The Bridge Program: Recasting Blackness, Fostering Resilience and Transformative Resistance through Narratives of Success

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ABSTRACT: This article presents the results of a qualitative research project conducted with African Canadian/Black students who participated in a post-secondary student retention program called The Bridge. The program was specifically designed to address the needs of Black students and to provide support programming to enhance their engagement and graduation rates. Three of the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups included: the importance of developing differing frames of Blackness; engaging in transformative resistance; and the importance of providing spaces for the students to engage with and explore multiple conceptions of Blackness and narratives of success.

Introduction

Black students, when provided with the appropriate supports, exposure to models of success and narratives of success, experience higher graduation rates and academic excellence. However, the experience of Black students and other racially minoritized groups in the context of schooling continues to be a source of concern for many educators. The achievement gap between Asian, White, Black, Hispanic and Aboriginal students continues to grow, with Asian students outpacing the other groups. In the Canadian context, research conducted by the Toronto District School Board (2012) indicates that Asian students (both South 60.3% and East Asian groups 73.2%) have the highest rate of applications to and acceptance of offers to post-secondary institutions. In contrast, Blacks and Latino/a students have the lowest rates of applications and acceptance to university, 24.2% and 22.9% respectively (Toronto District School Board, 2017).

This significant discrepancy in rates of applications and acceptances to post-secondary educational (PSE) institutions has the potential to have long-term impact on racialized communities in terms of economic viability, family stability and educational attainment. It is the recognition of the potential consequences of limited PSE attainment that was the impetus for the development of The Bridge program and the related research project.
Increasing engagement, retention and post-secondary graduation rates for Black students in tertiary institutions has the potential to significantly impact on the long-term outcomes for Black students and their communities.

In my role as the program coordinator of a justice studies program, I noted that Black students had a high dropout rate from the program and recognized that the pattern was consistent across the 3 years that the program had been in existence. The students had an approximately 40% completion rate; in other words, approximately 60% of the Black students dropped out of the program. The approximate program completion rate for the college population was 65%. Given the above indications that Black students were applying to and accepting post-secondary offers of acceptances at an already lowered rate than their counterparts, it was important to explore options for increasing their retention. All the more troubling was that the students who were dropping out were bright, competent and capable students as evidenced by their initial performance in the program. Therefore, the first part of the process required developing an understanding of the factors that led to early school withdrawal, which required conducting interviews with Black students to explore the challenges they were experiencing that were negatively impacting their rates of successful completion of their studies. The second step involved providing supports for the students in an attempt to ameliorate those challenges.

The Bridge program, the first of its kind in any post-secondary institution in Canada, was aimed at increasing engagement, retention and graduation rates specifically for students who identified as African, Black and Caribbean. Research on student retention indicates that students who are engaged in the larger college or post-secondary environment, including campus activities, tend to have higher rates of program completion (Harper, 2014). This paper will discuss the programs, strategies and data outcomes for The Bridge program based on the existing research literature, individual interviews and focus groups conducted with students who participated during the first 2 years of the program (n=31- individual interviews; n=20 focus group participants). The three main themes that will be discussed are recasting Blackness; transformative resistance and resilience; and the importance of safe spaces on campus for Black students. The success of the program underscores the importance of providing intentional programming to support Black students in challenging systemic oppressions that serve to limit their academic success.

**Background and Purpose**

Over the years it has been estimated that within Ontario, there has been a 40% dropout rate amongst Black students from high schools, which represents a pattern of systemic failure. A report on Black student achievement indicates that third generation Black students still present a similar pattern (James & Turner, 2017). However, an alternative viewpoint would suggest that 60% of Black youth and Black people in general are succeeding. The message and normativity of success, which has been and continues to be a strong thread woven throughout the fabric of Black history and society, needs to be reinforced for students if we
are truly invested in ensuring their success as part of the larger Canadian society. The message that one receives about the self informs identity development and, unfortunately, all members of society are inundated with the message of Black student failure and social challenges. The result is that members of society adopt and often deploy the negative stereotypes about Blacks in all arenas. In addition, Black students essentially become primed for failure, impacting their attitudes, forms of engagement and thus limiting their options for success. Therefore, taking the idea that Black students can be primed for failure through larger systemic machinations, The Bridge program focused on priming them for success.

