

## “Returning the Dues:” Community and the Personal in a University-School Partnership

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This study uses interviews to explore students’ perspectives of a university path program, one initiative of a university-school partnership. Responses show that the abstraction of the program lives in concrete and personal dimensions for students as they move from high school to university in the same neighborhood. Advanced placement work at the university and the secondment of faculty from the school board blur distinctions between school and university. Most striking is the students’ desire to contribute to the community that has supported them and is most closely associated with their families, the school, and the university that lies, at least geographically, within community bounds.

But also I am thankful to be here [in Canada], so I’m paying, well, it’s not really paying back, but I want to return my dues. So if I’m not going into teaching, I’m probably going into some service field. . . . It’s very silly, but it’s deep-rooted in me that I’m thankful to be here.

—Nguyen (interview regarding the Partnership Project, December 8, 1997)

I think the two are intertwined for me because in my part-time [work], I’ve always helped at the community center and I’m always doing some sort of, I guess, teaching with young people. So I see it, if I go into the law profession, I’ll still be able to have my community because I can defend a lot of them that will be involved in the law. Or, as a high school teacher, I can still prepare them and better help them and give them the push to go on.

—Rebecca (interview regarding the Partnership Project, December 11, 1997)

While immigrants can be expected to do their part in helping their children with the difficulties they experience in the new society, [people in] the educational system also have a responsibility to cater to the needs and aspirations of immigrant students.

—James and Haig-Brown (1996 project proposal, Toronto Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement)

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Research on university-school partnerships has tended to focus on the complexities of the two educational structures with little emphasis on how such collaboration has served students. The absence of students from much academic research and writing may be partially a product of the assumption that university-school partnerships are universal—that project findings have a

generalizable significance applicable across socioeconomic, national, geographic, cultural, and historic contexts. The field or industry that has developed around creating and analyzing university-school partnerships tends not to tie its conclusions to specific, localized contexts and therefore does not refer to particular students.

For the most part, the literature reviews of university-school partnerships define the field of partnership characteristics (Clark, 1988; Stoddart, 1995; Su, 1991; Thorkildsen&Stein, 1996;Van de Water, 1989), and these discussions of what precisely partnership means pay little attention to the place or relevance of students (e.g., Clark, 1988; Goodlad, 1988; Slater, 1996;Vivian, 1986). Similarly, other works focusing on rationales emphasize benefits for university and school educators, not the students (e.g., Brookhart & Loadman, 1992; Jones&Malloy, 1988; Stoddart, 1995; Trubowitz & Longo, 1997). References to culture clash and related dissonances (e.g., Clark, 1988; Sirotnick, 1995; Sirotnick & Goodlad, 1988; Zetlin, Harris, MacLeod, & Watkins, 1992) focus on the need for intermediaries who can serve as liaisons between the school and the university. Almost without exception, students are pushed to the background of the studies if they are mentioned at all.

As a place of transition between the two cultures, the University Path Program examined in this article is a helpful site for evaluating what difference a partnership can make for students, particularly working-class immigrant and minority students whose needs are least addressed by the educational system. The experiences, perceptions, and assessments of these students are the basis of our attention here. Specifically, we seek to establish the extent to which the university-school partnership in which we have been involved over the past 6 years has been effective in providing working-class, immigrant, and minority students who eventually enter university the support they need to negotiate a program of study that reflects their needs and interests. And what role has the partnership played in the aspirations and expectations that the students construct? A final, related question for us is as follows: How has a Eurocentric upper-middle-class institution (the university) facilitated the educational growth, interests, and aspirations of working-class, immigrant, and refugee youth?

Investigating these issues and questions enabled us to identify with students the factors and strategies that help to nurture their educational and occupational goals, enabling them to acquire postsecondary credentials in today's society. Although some school boards<sup>1</sup> have undertaken initiatives designed to help students maintain high educational aspirations, very little documentation exists on the perceived effectiveness of particular strategies and programs.

### **Immigrant, Minority Students and the Canadian Educational System**

Whereas particular groups of immigrant and minority students tend to do well in school, others do poorly and eventually are pushed out (Brown, 1994; Cheng, Tsuji, Yau, & Ziegler, 1993; Cummins, 1997; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Fine, 1991; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier,&Archibald, 1997). Studies indicate that low teacher expectations, linguistic and cultural adjustments of both teachers and students, and the inability of schools to respond to cultural needs and interests have contributed to many students' feelings of alienation from school, which results in low educational attainment and eventual disengagement. Particularly significant is the situation of students in urban, working-class, and immigrant settings where the combination of family, neighborhood, and school factors act to reduce the

likelihood of their successes in school (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992; Fine & Weis, 1998; McLaren, 1998; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1998).

Despite the barriers and uncertainties, research also shows that a significant proportion of immigrant and racial minority students, supported by their parents, do aspire to postsecondary education, especially university, during their high school years (e.g., James, 1990; Lam, 1994). But in a number of cases, by the end of high school, those high educational aspirations diminish and are not realized because of limited financial resources and other institutional and structural barriers caused by classism, racism, and sexism (James, 1990). And although parents and community members have actively intervened in the educational process in an attempt to address the individual and structural barriers faced by students, their efforts have met with varying success (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Haig-Brown et al., 1997). On the other hand, some school boards have initiated programs that seek to address the particular situations of immigrant and minority students (D'Oyley, 1994; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Handscombe & Becker, 1994) but generally speaking, little has changed. Universities have initiated access programs that give special consideration to racial minorities, aboriginals, working-class individuals, refugees, and people with disabilities (James, 1997; Kirkness & Bowman, 1992). But access initiatives often come too late in the educational process for students who already see university as inaccessible.

