alienation.

A glimpse of this cultural assimilation with the dominant culture is seen in a comment made by Lacy, who was the only person of African ancestry in her school. She commented that "I was treated like another person from the dominant culture, so I probably acted like everyone around me". Through cultural immersion and development, Lacy had adopted the behaviours of the dominant culture and having done so was able to become an assimilated other, adopting Euro-Canadian cultural norms, perhaps as a way to survive the hostile system which she was in.

Being overlooked or ignored is not an uncommon experience for Black female students. Another participant Eva makes the point: "I was invisible in a lot of the classes. I was just ignored." In fact, Grant (1984) notes that despite receiving average or greater amounts of day-to-day praise, Black females don't receive noteworthy types of praise, which are reserved almost exclusively for white girls. Teachers signalled white girls as competent trusted aides by assigning them high-responsibility tasks such as tutoring peers or orienting new students.

Students' positive experiences with teachers. Although negative experiences form an inescapable thread, participants also recall some positive experiences with teachers. Amanda recalls a university professor who encouraged her to succeed:

> He was an English teacher and when he handed back one of my pieces of work, he leaned down and whispered in my ear, "you know, you're a very good writer. Keep up the good work. You'll go places." He was cool. He was an older guy, but that's the only time I can ever remember being encouraged. I was a good student, even in the general program, and except for that teacher, I still wasn't encouraged.

As with many of the women of African ancestry, one of the women Janis's account of a positive experience with one teacher is also accompanied by a general disappointment about being ignored by others:

> In high school I had a white teacher who was married to a Black woman. He would push me and expected me to excel. He was favourable to Black students. But I found that with other teachers I had to make myself noticeable in class, to sit at the front of the class or just be somewhere noticeable.

As with Janis, Eva also found a teacher who took an interest in her, and her brother as well. She noted that, "[i]n elementary school my teacher really made that special effort for my brother and me. She wanted us to be ahead of the white students. Even though we didn't necessarily need the extra help, she felt that we would need to work ten times hard to succeed than they

would. So she gave us that extra push so we were always ahead of them". Eva added, "[a]nother teacher I had very positive experiences with was my kindergarten teacher. There were not a lot of Black students in the school and she was pretty much the only Black teacher. So she took my brother and me under her wing, and took us to her house on Saturdays to do extra reading and extra work so we could be ahead of the other students."

Chisholm (1994) asserts that students who are empowered by their school experience develop the confidence and motivation to succeed academically. Conversely, students who are disempowered by their school experiences do not develop this type of cognitive/academic and social/emotional foundation. Thus, student empowerment is regarded as a mediating construct in influencing academic performance and as an outcome variable itself.

For many of the participants, *good* teachers are those who are interested and passionate about the work they do, who listen to students, and adapt the curriculum to suit their learning needs. Nova offers an example of this kind of teacher:

> I had really good teachers in music, math and French at various points. What I liked about them was that they were very open, were passionate about what they were doing. The music teacher just loved what he was doing; it just flowed into all the students. The teachers that I didn't like were the ones who didn't seem like they were enjoying themselves. They just looked sour all the time.

Another case in point is offered by Lacy: "My math teacher, I thought he was amazing. I did very well in that class. I thought he was very inspiring. He seemed to really love what he was doing, and I think that's what inspired me".

Power and status relations between minority and majority groups exert a major influence on students' performance in school (Cummins, 1995). Similarly, Gay (1997) notes that many researchers and scholars agree that "the quality of student/teacher interactions in instructional situations is the ultimate test of educational equality, and the ways in which these are structured and negotiated are determined by cultural attitudes, values and assumptions. When cultures, students and teachers are not synchronized, someone loses out" (p. 223).

The narratives shared by these women about their schooling experiences show that the majority of the women have been the target of both covert and racialized attitudes from a significant number of teachers. Nevertheless, there is a spirit that has been instilled in them and which drives their desire to succeed academically. Although at the time of data collection, several have yet to complete higher education, they intended to. Others broke through many barriers to gain college diplomas or university degrees.

Findings and Discussion

While Black women are diverse, coming from many different geographical locations and cultures, they nonetheless share a history of marginalization within Canadian formal educational settings. This study has some key findings. One is that whiteness and being white continue to be perceived as the norm. The participants say the school system, in general, expects them to conform. They mention the continued othering, and it appears that many teachers are implicated in maintaining a hierarchy wherein some students' views are validated, while others are not. There is also evidence of a continuing Eurocentric curriculum in schools. The participants had similar experiences with Eurocentric curriculum regardless of their ages. . This work supports previous research that institutionalized barriers remain, and that Eurocentric

dominance continues to be maintained and reproduced into contemporary contexts.

All of the participants stressed the importance of their acquiring a formal education, in order to secure better life chances in the future, in hopes of greater economic benefits, and being a role model for their younger family members. Despite challenges with the education system, including occasionally being pushed out of it, the women continue to value formal education. Additional problematic findings emerged that support and reinforce previous research findings, such as negative teacher assumptions. Settles (2006) indicates that, "Black women may experience a unique form of discrimination that is simultaneously based on their race and gender" (p. 2). Race and gender issues were clearly played out in the lives of the participants in formal educational settings. They felt denigrated, ignored or invisible in the classroom. Encouragingly, all of the women noted that they have had at least one positive teacher in their lives while pursuing formal education. For the majority of the women, the race of the teacher did not matter as long as the teacher treated them positively.