In the 1950’s, Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted the famous “Doll Experiment.” In their study titled “Emotional Factors in Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children,” the researchers examined “the genesis and development of racial identity as a function of ego development and self-awareness” (K. Clark & M. Clark, 1950, p. 169) and its relation to racial attitudes. The results of the study indicated that Black children overwhelmingly preferred White dolls to Black dolls and regarded the White doll as the “nice doll” while the brown doll “looks bad.” These early messages become the foundations for children’s concepts of self. Children begin to develop mental schemas about the self, based on the images that are present or absent in society (Clark & Clark, 1950), and members of society often also interact with the children based on those same messages. If Black students are inundated with messages of failure and are exposed to differential treatment by teachers from their earliest interactions in school, then it is not difficult to understand the patterns of failure that are evidenced. Further to this, the existing research underscores the challenges of healthy identity development amongst Black students which is central to education, social and personal success and development. The challenges to healthy identity development unfortunately enter the lives of Black children during their earliest experiences of schooling.

Research by Downey and Pribesh (2004) has shown that in the early grades in some classrooms, Black males are proportionally disciplined at much higher levels when subjective levels of analysis of behaviour are employed. However, the levels are relatively consistent between Black and White students when objective measures are employed. The reality is that the vast majority of decisions that teachers make in the context of their classrooms are often based on subjective measures. As such, teachers’ varying notions and beliefs about race, class and multiple sites of differences will inform and impact the ways in which they interact with students (Dickar, 2008; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). A study by Downey and Pribesh (2004) examined teachers’ ratings of children’s behaviour in kindergarten classes. The results indicated that teachers consistently rated the behaviour of Black students as indicative of poor citizenship and being engaged in externalizing behaviour. The authors posit that this breakdown in the teacher-student relationship occurs in the early schooling years, primarily because of the often unconscious, anti-Black bias amongst teachers and Early Childhood educators (Araujo & Strasser, 2003; Brown, Souto-Manning, & Tropp Laman, 2010). The pattern is replicated in middle and high schools (Edelman, 2006, 2007; Fenning & Rose, 2015; Hatt, 2011; McMurthry & Curling, 2008; Monroe, 2009; Swain & Noblit, 2011) and again amongst college and university students in post-secondary institutions. The reality is
that at each juncture in their educational journey, Black students are bombarded with messages of failure and exposed to inequitable treatment.

When Black students are exposed to such disparaging messages through various institutionalized processes and practices, these experiences can negatively impact their attitudes towards schooling. According to Wood and Turner (2010), challenges related to their experiences at post-secondary institutions can limit their engagement, levels of success and inhibit their academic self-concept (Awad, 2007; Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009). Alternatively, teachers’ exposure to the negative ideas regarding the capacity of Black students also contributes to their rating, evaluation and expectations of the students (Dragnea, Erling, Toronto District School Board, & Canadian Electronic Library (Firm), 2008; Ferguson, 2003). This perpetuates a troubling cycle wherein society provides negative messages, which teachers and students consume and internalize. Teachers have lowered expectations of the Black students, while at the same time, Black students develop lowered expectations of themselves, thus resulting in the outcomes we have witnessed. In addition, the challenging experiences that many racialized students have in elementary and secondary schools, there are skills that are necessary for post-secondary success that many of the students may not have developed.

The Bridge Program Description

This project explored the academic outcomes for Black students who are exposed to positive messages regarding their racial and academic identities. In addition the project explored the possibilities when the students themselves began to envision the possibility of success and to adopt strategies that promoted their personal and academic success.

The project had the following objectives:

- To identify the best practices within a Canadian and, more specifically, within a post-secondary context that would foster African, Black and Caribbean student engagement, retention and graduation.
- To support the students’ development of the academic skills that can promote success.
- To support students’ ability to effectively navigate the broader social, academic and cultural environment of the college to increase retention rates.

The workshops and curriculum were designed to enhance student academic skill development, community based connections (including mentor and career guides), provide peer based engagements and support participants in developing positive racial and academic identity markers.

The program included a series of 8 workshops that focused on career planning,
navigating school environments and developing positive academic, personal, career and race-based identities. In addition, the students were offered drop-in sessions and individual appointments. The program also provided students with opportunities to engage with members of the Black community who represented a range of career fields. The students spoke to the centrality of this experience given that many of them had not had opportunities to interact directly with people who were considered successful. Program participants were also provided with the option of being paired with a mentor upon completion of the program.

Harper (2014), when examining the records of the multitude of interventions and strategies that were intended to increase the graduation and retention rates of Black males in post-secondary institutions, identified several gaps in the programming. According to his research, programs were generally structured as 1-2 day conferences that attempted to provide mentoring. However, these programs were limited in their efficacy and long-term outcomes. His research also indicated that the participants’ did not attribute their continued involvement in schooling to these conference-type programs. Although Harper’s research specifically focused on the needs of Black males, the work provided strong direction that guided the development of the current program. The Bridge program provided opportunities for the students to access regular and ongoing support.

