

# **“It’s Like We’re One Big Family” : Marginalized Young People, Community, and the Implications for Urban Schooling**

*Kevin Gosine and Faisal Islam*

## **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of high school students from a diverse, low-income urban community in Toronto, Canada. Findings revealed a strong sense of community, reinforced by the interlocking racial and class oppression and stigmatization participants experienced within the broader society, including school. The argument is made that students’ strong sense of community stands in contrast to the individualistic ethos that characterizes mainstream schools where educators frequently fail to cultivate the “community cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005) such students possess. The article concludes with a discussion of strategies educators can utilize to cultivate the strengths that marginalized youth bring to the classroom, highlighting the potential benefits of service learning, in particular.

Key Words: urban high school students, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, diversity, collectivism, service learning, Canada, achievement gap, community organizations, community cultural wealth, marginalized youth, achievement

## **Introduction**

In spite of a declining high school dropout rate in Ontario, Canada in recent years, an academic achievement gap stubbornly persists for certain groups of

students, most notably students of Caribbean, Hispanic, Portuguese, and Aboriginal backgrounds as well as students of lower socioeconomic status (Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, & Waters, 2008; Rushowy, 2013a; Wotherspoon, 2009). Given that poverty in Ontario remains highly racialized (Galabuzi, 2006; Ornstein, 2006), this ongoing achievement gap is fueled by an interplay of in-school and out-of-school factors as influenced by the intersection of race and class. The question persists, then, as to whether Ontario schools are doing all that they can to better accommodate class and ethnoracial diversity and promote inclusiveness. For over two decades, critically oriented scholars and researchers have critiqued the structures of teaching, learning, and educational administration in Canada for fostering the problem of minority student disengagement (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; James, 1991, 2007, 2012). Aspects of schooling long identified as problematic include the differential treatment of students based on class, ethnoracial background, and gender; low teacher expectations of students from particular class and ethnoracial backgrounds; labeling of students and discriminatory streaming practices; Eurocentric curricula; a dearth of appropriate supports; and the lack of diversity among teaching faculties (Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2007, 2012; People for Education, 2012, 2013; Rushowy, 2013b). Ontario schools have also been critiqued for maintaining schooling cultures characterized by an individualistic, middle-class ethos that promotes competitiveness and reinforces the ideology of meritocracy (Dei, 2008; James, 2012).

Vividly illustrating the individualistic ideology that pervades Ontario schools is the escalating trend toward standardization, which has been fostered by an increasing neo-liberal emphasis on effectiveness, performance measurement, the setting of quantifiable goals, and individual attainment (James, 2012; Wotherspoon, 2009). Critics charge that this individualistic emphasis on “excellence” within schools is inherently exclusionary in that it “runs counter to student-centered learning and an accessible education for all students” (Dei, 2008, p. 126). With the prevailing emphasis on individual achievement and merit, it is widely argued that schools tend to de-emphasize the idea of community ethic and belonging (Dei, 2008).

Presenting individual interview and focus group data from high school students who live in Regent Park, a low-income community in downtown Toronto, Canada, as well as youth workers who work with these young people in a community youth program, this article reports the results of a research study that explored the perceptions, experiences, and subjectivities of marginalized youth in the Toronto school system. The first author, Kevin Gosine, grew up in the Regent Park community and later, upon completing a Ph.D., worked for one year (2005–2006) as the researcher at the Regent Park youth program

Pathways to Education that served as the study site for this research. The second author, Faisal Islam, worked as the researcher at the Pathways Regent Park site at the time this research was conducted and was involved with study participants in a professional capacity before this project was undertaken.

## Study Site

The neighborhood in which the research participants lived and/or worked is known as Regent Park, the oldest and largest social housing community in Canada and one of the priority neighborhoods<sup>1</sup> in Toronto with the lowest family income rate in the city (City of Toronto, 2009). Regent Park has an approximate population of 10,000 residents, with 16.2% of this population consisting of youth aged 15–24 years (City of Toronto, 2011). Over 80% of Regent Park residents are racialized minorities, with this visible minority population being highly diverse in terms of ethnocultural background and nativity. For many in Regent Park, English is a second language. According to the 2006 Census, the median household income in Regent Park ranges between \$20,673 and \$30,451 (Cdn), depending upon the Census tract. This is well below the Toronto average of \$52,833. Of the visible minority population in Regent Park, 59–73% are classified as low-income, compared with 33% for the overall visible minority population in Toronto (Mukath, 2009). Similarly, 53–72% of the recent immigrant population in Regent Park is classified as low-income, compared to 46% for the total recent immigrant population in Toronto (Mukath, 2009). Since the fall of 2005, a redevelopment initiative has been underway in Regent Park in which aging public housing structures have been replaced by new market housing.

The program for which the study was conducted is Pathways to Education, a community-based educational program that, since 2001, has been supporting Regent Park youth to help them succeed in high school. Pathways to Education provides a variety of services via four pillars of support: (1) advocacy—one-on-one emotional and school-related support, including brief counseling; (2) academic—afterschool tutoring in all high school core subjects to improve academic performance; (3) social—nurturing teamwork and networking skills to reduce social isolation; and (4) financial—free public transportation tickets that enable students to travel to distantly located high schools. Also provided are bursaries after finishing high school to lessen the cost associated with post-secondary education. As of 2012, the program enrolls over 92% of eligible Grade 9, 10, 11, and 12 students within the geographical boundaries of Regent Park, comprising a total enrolment of over 900 students.

One of the key features of the program is to support students by way of advocacy as carried out by Pathways' Student-Parent Support Workers (SPSWs), whose job is to support both students and parents. All students enrolled in the program are connected with a SPSW who meets regularly with students, develops a relationship of trust with them, and creates a space where students can discuss issues ranging from the personal to school-related. SPSWs connect students to appropriate supports, including the other pillars of the program as well as external resources, and serve as an intermediary between students, their families, and schools. SPSWs understand the structure and policies of schools and are connected with key personnel such as teachers, vice principals, and principals. This enables them to help students and parents to understand and interpret school policies and procedures and, if necessary, serve as advocates for students and their parents.

The Pathways program has been widely lauded for addressing many of the challenges faced by Regent Park youth, especially reducing the dropout rate and improving the rate of high school graduation. The Boston Consulting Group in 2006 found that, for the first four cohorts of students to come through the Pathways program, there has been a reduction in the dropout rate of approximately 70% (Boston Consulting Group, 2011). Correspondingly, the four-year high school graduation rate among Pathways participants improved to 57% in 2007 from 41% in 2001 (Pathways to Education, 2012). As a result of these achievements in Regent Park, the program has now been expanded to 11 different low-income neighborhoods across Canada under the umbrella organization of Pathways to Education Canada.

