

“Education will get you to the station”:  
MARGINALIZED STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES  
AND PERCEPTIONS OF MERIT IN ACCESSING  
UNIVERSITY

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This article explores how four minority students in a university access program reconciled their presence on merit. They shared their experiences over two years through their application statements, life history interviews, weekly group sessions, and personal journal entries. Consistent with the discourse of merit, participants believed that by exercising agency and taking responsibility for their schooling, education will work to their benefit. They reconceptualized the access program as a scholarship program and affirmed pride in being university students, with a sense of obligation to their immigrant parents and a desire to give back to their communities.

Key words: immigrant youth, access programs, racism, parental expectations

Les auteurs analysent comment quatre étudiants faisant partie de groupes minoritaires et participant à un programme d'accès à l'université réconcilient leur présence au mérite. Ces étudiants partagent leurs expériences par divers moyens : textes rédigés lors de leurs demandes d'admission, entrevues portant sur leur histoire de vie, sessions hebdomadaires en groupe et journaux intimes. Dans le droit fil du discours sur le mérite, les participants croient que s'ils prennent leur éducation en main, elle leur sera profitable. Ils reconceptualisent le programme d'accès comme un programme de bourse; se disant fiers d'aller à l'université, ils se sentent redevables à l'égard de leurs parents immigrants et souhaitent faire profiter leurs communautés de leur acquis.

Mots clés: jeunes immigrants, programmes d'accès, racisme, attentes des parents

*Lewis: Education will get you to the station. While little education will get you near the station [like high school], the more education you get, gets you to the platform. There might be a barrier that won't let you onto the actual train. But education can get you that far. But at least you're there – but you have the opportunity to jump onto the train and sure there are roadblocks there, but at least you're on the platform and you're equal to everyone else and you can get on the train.*

*Tristana: I completely understand what you're saying. But if you think about the increase in education for minority kids – before, there was segregation in schools, so white and Black kids got different types of education. With desegregation you're seeing more minorities getting education. But do you see the balance in jobs? Do you see Black CEOs? Do you see women CEOs? Do you see a change in the demographics of who holds jobs?*

**Several participants remarked at once:** *But that's changing though...*

*Tristana: But it's not changing drastically in terms of education policy. I understand education can get you to the station . . . but you have no ticket.*

In the above dialogue between Lewis and Tristana<sup>1</sup> (part of a discussion among a group of racial minority or marginalized first-year university students), Lewis used the train as a metaphor to represent the journey towards one's career destination. He argued that education – the “ticket” that brings everyone to the same starting point – requires maneuvers in terms of effort, skill, perseverance, and anticipation (such as jumping “onto the train”) to successfully negotiate the barriers (or “roadblocks”) to social mobility. In contrast, Tristana posited that even with their efforts and perseverance, racialized individuals like them might not gain access to prestigious jobs like their majority group peers because there are “different types” of tickets (i.e., education) depending on individuals' social, economic, cultural, and familial circumstances. Tristana's critical position is at variance with the optimism shared by Lewis and other members of the group, who claimed that times are changing.

Ostensibly, Lewis and his peers subscribed to the common belief that education is an equalizer that, if accessed, would not only provide individuals with knowledge and skills, but also guarantee more life opportunities, fuller participation in society, and upward social mobility (Forcese, 1997; Lessard, 1995; López, 2002; Portelli & Solomon, 2001). The

dialogue also indicates, however, that these students understood education does not come without challenges, nor is success guaranteed, particularly for those who are faced with race, class, and gender barriers (Frenette, 2007; Henry & Tator 1994; James & Haig-Brown, 2001; Kazis, Vargas, & Hoffman, 2004; Law, Phillips, & Turney, 2004).

