

SCHOOLING AND THE DILEMMA OF YOUTH DISENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I focus on some of the broad theoretical and political questions of researching student disengagement in the context of my longitudinal studies in the Ontario school system. My interest is to show how politics mediate schooling experiences of Black and minoritized youth and the implications for addressing the dilemma of youth disengagement from school. I pose the question: What are the obligations and responsibilities for Canadian schools and educators, given the nation's growing diversity? I argue that Canadian educators can appropriately respond to the challenge and possibilities of difference, by first acknowledging the extent of our diversity, and that they need to do so. Moral, political, economic and social arguments can be advanced to address this difference and diversity. At a wider level difference and diversity *must* be addressed if we are to have a complete history of ideas and events that have shaped human growth and development. This means ensuring that education takes into account the different knowledges, experiences and expectations of learners. This is significant given the dilemma of student disengagement from school as examined through the lens of race and difference. The individuation of school success or failure allows many of us to see homes, families and their support systems as the sources of schooling problems instead of critically examining what schools do or do not do to enhance and support academic excellence for all students. The paper concludes with the challenge of looking to the future and pinpointing some educational practices that encourage "inclusive schooling" in the truest sense of the words.

LA SCOLARITÉ ET LE DILEMME DU DÉSENGAGEMENT DES JEUNES

RÉSUMÉ. Dans cet article, j'étudie certaines des grandes questions théoriques et politiques des recherches sur le désengagement des élèves dans le cadre de mes études longitudinales du système scolaire de l'Ontario. Mon objectif est de démontrer le rôle de médiation que la politique joue dans les expériences scolaires des jeunes de la communauté noire et des minorités et les conséquences qu'il y a à vouloir régler le dilemme du désengagement des jeunes face à l'école. Je pose la question suivante : quelles sont les obligations et les responsabilités des écoles et des éducateurs canadiens, compte tenu de la diversité croissante du pays? Je soutiens que les éducateurs canadiens peuvent relever le défi et exploiter les possibilités des différences, en reconnaissant pour commencer

l'ampleur de la diversité du pays et en sachant qu'ils doivent agir dans ce sens. On peut avancer des arguments moraux, politiques, économiques et sociaux pour traiter de la différence et de la diversité. À un niveau plus étendu, il faut régler cette question de la différence et de la diversité si nous voulons avoir un tableau complet des idées et des événements qui ont façonné la croissance et le développement de l'être humain. Pour cela, nous devons nous assurer que l'éducation tient compte des connaissances, des expériences et des attentes différentes des apprenants. Cela est important, compte tenu du dilemme du désengagement des élèves face à l'école, désengagement observé dans l'optique de la race et de la différence. L'individualisation de la réussite ou de l'échec scolaire permet à beaucoup d'entre nous de percevoir les foyers, les familles et leurs systèmes de soutien comme étant à l'origine des problèmes de scolarisation au lieu d'analyser d'un oeil critique ce que les écoles peuvent faire ou pas pour favoriser et appuyer l'excellence scolaire de tous les élèves. Cet article se termine en analysant les défis de l'avenir et en proposant certaines pratiques éducatives qui encouragent « l'intégration scolaire » dans le sens le plus authentique de l'expression.

I. INTRODUCTION

I begin this essay with this question: What are the obligations and responsibilities for Canadian schools and educators given the nation's growing diversity? I believe that Canadian educators can and need to respond appropriately to the challenge of difference by first acknowledging the extent of our diversity. The human potential and resource in our numbers are undeniable facts. It is without saying that Canada has benefited greatly from its diversity. In 1991 the population of 'visible minorities' in Canada was estimated by Statistics Canada to be 2,488,100 (including non-permanent residents). Within the 'visible minority' group are the arbitrary classifications of Blacks, Indo-Pakistanis, Chinese, West Asians and Arabs, other Asians, Filipinos & Other Pacific Islanders, and Latin Americans (see Michalowski, 1991, cited in Kalbach, Verma, George & Dai, 1993). This group is growing much faster than Canada's total population which increased at a rate of nine percent from 1986 to 1991 in comparison to the 'visible minorities' group which grew by 58 percent in the same time period.

