A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PEEL DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD DOCUMENTS: SITUATING

THE REALITIES OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

A Discourse Analysis of Peel District School Board Documents: Situating the Realities of Black Male Students

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This paper used a methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the education of Black males in the Peel District School Board. Using a theoretical framework comprised of anti-Black racism I examined four documents published by the Peel District School Board: *Safe Schools Policy, Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, We Rise Together* report*,* and *Fighting an Uphill Battle: Report on the Consultations into the Well-Being of Black Youth in Peel Region.* My findings revealed three main discourses evident from the policy documents, which are the following: 1) institutional/systemic racism, and 2) discourse of fairness, objectivity, and neutrality, and 3) Whiteness. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for Black males and Black families.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this Major Research Paper (MRP) to my children, Nicholas Jr. (NJ) and Teairra. Particularly my son NJ, who is the inspiration behind this MRP. Mommy loves you both!

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

The lived experiences of Black male students within the Peel District School Board has recently gained media attention. However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, these experiences have been characterized by racism, and the undervaluation of Black communities and families, and this needs to be addressed immediately (Kumsa et al., 2014; Pon, Gosine, & Phillips, 2011). One of the ways in which Black boys experience marginalization is through the process of racialization. Race is a socially constructed category often used to classify humankind per common ancestry and is reliant on differentiation by physical characteristics such as: skin color, hair texture, stature, and facial characteristics (Yee, 2005). Racialized male bodies, and particularly those marked as Black, experience issues of discrimination and racism significantly differently than their White counterparts. The notion of race is a social construct; yet, racism has caused many disparities for those whose bodies are marked as Black. Moreover, if researchers and social work practitioners continue to address issues faced by Black male students through a Eurocentric lens, the needs of Black male students who experience anti-Black racism will continue to be inadequately addressed**.**

Hart (2002) asserts that colonization is driven by a worldview that embraces dominion, self-righteousness, and greed (p. 24). Through the imposition of this system, the colonizers developed and maintained dominance of the system and used the power gained to reaffirm this position for their own benefit (Hart, 2002). This process is an accurate reflection of the education system in the Peel District, and the Canadian education system in general. Indeed, the education system is constructed based on Eurocentric values, beliefs, norms, and morals. Within Eurocentric education Indigenous students realize their invisibility as they do not see reflections of themselves in this system (Hart, 2002). Similarly, Black students are marginalized by this

system that is designed to benefit and ensure the success of White students. Dei (1997) explains that Black or African is not simply a reference to the self but to the group, as well as to the collective struggles of peoples disadvantaged by a history of slavery, colonialism, and racism (p. 252). Thus, it is not uncommon for Black boys to be pushed to the periphery within social institutions such as the schools.

This research paper is important as it continues the dialogue around understanding how the intersection of Black ethnicity and the male gender can impact a person's experience within public education. This research paper also may help facilitate discussions in making positive changes for this demographic. There is research similar to this that has been conducted by scholars such as Carl James and George Dei, however, I believe this research will add to the important discussion around what the experiences are like for Black males who attend school in the Region of Peel. I also bring to this research my own unique positionality as a Black woman, who is a mother to a Black son who attends school in Peel Region.

I believe this research could bring a different perspective instead of the usual narratives written from Eurocentric perspectives prevalent in academia. The findings may hopefully continue the discussions around rectifying/addressing issues surrounding the Black male student's experience within the Peel District School Board. This is relevant to social workers as it contextualizes the problems they often encounter with Black male students and their experiences within the education system. This may help improve services in a multitude of areas including how social work practitioners address issues of anti-Black racism against Black male students within the Peel District School Board.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This critical literature review provides an understanding of existing literature on this topic of the educational experiences of Black male students. Upon reviewing the relevant literature, some of the reoccurring themes regarding the experiences of Black boys who attend the public-school system in Canada, America and the United Kingdom were: institutional racism plays a role; there is a discourse around Black boys being constructed as "students at risk"; low expectations from teachers; and the construction of Black masculinity as 'aggressive' and 'violent' to justify the use of harsh disciplinary actions by teachers/principals. The literature also reveals that there is ongoing concern among parents, educators, and youth in Canadian schools of the disengagement, poor academic performance, and low educational outcomes of Black male students (Codjoe, 2006, Dei, 2008, James, 2012), and the tendency, subsequently, for them to be identified as youth "at risk" who need special educational support.

The "at risk" discourse is utilized to justify the social control, surveillance/hyper-surveillance, and regulation of these bodies. Dei (2008) asserts that the constant referencing to such terms as at risk, dropout, disadvantaged, and special needs has constituted a negative narrative around Black male students. The process of classification and/or categorization is executed by identifying certain "risk factors" and/or "risk behaviour" that stream youth into specific sections that are used as a means of control. These factors place racialized individuals at a higher risk of being streamed. This relates directly to the school to prison pipeline where Black youth are negatively categorized and labeled upon their entrance into the education system and thus eventually streamed into the judicial system (Wilson, 2014).

**Whiteness**

Another theme that emerged in my literature review was Whiteness. Whiteness can be defined as a complex social process that perpetuates and maintains the domination of the majority groups' way of life (Yee, 2005). Whiteness is attainable through the exclusionary process of the identifying the other, and for constructing a social distance between groups (Razack, 1998). The normativity of Whiteness and/or the possession of White privilege allows social, political, and economic benefits to accrue to groups and individuals even as the practice is conveniently denied (Dei, 1997 p. 243). Dei (1997) points out that the privilege of Whiteness refutes the existence of racism and is protective of the source of sanctioned privilege (p. 243).