Further, this sense of their possibilities can be related to the "community cultural wealth" upon which they draw. According to Yosso (2005) community cultural wealth is "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and microforms of oppression" (p. 77). She identifies six forms of community cultural wealth – aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital. She writes:

These forms of capital are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth. For example, aspirational capital is the ability to hold on to hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality. Yet, aspirations are developed within social and familial contexts, often through linguistic storytelling and advice . . . that offer specific navigational goals and challenge (resist) oppressive conditions. (Yosso, 2005, p. 77)

In this article, we discuss the perceptions and expectations of four (out of the first cohort of twelve students in 2001) marginalized<sup>2</sup> students in an access program (Lewis, Tristana, Beth, and Peter) who, over a two-year period, shared their experiences of attending a large metropolitan university. The pilot program, *Bridging the Solitudes*, was developed not only to address the barriers these youth faced in accessing postsecondary education,<sup>3</sup> but also to ensure that they remained fully engaged in the courses they selected to realize their educational goals.

This was not a transition program in which students are supported in meeting university entry requirements (see Brathwaite, 2003). Eligible participants had to meet the admission criteria for the university program in which they might not have otherwise participated because of institutional barriers, as well as familial, social, cultural, and financial circumstances. Access, therefore, meant the opportunity to attend university based on expressed interest, having a high-school diploma, being recommended by a teacher, school counsellor, or community

worker, and getting financial support. A program coordinator assisted participants with program and administrative issues, and a research assistant facilitated weekly group meetings or common hour sessions (which were part of the data gathering process), acted as a mentor, helped with course selections, as well as with institutional (especially coursework) and familial issues. As researchers and professors, we also participated in the common hour sessions and counselled participants on academic issues, intervened in problems with administrators, and helped them get into courses or talk with faculty about problems participants might have with their classes.

In this article, we focus on participants' conceptualization of merit and on our observation that they expended a considerable amount of energy trying to reconcile their experiences as students who were qualified for postsecondary education with the fact that they gained admission to university through an access program. They believed that having met the admission requirements and academic expectations – i.e., having the required education (“ticket”) and putting out the appropriate effort in addition to their demonstrated abilities, skills, potential, and motivation – meant that their presence in university was based on merit. This understanding of merit is part of the fiction or myth through which systems of inequity are maintained (Henry & Tator, 2006; Kazis et al., 2004; Orfield & Miller, 1998). In fact, as Forcese (1997) points out, educational institutions function as “gatekeepers to ‘success’,” and “where formal education may permit some mobility, it does not secure equal opportunity for all classes in Canada” (p. 128). Therefore, although some racialized and working-class students attain postsecondary education, it does not alter the fact that educational institutions generally serve to reinforce and perpetuate the relative advantages of middle-and upper-class people, particularly those of European background (Forcese, 1997, p. 128).

In this work, we reflect on the seeming contradiction in Lewis' and his peers' understanding of merit and the realities of their racialized existence in a discursive space where racism operates to produce “a terrain of tension and conflict . . . in the everyday experiences of minority students” (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 223). They engaged in a particular discourse of merit that reflects an accepted association between their

beliefs and activities and how they identify as members of a social group (Gee 1996). Their discourse is embedded in individual identities and practices and as such, are dynamic and inconsistent, inevitably producing conflicts and tensions in individuals' values, beliefs, attitudes, moral choices, language use, actions, and ways of being in the world (Gee 1996; Henry & Tator, 2006). Their particular locations, as well as their personal, family, and community histories frame their discourse.

For these students, how they take up the discourse of merit is related to the fact that they are in a period of transition, a period in which they might be experiencing cultural conflicts of identity and self-image arising from the discontinuity between the cultural values and expectations of their homes, concomitant beliefs about the role of education, and the meanings they perceive to be associated with being full-time university students (Presmeg, 2002). They, therefore, functioned with an understanding of merit that reflected, among other things, what is most expedient for their survival as students as they resolved the conflict between their belief in meritocracy and their marginalized position. Accordingly, they had the option to accept, reject, and/or compartmentalize the various meanings or discourses of meritocracy. What becomes particularly evident in this process is the assertion by some that "things are changing" – their presence in university is a reflection that society is beginning to function on the basis of merit. This conventional understanding of merit (or at least telling themselves that meritocracy works) supports a belief that their work and the treatment they received from their instructors were based primarily on their abilities and performance, unaffected by their marginalized position. To do otherwise risks acknowledging that their own and/or their parents' immigrant dreams of success may not be realized (see James, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001).

