

# **Exploring the Challenges of Conducting Respectful Research: Seen and Unforeseen Factors Within Urban School Research**

Julia Samaroo  
*York University*

Negin Dahya  
*York University*

Shahnaaz Alidina  
*York University*

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the significance of conducting respectful research within urban schools, using the example of one large-scale university–school board partnership in northwestern Toronto. The authors, three research assistants on the project, use their experiences within three of the participating schools to interrogate the research approach and methods involved and highlight the challenges of conducting respectful research. The paper outlines how aspects of respectful research were both included and overlooked

within the research project. The authors' critical reflection builds on the existing conception of respectful research with the added inclusion of accountability as a primary focus, derived from existing work in decolonizing research methodologies.

*Keywords:* accountability, deficit discourse, researcher positionality, respectful research, school–community relationships, urban schools.

## **Précis**

À l'aide de l'exemple d'un partenariat entre une université de grande envergure et un conseil scolaire du nord-ouest de Toronto, le présent document traite de l'importance de mener des recherches respectueuses dans les écoles urbaines. Les auteurs, trois assistants de recherche travaillant sur le projet, font appel à leurs expériences vécues dans trois des écoles participant au projet pour vérifier la démarche et les méthodes de la recherche et souligner les défis liés à la gestion d'une recherche respectueuse. La réflexion critique dans laquelle les auteurs s'engagent se construit sur la conception actuelle de la recherche respectueuse en ajoutant, de surcroît, la « responsabilisation » comme priorité dérivée du travail existant de la décolonisation des méthodologies de recherche. Le document décrit comment certains aspects de la recherche respectueuse sont à la fois inclus et négligés au sein de ce projet de recherche.

While widespread achievement gaps and high dropout rates among racialized groups of students are at the forefront of educational concerns in Ontario's urban schools (School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008; Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2010; Yau & O'Reilly, 2007), the underlying societal inequities reproduced within urban school settings need to be brought to the forefront as well. The term *racialized* is used by the TDSB (2010) to describe groups of people for whom "perceived common racial background, colour and/or ethnicity" (p. 3) within society results in their differential treatment. Racialization is an important term to discuss because it encompasses conducting respectful research among already racialized groups. The notion of research with racialized students and communities implies assumed shared experiences of oppression and imposes in itself a kind of deficit discourse on those very people who embody the definition; yet, without such a term, it is difficult to begin the discussion. It is also important to note that while the TDSB collects demographic data (e.g., race, ethnicity, income level) from parents and the census profiles, it is unknown whether the people who represent these "racialized groups" would describe themselves as racialized. As such, we recognize the difficulties in addressing contentious topics such as racialization in a way that adequately responds to the problem without also perpetuating negative assumptions about the communities we and this project have aimed to serve.

Despite an abundance of initiatives and programs operating within urban schools to support students of Aboriginal, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Portuguese backgrounds, who are heavily represented in the lowest academic achievement bracket across the TDSB, schools continue to face serious challenges in meeting the needs of these particular students. In Toronto, the schools with the lowest achievement rates are in low-income neighbourhoods with high immigrant and minority-group communities. Warren (2005) indicates that "the fates of schools and communities are linked" (p. 133), and educational reform at any level needs to be informed by school–community relationships. Accordingly, research conducted within these urban school settings requires researchers to understand the realities of students and educators, to question systemic and individually instigated inequities, and to collaborate with schools, parents, and their communities toward greater understanding of locally contextualized problems.

In this paper, we offer self-reflective criticism from the standpoint of three doctoral candidates, following our experience on a large-scale urban research project during 2008–2011. In addition, through this work we came to understand the ways in which our

own language and theoretical framing impacted not only the work that was done but also how we as researchers in a larger project were able to understand the people and communities whom we aimed to serve.

