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Jane-Finch Black Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto

By

Tina Sharma

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Faculty of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Education at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Jane-Finch Black Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto

By

Tina Sharma

APPROVED BY:

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Wansoon Park, External Reader

---

Finney Cherian, Faculty Reader

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Kara Smith, Advisor

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Andrew Allen, Chair of Defense

## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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## ABSTRACT

Africentric schooling in Toronto is a controversial educational initiative. A problem amongst the debatable perspectives published in media and literature accounts are the lack of black youth voices pertaining to Africentric schooling. An attempt is made to explore black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling in Toronto. Participants in this study consisted of five black males and five black females between the ages of 16 to 19. Youth perspectives about Africentric schooling and their desire to attend an Africentric high school were obtained.

Youth perspectives revealed that all participants supported the social and cultural tents of Africentric schooling; however, they reported mixed reactions regarding their desire to attend such a school. Stereotypes, intra-group politics, and family and media opinions were fears and concerns of the participants interviewed. To build the academic strengths of urban black youth and promote educational change in our system, it is argued we need to explore Africentric schooling to increase student academic outcomes. Recommendations and avenues for future research are suggested.

## DEDICATION

To the man who inspires and guides me every day; my papa, Raj Kumar Sharma.

I am everything that I am because you love me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank God for his continuous blessings. With God, everything is possible. Thank you to all the professors at the University of Windsor that I have had the privilege to learn from. Their informative lectures and constant encouragement have helped me grow both on a professional and personal level.

Thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Kara Smith, for her enthusiasm and patience with this project. Her passion and excitement for education are inspirational; so too is her support for social justice. Thanks to Dr. Finney Cherian, for his support and thought-provoking conversations. When he talks, we are compelled to listen.

I am in the debt of Dr. Wansoo Park for agreeing to be my external reader; the connection with social work was fitting. Dr. Andrew Allen supported and guided my research; his contribution was constant and has left a mark on this project. Lastly, I thank Dr. Nombuso Dlamini for beginning this journey with me. Her advice and encouragement kept me moving forward, helping me find a new supervisor when she accepted a teaching position elsewhere, all of which are much appreciated.

Thanks to Dr. Parbattie Ramsarran for being my mentor and encouraging me to pursue my graduate degree. Her passion for and commitment to social justice transcends beyond the classroom. Lastly, I thank my family and friends for their confidence in me. Their support and pride in my work motivates me to do better every day. Words cannot describe my mother, Santosh Sharma. She is my best friend, teacher, nurse, lawyer and support system. Her love is selfless, pure and her spirit simply magnetic. My grandparents, Chiji and late Papaji, thank you for showing me what it means to be loved unconditionally. They have given meaning to life itself.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

With a final vote, 11:9, on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) approved the proposition for the launch of the first Africentric Alternative School (Grades K-5) for children in Toronto. The first school of its kind opened in September 2009 and is located in North York (Keele-Sheppard), Toronto. The Africentric school is an elementary school initiative; an Africentric secondary school has yet to be established. The current Africentric school accommodates 120 children drawn from diverse ethno-cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Africentric school curriculum aims to deal with issues of student disengagement, drop out and achievement disparities between black youth and their peers. The Africentric school has an educational program that provides an inclusive curriculum and utilizes wide-ranging instructive approaches to empower black youth. These approaches confirm and reconstruct historical, social and cultural experiences to empower black students (Galabuzi, 2008, p. 29). It must be noted, although the term *black* often homogenizes the complex Diasporas of people of African descent, a collective black identity associated with descendents of Africa exists (Asante 1992; Cokley, 2002; Lukens & Traore, 2006; Marable, 2000; Schmidt & Patterson, 1995). Furthermore, the Africentric curriculum acknowledges the correlation between social class and educational attainment and aims to teach students how to deconstruct and reconstruct curricular knowledge.

“The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety” (Falconer’s Report), a study requested by the Ontario government (2008), is credited for drawing attention to the realities of a select community of students. The Falconer’s Report reveals that 40% of black students do not

graduate high school (Brown, 2008a). Failure to graduate indicates a dilemma in our education system. Although we have acknowledged that the achievement gap amongst black youth needs to be addressed, controversy surrounding Africentric schooling indicates that a communal consensus as to how we can best assist our students has yet to be reached (Brown, 2008b; Dei, 2005; Kay, 2007; “McGuinty...,” 2008; Milton, 2008; “Voices...,” 2007, 2008). Issues surrounding segregation and integration (social welfare); tax dollars and public education (economics) and the quality and culture of education (social justice) have been debated by parents, teachers/school administrators, and community members (Milton, 2008, p.18).

### **Problem Statement**

This study aims to research black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling in Toronto. The lack of black youth perspectives addressing perceptions of the Africentric program is problematic. Gaining the perspectives of black youth is important because numerous black students are affected by the failure to graduate educational predicament. One may question, would black youth voluntarily attend an Africentric high school? What might be the fears and concerns of black youth with regards to the program? Can the Africentric approach meet the educational needs of black youth? Africentric education has the potential to have an impact on the educational conquests of future black high school students. Black youth voices may provide us with feedback and possible suggestions to improve the Africentric program. Furthermore, their voices are imperative for further research as they may shape the purpose of the school.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study is to examine black youth's perspectives of Africentric schooling. Specifically, to 1) examine if youth support Africentric schooling and 2) to explore the opinions and concerns youth may have about the Africentric program. A prospective Africentric high school may have the potential to counter some of the educational realities facing black youth in our current public school system.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) What are black youth perspectives of Africentric education in Toronto?
- 2) Would black youth in Toronto voluntarily attend an Africentric school?

### **Significance**

This study provides black youth opportunity to have their voices heard on a matter that has the potential to change futures. This research allows us to understand how the Africentric initiative may impact black youth education and if they believe it will be beneficial to their success. We need to better understand in what ways the Africentric program meets the needs, interests and expectations of black youth to determine if it is accommodating and effective. Furthermore, this study potentially provides research about black youth concerns for teachers and school administration to better meet the needs of marginalized students.

The Jane-Finch community will gain insight into the perspectives of black youth in their community through this study. This information can help gain community support for students and may encourage community members to develop communal networks and work side by side to assist youth. Unions, social and youth workers and police officers would be beneficial in addition to the Africentric curriculum to ensure future success. Furthermore, this study may



impact policy makers and the education system itself as youth perspectives may help develop future Africentric curriculums and programs.