Tristana, in contrast, rejected the notion of merit that Lewis articulated, arguing that inequity and racism are structural realities hence a limit to social mobility for minorities, even through education. Nevertheless, she was pursuing postsecondary education with the expectation of success. It is possible, then, that she was compartmentalizing her understandings – keeping "different values in different mental compartments, to be used in the appropriate different socio-cultural contexts"

(Presmeg, 2002, p. 217). Clearly, negotiating these students' university education requires an understanding of the complex and delicate relationship between structure and agency, and how students construe it depends on their sense of identity and the meanings they construct from their experiences. To a large extent, students' development of a healthy socio-cultural identity during this period of transition depends on the extent to which the meanings they give to their experiences are "*perceived* to be shared, whether or not the deeper significance of these meanings is compatible" (Presmeg, 2002, p. 219, emphasis in original).

In proceeding, we first present a profile of the four participants and then discuss the three themes that emerged from our interviews and discussions. These themes are conceptualizing merit, taking advantage of opportunities, acting on what education makes possible, and how education enables them to fulfill their sense of obligation to their parents and communities.

#### GETTING THE STORIES

The stories of Lewis, Tristana, Beth, and Peter are based on their application statements, data collected during weekly, common hour sessions, individual life history interviews, and personal journals kept specifically for the purpose of the research. Participants received an honorarium of \$2,000 each year<sup>4</sup> for participating in the common hour. Three individual interviews occurred over two years – once when they entered the program and at the end of their first and second years. The interviews and common hour sessions were tape-recorded and transcribed with signed consent.

Our analysis proceeded in stages. From our initial reading of the applications, we identified themes particular to participants' personal circumstances in the areas of schooling and work experiences, progress toward high-school graduation, educational and occupational aspirations, family characteristics, and community involvement. We used the life history interviews to explore themes, noting variations, and to identify additional themes to pursue. We analyzed the data from participants' journals and the common hour discussions<sup>5</sup> in sequence, scrutinizing what they documented about their emotional, educational, social, and familial experiences. Periodically, those of us working with the

common hour sessions met to discuss emergent themes and to incorporate them into subsequent interviews and meetings. Eventually, we used the coded themes to develop a profile of each student that allowed us to cross-reference themes and examine how students expressed and interpreted their experiences.

In working with participants' stories, particularly how they described their worlds, we took an approach in which we abandoned attempts to treat their accounts "as potentially 'true' pictures of 'reality,'" hence opening up for analysis "the culturally rich methods through which interviewers and interviewees, in concert, generate plausible accounts of the world" (Silverman, 2000, p. 823; see also Snyder, 2005). As such, we do not consider what the participants told us as mere descriptions of the contexts in which they existed, but as complex interpretations of their situations that were mediated by particular social, economic, cultural, and political structures (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Denzin, 1997; López, 2002; Munro, 1998). Further, the stories of these students reflect change, growth, contradiction, tension, and conflict that continually factored into their evolving experiences, aspirations, and goals (see James, 1997; James, 2005a). As well, their stories provided a view of how their marginalized position as ethnic and racial minority, working-class, immigrant, and second-generation individuals contributes to the complex challenges they faced in university and within their families.

The common hours, in particular, not only served as mentoring sessions, but also enabled participants to have, as Madriz (2000) would say, a transformative collective experience where giving testimony contributed to their empowerment in a dynamic way insofar as "social empowerment enables people to speak and speaking empowers" (Benmayer in Madriz, 2000, p. 843). During these common hours, participants made sense of their experiences, especially of marginalization, by speaking and engaging collectively with peers they came to know and with whom they identified (Gonzalez 2001; Madriz, 2000).

We recognize that the participants' stories are mediated by their perceptions of us as individuals within the university system working variously as researchers, research assistants, and professors. Although we had an authority relationship, social class and educational differences

notwithstanding, we also shared an ethno-racial minority status that has placed us at some level as outsiders to the institution. On this basis, we sought to build a relationship through which participants would be comfortable not only to share their experiences but also to permit us to act as mentors and/or advisors as they negotiated and navigated the university system. Although participants did respond to our invitation to share their stories, thus indicating faith in our doing justice to their experiences, as Delgado-Gaitan (1994) writes, "as trusting as the relationship may be" between the researcher and participants, "it does not eliminate the problematics of representation" that haunt all socially conscious researchers (p. 301).