Many of the participants noted how their formal schooling experiences improved as they moved on to post-secondary education because they were able to choose from a wider variety of subjects. They tended to gravitate toward the subjects they found relevant and meaningful, and this helped their overall experiences. For many students, the Eurocentric-based education in high school continues into post-secondary institutions (Wane, 2007; Wood, 2011). The same is true for these participants. Their negative experiences throughout their schooling originated from the history of institutional racism, gendered violence, colonialism and other forms of inequalities that are manifested in educational settings. Sleeter and Bynoe (2006) remind us that students in universities who are women, people of colour, and from marginalized segments of the population require a renewed philosophy of education and socialization. Encouragingly, they also note that there is a trend towards socially just teaching in higher education, with some university education providing students with complex experiences that involve both ideas and emotions. In other words, students are able to connect with their academic studies holistically with learning that includes the full being of a student and one that values their race, gender, and other interlocking forms of oppression that manifest in their everyday lives.

An overarching finding of this study is that race and gender are dominant and intersecting aspects in the lives of the women. They are important issues that are often unspoken or unexamined and constitute an integral part of their educational studies. For instance, Tara spoke about feeling good about the coverage of gender relations in her university studies, but felt that issues of race were never discussed or brought up in her class.

In their article on schooling issues and education, Teel and De Breuin-Parecki (2001) claim that schools and teachers have failed to honour other cultures and acknowledge multiple perspectives. This approach has alienated non-European students as it fails to validate their cultural heritages. On the other hand, many European students have experienced cultural validation over the years since European culture has been the focus in North American schools. Perhaps the issue is not so much the fact that European culture has been the focus of the curriculum, but that it has been, in many instances, the only focus. King and Lightfoote (1994) contend:

> The Eurocentric version of history that justifies oppression and promotes values that highlight ranking human beings and the patriarchal Eurocentric values in student texts many times remain unchallenged, especially with regard to the experiences with African and Native Americans, and society's `throwaway peoples'. (p. 279)

In light of the educational challenges faced by Black students, Murrell (2002) has called for a framework that "critically interrogates the hidden but harmful instructional and curricular practices" (p. 46). Otherwise, Murrell argues, they are certain to continue to cause harm.

Conclusion: The Women Speak Out on Moving Ahead

Women of African ancestry have been denied equal educational chances, are stereotyped and misrepresented, and research agendas and policies that impact their lives continue to be implemented without their consultation (Ruiz, 2007). One of the participants noted that there need to be courses that speak to different people's histories and that history curricula should not be restricted to Western Europe. Indeed, studies have shown how inclusive education can work in today's classrooms (Dei, 2005; Wane, 2007). For example, in looking at effective classroom engagement and accomplishments in the classroom among students of African ancestry, studies show that inclusive education is effective when schools make the effort to provide an environment where they can grow and flourish, which is accomplished through teaching and learning that incorporates various worldviews and validation of each student (Demie & McLean, 2007, Wane 2007). This means that serious and honest representations of non-European cultures must be allowed to flourish in the educational environment without bias, denigration, or exclusion.

According to Abdi (2005), "[i]n the ensuing colonial encounters among the two groups, one constant issue was the way Europeans portrayed African traditional education and systems of thought as either nonexistent, basically non-tenable and or non-coherent primitive noises that the native population was to be cleansed of" (p. 27). Similarly, Shizha (2005) maintains that pedagogical practices need to integrate history and should be conducive to reconstructed curricula that incorporate reality as perceived from different cultural and social backgrounds. Learning in this context becomes a meaningful and fulfilling experience that helps students to be productive participants in their society. Roxine adds:

> I think there needs to be a space for peer support where Black women can support and help each other in terms of connecting with other students, connecting with resources, both in and outside of school, and just have somebody like a peer mentor. I think that would be very helpful. Someone they could share ideas with and share their experience of oppression. There should be ways for women to actually report forms of oppression they encounter, and people should be held accountable for oppressing Black female students.

Alberta commented that teachers, need to be part of this process of encouraging students of African ancestry:

> Teachers need to make more of a conscious effort to be there to support students and provide some academic assistance. They need to put their heart and mind into their job, and make a conscious effort to motivate students, to encourage students to do better and see their potential and incorporate that into the way they teach, the way they approach teaching, the way they do their lesson plans, [they must] make themselves approachable to students.

Finally, Yvonne argued for the need for teachers and administrators to be better trained on the dynamics of race, class and gender and other types of oppression:

They need to spend more time helping students and be race or culturally sensitive to students. When they talk about world history and are doing social science units, they need to help students develop critical thought. I believe putting supports in place for Black students, Black women, and putting those kinds of social circles together where they can actually get support from their peers would be helpful. They can gain knowledge of resources, they can have people to talk with, and they can socialize and get strength individually and collectively. So those kinds of things would be very useful and really empower students of African descent and also other marginalized groups.

Ruiz (2007) reminds us that understanding the significance of a culturally relevant pedagogy requires that research attend to all facets of the learning surroundings that impact learning. She adds that our culture is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we identify ourselves. It molds and shapes our experiences and how we interpret those moments in our lives. Most importantly, as Gloria maintains, "There's got to be a more holistic approach. We have to look at the physical, mental and emotional needs of students, and provide a whole circle for them to come together and get their needs addressed to some capacity. So their learning potential can be actualized."

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Notes

1 In this work, I use the term Black and women of African ancestry interchangeably.

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