Harper critiques what he referred to as the movement to enhance Black male success as a “directionless campaign” (2014, p. 126) with the development of stand-alone programs that were not institutionally supported or implemented and with no clearly defined goals and or mission. The Bridge program, like the other programs emerged in response to an identified need and in its development, worked towards becoming embedded in the institution. Academic institutions need to recognize the importance of, and commit to, implementing differentiated retention programming models to support historically marginalized students including Aboriginals and Blacks. The Bridge program, while seeking to empower the participants to address the daily and structural level micro-aggressions, worked with various departments at the college to conduct presentations and workshops related to the issues in an attempt to get staff and administrators to understand the broader macro level issues. Therefore, the program sought to combine macro – institutional; meso – staff ideologies; curriculum materials; broader systemic issues of injustice; and micro - individual levels of focus. Although the aim was to ensure that the program was institutional embeddedness, there continued to be a host of challenges and resistance at all levels of the college that were clear indications of anti-Black racism at the college. However, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another critique offered by Harper (2014) of retention programming that was aimed at Black male student engagement was the way in which the programs focused on the “amplification of deficits” (p. 127). From its very inception, The Bridge program identified a clear focus on fostering success, highlighting the successes of Blacks, and including several tag lines like “Making success visible” and “Making Black Excellence the norm”. Recognizing that the enduring pathologization of Blackness had become the dominant
narrative in society, I focused on reframing this dialogue and as evidenced in one of the themes that emerged from the research, the participating students themselves developed the facility to ‘recast Blackness.’ And in part, it is this recasting that mediated their conceptions of self and their possibilities. This preliminary data set led to the question, “How might the experience of academic success change for Black students if the markers of Blackness were framed as strengths and possibilities?” The research and continued development of The Bridge program continues to privilege strengths-based approaches and the notion of capabilities wherein which the focus remains on what human beings are able to accomplish and become (Akos & Galassi, 2008; Heyne & Anderson, 2012; Saleebey, 2008).

Discussion and Analysis of the Results of the Research

This project adopted a multi-method design that included individual participant interviews, focus groups, pre- and post-assessment questionnaires and observation notes taken by program facilitators and interviewers. The data that is included in this paper is based on the preliminary data that was collected during the first 2 years of the program. However, at the time that this paper was being written, the program had provided supports to more than 400 students. The following section provides a discussion and analysis of some of the themes that emerged from the data. The main themes that will be discussed in this section include recasting of blackness, transformative resistance and resiliency and the importance of safe spaces for positive racial and academic identity development.

Recasting of Blackness

The theme of recasting Blackness is based on the idea that the model or mold which had been presented to Black students was one that reinforced constructed stereotypes of negativity, pathology and failure. Those ideas, although historically produced, remain contemporarily putative and are constantly reproduced in the everyday discourses that pervade the conversations of Blacks and other members of society. When students in the program were asked to identify the prevalent markers of Blackness to which they had been exposed, terms such “ghetto,” “ratchet,” “criminals” and “failure” are readily spewed with impunity. The markers of Blackness are framed within negative constructions that appear to have been fixed in their imagination. It is this limited imagery of Blackness that then frames notions of what Black students regard as possible. The conceptions are reinforced through a multitude of sources with limited opportunities to challenge these ideas. The Bridge program, according to the participants, was the first opportunity that they were exposed to that challenged the long-held conceptions of Blackness and it is this critique of the prevailing ideas of Blackness that became a primary connection to the program for the participants.

The Bridge program provided students with opportunities to attend scholarship events, academic fairs and community events that focused on the celebration of Black success. The students who attended these events indicated their surprise at the number of Blacks present at the events who would be considered successful by anyone’s standard. The students had
become so immersed in the idea of Black failure that they were unaware of the existence of the many Blacks in the city who were successful. The experience was very impactful for the students. As part of the basic structure of The Bridge program, each group that entered the program was exposed to a panel of Black mentors who have attained varying levels of success in their given profession and who were at different stages in their careers, ranging from entry level to post retirement work. Students had the opportunity to connect directly with the panel presenters, ask questions and interact with the panel in an informal setting. These experiences made the possibility of success real and achievable and to align success with Black bodies.