In recent years, partnerships between a university and a school board (in this article, referred to as a university-school partnership) have been established as a means of helping school boards to address the issues that they face serving the diverse needs and aspirations of students: issues such as school retention, academic performance, teacher preparation and professional development, administrative needs, and educational changes (Castle & Giblin, 1992; Goodlad, 1993; James & Handscombe, 1996; McCormick, 1990; Sewell, Shapiro, Ducette, & Sanford, 1995). This study focuses on one such program and the perceptions of students within that program about its effectiveness. Ultimately, the article is an effort to begin to address the underrepresentation of students in the literature on university-school partnerships by broadening the discussion to include some of their perspectives.

### **The Partnership Between North York School Board and York University**

Initiated in 1991, the Westview Partnership is an agreement between the North York Board of Education and the Faculty of Education at York University. It has as its objectives: enhancing the quality of academic opportunities, making possible university access for students in the Westview family of schools, and opening up opportunities for teacher candidates and practicing teachers to develop their skills in the area of urban education.

The family of schools involved in the partnership is located in a low-income area of metropolitan Toronto characterized by diversity in ethnicity, race, and religion. Some regard it as a reception area for new immigrants and refugees.<sup>2</sup> Both people living in the area and those from outside often refer to the area as Jane-Finch, a name derived from the two streets forming the main intersection. Guided by research that school board researchers, teacher researchers, university faculty, and students have conducted, the Partnership Committee has initiated a number of programs that attempt to enhance students' school experiences. One such program, the University Path Program, consists of a series of activities geared to students in their elementary and high school years with the aim of helping them to think seriously of postsecondary education as an option. Through the program, students and parents receive information about various postsecondary requirements and scholarship opportunities; all students

from participating schools visit the university to tour the facilities and/or attend seminars, workshops, and lectures; and teacher candidates carry out their practice teaching in the area schools. In addition, high school students are able to participate in a future teachers club, take one university course, and work as interns on science projects in the Faculty of Science at the university. There is also assistance for students applying to the university and other support services for those who attend the university. The partnership coordinator estimated that more than 500 students have participated directly in these activities or have benefited indirectly from them.

The Westview Partnership and the University Path Program in particular serve as examples of special programs designed to enhance the educational experiences of the area students by using the resources of both the university and school board. This approach recognizes that students' success may require supports that first help them to conceive of the possibilities of postsecondary education while they are in middle school and then maintain that sense throughout high school and into the university. It further recognizes that students' failures are due not merely to their individual efforts, social situations, or cultures but also to educational and social contexts and structural barriers that limit their capacity to imagine and pursue certain possibilities after high school. And according to Isoki (1997), a teacher at the school and coordinator of the partnership, the program also helped teachers to change students' attitudes and expectations, making them think of attending university and college as possibilities. Isoki cited the "substantial increase" in the number of students from the Westview area that have been admitted into York University (from 22 in 1992 to 33 in 1993 to 47 in 1994) as evidence that the initiatives of the University Path Program have produced success.

### **Proposed Research**

In 1997, the Toronto Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) funded this project, which proposed investigating student perceptions of the role the University Path Program played in their decisions to attend York University. We began our work with the following broad questions:

- How effective have these intervention strategies been in raising the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of immigrant and refugee students and parents?
- How effective has the university path intervention program been in supporting immigrant and refugee students in overcoming barriers to education, thus enabling them to realize their educational aspirations?
- What else might be done or what might be done differently to enable these students to achieve their educational and occupational goals?

We set out to interview a number of immigrant and refugee university students to ascertain the extent to which they saw the partnership as effective in addressing their educational needs. As the research progressed, and in keeping with critical qualitative design's responsiveness to researchers' developing understandings, we moved to a more fundamental consideration: students' perceptions of the partnership's initiatives. We asked the students about intervention practices and programs that worked to help them in their educational performance, their postsecondary aspirations and achievements, and the conditions that enabled them to adapt successfully to the university context.

### **Method**

Extensive and systematic research has been conducted in the Westview family of schools since the inception of the partnership with the university (see Handscombe & Milne, 1996). The data from those studies helped us to shape this one and to identify focal groups for interviews. With the exception of one student whose permission was secured during the study, students had agreed in their graduating year to participate in the ongoing research with the partnership by signing informed consent letters.

For this study, we sought volunteers for interviews from students whose university progress the partnership has been tracking. Students were contacted by telephone and then given time to decide if they wanted to participate. We made every effort to speak to students who were doing well in addition to those who were having some difficulty with coursework. All together, 12 students were interviewed. About half of the participants had graduated from high school with grade point averages in the 80s; the others had averages in the 70s. Most of them tended to take less than four university courses per semester and had averages of B or less. The majority (5 each) were 22 and 23 years old, and 2 were 24 and 26 years old, respectively. Four were born in Canada, whereas the others were born elsewhere, including Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Ghana, and New York. At least two of those born in Canada had immigrant parents from the Caribbean, including Guyana.

