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**Equal To The Challenge: Reconstructing Ways Of Thinking, Knowing And Doing  
Re: The Schooling Of Young Black Women In Metro – Montreal**

**Valerie Stephenson**

**A Thesis**

**In**

**The Department**

**of**

**Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

**August, 1999**

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0-612-43598-9

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Equal To The Challenge: Reconstructing Ways Of Thinking, Knowing And Doing  
Re: The Schooling Of Young Black Women In Metro – Montreal**

**Valerie Stephenson**

**This thesis examines the implications of status-quo-ism in Metro - Montreal's school system. Addressing minority and power issues, it explores the influence of curriculum, pedagogy and environment on the school experiences of young Black females. As these young women attempt to participate in the social and academic milieu of the school, are their behaviour patterns circumscribed by racial, gender, or class biases? What are the social, emotional and psychological ramifications, and how do these influence their academic progress and subsequent efforts to become constructive contributors to society?**

**This study is written from the perspective of a Black, female teacher of West Indian origin and is based on the experiences of nine young Black women and three young Black males who have been educated in the schools of Metro-Montreal. It draws on the insights of Canadian, American and British educators such as George J. Sefa Dei, bell hooks, and Heidi Safia Mirza on female and black issues, and offers an interpretation of classroom dynamics which reveals some unique pedagogical challenges faced by today's educators. Most importantly I explore the negative consequences of educators' failure to rise to these challenges on students' ability to maximize their potential.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**My gratitude to the twelve young people without whose cooperation this study would not have been possible.**

**I am especially indebted to Professor Arpi Hamilian for her invaluable assistance and support during all stages of this work.**

**To the many others who believed in me, and who freely gave of their time, effort and skills, (especially Wilmot, Sharon, Andrew and Shaunna) I wish to extend my sincere thanks.**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER I: FIELD OF INQUIRY.....</b>	<b>1</b>
THE PROBLEM .....	1
RECENT RESEARCH TRENDS (1960-1998) .....	3
LIMITATIONS OF MULTICULTURALISM RE: EDUCATION OF MINORITIES .....	8
<b>CHAPTER II: THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>13</b>
PURPOSE.....	13
ASSUMPTIONS.....	14
DESIGN.....	14
RESEARCH TOOLS .....	15
PARTICIPANTS.....	15
FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS .....	17
PARTICIPANT PROFILES .....	18
COMMENTS ON INFORMATION PROVIDED IN PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	32
<b>CHAPTER III: RISING TO THE CHALLENGE .....</b>	<b>34</b>
THE ARGUMENT .....	34
BLACK FEMALE SELF-RE-CONSTRUCTION.....	39
THE BLACK FEMALE CANADIAN/VEST INDIAN PERSONALITY: A RESPONSE TO TEACHER ATTITUDES .....	49
<b>CHAPTER IV: M.E.Q. REFORMS (1999-2005) RE: EDUCATION OF MINORITIES .....</b>	<b>84</b>
REACTIONS.....	84
LIMITATIONS.....	86
<b>CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>APPENDIX – MATERIALS USED IN FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS.....</b>	<b>104</b>
QUESTIONNAIRE.....	104
MEMORIES OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCES .....	107
A LETTER FROM A PARENT .....	108

# **Chapter I: Field of Inquiry**

## **The Problem**

*“Black children must develop a duality for their existence - they must develop the skills to do well in two different cultures - Black and non - Black.”  
(Mc Adoo, 1985, p. 9).*

Unless she lives in a predominantly black neighborhood, the black female who each day steps into most Quebec classrooms is immediately aware of her status as a visible minority; often each black female is the sole member of her race in the classroom. Then, not only must she understand the codes of the dominant culture, but, as a minority, her success or failure is dependent on her ability to negotiate the meaning system of that culture. Her knowledge of the codes of her own minority culture, her skill at negotiating her way within it, are of no value within the dominant culture; they bring no power, no say, no control. The resolution to this problem could take one of several forms, or various combinations of these forms. She could choose:

1. To become totally assimilated into the dominant culture (concomitant rejection of her own minority culture is understood).
2. To totally reject the dominant culture (concomitant maintenance of her own minority culture is understood).



3. To become bicultural (adherence to norms of the dominant culture at school while adhering to the norms of the minority culture at home).
4. To demonstrate varying degrees of bicultural behaviours (e.g. depending on the circumstances, deciding to demonstrate one or another cultural norm).
5. Together with other Black youths, to develop an alternative sub-culture.

To have to make decisions such as these is in itself traumatic even for the most well-adjusted. What then must be the effect on those whose egos are already fragile? Yet these are the types of decisions that members of any minority culture must make. Most specifically, these are the choices Black females and their families make consciously or unconsciously as they attempt to develop meaning systems and modes of expression in order "to come to terms with the contradictions of their shared social situation." (Murdoch, 1974, in Burtonwood, p. 4). Where, then, do these students look for their role models? To whom can they turn for empathy? To whom do they address their concerns?

Black students in Quebec, like Black students born in England and the U.S.A., understand the reality of always having been a racial minority in a dominant white milieu. The difference here lies in the perspectives from which they view their life situations, i.e. the way they have learned, from their significant others, to see themselves in society. While the

parents of Black American students have always been part of a racial minority, the parents of Black Canadian or British children have had the experience in the West Indies<sup>1</sup> of being a part of a racial majority. Thus the life-lessons which these children absorb from their parents are motivated by different parental paradigms. So, when for example, the West Indian parent at his/her lowest point, can dream about going Back Home, her children cannot. This for them is home. They know of no other. This factor together with the close proximity of the U.S.A. and Canada, encourages Black youth in Canada to look toward the American Blacks rather than towards the Blacks of Britain or the West Indies for role models in terms of speech patterns, dress, values, aspirations, etc.

### **Recent Research Trends (1960-1998)**

#### **- Defining and Re-defining Black Underachievement in School**

*“Research investigating the educational experience of young black people persistently fails to integrate satisfactorily into its findings the differential achievement of black girls.” (Mirza, 1993, p. 10).*

Over the last three decades, much of the research which has focused on Blacks of West Indian heritage in the British, American and Canadian school systems indicate that West Indian Blacks exhibit a high rate of underachievement at school. The research also showed that Black West Indian girls consistently performed better than Black West Indian boys and that often the scores of these girls were on par with those of

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<sup>1</sup> This is meant to include Guyana. Geographically, Guyana is not a part of the West Indies, but for convenience and because its culture parallels that of the West Indies, in this paper it will be included in the term West Indies.

their white peers (Mirza, 1993). Yet it was only in the eighties that gender was even recognized as a viable issue in this research. This is not surprising once you realize that, all along, research on race and education has been greatly influenced by politics.

The racial confrontations of the sixties and early seventies helped to raise the consciousness of all Blacks especially those living as a racial minority as well as those who had been colonized. Their demands for equality coupled with the influx of West Indian immigrants into Canada, challenged education systems whose paradigms were eurocentric. Thus the underachievement of Black students was explained as the direct result of racial inferiority, and academic research focused on measuring the difference in IQ and intellectual abilities between the races. (See Houghton, 1966; Little, 1968; Payne, 1969). The solution - Assimilation!

The seventies saw a shift toward cultural inferiority and poor socio-economic conditions as major causes of Black underachievement. Further, these factors were seen to have an adverse psychological effect on Black children which accounted for their poor self-concept and subsequent underachievement in school. The argument was that, over time, Black children learn to accept society's negative racial values and to see themselves through the eyes of the dominant white majority as non-achievers and failures. The result? Academic underachievement! The solution - The addition of self esteem building activities and programs, e.g.

Black History Month, Multi-culturalism week. (Phillips, 1979; Allen and Smith, 1975; Jones, 1977).

Up to this point in time gender, as an issue, was not a factor in research on race and education for, as Mirza points out, it was believed that gender “could not lend any valuable or illuminating insights to a debate whose underlying premise was about racial differences.” (Mirza, 1992, p. 11). It is not that Black girls were excluded as research subjects. Rather, no value was attached to studying them as a separate group for the assumption was that there would be no difference in the male/female responses to the same set of circumstances. In the eighties, however, researchers were forced to recognize that there are differences in the academic successes of Black males and females.

Black female success in school, a phenomenon which contradicted the established expectations of Black underachievement, was explained primarily as the result of the matriarchal structure of the Black family. (Fuller, 1982; Phizacklea, 1982; Sharpe, 1987). Seen from a typically Eurocentric-male perspective, the Strong Black Female could only be understood when placed in opposition to a Weak Black Male. Consequently Black female success was regarded negatively as it was considered destructive to the black family structure. (Moynihan, 1965, In Ryan, 1967; Davis, 1982). This early pathological explanation was later rejected by Wallace (1979) and Phizacklea (1982) who see instead a “superwoman” capable of overcoming all odds.

Both Rutter et al. (1982) and Driver (1980) point to the commitment to education exhibited by girls of West Indian origins. For this Rutter offers no explanation, but Driver sees it merely as a result of the social structure of the West Indian family. Fuller, (1982) on the other hand explains the educational success of Black females in terms of a subculture of resistance. She argues that Black females suffer a double subordination viz. society devalues them because of their race and their parents and male peers because of their gender. Therefore, from her perspective, success in school, for these girls, is a public affirmation of their self-worth.

Strangely, though at this time research on race and education pointed clearly to a difference in the school achievements of Black males and females, the institutions still talked in terms of the underachievement of the Black child. It is as though the success of the Black female was being purposely overlooked. Why? For Mirza the answer is simple. She points out that based on the premise that genetics, poor home background and adverse cultural and socioeconomic circumstances cause Blacks to be academic underachievers, it follows that Black girls should fail at school. Therefore to accept Black female school success would indicate a faulty original premise. Acceptance would expose society's need to address the fundamental issue of social inequality (Mirza, 1997). But society was not ready for this. The solution? Ignore this minor detail.

In the nineties, however, the upsurge of feminism and the increasing number of women whose voices are being heard, have had a positive effect on research on race and education. Some female issues are being valorized, and Black female success in the field of education is gaining acceptance. Unfortunately, many Blacks and whites alike see Black female success as conforming to the values of the dominant white majority. But the Black females in the forefront see their behaviours differently. They see the Black female's pursuit of education in terms of a subculture of resistance - with a difference! On the surface she appears to be "buying into the system"; she strives for success on society's terms, but in reality her goal is to overcome the process of inequality based on race and gender that persists in society. (Mirza, 1997, p. 269).

## **Limitations of Multiculturalism re: education of minorities**

*“Educating students to be democrats ... is a serious challenge in a society characterized by cultural, ethnic, racial and language diversity, especially when these variables are used to privilege individuals from some groups and to deny others equal opportunities to participate.” (Banks, 1997, p.1)*

*“Multiculturalism is generally about Otherness, but it is written in ways in which the dominating aspects of white culture are not called into question and the oppositional potential of difference as a site of struggle is muted.” (Giroux, 1992, p.117)*

Canada’s Multicultural Act of 1998 draws attention to issues of equality, tolerance, harmony, justice, fairness and understanding, yet the subjects of my study did not feel that this act addressed their concerns. The consensus is, that on most issues, they still need to struggle to have their voices heard.

For Multiculturalism, as is the case with most government policies, the underlying motives were political. Cardozo and Musto suggest that the policy originated in the need of the federal government to secure electoral votes and to win the ethnic minority support for bilingualism. (Cardozo and Musto, 1997, p.8). The goal was not inclusion and power sharing, but to use the minorities to keep power in their own hands.

In theory, the aims of Multiculturalism are laudable in that they address some key concerns of minorities. However, in practice, they fall far short of the stated goal. The problem here is that Multiculturalism

ignores those very issues which made such a policy necessary in the first place. This indicates a hidden agenda, one which contributes to the marginalization and powerlessness of minorities and reinforces the idea of “otherness” as a negative concept.

For minorities, emigrating to Canada provided escape from the yoke of colonial oppression, and having learned strategies of resistance under colonial rule in their home countries, they knowingly apply these strategies in a Canadian context. They demand their rights as outlined in Canada’s Multicultural Act which states, “ ... encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada’s multicultural character.” (Department of the Secretary of State, 1987, p. 20). They call into question institutional practices, and challenge master narratives. They speak individually and collectively. Nevertheless these Relative New-comers, (more specifically the visibly different Relative New-comers) find themselves consigned to the margins of Canadian society. Joseph Wong (In Cardoso and Musto, 1997, p. 211) takes a look at Canada’s corporate boardrooms and finds the absence of visible minorities in these crucial decision-making arenas abhorrent.