The Province of Ontario provides a clear example of the diversity of Canadian society. Ontario has a population of over 10 million people. The Province contains 37 percent of Canada's total population and slightly over 49 percent of Canada's 'visible minority' group. When consideration of ethnicity/nationality is included, nearly half of all people in Canada who reported origins other than British or French resided in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 1993). In fact "over half of all persons in Canada reporting West Asian, South Asian, African, Caribbean and Black single ethnic origins lived in Ontario" (Statistics Canada, 1993:1). For example, in 1991, 66 percent of the total 345,445 peoples of African descent (African, Black,

Caribbean) in Canada were living in Ontario. Similarly, 49 percent of the total 1,463,180 peoples of Asian descent (South Asia, West Asia, East & Southeast Asia) in Canada also resided in Ontario (see Statistics Canada, 1993:1). Kalbach, Verma, George and Dai (1993:33) projected Canada's total Black population could reach 1,381,500 by the year 2016. The city of Toronto is also seen as the world's most ethnoculturally diverse city, and it continues to be a primary destination for immigrants to Canada. In any given year, the city receives almost one quarter of all new arrivals to Canada. In 1996, 47 percent of the population were foreign-born and nearly 40 percent were members of a visible minority.

Usually discussions of Canadian diversity would dwell on the level of immigration into the country. The benefits from immigration are just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, it is estimated that there would have been a one billion dollar cost to the country if adult immigrants arriving in Canada between 1992 and 1997 had been raised and educated in Canada. For long, immigration has been seen as a way to address human power shortage, particularly for skilled personnel. The Conference Board of Canada has projected that there will be one million skilled workers in Canada by 2020 (see Ghafour, 2001). In 1999, 196,871 immigrants arrived in Canada of which 133,201 were of skilled and business classes. Forty percent of the immigrants arriving in Canada had first degrees. Yet, a large number of highly qualified and educated immigrants have recounted stories of disappointment in terms of the inability to secure jobs commensurate with their educational qualifications (Ghafour, 2001; see also Royson, 2001). Immigrants are not just individuals, they are families who bring knowledge into the school system in terms of their histories, experiences and cultural knowings. The question is: have our schools really tapped into this knowledge? The fact of the matter is that, as we read about such changes in Canadian society, it ought to be emphasized that particular changes in the structural and organizational life of schools have not kept pace with such changes in demographics, that is, the racial and ethnic mix of students.

For example, within the high school setting it is estimated that over one-third of students in Metro Toronto public schools were born in approximately 174 countries outside of Canada. Furthermore, over 40 percent speak a mother tongue other than English. The question is: have our schools registered this demographic fact? The situation is not much different at the college nor university levels. Minority representation of faculty makes up less than 5 percent (see Cheng, 2002; Cheng & Yau, 1998) in these institutions. There is no sense of comfort or concern in the fact that in the mid-1990s for example, less than seven percent of the new student-teachers in Ontario's nine university faculties of education will classify themselves as visible minorities. This is at the time when for Metro Toronto School Board

over 50 percent of students in 1997 were of racial minority backgrounds (Carr, 1998; Cheng, 2002).

I found some statistics recently shared by a group of educational practitioners and social activists very startling (see 'speakout4@hotmail.com'), 'The Loss of Equity in Toronto Schools', February, 2003). In examining the situation in one school board in Ontario, The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) we learn that approximately 53% of secondary school students have English as their first language; 41% of students have a first language other than English. Over 70 different languages are spoken at home by students. TDSB elementary schools (grades 1-8) receive 8,000 newcomers each year representing more than 170 countries, and 12% of secondary students have been in Canada for three years or less. On the whole TDSB secondary schools receive approximately 4,000 newcomers every year. But our schools are not simply multilingual and multiracial. They are truly diverse. There are other significant markers of difference. Again in TDSB slightly over a half of the students are female, almost one in three students live in poverty, one in ten are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and one in ten of the students have an identified physical, psychological and learning disability.