Using the context of our experiences within this project, we interrogate the research methodologies involved and approach the work through the lens of Susan Tilley's (1998) notion of "respectful research." *Respectful research* refers to the collaborative and emergent nature of research whereby participants' voices are considered expert and the engagement between researchers and participants is understood to be transformative for both parties within their shared cultural contexts (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Tilley, 1998). As three of the primary data collectors throughout this 3-year study, we questioned how we influenced the behaviour and discourse of the students, teachers, administrators, parents, guardians, and community members who were involved in this study. Accordingly, within this paper, we examine the research practices we used in the project, explore the possibility of integrating aspects of respectful research to the project, and consider the implications for urban school research as a whole. With the intent of building on Tilley's (1998) framework, we propose that the concept of accountability, adopted from a "(de)colonizing"<sup>1</sup> approach (see Wilson, 2008), complements and strengthens the possibility for respectful research. Our theoretical framework in this paper, then, applies respectful and decolonizing research methodologies in discussion of our work *post hoc* to generate richer conversations about the way critical and reflexive practice could strengthen urban school research. As three middle-class women of colour conducting research in a community with which we have no concrete ties, we interrogate the methodologies of the research project using the following questions: Has our presence as researchers within this project further marginalized<sup>2</sup> (Nygreen, 2006) the very students, parents, and community members we are working to engage in inclusive educational practices? And has the project systematically (and unintentionally) overlooked opportunities to conduct more respectful research?

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1 The use of parentheses in the term *(de)colonizing* represents the inseparable reality of colonial influences with efforts to move past colonial ideologies and practices, especially apparent within institutions such as the public school system.

2 To be *marginalized* is here defined as being pushed to the periphery or being made insignificant. Students who are marginalized hold marginal or limited significance, importance, or power and live in a state of oppression. Systemic discrimination in the form of racism, linguistic imperialism, and cultural and economic barriers are but a few of the obstacles for students and parents living in low-income urban communities.

This paper focuses on our work in three of the five schools that participated in the project: Cedarbrook Middle School, Creekwood Middle School, and Springdale Public School.<sup>3</sup> First, we outline our conceptualization of respectful research and the rationale for its use within the context of urban schools. Next, the presence of aspects of respectful research is discussed in terms of accountability within the project. Finally, we examine various challenges to the possibility of conducting respectful research and the implications for urban school research through the following intersecting themes: deficit discourse, school–community relationships, researcher positionality, and marginalization of students, parents, and community members. Being a reflective paper, what follows is a broad thematic analysis of the research process to share with colleagues conducting similar research, outlining both the successes and limitations of the work we have done. The paper explores selected themes (i.e., common experiences, actions, expressed opinions and beliefs) that emerged from the data (e.g., classroom observations, event observations, interview and focus group transcripts) of the three schools through the lens of respectful research. It is our intention that this paper serve as a prompt to generate and continue discussion about how to conduct respectful research with and for marginalized communities, thereby helping improve our own research practices, and those of others.

### **The Context: A Large-Scale Urban School Research Project**

In response to the high dropout rates of certain racialized groups of students (TDSB, 2010), a lack of student engagement in school (Dippo & James, 2011; Zyngier, 2008), as well as a significant disconnect between how schools and members of local communities understand and interact with each other (Dippo & James, 2011; Warren, 2005; Wells, 2010), five schools in northwestern Toronto, Ontario, were selected to participate in a university–school board partnership. The project aimed to strengthen the inclusive practices at the participating schools, and to indirectly enhance student engagement and academic achievement, by urging educators and administrators to take into account the backgrounds of their students and the communities they come from (i.e., through curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, and parent and community engagement).

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3 Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper for school names.

Over the course of a multifaceted, three-year (2008–2011) term, the project focused on five specific areas: parent engagement, community engagement, staff development, mentorship and achievement counselling, and knowledge mobilization. Together, these five factors represented a model for an inclusive approach to schooling through the development and implementation of inclusive curricula, on-site research in schools, and a series of professional development opportunities for teachers and community members. The project was designed to determine student, parent, community, and teacher needs within each school “from the ground up.” The project team was organized into three committees: advisory, program, and research. Each participating school was assigned one facilitator (seconded teacher to Faculty of Education at the university) and one research assistant (graduate student) who interacted with the students, teachers, parents, and community members on-site at the schools. These pairs entered each school without a predetermined research agenda in order to first build a relationship with and ascertain the needs of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members.