Similarly, Blackness is a social construct that is ascribed to oppress, dominate, and subordinate those marked as Black (Fanon, 1967). Both in school and in the wider society, Blackness is positioned outside the normalcy of Whiteness (Dei, 1997). Markers of difference such as gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, are all social constructs deeply embedded within our society (Yee, 2005). Yee (2005) explains that when examining race, one must look at the process of racialization and how the process is rooted in racism and colonization. The dominant group has deployed these categorizations as a tool to maintain power. Hart (2002) explains that the process of colonization attacks individuals on the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual levels. These identities have been socially produced and reproduced throughout history and society through dominant discourse. Dominant discourses are powerful mechanisms that reproduce marginalization in society. For instance, Fanon (1967) notes that Western discourses hold an untrue and falsified homogeneous ideology of Black men, and moreover, these negative views are established as truth in society.

Furthermore, the dominant discourses around Blackness are often associated with many negative stereotypes or view Black bodies in a negative light, which promotes fear of the

community. Ahmed (2000) explains that cultural difference becomes the text upon which the fear of crime is written. Due to these categorizations that are assigned to Black bodies, they are in turn subject to constant surveillance (Browne, 2015). These constructs mask power relations and enable dominant groups to maintain their innocence (Razack, 1998). These unchallenged assumptions of Whiteness systematically position Black students at a disadvantage. Whiteness is an institutionalized privilege that perpetuates a system of dominance and can only be unravelled once the concept of Whiteness is critically deconstructed (Yee, 2005).

It has long been understood that for a person living in a Western society like Canada, education is a major contributing factor in quality of life (Ross & Marieke, 1997). Scholars argue that there is a difference between schooling and education. Shujaa (1993) points out that, schooling "is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures" that support the socially sanctioned values, norms, and patterns of behavior that members are expected to learn to fully participate in the society (p. 330). In contrast, education is "is the process of transmitting from one generation to the next" the knowledge, values, skills, and traditions that will maintain its culture and ensure its survival (Shujaa, 1993, p. 331). Unfortunately, many racialized students are marginalized by the system that is designed to benefit and ensure the success of White students. Moreover, racialized ideologies have influenced public policies, government institutions such as schools, and these systemic barriers continue to perpetuate racial discrimination against Black bodies. Thus, the school system reproduces colonized knowledge as it attempts to subjugate, erase, and impose Eurocentric knowledge and worldview upon Black bodies.

**Streamlining/Institutional Racism**

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Another theme that came out of my review of the literature was streaming of Black boys. Streamlining Black boys into lower academic streams as well as into behavioural classes is a prevalent issue. The process of streaming manifests itself in various ways. Henry and Tator (2010) point out that there are two dimensions to the curriculum that produces inequalities for racialized and Black students; the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum. The formal curriculum largely excludes significant contributions of Black and other racialized people in schools. The textbooks primarily include contributions of European authors and courses are taught from the Eurocentric perspective. Racism in the curriculum manifests itself in subjects such as history, literature, social studies, geography, and science (Henry & Tator, 2010). This has a negative impact on the identity of racialized students who do not see positive representations of their culture. The lack of representation of Black/African perspectives, histories, and experiences, low teacher expectations, and what can be described as a hostile school environment constitute racist behaviour in schools (Codjoe, 2001).

As Henry and Tator (2010) explain, the history of Indigenous peoples taught in school generally claim that White people discovered them. White people are made to appear as if they are the heroes and the only group to make significant contributions to the world per these textbooks. These aspects of schooling are often enacting negative stereotypes into everyday classroom interactions and school practices (Henry & Tator, 2010). Purposely excluding the contributions of racialized people reflects bias and institutional racism deeply entrenched in the curriculum. The other dimension of the school curriculum is the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is one of the most difficult aspects of racism to isolate and identify, as it embraces the social and cultural environment, organizational assumptions, values, and norms of those working in it (Henry & Tator, 2010).

The hidden curriculum is also very subtle and is manifested for example in school calendars demarcating what holidays are celebrated and which are ignored, concerts and festivals, book collections in the school libraries and school clubs (Henry & Tator, 2010). The hidden curriculum often streamlines Black boys, and racialized children into low academic programs and vocational programs. Racial discrimination is embedded in the school system, and is one of the root causes of marginalization, which negatively impacts how well racialized peoples will fare in Canada (Henry & Tator, 2010). Racism, particularly when it comes to Black communities, is vicious in its treatment towards this community and, is dangerous in how it operates covertly. The hidden curriculum also manifests in the form of low teacher expectations of Black students, a Eurocentric curriculum, and streaming into non-college preparatory or special education programs (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). This streamlining process produces and reproduce disparities for Black male students.

Teachers play a vital role in the success of their students. However, with respect to Black males, educators also play a role in the construction of students as underachievers and their label of students as "at risk" (James, 2012). Moreover, many teachers attribute students' academic failure to the students, their parents, their community, rather than to their teaching (James, 2012). This assumption of parents' commitment to their children's schooling is used to justify children's underachievement and ultimately the "at risk" designation (James, 2012). James (2012) asserts that young Black male students either conform to, or resist, the underachiever stereotype. With these underlying assumptions and biases by schoolteachers, administrators, and other staff, Black male students are judged more harshly based on their Black bodies.