What is ironic is that the very group which purports to uphold multiculturalism is the one which turns a blind eye to the fact that there are no contingencies to ensure that the goals are being met. (Cardoso and Musto, 1997, p. 159). Therefore recognition of the hidden agenda which



results in marginalization and powerlessness for minorities is a topic which will not readily be tabled for discussion because to do so requires an admission of the need for change. So the center of power (and resources) remains squarely in the hands of First Wave Immigrants, and multiculturalism focuses on issues of art, music, drama, culinary arts and 'Where are You From?'. There are even measures in place to include, in schools, literature texts and courses on marginalized cultures. But Hazel Carby draws our attention to the fact that both texts and courses are "exotic" additions and are not included in the requirements for majors. In other words they are included but not awarded any value or importance. Thus nothing really changes. The real issue, the need to examine the power structures in Western society, has been side-stepped. (Carby, 1989, p. 36-37). The advocates of Multiculturalism must remove their blindfolds. They must no longer contribute to the maintenance of the status quo, thereby doing a disservice to an increasingly diverse society by refusing to "identify culture as a problem of politics, power and pedagogy." (Giroux, 1992, p. 117).

In Quebec in general and in Quebec schools in particular, Black History month has become a cultural montage, yet school examinations are still only from the Eurocentric perspective. This is so because Black History is not a part of, but merely an appendage to, the curriculum. Althea Prince, the author of "Black History Month - a Multicultural Myth" tells us that when her daughter asked for the African experience to be

included in her history program as one of the “links in the chain of historical development,” her teacher told her that only a historian who was “a quack” would write of such things because, as far as he was concerned, the African experience was not a historical truth. (Brathwaite and James, 1996, p. 176).

Notice the subtle way in which the teacher renders an Afro-centric perspective valueless. By writing off the attempts to tell of the African experience as the work of persons devoid of respect and credibility in the intellectual world, this teacher was able to banish the African narrative, and the child, who by extension is part of the narrative, to the margins of society. He rendered them not worthy of inclusion in the Center. The alert youth must then fight against internalizing this message that she must be “remade in the image of a dominant white culture in order to be integrated in the heavenly city of Enlightened rationality.” (Giroux, 1992, p. 116).

These experiences demonstrate the dominant white culture making a (small) place for its minorities but maintaining a mentality of “otherness”. Policy measures are limited to the recognition and exploration of cultural commodities, but those at the Center are silent on issues which necessitate power sharing, issues which are key to any meaningful multicultural discourse. By creating “the self-delusion that the boundaries of racial inequality and ethnicity were always exclusively about language experiences and histories of ‘the Other’” (Giroux, 1992, p. 114), the

**Eurocentric attitude dismisses its role in the creation and maintenance of difference and inequality in Quebec society.**

## **Chapter II: The Study**

*“Like explorers who seek to identify and understand the biological and geological processes that create the patterns of a physical landscape, qualitative adventurers seek to describe and understand the processes that create the patterns of the human terrain.” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 173).*

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to obtain information on the school experiences of young Black females in predominantly white schools in Metro-Montreal. Over the last three decades much of the research on Blacks in Canadian schools has focused on Black youth in general or on Black males. (Solomon, 1992; D'Oyley, et al., 1994; Brathwaite, 1996; Dei, 1996; Henry, 1996). Information on the Black female in Canadian schools is scarce, yet the situations Black females encounter, the problems they face, the choices they must make, are just as difficult. By providing a forum for the perspectives of this group of young women to be heard, by listening to their voices, by paying close attention to what they have to say, I hope to gain an understanding of how they see their school experiences being impacted by their race and gender. Information such as this is crucial to any improvement in the quality of interaction between educators and their Black female students. The steadily increasing diversity of Quebec's school population makes this a crucial issue.

## **Assumptions**

This research is based on the assumption that for the Black female, her race and gender are seen as negative factors only within the context of a predominantly white milieu. I also assume that given the right circumstances, Black females will speak openly about their gender and race-related concerns.

## **Design**

The framework for this research evolved from critical pedagogy (Kozol, 1990; Kohl, 1991; Giroux, 1992, 1996; Bruner, 1997; Banks 1997) Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990; Brand, 1991; hooks, 1993, 1994; Mirza 1992,1997; Hemmons, 1996) and emancipatory Black pedagogy (Casey, 1993; D'Oyley, 1994; Henry, 1995, 1996; Dei, 1996; Brathwaite, 1996).

Since it is my goal to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon as it exists, and since it is not possible to manipulate the race, gender or environments of my subjects, I chose to use the qualitative case study as my research design. This decision was reinforced by Yin and Merriam who, in their arguments in favour of this design made what, for my research, are two crucial points. Yin points out that in situations where “the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin,1984, p.13) the preferred strategy is the case study. And Merriam states, “I believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and

understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and the practice of education.” (Merriam, 1988, p. 3).

It was not my intention to study any one school in particular. Rather, my focus was on school settings where young Black females were in the minority. I therefore chose schools off the island of Montreal, more specifically on the South Shore because, in the classrooms of these schools, black students are in the minority. Often they are the only members of their race in the class, even though there may be students from other visible minorities in the class or school.

## **Research Tools**

My basic qualitative research tools were questionnaires, structured interviews and focus group discussions which were open-ended and semi-structured. During the early stages of the research, especially when it was crucial to establish common grounds for understanding, expectations, intentions and trust, questionnaires and brief structured interviews were used. Focus group discussions provided opportunities for my subjects to engage in discussions on points of common interest. The interviews were conducted over a thirteen month period in various locations.

## **Participants**

Initial contacts were made through a local community association, a church youth group and recommendations by other participants. All the young people whom I initially contacted expressed keen interest in the

topic and were eager to participate. My final choices were based on availability due to school and/or work schedules. The twelve subjects chosen ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-five. This was done to ensure that the opinions expressed and the experiences described did not reflect any one event or any one point in time. Care was also taken to ensure that my choices did not reflect conditions which were specific to any one community. Hence the participants chosen had attended ten different elementary schools and seven different high schools in five different cities on the South Shore.

Although the Black female experience is the focus of the study, I have chosen to include a few black males because they constitute a vital part of the female in-school experiences. In all, nine females and three males participated. Three are still in high school, six are attending University as full-time or part-time students, five are undergraduate students and one is a graduate student. Two work full time, but while not presently in school, both have expressed a desire to go back to night school. They are all single.

All of my subjects were born in Canada of West Indian parents who had emigrated to Canada as young adults. In addition, all participants had spent their entire elementary and high school years in Quebec classrooms where they were always in the minority, sometimes being the only Black person in the class.

## **Focus Group Sessions**

In all, three different sets of meetings were held. Four females aged twenty-one to twenty-four years participated in the first which was held in a church library. The second was conducted in a University classroom and three males and one female aged twenty-three and twenty-four participated. The third meeting was held at the home of one of the participants and six females aged fifteen to twenty-five attended. (Two females participated in two different sessions.)

In each of the three meetings the same basic structure was followed. First participants were required to respond in writing to a questionnaire designed to help them to begin to focus on the topics which they would later on be discussing. Secondly they were asked to read and respond verbally to two pieces of writing:

- 1) To a provocative paragraph written by a Black female describing her reaction to her school experiences in England and Canada.
- 2) A letter from a Black Canadian – West Indian parent to the principal of her daughter's school serving notice of her intent to participate fully in her daughter's bid for an education that is inclusive.

This then led into the third and most lengthy part of the meeting, the focus group discussions. In each case this portion of the meeting was guided by a list of questions, but it was not crucial for the wording or the order to be followed exactly. For me it was more important that my subjects felt at ease and knew that all input was valued, so my goal was



to encourage responses to concerns as they were voiced, thus replicating the ebb and flow of normal conversation. Throughout each of these three meetings, a relaxed, non-threatening and non-judgemental atmosphere was maintained freeing participants to dare to risk, to share their thoughts and experiences and dreams, to allow dormant feelings and scenarios to awaken, to see the humour in their situation and to begin to explore possibilities.

Though hesitant at first, it did not take long for all the participants to join in willingly. The interaction was spontaneous and dynamic and riddled with passion. All seemed to relish the opportunity to speak their minds. Sometimes it was difficult to sit and watch, to just let the silence happen, as the participants paused, in deep thought about something someone had just said. At other times it was equally difficult to allow several voices to be raised at the same time, in contradiction.

Each meeting lasted at least twice the time predicted, yet no one had an eye on the clock. Even at the end all, though drained, displayed no signs of an urgent desire to leave, saying that they had not expected that it would be so much fun and hoped that we could meet again. These sessions were a great consciousness raising experience for everyone involved.

## **Participant Profiles**

The following profiles were compiled using the responses on the written questionnaires which participants had been asked to complete

during the first stage of each focus group session. Sometimes it was necessary to clarify details or to fill in missing data. This was done over the phone.

Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : Barbara

Age : 25

Personal Goals : Complete a Post Graduate Degree; obtain a job with a good pension & health plan

Extra curricular activities : Workshops, Seminars, Sport

<b>Level</b>	<b>School<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Program<sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)</b>	<b>Grade (avg)</b>	<b>Effort*</b>	<b>If you could, what would you change about your school?</b>
Elementary	E.S. 10	78-85	French Immersion	B	B	Teachers need a serious and intensive course in child psychology. Classes in African American/Canadian History
Secondary	Citywide H.S.	85-90	English	B	B	Classes in African/American/Canadian History taught by an African/ American/Canadian or Caribbean teacher.
CEGEP	Grove	90-93 93-94	Social Science Science	B C	B B	More classes in Caribbean Literature
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U.	97-99	Commerce	B	B	Forum for intellectual discussion, lectures and seminars in Black history and other cultural issues.
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

Interviewer's comments:

Barbara is a quiet, sensitive and serious young woman who enjoys the academic life, sets high standards for herself and is self-motivated. Negative situations concern her and often her solution is to retreat. She would like to work and continue her education, but to date a permanent-position has been elusive. In her family she is the second of four children and the oldest girl.

Note 1) To protect the identity of all participants, pseudonyms will be used throughout for all persons and places mentioned

Note 2) F = Full time Student R = Regular  
P = Part time Student IS = International School

Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key: A- I always did my best B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble D- I did not try



## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : Cynthia

Age : 23

Personal Goals : Run own day care center; become more spiritual

Extra curricular activities : Arts and crafts; reading

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (avg)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 70 E.S. 21 E.S. 18	80-82 82-85 85-87	French French French	B B B	B B B	More information on other cultures
Secondary	Ocean View H.S.	87-92	French	B	B	More classes on minority issues
CEGEP	Groove	92-96	(F)	B	B	To have had at least one Black teacher in my program
University (Undergrad)	-	-	-	-	-	-
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

Interviewer's comments:

Cynthia is a full time employee in a day care center. She is a trained elementary school technician, but cannot find work in this field. She is a bright, articulate and thoughtful young woman. Her parents are from Haiti, so French is her first language. She has one younger sister and one younger brother.

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Note 2) F = Full time Student          R = Regular  
P = Part time Student          IS = International School

Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                  B- I did my best sometimes  
  C- I did enough to stay out of trouble    D- I did not try

## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : Marina  
 Age : 21  
 Personal Goals : To finish university and find a job  
 Extra curricular activities : Student Association member

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (avg)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 19	81-88	French Immersion (R)	C	B	To have had at least one Black teacher
Secondary	Hill Top H.S.	88-93	English (R)	C	B	Courses in Black History
CEGEP	Lake	93-96	English (F)	C	B	More in depth courses in Black History
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U.	97-99	M.I.S. (F)	C	B	Discussion groups on Black issues
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

**Interviewer's comments:**

Marina is a practical, pleasant and ambitious young woman. She takes her responsibilities seriously and finds pleasure in helping others. She has one older brother and one older sister.

Note 1) To protect the identity of all participants, pseudonyms will be used throughout for all persons and places mentioned

Note 2) F = Full time Student                  R = Regular  
 P = Part time Student                        IS = International School

Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                                  B- I did my best sometimes  
    C- I did enough to stay out of trouble                D- I did not try

## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : Roxanne  
 Age : 21  
 Personal Goals : M.A. in Public Policy  
 Extra curricular activities : Photography, film, weight-training

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (average)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 18	82-89	French Immersion	B	A	Teachers should become more aware of the damage they do to young children by labelling them
Secondary	Citywide H.S.	89-94	English (R)	B	B	Classes in Black History taught by someone who understands minority issues
CEGEP	Lake	94-97	Creative Arts (F)	B	B	Eliminate the entire CEGEP program
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U.	97-99	Economics (F)	B	A	Students should have more say about the curriculum content
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

Interviewer's comments:

Roxanne is a very bright, articulate and out-going young woman who enjoys the social, as well as the academic side of her school life. She is also very open-minded and outspoken. In her family she is the second child and oldest girl of four children.

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Note 2) F = Full time Student                      R = Regular  
            P = Part time Student                  IS = International School

Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                      B- I did my best sometimes  
    C- I did enough to stay out of trouble              D- I did not try

**Participant Profile**

Name<sup>1</sup> : Nathalie

Age : 21

Personal Goals : BA and MA; Job security; Marriage; Family

Extra curricular activities : Plays trumpet in Orchestra at church; youth leader; movies; reading; weight training

<b>Level</b>	<b>School<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Program<sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)</b>	<b>Grade (average)</b>	<b>Effort*</b>	<b>If you could, what would you change about your school?</b>
Elementary	E.S. 14	82-84 84-89	French Immersion	B	B	-More patient teachers -Courses in Black History
Secondary	Hill Top H.S.	89-94	English (R)	B	B	- Black History courses
CEGEP	Lake	94-97	Commerce (F)	B	B	Black History courses
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U.	97-99	Urban Studies (F)	B	A	More teacher concern for minority students interests
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

Interviewer's comments:

Nathalie is a respectful, motivated and dependable young woman, who is very sensitive to the needs of others. She is also very religious and devotes most of her spare time to participating in a variety of church activities. She is an only child.