The researcher strives to develop an understanding of the educational realities of black youth. At times, society has not drawn attention to the urgency for a relevant curriculum for black youth. Given the situation, we must consider Africentric schooling, as revolutionary as it seems, to explore potential successful outcomes. Furthermore, this study is central to the researcher's growth as a student, teacher and researcher. Issues of social justice and equity are of importance to the researcher's teaching philosophy and practices.

## **Overview**

In Chapter 2, I will examine a range of Canadian and American literature related to black youth and Africentric education. Chapter 3 is about the research approach and methods used during this research process. I will provide a summary and analysis of the main findings of this research in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, recommendations, suggestions for future research and limitations of this study are considered.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

In this chapter, the researcher will examine a range of literature related to Africentric education. This literature is necessary to explore in order to gain a thorough understanding of the issues investigated in this study. The review of literature is categorized under the following subheadings: 1) Black Youth; 2) Africentric Education: Answering the Call for a Relevant Curriculum; 3) Afrocentric Education: Origins and the American Perspective; 4) Africentric Schooling and the Canadian Educational Landscape; and 5) Africentric Education: Mixed Reactions.

#### Black Youth

##### Diversity amongst black Canadians.

The term *black* homogenizes the complex Diasporas of people of African descent. However, Africa is not a homogenized continent. It is constituted by various cultural representations and diverse individuals. Although black Canadians may be bound through multifaceted connections such as historical origins, they also may differ in regards to cultural backgrounds, skin tones, nationalities, languages, customs and beliefs. In characterizing black youth, it should be noted that race is a social construct and not a biological category (Marger, 1994, p. 24). Historically, notions of race were introduced in the process of developing a social system based on arbitrary physical characteristics (Cokley, 2002, p. 30). During African enslavement in the Americas, Africans represented many different ethnic groups and many different languages; however, there was often the recognition by the enslaved Africans that Africa was their common motherland. For example, “We are not black because we share a

certain set of essential or natural properties. We are black because we share a history” (Farr, 2002, p. 19). In fact, substantial research is consistent with the notion of a collective black identity associated with the African Diaspora (Asante 1992; Cokley, 2002; Lukens & Traore, 2006; Marable, 2000; Schmidt & Patterson, 1995). Nevertheless, black experience is not limited to ancestry, as it is also “based on shared values and beliefs and a common struggle against oppression and suppression in a “white-dominated, hostile world” (Lukens & Traore, 2006, p. 113).

### **Black youth and education.**

Black students experience one of the lowest rates of school success in our current education system. About 40% of black students do not graduate from TDSB secondary schools (Falconer, Edwards & Mackinnon, 2008). It must be noted that not all black students are burdened by the latter; however, the failure rate indicates a disconnect between our school system and black youth. Report of the Royal Commission on Learning (RCOL) reiterates that there is “a crisis amongst black youth” with respect to “education and achievement” (“Report of...,” RCOL, 1994, p. 93). The RCOL acknowledged that black youth have been failed by our education system for years. For example, 42% of black youth also did not graduate high school in 1992 (RCOL, p. 93).

In the following section, the researcher will investigate issues surrounding black youth academic success and will examine the context in which social class effects minority youth educational attainment.

Much educational research has focused on the low academic achievement of minority students (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Campbell, 1995; Delpit, 2006; Dragne & Erling, 2008; Ogbu, 2008; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Factors such as environment and culture are commonly found to have an effect on behaviour and academic performance. According to TDDBS's "The Effectiveness of Africentric Schools in Closing Student Success and Achievement Gaps" report, there are two primary reasons why achievement gaps occur between white and minority students: 1) factors outside of school and 2) school related factors (Dragne & Erling, 2008, p. 2). Dragne and Erling stated factors outside of the classroom are constituted by of economic, family and personal characteristics such as second language learning and lower-income families. School related factors consist of feelings of insufficient support and instruction and lowered expectations of minority students by school staff. (Dragne & Erling, p. 2). Conventional educational environments and present systemic white middle class norms often times create disconnects between one's culture and the school structure for minority students (Dragnea & Erling, p. 2). The out of school and school related factors discussed by Dragne and Erling often result in minority students experiencing cultural differences, racial tensions and disadvantage; affecting marginalized youth academic achievement.

### **Cultural differences.**

Cultural differences can be seen as problematic in our educational system when distinction is deemed systemically interpreted as other or not understood as diverse. There are multiple 'ways of knowing' that come from individual cultures and backgrounds. Delpit (2006), in *Other People's Children*, makes reference to the theme of "culture of power" (p. 24). Delpit explained power is exercised throughout multiple classroom practises. For example, publishers

and curriculum leaders determine what we read and how we learn to view the world. Furthermore, teachers hold power over students because they determine intelligence and ability. In the classroom environment, there are rules and codes of conduct for participating in a culture of power. The rules and codes of conduct are enforced by regulating the ways we are expected to talk, interact, dress and write. Delpit explains that the rules of the culture of power reflect those who have the power; therefore schools reflect the culture of upper and middle class children (Delpit, p. 24). Due to varying cultural and socioeconomic differences, not all students can take part in a culture of power within schools. This can create superior and inferior participatory status in education (Delpit, p. 25).

The culture of power and Eurocentric norms marginalize minority and black students to the periphery of education in institutionalized settings (Delpit, 2006). Cultural differences transmit varying values and 'ways of knowing' and this can create conflicts between school and home cultural practices for marginalized youth. According to noted Canadian Africentric scholar, George Dei (1995) black students express feelings of alienation and not belonging as factors that are indicative of student disengagement and decisions to drop out of school. In his report, "Drop Out or Push Out," one student states, "Mostly it's just the person who's, like, being stretched out, stretching him or herself out, and saying that they don't feel like they belong. They don't feel like they belong in school..." (Dei et al., 1995, p. 25). The phrase, "stretching him or herself out" refers to a perceived disconnect between the reality of that student and the school. Behaviours such as "skipping class, hanging out, 'acting up' and not being involved in the formal aspects of the school" are cautionary signals related to deeper issues of disengagement and drop out, however are often misinterpreted as bad behaviour by school personnel (Dei et al., p. 21).

Dei associates the above responses with “the centrality of white middle-class norms, values and curriculum as the basis of a multi-ethnic school system” (Dei et al., 1995, p. 25). Once minority cultures are marginalized, minority students become marginalized as well. For example in Dei’s (1995) study, black youth report “being systematically excluded” and associate the “lack of black history with their inability to stay in school” (Dei et al., p. 76). We learn in part disengagement exists because certain knowledge and class based values equate success in traditional schooling. The lack of culturally relevant curriculums is said to also play a factor.