### Suspension & Expulsion

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Another theme that was evident in the literature review was racism in the processes of disciplining students. Racialized students are more likely to be disciplined at school than White students (Ruck & Wortley, 2002). There is ongoing concern among parents, educators, and youth in Canadian schools of the disengagement, poor academic performance, and low educational outcomes of Black male students, and the tendency, therefore, for them to be identified as "at risk" who need special educational support (James, 2012). The "at risk" discourse is utilized to justify the social control, surveillance/hyper-surveillance, and regulation of these bodies. Dei (2008) asserts that the constant referencing to such terms as at risk, dropout, disadvantaged, and special needs, has constituted dominant educational discourse. Moreover, the literature highlights the fact that Black masculinity is constructed as 'aggressive', 'violent', and thus in need of regulation. Black men have been defined as a threat throughout history while being accepted in roles that serve and entertain White people, where they can ostensibly be controlled and made to appear nonthreatening (Ferber, 2007). Generally, discourses around Blackness or those in Black bodies are often homogenized as one group. For instance, dominant discourses essentialize Blackness in a way that perpetuates negative stereotypes. These views of incivility originated from colonial practices which are still present in today's social institutions. James (2012) explains that, "the language of risk can serve as a euphemism for racism, sexism, and biases" based on factors such as class, immigrant status, family makeup, neighborhood of residence, cultural assumptions, and other "risk-inducing" constructs" (p. 465).

In 2000, Ontario's legislature passed the Safe Schools Act (Winton, 2013). This act now deploys a tougher approach to discipline. Moreover, there is a discourse on zero tolerance that casts social problems as issues of security (Wacquant, 1999, as cited in Wilson, 2014). Zero tolerance refers to strict, uncompromising, automatic punishment to eliminate undesirable

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behavior. Winton (2013) points out that zero tolerance approaches mandate that offenders be punished uniformly and require students committing certain acts to be suspended or expelled without consideration of factors surrounding their actions. Zero tolerance policies have a disproportionately negative impact on racialized students, students with special needs, poor students, and those who are academically failing (Winton, 2013). The irony is that students who are suspended or expelled often experience long-term consequences such as falling behind in their academics (Winton, 2013). Additionally, there is overwhelming evidence that racialized students, especially Black males, are much more likely to be suspended from school than their White counterparts (Ruck & Wortley, 2002).

Consequently, the very policies that schools adopted to manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). Wilson (2014) asserts that the causal link between educational exclusion and criminalization of youth is called the school to prison pipeline, which is correlated with zero tolerance policies. Moreover, expulsion from school has been identified as a key risk factor in youth experiencing homelessness (Springer, Lum & Rosewell, 2013). Wilson (2014) explains that exclusion and suspension have become standard tools for schools to demand obedience and compliance. A core issue of the school to prison pipeline is that it is steeped in systemic and institutional racism, specifically anti-Black racism, and anti-Indigeneity. As such, this topic can be traced back to the history of colonization and slavery in Canada.

**Educational Attainment & Occupational Attainment**

Another theme that emerged from my review of the literature pertained to racism as evidenced in educational attainment and occupational attainment. Education is often deemed as a pathway to success in our society, yet many racialized people are not mobilizing upwards

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regardless of how much education they have attained. Smith and Lalonde (2003) explain that educational and occupational inequity has conspired to limit the upward mobility of generations of African Canadians. Education is linked to employment because education credentials are highly relevant in Canada as it determines the types of occupation one will qualify for upon the completion of high school. Moreover, schools have served to maintain and entrench socioeconomic disparities (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Occupational attainment and income earnings tend to be lower than average for certain ethnic groups amongst Black, South Asian, and Aboriginal peoples in comparison to their White counterparts. Abada, Feng and Ram (2008) point out that group differences include: financial/human capital, family structure, community resources, cultural relations as well as external factors such as racial stratification and economic opportunities. An explanation for this differential in earnings could be the fact that people of color are facing discrimination in the workplace in comparison to the dominant group (Galabuzi, 2005).

Henry and Tator (2010) explain that employment discrimination is a form of systemic discrimination that operates in the public and private sectors. Given that certain ethnic groups are being overlooked when it comes to being recruited, hired, and promoted, they become the disadvantaged group. Pedukar and Pedukar (2011) assert that the earning gap by Canadian born visible minorities has not eroded since the 1990s despite the increase in the immigrant population over the last 20 years. Henry and Tator (2010) point out that an important factor influencing these earning disparities is that in many industries, such as corporate, auto, banking and steel, racialized employees are highly underrepresented at the managerial level. On the other hand, racialized people are vastly overrepresented in low paying positions such as retail, textile, and service sector positions (Henry & Tator, 2010). It is important to note that even when 'visible

minorities' are Canadian born, they still earn far less than their White counterparts. Discrimination within education and occupation relates to higher rates of racialized poverty (Galabuzi, 2005).

## Racialization of Poverty

Another theme that stood out in my review of the literature is the racialization of poverty. The racialization of poverty is a process by which poverty becomes more concentrated and reproduced among racialized group members and in some cases, inter-generationally (Galabuzi, 2005). Galabuzi (2005) asserts that Statistics Canada reported that the poverty rate for racialized groups was 36%. Furthermore, even when a racialized person had a similar educational background to their White counterpart, the racialized person with a university degree earned 8.5% less than their White counterparts. Kumsa et al. (2014) assert that even professional and non-professional Black employees face barriers and the doors of upward mobility are slammed shut. The racialization of poverty is also linked to the entrenchment of disproportionate privileged access to the economic resources of Canadian society by the dominant group (Galabuzi, 2005). Poverty entails lack in areas of empowerment, knowledge, and opportunity as well as lack of income and capital relative to the others in society; this infringes on the dignity of people (Galabuzi, 2005). Indeed, it is important to examine how education affects occupational attainment and how both are all linked to the racialization of poverty.

## Gaps in Research

Although many authors have done important research, there are several gaps within the existent literature. Many of the research studies I reviewed asked similar questions about racism within the school system, and the experiences of those who identify as Black males, and particularly youth. There is not a significant amount of literature that analyzes the experiences of

Black male students and their emotional, spiritual, mental wellbeing, as well as the impact of racism and health within the public-school system in Ontario. Codjoe (2001) explains that it has been observed that the psychological effects of racism on the education of Black youths remain greatly underestimated. Many racialized group members with mental health challenges identify racism as a critical issue affecting their lives (Galabuzi, 2005).