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Where appropriate, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted. These additional interviews enabled us to clarify and expand on some aspects of the initial interviews, particularly around the notion of community, which figured prominently in the conversations. It should be noted that it was through the initial interviews and preliminary analyses that we were guided to explore the discourses of community at work in students' accounts of involvement with their high school and York University.

Throughout the project, regular research team meetings were held to discuss the progress of data collection, generate an analytic framework, and analyze the transcripts (after individual analyses). Earlier meetings included other faculty members who were involved in the partnership. Researchers kept "jot notes," which were used as part of the developing analyses of various dimensions of the project. This article also incorporates existing research reports and other documents pertaining to the University Path Program with the analysis of the interviews.

## **The Study: Students' Perspectives on the Partnership's Opportunities and Possibilities**

### **Reconceptualizing Community and Considering the University as a Community Resource**

Community plays a significant role in the ways that the students talked about their experiences living and attending school in the Westview community. Their discourses about community included not only their respective personal and family histories and educational and community experiences within the context of their ethnic and racial backgrounds but also attempted to contest the media's discursive images of the area as bad and their school as a bad school. Their talk reveals fascinatingly varied understandings of the same geographic area and a demonstration of the extent to which the fields of study in which they are enrolled—social work, teacher education, political science, law and society, and psychology—shape their readings of community and, concomitantly, their thinking about what they might contribute to the community.

Through their questions and actions, parents and teachers contributed to the notion of the community and schools as places to get away from. For example, Rebecca recalled that her Guyanese mother initially sent her out of the school district to avoid sending her to Westview.

But whereas Nancy's Jamaican-born mother did not raise questions about Nancy's choice of Westview as the high school she would attend, her elementary school teachers did. In sending students to elementary and high schools outside of the area and questioning their choice of high schools, parents and teachers in a way inscribed a negative image of the community, which is surely a dilemma and a contradiction, because it is the community in which they live and, for the teachers, the place where they work.

Sumita, a political science major, spoke extensively of the community. First, she said, "I'm trying to stay as much as I can in the community because I think it's a very dynamic community, right, and York University is part of the reason." She said that she thinks of the community as extending out from the intersection at Jane and Finch to include "the schools there, the workplaces" and other "resources it doesn't use, for example, the university. They overlook each other but are ignorant of each other." She pointed out that residents of the area were "not fully informed" about the university, its significance, and its relationship to them. She went on to say that the university "sets itself apart from the community around it" and "inadvertently" perpetuates stereotypes about the neighborhood. On this basis, Sumita advocated for an "interdependent relationship" between the university and surrounding community. And as one who is familiar with both the university and the Jane-Finch neighborhood, Sumita thought of herself as able to help build links between both.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible that these university students whom we interviewed and who have lived and attended school in the Westview area did not wish to live with the negative characterization of their community as bad and the school as producing, according to Akaos, a 22-year-old, Ghanaian-born student, "belowaverage" students. Living with this characterization, which the media promote and which some parents and teachers believe, seemed to have contributed to the doubts that some students had about their abilities to succeed at university. Others, as Akaos stated, "see my school differently," which is a conceptualization of their community that enabled them to develop a degree of confidence that they have attained their university status on merit and therefore have the right to be there. Their wish to actively engage in activities that change the stereotyping of their community is likely informed by their desire, as we will see later, to give back to their community. They hope that in giving back, not only will the reputation of the community change for the better but also their own standing in and outside of the community, indeed within the university community. Furthermore, such conceptualization of their community reflects an understanding of the interconnections between it and them as individuals.

### **The Route to University, and York in Particular**

Although the majority of the students had a sense of a "special relationship" between Westview Secondary School and York University, the partnership per se was not named as significant to them. Most important in their decisions to attend university were the expectations and encouragement of family and teachers. When asked directly about attending York, research participants tended to cite proximity and the ability to save money while living at home as well as specific programs such as education and law. Their reasons do not underestimate, as we have already established, the importance of a sense of a connection between their school and the university, for as Nguyen puts it, York is "still in the community." Nguyen is a 22-year-old student born in Vietnam who came to Canada in 1984.

One aspect of the university path program had students take a university course offered in a York faculty: Leslie Sanders taught one such course called "Black Writers and the New World." According to Nancy, Sumita, and Rebecca, this advanced placement course was a good

experience. Rebecca pointed out the course gave her the assurance that she could “handle” university. She chose to attend York University because

it’s very multicultural . . . and on top of it, York had the programs that I wanted and I had already been exposed to teachers at York like Leslie Sanders, because I had taken a course with her. . . . It was great, it was really good, and I actually, I was like, if this is what university is about, then I can handle this because some of the stuff we were talking about in the course was concepts of males and females in Western society, so it was really something I could relate to. . . . I remember that that was the first time I had read Toni Morrison, *Sula*, so it was like, Wow. This was good, if this is what university is about. It wasn’t like I perceived it to be, which was a lot of meaningless hard work, you know what I mean?

Nancy, who took Sanders’s course with Rebecca, commented, “I loved the course.” She also noted that it might be considered “a partnership” between Westview school and “one of the professors, Leslie Sanders, over at Atkinson [one of York’s campuses].”