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Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                                  B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble                  D- I did not try





## **Participant Profile**

Name<sup>1</sup> : Amy

Age : 16

Personal Goals : To go to college and University

Extra curricular activities : Music, dancing, reading

<b>Level</b>	<b>School<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Program<sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)</b>	<b>Grade (avg)</b>	<b>Effort*</b>	<b>If you could, what would you change about your school?</b>
Elementary	E.S. 21	92-96	English	C	A	Some information on Black people
Secondary	Lake H.S.	96-99	English (R)	C	A	-More Black students -Courses on Black issues
CEGEP	-	-	-	-	-	-
University (Undergrad)	-	-	-	-	-	-
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

**Interviewer's comments:**

Amy is a very quiet, soft-spoken, responsible and reflective teenager. She is well liked by her peers mainly because of her sense of humour and spirit of cooperation. She is very easy-going and while she would not go out of her way to court trouble, she will stand her ground if occasion warrants. In her family she is the only girl and youngest child of three.

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Note 2) F = Full time Student          R = Regular  
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Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                                  B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble                                  D- I did not try

## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : Sandy

Age : 15

Personal Goals : To Complete College and University and own a business

Extra curricular activities : Afro-Caribbean Dance Group; Variety concerts (Singing, acting, dancing)

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (avg)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 17	88-99	French Immersion	B	A	More Black students in the class
Secondary	Riverdale H..S	89-99	English (R)	A	A	-More courses on Black awareness -More Black issues
CEGEP	-	-	-	-	-	-
University (Undergrad)	-	-	-	-	-	-
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

### Interviewer's comments:

Sandy is a very dynamic, articulate and level-headed teenager. After a slow start in high school, she is now on the honor roll and credits this change to the influence of one of her teachers. She is now excited about school and thinks positively about the future. She has one older brother and one younger sister.

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Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                      B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble                      D- I did not try

## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : David

Age : 24

Personal Goals : Good health; job security; leave Quebec

Extra curricular activities : Acting, travel, fitness training

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (avg)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 16	81-85	French Immersion	B +	A	Teachers should calm down and be more understanding
Secondary	Citywide H.S.	85-90	English (R)	B	B	Comprehensive Black History Courses
CEGEP	Lake	90-93	Social Sciences (F)	C	C	Build rapport with the teachers
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U. Omega U.	93-94 94-99	App. Soc. Science (F) Public Relations (P)	C B	C B	Teachers should create safe atmospheres so that Black students would dare to risk to discuss issues of importance to them.
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

### Interviewer's comments:

David is a respectful, bright, articulate young man, who is sensitive to the pain of others. He is very popular among his peers. He is actively pursuing a career in communication and suspects he would eventually have to leave Quebec to realise this dream. He is an only child.

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Note 2) F = Full time Student                      R = Regular  
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Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:    A- I always did my best                      B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble                      D- I did not try

## Participant Profile

Name<sup>1</sup> : James

Age : 24

Personal Goals : Job security; inner peace and my soul mate

Extra curricular activities : Fitness training

Level	School <sup>1</sup>	Date	Program <sup>2</sup> (Eng./Fre.)	Grade (avg)	Effort*	If you could, what would you change about your school?
Elementary	E.S. 15	79-86	English (R)	B	A	Authority figures should take racist behaviour seriously and act accordingly
Secondary	Citywide H.S.	86-91	English (R)	B	B	Revamp whole perspective from which history is taught
CEGEP	Lake	91-94	Commerce (F)	B	C	Increase cultural activities
University (Undergrad)	Alpha U.	94-99	Business Administration (F)	B	B	More collaboration between student associations
University (Graduate)	-	-	-	-	-	-

### Interviewer's comments:

James is a very soft spoken and sensitive young man, who is generally in full control of his emotions. He takes his academic life very seriously because of his concern over job security in Quebec. His thoughtful ways make him very popular among his peers. He has two older sisters.

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Note \*) Participants rated themselves - Key:      A- I always did my best      B- I did my best sometimes  
C- I did enough to stay out of trouble      D- I did not try



## **Comments on Information Provided in Participant Profiles**

The following points have emerged as areas of concern.

### **1) Personal Goals**

The two major goals of these students are to obtain a good education and job security. They consider a good education to be their best chance of achieving job security.

### **2) Academic Performance and Effort**

Generally the students' academic performance remained consistent. However, ten out of the twelve felt that most of the time they were not doing their best. It is also significant that none felt that he/she had worked to potential in CEGEP.

### **3) Desired Changes**

#### **A) Cultural Awareness**

Of primary concern is the need for schools to provide opportunities for Black students to learn about their Black heritage. This they felt could be achieved through structured classes, formal lectures and seminars given by informed persons preferably of African/Canadian, African/Caribbean or African/American heritage, and informal group discussions. Also needed are up-to-date reading materials on the subject.

## **B) Teacher Input**

**They feel that teachers could help to make their school experiences more productive if they would .**

- (1) remember that learning requires a collaborative effort**
- (2) develop more tolerant attitudes and behaviours toward minority students**
- (3) help to create safe spaces where students could participate in free and unbridled exchange for the purpose of mutual understanding and growth.**



## Chapter III: Rising to the Challenge

### The Argument

*“For the oppressed to be really free, he [she] must go beyond revolt, by another path he [she] must begin other ways, conceive of himself and reconstruct himself independently of the master.” (Memmi, 1969).*

In some circles it is perhaps not popular to describe the experience of the Black female in Quebec schools as oppressive. Many may even prefer to regard such an idea as ridiculous and dismiss it altogether. Yes, I am talking about Canada, not the U.S.A. And yes, I am aware of Canada's Multicultural Policy and I have also heard its promises of equality. But when I listen to the voices of young Black females describing a system which, without explicitly saying so, relegates them to the periphery of all discourse, a system which promises a fair share but fails to deliver, a system where “THEIRS” are not validated, a system where they feel they must be silent in order to be allowed to stay, a system where they must adopt the conceptions and formulations of a white-supremist patriarchal society as the benchmark of success, I understand oppression.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the efforts of many well-intentioned individuals and groups, the menace of racism and sexism feature boldly among several other forms of oppression which still plague Canadian society today. The Black female quickly recognizes that once she steps outside of the

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<sup>2</sup> Oppression in this context must be understood as the “unjust exercise of authority or power, a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the mind.” (Definition taken from Webster's Dictionary, Seventh Edition,

sanctuary called "Home" she must continually face denigration on three levels. First, as a female in a patriarchal society, her access to power and wealth are severely curtailed. Secondly, as a Black person, devoid of the physical characteristics that Euro-Canadian/American society deems as "racially white and of the highest value", (Dei, 1996, p. 62), she is again relegated to a materially disadvantaged and powerless place. And thirdly, as a Black female, regardless of her true economic or social status, she discovers that the primary assumption is that she must belong to the lowest socio-economic group. So three times out of three the Black female finds herself in a negative place. His gender allows the Black male to count himself (in theory at least) within a powerful patriarchy. Likewise the white female may be poor, but because of her race she is still a part of the dominant white majority.

Dei, quoting scholars such as hooks, King, Collins, Calliste, Ng and Carby, draws attention to this unique form of oppression that constitutes the reality of the Black female existence. Like these scholars, he concludes that only within "the context of how the dialectical relationships of race, class and gender are played out" in the lives of Black females, can one gain a sense of oppression." (Dei, 1996, p. 62). To this I must add that only when the Black female herself understands how these dialectical relationships contribute to her oppression, can she begin to withstand and eventually overcome this oppression. Unfortunately, for some Black females, attaining such a place is difficult.

Two of the participants in this study displayed behaviours indicative of such a lack of understanding. These young women participated in two different focus group discussions. I do not believe they even know each other. Marina grew up in a Guyanese/Canadian English speaking community. Cynthia's experiences are largely Haitian/Canadian French speaking. Initially they both denied ever having been in a position of racial or gender - motivated oppression. After reading "A Letter from a Parent" and an excerpt from an article in which Annette Henry describes her school experiences in England and Canada (See Appendix p. 108, 109), Marina was the only one to claim absolutely no relevance to her own life experiences. The responses of the other participants ranged from slight agreement, to "KNOWING what they [Henry and Clarke] mean," i.e. In full agreement. Even later, as she described a personal experience which, to all others in the group, reeked of racism, Marina was unable to see it as such.

**Marina:** *It was my Grade 5 [teacher]. She didn't like me for some reason. I don't know. So I went and told Mommy, so Mommy went to see the teacher and the teacher told her, "Oh, she is a good student, yes, but at times she doesn't do her homework." But the thing is I always did my homework and I always had it right. Just the fact that she didn't like me. I don't know...*

Cynthia's situation was somewhat different. At first she pointed out that at her school, because her father was on the Board of Directors, she had been given preferential treatment. She therefore felt she had no stories to share. But, as she listened to the narratives of others and understood their interpretations and emotions, she soon realized that, indeed, she had had similar experiences which she then willingly shared, for example:

**Cynthia:** *We were doing evaluations for going into CEGEP. I told her [the advisor] what my goal is – to go into teaching. I wanted to be a teacher and she kept telling me it would be better if you did this and this ... and it had nothing to do with education ... it was like lower and lower and lower, ... you know ... maintenance types of stuff ...*

Cynthia's perspective of her school experiences changed. For her this exercise proved to be a great consciousness raising experience. Without meaning to, both of these females (i.e. two out of the nine Black females in this study) had willingly participated in their own oppression. This is an alarming statistic; it translates into 22% unwitting acceptance of the role of the victim. Surprisingly, in both cases, the others in the group did not exert undue pressure to effect a change in perspective. This was especially noticeable in Marina's case. It was as though each person was unwilling to be the one to "burst her bubble."

In his discussion of the complementary roles of the colonizer as the oppressor and the colonized as the oppressed, Memmi says,

*"In order for the legitimacy [of the role of the colonizer] to be complete, it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept his role. The bond between colonizer and colonized is thus destructive and creative .... One is disfigured into an oppressor, a partial, unpatriotic and treacherous being, worrying only about his privileges and their defense; the other, into an oppressed creature, whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat." (Memmi, 1969, pp. 88 - 89).*

Memmi's point here is that the victim must agree; she acquiesces and accepts the role of the victim. I doubt whether at first this decision would be consciously taken for, as Bruner explains, we usually engage in actions long before we conceptualize or rationalize them. He writes, "When human action finally achieves its representation in words, it is not in a universal and timeless formula that it is expressed but in a story - a story about actions taken, procedures followed, and the rest." (Bruner, 1997, p. 158). I do believe, however, that one would become aware of having made such a decision once it had been brought to one's attention. Why, then would Marina steadfastly maintain her initial perspective even after her own examples proved the contrary? How could she not recognize when she was being discriminated against? How could she ever begin to rationalize oppressive behaviours? bell hooks suggests an answer to this paradoxical behaviour when she says, "a culture of domination necessarily promotes addictions to lying and denial." (hooks, 1994, p. 28). By lying to herself about her situation, Marina finds safety in

perpetuating the myth of equality and fair play. In this way she contributes to her own oppression.

At this point, I must reiterate that the purpose of this study is not to prove or disprove the prevalence of oppression in Quebec schools. Rather I aim to reveal something of the way the Black female responds to attitudes, behaviours and environments which she sees as oppressive. I ask, how can she recall such painful incidents without bitterness, hatred or rancour? How is it that she is able to claim success in school under conditions which should normally result in failure? How does she maintain mental health in a society based on the paradigm of white male supremacy? In other words, how does she construct her reality? This, therefore will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

### **Black Female Self-Re-Construction**

*"It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies and only lukewarm defenders." (Hemmons, 1996, p. 25).*

When the Black female attempts self-reconstruction, she is, in effect rejecting the denigration of her race and gender, and breaking the habit of "living two lives; one for them and one for ourselves". (Gwaltney 1980, p. 240). She is doing this in a hostile environment, one which will not readily relinquish its stereotypical images. To do so would upset the established order of things - an order which classifies the Black female as "Lesser Than" and "Other" and tries to keep all power and material wealth

firmly out of her reach. For her, therefore, self-reconstruction is an attempt to secure a share of the “Good Life” as enjoyed by those at society’s center. Nathalie, a bright, confident, 21 year old university student declared, *“Sometimes, sometimes I wish I were somebody else, somebody ... O.K! This sounds really bad, but I wish I were somebody white because that person does not have the problems we have ... not only in school but when you go applying for jobs ... they see your colour first before they see anything, even gender and this has an effect on whether they employ you or not ... and it is the same thing in school.”* Her frustration was painful to hear. No person in that room understood her stated desire to be white as a negation of Blackness. What they all heard was her acknowledgement of the benefits of being white.