Some other gaps I found within the literature is that there is little research done from the perspectives of Black mothers/fathers and how they support their sons in navigating the public-school system. I believe this information would demonstrate the resistance/resilience of Black parents and their ability to advocate for their children. Much of the existing literature has focused on the students' underachievement or failure (Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Due to the lack and gaps in information and literature; I would like to research the experiences of Black males within the education system in Peel District School Board and how they resist the dominant discourses/overcome racism within the school system and attain educational success.

**Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that will inform this major research paper is anti-Black racism. The African Canadian Legal Clinic explains that anti-Black racism is "a prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement" *(aclc.net).* Anti-Black racism looks at the daily biases, discriminations, and inequalities that Black peoples experience socially, economically, and politically in Canada *(aclc.net).* Kumsa, Mfoafo-M'Carthy, Oba and Gaasim (2014) explain that societal forms of racism against Black people are directed at people from the African/Caribbean diaspora. They experience a particular kind of violence in the form of anti-Black racism which is tangled in the web of global and local power relations (Kumsa et al. 2014). Kumsa et al. (2014) argue that while other racialized communities face systemic discrimination, the Black community is the target of anti-Black racism.

All forms of racisms—from the individual to the institutional to the structural (or societal) — are maintained through the process of racialization, which is the categorization of individuals into groups regarding their physiological characteristics (specifically skin color) and attributing abilities, cultural values, morals, and behavior patterns according to these categorizations (Henry & Tator, 2010). Moreover, racism can be defined as, "any action or institutional practice backed by institutional power that subordinates people because of their color or ethnicity" (Boyd et al., 1998, as cited in Raby, 2004, p. 9). Racism within the school system has been well-documented by a variety of scholars. Racism is a significant social issue, especially for Black males who are at a disproportionately higher risk of experiencing various forms of violence (social, physical, emotional) in Canadian society. The process of racialization serves to essentialize, homogenize, and generalize about minority group members, thereby

ignoring group diversity and intragroup differences, and, in the process, de-contextualizing and de-historicizing their experiences (Celious & Oyserman, 2001 as cited in James, 2012). Racism is understood to be complex, subtle, and flexible; it manifests differently in different contexts, and racialized groups are subject to a range of different (and changing) stereotypes (Dei 1997)

James (2012) asserts that the "at risk" designation applied to Black males supported by the convergence of stereotypes of them as immigrants, fatherless, athletes, troublemakers, and underachievers, places them at a considerable disadvantage in school and society. Within Canadian schools, stereotyping, including the "at risk" designation, operates in a context informed by a multicultural discourse that masks the fact that race matters (James, 2012, p. 485). Moreover, in the Canadian context, the national multiculturalism discourse sustains the myth of a color-blind, racially neutral society where culture is not informed by race (Henry & Tator, 2010). Likewise, in the Canadian education system, there is a discourse of denial with respect to racism in schools.

Race implicates and orients schooling, and any education that sweeps race under the carpet is a miseducation of the learner (Dei, 2014). Marginalized students assert that not being able to express themselves is, in terms of recognizing racism, much more dangerous than a teacher who refutes the existence of racism (Dei, 1997). Overall, there are significant issues of institutional racism within the Canadian education system. These forms of injustices are rooted in a historical legacy of social exclusion that continues to influence our society in ways that marginalize certain groups. Canadian school boards' outlook of the family is shaped around the White middle class, nuclear family ideals. Yet within the Canadian education system there is a discourse of equal opportunity which claims that all groups have equal opportunity to succeed and have the same rights, and thus are treated fairly (Henry & Tator, 2010).

An anti-Black racism theoretical framework challenges the dominant Canadian discourses that elide systemic and structural racism. It also challenges stereotypes of Black children, youth, and families, while critiquing multicultural discourses of colour-blindness. The anti-Black racism framework also acknowledges the roots of anti-Blackness in a history of colonization, white supremacy, and enslavement of Africans. Anti-Black racism also calls attention in a dialectic manner to the tremendous resistance and resiliency of Black children, youth, and families to the oppressive forces that are mobilized against them in a white supremacist settler society such as Canada (Phillips and Pon, 2018).

**Chapter 4: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to examine Black male students' experiences of anti-Black racism within the Peel District School Board. The choice of this methodology, and its implementation is guided by the following research questions guiding: How are policies of the Peel District School Board understanding and addressing the experiences of Black male students? What are the discourses evident in the policies and publications of the Peel District School Board? I will utilize a critical discourse analysis methodology. Critical discourse analysis studies the links between discourse, text, and social and cultural practices (Fairclough, 2003).

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis can be described as the study of "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception that brings an object into being" (Philips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6). Discourse is the use of language, in talk or text, as well as processes of production, control and distribution that organize which discourses can or cannot be made available in particular contexts (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Issues of power can be revealed through discourse in which certain discourses become understood as truth at the expense of other knowledges which become subjugated (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Moreover, discourse is a powerful tool that can produce, reinforce, or transform social relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