Community played a part in the students’ move toward university as well as their future goals. According to Rebecca, not only did her teachers encourage her to apply for university, but they “pushed” her to go for scholarships, even compiling her applications and faxing them to various organizations. When asked why they selected her, she said,

because I’ve always been involved with the community, and I’ve always, since I was 12 years old, I’ve always been doing something at the community center, and like, when they spoke to me on that individual level, they found out that stuff, and they helped me to further my dreams, to better help my community, and so forth. And I think, too, they truly believed that I would be someone to come back and help the community, not just go off and just forget where I came from, which is something I’ve always stressed.

Sumita also spoke at length of the relationships between teachers and students. She said she felt “pressured to go to university” by her teachers: “I guess in fact when you’re a high-achieving student, and you’re very involved extracurricularly and in the community and stuff like that, the expectation is immediately university, and college tends to get a bad rap.” Later, she said that teachers tended to privilege some students over others—those she called the “superstars,” students who raise their hands all the time and know how to use resources. Those are the students she felt would “give back” to the community—“students who’ll be social movers and shakers, who’ll agitate for change.” Others, she felt, were not as “opulently encouraged.”

As a superstar, Sumita’s represents what Warren Crichlow (personal communication, 1998) calls the “minority subculture of achievement,” students whose ideas and interests correspond with those of the school and are therefore reinforced. This status of “superstar” seems to bring with it a strong sense of direction accompanied by some pressure and sense of responsibility to give back to the community. It is understandable, then, that students such as Nguyen, Akaos, and Rebecca would aspire to return to teach at the high school they attended and for Sumita and Shakyl to work as activists in their respective communities.

The students’ aspirations to attain a university education were supported not only by their teachers’ and parents’ expectations and their own wish to give back to their communities but also by the encouragement of friends with whom they shared a sense of community. For instance,

when asked how her friends reacted to her decision to go to university, Rebecca told of their support.

*Rebecca:* Actually, they're proud of me. A lot of them see me as their opportunity, you know what I mean, so it's like, I'm kinda the breakthrough, for some of them, you know what I mean, so I get pushed a lot from them; they understand when I can't hang out, and they actually push me not to hang out and say, "Go pick up your book" or something.

*Interviewer:* Why do you think that is?

*Rebecca:* Because I think underlyingly we all want to succeed, but it's easier to place your hopes and dreams in somebody else than be responsible for doing it yourself.

Rebecca illustrates how much her achievements were connected to her friends who seemed to live vicariously through each other. Interestingly, Rebecca's peers' stated responses to her university aspirations differ from studies in Fordham (1988) and Ogbu (1988), where the peers were more likely to characterize such aspirations as "White."

But these "breakthroughs" are not without costs; what friends, teachers, the community, and parents expect students to make of their university education places them in contradictory, sometimes tension-ridden situations. Take, for example, Nguyen, who, contrary to his parents' wishes that he obtain a university education that would ensure "a better tomorrow" for himself, told us that he was less interested than his parents in money and status. It was left then to Nguyen and others like him to work around the aspirations that their families had for them.

### **University Education as a Way of Qualifying to "Pay Back"**

Strikingly, much more common in the narratives of the students and what the partnership seemed to have inadvertently given students was their hope, in the words of Nguyen, to "pay back" their community. University for them was not merely to fulfill their personal educational and career aspirations but to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to work in the community. Their educational and career aspirations were inextricably linked to their community and identity: Nguyen and Shakyl, for instance, were both planning to become teachers, hoped to stay in the community, and work at Westview.

For Nguyen, paying back is specifically related to his being a Vietnamese refugee. Although his parents had first wanted him to go into business, where it might be "easier to get jobs . . . and probably make more money," he was less concerned with making money or having a prestigious job—although teaching still is prestigious to his parents—than with paying back.

*Nguyen:* But also, I'm thankful to be here, so I'm paying, well it's not really paying back, but I want to return my dues, so if I'm not going into teaching, I'm probably going to go into some service field. . . . It's very silly, but it's deep-rooted in me that I'm thankful to be here.

*Interviewer:* It doesn't sound silly.

*Nguyen:* So I'm saying "paying back," but it's not the word, the right term. . . . So this is why business is not for me. . . . I think you're in business for yourself . . . not the community or the country, whatever. Even though, you always have second thoughts as



you grow up, and now you think, is it worth it to go into teaching because of all these things, all these political issues, that involve teaching.

Nguyen's history as a refugee from Vietnam not only contextualizes this deep sense of appreciation and commitment he feels toward his community and the country but also the kind of occupation that he felt would best enable him to pay back the community. This notion is further captured in his statement, "I came from Vietnam and I know in a way that I was thankful to be here"; this thankfulness was "good motivation when I was growing up." This commitment seems to be motivating his desires to become a teacher. And although his comment may indicate that his feelings about teaching were wavering, as we will see later, his "second thoughts" have less to do with his desire to teach and more to do with not wishing to be the recipient of what he considered to be more favors in his attempt to realize this career goal.

Sumita, having been actively involved in student administration in high school, planned to pursue a career in politics to "help effect change" in the community. She identified a career in politics as "an outlet, access to a resource base, people, and knowledge, the ability to change things I don't like in the community." She feels she is suited to changing hopeless attitudes of many people in this community because "I grew up there, and I know what it needs and what growing changes it's going through."

As we noted earlier, in addition to geography, the conceptualization of community—and hence the community to which students such as Catherine, Vivian, and Rebecca expected to donate their time and energies—is related to ethnic origin. Catherine is a 25-year-old born in Cambodia who came to Canada in 1980. She imagined her community in ethnic terms, despite her initial—and broader—textbook definition.