They all know that, at the core, the colour of one’s skin was never really an issue of racial inferiority. It is an issue of oppression i.e. the desire of one group to control another for the purpose of economic and social prestige. They understood what Nathalie meant. Her words were accompanied by several nods of agreement from the others followed by one of those difficult periods of silence. No! These females do not want to change the colour of their skins. They want to enjoy society’s economic and social benefits in the same manner as the person who inhabits white skin. Denied this by an oppressive society and recognizing that pejorative language and discriminatory behaviours are a means to maintaining this

oppression, the Black female accepts that she must counteract these measures with some of her own. She must construct a new self.

If we accept the theories of the symbolic interactionists (e.g. Cooley, 1908; Mead, 1934), attachment theorists (e.g. Bretherton, 1991; Sroufe, 1990) and cognitive developmentalists (e.g. Case, 1991) which describe self as a social construction, (In Ashmore, 1997, p. 81) we would also have to agree that any person can construct more than one self. In other words, if the self which I construct is determined by the attitudes of my significant others, then as my significant others change, so must this self. The point here is that the construction of the self must be understood as a process, not as a rigid entity. According to Dei, "Identities are not static; we are forever negotiating who and what we are." (Dei, 1996, p. 59).

It is also important to understand that though we cannot control all of the circumstances of our self-construction, neither do these circumstances have total control over us. (Dei, 1996, p. 59). So while we often have to accept certain conditions which influence our self-construction so we can also choose how to adapt to these conditions. But what is it that determines the adaptations we make? A look at Gordon Allport's definition of personality in conjunction with James Jones' four basic dynamics of personality will help to provide an answer to this question.



According to Allport, personality is the result of strategies employed in response to one's environment. It dictates how you think, how you formulate problems and how you solve them. He writes, "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment." (Allport, 1937, p. 48).

As Allport explains, in this definition, the word "dynamic" draws our attention to the self-regulating, constantly evolving nature of the personality. The word "psychophysical" reminds us that both body and mind are involved in the creation of personality while "determine" indicates that personality becomes visible as a response to certain stimuli, and "unique" underscores this special quality inherent in all persons. And as Noble points out the underlying reason for all of this is self-preservation. (In Jones, 1991, p. 310).

Jones takes this a step further by suggesting that there are four basic dynamics of personality organization. This concept emerged from a study of American Blacks and was identified by Jones as the determinants which "impart structure and guide behaviour." Jones' four basic dynamics of personality are summarized as follows:

**(1) Individual versus Group Identity**

When and under what circumstances does one espouse individual versus group identity? Both oppression (negative) and Black Liberation (positive) indicate identification with a group.

**(2) Trust versus Mistrust**

How does one believe that there is a potential for fairness in a majority culture which has systematically earned one's mistrust?

**(3) Personal Accountability versus Contextual Blame**

The question is, does one choose to overcome a difficult situation or does one place the blame for the situation on the circumstances in one's life.

**(4) Majority versus Minority**

This is a matter of perspective which changes depending on the environments in which one finds herself. (Jones, 1991, p. 316).

Most significant in this is the individual's capability, and opportunity for choice. In the creation of her new self, then, the Black female chooses characteristics which are flexible and which allow her to have a voice.

This new self that she creates must be capable of:

- (1) withstanding the physical, mental and emotional pressures of a hostile environment

- (2) eliminating images of subservience, obsequiousness and good citizenship
- (3) replacing those with images of autonomy, ingenuity, creativity
- (4) believing (and acting on the belief) in her new self
- (5) dealing constructively with challenges to this belief
- (6) carrying out operations 1-5 in a manner most likely to ensure success.

Self re-construction of some sort is inevitable in the life of every Black female; environmental changes and constraints make it so, and her survival depends on it. Also self-reconstruction varies from individual to individual because the adaptations we make are a reflection of various combinations of the dynamics of personality as described by Jones, in conjunction with the sense of self which already exists. This becomes evident in the way different individuals respond to the same situation.

The participants in this study unanimously rejected the idea of racial and gender motivated discriminatory behaviours in school and out. However their responses to the practice of discrimination was different. Not only did they display a variety of reactions to the discriminatory behaviours directed at themselves and at others, but also different was their perception of what constituted discriminatory behaviours directed at themselves.

One female, Marina, as stated earlier, felt that she had never been discriminated against even though the example she shared seemed to indicate the contrary. Whenever she felt unfairly treated, she chose to understand this as the teacher's dislike for her, as an individual, not as a member of a group and definitely not as a Black person. She could not say for sure why the teacher disliked her, and refused to explore other possibilities.

Cynthia, came to understand, during the discussion, that she had been subjected to discriminatory behaviours even though at the time these occurred she had not realized it. She was angry at herself for being so naïve as to believe that her father's administrative position in the school system would grant her immunity. However, she saw the humour in her situation.

Amy, Melissa, Nathalie, Roxanne and Allison, on the other hand, instantly recognized the discriminatory behaviours. They felt hurt, resentful, betrayed but preferred not to challenge the perpetrators who, unlike them belonged to the dominant white majority. They chose to seethe in silence and give vent to their emotions later on in a safe place.

Sandy is the only participant who said that, in her classes, discriminatory issues were discussed from the perspectives of all minorities, so she felt safe to voice her concerns on issues of race or gender. There was no fear of being singled out. She claims that to date she had experienced no racial or gender motivated oppression in school,

and feels that, should this occur, she would have a forum in which to challenge the offending party.

Both males and females reacted negatively to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours in school. However, the method of rejection chosen by the males was different from that chosen by the females. While the males chose more direct, overt, confrontational methods and did this openly, anywhere and whenever a pejorative incident occurred, the females were more cautious, choosing the method, time and place of rejection with utmost care. In the following examples, Steven and Roxanne's reactions stem from their objections to portions of classroom discussions, but notice the differences in their responses. Roxanne just sat there, even though she was becoming angrier by the minute, while Steven got into a verbal confrontation with the teacher.

**Steven:** *This woman had the nerve to tell me that, because of my attitude ... I would never succeed in life or in music ... and I was like [I said] 'You don't even know me' ... and she's sitting there ... totally discrediting me ... I used to, like, challenge her in this class ... [She said] your attitude is wrong. You argue the teacher's point ... you can never survive [so I said] 'Who are you to tell me that?'*

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**Roxanne:** *In an anthropology class the question came up – 'Can white people really understand the other culture?' – The*

*question was meant to be open-minded ... but it seemed like such a limited stupid question ... they already had the answer in their head ... so what's the point – the anthropologist is supposed to be open-minded, non-biased ... but every reading we had to do was so biased ... everything ... Everyone [was] saying “these primitive savage-like people” ... and I'm quoting! ... and this was acceptable ... and I'm not trying to learn, I'm sitting there saying, “Idiots! Idiots!” You know I get mad at myself ... after ... for not saying anything ...*

This difference in behaviours is the result of different personalities emerging from multiple combinations of the four basic dynamics of personality as outlined by Jones in conjunction with the sense of self which each of these young women had created. The choices made were 'dynamic', 'psychophysical', and 'unique', and 'determined' by external stimuli. Also in each case we can recognize these choices as tools for survival. (Jones, 1991, p. 310). If we now venture once more to reconsider Allport's definition, the concept of the personality as a survival mechanism becomes clear. The personality the Black female constructs is, for her, a tool for survival in the hostile environment that is her reality, and this personality is founded on a belief system unique to her gender, race and culture.

The Black female participants in this study are survivors and their survival skills ingenious. Each appears to be trapped in a web of forces which aim to control and subjugate her. In addition to the controls which she has to negotiate because of her race and gender, she must also contend with those imposed on her by her West Indian heritage. Her success at out-manuevering these constraints is, I suggest, largely a result of the Black female Canadian/West Indian personality (The BFC/WIP) which she has constructed. I shall now turn my attention to the belief system underlying the BFC/WIP. What are its main components? How does it function as a major catalyst in the decision-making process?

## **The Black Female Canadian/West Indian Personality: A Response to Teacher Attitudes**

*“Living life as a Black woman requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender and class oppression has been essential to Black women’s survival.” (Collins, 1990, p.208).*

*“From school to university and into the community, Black women access educational resources and subvert expected patterns of educational mobility.” (Mirza, 1997, p. 269).*

Collins correctly identifies wisdom as the corner stone of the Black female personality. In this study I have isolated three aspects of wisdom as they relate to the BFC/WIP. These are possibility thinking, resolve and resilience.

### **Possibility Thinking**

*“Slow fire ah bile haad cow heel”<sup>3</sup>*

The richest inheritance bequeathed to today’s Black West Indian female is the ability to make possibility thinking the focal point of her problem solving technique. This gift has been passed down mainly from her own ancestors and also through generations of freedom from oppression fighters and, like them, though hampered by problems resulting from racial and gender discrimination compounded by a heritage of slavery and colonialism, she can often count on this aspect of her personality to help her gain a positive rather than a negative resolution.

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<sup>3</sup> In standard English – Making a way out of no way



Guided by her parents she develops a sense of family<sup>4</sup> and community, and learns to value education as the way to improve her lot in life. She learns love and support of family and the community, and respect for her education and for those who dispense it. Narratives of relatives, friends, acquaintances and complete strangers who had 'come from nothing and made it to the top' plant in the soul of the young black female the concept of possibility thinking. As she perceives her mother's life as well as the lives of other female role models, the seed takes root and sprouts.

Every participant in this project knew of the hardships her predecessors had endured. Each was aware of the seemingly insurmountable odds they had had to overcome, and thinks herself fortunate in that she is now able to benefit from those hard-won gains. However, most important of all is the fact that the concept of possibility thinking has impacted the way she looks at situations and has influenced how she sets about solving problems or resolving confrontational issues. On the surface she might appear to be tolerant of a disempowering situation. She might have little to say and seem willing to comply. In fact she is neither tolerant nor compliant. Nor should her silence be misinterpreted as agreement. I believe that it would be closer to the truth to conclude that, having observed the varying reactions of older generations to similar circumstances, she knows that achieving her

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<sup>4</sup>Family includes parents and siblings as well as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces many times removed. Also included are close family friends and their families.

personal goals are possible only if she chooses her words and actions carefully.

In an anthropology class, for example, Roxanne was faced with a situation which she felt reeked of racial discrimination. She felt that the white teacher's choice of vocabulary re: non-white races, was derogatory. In addition there was, in the class, a small subsection of students, all white, with whom the teacher consistently and continually conversed. They all used the same sort of vocabulary and shared the same views. Like the rest of the class, several of whom were also non-white, Roxanne decided that her best course of action was to sit, listen, and submit her assignments on time and according to specifications. She knew that something wrong was taking place and realized that she would have to survive without input from the teacher. She felt that to draw attention to the wrong doing would jeopardize her grade. For her, at this stage of her life, getting a good grade was more important than being allowed to share her opinions. She could have chosen to skip or to disrupt the classes, or to ignore the assignments then blame the teacher when she failed. Instead she preferred to hold herself personally accountable and to take whatever steps were necessary, on her own, to achieve her goal. Past experiences had taught her that she could not expect the teacher to respond positively to her concerns.

Nathalie, on the other hand, in a somewhat similar situation, chose a different route, but one which, nevertheless, shows the legacy of

possibility thinking in action. Nathalie's fear of ridicule or of being patronized causes her to be quiet in her classes, but she welcomes the chance to speak when asked to do so by a caring and concerned teacher. Whenever she finds herself in a class with a teacher who shows indifference to her lack of participation, her chosen course of action is to request conferences in his/her office on a regular basis. Even though she feels that she is being ignored because the teacher thinks her inadequate or unprepared or maybe he/she just doesn't care if she understands or not, she refuses to be distracted by what she feels is discriminatory behaviour. For her, also, survival i.e. getting a good grades, was more important than struggling with feelings of rejection or unworthiness. So rather than placing the blame on circumstances or on other persons, she chooses to find for herself a viable solution.

For these two young women, obtaining the diploma or the degree was the most important thing so getting side tracked by oppressive issues was not an option. This position was echoed by the others in the group. Listen.

**Interviewer:** *Why do you feel that you need to stay in school, to put up with the injustice?*

**Roxanne:** *Education is a first step, to get ... to achieve your goal, to fulfill your dreams. When I'm on top [I'll be able to say] like...you know what...you did this to me, you did that to me, and look where I am. If you want to fight, come now!*

*[But] If I start arguing and fighting now, I will be so pre-occupied with that, people will start passing me and I'd still be fighting over this ... When I could get the degree and come back.*

**Barbara:** *The degree is a lever.*

**Amy:** *Without it they'll think all Black people are dumb, ignorant ... the way they expect us to be.*

**Roxanne:** *The paper is proof that I am qualified, neither Black nor female.*

This exchange conveys a clear picture of concern for personal progress within an oppressive system as well as concern for the race coupled with a determination that both should achieve success at all costs. What these words cannot convey, however is the emotion, i.e. the tone of voice and the body language accompanying these words. No one showed any signs of bitterness or vindictiveness or even anger. It is as though, feeling that these were unproductive emotions, they preferred to employ their energies elsewhere. They spoke showing glimpses of wry humour, and in a very matter of fact and self-confident manner. What I learned from this is that they understand the rules of the game and know that it is up to them individually, and as a race, to become winning players. This is evident in their concern for their Black male peers. Their concern hinges on two points:

(1) Generally Black males do not remain long in our schools.