#### THE PARTICIPANTS

##### *Lewis*

Born in Ghana, Lewis immigrated to Canada with his mother when he was eight years old, leaving behind four older brothers. Growing up alone with his mother, to whom he was very close, Lewis knew she had high expectations for him to attend university. From the beginning of the project, Lewis was one of the most outspoken participant, and he displayed his strong ambition to succeed. He intended to pursue his degree in both Political Science and Law and Society – fields in which Black males are underrepresented. Lewis, a nominated high-school valedictorian, entered university with considerable volunteer experience and became involved in various student associations through which he organized activities for Black students.

##### *Tristana*

Tristana, the youngest of three children (all girls), was the only one born in Canada. Her family emigrated from El Salvador in the late 1970s. Highly outgoing, like Lewis, her awareness of the challenges and discriminatory barriers she faced as an Hispanic woman came through in her candid comments about herself and her family for whom she had deep commitment and love. Tristana lived with her mother and worked in her mother's small beauty shop located in a low-income, high-immigrant neighborhood in downtown Toronto. Prior to attending university, Tristana completed esthetician courses. She entered univer-



sity with the intention of studying Law and Society with a minor in mathematics. But she switched to sociology because, "Math is not going to make me a better person." Enrolled in courses such as "Racism and the Law" and "Women's Studies," Tristana routinely shared her views on the revolutionary potential of groups and the value of social movements that she sought out during her time at the university. Her decision to attend university was highly influenced by her mother who placed a strong value on education and who would "give up everything" to see her daughters succeed.

*Beth*

Born in Dar es Salem, Tanzania, Beth immigrated to Canada as a young child with her mother and sister after her father passed away, when she was two years old. She grew up with her mother, grandmother, and sister, who is older by 10 years and who has played a significant role in Beth's upbringing, often making sacrifices in her own education to support Beth. Identifying as "African-Indian," Beth described her family (particularly her mother, uncle, and sister) as being very insistent on her education, explaining that she "had no choice" but to attend university, and that the pressure persisted because "the stakes are higher now." Beth had always wanted to be a teacher and, after her second year at university, enrolled in the Concurrent Education Program.

*Peter*

Peter's mother immigrated to Canada from St. Kitts because she saw Canada as a place in which her future children could receive a good education. His mother's confidence in the Canadian educational system might have played a role in Peter's "quite positive" schooling experiences. He became "the first Black president" of his high school and received various accolades and awards as well as glowing recommendations from teachers and work supervisors, especially pertaining to his leadership skills. He had also worked part-time within union organizations. Like Beth, Peter (the younger of two boys) came to university with the aspiration to teach, enrolling in the Concurrent Education Program after his second year.

In sum, all four students were born in 1982, had immigrant parents, lived in the Toronto area, and entered university immediately after high school. They came from working-class, single-mother families, a situation that contributed to their inability to afford postsecondary education without financial assistance. Because the participants were the youngest children in their families, and hence the “last” child, the parents’ hopes for their children would “end with them.”

#### CONCEPTUALIZING MERIT

Studies indicate that in institutions and programs where access or affirmative action initiatives exist, race (i.e., especially in the case of Blacks) is often used as a signifier of “access student” status (Brathwaite, 2003; Feagin, Hernan, & Imani, 1996; Gonzales, 2001; James, 1997; Sleeter, 1994). Participants in such programs struggle to establish a sense of belonging amid the questions and doubts about their academic qualification and intellectual abilities expressed by both peers and instructors. The idea that access to university is based on merit and excellence informs the stories that the participants tell, and that those who gain entry have successfully completed high school and met the admission requirements of the university. In the transitioning period to university, participants used their academic performance to deal with the contradictions and conflicts they would have experienced if they subscribed to being access students.

Hence, in the first interviews and common hour sessions, participants referred to the project as a “scholarship program” constructing the \$2,000 they received annually not as aid support but as a scholarship – an indication that they *earned* their place in university on the basis of merit, as demonstrated through their academic abilities, skills, and potential. Lewis declared: “Receiving this scholarship would enable me to pursue my dreams of becoming a respected professional, and help[ing] others.” Conceived this way, the opportunities the project provided helped participants build confidence and pride in themselves, knowing that their achievements were *not* the result of a handout or special privilege, but given to them by the university, which only provides such support to eligible and worthy individuals on the basis of merit. To their parents, the scholarship also brought pride and honour.