*Interviewer:* What do you mean by community?

*Catherine:* A group of people living within a common area, with same or common interests, ethnic background, race. [Interviewer and Catherine joke about how easy it is for someone taking classes in social work to answer this question.]

*Interviewer:* Do they have to be Cambodian?

*Catherine:* Yes, Cambodian people, same ethnic background, and we could be related.

*Interviewer:* How about Jane and Finch?

*Catherine:* I would call that the community I live in, but not my community. But there are Cambodian people living there.

Catherine originally wanted to be a teacher. After she was not accepted into York's Faculty of Education (a fact that made her so "pissed" she didn't do well in her second year), Catherine moved into the School of Social Work and was completing a second degree, a bachelor's in social work. She was also working at the Cambodian Association of Ontario in a job she got immediately upon completion of her sociology degree. When asked why she chose social work, she replied,

because I've always liked teaching. I find there's not much difference between a teacher and a social worker, besides that one teaches, in a sense, but you know you both work with people. You know you help them, you guide them through their ways and stuff like

that. That's one of my main interests is to help people, and teachers provide that, social work provides that also, right? So, as I get more experience working with my community, I feel the interest to serve my community, to help them through the problems that they're having now. So that's how my interest in becoming a social worker has played a part in my life, because I've been so interactive with my community that I know the issue that's been affecting them; and I, as a Cambodian worker, would like to serve my community as much as I could, as much as I want to be a teacher. But, you know, I think it's more of me to serve my community; that's why I chose the field of social work.

Like Nguyen, Catherine's profession is related to her need to help people. Testimony to the importance of the discourse of community, Catherine mentioned the term *community* five times in her response. Like Sumita, she felt her familiarity with Cambodians' circumstances in the area gives her a knowledge of the issues, which makes her an appropriate person to serve the community as social worker or teacher.

Vivian, who was born in Jamaica and is a teacher candidate in the Faculty of Education, also saw herself as better able to help because of familiarity with the community. She wished to teach at Westview High School "because I grew up in the area and went to the family of schools." Grateful to teachers who encouraged her—including one who came to her home to teach her a distance education course when she was caring for her small children—she wanted to "offer students the same thing." She changed her first plan, which was to work as a nurse in the maternity wards, to teaching, because she "could offer more as a teacher, set an example as a role model, counsel, offer advice, [and] steer someone in the right direction." When asked how she understood role modeling, she elaborated by saying that she was an example of someone who grew up in the neighborhood and fought "obstacles"—including, as the eldest of five, helping her mother who worked nights and then having four children herself and now being pregnant again. Becoming a teacher, then, meant that she could model the idea "I've been there and you can too."

Rebecca's priority is also to serve her community, and she hopes to be either a teacher or a lawyer. A teacher candidate, Rebecca is presently enrolled in the Faculty of Education. When asked about her aspiration to become a teacher, Rebecca responded,

Well, I want to do it [teaching] for now. Like because I say law school is a long-term goal and I don't know if it's really practical for me right now, because I don't want to be in school forever, and I don't want to be owing back the government money. But I think the two are intertwined for me because in my spare time, I've always helped at the community center, and I'm always doing some sort of, I guess, teaching with young people. So I see it, if I go into the law profession, I'll still be able to have my community because I can defend a lot of them that will be involved in the law, or as a high school teacher, I can still prepare them and better help them and give them the push to go on, which a lot of them don't get from, say, other schools.

Rebecca's idea of giving the students in the Jane-Finch community a "push" is related to her own high school experience at Westview. As she explained, she "hung out basically with the worst set of kids in the school . . . the ones that didn't go to class, the ones that, the reason they

had to invent a hall pass for.” Having experienced these kinds of students, Rebecca seemed to feel that she had a responsibility to ensure that her situation does not recur with today’s students. To this end, even before qualifying as a teacher, Rebecca volunteered with some female students at Westview who, she explained, are likely to benefit from having teachers who care about them and are similar to them in terms of social and racial backgrounds.

They just have a bad attitude towards teachers; they’re just used to teachers that don’t care or are used to seeing teachers that aren’t them, that don’t live in the community, you know what I mean? So it’s like when I say it would be beneficial if there were more, I guess, teachers of color, or teachers that actually lived in their neighborhood, do you know what I mean? And because Jane and Finch is a community kind of area where things get done by, I guess, people working together and like, me talking to your mother to help you out, kind of thing, so more of that basically.

That Rebecca also thought of becoming a lawyer is a noteworthy point. This aspiration gestures to the fact that like teachers, lawyers were also perceived to be critical to addressing the needs and issues within the community. Indeed, as a young Black woman, Rebecca seemed to be well aware of the extent to which Black youths, particularly those in working-class communities, tend to be constructed as troublemakers and law breakers; hence, they are often targeted by police and in the process get criminalized (Chambliss, 1995; Forcese, 1992; Henry, 1994; James, 1998; Snider, 1988; Ward, 1985).<sup>4</sup> Understandably, then, Rebecca and others like her were likely to see the need for lawyers who could provide legal support to community members as they struggled to defend themselves in the legal system.