The panel members also discuss the challenges and obstacles they overcame, the strategies that they employed in addressing those challenges and the lessons learned. The panel presenters are informed prior to their attendance that The Bridge program adopts a strengths-based model and focuses on the possibilities rather than the pitfalls. Strengths-based approaches provide a different frame of reference and focuses on the strengths and assets that an individual possesses, rather than what is deemed to be a problem, thus fostering growth and development (Feintuch, 2010; Heyne & Anderson, 2012). The participants indicated that the stories are highly impactful and provide them with the understanding that there are others who travelled difficult paths but have negotiated the societal obstacles to achieve success. As one student attested:

Being able to have guest speakers come into our program during our various sections and have them speak about their stories of success was a motivation for me that I couldn’t stop at this college position where I was, just a college diploma. I had to move on and achieve more for myself as an individual. (A.O.)

The panel presenters also highlight for the students the fact that there are other options and paths they can travel to achieve success. This knowledge also provides a shared sense of possibility, normalizes ideas of success and provides the students with the knowledge that there is a wider community committed to their growth and development.

These experiences foreground a shift in the students’ conceptions of self and their potential for achievement. This work of recasting Blackness was supported by the workshops which focused on critiquing constructions of Blackness and providing the students with strategies and tools for critiquing the existing constructions of the self. Based on the responses in the individual interviews and the focus group sessions, it is vital that the students are exposed to opportunities to change their constructions of Blackness and have this occur early in the program because those are the moments of revelation that allow them to cast Blackness in a different light.

Another participant learned “through The Bridge program, that there really is no glass ceiling. Not only is the sky the limit, but the stratosphere, the universe, the stars, whatever, is
Another participant commented on the changes he began to make in his life when he realized that there were people who had gone through similar challenges before him and made a life for themselves. This participant stated:

A lot of the times our parents strive for us to be the best but we’re never really given the tools to actually pursue these things, but at The Bridge it gives us the tools and it shows us ways and means and we have people that are successful and have taken different paths in life and that can actually mentor us to these places that we want to go. (C.G.)

These exposures appear to suggest that the ongoing negative portrayal of Blackness has an extremely adverse effect on the students’ conceptions of success and what they can see themselves accomplishing. The exposure, according to the participants, was all encompassing almost to the point of invisibility, thus creating the sense that failure was the norm. As another participant stated:

So there’s this narrative for Black people in the west that we are either intellectually inferior, mentally inferior, so on and so forth, and that we come from slaves or that we come from primitive societies in Africa. So when you have those ideas constantly reinforced, you start to think that you are not intelligent enough, or that you aren’t capable enough and that anything you reach for you’re not gonna accomplish it. So in some regard there is a glass ceiling as to what you can accomplish (M.T.)

The above quote highlights the extent to which the continued exposure to negative messages regarding Black capacity, consciously and unconsciously limits the options that students see themselves as having, and highlights the systemic and insidious nature of oppression. Carter (2007) states that “racial stratification and systemic racism have been and continue to be endemic and ingrained in all aspects of ... life ... as such these barriers to equality have had a profound impact on those who have been racially oppressed…” (2007, p. 13). According to Harper (2012):

Those who are interested in Black male student success have much to learn from Black men who have actually been successful. To increase their educational attainment, the popular one-sided emphasis on failure must be counterbalanced with insights gathered from those who somehow manage to navigate their way to and through higher education, despite all that is stacked against them” (p. 1).

Although in this context Harper is focusing specifically on Black male development, the issue speaks to all genders when he highlights the importance of employing an “anti-deficit achievement framework” (p. 8) that focuses on the factors that promote success. An anti-deficit framework lends itself to reframing the focus on strategies that have fostered success,
leads to persistence and promotes positive, healthy, supportive relationships. The Bridge program embedded those discourses of success, possibility and no limitations, positively impacting the participating students and supporting them in developing new conceptions of Blackness, thereby creating a new cast or mould that challenged their prior racial conceptions.

**Transformative Resistance and Resiliency**

The program provided spaces and opportunities for the participants to discuss issues and challenges related to the systemic, institutional and societal aspects of racism, oppression and structures of power. It is important to note, however, that the discussion of racism was framed through a critical discourse lens that focused on understanding the manifestations and sites of interruptions rather than structuring it as a space for purging. The participants were provided with opportunities to explore personal challenges, including familial support systems, financial issues and personal difficulties they were attempting to address.