According to Ogbu (2008), disengagement can be expressive of one’s assertion to defend one’s minority identity as it may be perceived as being challenged by oppositional culture. In Ogbu’s (2008) book *Minority Status, Oppositional Culture, and Schooling*, he introduces his 1986 Fordham-Ogbu thesis, the idea that there exists a nexus between a minority student’s cultural frame of reference, collective identity and school performance. Collective identity refers to a shared feeling of self that can be expressed through behaviour, linguistics, and attitudes. Ogbu (2008) explained:

A cultural frame of reference reflects an ethnic group’s shared sense of how people should behave, and a collective identity expresses a minority group’s cultural frame of reference. In some situations, an ethnic minority group’s collective identity may oppose what its members perceive as the dominant group’s view of how people should act (p. 3).

In resisting dominant group behaviours and creating a sense of self in opposition to one’s understanding of the dominant group, Ogbu states that schooling is affected. Ethnic minority students may not engage in behaviour such as being proactive towards school and adapting

attitudes and behaviours conducive to making good grades. Such behaviour is linked with the dominant group (white) mannerisms (Ogbu, p. 57). It is important to note however, Ogbu is not saying black youth do bad to avoid “acting white” he is saying “they reject certain dominant group’ attitudes and behaviours that I [Ogbu] believe are conducive to making good grades” (Ogbu, 2008, p. 112). Therefore, one’s collective identity and cultural frame of reference may influence the low academic achievement of black youth.

### **Racial tensions.**

Perceptions of school safety are examined in “The Road to Health: A Report on school Safety” (Falconer’s Report). Falconer’s Report represents the attitudes, experiences and opinions of students in the TDSB. Feelings of safety and security within ones school environment have a strong correlation with student mental health and productivity in the classroom environment. According to Falconer’s Report, many marginalized youth who are not succeeding academically and are disengaged, are the same youth who are reported to face the greatest safety concerns in our school system (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 5). C.W. Jefferys secondary school (Keele-Finch) and neighbouring secondary school Westview C.I. (Jane-Finch) are characterized in the research data. Both schools are located in close proximity and are fragments of the Northwest 2 family of schools in the TDSB (Falconer et al., p. 166).

During the course of study, 56% of the C.W. Jefferys school population was surveyed by Falconer and his research team. Of this population, 35% of the respondents were self identified black. Seventy-nine point nine percent of Westview students were surveyed as well. Thirty-seven percent of this population self-identified as black. Student perceptions of school safety in

relation to racism were reported to be a major concern amongst black students at C.W. Jefferys and Westview C.I. (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 39).

Falconer's Report expressed student perceptions of racism and social injustice in and out of the school environment. Black students report higher levels of perceived racial and social prejudice in comparison to any other racial group. Racial discrimination was reported in relation to school grading, expulsion, employment, student-police and student-teacher relations. For example, 52% of black students feel that they encounter racial discrimination when it comes to school grades in comparison to 24% of Asians, 23% of South Asians, 18% of Whites and 5% of West Asians at C.W. Jefferys (Falconer et al., p. 100). Similar statistics are depicted in the data collected from Westview C.I., where 48% of black youth report school related racial discrimination in comparison to 21% of Asian students and 25% of South Asian students. Moreover, 55% of black youth also feel that the school is more likely to call the police on black youth in comparison to any other racial group and interestingly 24% of White students agree (Falconer et al., p. 285).

Similarly, Dei's (1995) study "Drop Out or Push Out?" asserted that many black youth are reporting discriminatory treatment by teachers and school administration based on their race. Black youth report being called out amongst their non-black peers as being disruptive, feel that they are targets of excessive expulsion and report not getting the same recognition for their achievements as their peers. One student states:

If I was white... with the athletic stuff that I did... I would have got so much recognition more at school than if I was black. Even though I did do well in that, there was still a negative side towards it that was pinned on me. No matter how good



you did there was still part of you, well, you know, he does get in trouble sometimes.

If I was a White kid they would overlook that (Dei et al., 1995, p. 43).

To understand race and racism in relation to student disengagement and dropout rates, Dei states we need to examine at the structure and culture of schooling (Dei et al., 1995, p. 144). Race and racism influences the way students think and act, in addition to shaping their schooling experiences. “For black youth, the dynamics and intersections of social difference: race, class, gender and culture and language present the additional challenges of schooling and education. Black youths continually struggle in varied ways to negotiate and contest their intersecting marginalities” (Dei, p. 144). There exists a predicament in our school system because perceptions of discriminating treatment founded on race in education are problematic. As exemplified by the literature explored, racism may hinder student academic performance (Dei et al., 1995; Falconer et al., 2008).

When teachers were asked about racial tensions and student performance in schools; Falconer’s Report stated “By contrast, few staff see problems with the unfair punishment of students, unfair grading of students, uncaring teachers, teachers who don’t listen or racial discrimination by teachers against students” (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 113). Disconnects between teacher and student perceptions of discriminatory treatment signifies differing interpretations of experience which may impact student-teacher relationships. Falconer’s Report reported that almost 90% of the teachers come from wealthier or much wealthier areas that are less ethnically diverse (Falconer et al., p. 111). Educators expressed feeling unsafe in their school area because as their neighbourhood community has much lower crime rates. Furthermore, three quarters of the teachers’ surveyed report that they would not want to live in the area in which they teach (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 111). It is important for teachers to have a thorough understanding of

their students and school community to ensure student success (Ungar, 2004, p. 6). Parents of the respondents in the Northwest 2 family of schools felt that student-teacher relationships suffer because educators cannot relate to youth experiences outside of schooling (Falconer, 2008, p. 110).

Falconer's study raises some important questions for educators, parents and students. Are our educational practices unintentionally "pushing out" out black youth? Is there a need to have teachers teaching in urban schools who are members of that specific community? How would a greater presence of minority and black teachers' impact perceptions of racial tensions in schools? To what degree does the perceived racial discrimination affect student disengagement and low academic achievement? And more importantly, how can we accommodate black youth? Despite raising critical questions and questioning our institutions and teaching practices, one truth still remains; reports of racial tensions continue to be consistent with past studies. For example, Falconer's results are parallel to the 1994 "Commission of Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System" study which articulated a strong correlation between Toronto's black youth and perceptions of racial discrimination in schooling (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 101).