### **Into the University: Negotiating the Problematics of Identity, Family, and Community**

As Sumita pointed out, the world of the university is a world removed from many of the students’ lives and is one where they must negotiate the dialectical and contradictory tensions that result from their presence in the institution as “outsiders” who are now “insiders” (James, 1997). Friendships, as Catherine noted, play a significant role in this process. And as in Catherine’s case, friends at university tended to be students with whom she shared “similar backgrounds,” made her feel “accepted,” and were members of the Future Teachers’ Club (an initiative of the partnership) at her former high school, Westview.

The difficult and problematic issues of identity as outsiders who are now insiders was also evident in the students’ conversations. For example, Rebecca, a Black student, described herself as a “misfit” at York, particularly in terms of what she considered to be “street markers of Blackness,” such as her gold tooth and “that hardness or that core, you know, roughness from Jane and Finch” that make them stand out.<sup>5</sup> York, she went on to say, although “diverse,” is full of students who “have never stepped into Jane and Finch” and Blacks who are “what I would call bourgeois-ish: They were upper-middle-class Blacks, and their, um, culture was similar to White culture and opposed to things that I might have been similar to or exposed to.” In referring to herself and others as misfits, Rebecca alluded to the complex, contextual, paradoxical nature of identity. Her comments suggested that her university experience alerted her to the notion that she was not just Black but a Black woman from the Jane-Finch community. This identification carried with it a particular construction that she seemed willing to own. It is possible that it is these university experiences that contributed to the students’ assertions that people—teachers,

social workers, and lawyers—who have had the experience of living in the Jane-Finch community are best qualified to make the needed contributions to the community.

Once in university, there is also the challenge of negotiating identity as a racial minority student with a legitimate right to be in the institution, particularly in a situation where the university has an access program that addresses barriers to admission for students of particular backgrounds (James, 1997; Sleeter, 1994; see also Bramble, 1999; Carty, 1991; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; and Monture-Okanee, 1995). The access program that operated within the Faculty of Education seemed to have a direct bearing on these students' presence in the university. Through that access program, racial minorities, aboriginal people, refugees, and people with disabilities are given special consideration in obtaining entry to the faculty. The existence of such programs, as James (1997) points out, tends to implicate students from those groups in that they are often considered access students regardless of how they might have entered particular university programs. It is possible that when caught in the situation where they are considered to be access students, middle-class Black students to whom Rebecca referred might have deliberately created distance between themselves and those whom they perceived to be access students. Such a situation contributed, as Catherine indicated, to the friendships or cohort relationships that developed among the Westview students at the university.

Furthermore, for some students, asserting their presence in the university as qualified students meant distancing themselves as much as possible from anything that indicated their involvement in the access program. This distance seemed to be what Nguyen was seeking to achieve when he pointed out in the interview that he did not want the partnership coordinator, Stan Isoki, to know that he was interested in becoming a teacher and would like eventually to teach at Westview High School. Nguyen's reluctance to have Isoki know of his aspirations was premised on his desire not to be given more of what he considered special treatment.<sup>6</sup> Nguyen feels that, as coordinator, Isoki, whom he knew quite well, was in a position to advocate for him getting into the faculty. Instead, Nguyen and others like him preferred to demonstrate that they gained entry to university on their own merit and not through some special treatment.

Many of the students not only struggled with the interpretation of their presence in the university community but also with what their participation in postsecondary education had done to their family life. For example, in explaining the extent of the communication he had with his family, Nguyen had this to say:

Me and my parents don't talk that much. It's a little different. [*Laughs.*] We talk, but we don't talk about things like this; we talk about the everyday life, you know? Okay, what are we doing, what are we getting, you know this week when we are going grocery shopping, we talk about things like that, but we've never really talk about things like, we've sat down and said, Okay, Nguyen do this, you know, the future you know, let's plan together or whatever, like no [*small laugh*].

*Interviewer:* Why not?

*Nguyen:* How come? Probably because, has do with, see, my, my father never finished elementary school, my mom got to Grade 6, so by the time I passed Grade 6, academically I was already ahead of them, and I think they might feel a little inferior to talk to me about it.

*Interviewer:* Like, “What do we have to tell you?”

*Nguyen:* Yeah, because as I was saying, they weren’t able to help me in mathematics, because the concept would, or even, I know for sure a friend of my mom, for example, wanted me to explain the concept of negative integers, and I had a hard time. . . . It took me a while. . . . In a way, I was already beyond them academically. Definitely not in life, I guess, um, so that’s why we never talk about serious things.

Recounting a similar life experience with his parents growing up in his working-class, Spanish-speaking Mexican American family outside of San Francisco, Rodriguez (1995) tells of the ambivalence his parents showed toward his education. On one hand, they expected him to do well in school, whereas on the other, they questioned his dedication to his books. School, according to Rodriguez, “had irretrievably changed my family life,” particularly in terms of his communication within his family. He writes that as a successful student or “scholarship boy,” he “spoke to his classmates and teachers more often each day than to family members” (p. 474).

### **“Some Kind of Special Relationship”: The Partnership in the Concrete**

What became evident as the interviews and the analysis progressed was that, although the students did not name the partnership as significant, they named the people and the programs they worked with in the partnership who, for the most part, had made a positive difference to them. The partnership was not a singular event for them but an ongoing set of relationships among people; the abstraction called “the partnership” was not part of their discourse. On the other hand, they clearly acknowledged the concrete presences of the coordinator of the program, an instructor in one of the advanced credit courses, and of their friends from school and community. For the most part, they did not see these as directly related to the partnership.