A central tenet of discourse analysis is that it challenges the assumption that language is neutral and transparent (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). I chose critical discourse analysis methodology to explore what discourses are at work in the policies of the Peel District School Board and how these policies understand and respond to the experiences of Black male students.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis is the study of how discourses of power and dominance are reproduced in society and inversely, how these discourses are challenged and resisted (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Wodak and Meyer (2015) distinguish critical discourse studies from other forms of discourse studies due to the former's focus on making power relations explicit in discourses, recognizing discourses as historical and contextual, and using research as a tool for social justice work. A critical discourse analysis also aims to understand how discourses construct reality in ways that produce and reinforce unequal power relations, and how these discourses become institutionalized (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In addition, a critical discourse analysis seeks to understand how certain knowledges and discourses become privileged and viewed as truth, whereas other discourses become marginalized and subjugated (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). A critical discourse analysis also seeks to understand how discourses construct subject positions and institutions and how actors can influence and resist discourses (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Critical discourse analysts take clear socio-political stances to analyze texts with the aim of uncovering the discourses that affect oppressed people (van Dijk, 1993). Fairclough (2003) further identifies the two ways this term is used. "Discourse" he writes, "is used abstractly (as an abstract noun) for the 'domain of statements' and concretely as a noun ('a discourse', 'several discourses') for groups of statements or for the 'regulated practice' (the rules) which govern such a group of statements" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). Discourses are constructed by the world but also construct the world (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). I will be drawing on Poole (2007) who builds on Wodak and Meyer's (2009) analysis of Fairclough's critical discourse methodology. Critical discourse analysts "identify the resistance against the colonization processes executed by the dominant styles, genres and discourses" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 28).

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**Data Collection**

To conduct a critical discourse analysis as outlined by Poole (2007), I chose to look at data from four documents published by the Peel District School Board: *Safe Schools Policy, Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, We Rise Together* report, which spoke to the experience of Black male students within the Peel Region, and *Fighting an Uphill Battle: Report on the Consultations into the Well-Being of Black Youth in Peel Region.* I analyzed these policies to deconstruct the underlying discourses embedded within them.

**Data Analysis**

I chose to analyze the above noted policies and documents of the Peel District School Board because I wanted to uncover how these policies inform practices that take place within the schools, and particularly, the impact this has on Black male students. I highlighted the texts and took notes in the margins as I read the policies. Throughout, I constantly brought my awareness back to my reactions, and made several voice notes on my cellphone, to revisit them later. I was aware that I had a set of counter-discourses about school board policies and how this informed my theoretical framework pertaining to anti-Black racism. I constantly reminded myself to stay mindful, open, and welcoming to refutations and surprises of the data (Poole, 2007).

I had several ethical considerations when conceptualizing this research. I was concerned about potential risks for myself and others. Reading policies about equity and human rights can be problematic in many ways and could bring up issues for me as Black woman who is mothering a Black son. It has been difficult for me to read the policies at times, because I am a part of the Black community and I had to read, reflect and sit with the impact the discourses have on not just me and my children but around Blackness/ Black students within the Peel/public school system. However, I have chosen to use those moments of discomfort as learning

opportunities as I critically reflected on why I was feeling uncomfortable, what was causing my reaction and why it was important for my research. I am aware that these reactions guided my analysis. I also considered the risks to potential future readers of my paper. It might be difficult for Black mothers to read this paper and be faced with the reality about the colonial and racist treatment of Black male students. I hope that the readers who do seek out my MRP understand the potential discomfort they may experience, and despite the potential difficulty, they might find value in my research paper.

**Limitations**

My research design had some limitations. The main limitation is that my data consisted only of policies from the Peel District School Board such as; the *Safe Schools Policy,* the *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy,* as well as the report *We Rise Together* and *Fighting an Uphill Battle: Report on the Consultations into the Well-Being of Black Youth in Peel Region.* This narrow focus means that I cannot draw conclusions about how anti-Black racism discourses are operating in the broader society. I can draw conclusions about how the Peel District School Board policies are presenting and upholding these discourses, but my findings are limited to the policies I analyzed. Another limitation was that I did not look at a larger number of policies in other school boards such as the Toronto District School Board and make comparisons to those of Peel.

This research is a small snapshot of a much larger picture. However, given the time constraints, and expectations of this MRP, I felt I could not reasonably analyze more data within the timeframe, and page limitations of the MRP. I also feel that a limitation of this MRP was my own inexperience as a researcher. I felt uncomfortable with having the research be so completely guided by my own interpretations and impressions, because I felt a lot of uncertainty throughout

the process. There were also the occasional moments throughout writing this MRP where I had regrets around choosing critical discourse analysis as my methodology and I considered changing it multiple times, but it was not possible given time/life constraints. I believe it would have been less of a challenge to select a methodology where the steps to conducting research were much more clearly laid out i.e. my first choice of phenomenology.

**Chapter 5: Findings/Discussion**

In this section, I will examine the findings that emerged through my analysis of the *Safe Schools Policy,* and the *Equity and Inclusive Education policy,* as well as the report *We Rise Together*, and *Fighting an Uphill Battle: Report on the Consultations into the Well-Being of Black Youth in Peel Region*. My discourse analysis of these Peel District School Board documents yielded some discourses that support anti-Black racism whether intentionally or unintentionally, and these discourses have an impact on the experiences of those bodies marked as Black and male. I highlight and speak to three main discourses evident from the policy documents, which are the following: 1) institutional/systemic racism, and 2) discourse of fairness, objectivity, and neutrality, and 3) Whiteness.

**Institutional/Systemic Racism**

Upon reviewing the policy documents, one of the reoccurring themes I was able to identify was the discourse of institutional/systemic racism. According to Henry and Tator (2010), institutional/systemic racism is a form of racism that consists of ideologies, cultural values and norms, policies and practices entrenched in established institutions and systems/structures that result in the exclusion or advancement of specific groups of people. The language used throughout the *Safe Schools Policy* at face value appeared to be inclusive, however, upon closer examination it revealed the pervasiveness of institutional/systemic racism. Whether or not this was intentional or unintentional, the negative impact on Black male students is prevalent. For example, the beginning of the *Safe Schools Policy* states:

> The Peel District School Board is committed to providing and maintaining safe and
> healthy environments conducive to learning and working for all. The Board recognizes
> that encouraging and respectful environments help students to achieve to the best of their

ability. To improve student success and achievement, we must ensure that students continue to feel safe, nurtured, welcomed, respected and included. (Peel Safe School Policy, p. 1)

The *Safe Schools Policy* continues to state the following:

The Peel District School Board's commitment to providing a supportive and safe environment must be one that changes to meet the needs of students, respects differences, and provides opportunities for all students to succeed. Learning and working environments must be free of negative factors such as abuse, bullying, harassment, discrimination, intimidation, hateful words and actions, and physical violence in any form. They must also be sensitive to the diversity, cultural and special needs of individual students. They must clearly demonstrate respect for social justice and human rights, and promote the values needed to develop responsible members of a democratic society.