It is not within the scope of this paper to delineate the findings of the project (see Barkoui, Barrett, Samaroo, Dahya, Alidina, & James, 2013). Rather, we reflect on our experiences within the project and recognize, through the data, an opportunity to contribute to the dialogue about respectful research and decolonizing methodologies in urban school research.

### **Looking Through a New Lens: A Framework for Respectful Research**

In the paper “Conducting Respectful Research: A Critique of Practice,” Susan Tilley (1998) described respectful research as “research sensitive to individual participants and research contexts, with both researcher and participants benefitting—research that included but pushed beyond concerns for ethical behaviour by the researcher” (p. 317). We use our experiences within the project as an impetus to expand the notion of respectful research to include the concept of accountability. Use of the term *accountability* has been informed by our reading of (de)colonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). In the Canadian context, (de)colonizing approaches are primarily associated with Aboriginal cultures but are also applied to studies of racialized groups (Dei, 1995;

Nygreen, 2006). Approximately 70–90% of the students in the three schools were immigrants or children of immigrant parents with backgrounds ranging from South and South-east Asian to European, African, South and Central American, and Caribbean (TDSB, 2010). Theoretical frameworks that focus on the issue of (de)colonization complement respectful research because they have emerged from a history of attempts to eradicate Aboriginal cultural—centuries of oppression of Aboriginal people, resulting in epistemological standpoints that disrupt rather than perpetuate normative, hegemonic categories (Bhattacharya, 2009). Ignoring the ongoing effects of colonialism embedded in Canadian culture and society can result in a continued imperialist interpretation of contemporary research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) suggests,

Research “through imperial eyes” describes an approach, which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (p. 56)

Smith conveyed how a particular worldview can also frame research, clouding the researcher’s lens from alternative ways of knowing and thinking. The effects of colonialism, which have devastated Aboriginal communities across Canada, have also resulted in the creation of structures and social frameworks that leave minority groups on the fringe of society as “Other” to the dominant European norm (Faries, 2009). The adoption of a research framework that incorporates aspects of Aboriginal methodologies and approaches may better ensure that minority communities and the political issues that frame their schooling experiences actually inform the research being done about them. The adoption of accountability into the existing model of respectful research (Tilley, 1998) then offers opportunities for the inclusion of alternative perspectives and the valuing of different ways of knowing and learning.

Accountability involves the concepts of relational accountability and sustainability. *Relational accountability* includes responsibility and relationality and is defined by Wilson (2008) as a methodology “based in a community context (be relational) and demonstrate[ing] respect, reciprocity and responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action)” (p. 99). Accordingly, accountability requires the inclusion of the voices, histories, cultures, and needs of the research participants. *Sustainability* refers to a project’s ongoing contributions to and impact on participating communities. The principal

investigators on this project indirectly addressed relational accountability for improving school–community relationships by suggesting the following:

The key to developing an inclusive and community-engaged approach to curriculum and pedagogy lies in establishing relationships of reciprocity and mutuality between schools and communities . . . [to] enable new, creative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, which would, in turn, engage students and contribute to their academic achievement. (Dippo & James, 2011, p. 117)

Reflecting upon and thematically analyzing our experiences through the lens of respectful research exposes locations of possibility and tension within the project. We propose that the concept of accountability (relational accountability and sustainability) incorporates important epistemological connections that are formative to urban school research. Some of these connections include promoting cultural sensitivity within schools (Tillman, 2002), ensuring relevance of curriculum to participants' lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and viewing parents and community members as partners in the educational process (Epstein, 1995; Warren, 2005), while problematizing issues of power imbalance and inequity and emphasizing the value of relationality that is essential to building collaborative relationships.