(2) Black males do not seem to perform as well academically as Black females.

**Melissa:** *Black Guys?*

**Sandy:** *They're gone.*

**Melissa:** *None existent!*

**Amy:** *There are no Black guys at your school?*

**Melissa:** *I can count one in Regular. He used to be in I.S. and another one. That's it!*

**Amy:** *The weird thing is they just disappear. You don't hear nothing.*

**Melissa:** *You don't hear anything. They just ...*

**Amy:** *They just ... they just disappear!*

**Melissa:** *I remember one day I was just walking around ...*

**Amy:** *You just hear they did this and they're gone ...*

**Melissa:** *One day I was walking around. I was, like ... hey! What happened to Carlton? ... Like three months ...*

**All:** *Ha! Ha! Ha!*

**Melissa:** *Three months later I was like, "What happened to Carlton? No one could tell me.*

**Amy:** *First they get kicked out of your school. Then ... there is nothing. Like ... I didn't hear nothing about it. Then he ended up at the Odderway School. Then he is gone to Toronto.*

**Melissa:** *Yes, I just hear everybody ... I don't know ...*

**Amy:** *They just disappear like that.*

**Melissa:** *They just find a way to get rid of them.*

Described from this perspective, power in the hands of those at the center, those who control society's social institutions, is believed to instigate negative responses in the Black male who is then punished for normal human reactions. Observations such as these teach the Black female that her choices must be different. She must stay and she must excel.

**Melissa:** *Why, Black girls... you see them up there, but Black guys are underachieving. I wonder why?*

**Amy:** *Maybe it's because Black girls take it. Black guys don't take it. They react, and like ... they [school authorities] don't like that.*

**Barbara:** *They get their eyes off the goal.*

**Melissa:** *There are some guys who react violently ... Oh! I don't want to take this garbage. I'm gonna do this ... This*

*pisses me off ... This is how I react ... They lose track of their goal and it becomes harder.*

**Sandy:** *The girls, they don't say anything. They just keep it in.*

**Melissa:** *Oh my gosh! Look at the Black guy. He just did this. Get him out of school ... That's why all four of the guys were gone. Seriously all four in like a year ... I guess we have to still keep quiet if we want to stay here ... to get where we want to be going.*

The Black males interviewed for this study expressed great pride in the way most Black females of West Indian descent conducted themselves in school. They described them as serious, sharp, ambitious, focused and goal oriented young women, and admire their ability to control themselves. Often, in the classroom, when the Black males reacted verbally or physically and got into trouble as a result, the Black females, though just as angry, would wait and select a safe arena outside of the classroom to voice their opinions and express their anger. Steven tells of an incident in high school.

**Steven:** *This girl called me a nigger. The Black girls in the class wanted to beat her up, but didn't. They were upset. They wanted to attack her ...*

Steven, however, did react. He pushed the girl off of her chair and was suspended for his efforts. Nothing happened to the girl. And, as he

put it, not only was he unjustly punished, but he missed school for a whole week and had to catch up on his own. How unfair, thought the Black females, but they saved their anger for safe places such as the school corridors, the home, the Black Student Association Meetings.

**David:** *They would make their comments known after class ... [In class] they would give non verbal cues. They look around and they'd go like, "Sigh!" You could see the frustrations on their faces, you know what I mean ... they're getting all restless in their seats and everything like that, but it's usually after class. They go outside in the hallways and ... "The teacher is this and that" ... That's when they get loud ... make themselves known ... they'd all get together ... then they'd have the freedom ... I guess it's more comfortable to say what they wanted to say ... but never at that moment during class.*

\*

**Roxanne:** *I go elsewhere to complain, e.g. the Caribbean Students Association.*

\*

**Melissa:** *My friends and I are visible minorities. We talk to each other about these issues.*

The need to survive within an oppressive system coupled with the desire to be on the winning team, determine the choices Black females



make in response to discriminatory practices and attitudes. In the face of blatant or subtle racist and sexist oppression, why does the Black female seem to compromise her integrity? Why does she not yell, scream, rail against the injustice of it all, RESIST?

In I Won't Learn From You, Herbert Kohl tells of Akmir, a young black student, who overtly resisted the system and eventually lost his life. Kohl's conclusion is the conclusion of the female subjects of this study. He writes,

*"Struggling to maintain integrity and hope may not always be the key to survival under conditions of oppression. Imitating your oppressor and trying to integrate yourself into their society might work better. Sometimes survival indicates swallowing one's pride and giving up self-respect. When there is no large scale movement for liberation ... resistance and rebellion are lonely and dangerous choices." (Kohl, 1991, p. 38).*

So, she rationalizes, if overt reactions do not earn the males the results they crave, then surely such reactions will not work with me, a female in a male dominated society. I have even less status. I must therefore use different strategies. Mine must be more subtle. No! This is not devious or deceitful thinking. It is logical and practical. Of course it takes great strength of character to decide to compromise one's integrity, but the Black females has an alternative motive. This survival strategy is necessary if she hopes to achieve something better for herself, her gender and her race. In order to change the system she must succeed and in order to succeed she must appear to conform. Mirza states:

*“---Black female ... desire for inclusion is strategic, subversive and ultimately far more transformative than subcultural reproduction theory suggests. The irony is that Black women are both succeeding and conforming in order to transform and change.” (Mirza, 1997, p. 270)*

## **Resolve**

*“Me eye shut but me na dead.”<sup>5</sup>*

Resolve is that aspect of the Black female personality which helps to keep her on target. No one knows better than she how difficult it is to stay in school and remain focused on the goal. The temptations to lure her away, and the obstructions to her progress, are many. But there is something in her personality which causes her to persevere, and that something is resolve.

Webster’s dictionary defines resolve thus: “Firm and fixed in purpose.” To be “firm and fixed in purpose” requires inner strength, will power, construction, tolerance, patience and discipline - words which readily come to mind when one tries to describe the in-school experiences of the Black female. It takes all of the above qualities to sit in a classroom and be a witness to, or a victim of, racial and gender motivated discriminatory behaviours ... and remain silent. Yet, even though the Black female is angry, hurt or otherwise stressed, this is usually what she does. Listen as Amy shares one of her experiences.

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<sup>5</sup> In standard English – I shall not give up that easily.

**Amy:** *[In my school] if you don't do your homework you get a Homework Log and you have to get it signed by your teacher every day [and] you have to get it signed by your parents. There is this Black guy, he got a Homework Log. He, like, he didn't do his homework for a week. And this white guy, he never does his homework and he never gets a Homework Log, and he just makes up this stupid excuse and he gets away with it. And I think that's, like unfair.*

Of course, Amy did nothing to draw attention to this injustice. Similarly, as narrated earlier, the Black females in Steven's class, though angry, exercised great will power, discipline and inner strength by not rushing to show support by beating up the offending person. It is not cowardice that causes this sort of response, but resolve or "fixity of purpose." (Webster's Dictionary). Her immediate goals are to remain in school and excel, and these can be achieved only by her refusal to put herself in situations which might jeopardize her chances of success.

One of the major concerns, however, is the feeling of dismay she experiences when her resolve leads her into situations where she has to compromise her integrity by being silent. These feelings are especially poignant when a teacher is involved or when he/she turns a blind eye to what is really going on. In discussing classroom experiences revolving

around topics which had any Black racial content, all agreed that the first reaction usually came from their classmates.

**Roxanne:** *Well, right away all the students would, like, what ever you were talking about, the students eyes would turn to the Black person. They want to see. They want to see your reaction.*

★

**David:** *Anytime something came up ... a racist issue ... I always felt powerless ... I always felt alone, like I was the only one that would have to speak on behalf of so and so ... white people ... they know ... they pretend like they don't know ... about racism ... "We're all the same. We're all one happy family ..." and as soon something was brought up, the first thing they would do is look at me ... "Oh! He's gonna explode" ... That's the first thing they'd do ... look straight at me.*

This bothers them because they feel that they are expected to speak for the whole race. Says Barbara, *"That's what they want you to do, then they'll say all Black people think like that!"* In discussing teachers' reactions to this situation, Roxanne says, *"The teachers were very careful in the way they used their words. They didn't want to get into any trouble ... remember when we were talking about acts of violence? ...*

*They did not recognize me for who I want to be recognized as, not as a real person, just as a Black person ...”*

These attitudes and responses evoked the feeling that there was something intrinsically wrong or bad or inadequate about being Black. Barbara describes a situation in high school where the word ‘negre’ came up. The teacher asked for a definition and all eyes turned her way, but no one volunteered an answer even though everyone in the class knew what the word meant. Barbara says she started to feel more and more uncomfortable as the teacher rephrased and rephrased the question and waited and waited and the tension grew.

**Barbara:** *It seemed like five minutes, but it must have been only a minute or a minute and a half.”*

Were they waiting for her to say, “ Hey! Look over here! I’m a negre!? Barbara’s feels that the teacher’s apparent insensitivity to the interplay between her and the rest of the class served to intensify the negative vibes and did nothing to relieve the tension or to create the impression that to be Black was normal. At the time she recalls feeling relieved when the teacher finally explained the word because she was no longer on the spot. But later on she felt ashamed that she had just sat there, upset, angry ... but silent, and all because she had been so caught up in the moment, so afraid that if she was singled out she might have said something like *“Why ask me? You know what the word means. Why don’t you just say it. Why are you making me go through this?”* Like the

students, the teacher herself probably perceived Barbara as a 'native informant' (hooks, 1994 p.43) and had no idea of how Barbara might be feeling, so obviously she would not have understood such an outburst. Barbara would have been punished for disrespecting the teacher and her parents would have been called in. Her decision not to speak allowed her to maintain a place in the classroom, but it also demonstrates how the unequal relationship between the dominant authority and the subservient minority figures is maintained.

Roxanne, a self-assured, and usually out-spoken young woman, in similar circumstances, welcomed being singled out. But, like Barbara, she too felt the need to temper her words. The repercussions at school and at home would not have been worth it. As every child of West Indian origins knows the last thing you want is for the school to call your parents with a complaint. David shares his experience:

**David:** *Anytime I had a progress report sent home ... Of course Mom, she always had her mind made up. 'Boy, is your fault! You must ah did something to make these teachers call me at work.'*

Steven said that his parents would listen and understand, but get angry at him anyway. Most of the others claimed experiences similar to Steven's, but all agreed that parental anger directed at them was a regular response to their in-school problems.

Their perception is that having attended school in the West Indies, their parents do not really understand what it is like for them in Canadian Schools. While it is true that their actual in-school experiences are different, West Indian immigrant parents do understand Canadian discrimination, and work hard to prepare their children to deal with it. However, coming from an environment where they had been accustomed to seeing Blacks in every position of power, "they never question whether they have a right to exercise authority. They accept the right to power." (McClain, 1979, p.49). This perception influences how they view and react to discrimination and consequently what they teach their children.

The child learns that she must not do anything that would place her in a position subservient to the dominant race. So when the parent receives a complaint, he/she feels annoyance, and disappointment, but the over-riding emotion is anger and that is usually directed at the child for providing an opportunity for the discriminating majority to point a finger and say, "What else can you expect?" This is regarded as a position of weakness, of subservience, as the child is seen to be giving power to those who would subjugate her. As bell hooks writes, "negative parental strategies were employed to prepare black children for entering a white-dominated society that our parents knew would not treat us well. They thought that by making us "tough," teaching us to endure pain with a stiff upper lip, they were ensuring our survival." (hooks, 1993, p. 37). How then can she stay in school and excel, negotiate classroom dynamics and

live up to parental expectations? Her options aren't many. She chooses silence.

In **I Won't Learn From You!** Herbert Kohl shows the power of resolve when used by children to "not-learn". (Kohl, 1991, p. 10). He argues convincingly that if a student decides not to learn he won't, and coined the word 'not-learn' to describe this phenomenon. The concept of assent as a major factor in the learning process is intriguing, as is the awareness of the power this places in the hands of the student. Kohl says, "Not-learning played a positive role and enabled them to take control of their lives and get through difficult times." (Ibid., p. 20). I address this concept because it goes right to the core of the Black female's choice to learn-at-all-costs, and therefore warrants closer scrutiny.

In 'not-learning' the student decides not to learn, and in spite of all efforts to help her, she fails. In learning-at-all-costs, the student decides to learn in spite of all efforts to prevent it, and she succeeds. In both cases the strategies employed originate from the same place, viz:

- 1) *The need for "self-respect and identity."* (Ibid., p. 11).
- 2) *The need "to deal with unavoidable challenges to his or her personal and family loyalties, integrity and identity."* (Ibid., p. 15)
- 3) *The need to resolve a "cultural problem."* (Ibid., p. 10).