### **Disadvantage.**

Social class can be determined by factors such economic status, level of education completed and occupation. There exists a strong correlation between social class and educational attainment (Africentric Alternative School Support Committee [ASSC], 2009; Brown & Sinay, 2008; Falconer et al., 2008). The report "Student Success: Africentric School," produced by the Africentric Alternative School Support Committee (ASSC) (2009) discussed understanding social demographics of racialized minority youth to make sense of low black youth academic

achievement. An examination of neighbourhood clustering of ethno-cultural groups illustrated that elevated levels of poverty, unemployment and single parent families are present in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of African Canadians. According to ASSC data, amongst black, Chinese and South Asian minorities, blacks have the lowest university enrolment (8.7% in comparison to Chinese 21.2% and Southeast Asian 11.8%), highest unemployment rates (18.3% in comparison to Chinese 11.2% and Southeast Asian 13.1%), highest percentage of low-income (48.5% in comparison to Chinese 28.4% and Southeast Asian 28.3%) and highest percentage of lone parent families (33.7% in comparison to Chinese 11.7% and Southeast Asian 17.6%) (ASSC, 2009, p. 5).

Milton (2008) advocated that socio-economic status and racial background result in a “double jeopardy” effect for students who are both black and poor. He claimed that due to social housing clusters, segregation based on income already exists and therefore creates areas of dense poverty. Youth living in clustered neighbourhoods make up the student-body population for the greater school system and become involuntary victims of separation by race and socio-economic status. Although black youth make up 12% of the student population in Toronto, due to poverty and social clustering the percentages rises to 60-70% in a few schools (Milton, 2008).

When examining research data exclusive to TDSB, “The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety,” (Falconer’s Report) describes a large proportion of its sample as being indicative of a socially disadvantage background. Factors such as residing in public housing, gang relations and exposure to violence and self-identification as poor or very poor represent social disadvantage (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 39). Commonalities between both C.W. Jefferys and Westview C.I. school neighbourhoods were overexposure to crime, violence, sexual

harassment and gang association in and outside of the school environment. Specifically, Westview's Jane-Finch neighbourhood was associated with a 50.1% poverty rate, a dense population characterized by high rise apartments and racial diversity (Falconer et al., p. 167).

However, Falconer's Report suggested that black youth are more socially disadvantaged in comparison to any other minority youth group sampled. For example, 38% of black youth claim to live with both parents in comparison to 84% of West Asians', 83% of South Asians' and 77% of Asians' at C.W. Jefferys (Falconer et al., p. 40). Furthermore, 35% of black youth report living in public housing, where as only 11% of West Asian students, 6% of South Asian students and 12% of Asian students do so (Falconer et al., p. 40).

TDSB's (2008) research report, "2006 Student Census: Linking Demographic Data with Student Achievement," examined student academic achievement patterns in relation to various family backgrounds and demographic characteristics. Amongst the Grade seven to ten cohort of students examined, self-identified black students obtained the lowest pass rates in provincial literacy tests and were behind their minority counterparts in reading, writing, mathematics and science (Brown & Sinay, 2008, pp. 1-2). Specifically, only 30% of black students in the TDSB were at the provincial standard in the subject area of science (Brown & Sinay, p. 31). The report suggested that there exists a relationship between these achievement patterns and family background. High socioeconomic status and strong parental presence, including both parents living at home, was associated with achieving and exceeding the provincial standard in reading, writing, mathematics and science (Brown & Sinay, p. 3). Social demographics then can be understood as factors influencing black youth academic success.

In literature examined thus far, research has indicated that non-black minority youth who are also victims to cultural differences, racial tensions and disadvantage are succeeding over their black peers (ASSC, 2009; Brown & Sinay, 2008; RCOL, 1994). To better understand this phenomenon, Ogbu's (2008) Cultural-Ecological Model is of importance. The Cultural-Ecological Model takes a comparative approach and explains why other non-white minorities do better than blacks in schools even though both groups are expected to "act white" (Ogbu, 2008, p. 11).

Ogbu used the Cultural-Ecological model to show that in addition to school and social factors, community forces impact educational performance. Amongst marginal communities, voluntary minorities such as immigrants are said to have a positive mindset when moving to the America. Immigrants leave their countries of origin for better opportunities and are prepared to encounter obstacles during their transition. Furthermore, voluntary minorities perceive challenges as expected and temporary. Voluntary minorities aim to better themselves and assimilate within Western culture. Such aspirations are associated with behaviours such as learning to speak standard English and internalizing North American behaviours to succeed (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 64).

Involuntary minorities are described as individuals who were colonized, conquered and enslaved. Ogbu argued historical discriminatory practices and continued oppression are reasons why some involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, have distrust in the system. Many involuntary minorities do not believe that America is the land of opportunity where individuals are rewarded on merit. Members who identify with this group are often of low economic status and resist behaviours that are associated with the oppressor. Identifying with the oppressors

behaviour is interpreted as a form of abandoning one's identity. For example, conforming to school cultural practices may be interpreted as acting white and may displace one's minority identity (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, pp. 165-6).

Ogbu asserted the attitudes of voluntary minorities lead them to success over their involuntary minority counterparts. It should be noted that the Cultural-Ecological Model is not built on the premise of race; rather it is based on dominant patterns of different minority groups (Ogbu & Simon, p. 167). Nevertheless, educational practices are challenged because race is a factor that is consistent amongst poor economic and social situations.

Educational institutions are not solely responsible for contributing to the marginalization of black youth. However, schools should be held accountable in taking proactive measures to counter such adversity and protect students. Reported misbehaviours, racial tensions and low provincial testing scores are reflective of the lack of programming and services available for black students who need support. According to the RCOL (1994), "Our belief is that children of African heritage can learn and achieve excellence in all academic areas where appropriate attitudes, support and educational programs are established" (p. 94). The demand for an Africentric school by community members is not new. There have been efforts since 1986 that reflect the concerns of educational leaders and community members to meet the academic needs of black students (Appendix A). There is urgency for a relevant curriculum for black high school youth. The absence of a relevant curriculum is potentially failing black students and our educational community.

### **Africentric Education: Answering the Call for a Relevant Curriculum**

...we can expect that in a truly equitable system, roughly the same proportions of each community will excel, do satisfactory, or do poorly, as in the total student population. If, as is currently true, they do not, the system needs to be fixed.

(RCOL, 1994, p. 88)

The Report of the Royal Commission on Learning (RCOL) recognizes that through inclusive schools and curricula, students can be officially included but still marginalized. The province must therefore “create schools and curricula that place views, concerns, and needs of all students and communities at the very centre of the teacher’s work” (RCOL, 1994, p. 87). The current Africentric Alternative Elementary School is a reflection of numerous educational recommendations and of TDSB’s support for an equitable school system. According to the Falconer’s Report, “Equity includes a recognition that students have different needs, experiences and ethno-cultural backgrounds and that a “one size fits all approach” to addressing students needs, experiences and ethno-cultural backgrounds does not create an environment where all students are afforded the opportunity to succeed” (Falconer et al., 2008, p. 539). There is growing awareness that specifically tailored educational programs are necessary for assisting particular youth groups.