Another important area for discussion and debate was based on the internalization of the negative conceptions of Blackness as an aspect of internalized racism, and the ways in which this led to engagement with forms of terminal resistance rather than transformative resistance. Terminal resistance is defined as forms or patterns of resistance or challenge to the status quo that has negative consequences for the person who is challenging systemic inequities primarily because the resistive behaviours they adopt reinforces the negative ideations of self. It emerges as a form of opposition that results in increasing personal and professional costs for the person engaged in the oppositional behaviour. In the case of Black students, when they experience challenges in school, terminal resistance is evidenced in their internalization of the tropes of failure and then performing behaviours such as skipping classes to avoid interacting with teachers. This result in them failing classes, having to repeat classes, extending their time in school, lowering their GPA which then makes it more difficult to successfully apply to other post-secondary institutions or to complete their current program of study. In essence, their behaviors result in long-term negative consequences for the self, reinforces the dominant narrative of failure and leads to limited, if any, change in the overall systemic inequities and in effect reproduces the dominant relations of power (Giroux, 1983) and institutionalized discrimination. Their actions lead to more negative outcomes and consequences for themselves and can severely curtail their educational options, thus producing a self-defeating cyclical pattern. The negative ideologies and discriminatory practices of the system on the other hand remain firmly entrenched (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) while at the same time the dominant experiences significant economic benefits from the continued failure. The increase in funding for prisons (Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo, & Lobao, 2004), the increase in clients for the middle-class service industry (social workers, lawyers, judges, corrections officers, etc.) ensures that there is a viable middle class that functions and thrives on the failure of Black bodies.

In addition, the resulting outcomes of failure, lowered academic performance and engagement, and the increasing push towards the prison pipeline (Daniel, 2017; Edelman,
2006) reinforces the initial stereotypical ideas of blaming the oppressed for their failures. This merit-based analysis limits the culpability of the system and its adherents for the continued challenges that marginalized groups’ experience. Similarly, when school administrators, teachers and guidance counselors believe that the system is equitable and non-discriminatory, and that the students are simply not capable, they employ a limited analysis of the students’ resistive behaviours, thus replicating the patterns of failure. At the end of it all, the students experience terminal resistance because their behaviours reinforce the notion of failure in the minds and responses of the dominant.

An added problem with engaging in terminal resistance is that many of the participants and observers are unaware and have not developed the critical analytical frame to name what they are doing or why. Students are aware on a visceral level that something is wrong or oppressive; however given that most schools and teachers do not teach how to think critically, the students’ ability to articulate positive forms of resistance both verbally and behaviourally, is partial at best. Most students, who engage in what they perceive as a resistance to the system, are engaged in these behaviours with limited understanding, analysis and critique of the outcomes of their challenges. These behaviours can be read simply as forms of opposition or defiance aimed at frustrating teachers and thwarting the power dynamics in the classroom. This rather problematic reading and response to the behaviours lends itself to the increased use of hyper-disciplinary strategies, such as suspensions (Edelman, 2007; Swain & Noblit, 2011), the placement of students (particularly racialized males) into special education classes or what Downey and Pribesh (2004) regard as a push for the diagnosis of ADD and ADHD. According to a recent report on statistics from the Toronto District School Board, although Black males make up 14% of the student body, they represent over 50% of the number of students who are suspended (James & Turner, 2017). In a system where neither the actors nor the responders consistently adopt critical lenses and strategies aimed at supporting the need for a differentiated engagement with the system to increase democratic schooling, the outcome continues to be troubling, with the students paying the highest price.

The Bridge program supports the students’ investment in constructive or transformative resistance which is defined as the adoption and practice of attitudes and behaviours that seek to transform the system, produce positive markers of self and construct new identities based on critical analyses of power, social systems, practices and ideologies. The term transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) has been used and the authors state that this term:

refers to student behaviour that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice. In other words, the student holds some level of awareness and critique of her or his oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be at least somewhat motivated by a sense of social justice. With a deeper level of understanding and a social justice orientation, transformational resistance offers the greatest possibility for social change (p. 320)
This shift in understanding resistances, requires that the students engage in an interrogation of the self, their identity, the scripts to which they have been exposed and the behaviours they perform which reinforce those scripts. In the context of The Bridge program, the students were provided with multiple opportunities to explore alternative scripts and ideologies and to map out the outcomes of a range of approaches. Students discuss, analyze and critique the ways in which their options are scripted and delineated by their continued investment in the scripts of pathology and failure.