Also the same, are the benefits to the student. His/her decision to 'not learn' or to learn-at-all-costs help to

1) *"clarify the definition of self ..."*

2) *"strengthen the will ..."*

3) *"provide inner satisfaction" (Ibid., p. 15)*

It is only in the execution of the strategies associated with 'not-learning' or learning-at-all-costs, that we see differences. For example, while the not-learner refuses knowledge, the learner-at-all-costs actively seeks it in spite of all subtle or obvious obstructions. While the 'not-learner' "refuses to pay attention, acts dumb, scrambles his thoughts", (Ibid., p. 13) etc, the learner-at-all-costs does just the opposite, often having to force her way into the consciousness of the provider of knowledge. Decisions such as these are born out of great frustration. Both result in acts of defiance and, to continue to the bitter end, requires great resolve. In both cases there are deficits. The "not-learner" is classified as a failure and the learner-at-all-costs often has to compromise her integrity. But these deficits are far out-weighed by the benefits for, ultimately, both decision-makers achieve their purpose. They have both successfully challenged an oppressive system. What power!

Power plays an important role in classroom dynamics, and since much of this power rests in the hands of the authority figure, i.e. the teacher, then he/she must be held responsible for creating, within the classroom, a constructive, inclusive learning environment. Of the nine

females in this study, four were lucky enough to have had at least one teacher who created such an environment and, as a result, proved to be a positive influence in her life. The consensus was that these were teachers who cared enough to pay attention not only to what their students said, but considered their actions to be even more important. They recognized the students' defensive, protective, survival strategies and took the extra steps to reach out and draw them into the center of all dialogue. These teachers did not allow themselves to be put off by the negative behaviours of any student in the class, and this persistence paid off, for these young women remember them with love and respect and, as they tell us, they in turn, worked their hardest for these teachers.

**Roxanne:** *The teacher was from the Middle East ... she always made eye-contact with me ... but I wondered why she was always staring at me. I do my work! What else does she want? ... I did the exam, and I went to her office to go pick it up and she sat me down and asked me, "Do you feel comfortable in the class ... I stare at you 'cause sometimes I see in your eyes you want to ask a question but you don't" ... And I'm like, True! (Awestruck!) That's so true. But she actually took the time to ... and she was willing to give me all the help that I needed, so I started pouring out all my feelings ... Well you see, I have THIS teacher ... I sat there with her for an hour...*

★

**Sandy:** *My math teacher from last year ... he's Jewish. Once in class I was sitting there and they were going through a test and I'm like ... Whatever!! And he started yelling at me "Sandy! Get Up! Say something!" I got so mad! I didn't like that ... but I saw his face ... like ... I knew that he really did care. He helped me. He pushed me to excel in math. This year his eyes light up! He is so proud of me and he goes, "I knew you could do it. I saw when your attitude changed and it was so beautiful!" ... You know, it felt good ...*

★

**Steven:** *Most of my cool teachers happened not to be white ... My Grade 7 English teacher... she's Indian, and she'll always sit down and she'll always, like, talk to me and Alfred ...*

★

**Nathalie:** *In this ... class that I have taken ... the teacher is Black ... When she realises that her Black students are not participating, she will call you out ... and she will make you start talking, start getting involved. (She calls us her children, you know) ... I remember she took me aside one day and she goes, "Nathalie, I know this is probably the*

*first time you've ever had a Black teacher teaching you ..."*

**All:** HA HA HA

**Nathalie:** *"and I know what you must be going through so I want you to know that no matter what, I'm here for you ..."*

**Roxanne:** *I wish every teacher could say that so passionately ...*

**Nathalie:** *... no matter what ...*

**Barbara:** *Passionately!*

**Roxanne:** *Passionately!!!*

**Nathalie:** *I wish every teacher could say, that passionately...*

**Barbara:** *... And mean it! And do something!*

**Melissa:** *That's the point ...*

**Barbara:** *And actually do something about it!*

**Roxanne:** *The way you said it, I'm sure you're saying it exactly the way she said it to you ... the thing I like about her is that she wants everybody to be educated, comfortable and intergrated.*

**Nathalie:** *I love that woman! ... She's like ... she's like a second mother.*

★

**Marina:** *I loved my Grade Six teacher. I always did my best in her class.*

## **Resilience**

**“No matta how much time yuh fall, get up, duss up yuh self and guh again.”<sup>6</sup>**

In the context of the in-school experiences of the Black Canadian/West Indian female, resilience is that aspect of her personality which enables her to bounce back when she finds herself on the receiving end of discriminatory behaviours. This indicates that, for her, school is a site of psychological, social and physical struggle, and resilience becomes a visible demonstration of her decision to fight back ... and win. This means that for the Black Canadian/West Indian female, her resilience is a way of challenging the existing social order, of subtly forcing a re-thinking of the in-school practices which ensure the marginalization of minorities in general, and Black females in particular.

When asked to summarize his philosophy of education, Giroux began with the question: “Are schools to uncritically serve and reproduce the existing society or challenge the social order to develop and advance its democratic imperatives?” (Giroux, 1992, p. 18). Giroux’s question provides a focus for a look at the system of education in Quebec and the practical application of its philosophy as seen through the eyes of several Black students. The point is, and I quote Giroux, do Quebec schools

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<sup>6</sup>In standard English: It is not how many times you fall but how many times you get up that is important.

**“uncritically serve and reproduce the existing society” or do they “challenge the social order to develop and advance its democratic imperatives?” It is my contention that the first option best describes the pedagogical approaches of the Metro-Montreal schools.**

**In Metropolitan Montreal, because of the modernist approach to schooling, public schools are not prepared to meet the needs of minorities. Giroux points to a similar phenomenon in schools in the U.S.A. and concludes that this is the result of the refusal of these schools to “relinquish a view of knowledge and order that undermines the possibility for constructing a radical democratic project in which a shared conception of citizenship simultaneously challenges growing regimes of oppression and struggles for the conditions needed to construct a multiracial and multicultural democracy.” (Giroux, 1996, p. 64). In explanation he makes the following observation regarding the modernist approach and its stand on difference:**

- 1) Schooling is the tool for the maintenance of social order.**
- 2) Schools are structured according to a system of licenses, order, and regulations, based on the need for sameness and predictability.**
- 3) In the curriculum, knowledge and authority are so organized by rigid testing, tracking and sorting, that differences in race, gender and class are ignored or relegated to subordinate positions.**

- 4) In the curriculum the histories, experiences and culture of the white middle class students are privileged.
- 5) Pedagogical practices treat cultural differences as threats.
- 6) Educators do not celebrate the incorporation of popular culture into the curriculum. (Giroux, 1996, pp. 64-66).

It is fair to conclude that the modernist approach does not celebrate difference. Unfortunately, when one discusses the school-aged population in Metro-Montreal, one is compelled to deal with differences. The daily increasing diversity of this population makes it a priority. Yet, if we listen to the voices of one section of the population, the Black youth, we hear a different story. What we do hear is intolerable in a country which prides itself on its democratic ideals and principles of multiculturalism.

The following direct quotes are taken from our focus group discussions where the participants shared their experiences. These quotes have been placed in five categories, viz: relationship with teachers, course content, discipline, relationship with peers and personal growth.

### **Relationship with Teachers**

**Roxanne:**      *They [the teachers] did not recognize me for who I want to be recognized as ...*

★

**Melissa:** *Sometimes teachers try harder to get white kids back on track.*

\*

**Roxanne:** *I think it was the people in authority who made my life difficult.*

\*

**Allison:** *Teachers just don't have the time to give us the motivation to excel ... 'cause I guess they figure they have so many students to deal with and especially if there's only one or two of us in the classroom, they just don't have time to focus on us ... time as devotion from their hearts to want to give to this child ...*

\*

**David:** *Sometimes I would ask questions ... I wouldn't just sit still and accept what was being said ... There were times when I had my hand up for hours upon hours ... I knew what was going on, you know what I mean ... I'm not stupid ... and he would skip right over me or he would try to catch me off guard. When I didn't know the answer ... find the hardest question in the book to ask you ... I felt the injustice ... I knew that something was wrong ...*

**Steven:** *They stop you from answering questions in school. But they are quick to push you to try out for the soccer team.*



**David:** *Why don't you go into show business ... I'm sure you play basketball ... I'd say, now you're supportive [but] when it comes to books, no! They always try and push you into that stereotype, their conception of what constitutes a Black role model. ... At the time ... I should've been this verbal. I should've had Steven in the classroom to help me rebel.*

**Steven:** *It catches you off guard.*

★

**David:** *They are teachers, man. They should be building your self-esteem...*

★

**James:** *Before I'd even be given a chance to present my case ... I'd try to come out in a respectful way... the teacher is already on the offensive, attacking. I just didn't have good experiences as far as interacting with teachers.*

### **Course Content:**

**Interviewer:** *Today, in the classroom, can you ask questions about Black issues, current or otherwise? Would the teacher help you to understand ... to explore ...*

**Melissa:** *I won't even feel like ... I won't even think about asking him. I don't know ... maybe it's my bias but I think he*

*won't really have the right answers ... especially if he's not of the Black race or whatever ... I won't ask him!*

**Amy:** *When we try to bring up the subject, people have their own conversations and talk over your voice because they don't really care about it ... The teacher just says things you already know, and other things you might want to talk about, they don't know much about it because they don't read books [on the subject]...*

★

**Allison:** *We pick courses we need. We don't pick courses we want or feel we can benefit from.*

★

**Melissa:** *To change the curriculum we have to talk up sometimes and sometimes ... we have to keep our mouths shut.*

**Nathalie:** *You have to watch what you are saying and where you are saying it.*

★

**Allison:** *What could be done in the schools ... like she was saying, .... we urgently need Black history, even if it's not a whole book on Black history, maybe like a chapter or so that the Black students in the class or anybody can just read it and say, "Oh,..." just have some sort of interest in*

*it, and maybe go to the library and maybe do a paper ...  
and maybe the Chinese people and the Indians too ...*

## **Discipline**

**Allison:** *Boys were always more severely punished.*

\*

**Steven:** *If anything [bad] happened, they'd call all the Black kids first ... I wish I could have done something ... Who could I go to? There was nobody to talk to.*

\*

**James:** *Sometimes, you know ... one of the girls ... she'd make some rude noises and she would get kicked out.*

\*

**Roxanne:** *In elementary school, somebody said the forbidden word to somebody and the ... of course ... you know ... a big uproar ... FIGHT! ... the principal came to class and said, "You shouldn't say that because it was not nice." ... No effort to go deeper ... It was not like he made us recognize each other to be individuals of equal worth.*

## **Relationship with Peers**

**James:** *In elementary school people will call you a nigger but in High School and from then on, they know you'll come back at them. It's more subtle ... It's still there ... These*

*are the same people who in elementary called you a nigger ...*

## **Personal Growth**

**Roxanne:** *They put me separate as a Black person ... I said "O.K. Fine!" and I stayed separate. What I should have done was, well, I'm like everyone else. We're all, you know, of the human race, and that's fundamentally what we should consider ourselves to be ... part of the human race, but I was, you know doing the same thing they did.*

★

**Barbara:** *It took a long time to get to the pride I have now. It was only in CEGEP that I had the resources ... the library books to read ... If in elementary I knew there were kings and queens in Africa, I think I would have had a ... I wouldn't have been a shy person today.*

★

**Roxanne:** *I realize this now ... I guess I made my self sound naïve ... like I do deal with it [racism]. But when I think about it, why is it that I love to go back to Trinidad every year even if I don't have the money? ... 'cause when I went there I had no problems dealing with who I am ... I mean every country has its problems, but I never felt threatened about who I am ... They give you that respect that you deserve*

*... I feel so comfortable and so worthy ... I went down there for Beach, Family, Fun, but I didn't know it would make my soul at ease ... I felt so at home ... I felt so comfortable ... They won't treat you special, but they won't bring you down.*

In a nutshell, the problem, as seen through the eyes of the participants of this study, is a deep dissatisfaction with their in-school experiences. They feel their needs are not being met, perhaps not even considered, and they blame the authority figures, viz: the school personnel – teachers and administrators, for they are the ones with whom they come into daily contact, they are the ones responsible for interpreting and applying the M.E.Q.'s guidelines, and they are the ones whose attitudes make learning a rewarding or distressing experience.

As these young people shared their stories, I became increasingly concerned about one particular aspect of their school experiences i.e. the use of language by the authority figures to rationalize behaviours they must know are wrong. For example, prior to a final exam, David says he approached his teacher with a request for help with the course material. I'll let David tell the rest.