The policy further states:

This shall be achieved by establishing and maintaining high expectations for behaviour, while offering a program that emphasizes early, ongoing and proactive positive and restorative practices, including promoting healthy relationships, mentorship programs, student leadership, direct skill development, early and ongoing intervention, bullying prevention and intervention, conflict prevention and intervention, character development and education, counseling and the inclusion of social skills in the curriculum. The Peel District School Board also supports the use of a continuum of developmentally appropriate progressive discipline strategies, including suspension and expulsion where necessary, as corrective, supportive consequences for inappropriate behaviour. (Safe Schools Policy, p. 2)

Despite the above statements by the Peel District School Board, the *We Rise Together* report highlighted students who share that some teachers are disrespectful and display negative attitudes toward Black students (e.g., use sarcasm, will not listen, provide negative responses on assignments or tests, do not choose Black students when a question is asked in class). Students also noted that some teachers "expect Black students to mess up" (Gray, Bailey, Brady, & Tecle, 2016). Consequently, Black students feel that they must prove they are good kids before teachers give them a chance. Other individuals reported that some teachers choose to ignore Black students or are scared to confront them. For example, these teachers do not approach Black students who are using their phones during class time, acting up in class or are loud in the hallway.

The discourse of systemic racism that is operating in the above situation highlights a disconnect between the school board's stated commitments to inclusion and the disrespectful attitudes of some teachers towards Black students. As such the Peel *Safe Schools Policy* provides an aegis for some teachers to treat Black students disrespectfully, use sarcasm, and to have generally low expectations of these students. As noted above, the fear that some teachers feel towards Black students reproduces this dynamic of low expectations. In this manner, a systemic marginalization of Black students is maintained and reproduced in the day-to-day practices of schooling in the Peel District School Board.

The discrepancy between the inclusive discourse espoused by the Peel *Safe Schools Policy* and how schooling in Peel is experienced by Black students is articulated by the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report.  A key informant from the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report explains:

Black youth develop coping mechanisms that people perceive as behavioural problems. They can't say what they feel sometimes. They are often mislabelled as criminals and

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thugs. This affects their sense of self, confidence, educational performance. (Fighting an

Uphill Battle, p. 22)

*The Fighting an Uphill Battle* report found that Black students struggle to "fit in" at

school and, at times, feel ostracized by their peers. Many non-Black students will not speak to

Black students. Students, teachers, and the police are quick to judge Black students based on

their appearance (i.e., clothing), race, and behavior. They think all Black people are from rough

neighbourhoods and are quick to conclude that Black people are "gangsters" or "drug dealers."

When Black students talk about their interests, pathways, or careers, other non-Black students

joke about their choices, criticize them, or act surprised if the choices are not within the "Black

stereotype" (i.e., if they [Black students] indicate that they would like to be a filmmaker or a

pianist). Black students shared that teachers frequently stop Black students in hallways and ask if

they should be in class at that time. Teachers will also approach Black students first if something

(negative) happens at school. In school, police blame school incidences (e.g., graffiti, vandalism)

on Black students without asking questions first.

These findings of the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report bring into sharp relief the

discrepancy between the inclusivity expressed in the Peel *Safe Schools Policy*. While the

language of the *Safe Schools Policy* champions a discrimination free environment, it is clear that

Black students do not experience their schools as equitable or inclusive. Rather, anti-Blackness

characterizes how many Black students experience their education. Moreover, the widespread

nature of this anti-Blackness recalls Henry and Tator's (2010) definition of systemic or

institutional racism.

The *We Rise Report* also found that in the community, Black students are stopped or

randomly pulled over by police more frequently than non-Black students (e.g., for walking with

headphones on, driving their parent's luxury car). Some teachers do not understand or choose to ignore the various challenges students face in their personal lives and at home. These challenges may impact punctuality, attendance, and/or achievement at school, but teachers continue to reprimand students without considering the reasons for their behavior. Students noted that guidance counsellors are quick to recommend that Black students enroll in college level courses, when some of these students would do fine in academic courses and in university.

These findings about the discrimination and oppression experienced by Black students points to systemic and institutional anti-Black racism. While the Peel *Safe Schools Policy* purports to champion an inclusive and discrimination-free environment, the reality as experienced by Black students is characterized by systemic racism. This dynamic reveals a prevailing tension between competing discourses of equity and experiences of anti-Black racism within the school board. This tension is characterized by an overdetermination of anti-Blackness that finds the institution of policing Black lives interlocking with anti-Black racism in education. This overdetermination of anti-Blackness renders the school unsafe, despite the *Safe Schools Policy*. This finding of systemic racism dovetails with the second discourse I identified, which is a discourse of fairness, objectivity, and neutrality.

**Discourse of Fairness, Objectivity, and Neutrality**

The Peel *Safe Schools Policy* states that,

> A positive school climate is free from violence, harassment, verbal, physical or sexual abuse, bullying, threatening, unethical use of technology, hate-related behaviour and language, gang-related activities, vandalism, intimidation, extortion, harassment and discrimination on the basis of race, place of origin, ethnicity, language, ancestry, colour, faith, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, size,

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strength, age, peer group power, socioeconomic status, family circumstances, ability,

intelligence, receipt of special education or any other similar factor. (p. 4).