As Tristana related, "My decision to come to [this university] is heavily based on my older sister and this scholarship."

In addition to being "scholarship" holders, Lewis, Tristana, Beth, and Peter also positioned themselves as active and participating members in the research project. They often used the weekly sessions as an opportunity to benefit themselves and their respective communities. For example, they would network and support each other, express their concerns and fears, obtain assistance with their coursework, seek and offer help on how to approach teaching assistants and professors, and share what they knew about the university's administrative policies and practices. Also, they often offered more than what was expected from their experiences and volunteered suggestions and advice that they felt would make their experiences more useful to the research program.

Even as participants rationalized their presence in university and the value of the education they were pursuing, Tristana consistently reminded her peers of the perceived contradiction their presence in university signaled in relation to the discourse of merit. "But doesn't it bother you guys that this system has oppressed your people, our people? I come from a country where the Americans basically slaughtered my people. Doesn't this bother you that this is a system where you are saying you want to become top dog?" Although Tristana's comments likely represent her own struggles, they also point to the conflict that students like her experience as they deal with the juxtaposition of the discourses of merit and those of marginalization and racialization – their social reality. In admitting to the contradictions, Beth felt that "there's nothing you can do . . . you just have to conform" to get ahead.

To an extent, then, some participants survived their university experience by compartmentalizing their concerns about the discourse of merit and expectations related to their presence in university. In so doing, they affirmed their integrity and legitimacy by projecting their individual success and by extension, the success of their families and communities. In this way, they remained invested in what Yosso (2005) refers to as "aspirational capital" – that is, "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers," allowing themselves "to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances," even without the "objective means" to attain their educa-

tional goals (p. 78). Although, for example, she pointed out that her mom was single, worked part time, and could not afford tuition fees, Beth nevertheless lived with the dream of getting to university and prepared herself to do so.

#### TAKING ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES

Beginning with their application to the project, these participants consistently tried to demonstrate their resilience and optimism, asserting that the difficulties they experienced in life had not deterred or prevented them from making efforts toward attaining their goals. Peter used the metaphor of “a poker game” to capture this idea. In his application to the project, he wrote:

Successfully dealing with adversity is one of the most quintessential characteristics in succeeding in life. Life is like a poker game, some people are dealt flushes while others are lucky to leave the table with their shirts on their backs. I consider myself a person who makes the best of the cards I am dealt under any circumstances. (Peter's written application)

Peter's references to “poker game” and to “luck” indicate his understanding that not everything is within an individual's control; in any context limitations occur because structural forces are at play. He was aware, as were the others, that they must exercise initiative and have strategies if they are to successfully negotiate and navigate these forces. Rather than surrender to the limitations inherent in their marginalized social position, the participants, like good “poker players,” actively sought to take advantage of the opportunities offered them. As Lewis explained in an interview, “‘Bridging’ was a good opportunity. When I saw the chance I took it not really knowing what to expect, then I got into it and I saw what I can get out of it.”

Understandably, as all four participants admitted, succeeding in university cannot be left to chance; it involves making choices such as cutting oneself off from “potentially negative influences.” For instance, Lewis explained that he ended some high-school friendships because he believed they were not helpful to his educational endeavour. And although he liked the social aspects of school as well as “to party,” he reasoned that “you want to be in a boat with others who are paddling,

not people who are just going to chill." Furthermore, just as a boat needs to be paddled to avoid becoming adrift in an uncertain future, he needed to direct his own progress. We found that as the participants transitioned to university, they developed ways to effectively negotiate peer pressure and avoid situations that would place them off-course, particularly in cases where they had different ambitions from those of their friends. For these students, then, the weekly sessions with their peers, who were "in the same boat," were quite significant because, as Beth pointed out, they could affirm each other in "what you're doing right, [and] what you're doing wrong," as well as offer each other "the courage to be different" (Presmeg, 2002, p. 215).