Moral, political, economic and social arguments can be advanced to address this difference and diversity. At a wider level difference and diversity must be addressed period if we are to have a complete history of ideas and events that have shaped human growth and development. This means ensuring that education takes into account the different knowledges, experiences and expectations of learners. For example what do we know about the different experiences of learners? What does it take or mean to teach a diverse student body? How does it mean to develop expectations of a diverse group of learners and teachers? And, what are the implications for schooling when we (educators/learners/students) have a limited vision of education? These questions come to the fore if we examine the dilemma of student disengagement from school through the lens of race and difference.

Educational research on the performance of academic students shows the severity of issues for certain student bodies. Despite some successes, Black/African-Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals and Portuguese students are at the forefront of student disengagement from school (see Brown, 1993; Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1993; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, Campbell, 1995; Radwanski, 1987). Studies have shown that Blacks and Portuguese students have between 42 percent and 40 percent dropout rates compared to 30 percent for the general population. Students from these groups are enrolled in disproportionate numbers in special education and non-university stream programs (see Brown, Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1992; Brown, 1993; Statistics Canada, 1991; Canadian Council on Social Development, 1991; Cheng & Yau, 1998, 1999). Even

for those students purported to be doing well (e.g., the Asian model minority students) there is the problem of narrow fields of academic choices, for example the over subscription in science/math related occupations (see Cheng, 2002).

Also, there is a human side to stories that statistics do not tell us. Beyond the figures there is a human dimension to the story of Black and minority youth disengagement from school. For Black/African students particularly, there is a trade-off to school/academic success. There are important questions of self identity, history and social esteem. This means besides the physical absence from school there are also other issues to be addressed when students are physically present in school. This is where the notions of "schools as working communities" and "inclusive schooling" become relevant. The problem of youth disengagement from school cannot therefore be decoupled from discussions about inclusive schooling.

II. THE DILEMMA OF SCHOOL DISENGAGEMENT

In attempting to understand the dilemma of student disengagement from school, social science discourse has been successful in locating social problems within individual actions and families. "Dropping out" from school is conventionally attributed to individual failings and weaknesses. Youth truancy and delinquency are generally explained by poor parenting and socialization skills. Often victims are seen as the causes of their own problems. The individuation of school success or failure allows social science to see homes, families and their support systems as the sources of schooling problems instead of critically examining what schools do or do not do to enhance and support academic excellence for all students. This critical observation must not, of course, be read as a way to avoid asking local communities, parents and families to take responsibility for the education of their children. On the contrary, such critique is intended to affirm the fact that the language of science, by default, decontextualizes social problems in as much as it carries a strong political message that excuse institutions, systems and structures from social culpability. The language of science hardly addresses questions of institutional responsibility. Admittedly, we cannot expect institutions to be ethical. Ethics resides in subjects, not objects or institutions. As an institution, schools have a responsibility not just to take credit for their students' success, but also to accept blame and responsibility for youth failures in schools.

The pathologizing of local families and their communities when accounting for youth failures at school has also had the effect of disallowing educators from understanding and appreciating the efforts, resilience and hard work of particularly marginalized and minoritized segments of our population. Yet these strategies of resilience offer important lessons of social and educa-

tional change. How have these communities survived despite the systemic and institutional barriers they have had to contend with? How have some minority youth excelled in school despite the existence of racism, sexism and homophobia in school settings? What do we learn from a critical study of student disengagement that is useful for understanding educational transformation? While these questions are relevant they are beyond the scope of the present discussion. The intent of this paper is to raise ethical and moral questions that conflate with intellectual and academic debates about dropping out of school. To this end, even a cursory examination of some of these broad questions can offer important lessons in the struggle for inclusive schooling.