## **Research Objectives**

This study was guided by four broad research questions: (1) What meanings and significance do Regent Park youth attach to the urban communal space in which they live? (2) How do these young people perceive and experience the world outside of Regent Park, especially dominant institutions such as schools? (3) What strengths or assets do Regent Park youth possess that might be utilized by educators and youth workers to promote academic as well as civic engagement? (4) How might schooling be reenvisioned to better cultivate these strengths and assets?

In contrast with widespread perceptions that emphasize deficiencies within marginalized communities and highlight a dearth of cultural capital, this study aimed to illuminate the strengths, assets, and knowledge (Moll, Ament, Neff, & González, 1992; Yosso, 2005) that Regent Park youth possess and explore the ways in which educators and community workers can cultivate

and build on these attributes to enhance academic success and promote a critical and transformative consciousness. While there are a number of studies that analyze communal identity, oppositionality, and resistance among White working-class and particular lower-working-class racialized communities (e.g., Dei et al., 1997; Fordham & Ogbu, 1992; James, 2012; Willis, 1977), there is a recent growing interest to explore these themes within highly diverse, multi-ethnic inner-city communities along with the implications for schooling and academic engagement (e.g., Dei, 2008; James, 2012). This study represents an exploratory contribution to this still underresearched area. Finally, study findings inform our pedagogical recommendations for enhancing academic engagement among marginalized young people. We argue in particular that service learning holds the potential to resonate with youth who possess a strong sense of community by bridging classroom learning with the issues in their community that influence their lived experiences.

## Literature Review

### Young People, Community, and Resistance

A large body of research exists documenting the ways in which many young people from marginalized backgrounds resist the structures and processes of schooling that they experience as alienating and oppressive (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2007, 2012). Such forms of resistance frequently entail opting out of the system by limiting school attendance and being truant, disrupting classes, challenging teachers, choosing to participate in school primarily through athletics, and, in far too many instances, leaving school without graduating (Dei et al., 1997; James, 2007). This sort of oppositional behavior on the part of students, argues Yosso, is “grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color” (2005, p. 80).

Studies of working-class and economically marginalized Black youth have found that these young people tend to adhere to a collectivist ethos (relative to the broader middle-class, individualist-oriented society) and embrace an oppositional subculture of resistance (Fordham & Ogbu, 1992; Willis, 1977). Willis (1977), for example, conducted ethnographic research in England. Having observed older male family and community members achieve little in the way of vertical mobility, Willis found that most male working-class youth resigned themselves to the idea that the dedicated pursuit of education will yield little return. According to Willis, the advancement of the working-class community as a collectivity is emphasized, and the prevailing sentiment within this class culture is that education is not the avenue by which to achieve this collectivist

goal. Other scholars (e.g., Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1992) have found a similar collectivist disposition and oppositional outlook within lower working-class Black North American subcultures. Fordham and Ogbu (1992) found that, in response to the racism and oppression they experienced within schools and the broader society, African American youth embrace an oppositional identity in which they reject dominant “White” values, including the hegemonic emphasis placed on academic success, and instead value a strong sense of “peoplehood” and communal loyalty. Much like Willis’s working-class English boys, young inner-city African Americans view the dominant White society as offering them little in the way of mobility opportunities and therefore see little point in taking school seriously (Fordham & Ogbu, 1992).

Arguing from ethnographic research undertaken in Canada, Dei et al. (1997) challenged the dominant understanding of the term “dropout.” Contrary to the common understanding of dropping out as a personal decision made by an individual to leave school before graduating due to personal deficiencies, such as a lack of intelligence or work ethic, Dei and his colleagues argued that the racism and classism embedded within the institutional processes of schooling in Canada served to alienate Black youth. In turn, this reality resulted in such students disengaging from the system. Dropping out, then, can be viewed as a sense of agency designed to realize some degree of empowerment. Put differently, it can be construed as a form of resistance against a Eurocentric system that fails to meet the needs of marginalized youth and deprives them of resources that would enable them to cultivate a positive sense of identity. Looking at Toronto’s lower-working-class Jane and Finch community, James (2012) highlighted how negative media representations of the neighborhood pathologized the community and stigmatized the young people who live there, while in the process deflecting attention from the larger structural forces that work to marginalize the community. Whereas Dei et al. (1997) focused on factors that push marginalized young people out of school, James’s (2012) primary focus was on Jane and Finch students who exhibited a determination to use schooling to achieve social mobility and give back to the community despite feeling alienated within an educational system that is largely oblivious to their frame of reference and generally fails to recognize the abilities and assets cultivated within their communities.

Resistant behavior is frequently the result of some level of awareness on the part of students of the racism and classism that are systemically woven into schooling environments. This noted, Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) highlighted variation in the degree to which student resistance is motivated by a desire for social justice. These scholars conceptualized a spectrum, outlining four types of student resistance ranging from oppositional behaviors

underpinned by little or no awareness of social inequality to forms of resistance motivated by a genuine critical consciousness and transformative desires. In between these two extremes fall two additional forms of resistance. One is what the authors refer to as self-defeating resistance. While motivated by a vague awareness of social inequalities, students who exercise this highly oppositional form of agency generally lack a clear vision for achieving social justice. Conformist resistance, according to Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal, is generally exercised by students who possess an awareness of social injustice, but nevertheless subscribe to the dominant ideology of the school system in order to achieve social mobility (see also Fordham, 1988; James, 1991, 2012; Lee, 1994). Research on resistance, then, argues that students often intentionally engage in oppositional forms of behavior in response to the social injustice they experience within school settings.

### **Strengths and Assets Possessed by Marginalized Youth: Community Cultural Wealth**

While student resistance tends to be written off by many educators as little more than poor classroom behavior on the part of young people who lack the cultural capital necessary to meet the demands of the educational system, critical scholars view such forms of agency as demonstrating the strength, resilience, and critical consciousness of marginalized youth (Dei, 2008; James, 2012). According to Yosso (2005), the individualistic emphasis within North American schools has, by and large, prevented educators (largely White, middle-class individuals educated within mainstream schooling contexts) from recognizing and cultivating these assets that marginalized youth bring to the classroom. Drawing on critical race theory, Yosso critiques the way in which Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital has been used to explain the relative academic underachievement of students from marginalized communities. She argues that schools often operate from the assumption that marginalized youth emerge from backgrounds that fail to equip them with the cultural capital (values, knowledge, skills, and dispositions) necessary to succeed within the broader meritocratic society (Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Yosso, 2005). This widespread assumption stigmatizes and pathologizes youth and masks the strengths and assets they possess—attributes Yosso refers to as “community cultural wealth.”