### **Presence of Accountability: Methodological Factors**

Several aspects of this project adhered to principles of respectful research. First, from the outset, the project was developed based on the needs of each school, as determined by the teachers, administration, and community members. This grassroots approach to urban school research attempts to treat the pertinent stakeholders as experts in their own contexts. Second, as previously mentioned, the principal investigators of the project recognized the essential role of mutually beneficial relationships between the schools and wider communities. Third, in order to focus on building relationships, the project team shifted the research interests during the first year of the project. Initially, our research was guided by the question “How do we develop an inclusive curriculum in collaboration with teachers, parents, students, and community members?” The research focus shifted

during year one to “How do we develop a collaborative relationship between teachers, administrators, and researchers that allows for the development of an inclusive curriculum within schools?” The focus on building relationships rather than creating an “end product” (i.e., an inclusive curriculum) reflects the significance of relational accountability and strengthening the sustainability of programs by people who will continue to work in the schools beyond the duration of the project. Thus, on the ground level (i.e., in the school and community) the first year of the project was spent developing and nurturing relationships with teachers, administrators, parents, and community members at each school. Similarly, the project team modified the initial research design to be five case studies rather than one case study of inclusive curriculum implemented at five schools.

A respectful approach to research was also evident through the intentions of the project. For instance, the intention to share data (e.g., from interviews and focus groups) with teachers and have them review from their voices was an attempt to ensure their opinions were represented accurately.

Another example was the proposal of the Springdale team to collaborate with community leaders in an effort to strengthen parent engagement at the school. During year two, parents were surveyed regarding the cultural and religious institutions that they attended. Based on their responses, community leaders from those institutions were invited to the school to share their knowledge of the community and build partnerships between the community and school. This initiative was intended to have a sustainable impact on Springdale and the larger community as the cultural and religious institutions have a vested interest in the community and would be there beyond the scope of the project. Despite these instances where respectful research methods were present, there were also instances where it was absent.

### **Absence of “Respectful” Approaches and Methods: A Lack of Accountability**

The project was not designed to explicitly employ “respectful research” methods, and we recognize several emergent themes that were associated with a lack of accountability. The discussion of the absence of accountability is organized into four themes: deficit discourse, school–community relationships, researcher positionality, and marginalization of students, parents, and the community.

## **Deficit Discourse: Blaming the Victim Rather Than the System**

Discourse is more than speech or writing; it is “a collection of statements and ideas that produce networks of meanings . . . [which] alerts us to what language does and to how it produces and situates individuals” (Yon, 2000, pp. 3–4). Discourse “provides a language for talking about—i.e., a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic” (Hall, 1992, p. 201) and thus can be both enabling and constraining in the way subjects are constructed. The deficit model can be conceptualized as a “blaming of the victim,” which attributes school failure to internal deficits within the student or his/her family (Valencia, 1997). Discourse on urban schools may also promote deficit-based thinking about students, parents, and communities as they are negatively portrayed in the media (see Richardson, 2008).

In the case of this project, the discursive binary of “engaged” versus “disengaged” students was present. We did not, as a project team, interrogate the implications of this binary and its role in the way we constructed students. Here, the deficit model was present in labelling students as “disengaged” and such an approach could imply a deficit in the student, deflecting from a deeper examination of deficit(s) in the school system (e.g., school practices, educational policies, etc.). Again, we cannot ignore that the terminology in use by the school board regarding students who are racialized similarly implies a deficiency that may impact how these students also come to perceive themselves (Buniar, 2011). There is a duality here at play, in that we as researchers must identify ways in which to talk about problems that are apparent without reinscribing them. In the case of student disengagement, we argue that instead of drawing attention to the flaws in an education system that fails to engage students and highlighting the system as possessing deficiencies, students are indirectly blamed for not thriving in a system that does not address their needs.

Deficit discourses of the community also exist. Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) discussed deficit theory that is a remnant of colonial and imperial history. Gorski (2008) suggested “deficit theorists draw on stereotypes already well-established in the mainstream psyche . . . in order to pathologize oppressed communities rather than problematizing the perpetrators of their oppressions” (p. 518). While we understand certain terms were adopted for the project in order to meet the standard discursive expectations