Of the partnership, Rebecca said, “Yeah, I knew that they [the school and university] had some kind of special relationship, and I figured it was because they were in close proximity to each other.” She went on to say of the coordinator,

Well, Isoki, I always get extra help from him no matter what, but I never really linked that to being something to the program [partnership]. I just linked it with being his individual choice, you know what I mean? So I didn’t realize there was any benefits out of being part of the partnership, but if there are, let me know.

Many of the students identified partnership coordinator Isoki, a teacher at Westview High School who was seconded for a 3-year term to the Faculty of Education, as providing them with much needed support. Although his official portfolio did not include advising and counseling these former Westview students, his familiarity with their lives and his interest in ensuring that they succeed in university led him to do just that. And whereas some students, such as Nguyen, remained quite ambivalent in seeking his assistance and support, others, such as Vivian, found his support invaluable. Vivian, a single parent of four, saw the coordinator as a stark contrast to some of her professors, who were less than supportive if she asked for an extension because of family demands. Of Isoki, she said, “I know him from Westview for 8 years. He’s my venting post, kinda. When I’m having a bad day I’ll go to him and say here’s how I’m feeling, and I know it won’t go beyond the doors.” Perhaps Catherine makes most clear the significance of the

coordinator's support: "Like, I know Isoki was one of the teachers that I respect and trusted most in terms of helping me. . . . Develop some sort of friendship is the key."

In addition to the coordinator, the Future Teachers' Club (FTC) at their high school gave some students, in Catherine's words, "some vague" insight into the existence of the board-university partnership. Catherine, who credited the FTC for providing her the opportunity to meet supportive students who became her friends, had the following to say about what she came to understand of the partnership:

I was in that program because I wanted to pursue my career as a teacher . . . and they explained to us that York University and Westview has some sort of connection and some sort of getting students from Westview to come to York University and become a teacher. . . . I think I remember vaguely that there was some sort of partnership between Westview and York University, only with the concurrent or education . . . the Faculty of Education, that's it. That's the only one that I was aware of in terms of partnership.

Again, what Catherine remembered of the club was not the existence of a partnership as much as what she was able to do within the mandate of the club. In addition to gaining insights into what teaching would be like and which classes to take to become a teacher, she said,

I also act as a teacher's assistant that time because I was in the FTC, and they were in the process of hiring students as teaching assistants so that they can gain some valuable experience. . . . It was very helpful. . . . I got to know others who were my classmates, and I didn't realize that they wanted to be a teacher. So we exchanged information, we exchanged our ideas and thoughts, so you meet new friends, you feel acceptance. The people I met at Westview have later come into York, and we're now friends and have some similar backgrounds and similar interests.

Despite the initiatives of the partnership that the students experienced directly, the students saw the people within the partnership and their relationships with them as significant, rather than the partnership that has created the opportunities for extra help and an introduction to the university before first year. Their comments raised a question for us: Does it matter if the students know about the benefits of the program? Clearly for the institutions, giving credit where it is due in the form of ascribing the benefits of the partnership to the partnership may become necessary for public relations and ultimately for continued funding. The students, based on these interviews, were clearly benefiting, but is it important that the students are able to credit the partnership for at least some support?

Although the partnership did figure into the students' lives whether they were conscious of it or not, we want to leave the reader with one of the most notable dimensions of the interviews—the whole notion of paying back, which figures largely despite the fact that it was not an area we were actively seeking in our questions. Students did call on the notion of community and clearly saw some loose-knit connection between the school and the university and their own circle of family and friends. This connection provided them with enough of a

defined entity that they consistently referred to reciprocity in some form or another based on their educational experiences both in Westview and at the university.

For Rebecca, for instance, the notion of giving back to the community related directly to the people who worked within the partnership, although, again, she did not articulate any connection to it. She brought a group of students with whom she was working to the university to meet the partnership coordinator partly to encourage them to think about more education beyond high school. In this way, the partnership and its community came together as the students, who had in some way been beneficiaries of the relationship, carried on the work of starting the personal connections for others—personal connections that had served them well and that ultimately were a dimension of the partnership. And the final question we find ourselves facing is, Would any or all of this have happened without the partnership?

## **Conclusion**

The students' visions of community provide a deep and complex conception based partly on "likeness," partly on differences within, and partly on proximity with people living within the same neighborhood and knowing how things "get done." As such, it is a model of what community means in practice rather than as an abstraction. There is nothing simple about it.

Rebecca's sense of "Black" as a unified category is challenged by her experiences with "the bourgeois-ish" Black students she meets at York. However, like the other students, she still speaks of Jane-Finch as a coherent community. Catherine's statement about her Cambodian connections is the statement that most obviously acknowledges what Yon (1999) called the "difference within" communities, the conflicts and contradictions that exist within most neighborhoods and ethnic or racial groups. Further exploration with the students could address these complexities more fully. The different formulations of going back to give back hint at various conceptions of what this abstraction might mean if and when it becomes another example of community in practice rather than remaining as an abstraction, a goal to be achieved.