Since 1992 I have worked with a number of graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) on two major projects looking at minority youth experiences in Canadian schools and the challenge of developing an inclusive schooling environment. In an initial three-year project (1992-95), we examined the narratives of Black students and school dropouts as they discussed their experiences in the Ontario public school system, and in some cases their reasons for leaving school. Study findings have been reported in two publications co-authored with my graduate assistants (see Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1995; and Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997). In this study the main research objective was the investigation of what student narratives tell us about the dropout problem, and particularly about the influence of race/ethnicity, class, gender, power, and social structures on dropping out of school. Specifically, research was designed to shed some light onto how and why students understand and articulate the factors that contribute to some students staying in school while others decide to leave school prematurely. Attention was paid to students' reasons for articulating alternative schooling environments.

Admittedly, the concern and fascination over school disengagement are not new. Over the years a number of Black and racial minority parents and community members have expressed concerns about mainstream schools not addressing the educational and schooling needs of their children (see Brathwaite, 1989; Brathwaite & James, 1996; CABE, 1992; BEWG, 1993). In another three-year study (1995-2000) OISE/UT students and I examined and conceptualized exemplary practices of inclusive schooling in selected Ontario schools and communities. Exemplary practices are defined as strategies (both in and out of the schools/classrooms), which make for genuine inclusion of all students, by addressing equity issues and promoting successful learning outcomes particularly for students of racial/ethnic minority and working-class backgrounds. A special focus has been the examination of the Nighana Alternative School for Black and African-Canadian youth who do not find themselves engaged in mainstream schooling (see Dei, James,

James-Wilson; Karumanchery, & Zine, 2000; Dei, James-Wilson & Zine, 2002).

In this paper I focus on some of the broad theoretical and political questions of researching student disengagement in the context of these previous studies. My interest is to show how politics mediate schooling experiences of Black and minoritized youth and the implications for addressing the dilemma of youth disengagement from school. As an educational researcher from a racial minority background, I found that studying students' reasons for dropping out of school was challenging; I had to come to terms with, and negotiate around, personal, political and intellectual/academic projects. In any scholarly research there is a need to formulate key ideas of investigation by carefully delineating the specific learning and research objectives. Formulating ideas on youth disengagement emerged through a process of identifying a subject personal to my situation and recognizing my location as a researcher. As a parent with step children in the school system at the time, and having witnessed many youth speak at public gatherings of their schooling experiences, I found the reliance on prior existing personal and experiential knowledges about youth and the challenges of schooling very useful.

I also had to review existing literature with an eye towards what minoritized voices say on the topic of investigation. Often times such voices are devalued, marginalized and outwardly negated. As already noted there exists a vast literature on school dropouts. Research begins with the researcher identifying this knowledge and demonstrating the strengths and gaps, what to build and how to locate a point of departure. Following this step I needed to understand the dilemma of school dropouts, what explanations have been, and what can be offered to account for the problem. Also, I am fully aware that the concern and fascination over school dropouts is not new. It sometimes seemed to me that this interest only emerged when dropouts become a "problem" for society. When these dropouts are doing menial jobs there seems to be little interest in their plight. It was therefore, important for me to follow an initial process of consultation with local experts, parents and community members of local organizations in Ontario, particularly the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC) and the Ghanaian-Canadian Organization (CGO) to identify some of the issues of schooling as understood by this population. I was also involved in participating in scholarly academic exchanges with pioneering researchers in the field. These exchanges, particularly with academics and researchers in the Ontario public school system, along with conversations of possible research topics relating to the dilemma of premature departure from school, were crucial steps leading to the formulation of my learning and research objectives.