Yosso highlights six dimensions of community cultural wealth: *aspirational capital* (“the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers”), *linguistic capital* (“intellectual and social skills attained” via communication in multiple languages and/or styles), *familial capital* (“cultural knowledges” cultivated via family or kin that encompass communal history, memory, and “cultural intuition”), *social capital* (“networks

of people and community resources”), *navigational capital* (the capacity to navigate White-normed and dominated institutions), and *resistant capital* (“knowledges and skills” cultivated via “oppositional behavior that challenges inequality”; 2005, pp. 77–80). These six forms of capital constitute “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Marginalized youth channel these various forms of community cultural wealth to maintain a positive social identity and to assist themselves in navigating the structural obstacles embedded within dominant institutions. Yosso (2005) maintains that, rather than highlighting perceived deficiencies of marginalized youth, educators need to recognize and build on the community cultural wealth that young people possess to promote student engagement (see also Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Moll et al., 1992).

## Study Methodology

We employed a qualitative research design in which data were collected by way of nine focus groups (in which students and SPSWs took part) and 20 individual, in-depth interviews conducted in March and April 2011 at the Pathways Regent Park site where the young people in the study regularly received academic and social support. The study made use of a combination of purposive/quota sample consisting of 39 Pathways student participants and five current Student–Parent Support Workers from the Pathways Regent Park site. Invitations to participate in the study were extended to Pathways students who attended West Valley High School (a pseudonym), a school in Toronto outside of Regent Park, which, while having an academic stream, is known largely for providing technical and vocational training. In consultation with Pathways staff, West Valley High was selected for the study as it was a school with one of the highest enrollments of Pathways students. In addition, the school provides a wide variety of courses, including all core academic courses as well as a concentration in technical studies—something that may attract those students who are not inclined toward conventional academic courses.

The student sample, which consisted of Pathways students who were in Grades 10, 11 and 12 in the 2010–11 school year, was stratified by level of academic engagement,<sup>2</sup> gender, and grade.<sup>3</sup> Given our interest in gaining insight into the reasons for academic disengagement among marginalized youth, we sampled students who struggled in school (despite access to Pathways supports); academically strong or engaged students were also included in the sample as a possible point of comparison for the perceptions and experiences

of Pathways students who struggled academically. Thirty-five of the 39 student participants took part in eight focus groups, each consisting of between two and seven participants and lasting between one and one and a half hours in length. To corroborate findings from the focus groups and to get some deeper insights into the issues that young people may not want to talk about in group settings, we also conducted individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, four of whom had not participated in the focus groups. Individual interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes in length.

Among the 39 students who participated in this study, 27 were identified as “academically disengaged,” and 12 were deemed to be doing well academically.<sup>4</sup> Among the academically disengaged students, 19 were male and eight were female; among the high-achieving students, 10 were female and two were male. In terms of ethnoracial identification, all except one student in the sample (an academically disengaged Grade 12 participant) identified as non-White. Twelve of the 39 participants (8 struggling students, 4 high-achieving students) were born outside of Canada; all of these individuals were under 16 years of age when they arrived in Canada and were fully conversant in English.

In addition to conducting focus groups and individual interviews that explored the subjectivities and experiences of Pathways student participants, we conducted a focus group with five current SPSWs from the Regent Park Pathways site to elicit their observations of the young people with whom they worked and of the various contexts that frame students’ experiences. These five SPSWs worked largely with students at the school that the student research participants attended. Three of the five SPSW study participants were female, and two were male. The mean age of the five participants was 32.6 years and the mean number of years they worked as a Pathways SPSW was 4.1 years.

With the consent of study participants, research assistants digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim all focus groups and individual interviews conducted as part of this study. Pseudonyms are used wherever participants are identified by name. The researchers utilized a grounded theory approach to analyze the data generated from the focus groups and individual interviews. Hence, the theoretical insights produced were grounded in the field-gathered data (Charmaz, 2000; Gosine & Pon, 2011). The two primary investigators and four research assistants (RAs) systematically coded the qualitative data in order to locate emerging themes (a different pairing of RAs assisted separately with the student data and SPSW data). The coding process commenced with the first transcript, and coding categories were refined to encompass ensuing data. Following this initial process of open coding (for the student and SPSW data respectively, this was conducted individually by each of the four authorized research personnel), the researchers and the research assistants converged to engage in the collaborative process of focused coding. Focused coding involved

negotiating consensus as to which of the open codes we identified comprised the main themes and patterns upon which we should focus in light of our study objectives (Charmaz, 2000; Gosine & Pon, 2011). To provide an opportunity for review and feedback, SPSW participants were given the transcript of the focus group in which they took part along with a penultimate draft of the larger report from which this article emerged.

## Findings

### Strong Sense of Community

A major theme explored with study participants was students' level of attachment to Regent Park along with sources of empowerment within the community. Students expressed a strong sense of connection and commitment to Regent Park which they attributed to a communal richness produced through multiculturalism and diversity, shared experiences and a resultant understanding of each other's struggles, the convenient location of the community, and an affirming environment in which to cultivate friendships and networks of support. Racism and class oppression experienced by Regent Park youth within the larger society also served to strengthen communal solidarity. The following exchange between academically struggling Grade 11 focus group participants captured this family-like sense of community:

Student 1: It's home.

Student 2: It's like we're one big family!

Student 3: Regent Park is not a bad place...just get to know the place.

Similarly, the following discussion in another focus group with high-achieving Grade 12 girls bolsters the theme of Regent Park being akin to a family:

Student 1: I've been here for six, no, no, five years. And the way I find Regent Park is, it's a home...especially because I live in south Regent. So when I get past Dundas [Street] and I enter into the, like, Dundas and Parliament [streets]—so, those borders of Regent Park—I feel safe, like I feel I can just walk around. It doesn't matter if there's any street lights on, and like I'm nice, like I'm good, and the way that I see Regent Park is just like, I know everyone, like I know all these faces in this room, you know? So it's like if I'm walking in Regent Park or to go to the NoFrills [grocery store] like, "oh, you live on Sackville; you live on Sumach; I see you all the time; you're like family because you live in Regent Park."

Student 2: So personally, I've lived here ever since I can remember, like I started kindergarten here, daycare here, and I love Regent Park. Like Natalie said, it's like one big family, like a big community.