of the school board and academic community (i.e., in order to do this work we needed to work with and within the existing literature), we also question the value and impact of the project's continual description of the schools and communities as "marginalized," "low income," "low socioeconomic status (SES)," "minority," "immigrant," "high poverty," etc. The stigma associated with these descriptors constructs communities in both enabling and constraining ways. On one hand, the researchers used these descriptors as a form of explication for the project rationale, constructing a community "in dire need of help," which can also be seen as "in need of fixing." In doing so, the school board might be more compelled to fund and support the project. On the other hand, the descriptors can be understood as a way to describe the context of the community. These descriptors arguably denote the lived experiences of students, parents, and community members. We question whether the community would describe themselves with these words, and if they did, would that too be an adoption of deficit discourse prevalent in mainstream media about the community. Have community members themselves adopted deficit-based language as a way of understanding themselves—a phenomenon Patti Lather (1991) called "false consciousness," wherein oppressed people engage with beliefs that sustain their own oppression? Accordingly, while it may be perceived as necessary and beneficial to frame the impetus and rationale for research within urban schools and communities using the above descriptors, researchers risk perpetuating deficit-based thinking about the students and communities they want to help. While the reality is that whether the descriptors are used or not, the issues will still exist, we contend that the choice of language and the way it is used has lasting effects.

### **The Sustainable Nature of School–Community Relationships**

Efforts to build, strengthen, and repair relationships with and between students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and the project members underpinned the project from year one. For instance, one of the project's initiatives at Creekwood was the development of a parent resource room to address and strengthen parent engagement. The parent resource room was envisioned as a safe and supportive space within the school for parents to have access to information about community services (e.g., health, education, housing, jobs) and to resources (e.g., computers, printers, Internet). The Creekwood team (i.e., teachers, community members, project facilitator, and RA) intended for this room to

build two-way relationships with parents whereby the school played a supportive role to parents rather than just adhering to the “volunteer” type of parent involvement (Epstein, 1995) often enacted in schools. One of the community members on the Creekwood team volunteered to be the parent room coordinator until administrators could secure funding to pay him; funding was obtained months later. At the start of the following year, the space was closed due to lack of funding and to the coordinator leaving the school; it was then reopened a few months later when the school’s community support worker took the lead in running the room. The inconsistent operation of the room greatly deterred steady usage by parents. The financial reality of schools and the commitment or investment by stakeholders to school programs and initiatives can impede the sustainability of these programs. In terms of research, the unknown longevity and continuous impact of the research for, by, and with community members—considering not only whether it is sustainable but also in whose interest it is sustainable—are important considerations that should be addressed in urban school research projects. What happens when the priorities of the schools change and these programs or initiatives become more of a priority to the researchers than to the school? Herein lies one of the complexities of conducting respectful research and taking into consideration the notion of accountability. In our experience, we continued the grassroots approach of the project and allowed the priorities of the school to dictate the initiatives developed in the schools. We are not suggesting there is a formula to adhere to; rather, we implore researchers to take into consideration these tensions as they navigate through urban school research.

In order to bridge the divide between school and community, each project team extended invitations to parents and community members to attend project events (e.g., professional development institutes connecting theory and practice, and discussion-based “Inclusive Learning Communities”). These invitations were sent electronically via email through a project listserv and by word of mouth through parents and/or community representatives at a local community-outreach centre already participating in the project. Although there seemed to be a steady group of participants who regularly attended the project events, it was difficult to elicit more participation from the wider community. The community workers involved with the project agreed that reaching parents could be difficult due, in part, to time and language constraints; they have also deepened our understanding of how parents see and understand schools. In the project’s 2009 Summer Institute, one parent/community worker emphasized the need for parents to have “meaningful

engagement” with the school in such a way that their experiences, education, and skills contribute back to the school and community, such as parents acting as mentors and tutors in after-school programs. This was discussed in contrast to parents attending parent–teacher meetings or student performances that do not involve parents “giving back.” Logistical challenges such as filling out and paying for the required police checks were quickly presented as structural roadblocks to this more meaningful engagement. This reflects how the bureaucratic structure of Western culture in specific institutions (and as a whole) affects parents at the level of the local school community.

Based on our work, we argue that our relational accountability to teachers was strongest as we focused most on those relationships for the majority of the project. Upon reflection, we recognize that our relationships with teachers, as opposed to the parents and community, were the easier ones to cultivate within the structure of the project since we possessed similar levels of education and privilege as they did. With this in mind, we then ask and urge others to consider this question: How can we ensure that our involvement with schools has a positive influence on the entire surrounding community and also a sustainable impact on the school?