The Africentric initiative is targeted at black youth and provides a culturally affirming environment to empower, with proper guidance and support, all youth whether or not of African descent. Students in attendance represent diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Given the educational situation of many black youth, the Africentric paradigm and case examples examined in this section illustrate the benefits of considering alternative methods of

schooling. An Africentric alternative high school program may be an effective tool to combat issues confronting black youth academic success.

The Africentric vision aims to inculcate the existing Ontario curriculum with the histories and events of peoples of African descent. The Africentric curriculum is a pedagogical approach with a core set of values rooted in African cultural norms and experience. These values include but are not limited to Umoja (unity), Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and Imani (faith) (TDSB, 2009a). According to Dei (1994) “...beyond ethnic pluralism and cultural diversity there are underlying commonalities or affinities in the thought systems of African peoples... the unity of experience, struggle, and origin causes African culture to have an internal unity, just as European culture does” (pp. 6-7). Cultural norms and experiences are transmitted through various components of the program such as school leadership, the school social environment and curriculum content.

School leadership establishes a culture amongst teachers, administration and students that mutually carries out leadership roles and responsibilities. Marginalized students may embody feelings of ownership and empowerment in the process of building aims to build a positive sense of self and cultural identity. The social environment maintains clear expectations and allows for open dialogue. Students can provide feedback on the programs progress and can discuss personal issues in a safe and supportive setting with school personnel (TDSB, 2008, p. 1). Differences in intra-cultural group identities such as religion and country of origin are addressed with a focus on the Africentric principles of unity and harmony with the school environment. Furthermore, the school carries “positive images and symbols of cultural significance,” in all spaces and is influenced by daily African-inspired affirmations (TDSB, p. 1).



Curriculum content is made relevant to the student body by focusing on factors such as socioeconomic statuses, lived experience, and group orientations. In using “real life experiences of the students and their social context as a basis for learning,” personal and social growth and positive relationships amongst student, teachers and communities are formed (TDSB, 2008, p. 1). Moreover, the school, its teachers and administration, in all of its totality, are committed to “the pursuit of excellence,” and to an “inclusive and equitable school environment.” Priority is given to hosting an environment with high expectations for all students and to the “positive development of self identity, self-knowledge and self-esteem” (TDSB, p. 2).

In the article, “Making the Case for African-Centered Schools, in the Euro-American Context,” Dei (2008) uses guiding principles outlined below to describe what Africentric alternative schooling may embody in the Canadian educational landscape. Guiding principle ‘Representation in Education’ is constituted by a collection of visual representations of diverse religions, cultures and ethnic minorities within the school and staff. Representation entails inclusive knowledge of non-European experiences in the curriculum as well. Such values are reflected in the staff members hired and world views explored within the classroom. ‘Language Integration’ aims to incorporate ones primary language with English in the teaching process. Approaches such as this are used to validate the learners’ primary language and harmoniously integrate English language skills. In addition, student support services provide counselling and special educational programming.

The principle ‘Equity, Accommodation and Access in Education’ aims to make education culturally relevant and is conscious of issues of bias and power within the curriculum and school system. The aim is to teach students how to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge in ways that

will help them better understand themselves, their community and the world. ‘Family, Local Community and School Partnerships’ focuses on the roles of parents and community members as advisors and knowledge producers in the school. For example, Africentric schooling would welcome experts and community elders into the classroom to enhance educational experiences and the school environment.

The principle of ‘Cooperative Education’ places importance on broadening the definition of success. Success is not only characterized through educational achievement but through community involvement, cultural knowledge and other non-academic achievements. All forms of success improve the learners’ sense of identity and self-esteem (Dei, 2008, p. 2). Cooperative Education would be carried out through relevant and authentic instruction and through student participation in community activities.

The discussed principles allow for us to understand the multi-centric approach to African-centered education. Students are located within the context of their own social frameworks. Centered education counters hegemonic education to end dominance and introduce other forms of “centric knowledge” (Dei, 1996b, p. 177). Diverse bodies of knowledge highlight the contributions of other societies in knowledge production and world history.

The TDSB produced Africentric inclusive curriculum units for various school subjects. The grade seven and eight “Literacy Through Geography” unit is based on the 2004 social studies, history and geography Ontario curriculum documents. The unit explored patterns in physical and human geography. The unit incorporates patterns of life in Africa through building knowledge of interrelationships between people and each other, individuals and their surroundings, and the environment and its many parts. For example, since developing an

awareness of global citizenship is one of the ultimate goals of social studies teachers, the Africentric curriculum teaches about the contributions of Africans to Canadian colonial heritage as well as about the impact of colonialism on Africa. Furthermore, students are exposed to both the positive and negative impacts of foreign aid and learn the different ways that global interactions have affected individuals and groups within African communities.

In addition, the Africentric curriculum document illustrates the goals, structure, and pedagogy of the Africentric curriculum. For example, critical thinking is promoted as the document reads, “History is not the same as the past; rather, it is a compilation of interpretations of the past...Questioning their meaning and message encourages the researcher to reconstruct the social world in which they first appeared” (TDSB, 2009b, p. 2). Such activity aims to strengthen students’ ability to recognize bias and stereotypes and current and historical representations of history. Furthermore, the Africentric curriculum is not an “add-on” curriculum. Content and topics that are Eurocentric in nature in the existing curriculum are fused with global content and experience.

### **Africentric schooling and black youth.**

Using culture as a tool in teaching is valuable in creating a community of learners (Delpit, 2006; Diller, 1999). Teacher-student interactions and school dynamics may be agents of cultural discontinuity. For example, in the article, “Opening the Dialogue: Using Culture as a Tool in Teaching Young African American Children,” Diller (1999) uses her personal experiences to describe her frustrations in teaching prior to making connections between culturally relevant pedagogy and student success. She reveals that by incorporating African inspired values such as cooperation and community sharing in her classroom principles, by

teaching through varied instructional approaches such as emotionally charged song and dance, and by recognizing and valuing difference, she was able to build trust with and better serve her black students. Diller used advice from literature, black parents and community members, teachers, colleagues and students to self educate and practise culturally relevant pedagogy.

The theme of culturally relevant instruction is also discussed by African-American author Delpit (2006) who stressed the importance of using culturally specific instruction in teaching. For example, Delpit introduced using direct and explicit statements when instructing black children. She stated that such mannerisms on behalf of the teacher commands respect and holds clear expectations while teaching. Direct statements create a stronger learning environment because black youth are culturally receptive to such instruction in their home environment (Delpit, 2006).