Not only did students feel that they belonged to one big family, they also observed that being a part of that family meant they share the same struggles along with similar life experiences. Jessica, a struggling Grade 12 student, elaborated on this point:

Um, I guess...because the community is kind of, in a way it's big, but in a way it's small, so we all know each other; we all grew up with each other, so we all have the sense of being close and being family...it's just that everybody goes through kind of similar struggles and similar problems; you know they understand where you're coming from and what you're going through, so I just feel like this is where, this is my home, this is where I belong.

Many of the participants observed that one of the unique characteristics of Regent Park is its capability to embrace new people and be open to different cultures. Evelyn, a disengaged Grade 11 student, emphasized that her strong bonds with Regent are due to its openness and a culture of accepting and helping others. She stated:

For me, I've been here for two years, so when I came here I didn't know like anybody. When I live here and I see how, like, people help people, you can be like, it's a bad community, but people help people; they understand you, even that you are not the same, like same color with them. They understand you; they know where you come from, and they want to learn your language, you know? So when you're living in, like where I live in that building, and when I saw people outside, they was like, oh, where do you come from? They start to ask me questions. They say, oh, can you teach me your language?

Monica, an academically disengaged Grade 11 student, corroborated Evelyn's sentiments as she reflected on her social networks within Regent Park:

Well, to me, I would say it's kind of a bad place, and it's a good place, too, because you experience a lot of stuff, and like good people is [*sic*] in the community. Like, you know they look out for each other, and I guess you can learn from older heads, I guess.

Kathy, a high-achieving Grade 12 student, was also impressed by the multicultural composition of Regent Park, which she deemed one of the community's best assets:

That's the best thing about Regent Park. It's the big community, big family, you just feel like you fit in, you know? And it's so diverse, it doesn't matter where you're from; you fit in somewhere in some form.

In all, the sense of community that Regent Park youth conveyed, a sense of community grounded in and reinforced by shared experiences of racial and class oppression (see below), would seem to stand taller than ethnoracial differences that would ordinarily divide people. This is not to suggest that racial tensions do not exist in Regent Park, as participants indeed articulated examples of such tensions (e.g., racist name calling, making racist jokes, etc.; sometimes with hostile intent, other times taken in stride as part of peer-group rapport). When push came to shove, however, it would seem that being a Regent Parker trumped such differences.

SPSWs corroborated the narratives shared by students with their observations of a generally strong level of communal attachment among the students with whom they worked, as well as a strong sense of community within Regent Park in general. As SPSW Participant 3 described:

From what I have sort of experienced, there is a lot of connection. Like in the community. Like a lot of, there is a lot of pride. That's my experience, and whereas in other areas that I have worked it wasn't so much like that. I am from [Regent Park], and this is, you know, like the history of here, whereas in Regent, a lot of people know their history of Regent Park, and the youth have a sense of it being unique.

Alluding to the negative representations of Regent Park within the wider community, SPSW Participant 5 noted that the “issue for kids is like overcoming some of the stigma that is attached to Regent Park.” Given the way the community is stigmatized within the broader society as well as the common challenges that many residents of Regent Park face, there would appear to be an “us against the rest of the world” mentality that prevails, which furnishes a basis for social cohesion. SPSW Participant 2 observed that this “tight knit” sense of community has enabled Regent Park residents to band together at various times to lobby for needed resources, such as the Regent Park Residents’ Association and the Pathways program. Workers noted that young people have various sources of support within the community in addition to Pathways, such as family, friends, and support workers from other community organizations.

SPSW study participants described Regent Park as a somewhat enclosed and self-contained community, a phenomenon that results in many youth rarely stepping outside of the community to engage with the broader society. “Regent Park is like its own community,” notes SPSW participant 1. “The roads are shut off, so people stay in their community, and often they don't want to leave their community.” Given the strong sense of attachment many youth feel toward Regent Park, as well as the self-contained character of the community, a challenge for SPSWs is to help youth see beyond “The Park” and explore opportunities within the broader society.

## Students' Perceptions of Violence in the Community

Student participants were by no means oblivious to issues of violence and drugs in Regent Park. A number of students reported losing friends and family members to violence, and some, particularly female participants, expressed concerns regarding personal safety. Despite these realities, however, most participants were in agreement that the media were largely responsible for exaggerating the prevalence of crime and violence within the community. While commenting on the role of media, Sylvie, an academically disengaged Grade 12 female student, observed that the “media politics” portray Regent Park as a violent community:

I'm always in, like, Regent Park, and it's like, it's not a bad place; it's just portrayed in a bad light. It's like the media is always there when something bad happens. They're never there when something good happens or anything like that, so no one gets the full story.

In a separate individual interview, Laura, a Grade 12 high-achieving student, agreed with the point raised by Sylvie. “The media overexaggerated everything,” observed Laura, “because, like, you knew everybody, and it wasn't a bad place to grow up.” Similarly, academically disengaged Grade 11 male focus group participants perceived Regent Park to be unfairly pathologized in the media:

Student 1: It's not bad, it's just the media, you know? Like the media make it look like a bad place. It's really a good place.

Student 2: I think Regent Park got its bad name from the outside community because, ah, they think like, pretty much, they look at the area, and just because it looks not as good as their neighborhood...you know, you always pick on the weaker guy, right? So then they, I think the media has to do something, something big with it, too.

Student 3: Like everything is the media, like the media twists its words to whatever they want to get a higher rating and more money. So they pick on Regent, they get more money!

Though students are concerned about the violence and crime in the community, they also argued that media has tended to amplify unfortunate events, thereby stereotyping the community. This sense of being stigmatized (or “picked on”) seemed to be an important source of cohesion for young people in the Regent Park community, as the perception that they were misunderstood and excluded by the broader society appeared to strengthen a sense of unity.

## Perceptions of the Police

Most of the students, especially the more academically disengaged, openly expressed their concerns about local policing, particularly with respect to abuses of power and authority on the part of police. Indeed, a contentious relationship with the police appeared to be a significant point of bonding for Regent Park youth. Some students recalled instances where they were unfairly stopped by police and searched in a disrespectful manner. A few students reported that, during the stop and search, they were physically mistreated, had their money and belongings confiscated, and their names and ethnoracial cultures were ridiculed. According to some students, the random stops and searches mostly occurred due to their physical appearance, color of skin, and the way they dressed. Sheldon, a Grade 11 student, contended that most of the time the police profiled individuals on the basis of color:

‘Cause, like I’ve seen people get pulled over and stuff. Like, I think, a majority of the people that get pulled over are people that wear, like you know, baggy clothes and like the, the big jacket, stuff like that, you know. All Black descriptions, right?

Another male Grade 11 student further asserted that the local police stereotyped on the basis of color and age: “It’s just because as a black teenager, you know, they always, they stereotype.”