Bridge participants were also supported in getting to know and understand that many of the teachers and or administrators with whom they will interact are unaware of the rationale for the opposition, nor do they acknowledge the existence of systemic and institutional injustices that impinge on the daily lives of the students. Given this knowledge, it is vital that students identify strategies for challenging the system that can result in positive change and development and a “commitment to social justice” (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313). For example, students discussed the impact on their self-esteem when teachers introduce curriculum material, both as text and in the form of movies that reinforce problematic stereotypes about their identities and communities. When teachers discuss gangs for example, the prototypical gang member is identified as a Black male and discussions of criminality are often accompanied by images of Black males. For Black students who do not participate in such types of criminal activities or ascribe to that lifestyle, these experiences can be very demeaning. In addition, students also discussed the difficulty they experience when the conversations in the classroom centers Blackness as the ultimate problem, with explanations that are mired in deficit theories.

Students then face the following challenges: how can they engage the teachers and their peers in discussions that challenge and critique the information in the classroom without being regarded as the prototypical angry Black male or female? How do they study for exams or write papers about topics with which they disagree and which diminishes their humanity? Carter (2008) recognizes that many students who possess a strong positive racial identity are able to challenge the information and succeed in spite of the odds; however, there are many students who have not developed positive conceptions of Blackness and are often unable to survive the onslaught. In The Bridge program, the students explore strategies to address these types of issues and occurrences in ways that lend themselves to fostering positive change while avoiding the inevitable pitfalls of terminal resistance. The focus of the program is on ensuring that the students exercise their own agency in choosing behaviours and strategies that are productive and can lead to positive changes in the system. Their participation in the program supports their capacity to successfully complete their education, thus ensuring that there is congruence between attitude, achievement and outcomes. The system level change is evidenced in the instructors’ willingness to adopt new curriculum, provide spaces in the classroom to challenge stereotypes and engage in more equitable, less oppressive practices that support the development of the Black students.

A central question that is posed for the students when examining the difference between
terminal and transformative resistance is: “How might your life change if you began to see yourself as being capable of excellence?” The question is posed in an attempt to have them explore the differences between the types of resistances, to adopt new identities and behaviours that can lead to engagement with their own success. Through the asking of the questions and the discussions, students begin to verbalize the possibility of success and to act in ways to ensure their attitudes and behaviours are in alignment with their goals and achievements. A participant stated:

Whether people talk about it, we are being disenfranchised you know in the workforce, we’re victims of oppression, its reality. So being able to discuss these issues and find strategies to overcome them and grow personally in life, that’s a big benefit. (R.R.)

Confidence for sure. I’ve been working better with groups since then. I’ve been taking more of a leadership role for sure and like I can talk to people, like I can make conversation easier now because I feel like I’m in (pause) like I’m in the (pause) in the society, like I feel more involved...I’ve been able to step up when I have to and...still feel more in my skin, you know, Black, confident…you know the racial stuff is happening now, some people might feel scared to be Black or you know, to look away from it, but I feel more confident. I feel better being Black (A.N)

In order for teachers and the students themselves to develop the ability to identify clear and purposeful rationale for the oppositional behaviours, the analysis of the behaviours need to be reframed. Knight Abowitz (2000) states that “the opposition of some groups against others is politically and morally necessary in social institutions where mainstream ideologies dominate to discipline participants and social norms” (p. 877). However, resistance that is not informed, constructive or transformative does little to “examine the oppositional acts of students in school settings as moral and political acts of opposition… (that can) lead to a more relational reading of resistance and can promote school based inquiry (Knight Abowitz, 2000, p. 877) or support the positive development of the students.

An additional aspect of their development is that the students come to know themselves in positive ways, which leads to higher levels of engagement:

The leadership for sure. The identity, the role-modeling…just getting to know Black, you know what it is to be Black, you know, what we came from, we’re powerful and so you know being able to use that power for good, you know. We are always noticed because we’re Black so now to be noticed for positivity, and so that’s that, yeah. (A.N)

She (the teacher) picks on me first. She goes um “what do you know about such and such” and I said honestly I don’t know because I did not get a
chance to do it...and then her remark was “oh well maybe you should go try another class or something”. And I’m like, oh really! So because of that I sat there, like I was silenced for the whole class literally...After class another girl came to me. She’s white, Caucasian or whatever and she was like “honestly, thank you for that” She like, “I like how you carried your way and how you just sat there and took everything in and just let it slide because honestly I didn’t do the work either and lot’s of people didn’t do it either so thank you for taking one for the team”...If I wanted I could have pointed everybody else out...(but) I just sat down and I’m like you know what, its fine. Its whatever, just let it slide...in the past like I would have been toe to toe with other professors, other students and it just got me nowhere so I’m like you know what, sometimes you just have to sit down, take a back seat and just let it be. (D.B.)