### **Researcher Positionality: Outsiders as Insiders?**

The positionality of the RAs in the schools was decidedly one of the “outsider,” as none of us live or have lived in the community, nor are we, nor have we been, active members of the teaching or administrative staff in the schools. We question not only how our position as outsiders was perceived within the school and community, but also how our presence in the school influenced (if at all) the students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members working with us.

Since the premise of the project relied on the inclusion of students’ lived experiences into the school culture, it was necessary to learn about the students’ cultures, ethnicities, spoken languages, religions, and socioeconomic status. By the same token, these aspects of the researchers also needed to be explored to determine their influences on the methodological decisions made by the project team. Tillman (2002) questions “who can research who” and states that while researchers and participants do not need to be of the same cultures or races, researchers must possess at least some “cultural knowledge of [the

participants] . . . to accurately interpret and validate the experiences of [the participants]. . . within the context of the phenomenon under study” (p. 4). Accordingly, while we tried to enhance our cultural knowledge of the students, teachers, and community we worked with, we question whether it was enough to claim that we could interpret and represent their experiences fairly. To the extent we could not, the project then seemed to continue to privilege dominant ways of knowing and learning.

As noted, one aspect of building respectful relationships between researchers and participants requires researchers to situate themselves in the research by being aware of and revealing their positionality. In terms of gender, class, race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, and religion, researchers must consider themselves in relation to the history of colonization in Canada (Faries, 2009) and Toronto, as they are embedded in dominant social and structural norms. Milner (2007) warns researchers to pay “attention to their own and others’ racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world” (p. 388). Researcher positionality in this sense forces researchers to implicate themselves in the research and holds them more accountable for the choices they make in terms of research approaches and methodologies, as these aspects are influenced by cultural systems of knowing and learning.

Furthermore, we question the value of our participant observations (e.g., field notes), taken from positions sitting, in many cases, like a “fly on a wall” rather than as active members of the school or community. In one instance at Cedarbrook, a teacher agreed to have one RA visit her Grade 7 math class. The RA was briefly introduced at the start of class and asked to sit at an empty table near the front of the room. The lesson began, and while the RA did observe the students’ seeming lack of attention and “misbehaviour” throughout the duration of the class, she later considered what student engagement looks like to different teachers (see Barkoui et al., 2013) and realized how she easily could have misread what was happening in the class. She had no point of reference then (nor does she now) for their behaviours, as during the 45-minute math class the teacher and students did not speak with the RA. Following this observation, the teacher chose not to participate in project events or further research. The researcher’s presence, however, unlike a “fly on the wall,” was very much apparent due to her embodiment of space. When she asked the teacher if she could return the following week, she was told it was preferable if she did not. What was gained from this classroom observation? Did the teacher or students feel that they were being assessed by the university, thereby upholding

an image of the university as an elitist “ivory tower”? We here question whether our relationships could have been improved through methods focused on treating research participants more as collaborators than as “subjects.” Wilson (2008) explains that “It’s a matter of forming a relationship that goes beyond the informant–researcher duality to becoming co-learners” (p. 113). The intention of the project was to develop such relationships with the school and community members, but those intended goals were not always achieved in practice. Later attempts by the same RA at Cedarbrook rendered similar results; although other teachers were more welcoming of her repeated presence in the class, none of her classroom observations provided students with an opportunity to work with the researcher. As a result of the superficial interaction with students during those observations, a deeper understanding of student culture was lacking.

### **Marginalization: Students, Parents, and the Community**

Students’ voices in this research project were limited. A lack of student voices undermines the concept of relational accountability, as the stakeholders contributing to the conversations about students do not include the students themselves. Although the project aimed to capture students’ voices through focus groups and interviews regarding their understanding of and perspective on the meaning and factors of engagement, this did not materialize primarily due to difficulties obtaining parent consent for student participation (i.e., consent forms not returned). This hindrance may have been due to our inability to meet with parents to explain the ethical process orally prior to sending consent forms home—forms written in a specific format using ethics terminology. Springdale was the only school that held a focus group with students. The selection of this group was based on those parents who picked up their children from school and who could speak English, eliminating other students who could have been of great significance to this project.