Some female students concurred with their male peers when they noted that the major motivations for random stops and searches by police were physical appearance and style of dress. The following conversation took place in a focus group consisting of disengaged Grade 11 girls:

Student 1: So yeah, police always, like, look at how you dress sometimes.

Student 2: Yeah, when you put stuff in your back pocket and you have that hood over your head and you drop your pants and, like, all those kind of stuff, the guys do that.

Facilitator: And they target those people?

Student 1: Yeah.

In addition, some students complained that the local police tend to react with excessive force and inappropriate use of power when a crime takes place. Joey, an academically disengaged Grade 12 male observed that, “when a crime happens, they, like, abuse their power, and then they just go to anybody and anyone that looks like, suspicious.” Similarly, Natalie, an academic high achiever in Grade 12, shared her personal experience of witnessing an incident in which one of her young neighbors was abused and beaten:

And there was one other occasion, I will never forget this day, this night actually, we were in, me and my family were in our, in our living room that's, like, by the door, and, uh, we hear a big commotion outside, and we basically open up and we see, like, my neighbors crying like they're like, they speak French so they're like, they're saying stop and all that or whatever. And then, uh, we see a bunch of cops on bikes, like five of them, and then...I don't know how to say it ...I don't know how to describe it, okay, so there's a, basically a walkway, and the cops had, uh, my neighbors' son in the walkway, and they were basically beating him up, like beating, beating him up like, like I don't know, like maybe if he disrespected the cops, okay, he gets hit, but like beating him to the point where he's bleeding through his nose, maybe has a fractured bone or something. It was ridiculous, and my mom got really mad, too, and we didn't want to get involved because we didn't want any trouble. And, uh, when they finished beating him up they...what they did, they just left, they just left right after....Didn't say a word, just left.

Some students also shared experiences in which police treated them in a disrespectful manner and often left them feeling humiliated. Luke, a struggling Grade 11 student, shared about an experience when he and his friends were victimized by an abuse of authority at the hands of the police:

One time they made us like, they made me and my friends take off our shoes in the wintertime. They wanted to check out our shoes, and we were walking around, like, with socks, whatever, and like, most of these kind of stuff. Weird stuff that they're not supposed to be doing.

When asked by the facilitator if they ever attempted to file a formal complaint when treated in this way, an academically disengaged Grade 11 male focus group participant conveyed the sense of powerlessness that marginalized youth often feel in such situations:

Student 1: Yeah, we're gonna be, like, some officer came to me, and he took my money. We don't know the cop's number, we don't know the name, and it's like, it's like, who's gonna believe a teenager, you know? They're probably gonna be like, "he's up to no good."

Student 2: Exactly. They think that it's dirty money.

Student 1: Exactly.

The mistrust of and estrangement from the police on the part of Regent Park youth is further illustrated in the following group exchange between academically disengaged Grade 11 male students:

Student 1: The number one rule if you live in Regent, you can never call cops, you can never, you know. And that's like one thing that we, none of us do here, call the cops.

Student 2: That's a problem, because, like they say, oh, you should tell your parents and stuff, right. You tell your parents, they call the cops, and then everything gets worse. It actually doesn't help to call the cops.

### **Stigmatization in School**

Student study participants—both academically engaged and disengaged—spoke of the stigmatization they experienced within school at the hands of both student peers and school staff. Regent Parkers are frequently labeled as “troublemakers,” “violent,” and “drug dealers” according to one academically disengaged Grade 11 male student:

Because the reputation, you know, it's supposed to be like a bad reputation. So and so are from Regent Park you know. It's like, oh, he's dangerous; he's probably selling drugs.

Student narratives suggest that the reputation of Regent Park influences teachers' perceptions of young people from the community, as teachers exhibit a tendency to judge them as “failures” at the very outset of their relationship. This perception puts students under immense pressure to prove otherwise. The following is an exchange that took place in a focus group consisting of academically disengaged Grade 12 male students:

Student 1: It works, like, both ways. Like some people, if you say you're from Regent Park, they think you're like cool and stuff. Yeah, but the other people ....like the teachers...

Student 2: ...See you as a failure.

Student 1: Yeah.

Student 3: So true.

Students shared experiences of exclusion and discrimination within the school, such as being ejected from sporting events due to fear on the part of school officials that they might possess drugs or guns and having their choice of attire challenged, which they saw as an assault on their identities and self-expression.

In contrast with disengaged youth, high-achieving students tended to articulate “conformist resistance” (Solorzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001) and generally reported more positive relationships with teachers and school officials. These students saw education as the vehicle by which to achieve their aspirations as well as overcome the stigma of being a Regent Parker. A few of the more accomplished students expressed frustration in noting that people

often expressed surprise that they were from Regent Park, invoking the perception that only certain types of people live in this community.

SPSW study participants also spoke of Regent Park youth being profiled in schools on the basis of both class and race. Quite often, these youth must endure the stigmatization of being placed in special programs that, more often than not, prove to be ineffective:

SPSW Participant 5: But sometimes, just by virtue of being in our program, it's automatically assumed that these kids are like struggling, right? Or if the kids are struggling, we put them into these other problematic short-term programs that are happening at [School X] that aren't really effective, that just like reinforce stereotypes about who these youth are and what type of, what type of prosocial behavior would be best for them, right?

SPSW Participant 1: We can't really challenge anything. So, you know what ends up happening, [School X] will occasionally come up with some kind of like weird programming which is supposed to meet the needs of like, you know, students that are struggling, which ends up being our kids. But they target the wrong kids.

In addressing the achievement gap generated by class and race, then, SPSWs observed a tendency on the part of educators to resort to special programming for marginalized youth—programming that implies deficiency or special needs—rather than revising the mainstream curriculum and pedagogy to better accommodate diversity and promote inclusivity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, West Valley High School, itself, was characterized as a “dumping ground” for young people from whom little was expected. As Pathways SPSWs have observed, within the school system, Regent Park youth are frequently constructed as problems to be controlled as opposed to assets that can be cultivated.

Such negative experiences with dominant institutions, such as the police force and schools, coupled with the stigmatization of the community within the broader societal imagination, perpetuates a deep mistrust of the larger society on the part of Regent Park youth. The oppression and alienation experienced leave young Regent Park residents generally feeling as though they have no one on whom to rely except one another. Narratives illustrate how race and class interlock to produce a defensively situated communal bond that, to a significant degree, transcends ethnoracial differences (see also James, 2012).