III. RACE KNOWLEDGE AND SCHOOLING RESEARCH

In the context of the advancement of knowledge, it may be said that research by race is still largely an unsettling issue for many Canadians (see also Daenzer & Dei, 1994). Yet, much of the available research data do point to significant differences between Black and other youths' experience in the Ontario school system (see Brathwaite 1989; Board of Education, 1988; BEWG, 1993; CABE, 1992; James, 1990; Solomon, 1992; Henry, 1992, 1994; Dei, 1993; RCOL, 1994). Our study on youth disengagement from school (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Campbell, 1995; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997) has drawn attention to the need to examine the institutional processes of schooling, bringing into the fore how racism, discrimination, exclusion and economic inequality contribute to schooling outcomes for Black youth. Within schools the denial around racism takes the form of race as a taboo subject in some classrooms. The sense is that the least said about race, the better students are for it. This becomes problematic when it is acknowledged that race is an important aspect of our identities that structures social organization. If one is privileged through race, the avoidance of any discussion may occur through discomfort, neglect or unacknowledgement. But it may not be the same for those punished through race. Also, students go to schools as identified bodies and race is an important marker for such identification. This identification comes with rewards and penalties. The racialization of student bodies come with concrete material and political consequences that cannot be glossed over through the denial of race as a valid concept. Contrary to what some educators may say, students are seen in racially coded terms. Race and difference continually provide the context for power and domination. To deal with the problem of dropping out, educators must come to terms with such understanding.

The analysis of the research data on dropping out suggests that students view dropping out as both a response and a solution to lived experiences, complexities of social existence and to social structural contradictions. The study particularly highlights Black/African-Canadian students' concerns on the issues of race, representation and identity in schooling and education. As already noted (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997) until the 1990's, much of the analytical work on dropouts tended to over-generalize, without delving into the specifics concerning various social groups in the educational system. Earlier efforts to understand the issue of school dropouts also concentrated on statistical reports of dropout rates without in-depth analysis of the subjective realities which influence a student's decision to leave or stay in school. In fact, studies of school dropouts have generally been structural accounts that offer little insight into the students' points of view (see also Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1989; Weis, Farrar & Petrie, 1989;

Fine, 1991). The lack of such insight into the experiential aspect of student disengagement renders these studies superficial and speculative.

Our research on student disengagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power, history and particularly students' lived experiences and social reality, reveal a complexity of factors that lead racial minority youth to leave school prematurely. It is reasonable to assume that addressing questions of power, equity and social difference is significant to ensure student engagement and retention in schools, leading eventually to enhanced learning outcomes. For Black youth in a multi-ethnic city, a contextualized or grounded theory for understanding the causes of dropping out builds upon the insights provided by earlier theoretical approaches. The question then is whether we can build a theory of school dropouts from the myriad of student realities and experiences? Multiple social forces and processes are implicated in Black students' disengagement from school. As argued in Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac and Zine (1997) no single cause adequately explains the phenomenon of dropping out for Black youths. In fact, the experiences of these youths suggest we cannot simply fit into neat, theoretical boxes the contextualized accounts of their off-school experiences, school interactions, and the socio-environmental forces and processes that create students' disempowerment and disengagement in the public school system. The data suggest the complexity of issues in understanding Black students' disengagement and dropping out of school. The narratives of the youth revealed their own theories of dropping out. Previously advanced theories on student dropouts have contained a reified notion of social reality. Students are often presented as "disembodied" youths and yet, students do come to school with their "bodies."

By allowing the youth to define and talk about themselves and to articulate problems in their own language and according to their experiences in the schools, they construct a self identity and give meaning to events that shed light on the dropout dilemma. The narratives of Black youth point out that the search for an understanding of the school dropout dilemma must be rooted in the institutionalized policies and practices of exclusion and marginalization that organize public schooling and characterize the off-school environment of many students.

IV. THE ETHICS AND ETHICALITY OF RESEARCHING STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

All intellectual scholarship, research and writing are inevitably politically motivated. It is not simply unproblematic to disallow or disavow a morally evaluative approach and a politically committed stance to our work. Our intellectual practice must be married with humane ideals. We must also recognize that our intellectual work can have harmful effects by undercutting projects aimed at securing minoritized people's recognition and entitle-

ment. This explains why for some critical scholars focusing on domination studies, allowing minoritized subjects to speak and articulate their own understandings of domination is crucial.