Further, the participants understood that their success in university not only depended on their ability to navigate peer networks, but also on their ability to effectively deal with institutional racism and sexism (Yosso, 2005). They took the position that their presence in university was a form of resistance to these forces; nevertheless, they also acknowledged that they had to work harder than their majority-group peers to achieve their goals (see Hällgren, 2005). Peter articulated this reality in his application to the program when he wrote:

As a Black male I have become accustomed to several inescapable prejudices. The gazing eyes of storeowners, suspicious looks from security guards, and fearful looks from elderly women, all contribute to prejudices. Living as a Black male can be very difficult in our North American society. People are quick to assume that I am either a drug dealer or a basketball player. In running for student government I learned early that I would have to work twice as hard to prove my capability. (Peter's written application)

Although Tristana also agreed that her educational success depended on "working hard and getting the results," she, more than the others, placed an emphasis on her willpower. As she put it, "years at [high school] have taught me that I have no limitations, and that if I have the will and the motivation to succeed, I will."

These youth believed that through individual effort and willpower, their network of university colleagues, and their strong belief in education, they could successfully negotiate university and attain their educational goals. Conversely, they recognized that racism and sexism could

operate to thwart their achievements; for this reason, they said that they had to work extra hard and prove themselves. This strategy of working diligently – indeed many of their strategies – emerged from their understanding that they were not playing on a level playing field; consequently, they engaged in their postsecondary education, not simply as members of a “minority culture” but as “cultural workers,” working to transform their educational environment so that they might be able to have an easier time (Gonzales, 2001, p. 554). Drawing on their abilities and navigational capital to maneuver their way through the institution, they sought to “sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place[d] them at risk of doing poorly at school” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

#### ACTING ON WHAT EDUCATION MAKES POSSIBLE

In his application to the project, Peter wrote: “I am also a firm believer that many of the world’s problems can be combated through education and knowledge.” The others expressed similar sentiments. Tristana, in particular, explained that unless she acted with a qualified understanding of the efficacy of education, then her future possibilities would be severely limited:

As a Hispanic woman, I am increasingly aware that higher education does not necessarily equate a quality occupation for myself in the future. But I am definitely aware that without higher education I would definitely fall into believing in my own inferiority which those in power continually attempt to stamp on me . . . . Thus without education I would have no power to fight against those that would try to oppress and belittle me. (Tristana, journal entry)

Tristana and others expected their university education to provide them not only with career opportunities, but also with critical thinking and problem-solving skills, institutional (navigational) knowledge, competence in communication, and access to the power necessary to combat the racism, sexism, and discrimination they faced in their communities and elsewhere. As Tristana explained during a common hour, “Education is important ‘cause it makes you more aware of where we are in society and of how people are trying to take advantage of us.” And, as she wrote in one of her journal entries:

My expectation of university is to receive a good education and life experience in order to increase my chances of social mobility . . . . More importantly university teaches a way of thinking and living. My goal was to receive skills in critical thinking . . . . Going to university also fights issues of racism, sexism, etc. that suppresses my family and people like me. Thus, university empowers me. (Tristana, journal entry)

This idea of empowerment through education is a common refrain among immigrant young people, particularly as they story how they intend to surmount marginalization and racialization in their bid to gain social mobility.

*Fulfilling Sense of Obligation to Their Parents and Communities*

Closely related to the participants' understanding of what education can do for them is their belief that education would enable them to fulfill their parents' expectations and the needs of their communities – all of which were motivating factors. This understanding is consistent with the fact that they received "strong support" and validation for their educational ambitions from their families (Fuligni, 1998, p. 134; see also Dinovitzer, Hagan, & Parker, 2003; López, 2002). Peter explained that his mother came from St. Kitts because she "wanted us born here," into a system of "adequate recognized education." Similarly, Lewis said his mother told him on several occasions: "I didn't come over here in this cold weather for you to play ball." In discouraging Lewis from "playing ball," his mother was alluding to the stereotypes of Black males as athletes whose efforts in the sports arena often operate to side-track them from their education and hence limit their career options (James, 2005b). Tristana's mother encouraged her daughter to seek an education that would allow her to escape from the aesthetic/hairdressing business where her mother and sisters worked. In response, Tristana enrolled in sociology, a field seemingly far removed from hairdressing, but one that Tristana felt still enabled her to meet the persisting needs of her community and of other racialized and low income communities. Similarly, Beth saw becoming a teacher as providing the opportunity to become "financially stable," something she did not have while growing up.