### **Assets Possessed by Regent Park Youth**

Another theme explored with study participants pertained to the assets and strengths that Regent Park youth possessed, assets that could be utilized by

educators and youth workers to enhance academic and civic engagement. SPSWs highlighted, in particular, the resistant spirit that many youth possess along with a sense of resilience. In terms of demonstrating resistance, SPSW study participants described Regent Park youth as being vocal in articulating critical perspectives on various aspects of their lives, including their schooling experiences. As SPSW Participant 5 noted:

They speak up for themselves. They might not do it in a way, the most constructive way, but like, kids, I think that kids can be a better potential advocate for themselves than sometimes we give them credit for.

SPSW Participant 4 concurred that while these youth may sometimes lack a socially acceptable means or vocabulary to convey their views, experiences, and resistance, they do possess a valuable critical consciousness that teachers can harness:

Yeah, I definitely agree with you on that as well. Youth, when they speak for themselves, they don't necessarily say it in the way that the teacher wants to hear it, but the teachers don't seem to have the tools to sort of help the youth, you know, to rephrase or reconstruct their ideas. They just start labeling them or accusing them or putting a label and just shifting them out of their classes, because they're not necessarily ready to be challenged in that way, right?

SPSW Participant 4, then, hinted at a sense of resistance on the part of Regent Park youth toward a school system in which they might feel devalued and oppressed. SPSW Participant 1 echoed this perspective that marginalized students bring a unique critical perspective and diverse lived experiences to the classroom which teachers and youth programs can work with and cultivate:

I think another thing for [West Valley High] is, I think, our kids, I mean, a definite strength they have is, some of them are vocal, you know? I think sometimes the way they're vocal is not necessarily appreciated, but they are vocal. They also come from really diverse backgrounds, right? And they have really diverse experiences, and they have like, ah, important critiques and criticisms for what's being taught, but it's not actually heard, and it's not incorporated into the programming, right?

SPSW Participant 1 described Regent Park youth as strong and underlined the importance of educators finding ways to work with this attribute as well as other assets that young people bring to schools:

It kinda ties into what [Participant 5] and [Participant 4] were saying. I think like, I think some of our kids are really strong. They have strong leadership skills. You know, I think it's about the teachers in the school

who actually, again, sort of knowing how to, to work with those kids effectively. To sort of, to harness those skills, actually sort of get them to engage in a way that's actually going to help them out, and I don't think—they don't tend to do it.

Other SPSWs echoed the notion of Regent Park youth being strong, with this strength being demonstrated by many young people in the form of a resilience grounded in their communal sense of belonging. To illustrate this theme of resilience, study participants shared examples of students with whom they worked who continue to do well in school and hold high aspirations despite having to deal with adverse family circumstances:

SPSW Participant 2: A student of mine is in Grade 10, straight As, like you know? But she's doing that on her own. Like, she's not going home for homework; she's not even very involved with her family. Like seriously, if she goes in the house, she sleeps. I don't think she even eats at home; she goes in, sleeps, and I know that's not healthy. Only thing pushing her is that she wants to be somebody.

SPSW Participant 5: I have some kids at [School Z] who are doing amazing, and their family life actually sucks...there's issues of, like, people struggling with diseases, people struggling with, like, no income, you know what I mean? Because of status issues or whatever, and [yet] the kids are doing well.

Participant 5 speculated this resilience on the part of many young people stems from a desire to circumvent the stigma associated with being a Regent Parker:

So all of my kids are really high achieving. I think some of, for sure, a lot of that has to do with their own motivation and their family, but it's [also] not wanting to be the Regent Park kid who's messing up.

In reflecting on the strengths and assets they possessed, student participants largely echoed SPSWs in highlighting a strong sense of community and family, resilience, a capacity and inclination to identify and name forces within the school and broader community that work to oppress them, and, in the case of many, a capacity to hold high aspirations despite the challenges they face. Reflecting on what makes Regent Parkers special, students acknowledged that Regent Park was diverse but still a close and caring community. This sense of belonging and communal support was highlighted in a focus group consisting of Grade 11 disengaged male students:

Student 1: What makes us special is, like, the support we have...

Student 2: Yeah, it's like we're a big family. Like, you can have problems with people in the Park, but if those people see you having a problem

with somebody outside the Park, those problems don't matter anymore. It's just protecting one of yours, you know?

Facilitator: Are your neighbors helping you?

Student 2: Yeah, of course they are helping, even if you don't get along with them just because...

Student 1: They're your neighbor.

Student 3: Yeah, I mean...

Facilitator: So everyone is very much connected with each other?

Students 1 & 2: Yeah.

It is clear, then, that Regent Park consists of social networks of peer and other social contacts that furnish instrumental and emotional forms of support that help individuals to negotiate dominant institutions and structures characterized by White, male, middle-class normativity (Yosso, 2005). Empowered by these networks of support, students believed themselves to be tough, as they had gone through many hard experiences such as stereotyping and stigmatization during the early part of their lives, a phenomenon experienced by few young people within the broader society. As a disengaged Grade 11 focus group participant explained: "Kids in Regent Park are special because they get put through so much and, you know, they're still able to overcome it, you know? [*All participants in focus group express agreement.*]"

In an individual interview, a high-achieving Grade 12 female student corroborated the narratives shared by many student research participants when she summed up the benefits of growing up in a community like Regent Park. In the following quotation, the participant rejected the notion that Regent Park youth are at a disadvantage. She highlighted the rewards of being part of a close-knit, supportive, and diverse community where individuals are strengthened by unique challenges:

I feel like growing up in a place like Regent Park is not a disadvantage; it's not a handicap; it's a privilege. We learn more from the people around us than other people living in places where there's only one specific culture or, like, one specific pay rate, or one specific, like, um, financial backing. For us, we grow up with people who are not so wealthy to people who are, like, on social assistance and stuff like that. I find that you learn more from them, because you're also going through your own challenges, but at the same time, they're there to support you because they know how you feel and the stuff that you're going through, and then you actually have people that will actually motivate you because they want to see you grow out of where you are. They want to see you get that, like,

big fancy house, so to speak, they wanna see you succeed in life. I feel that Regent Park is a family, and there's always gonna be somebody there to, like, help you in your life.

Despite the challenges they experience which can deepen academic disengagement, many Regent Park youth still display a resiliency and a determination to achieve culturally emphasized goals in addition to articulating a strong sense of family. The motivation for many is to demonstrate to siblings, other family members, and peers, as well as to the larger society, that Regent Parkers are capable of achieving worthwhile goals. Selim, a disengaged Grade 12 male student, discussed his desire to serve as a role model for his younger siblings:

They, they are really a big part of my life; they are my siblings after all, right; I have to like take care of them, watch over them, and stuff. Especially, like my mom, she can't handle, like, all of them by herself...I have to be like a role model to them, right? Yeah, I have to, so I have to be like, mature.