As communicated in this chapters section entitled 'Black Youth', cultural differences and racial tensions are factors that contribute to the low academic achievement of black youth. In taking culturally relevant instruction into consideration, if we adapt our teaching practices to work *with* as oppose to work against our student body, we may be successful in bringing forth academic mobility. We must ask ourselves what are we doing and what can we do differently in our education system to make a difference. "The more teachers acknowledge, respect, and build on the skills, knowledge, language, and behaviour patterns that children bring to school, the more likely students will become engaged in academic learning and benefit from it" (Diller, 1999, p. 827). To understand the correlation between culturally relevant pedagogy and issues of disadvantage, Dei (1994) states, "It [Afrocentricity] is a form of education intended to equip students and teachers with the requisite cultural capital to work toward the eradication of the structural conditions that marginalize the existence of certain segments of the school population"

(p. 17). Africentric education then is a culturally relevant framework that seeks social emancipation and mobility through schooling.

### **Case examples.**

In the article, “Nighana: Empowering black Students,” Sprang (1999) discussed the need for and success of an Africentric transitional program designed for students attending Toronto’s Eastdale Collegiate Institute. Nighana was developed after a survey funded by the Drug Abuse Program in 1993 revealed students were dropping out of school because they felt racially and culturally alienated in the classroom. As the goal of Nighana is to reintegrate students into mainstream schooling with a higher self esteem and sense of self, Nighana teacher, Jamil Kalim, cultivates the curriculum to make it culturally relevant to his students. For example, in addition to courses such as Canadian Family, African Civilization and African-Canadian History, Kalim introduced the African dance and drumming program to teach students about music and to have students perform for community members. The article states, “By learning basic patterns and performing in the community, they grasped the relevance of their culture, which in turn enhanced their self-esteem” (Sprang, 1999, p. 19).

The response from enrolled students in the program has been positive. For example, the article claimed program participants have been engaging in course work and attending school regularly. Furthermore, the report expressed many enrolled students say they look forward to go to school for the first time. For example, Sean Roberts, a student in the program said that he had difficulty relating to school until the Nighana program. The Nighana program had encouraged him to improve his attendance and care for school again (Sprang, p. 1999, 19). The Nighana program exemplifies a positive alternative program helping student potential shine through strategic culturally relevant pedagogical approaches.

In the summer of 2005, the Africentric Summer Institute, a pilot Africentric summer program, enlisted 73 participating students and taught through a diversified Africentric curriculum. The program provided an Africentric learning environment for black students in Grades one to five who were achieving at Levels two or below (on a four level scale) in literacy and numeracy. The report entitled, “The Africentric Summer Institute Research Report,” evaluated and assessed the impact of the summer pilot program on students. The study assessed student achievement using report card data and used perception surveys to better understand student perceptions of the program. According to report card data, “In reading, writing and math, about one-fifth of students increased their level of achievement (e.g., Level one to Level two)” (O’Reilly & Gregory, 2006, p. 1).

The perception survey conducted after the program was over also revealed positive feedback. For example, “Almost all of the students said that they enjoyed the program (94%). The vast majority of students reported that since participating in the program, they liked school more (87%), were proud of what they had learned (94%) and were excited to learn more (94%)” (O’Reilly & Gregory, 2006, p. 2).

Although the quantitative data examined is reflective of the Africentric summer pilot program, it must be noted that five weeks is short span of time to assess the actual academic growth and cultural impact of the curriculum on student achievement. For example, factors such as the time of year (summer) and the small classroom sizes may have had an impact on the results. Furthermore, although the report did provide quantitative data pertaining to student perceptions of Africentric schooling, it failed to take a qualitative approach to gain a detailed account of student voices. It would be valuable to understand what the students liked about the

program, why they were proud of what they had learned and what made them like school more to gain a better understand of the benefits and limitations of the program.

### **Multicultural education.**

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act differentiates Canada amongst other countries. Canadians pride themselves on inclusive practices, valuing difference and cultivating a sense of belonging for all citizens. The “Annual Report on the Operation of the Canadian Multicultural Act 2007-2008” expressed that federal institutions are encouraged to sustain values of respect, fairness and equality with respect to individuals of diverse groups. The act strives to acknowledge and celebrate Canada’s diverse population and all the vast contributions that have been made by Canadians regardless of their ethnic, cultural, racial, religious and linguistic backgrounds (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2009). The needs of Canadians are met through programs, policies and services implemented by governmental institutions.

According to Banks and Banks (2003), in schools, “Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students- regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics- should have an equal opportunity to learn in school” (p. 3). To sustain diverse educational surroundings, multiculturalism aims to adapt school environments to ensure that they are inclusive of all students. There is an emphasis on representative school staffing, on an all-encompassing formalized curriculum and on a tolerant school culture valuing different cultural attitudes and beliefs (Banks & Banks, p. 24). Hosting a culturally neutral school environment, recognition of ethno cultural holidays and the inclusion of minority names and pictures in text books exemplify some multicultural practices.

Although multicultural education is far more complex than noted, theoretically it is viewed as inclusionary. Multiculturalism’s goals in education allow individuals to practise their

own cultural values and beliefs while still remaining part of the Canadian school system. However, it can be argued that in the real world, outside ones home and away from cultural institutions, individuals are expected to ideologically assimilate to hegemonic cultural practices, values and ideals. Therefore, in practise, and within institutions, multiculturalism can be exclusionary. For example, in Canadian education, our current curriculum is Eurocentric in nature (Dei, 2002). Although multicultural practices result in exploring cultures through multicultural day and black history month in schools; on a day to day basis, institutionally, multicultural practices are challenged as we are conditioned by a Eurocentric ideological framework (Dei, 2002).

In the article, “Beyond the Rhetoric: Moving from Exclusion, Reaching for Inclusion in Canadian Schools,” Dei (2002) reconceptualises the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Exclusion is defined as an act or instance of excluding or keeping apart. It can range from involuntary segregation to “colour blind” methods of schooling. For example, personal or purposeful exclusionary acts can be demonstrated at the student level where some students may not be accepted into certain groups or clubs on the basic of some criteria. Institutional exclusion, on the other hand, can be exemplified by the structures of schooling.