The two quotes above highlight the changes that the students experience in terms of their self-identity, their roles and levels of engagement in the school environment, their ability to interact with others and their ability to manage conflicts differently. The management of the conflict gets linked to changing perceptions of self and a conscious choice to challenge the prevailing markers of Blackness.

Another participant stated:

The question that comes up a lot for my first year was “is racism going to stop” and every time I heard that question, it’s like I wanted to scream, I wanted to yell, and I wanted to cuss a nasty show. The stigma of us about Black people being rude and ignorant like that was what the anger that I would have portrayed...I’m slowly learning how to deal with those kinds of situations without being irritated or just keeping my mouth shut. (T.A.)

The students are supported in identifying strategies for effectively engaging with their environment, thus limiting their engagement with behaviours that can negatively impact on them academically or personally.

The Need for Safe Spaces for Positive Racial and Academic Identity Development

The importance of having a space where students can discuss their experiences without the need for censoring themselves, fear of offending others and to explore new identity options, emerged as another theme. Canada prides itself on having a multicultural mosaic where each group is afforded the legally protected right to maintain their original cultural, religious and social heritages. Theoretically, there is no significant push to adopt “Canadian” cultural patterns. In addition to the ideals of multiculturalism, the Canadian ethic is heavily invested in the construct of colour-blindness. This investment in colour blindness is deployed
quite strategically in that any claims to develop specialized services for racially marginalized groups can result in varying levels of social outcry and the continued investment in the idea that “we don’t see colour”. Therefore, if we don't see colour, the negative experiences that racially minoritized groups undergo can be explained as anecdotal and individual occurrences that are not emblematic of any social patterns of discrimination. Further to this, the investment in liberalist notions of meritocracy are deployed which speak to the failure on the part of the individual, community or group to avail themselves of the opportunities that are made available to all Canadians. Another strategy of resistance and critique to the naming of race or attempts to develop specialized programming to ameliorate the impact of socially sanctioned discrimination, is the cry of reverse discrimination/racism and the return to segregationist practices. Each of these tropes are problematic on multiple levels but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

The Bridge program was designed and developed specifically for students who identify as African, Black and Caribbean and of African racial ancestry, which challenged the Canadian illusion of colourblindness. The development of the program resulted in the targeting of students who registered for the program by their peers, both Black and White. The Black students who challenged the development of the program employed many of the aforementioned tropes but also indicated that the program was not being developed for “real Black” students because The Bridge focused on success. Other Black students did not join the program for fear of losing their non-Black friends and fear of reprisals from their peers. Further to this, the Black students also spoke to the idea that the students and coordinators of the Bridge program (all of whom are Black) felt that they “were better than other Black people”. The students who joined the program and started applying for and receiving scholarships, were also marginalized by other Black students who did not want to associate with them because they no longer “acted Black” or in other words were “acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2010; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). The response on the part of the Black students is evidence of the internalization of racism that plagues all too many members of Black communities living in a White dominated society.

The responses of some of the White students included open dissension to the idea of having a program for Black students when, according to their narrative, there was no programming in place for White students. In addition, some of the students wrote racist letters and took to Facebook to criticize the program. There were also claims that the Black students who had won academic scholarships had only done so because their grades had been inflated. Another site of targeting was the faculty members involved in the program and the verbal put-downs of The Bridge students. Many of their behaviours were clearly in contravention of school policies, harassment and racial targeting. According to one Bridge student:

“I mean a lot of the drawbacks that The Bridge has faced was mostly put over social media via Facebook, uhh, Instagram. It was just people stating their opinion on you know, The Bridge isn’t fair and if I’m not Black I can’t
get the same opportunities, this and that. You know people create their own rumors about The Bridge and what they think it’s set up to do for Black students. Umm, some students may get the impression that we’re plotting to be better than other minorities and umm, you know, but that’s just what you have to face right?” (S.A.)