This need for many student participants to take on extra familial responsibilities in the form of caring for younger siblings and contributing financially, responsibilities that are foreign to most teenagers, was highlighted to further demonstrate the strength and commitment of Regent Park youth. Evelyn, a disengaged Grade 11 female student, echoed this idea when describing the quasiparental role she assumed with her siblings:

I'm involved in their life though, because I'm the second oldest, so yeah, I'm always there. They do their homework, they be ready for school, all that stuff. I have to make sure they eat, I have to make sure they do their homework, have to make sure they have everything, you know?

Another disengaged Grade 10 female student articulated a strong determination when she maintained that she would achieve her goals despite her father's concerns. She insisted that she would not be negatively influenced by her two brothers, who left school without graduating:

My older two, they're high school dropouts, very bad. But my other sister, she finished high school. She just had a baby. So when the baby gets old, she's gonna go to university....No. It's making me wanna work harder and to prove my dad wrong, to make my dad proud.

Despite the academic challenges, as well as other obstacles experienced by many student participants, a number of students expressed high professional or occupational aspirations which required postsecondary credentials. Yosso identifies such *aspirational capital* as a form of "resiliency...in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present

circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals” (2005, pp. 77–78). Other assets highlighted in interviews and focus groups included a strong sense of community and family, a critical worldview informed by experiences of racial and class oppression, a strength and toughness shaped by those very experiences, and lived experiences enriched by the diversity of their community. In the view of the SPSW study participants, devising curricula and pedagogies that harness the strengths and reflect the lived experiences of young people *and* encourages them to sharpen and share their unique perspectives would greatly enhance student engagement in the classroom.

## Discussion

The narratives shared by student study participants and Pathways SPSWs provide insight into the values, assets, and perceptions possessed by Regent Park youth. The study also illuminates a clash of values between Regent Park youth with a strong sense of collective identity and a school system characterized by an increasingly individualistic ethos. A prominent theme explored in this study was the sense of community possessed by Regent Park youth. The young people who participated in this study seemed to be acutely aware of social injustices, and the stigmatization and oppression that they experienced at the hands of the police and other institutions constituted an important source of cohesion for them. Put differently, the perception that they are misunderstood and excluded by the broader society, including school, appeared to contribute to and reinforce a sense of unity. The sense of community articulated by student participants clearly served an empowering function in their lives, as these youth took pride in a self-proclaimed toughness cultivated by the ongoing challenges they endure, such as stereotyping and stigmatization, phenomena experienced to a comparable degree by few young people within the broader society. SPSWs also highlighted the toughness and resilient spirit of the students with whom they worked. This resilience and toughness constitute important pillars of identity for Regent Park youth and are instrumental in sustaining the imagined moral boundaries that demarcate Regent Park as a community.

The finding of a strong collectivist disposition among marginalized youth echoes previous studies of working-class and racialized communities (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1992; James, 2012; Willis, 1977) and contrasts greatly with the middle-class individualism that characterizes the broader society. While previous scholarship has analyzed communal connectedness and oppositionality within White working-class and particular racialized communities, this study illustrates a communal consciousness that transcends ethnoracial divisions

within an economically marginalized and highly diverse neighborhood. Despite occasional racial tensions, student participants expressed an appreciation for the ethnoracial differences that characterize the community and suggested that their lived experiences were enriched by this diversity. According to Yosso, the sort of communal connectedness conveyed by study participants constitutes a dimension of cultural wealth she calls *social capital*, which “can be understood as networks of people [that] provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (2005, p. 79).

This study illuminates a collectivist outlook among Regent Park youth that stands in contrast with the middle-class individualism that characterizes mainstream schooling culture in Canada. Mainstream education emphasizes a notion of success that centers on individual achievement and constructs success and failure as either/or propositions. Such a notion of success, argues Dei (2008), is inimical to building community and fails to encourage collective responsibility and belonging. Illustrating this emphasis on individual success, James (2012) has noted that, in Ontario, the school curriculum is heavily premised on standardized Education Quality and Accountability Office tests, which results in an education that does not adequately account for the social, cultural, and economic forces that shape the lives of students. In addition, critics have highlighted the effects of strict school discipline, which disproportionately affects low-income and racialized youth (Dei, 2008; Rushowy & Brown, 2013). Indeed, such youth are often disciplined in schools for nonconformity that frequently encompasses resistance to oppressive and authoritarian aspects of schooling (Dei, 2008). Such resistance on the part of marginalized youth, in many cases, stems from and reinforces an oppositional, defensively situated sense of community. Rather than validating and nurturing such oppositional forms of student agency toward social justice-oriented educational initiatives, the policing emphasis within schools works to suppress such resistance as well as the underlying collective consciousness. With its individualistic emphasis and narrow definition of success, mainstream Canadian schools often fail to highlight and cultivate the strengths and assets that marginalized youth bring to the classroom, most notably the strong sense of community, resilience, and resistant consciousness exhibited by the Regent Park youth who took part in this study. As Gay has pointed out, teachers need to recognize students who emerge from contexts that (relative to the broader society) emphasize community and cooperation “and how these preferences affect educational motivation, aspirations, and task performance” (2002, p. 107). Moreover, educators need to understand the empowering function that *community* plays in the lives of marginalized youth and build on this by way of a community-oriented approach to education (Dei, 2008).

In light of the prevailing disconnect between the communal orientation of marginalized youth and the individualistic cultures of schools, scholars (e.g., Dei, 2008; Gay, 2002; James, 2012) have highlighted a number of changes that schools can adopt to recognize and more effectively harness the community cultural wealth that students possess. First, educators need to embrace a broader and more inclusive definition of success. Dei (2008) calls for a notion of success that balances the current emphasis on individual achievement with equal emphasis on communal well being, collective responsibility, and social justice. That is, a definition of success is needed that not only stresses individual achievement and individual mobility, but also prioritizes political and social transformation (Dei, 2008; James, 2012).

Secondly, where the administration of education and the formulation of pedagogy are concerned, there must be a greater emphasis on *cooperative* (and community-driven) education within schools. This entails the active involvement of youth, parents, local community organizations, and other community stakeholders in the educational process. In this vein, Moll et al. (1992) stressed the need for educators to take on the role of ethnographers by visiting the communities (and possibly the homes) of students to learn about the perceptions and lived experiences of young people and their families as well as to identify the resources and empowering influences that exist in students' homes and neighborhoods. By employing such a strategy, educators themselves adopt the role of the student who takes initiative to learn about the lives and values of youth and their families. Educators could also explore with these stakeholders the roles they can take on within the process and administration of schooling. Such collaboration would, in turn, nourish educators' efforts to develop curricula and pedagogical practices that are meaningful and relevant to different groups of students given their histories and current realities as well as reinforce the notion of education belonging to communities.