"University," she felt, enabled her "to be somebody" and helped her to assist "inner-city kids" with whom she worked.

The aspirations and expectations that these parents had for their children were likely influenced by the parents' middle- or working-class background in their country of origin, their experiences in Canada as immigrants and racialized people, and their downward social mobility as immigrants. Although we did not probe for the participants' parents' class background in their country of origin, it became clear through our exchanges that their parents were of middle-class backgrounds or lived with middle-class values that they effectively communicated to their children, especially that education was the means to make opportunities possible. Therefore, the high educational aspirations for participants was, in part, a way to help their parents (if only vicariously) to rehabilitate the middle-class status they lost through immigration, or attain the middle-class status that eluded them in their country of origin.

With such context, it is not surprising, therefore, that making their families proud through their university education became an important theme in participants' discussions. College "was not an option" because it would not have provided the recognized education, better opportunities, and futures that their mothers wished for them and that they desired for themselves. Lewis wrote in his journal, "I came to university because that was where I was supposed to go." And later, "University to me is synonymous with pride." Similarly, Tristana wrote, "University also is a source of pride for me and creates a positive impact to my neighborhood, family, friends, etc." But this pride did not come simply from their attendance at university on scholarship, but also from the credit, respect, and status that their families gained for their achievements from their respective ethno-racial community. Tristana wrote in her journal, "Being in university gives my family status and pride with[in] our community."

Although their communities could not give them the mainstream cultural capital to support their progression from high school to university, all four participants felt that the nurturance and support they received from their communities contributed to their achievements. Peter recalled the role his community played in motivating him to run for his high-school student council:



I was motivated not only to win for myself, but also to win as an inspiration for other potential young Black leaders. After being elected Vice-President of the Student Council, I became a role model for several Black males wishing to pursue more active roles in student government. At that time, I never once entertained the idea of running for school president. It was not until a boy in grade 11 who I had never met stopped me in the hallway and said 'Peter, you're a great leader and an inspiration to every student in the school.' Those are words that will stay with me for the rest of my life. It was then that I decided to run for school President. I realized that one person really could make a difference and I became the first African-Canadian President of the Student Council. (Peter's written application)

Like Peter, the other participants believed that they had a responsibility to "give back" to their communities so that they could help to "make a difference." This sense of "obligation and duty" to their respective families and communities, as Fuligni (1998) suggests, functions as a "driving force in the lives of adolescents from immigrant families" (p. 141).

The link participants felt toward their respective communities also played out in their choice of educational program which they based on the perceived needs of the community and on their own experiences, skills, abilities, and interests. For example, Peter's interest in and involvement with school government, his responsibilities as a role model, and his desire to effect change contributed to his aspiration to become a teacher. Likewise, from her time spent volunteering with youth in schools, Beth developed her interest in pursuing a teaching career. And Lewis' volunteer work at local community centres, seniors' homes, and at his church, as well as his experience as vice-president of the Boy's Athletic Association at his high school, led to his interest in law as a profession. It is "a profession that I feel is extremely under-represented by minorities," he said, so he decided early that "I will garner the resources I have, to help the less privileged of our society. I will gather all the linguistic and communication abilities I have gained from my university education to advocate for justice." But these participants did not wait until after graduation to begin giving back to their communities. Throughout her attendance at university, Beth volunteered as a tutor in her former public school and worked with a not-for-profit community

organization that assisted new immigrants in Toronto. Towards the end of her participation in the project, Tristana indicated that she wanted to set up forums to address racism in her community. Lewis, who became highly involved with various African-Canadian organizations on campus, was instrumental in starting a group designed to help Black university students organize, network, and enter areas of law and politics.