These experiences are highlighted here to support the theme that emerged from the research regarding the need for a safe space where Black students can go to feel a sense of safety and security to develop coping strategies. The need for a space where they could retire and not have to deal with the feeling of being targeted was important for the participants. The participants were asked the following question, “Do you think The Bridge program would have been as useful for you had it been open to all students?” A variation of the question was also asked during the focus groups. All of the participants clearly indicated that had the program been open to all students, it would not have been beneficial to them or they would not have continued to come. When pressed for clarification on their position, the participants indicated that they believed that opportunities should be provided for different groups to have a space where they could discuss issues that are relevant to their group. In addition, the students indicated that an integrated group would have replicated the dynamics in the classroom and they would have felt disempowered, judged and relegated to the marginal spaces in the classroom. They spoke to the ways in which they experienced the classrooms as disempowering, particularly when discussions about race came up. The participants further highlighted their experiences of racism, racial targeting and being dismissed by non-Black students. They spoke of feeling judged and belittled by their peers and not feeling supported or that they could approach their professors for support. The classroom emerged as an unsafe space where, as it became more uncomfortable for them to be there, they avoided attending classes, thus resulting in further academic and personal sense of failure. The Bridge provided them with the necessary supports to enable them to more effectively navigate the classroom and the larger campus contexts.

The Bridge program sessions were described as a space and place of safety where they did not have to justify, defend or explain their experiences of racism and marginalization. There was a shared sense of understanding and acceptance of the voracity of their claims. There were other students who had shared similar experiences and were able to provide them with strategies that they had used, both successfully and unsuccessfully. The Bridge provided them with a space where they could ask questions and access supports. They spoke of the feeling of safety that the program provided and most importantly the expectation that they would be successful. According to one focus group participant:

The experience that I had from being involved in the Bridge program highlighted for me what I had been missing throughout my schooling career. The space was supportive and people expected you to be successful. (V.W.)
Another student spoke of ‘The Bridge Culture’ (C.G.) which he and others described as the message that he was capable and would be successful. The participants reinforced the idea that The Bridge environment provided them with a community of success where their achievements were celebrated and highlighted. The participants reinforced the idea that The Bridge environment spoke to their success and possibilities, which was, again, identified as unique for them given the normativity of messages of failure. In essence, The Bridge normalized success and excellence for the Black students, thus changing the narrative.

The participants indicated that the presence of non-Black students in the program would take the attention and focus away from their personal development because they would censor their comments for fear of offending others or they would hesitate to participate because they believed that non-Black students would not be able to understand their experiences, since they would not have the same, or similar frames of reference. The presence of non-Black students would replicate the silencing experience of the regular classroom and would have limited their willingness to explore different ideas, understandings and possibilities.

When participants were questioned about the reason why they kept coming to The Bridge despite being targeted by other students, they stated The Bridge environment reinforced for them the importance of recognizing that there will always be challenges and the importance of finding strategies for dealing with those challenges, rather than choosing forms of terminal resistance they would have previously adopted, such as avoiding classes. Further to this, their success would be the venue through which they voiced their forms of transformative resistance, which they had come to see as a more effective strategy for dealing with challenges. In addition, the participants had come to regard the challenges to their involvement as simply an example of real-life challenges they would have to face and used their participation in the program as an opportunity to develop, explore and share strategies that would foster their growth, development and resilience, which they could then transfer to their broader world. The resistance they faced from non-Bridge Black and White students emboldened them to navigate the world in positive and transformative ways. Their successes, they felt, would speak to their possibilities and would eventually silence the critics. The participants also indicated their willingness to go out and recruit future participants for the program to ensure that the incoming students would also have a space of safety, growth, support and a community of success where “Black excellence was the norm”— a statement that had become central to the program.

**Conclusion**

The Bridge program was started as a pilot project aimed at increasing Black student engagement, retention and graduation. The research component involved a series of individual and focus group interviews along with pre-and post-questionnaires. Based on the responses from the participants, three of the main themes that were identified included ensuring that students were presented with more realistic and comprehensive models of Blackness that allowed them to recast Blackness in frames that were positive and which
focused on success. The second theme, transformative resistance, was identified as an important strategy for the students to develop and employ to ensure that in their attempts to challenge the system, they engaged in behaviours that transformed their interactions with the space and resulted in positive changes in the space as well. The students recognized the differences between transformative resistances that underscored their resiliency and capacity versus the more terminal forms of resistance they had adopted before participating in the program. A third theme that was highlighted was the importance of having a safe space where they could critically analyze their own behaviours and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues of racism, power and oppression. This space allowed them to explore the new identities they were casting or molding for themselves while employing strengths and success based frames and narratives.

The Bridge program highlights the importance of providing intentional programming for Black students to support them in navigating post-secondary educational spaces. In addition, the program underscores what those of us who live and work in Black communities have always known – there is nothing wrong with Black students - it is the systems of oppression in place that continue to undermine their options for success. When effective, focused programming is implemented that centralizes the importance of the experiences of Black students and provides them with options for success, these students can and will succeed in exceptional ways.
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