Finally, given the strong sense of community exhibited by the young people who took part in this study, evidence (discussed below) suggests that an increased emphasis on *service learning*, specifically social justice-oriented service learning, can be employed to tap into the community-oriented ethos of marginalized young people, promote academic and civic engagement, and cultivate the community cultural wealth that students bring to the classroom. Service learning, broadly defined, is a pedagogical strategy that integrates classroom learning with service in the community. According to Boyle-Baise and Langford, "[a] service justice orientation redirects the focus of service learning from charity to social change" and emphasizes "principles of partnership, connectedness, critique, and activism" (2004, p. 55). A burgeoning body of research in the U.S. has shown that service learning has, among high school

students, improved test scores, heightened academic engagement and confidence, and narrowed the achievement gap (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Kraft & Wheeler, 2003; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005). Moreover, research by Scales and Roehlkepartain (2005) has revealed that students who participate in more elaborate or “deeper” service learning experiences tend to do better academically than students who take part in more superficial forms of service learning. The same U.S. study included a national survey of high school principals which revealed that principals in low-income (largely non-White) schools are more likely to view service learning as beneficial to student success than other principals (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005).

The reason for these findings, we argue, is because a service learning approach taps into the collectivist or community-oriented ethos of marginalized youth, illuminated in this and other studies, and enables them to bridge classroom learning with relevant, “real world” issues in their communities. Research indicates that Canadian schools, for the most part, are distressingly disconnected from communities (Dei, 2008; Levin, 2013; People for Education, 2012). While there are a number of schools in Canada that partner with community groups, Levin notes that such partnerships are “not yet an organic part of the way we do schooling” (2013, para. 15). Levin (2013) and Dei (2008) stress the need for schools to explore the possibility of partnering with local community initiatives (Pathways being an example) that can assist with the development of pedagogy and curricula relevant to youth. Arrangements can be made between schools and community programs whereby students receive credit for working with community organizations where they would have the opportunity to utilize classroom skills in the service of their community and a broader social justice agenda. Service learning approaches would also enable teachers (as well as classmates) to learn more about students, their lives, and communities via classroom discussions, daily or weekly logs, reflections that bridge classroom material with out-of-classroom learning opportunities, and other assignments whereby students make sense of the service they have carried out. Teachers, in turn, can help students to cultivate a sociological imagination whereby they develop the critical capacity to contextualize their service learning reflections and lived experiences through considerations of how race, class, gender, and heteronormativity interlock and operate within society at large. In other words, service learning can be utilized as a vehicle for consciousness raising, thereby cultivating, nourishing, and informing the raw critical consciousness that marginalized youth already possess and bring to school. When employed in this way, we maintain that service learning holds the potential to enhance relationships of trust in the classroom and increase students’ level of engagement and connectedness within public schools.

## Conclusion

The results of this research reinforce the case that marginalized youth would be better served by an education that works with (rather than against) their sense of community, contextualizes their lived experiences, nourishes their critical consciousness, and enables them to cultivate new ways of comprehending and negotiating the challenges they face within the broader society. Educators are encouraged to situate and promote learning within the context of students' existing strengths, interests, experiences, and frames of reference, and we argue that this can be achieved through the incorporation of service learning approaches within Canadian schools. A more egalitarian and cooperative approach to education, that is, an education that links the classroom to the community and prioritizes social justice alongside individual achievement, would result in educators working *with* the collectivist disposition of marginalized youth rather than against it. Such a pedagogical philosophy thereby holds the potential of channeling the self-defeating forms of resistance that marginalized youth frequently exhibit (e.g., acting out, skipping classes, leaving school before graduating, etc.) toward what Solorzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) refer to as "transformative resistance," a critically informed political agency characterized by a well-defined desire for social justice.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Since 2004, the City of Toronto has identified priority neighborhoods in collaboration with the United Way, a nonprofit charitable organization that supports nonprofits, businesses, government, and social service agencies in addressing the needs of the community. Toronto neighborhoods were assessed for a number of services deemed essential, including schools, libraries, community centers, and settlement and employment services. Also collected were statistical data such as median household income, educational attainment, and knowledge of English or French. The goal of identifying priority areas is to reduce crime, provide more opportunities for youth, and improve services for people in areas identified as underserved ("What Are Priority Neighborhoods," 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Sampling was carried out in two stages. In the first stage of sampling, a large pool of potential student study participants were identified using credit accumulation and school attendance as the criteria for determining academic engagement. Students were categorized as potentially "academically disengaged" if they were three or more credits short of the ideal number of accumulated credits (8 is ideal) by the end of Grade 9, six or more credits short by the end of Grade 10 (16), nine or more credits short by the end of Grade 11 (24), *and* missed the equivalent of 10% or more of their school days in the 2009–10 school year. Potential "high achievers" were identified using the criteria that they ended Grade 9 with the ideal number of accumulated credits, were no more than one credit short by the end of Grade 10, no more than two credits short by the end of Grade 11, and had a school attendance rate of 90% or better in 2009–10. In the second stage of sample selection, academic achievement was used to narrow down and finalize the sample. Achievement was determined by academic performance in the two core

subject areas of English and mathematics. Students who received 55% or less in each these two subjects in the 2009–10 academic year were considered to be “academically disengaged;” students who achieved 75% or more in each of these two academic subjects were deemed to be performing well academically.

<sup>3</sup>Our initial aim was to have a quota sample with an equal number of students within each achievement grouping, grade level, and gender category. Unfortunately, the failure or inability of some students to come to scheduled focus groups and interviews thwarted this goal.

<sup>4</sup>The student sample employed in this study is *not* representative of the overall Regent Park Pathways student population. Students classified as “disengaged” according to the criteria outlined in endnote 2 are heavily overrepresented in the study sample.

<sup>5</sup>SPSWs would seem to be echoing research which suggests that students from low-income backgrounds and certain racialized groups are more likely than other students to be labeled as having special needs (see People for Education, 2013; Rushow, 2013c).

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Kevin Gosine is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Brock University. He specializes in the areas of child and youth studies, the critical study of race and racialization, social inequality, and the sociology of education. He has taught service learning at the undergraduate university level. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Kevin Gosine, Department of Sociology, Brock University, 500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catharines, ON, Canada, L2S 3A1, or email [kgosine@brocku.ca](mailto:kgosine@brocku.ca)

Faisal Islam is an evaluation consultant in Toronto, Canada. His areas of expertise include place-based education, program evaluation, and international development.