**David:** *She said ... Well, ... you still have two weeks to study for the exams so I'm sure you'll get it ... I'm... I'm sure it'll come to you ... so again I was just like, what's the point? It took me all this time to come up and ask you for help ...*

*and she was like ... you still have two weeks so ... basically she might just have put her hand in my face, you know ... I was the only black guy in the class ... at the breaks they [other students in the class] would run up to her and like, oh can we go get some coffee together ... so I was like ... do I have to do that? Do I have to offer the teacher a cup of coffee to get help? ... We're in University and I can't even ask the teacher a couple of questions without her ... you know ... it's quite frustrating ... Well ... I remember I followed her from the class to the elevator ... and I said, 'Why is it you can't give me a few minutes?' ... [she replied] You know ... you know ... I barely have time left on the meter, I really have to go ... this and that ... giving me all kinds of excuses ... You know what I mean ... just to get some time...but again, once she got off the elevator, I was by myself ... you know what I mean ... going down! ... That was so symbolic ...*

Obviously this teacher had no intention of making time to accommodate David's needs. She could have scheduled an office appointment or sent him to feed the meter or even talked to him as they walked to her car! Anything, but what, in effect, was a firm refusal of help, and that couched in language which on the surface seemed to imply that he was an intelligent young man (a compliment?) therefore he would soon

figure out the problem for himself. David, however, heard the brush-off and felt the rejection, which I believe was her original intention.

It is in situations such as these where the techniques employed by the females prove more effective. For example, Nathalie's response was: *"I would have said, Miss, since you have no time now, when are your office hours? Could I please come then? She'd have to see me. I am the one who wants to learn ..."*

One may ignore the intellectual aspiration of the Black female. One may ignore her silences, her frustrations and her rage, but one cannot ignore her presence. She is here to stay in spite of all odds, ready to employ whatever strategy best suits the occasion and astute enough to acknowledge the paradoxical value of flexibility and consistency in the employment of these strategies. Resilience, as an aspect of her personality, is one such strategy.

In the school life of the Black female, resilience means attending classes anyway even if you feel you are being excluded; continuing to raise your hand even though your desire to contribute is being ignored; insisting on raising topics of concern to you even though others seem uninterested; getting help elsewhere if none is forthcoming in the classroom; taking the course any way after you have been advised that that program is not for you; re-doing the assignment if your mark is not good enough; turning a deaf ear to derogatory comments about your colour, gender, intelligence, habits, culture, etc.; insisting on speaking for

yourself as an individual, and not as a spokesperson for the whole race; when you feel depressed, thinking of all those who have gone before you and of the others who are coming behind; taking six courses and passing them all when you are told you could handle only five; changing programs, if you must, but staying in school anyway.

This requires great self control. This is self assertion in practice.

As a CEGEP student Barbara recalls an incident which left her feeling rejected unjustly treated, cheated of an opportunity to learn. On the first day of class the teacher had warned all students of the penalties of missing classes. Unfortunately for Barbara, illness in the family caused her to miss one class. When she tried to explain this to the teacher he brushed her off saying, *"I have no time now. No! No! No!"* Yet, she claimed, that on other occasions other students (she was the only Black person in that class) who had similar reasons were listened to and excused. He made time for them. He listened. She says, *"It always seemed like a coincidence but anyway... I am not stupid. I am not a child. I know what's going on around me."* Barbara is bright and motivated. The program she was in was difficult but not insurmountable. She felt that, with a small amount of positive teacher input, she would have mastered it. She completed the course but eventually transferred into another program because, she says, *"You have to be true to yourself. You can't put yourself in harm's way, day after day, after day, after day."*



Her dream of a career in science had to die so that she could survive. The other participants in this study felt that she should not have let her dream die. It was even implied that fear of failure had caused this reaction. But Barbara readily agreed that, had she remained in the program the way it was set up, she would not have been able to keep up. She explained that almost all of the students in the class had previously studied and worked in the field and were there only to complete their Quebec accreditation, whereas she was straight out of high school. This and other similar situations where the teacher's attitude could have helped to keep her on track, caused Barbara to conclude that teachers are not supportive of Blacks.

**Barbara:** *From my experience I know not to ask my teachers anything. Just from what happened in the past. If I wanted to do something, like go back to the Sciences, I would not ask my teachers. I would not! (Vehemently).*

**Interviewer:** *Why not?*

**Barbara:** *They were never supportive, so why should I?*

As a responsible pedagogue why did the teacher not question the requirements for admission to his course or at least consider a reorganization of his teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students in class. Equally important, why such a cursory and denigrating attitude? This failure, and unwillingness to look within for reasons for student's

problems (I suspect that such a thought never even entered his mind) is, I believe, the most destructive aspect of pedagogy.

Barbara is a caring, honest, motivated and respectful student. She must have been deeply hurt by the teacher's mistrust and his disrespectful, abrupt and off-hand manner. As she spoke you could hear the pain in her voice and see it in her eyes. This sort of in-school experience was not new to her. She is older now, but nothing has changed. She sees, stretching before her, a life-time of having to prove herself and having to struggle to defend her ethics. A part of this struggle revolved around the West Indian part of her which regarded the teacher as representative of that group of people in power whom she is supposed to trust and respect.

Barbara felt the discrimination. She knew she was being stereotyped and her avoidance strategies were effective. She would sidestep the pain and disenchantment by changing programs. This was her way of bouncing back, of trying to maintain faith in the system so as to be able to continue using it to improve her lot in life.

Resilience conveys a feeling of power for how you respond is your decision. You take control. Resilience also involves a physical act or a mental response which places you back in the same or a similar set of circumstances to the one that caused you grief in the first instance. This requires courage, self-control and a sense of your own self-worth. These can never be counted as the attributes of a weak character or a loser.

## Chapter IV: M.E.Q. Reforms (1999-2005) re: Education of Minorities

### Reactions

Coming as they did on the tail end of lengthy consciousness raising discussions, the reactions of the participants to excerpts from *Schoolscapes*<sup>7</sup> chosen at random and read aloud, were as expected. These reactions ranged from sullen acceptance to outright indignation, from derisive chuckles to angry sneers, and addressed the following concerns: reform personnel, the new curriculum, and problems relating to these.

Upon seeing the newsletter, their first reaction was that there were no Black people or young people pictured on any of the committees. Who would speak for them, they wondered? Who would champion their concerns?

**Melissa:**        *No Black people.*

**Nathalie:**      *And they're all old.*

**Melissa:**        *The reforms aren't gonna get us what we want. But I think that is also a little bit of our fault – none of us have a job there ...*

The curriculum content was another area of concern. What were they going to be asked to learn?

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<sup>7</sup> The MEQ reform newsletter. 1(1) Winter 1999 and 1(2) Spring 1999 were used.

**Roxanne:** *It's not what you are interested in learning ...*

**Sandy:** *It's what they want you to ... "This is important to me so it must be important to you" ...*

**Roxanne:** *Maybe I was wrong or just ... you know naïve ... but I took it as they are gonna try to integrate them [minority narratives] more ... but that's what I'm saying ... minorities are never integrated ...*

Their solutions to these and other problems were definitely proactive.

**Melissa:** *The first thing is about ... ah, looking at society and the way it is. You should try to be changing it right now. Like, I'm not saying to start a whole uprising and stuff (Laughter from the others) but like maybe we should ... we have to... it's probably our fault that we are not speaking up ... we should be out there telling everybody else, " O.K.! Listen to us. This is wrong!" and we should try to get some to help us change it ... we should get some Black people in there, and other colours working in there to help fix the problems.*

Melissa's point that minorities must strive for inclusion at the decision-making level is well taken.

## **Limitations**

Quebec's Ministry of Education (MEQ) is in the process of revising the programs of study in Quebec's schools. Considering the increasing diversity of Quebec's population this would seem to be an ideal time to replace the distinctly traditional eurocentric base of Quebec education with a more global one. Such an approach would permit both the narratives of minorities as well as those of the eurocentrics to share 'The Center' in Quebec classrooms.

We have been told that student groupings will become reorganized, evaluation methods revised, school regulations modified and "a new culture of professional development" established. (Schoolscapes, 1999, 1(2): 4). Also we learn from Claude Giroux, the assistant director of the Direction de la formation général des jeunes at the M.E.Q., that "this Program of Programs will place academic learning in a wider context, and link it to the students' own lives [therefore] it will encourage the development of competencies, capacities and skills." (Ibid, p. 2). On the surface there does not seem to be too much to complain about here. We understand that there will be discussions about linking school and real-life experiences. We hear of plans to keep evaluation methods 'in sync' with the new paradigm of education, and basic to all this, we are told, is the need to build a spirit of cooperation and "a culture of change." (Ibid., p. 3). What remains unclear, however, and largely because it is not specifically stated is, from whose perspective? Or rather, from which

perspectives? Will there be a place for visible minorities at the decision making table?

In the M.E.Q.'s Education Policy Statement we read, "In Quebec, the teaching of history is of particular significance, given our need to open ourselves up to other cultures and to confront various interpretations of our past." (Schoolscapes, 1999, 1(1): 17). On the surface this statement indicates constructive interest in the concerns of minorities. However the choice of words viz.: "to open up ourselves to other cultures" and "to confront other cultures" is significant for this demonstrates an inclination toward maintenance of the status quo. "Opening up" and "confronting" are a far cry from change or re-evaluation. I see no indication here of a decision to try to reconstruct the knowledge base of education in Quebec.

In addition, although the need for global understanding and communication are mentioned in those reforms, these concerns are still marginalized; there is still a noticeable absence of strategies that would move the narratives of minorities to a more central place. This sends a clear message about the educational perspectives of the reformers and indicates reasons why minorities are concerned about the educational paradigms within which their children have to function.

In order to keep all schools, school boards, governing boards and parents informed as to the progress of the reforms, as well as to explain any details related to these reforms or actions taken, the MEQ published the first volume of 'Schoolscapes', the education reform newsletter. In it

we read of several societal benefits of these reforms, among them being the globalization of relations, cultures and economies. (Schoolscapes, 1999, 1(1): 1). This means, as 'Schoolscapes' explains, that students will " ... redefine their relationships with the global community, i.e. in other words they must understand the world they live in." (Ibid., p.1). It is important to note here that 'Schoolscapes' ignores the idea of change implicit in the word redefine, preferring to focus on the concept of understanding. The message here is that our students will be taught to understand the world they live in - not reconstruct or evaluate or even examine. The things we teach our children, the things we want them to understand (here read accept) are things that we value. The problem here is that in today's society, because minorities are marginalized, by teaching understanding (acceptance) of society as it exists, we are, in fact, fostering status quo-ism, and this at a time when the number of minorities in our schools is increasing, at a time when minorities are crying for their voices to be included.

What concerns me most, however, is the role of the teacher in the implementation of these reforms. We are told that teachers will be encouraged to adopt the new paradigm of learning which underlies the whole curriculum reform because teachers must be permitted "to think about their current practices, to state their beliefs, to understand what the adoption of a new model will mean to them and to express their doubts and hesitations ..." ('Schoolscapes', 1999, 2(2): 3) What if teachers

believe their current practices to be flawless? What if they go through the motions but fail to commit to this new paradigm? In short what contingencies are there to ensure that these goals will be met?

Also, are they suggesting that teachers work at “self-actualization”<sup>e</sup>? (hooks, p. 1994, p. 17). This cannot be legislated and though it can be nurtured, at the best of times, it is a painful process. How, then, will this be accomplished? Let’s not forget that, as bell hooks say, “Shifting paradigms is difficult.” (hooks, 1994, p. 38). As we move further along the road to full implementation, I hope that these and other relevant question will be answered.

There are also, in ‘Schoolscapes’, photographs of the teams of educators who, in conjunction with the M.E.Q., are responsible for working on these reforms. In these photographs, the ratio of men to women is twenty-four to twenty seven. Good! However, there are no visible minorities pictured there - no First Nations people, no Chinese, no East Indians, no Blacks. Who then will speak for these minorities? Who will look out for their interests and hold the officials accountable? My fear is that, once again, many groups of Quebecers will be consigned to the fringes, their deep concerns ill-addressed or at best misunderstood. Supposedly it is the students, ALL students, and their need to be successful in the 21st century, which are at the heart of these reforms.

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<sup>e</sup> Self-actualization: In explanation of this term hooks quotes Thich Nhat Hanh. I shall follow her example: “The practice of a healer, therapist, teacher or any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy he or she cannot help many people.” (hooks, 1994, p. 16).



We are told that there will be changes made in initial teacher training and professional development, in the integration of new information and communication technologies, in the context of programs of study, in subject/time allocations, and in the evaluation of learning. Subjects will even be regrouped into broader fields. But, as demonstrated above, the M.E.Q.'s reform is firmly rooted in a eurocentric perspective, and I fear that, at the end of the day, for visible minorities, and for young Black females in particular, it will be "Business as Usual." (Sleeter and Grant, in Shapiro and Purpel, 1998, Chapter 6).