Examining student engagement by working only with adults (teachers, administrators, parents, and community members) subscribes to a functionalist approach (McMahon & Portelli, 2004) that favours the dominant practice of teachers and adults possessing decision-making power rather than sharing power with students. As a result, students get positioned on the margins of their own education. Who decides how to engage students and whether they are engaged or not? Even with the best of intentions and efforts to

speak directly to students, we tend to find ourselves talking *of* students but not *to* students. While we do not disregard the importance of and need for teachers' perspectives on student engagement, we argue that it is only one piece of the puzzle. Furthermore, it is one that is often from an outsider's perspective, as most teachers in the project schools, much like the researchers, are not from the community (Dei & James, 2002; Dippo & James, 2011).

Within the participating schools, parents and community members were also very much on the margins of our work. While Epstein (1995) suggested that best efforts are attained when parents are involved as essential partners and get involved in making decisions, we extend the same consideration toward community members. Parents who participated in focus group discussions throughout the project echoed Epstein's findings.

Relational accountability dictates that research should be of relevance to the community it serves. In an effort to help schools communicate with parents, the project attempted to connect with parents using letters and phone calls. Unfortunately, these methods replicated the schools' failures in connecting with parents by using their same approaches. After analyzing Springdale's parent surveys, the usefulness of translation services was apparent as a couple of parents provided their apartment addresses instead of the addresses of their community centres as requested, suggesting misinterpretation of the survey question. In hindsight, our continued use of one dominant language (English) demonstrated a lack of consideration for linguistic diversity (e.g., Somalian, Hindi, Tamil, Chinese) and, by extension, a lack of consideration for parents and guardians.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

We would like to return to Tilley's (1998) work and the questions she posed about respectful research, asking how researchers can give back to their participants in a way that is respectful of diversity and does not reinscribe structures of power and oppression in individual or systemic ways. We explored this research from our roles as RAs, focusing on how factors such as relational accountability, sustainability, agency, voice, and power permeated the project and denoted the importance of addressing the underlying social and political contexts of the schools and communities. In developing collaborative relationships among educators, schools, parents, communities, and university researchers, this

project illustrates how there can be a disconnect between the positions of collaborators, even though all are striving to attain a common goal. Adopting aspects of a respectful research framework may serve to do the following: challenge existing power structures implicit and explicit within the research project; ensure that the research is grounded and informed by the lived experiences of participants; and enhance accountability, relationality, and reciprocity between and among the researchers and participants. “Without de/colonizing epistemologies and methodologies to understand the world and its people in diverse terms, there remains a risk of erasing or minimizing varied forms of oppression” (Bhattacharya, 2009, p. 1082). As researchers we understand the challenges of this project as stemming from the reality that our position within the university is embedded in a matrix of hierarchy inscribed with colonial measures of how to qualify and quantify “data”—but understanding people’s experiences, in all their complexity, is not so easily measurable.

Although this project at times struggled to meet its own organizational and theoretical goals, the research was completed. The impacts of this and similar large-scale projects, and the learning outcomes that may be achieved for the researchers and participants, are difficult to measure. Social and community issues such as poverty and marginalization, school structures and pedagogies related to student engagement and inclusive education, and the roles of all the people involved in these efforts are wide in scope and difficult to capture from either an “insider” or “outsider” position. The outcomes of work in this area may be equally amorphous. A “messy” project is not necessarily one without positive outcome, though it may be only during the project evaluation stage, and for years later, that we understand that impact. We support the goals of this project and the endless work of the project team members whose intentions were geared toward contributing to the improved understanding of what are often otherwise neglected aspects of school and community—a worthy objective with the purpose of accessing the varied cultures and experiences of students and community members. This paper is, for us, a way to look toward improving research practices and to consider how, in future, we might account for unforeseen shortcomings, so visible only after they have occurred.

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