Undoubtedly, the discourse of community nurtured in the students is problematic. What aspirations does this language of giving back to the community exclude, constructed as it is within particular readings of the needs of the community and their schooling experiences? Many students talked about the importance of receiving a push from teachers. The students indicated they wished to become teachers, social workers, lawyers, and activists, all within the conventional helping professions. The school and partnership reinforced one of these aspirations by establishing the FTC. But this focus limits other career possibilities and the range of contributions that might be made to the growth and dynamism of the community—including visual artists, writers (Nguyen's aspiration), small business owners, scientists, and scholars. As well, one might question, why should these students be trained in altruism when so many others are encouraged to pursue whatever interests them? Nguyen's phrases, "paying back" and "returning the dues," conveyed the notion that refugees, immigrants, or children of refugees and/or immigrants recognize that they owe something to their host country and configure the opportunity to be in Canada as a governmental gift rather than as a dimension of an often exploitative economic policy (see chapter 6 in James, 1999). Educators have a responsibility to disabuse students such as Nguyen of these notions of obligations and encourage them to think of paths in life that appeal to their own interests, which may of course, include helping other

community members. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to think of other occupations that also contribute to and are integral to the community in ways similar to teaching and social and legal work.

If the partnership is thought of as a gatekeeping device between school and university rather than a springboard, the question of who gets the push toward university and in what direction, is inevitably accompanied by who does not and for what reasons. If those who might contribute to the community are frequently singled out as worthy of encouragement, what are the working definitions of community and contribution? And which student needs get incorporated into those of the partnership, and which ones get left out? Relatedly, what aspirations get swallowed by the available discourses of community and the available resources for encouraging participation?

Many of the students, particularly racial minority students, reported that they struggled with some interpretations of their presence in the university. They perceived that some members of the university community saw them as benefiting from special treatment in the admissions process. Race and social class signaled this misguided idea. Specifically, as racial minority students from the Jane-Finch community in a faculty with an access program, student teachers were perceived by other students as lacking academic skills and abilities to qualify for university on merit; on this basis, their presence in the university was questioned. It is little wonder, therefore, that some students wanted to avoid being known as students from Jane-Finch because of the resulting perceived special treatment.

Clearly, community in practice is always a word with shifting connotations. In this study, it enters the students' everyday lives filled with complexity and tensions as the partnership, although unnamed as such, comes to exemplify the contradictions inherent in the word. Even as the partnership provides support and may contribute to students' developing a sense of entitlement to a postsecondary education, it also stigmatizes and may actually limit choices. Despite these detractions, the students in this study indicated clearly that they want to return to their community with the skills and abilities that the university can provide for them to repay what they see the community has given.

Finally, what we have observed is the disconnection between the university and the community. This disconnection is reflected in the participants' observations that the university has set itself apart from the community and therefore is perceived as an alien place for students. To reverse this perception, the university needs to outreach to the community and develop both an educational and social presence in the lives of the residents of its immediate community, thus enhancing the credibility of the university. Adult residents and students alike need to come to think of the university not only as a possibility for their post-high school education but also as a community resource that offers library and recreational facilities, a venue for community events, and a place of possible employment. What is missing, then, from the school-university partnership in which we have been involved are mechanisms that would operate to connect the community—students, parents, and residents—with the university. Therefore, beyond the school-university partnership, York University needs to work with local community agencies who would have knowledge of the students' aspirations, needs, and interests and would be able to provide the necessary support as they negotiate and navigate the university system. Clearly, a



very important partner in school-university partnerships is the community, and every effort should be made to include the community in all program initiatives.

### Notes

1. *School board* refers to an association of schools within a defined geographical area served by a common administration. Within a given school board, families of schools are located in specific regions of the board. Since the writing of this article, the provincial government has amalgamated the board mentioned with adjoining boards as a cost-cutting measure.

2. The population of the Westview area is estimated to be 56,000 (February 1998). According to the North York Board of Education (1998) *Student Census*, the schools in the area serve about 7,200 students, of whom 61% were born in Canada; others were from Jamaica, Guyana, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Ghana, and India. Families were identified as coming from 57 countries and speaking about 37 languages, including Vietnamese, Spanish, Cantonese, Somali, and Tamil. With reference to the 1991 Canadian Census, the North York Inter-Agency Community Council (1995) reported that about 18% of the residents identified themselves as British (including Scottish), 23% as Italian, 4% as Chinese, 6% as East Indian, 12% as Black, 3% as Vietnamese, and 4% as Spanish, with many speaking their respective mother tongues. The council also indicated that the majority of the community members lived in apartments, which they rented.

3. The university-school partnership might be considered an attempt to establish the relationship that Sumita talked about, but interestingly, none of the students were informed about the partnership, and no mechanism existed for their giving input about the programs undertaken in the partnership.

4. Indeed, film director Roger McTair in his two films, *Home Feeling* (National Film Board & McTair, 1981) and *Jane Finch Again* (National Film Board & McTair, 1997), shows the pervasiveness of police harassment and suspiciousness of the young people of the Jane-Finch community.

5. Writers argue that the identity markers used by Black youth represent not only their struggle over identity, representation, and their right to self-expression but also the ways in which they resist confinement and definition (Walcott, 1997; Yon, 1999).

6. Relatedly, in their studies of racial minority university students and the question of university access through affirmative action programs, Grayson, Chi, and Rhyne (1994) found that Chinese people tended to perceive such programs as contrary to attainment on the basis of merit. Some “viewed it as an affront to their self esteem or ethnic pride” (Grayson et al., 1994; see also Pon, 2000).

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