## **Chapter V: Conclusion**

*“Postmodern pedagogy needs to go beyond a call for refiguring the curriculum so as to include new informational technologies. Rather it needs to assert a politics that makes the relationship among authority, ethics, and power central to practices of learning and teaching that expand rather than close down possibilities of a radical democratic society.” (Giroux, 1996, p. 76).*

In this thesis, I have committed myself to an echoing of the voices of the participants in this study and have permitted myself no levity. As a marginalized “Other”, I support their quest for educational opportunities which validate their voices; I applaud their efforts at self-reconstruction, and agree with their denouncing of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. But, as an educator, I know that for the pace of change to be accelerated, those in authority, more specifically, school administrators and classroom teachers, must become active participants.

### **Needed: An Inclusive Pedagogical Approach**

The over-riding concern illuminated by this study is the ineffective pedagogical practices of schools in Metropolitan Montreal. The experiences shared by the participants indicate that, in this area, schooling is based on an approach which celebrates ‘sameness’. They feel, and rightly so, that even though these institutions of education claim to uphold democratic principles, this is only a theoretical, ‘looks good on paper’ position. In practice it is the voice of the dominant culture that is most often permitted to be heard and valued. I believe that my subjects

are qualified to address this issue because, as Black students, they are speaking from a position of difference.

The increasing diversity of the student population in Metro-Montreal indicates a dire need for an inclusive pedagogy, but as the narratives of these students indicate, the approach to schooling is still traditional modernist. Giroux is right to be critical of the reluctance of schools to let go of this modernist approach for it is unproductive, rigid and fails to meet the needs of minorities. Such an approach is ill-equipped to take ALL students into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and it is about time that school administrators face this reality and act accordingly.

Teachers can no longer teach as they were taught, for an inclusive pedagogy renders a eurocentric perspective inadequate. Equally inadequate are strategies which assume “that memorizing information and regurgitating it represent(s) gaining knowledge” (hooks, 1994, p.5). Hooks calls this the “Banking System of Education” (Ibid., p. 5) and shows how it contributes to the development of sameness in schools. Under such a system, acceptance of society’s norms is expected and conformity to those norms, is the goal. What room, then, is there for the inclusion of new narratives?

Acceptance and conformity do buy for the Black female, the right to formal schooling, but her opportunity to become a truly educated person has also been curtailed. Under such a system, though she survives, has she been able to maximize her potential? Yes, she is succeeding now,

academically, but it would be revealing to record the difference in her performance should she be given the freedom to learn within a system committed to the celebration of difference, a system which would encourage her to think critically about herself and her “identity in relation to [her] political circumstances.” (hooks, 1994, p. 47).

### **Needed: Empowering Techniques**

It is encouraging to note that some of these young women remembered at least one teacher who touched their lives in a positive manner. What is remarkable, but not surprising, is that in most of these instances the teacher herself or himself was a part of a visible minority. The obvious question is, what did these teachers do differently? Christine Callender provides an excellent answer obtained from a study of the teaching strategies of successful Black teachers in two British schools. What we learn from this study is that teachers of marginalized students who wish to teach for empowerment must:

- 1) employ, in the classroom communication strategies and interactions which have a cultural orientation.
- 2) make consistent efforts to connect the students’ in-school and out-of-school experiences,
- 4) let students know that we (the teachers) are on their side, and, if possible, demonstrate a cultural solidarity with them,

- 5) take whatever steps necessary to give students the “knowledge, skills and values that facilitate school success, self-determination, healthy cultural identity, and survival in a society that professes equal opportunity while practicing institutional racism.” (Callender, 1997, pp. 19-22).

A second question concerns the replication of these characteristics among the Black teachers of Quebec. Also would the findings be the same for all teachers who are members of other marginalized groups? Answers to these questions would certainly further the cause of inclusive education.

### **Needed: Safe Forums for Intercultural and Intracultural Exchange**

In general the young women who participated in this study felt reassured by the presence, in their classrooms, of other Black students, male or female. They valued the support and the knowledge that they were not alone in the struggle. In response to the question, “If you could, what would you change about your school?” several of these young people expressed a longing for opportunities for intellectual discourse with knowledgeable, more experienced people of their own minority groups. A few also felt a need for peer group discussions across cultural lines. In addition, following our focus group discussions, these young women were very enthusiastic about the experience and expressed keen interest in participating in future discussions.

These two factors indicate a need within the Black community on the South Shore of Montreal, to create opportunities where young Black women could meet for mutual support and to discuss race and gender related issues with caring, informed adult females. As these young women pointed out, it's not so much what these significant others say that influences them most; it is what they do. Seen in this light, our input as mentors assumes even greater importance and for these young women the reaffirmation of self, and the information thus obtained would be immeasurable.

### **Needed: Self-Actualized Teachers**

Of the twelve participants in this study only one felt that she had a teacher who spoke of minority issues, all minority issues, and did so in a caring and sensitive manner. Therefore I must, as a teacher, speak to the need for all teachers to become "self-actualized". (hooks, 1994, pp. 15-17).

Daily teachers are faced with the challenge of interacting with and guiding the youth of Quebec. Self-actualization increases the quality of our interactions for, whether we are conscious of it or not, at some place in our lives we, ourselves, are oppressors. (Shapiro and Purpel, 1998, p. 383). A pedagogy of inclusion responds to the need of the marginalized for self-actualization, for inner peace. So by becoming self-actualized ourselves, our interactions become more effective, we begin to truly

understand the needs of the marginalized and the paradigm shift necessary for an inclusive pedagogy becomes less threatening.

### **A Critical Choice**

The Black female's choice of academics as a milieu in which to shatter existing societal norms while demonstrating her sense self-worth, is predicated upon her rejection of society' categorization of her racial and gendered group as "Other" and therefore "Lesser Than". It is no mean feat to conceive and execute such a plan, but she values her difference and realizing that times are difficult knows she must make a way for herself.

To win this game she knows that she must be more adept than the other players, so this becomes her hidden agenda. She appears to accept society's marginalization and low expectations, but determines to succeed in spite of all obstacles and, bit by bit, subtly, patiently, like water on stone, she hopes to effect a transformation. Thus, she hopes that society will be forced to redefine its criteria for acceptance in the center, and a valorization of all people will become inevitable.

The task she has set herself is very difficult. Often it requires settling for less when she knows she deserves more, being silent when she would speak or turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to injustice. Who else but someone with a strong sense of self and a firm belief in the rightness of her own agenda would consistently endure such torment?

The young women in this study though angry, hurt and sometimes disillusioned, all display behaviours that have the capacity to effect a transformation. Some were more assertive than others but all appeared to be actively involved in creating and projecting images of themselves as they want to be seen. Naturally, they resent the need for constant struggle, but they are not discouraged. Their goals are clear, their efforts to achieve them consistent, and their commitment to possibility thinking, their resolve and resilience, highly commendable.

The young women in this study are definitely Equal to the Challenge.



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# Appendix – Materials Used in Focus Group Sessions

## Questionnaire

### Focus of Study and Interview Questions

(1) Student academic attainment.

- Do you think that black girls are slower than other females? \_\_\_\_\_
- How much time do you spend on your homework per week (hours)? \_\_\_\_\_
- Does homework affect leisure time? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you have a quiet place (room) to do your homework? \_\_\_\_\_
- What subjects are you taking? \_\_\_\_\_
- How would you rate your academic ability? \_\_\_\_\_

(2) Student interaction with peers (male, female, other races).

- What is your relationship with your classmates? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel safe enough to speak out and express your views? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) Student interaction with teachers and administrators as authority figures.

- What is your relationship with teachers? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel that they recognize your needs and support your dreams?

(4) Student perception of being valued, accepted, tolerated, understood by peers, teachers and administrators.

- Have you experienced racism at school? \_\_\_\_\_
- By whom? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do they do? \_\_\_\_\_
- What do you do? \_\_\_\_\_
- How do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you think something can be done to change things? \_\_\_\_\_

What? \_\_\_\_\_  
Have you experienced sexism? \_\_\_\_\_  
By whom? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do they do? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do you do? \_\_\_\_\_  
How do you feel? \_\_\_\_\_  
Do you think that there is something that can be done to change things? \_\_\_\_\_  
What? \_\_\_\_\_

(5) Student participation in regular school activities.

How would you rate your participation in class activities? \_\_\_\_\_  
How would you rate your participation in academics? \_\_\_\_\_  
How would you rate your participation in physical education? \_\_\_\_\_

(6) Student participation in extra-curricular activities.

Do you participate in extra-curricular activities? \_\_\_\_\_  
What? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why did you choose these activities? \_\_\_\_\_

(7) Degree of parental involvement in decision-making processes as regards regular and extra-curricular activities of student.

Do you talk to your parents about what you would like to do? \_\_\_\_\_  
About what else? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do your parents consider to be the best choice for you when you leave school? \_\_\_\_\_

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(8) Student attitude towards parental involvement or lack thereof.

What do your parents think of your extra-curricular activities? \_\_\_\_\_  
How does this make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

(9) Student goals.

Do you expect to go to college? \_\_\_\_\_ University? \_\_\_\_\_



Where did you get information about colleges? \_\_\_\_\_ University? \_\_\_\_\_

(10) Student perception of the school environment as a positive/negative place.

Do you like being in school? \_\_\_\_\_

Why (why not)? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you dislike most about being in school? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

(11) Student willingness to take steps to affect changes.

Would you like to see changes in your school? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you participate in trying to bring about those changes? \_\_\_\_\_

How far would you be willing to go? \_\_\_\_\_

(12) Topics to be covered during focus group discussions

- Dress, music, mannerisms, hair styles
- Language (English, French, slang, patois, creolese)
- Values, goals
- School attendance
- Participation in in-school activities and in after-school activities
- Teacher attitudes (toward them, toward white peers)
- Parental attitudes and involvement
- Attitude toward males (females) (black, white, other)
- Attitude of females (males) (black, white, other)
- Relevance of curriculum/texts
- Academic ability
- Academic opportunity
- Prospective employment
- Further education-CEGEP
- University-Undergraduate level
- Postgraduate level

## **Memories of School Experiences**

*“Throughout my childhood, my school 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. They did not invite me to critically “read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective” (Clark, 1990, p. 304). As a young Black girl growing up in England and Canada, my school lessons were often acts of violence. In these lessons that perpetuated notions of Black people as inferior and primitive, I can still painfully recall shrinking at my desk, wanting to disappear, overhearing classmates snicker and mutter derogatory remarks about me and my race under their breaths – but loud enough for me to hear. School was not a place where I could ask any practical or critical questions about the ambiguities in my own life as a Black child in a White society. I did not have the courage to ask subjective questions out loud.” (Henry, 1994, p. 298-299)*

## **A Letter From A Parent**

*Dear Principal,*

*I would like to introduce myself to you as the mother of a Grade Six student who recently enrolled in your school. I believe in good communication between home and the school, and hope that you and my child's teacher will communicate with me as I will try to work with you in the interest of my child.*

*As a parent, I take my role seriously and consider myself as an important partner in the education of my child. I have learned through experience that Black parents have to be very vigilant when we enroll our children in school due to low expectations and negative attitudes some teachers have of Black students. I have already experienced some of this in my child's previous schooling, for even though she performed well, she sometimes felt excluded and passed over in the classroom. Like other parents, I wish that my child will feel part of the school, that she will see herself reflected in the curriculum and in the composition of the teaching body. I do not want school to be an alienating experience for her, as it has been for so many of our students over the years.*

*I would also like to share with you some of my observations about the education of Black students. My involvement in the black community in Toronto and in the Organisation of Parents of Black Children (OPBC) has exposed to me the depth of the problems Black students generally*

*face in schools due to racism, exclusion, stereotyping and low expectations of my teachers. I have listened to parents discuss their children's difficulties in school, and have tried to counsel and support some who felt intimidated by the system. Because of my knowledge of the research on Black students as well as the discussions in the conferences and workshops in which I have participated, I am very fearful about my child's education and future. I do not want her to become a high school dropout statistic nor do I want her to be streamed and be limited in any way. I have expectations of her completing her education and allowing herself options in terms of future studies and careers. So please, allow me to be involved in her education so that I can work with the school to help her accomplish her goals.*

*In my child's previous schools, even though I tried to be part of the school activities and attended all the meetings, I still felt a sense of unease. I felt that the schools are not sufficiently welcoming of us as parents in general and especially of Black parents. Many of us feel that the atmosphere in the school does not include us. This exclusion of our African heritage must impact negatively on our children's self-esteem, and must affect their academic performance, I believe. Let us be fair to the students. It is important that the school reflects all of them, including my child and other Black students. Her connection to her studies is very important to my daughter, as well as to me.*

*Just as I encourage my child to do her best in school, so I am asking the school to provide the best support for her in every area: the curriculum, the activities, the attitudes and expectations of the teacher, and involvement of parents. The kind of support she needs can be provided only in an anti-racist, inclusive environment in which she can grow and blossom.*

*I hope that my daughter will enjoy attending your school and will achieve good academic success as I know she is capable of. I hope that she will be taught by caring teachers who will appreciate her heritage and support her aspirations.*

*Let us work together for the good of my child.*

***Sincerely,***

***Muriel Clarke,***

***Parent***

(Brathwaite and James, 1996, pp. 142-143)