The official curriculum, the texts used within schools, teacher-student and school-community relationships exclude certain experiences, bodies of knowledge and histories due to prevailing hegemonic visions of schooling (Dei, 2002). Youth of African descent, for example, may not see their social realities or evolving histories in Canadian teachings of various subject matters. The erasure of global histories in a Western society that is comprised of a global majority can have adverse effects on students such as black youth. According to Schmidt and Patterson (1995) “colonial and neo-colonial powers manipulate the production of histories,



encouraging certain forms of history while discouraging and even silencing others” (p. 4). Governing bodies also exercised much control over the production of knowledge which has resulted in a power relationship between those who produce information and those who interpret it.

Classroom practices and educational institutions can be evaluated by analyzing them as agents of domination and oppression within society (Zeus, 2004, p. 11). The multicultural curriculum can be understood as an ideological framework that transmits institutional knowledge. Zeus (2004) stated when black youth are conditioned within a Eurocentric curriculum, to be successful, they are expected to internalize the norms and values educators teach through dominant ideology as being customary (p. 11). Our current school curriculum may therefore condition students to adapt to social norms and values that are thought of as being valuable in society.

From a critical standpoint, values that may encourage superior work ethics and compliance do so to maintain the status quo in society. Speaking from marginalized minority schooling experiences, multicultural curriculums can create a false illusion that hard work and obedience alone result in social status in society. The multicultural curriculum does not always take into account that in actuality, the probability of success for minority students in society is not based on school achievement alone. Due to systemic issues surrounding race, people of colour may have a lesser chance at success in comparison to other individuals (Zeus, 2004).

Often times, our pedagogical practices fail to acknowledge systemic barriers within the multicultural curriculum. Therefore, when some minority students do internalize these values and fail in society, they internalize these failures as personal. The internalization of failure can take the attention away from the fact that in essence, failure may be rooted in institutionalization.

In support, York University professor Carl James stated, “Within this context [multiculturalism], the failure of students is seen as more a product of their individual efforts, choices, values and aspirations than the system of education” (James, 2009, pp. 3-4).

In comparison, the Africentric curriculum can be viewed as an alternative to the current multicultural curriculum. “One may not accept the Afrocentric thesis if she/he cannot perceive the structure of Eurocentricism and how this structure has formulated the dominant group's conception of minority groups and/or alternative ways of knowing” (Dei, 1998, p. 200). In reconceptualising the Africentric curriculum in relation to an ideological framework, the Africentric curriculum can be understood as one that challenges systemic Eurocentric knowledge claims. The Africentric paradigm differs because it has a social and educational foundation that rejects a curriculum that is “ideologically conditioned by notions of domination, prediction, control, racism, and so on” (Chou, Lewis & Watkins, 2001, p. 55).

The Africentric curriculum gains its strength as a counter discourse to Eurocentrism by confronting systemic social arrangements. It aims for students to see themselves as “allies with the environment rather than the oppressed conquerors” (Lukens & Traore, 2006, p. 110). According to Dei (1998), “Too often, Eurocentrism masquerades as universalism, and political and academic projects that seek to break the silences around subordinate groups' knowledge are fiercely discredited. Afrocentric knowledge challenges Eurocentrism's commodification of values” (p. 200).

### **Anti-racist education.**

The diverse community that represents the Canadian population reflects a range of races, cultures and ethnicities. In turn, diversity reflects our student population and the challenges we

encounter in obtaining educational equity for all. According to Dei's (2002) article "Beyond the Rhetoric: Moving from Exclusion, Reaching for Inclusion in Canadian Schools," differences associated with race, religion, gender, class, sexuality, language and culture must be recognized as social realities. Total inclusivity within the school system means that we must teach about difference and its relation to power (Dei, 2002).

Anti-racist education recognizes prevailing racism and social oppression within society. Anti-racist discourse holds "issues of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as matters of cultural and ethnic variety" (Dei, 1996a, p. 25). Anti-racist education differs from multicultural education as it is aware that student identities intersect with factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, language, culture and religion. Anti-racist discourse is built on the premise that such factors have an effect on student educational experiences and inequalities in schooling. Furthermore, anti-racist education strives to educate students about "domination and subordination to ensure positive and equitable learning outcomes in educational programs" (Dei, 2002, p. 65).

The book *Letters to Marcia* written by Lee (1985) asserted that because racism exists in society and school is an institution of society, it is influenced by racism. Within the school system racism is present when for example educators have lowered expectations of racial minorities, when teachers teach to these lowered expectations and when large groups of children are streamed to certain subject areas because they are "good" at it and therefore don't grow and develop in other areas. Lee articulates that when we, as educators, claim not to see colour or difference when educating students, we are not seeing the child as a whole. We need to recognize social inequalities "because it's a fact; our society does devalues some people on the

basis of race and advance others on the same premise” (Lee, 1985, p. 10). By addressing our social realities in educational practices, anti-racist education will help transform our society to one that is more equitable. It should be noted that currently much effort has been put forth in our public education system in Ontario to integrate anti-racist principles in schooling practices and policies.

Aspects of the anti-racist paradigm in education can be applied to Africentric schooling as both models confront hegemonic schooling practices using equitable notions of pedagogy and curriculum. Anti-racist principles are reflected in Africentric schooling through addressing educational disparities and student rights to fair and equitable learning outcomes (Dei, 1996a, p. 109). For example, Robinson (2007) examines the Canadian Africentric math unit which is comprised of probability and data management activities. Real-life statistical data from the Rwandan genocide, the slave registry, black immigration, racial profiling, and racial discrimination was used to engage students. Teacher and Africentric curriculum writer Jones-George states that relevant curriculums work to re-engage black youth:

It’s talking about issues that are relevant to them and usually when you talk about issues that are relevant to students they’re hooked and interested in what’s going on. It also talks about social responsibility because I think that, yes, there is racial profiling, and yes, there are injustices, but then there is also responsibility of the students to take responsibility for their own behaviour. My unit ends asking people to take social responsibility. What are they doing to further the problem or to solve the problem? I am asking them to take a stand and do something for the betterment of community (Robinson, 2007).

Jones George states that acknowledging the truth in regards to what has happened and what is happening in our society leads to resolution, education and tolerance amongst students, teachers and communities. Synonymous to anti-racist educational values, the unit is inclusive of the social realities of some students. Inclusive practices aim to develop youth ability, knowledge, and skill. Furthermore, the anti-racist paradigm incorporates core Africentric values with a focus on community building and restoring relationships. Although African-centered pedagogy embodies anti-racist principles, its ideals are rooted in Africentric values and ideals. Africentric schooling is an alternative model of education. Black youth may benefit from such a curricular approach as it aims to specifically engage students and encourage positive self concepts through its social and cultural Africentric tenets.