The policy also explains the following:

To meet the goal of creating a safe, nurturing, and accepting school environment, the Peel

District School Board supports the use of early, ongoing and proactive positive and

restorative practices, as well as consequences for inappropriate behavior, including

progressive discipline, which includes suspension and expulsion, where necessary. The

Board considers bullying, sexual assault, incidents based on homophobia, transphobia,

biphobia, gender-based violence, and harassment on the basis of race, place of origin,

ethnicity, language, ancestry, colour, faith, religion, gender, gender identity, gender

expression, sexual orientation, size, strength, age, peer group power, socioeconomic

status, family circumstances, ability, intelligence, receipt of special education or any

other similar factor and/or any other immutable characteristic or ground protected by the

Human Rights Code, as well as inappropriate sexual behavior, unacceptable.

The Board supports the use of positive practices to prevent such behavior and authorizes

principals, or their delegates, to impose consequences in appropriate circumstances, up to

and including a referral to the Discipline Committee of the Board for expulsion from all

schools. This policy authorizes the use of progressive discipline practices. (p. 16)

In the *We Rise Together* report, Black students shared that while at school, they feel they

are under surveillance. Some students feel like they are being followed by school staff, or that

staff are constantly checking on them. For many students, school offers a safe and comfortable

environment. However, other students feel uneasy. Although police presence in school is

supposed to make students feel safe, for some Black students, the presence of police has the opposite effect due to the racial profiling they have experienced.

The *We Rise Together* report also found that some Black students feel that teachers favour non-Black students. Some teachers overlook Black students when they request help, and/or spend more time helping non-Black students with schoolwork. Teachers also tend to dictate where Black students sit in the classroom (at the front of the class or away from others), and/or assign harsher consequences to Black students for behaviours displayed by other non-Black students as well (e.g., arriving late to class, swearing). South Asian students are viewed by teachers as "model" students. Teachers tend to "play favorites" towards these students, show these students more respect, compliment their work more frequently, and are more patient with them, when compared to Black students.

Thus, while the policy purports to support an inclusive and bias free space, the experiences of Black students show that this is far from their reality. Rather, the school board policy assumes that the application of discipline strategies is applied with objectivity, neutrality, and fairness. However, the experiences of Black students reveal that they are surveilled, disciplined, and punished in unfair ways and that this unfairness is understandable as anti-Black racism. In this way, the school board policies that are informed with implicit assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and fairness belies the realities of Black students. These discourses that elide the operations of anti-Black racism in the school board flows into the third discourse I uncovered, which is whiteness.

**Whiteness**

The third discourse that was revealed in my analysis was Whiteness, more specifically the central role of Whiteness as ideology, discourse, and social practice in a democratic

racialized society. As noted by Ellsworth (1997), Whiteness functions as a racial signifier in the preservation of systems of domination and as a vehicle to reinforce structural inequality. Whiteness is examined as a process that is "a constantly shifting location upon complex maps of social, economic and political power" (Ellsworth, 1997). It is important to emphasize that in speaking of Whiteness, the focus is not on individuals. Rather Whiteness refers to what Ellsworth (1997) calls an invisible social process by which power and privilege is exercised in a society that is deeply divided along colour lines and aspects of social differences.

The discourse of Whiteness was discovered in my analysis to operate, very much like the aforementioned systemic racism, alongside the contradictory discourses of the school board's commitment to safety and inclusivity. The Peel District School Board's *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy* states that:

> School Climate and the Prevention of Discrimination and Harassment: Every person within the school community is entitled to anti-oppressive, safe, respectful and positive school climates for learning and working, free from all forms of bullying, discrimination harassment and hate. A safe, inclusive and accepting school climate is essential for student achievement and well-being. The school climate must welcome all stakeholders and encourage the active participation of students, families, and staff in ensuring that the principles of the Code, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy are applied in our schools, in addition to the guiding principles Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act. The Board is committed to the intentional creation of learning and working climates that values and accepts all students, staff, and families, inclusive of their intersecting race and ethnicity; gender; gender identity; place of origin; citizenship; religion; creed; cultural and linguistic background; social and

economic status; sexual orientation; age; ability/disability; and any other immutable

characteristics.

Despite the discourse of inclusion that is expressed in the above quotation, the *Fighting*

*an Uphill Battle* report noted experiences of exclusion experienced by Black students. For

example, a youth participant cited in the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report explains:

I think we have to fight an uphill battle in almost everything we do, especially school.

I've had teachers tell me straight up that they don't believe my group of people could do

certain things.  (Fighting an Uphill Battle, p. 31)

Another youth participant from the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report explains:

I feel so out of place, everybody looks down on us. There is a bad connotation to being

Black and being stereotyped often.  (Fighting an Uphill Battle, p. 20)

Another youth participant explains:

I feel angry and want to be away from it all. I don't want to interact with the world when I

see this. I feel my ethnicity holds me back from travelling and being something positive

in the world. Other races are told that Black people are evil. It makes me feel like a

failure. I know not all White people are racist. Some say they aren't because they have

Black friends....I have trust issues and feel people look at me like a peasant or charity

case. (Fighting an Uphill Battle, p. 20)

The Peel *Equity and Inclusive Schools Policy* purports to support an inclusive and bias-

free space. However, based on the findings in the *We Rise Together* report, and firsthand

experiences highlighted by Black youth from the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report, there is a

counternarrative in operation. The Black youth noted in these two aforementioned reports clearly

point out that they feel excluded, othered, and misjudged. Discourse is not just a symptom of the

problem of racism (van Dijk, 1988), but rather it reinforces and reproduces the racialized beliefs and actions of the dominant culture. Institutions such as education, policing, criminal justice, human services, media, and the state, have policies that speak to universalism, equal opportunity, and tolerance which becomes the language and conceptual framework through which inferiorization and exclusion are defined and defended (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2010). As such, the Peel *Safe Schools Policy* maintains and upholds Whiteness and is anti-Black. Moreover, the policy does not explicitly speak to the history of colonization, and the impacts of enslavement of Black people. Without this criticality and the historical contextualization of colonialism and slavery, the policy fails to articulate the root causes of oppressions such as anti-Black racism. As such, the policy maintains and reproduces Whiteness.