Every research and researcher has to grasp with very pertinent ethical and political questions. Personally, there were issues about my own academic and political reasons for undertaking such a study. Such issues as the search for and uses of research data, and how I would address the power issues and differences between myself as a researcher (supported by an academic institution) and my research subjects who express vulnerability in their situatedness in institutions were examples of my own concerns. What motivated me to undertake this study, why; what I hoped to come out of it, the benefits for the research subjects, along with the responsibilities to my academic profession were issues not easily brushed aside. Minoritized communities have for far too long borne the brunt of academic research. A number of past educational research has focused on minority and particularly Black pathologies, cases of failures and underachievement. Not many studies have dealt with the successes of the marginalized, particularly how people resist their marginality and domination. Minority communities have been blamed for their plight without any critical interrogation of the structures of schooling and delivery of education (teaching, learning and administration of education) which implicate schooling and academic success. The pertinent question for me was: how was this study to be different? Can I assure the participants that my research will move beyond such conventional research and contribute to strengthen their knowledge base, sense and spirit of intellectual agency. Can my research make a difference in their lives? Will their voices be heard? When a study participant asked what difference my study will make, I found it to be a very compelling question. Beyond such considerations, I dare say that for institutions alike there are broader ethical and political questions about what constitutes the roles and responsibilities of schooling for youth. An important concern is how do educators ensure that our schools respond to the diversity that is a hallmark of contemporary society? I raise this question because it is apparent that the failure of schools to respond to difference and diversity is at the heart of the student disengagement dilemma. In dealing with diversity and difference in schools we must hone in on the notion of 'inclusive schooling.'

V. THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING

I maintain that a conscious attempt to promote inclusive schooling can help address the problem of youth disengagement from school. In order to create an inclusive education system, one which truly responds to minority concerns, educators need to create working communities where all students feel a sense of identification and belonging. But, where do we begin as educa-

tors? Educators need to tap “into the cultural knowledge of parents, guardians and community workers” (Dei, 1996, p.33). This means that we value the different perspectives and knowledges that all people from all places have and can bring to the school system. The import of this knowledge is to ensure that all students find themselves in schools in such a way that their knowledges, histories and experiences are validated and accounted for. Such engagement allows students to develop a sense of entitlement, a sense of belonging and identification with the school. Unless this occurs, students will be a physical presence in school, but disengaged in terms of their minds and souls. Dropping out will always remain a looming possibility.

The valuing and accepting of different perspectives and knowledges may raise questions about what we deem ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable.’ From this, concerns about ‘morality’ emerge, and how to value and accept all types of moralities. If educators are to help students develop a sense of connectedness and belonging to their schools, how can we accept and integrate all knowledges that may not always work together? For example, often times within schools there may be a student or even a teacher coming from a different country who would make certain assumptions about how to deal with classroom conflict. It could well be that these assumptions are not ‘morally’ viable or compatible with dominant Canadian cultural values and norms. The key questions of inclusive educational practice is: how does the educator incorporate different and sometimes conflictual knowledge into a system of Canadian school knowledges? How does one deal with this situation of competing claims to moral values without devaluing another person’s cultural perspective and knowledge? It seems to me if inclusive education is to be one of the possible routes to ensure that all students develop a sense of connectedness and identification to their schools, then educators have to find a way to work with competing, conflicting and contesting knowledges and experiences.

An emerging educational practice is to centre the learner in his or her own learning in a way that promotes multiple cultures, histories and experiences. Student-centred learning draws heavily on our understanding of culture, identity, politics and history. My argument is that students with an African or Aboriginal heritage would benefit greatly from a system of education which is anchored around African-centred or Aboriginal/Indigenous knowledges. They would be able to relate to this, and so they may perhaps become more motivated in school. But it is not only students with African or Aboriginal heritages that would benefit from such incorporation of histories, cultures and experiences. Given that these cultures generally work with the idea of multiple, collective and collaborative dimensions of knowledges, more so than the conventional Western, Eurocentric knowledge systems, all students would actually benefit from the African-centred

or Indigenous world views (see Dei, Hall, & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000). This pedagogic approach should not be read simplistically as a retreat to “exclusionary education” rather than as an effort to integrate different knowledge systems. The approach to eventually bringing all knowledges from different cultures together must start with a recognition of the connections among knowledge systems, as well as demarcating the points of differences that can be tapped into to enrich and develop a collective sense of understanding. If students are to engage in schools and their knowledge systems, then the knowledge base must show connections while also affirming the different strengths that knowledge forms bring to classroom pedagogy.