Although these youth, in the pursuit of an education, lived with contradictions inherent in notions of meritocracy, such a pursuit seemed to be well worth their efforts because of what education would enable them to give back to their communities. As Lewis said, "I feel that this scholarship will help me initially, then hopefully it will eventually help others as I give back to the community." And elaborating further on the multiplier effect of the scholarship and education, Lewis contended that in giving back to his community, he would be helping "whoever helped me get wherever I was. So when I'm stable I want to give back to those who gave to me so it's a nice little cycle . . . I strive to make a positive change to the school environment and to the community." Thus, these students saw themselves as entering into, and thereby expanding, the exchange of community cultural wealth. Understanding that their educational and social outcomes were closely linked to those of their families and communities, they demonstrated the importance placed on "maintaining a healthy connection to [the] community and its resources" – aspects of familial capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

## CONCLUSION

### *Overcoming Hurdles, Reconfiguring Access, Giving Back to Community*

Gaining admission to university does not guarantee that students will complete their programs or eventually realize their career or occupational goals. Nevertheless, acquiring a university education provides options and possibilities, particularly for marginalized individuals for whom racism, sexism, and classism operate as barriers to career opportunities. Resisting the effects of these barriers Tristana, Peter, Beth, and Lewis placed their trust in education, reasoning that on the basis of their intellectual abilities, their exercise of agency, and their willingness to take advantage of postsecondary opportunities, they would be in a better position to attain the social and cultural capital necessary to compete in

the job market. Through that successful competition, they believed they would be able to give back to their families and communities, to become successful professionals, and to meet their immigrant parents' expectations, hopes, and dreams of success. A fundamental feature of this thinking is the idea that within Canada's democracy, meritocracy exists and as such, education can and does serve as an equalizer.

Although aware of the structural realities of racism and other related barriers, these youth took a position, consistent with the discourse of merit: that education had worked, was working, and would continue to work for them. Within this discourse, they conceptualized the access program as a scholarship program – one that offered not only financial support, but special cohort activities for research purposes. In this regard, they maintained their integrity, pride, and family honour as well as their sense of hope. They lived with the hope of fulfilling the desires, dreams, and expectations of their immigrant parents who firmly believed that through education, their children would be better positioned to access occupational opportunities, navigate the economic, social, and political structures of society, and become responsible and contributing citizens, thereby demonstrating that discrimination could be overcome, if not by them as adults and immigrants, then by their children. As these students consistently explained, their education and success fulfilled not only their personal desires, but also their obligation to their families and the needs of their respective communities.

Our experiences with these four students, and indeed with the larger group who participated in the project, indicate that universities, in their bid to make postsecondary education accessible to marginalized students, must provide broad support. Such support should not only be financial, but also encompass regular group mentoring sessions to help students take responsibility and make sense of their experiences within university. From our observations, one issue of concern among students who participate in access programs is the apparent contradiction between their marginalized experiences participating in a program set up to address their barriers, and the discourse of merit that the university purports to uphold. That discourse holds that those who eventually get to university do so on the basis of merit because they have the skills, ability, and potential to excel. Therefore, supporting the participation of

marginalized students necessitates that universities also create and facilitate conditions that do not contradict that discourse of merit or negate students' understanding of and belief in themselves as active agents capable of achieving their goals. In failing to do so, universities risk under-mining students' integrity, sense of pride and belief in what is possible, hence hindering their successful participation and eventual completion of a university program.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> The term marginalized youth is used to refer to youth who, based on demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, social class, or immigrant origin, experience a schooling system in which they are subordinated, stigmatized, and "placed in a position of marginal importance, influence, or power" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 548).

<sup>3</sup> The CURA (Community-University Research Alliance) funded project, in part, was described as helping "to provide a career path to students from traditionally marginalised groups, . . . [and] to encourage [those] with an aptitude to achieve a post-secondary education to consider university or college as a viable part of their career paths." The program aimed to "reach out to students by a) providing a mentoring system during their post-secondary studies; b) providing opportunities for students to gain experience in the labour market; and b) reducing economic burdens on student participants through a combination of bursaries and academic credit for paid work experience" (CURA application, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> This funding was provided to the university students for three years.

<sup>5</sup> The journals were brought to the common hours and were used as reference, as well as to record their ideas and feelings that were not taken up

during the discussions or which they might not have felt comfortable discussing openly in the sessions.

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