## Chapter 6: Implications and Conclusion

**Implications:**

This MRP sought to answer the following questions: How are policies of the Peel District School Board understanding and addressing the experiences of Black male students? What are the discourses evident in the policies and publications of the Peel District School Board? A review of the literature revealed six themes: First is that institutional racism plays a role; there is a discourse around Black boys being constructed as "students at risk"; low expectations from teachers; and the construction of Black masculinity perceived as 'aggressive' and 'violent' to justify the use of harsh disciplinary actions by teachers/principals. The second theme was Whiteness. Whiteness can be defined as a complex social process that perpetuates and maintains the domination of the majority groups' way of life (Yee, 2005). The third theme was streaming of Black boys. The streamlining of Black boys into lower academic streams as well as into behavioural classes is a prevalent issue.

The fourth theme was racism in the processes of disciplining Black male students. Racialized students are also more likely to be disciplined at school than White students (Ruck & Wortley, 2002). The literature highlighted the fact that Black masculinity is constructed as 'aggressive', 'violent', and thus in need of regulation. The fifth theme that emerged in the literature pertained to racism as evidenced in educational attainment and occupational attainment. Education is often deemed as a pathway to success in our society, yet many racialized people are not mobilizing upwards regardless of how much education they have attained. Smith and Lalonde (2003) explain that educational and occupational inequity has conspired to limit the upward mobility of generations of African Canadians. The final theme that stood out in my review of the literature is the racialization of poverty. The racialization of

poverty is a process by which poverty becomes more concentrated and reproduced among racialized group members and in some cases, intergenerationally (Galabuzi, 2005).

The findings of my discourse analyses of Peel District School Board policies and documents reveal three main discourses which are the following: 1) Institutional/Systemic racism, 2) Discourse of fairness, objectivity, neutrality, and 3) Whiteness. All of the above speaks to how anti-Black racism is reproduced and perpetuated within the public-school system, and in particular, the Peel District School Board policy documents, and the deleterious impact that this has on the lives of Black students.

I believe this topic is important and will contribute to transformative anti-oppressive practice. Anti-oppressive theorists emphasize that various forms of oppression interact with each other (Healy, 2005). The intersection of race and gender for Black male students, compounds the impact of their experiences within the Peel district school board. As one student articulated: "I feel that Black males have always experienced challenges more than Black females. Black males are targeted more and are more vulnerable. They experience more racism and discrimination. I feel that Black male youth face much more negative issues when it comes to accessing employment, and belonging to groups" (Fighting an Uphill Battle, p. 22). According to Healy (2005), "Anti-oppressive theorists identify specific kinds of oppression, such as ageism and sexism, while also recognizing that, in practice, different forms of oppression occur simultaneously and affect people in combination" (p.180).

Black students offered valuable recommendations for change which were noted in the *We Rise Together* report. For example, Black students desired changes to occur within their classrooms and their schools. Specifically, students suggested implementing culturally responsive and relevant curriculum, respectful and supportive school staff who hold higher

expectations of them, programs that support academic and social success, and equal opportunities to participate in activities that align with their interests.

School social workers should aim to understand the experiences of Black male students in order to provide meaningful support/services. Original conceptualizations of social work saw the profession as committed to the regulation of poor people, who were seen to be the "dangerous classes". These classes needed to be reformed to reduce deviance, disease, chaos, and to advance civilization (Mullaly, 2002). This echoes the influence of the themes outlined in the findings in my MRP regarding the experience of anti-Black racism faced by Black male students within the Peel District School Board. Black, male students are not named in the policy, yet they are the ones being impacted based on research evidence presented in the *We Rise Together* report and the *Fighting an Uphill Battle* report. Social workers need to be careful about reproducing these oppressive practices that underpin the history of our profession (Mullaly, 2002).

Therefore, it is important for school social work practitioners to engage in deepening their understanding/knowledge of anti-Black racism, and ensure they treat Black students as individuals, and not a monolithic group. This is echoed in the following statement: "Black youth in Peel felt that stereotypes reinforce anti-Black racism, which has consequences for them. They expressed frustration that all Black youth get painted with the same brush and are mistreated based on these stereotypes" (Fighting an Uphill Battle, p. 21). It is important for social work practitioners to understand that the use of dominant discourses upholds whiteness which can be utilized as an act of violence. As social workers it is important to recognize that dominant discourses are a way to control, regulate, and intentionally/unintentionally disenfranchise Black male students. Social work practitioners are socialized into the dominant culture just like

everyone else (Mullaly, 2002). As such, social work practitioners should attempt to challenge these perspectives, disrupt, and resist dominant, anti-Black discourses.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my discourse analysis reveals that while the Peel District School Board has published documents that champion discourses of inclusion, fairness, and anti-bias, the reality for Black students is one marked by anti-Black racism. It is important that the Peel District School Board adopt as its entry point for policy formation an anti-Black racism lens or framework. This anti-Black racism framework would better name the institutionalized anti-Black racism that is embedded in the school system and challenge the misleading discourses of objectivity and neutrality that characterizes the policies reviewed in this study. An anti-Black racism framework would better validate the experiences of Black students, particularly male ones. An anti-Black racism framework would also promise to better honour, highlight and validate the tremendous resiliency and accomplishments of Black students and Black families.

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