The failure of school systems to interrogate issues around the teaching, learning and administration of education can lead to situations where some students could feel “pushed out” of schools. Being pushed out is not strictly the exercise of physical threat or force to exclude other bodies from the schooling community. It is rather the subtle messages that can be sent through the school’s refusal to address questions of inclusivity, to ensure that the histories, knowledges and experiences of diverse youth are taken into account in schooling, or to ensure that teaching staff is representative of the diverse groups in our communities.

VI. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: AN APPROACH TO YOUTH DISENGAGEMENT

Let me conclude this discussion, then, by theorizing alternative schooling as a possible approach to address the dilemma of youth disengagement. In my work with students and researchers we have formulated the theoretical and practical underpinnings and implications of inclusive schooling as seen from the perspective of alternative school sites. Elsewhere, (Dei, James, James-Wilson, Karumanchery, & Zine, 2000; and Dei, Sonia-James, & Zine, 2002) we have highlighted some ideas as “domains of inclusive schooling” that form the basis of a theoretical approach to rethinking Euro-Canadian/American schooling and education. We argue that these domains also constitute the contextual basis of the development of alternative school sites in the Euro-American context:

(a) **REPRESENTATION (VISUAL/KNOWLEDGE/PHYSICAL) IN EDUCATION:** Inclusive educational practices address issues of representation in three areas: visual representation or the inclusion of racial/ethnic and religious minorities and their cultures within the visual/physical landscape of the educational setting; knowledge representation or the centering of non-European cultural knowledges, cultures, histories and experiences; staff equity, or the integration of teachers and educators from different racial, ethnic and gender backgrounds.

(b) **LANGUAGE INTEGRATION:** In an inclusive educational practice, home language (often a vernacular) is used in instruction in conjunction with English. Language becomes a fundamental component to cultural identity. Family/home, community and innovative school educational strategies validate learners' first languages [local vernacular], and facilitate English skills development.

(c) **EQUITY, ACCOMMODATION AND ACCESS IN EDUCATION:** The ideas of 'equity pedagogy' and 'culturally-relevant pedagogy' are central to inclusive educational practice, dealing directly with issues of power and equity. Educational stakeholders allow learners to participate fully in their education while developing and practising home cultures and personal and collective identities.

(d) **FAMILY, LOCAL COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:** That is, placing emphasis on the important roles of parents and community workers in youth education. In effective and inclusive schooling, parents become knowledge producers. Parents, guardians, caregivers, and adult community workers are seen as initiating, creating and resisting subjects. They are not simply inserted into the existing structures; rather educators allow adults to claim an important degree of collective ownership of community schooling.

(e) **CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION:** This places an emphasis on co-operative education and developing a broader concept of 'educational success.' While inclusive schooling and education cultivate high academic expectations, the learner's successes are defined to recognize the extent of community involvement, as well as non-academic proficiencies in areas such as psychosocial development and cultural knowledge. Thus, the learner is helped to improve and sustain her/his self-esteem, and sense of identity.

(f) **SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION:** This involves the promotion of spiritual and intuitive learning in schools, not necessarily an ascription to a high moral order, but an understanding of the self/personhood as a basis to engage learning. In inclusive schooling, education is anchored in a broader definition of education that encompasses emotional and spiritual dimensions, parental and community advocacy and youth empowerment. A personalized, subjective identification with the learning processes makes it possible for the learner to be invested spiritually and emotionally in the cause of educational and social change.

(g) **INDIGENOUS/LOCAL KNOWLEDGES:** That is, local knowledge associated with long term occupancy of a place. A recognition of the important role of indigenous, traditional and culturally-based knowledges in schooling is a valuable educational resource for the learner.

We see the practical implication of these ideas (as contained in Dei, James-Wilson, and Zine 2002) as a possible and effective way to address the problem of some youth leaving schools prematurely.

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