### **Afrocentric Education: Origins and American Perspective**

The Afrocentric movement, an American concept, was founded in the 1960s. African American intellectuals in the newly formed black studies department across universities began to formulate new ways of analyzing society. With communal progress and the release of Asante's book, *Afrocentricity*, the 1980s brought substance and attention to the Afrocentric paradigm. Asante's Afrocentric research interests have allowed him to become one of the leading faces fronting the Afrocentric educational movement across the United States of America. To completely understand Afrocentric education, it is important to explore the concept of Afrocentricity using the foundation Asante provides.

Asante (1992) relates Afrocentricity to Njia, the ideology of victorious thought (p. 1). "Njia represents the inspired Afrocentric spirit found in the tradition of African-Americans, and the spiritual survival of an African essence in America" (Asante, 1992, p. 23). Njia embodies a new way of viewing one's life, world and one's self. In concurrence, Afrocentricity explores

African history and experience and constitutes a new way of examining information to recover African place, respectability, accountability, and leadership. Knowledge is constructed to view Africans as active forces in the world, resulting in the transformation of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours (Asante, 2009a). “When black people view themselves as centered and central in their own history then they see themselves as agents, actors, and participants rather than as marginals on the periphery of political or economic experience” (Asante, 2009c). Afrocentric education is one way of achieving such a state of being.

In his article, “Toward the Centered School in Urban Areas,” Asante (2009b) asserts that one of the main principles of a centered education is that the curriculum aims to “create lessons, scopes, and sequences that reflect an authentic voice concept” (Asante, 2009b). In such reflective classrooms, creative discussion, discourse, debate and critical thinking are imperative to give life to the materials taught. Educators are responsible for fostering a critical learning environment in addition to remaining sensitive to all students when deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge.

Asante also states that “A centered school celebrates the culture of the students” (Asante, 2009b). Teachers are to incorporate student cultures in daily classroom activities. Through activities such as wearing symbolic culture clothing and welcoming guest speakers and performers who are representative of the student body, this can be accomplished. Educators are also encouraged to use student specific history, culturally relevant illustrations and artefacts within the lessons taught. Relevant strategies ensure that students learn the role and importance of his or her people in world events today and from the past. Furthermore, Asante claims that “A centered school involves parents in the process of centering students” (Asante, 2009b). We learn that it may be necessary to center the parents because once they understand the importance and

value of being centered they too can help center their children. Helping centre parents can be carried out by school personnel such as the principle or designated board members at school and community meetings (Asante, 2009b).

In analyzing mainstream schooling practices, Asante articulates that there is a great amount of ignorance that exists within the school system due to the lack of teacher/ student education in African American students. He says that teachers often do not discuss African American Studies because they themselves have not been educated on it, leading to students having little knowledge pertaining to African American Studies. In the article, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education,” Asante (1991) states:

Little mention is made in American classrooms of either brutality of slavery or the ex-slaves’ celebration of freedom. American children have little or no understanding of the nature of the capture, transport, and enslavement of Africans. Few have been taught the true horrors of being taken, shipped naked across 25 days of ocean, broken by abuse and indignities of all kinds, and dehumanized into a beast of burden, a thing without a name. If our students only knew the truth, if they were taught the Afrocentric perspective on the Great Enslavement, and if they knew the full story about the events since slavery that have served to constantly dislocate African Americans, their behaviour would perhaps be different...If the curriculum were enhanced to include readings from the slave narratives; the diaries of slave ship captains; the journals of slave owners; the abolitionist newspapers; the writings of the freedmen and freedwomen; the accounts of African American civil rights, civics, and social organizations; and numerous others, African American children would be

different, White children would be different- indeed, America would be a different nation today (pp. 175-6).

Teachers and students then can be viewed as victims of the current education system and of society. Because of the absence of information (such as illustrated above) in school curriculums, students can be dislocated and disoriented from worldly history (Asante, 1991, p. 176). Students can be affected by this by having trouble identifying with and placing themselves within historical experiences. Asante's argument is followed by a series of examples from narratives of slave experience. For example, Asante (1991) wrote:

The Weldons noted that Africans, having been captured and brought onto the slave ships, were chained to the deck, made to bend over, and "branded with a red hot iron in the form of letters or signs dipped in an oily preparation and pressed against the naked flesh till it burnt a deep and ineffaceable scar, to show who was the owner" They also recalled that those who screamed were lashed on the face, breast, thighs, and backs with a "cat-o'-nine tails" wielded by White sailors: "Every blow brought the returning lash pieces of grieving flesh". Children and infants were not spared from this terror. The Weldons tell of a nine-month-old baby on board a slave ship being flogged because it would not eat. The ship's captain ordered the child's feet placed in boiling water, which dissolved the skin and nails, then ordered the child whipped again; still the child refused to eat. Eventually the captain killed the baby with his own hands and commanded the child's mother to throw the dead baby overboard (p. 176).



Asante uses such narratives to illustrate that school systems are hegemonic and that withholding information is contributing to a disjoined society. He relates the teachings of such experiences to that of the Holocaust. Asante asserted that it should be just as important to learn about the “Black Holocaust” as it is the European Holocaust. Through building a thorough understanding and diverse perspective, African American students may gain a sense of centeredness by connecting to historical content in addition to learning to transform social practices in a positive way alongside their counterparts. Asante states that “Afrocentricity is not anti-White; it is, however, pro-human” (Asante, 1991, p. 179). Afrocentricity’s aim is not to divide society, rather to bridge an existing educational gap by providing African American children with the cultural and academic guidance to reorient their educational experience.

Although the Afrocentric movement is highly regarded by some scholars, there exists much criticism regarding claims of educational domination and oppression. In his article “The Disuniting of America,” Schlesinger (2001) acknowledges that much injustice has been bought upon African American (and Native American) peoples. Historical, social, economical and psychological struggles in addition to black achievement have not been documented accurately and fully by historians. Schlesinger mimics minority voices to express feelings of deculturalization and deprivation. For example, Schlesinger (2001) wrote:

Salvation thus lies, the argument goes, in breaking white, Eurocentric, racist grip on the curriculum and providing education that responds to coloured races, coloured histories, coloured ways of learning and behaving. Europe has reigned long enough; it is the source of most of the evil in the world anyway; and the time is overdue to

honour the African contributions to civilization so purposefully suppressed in Eurocentric curricula (p. 14).

Despite his polemic, Schlesinger articulates much effort has been put forth by both white and black historians to redirect balance in literature and to reverse judgments on slavery and the role of blacks in America. Efforts to readdress balance in literature have resulted in the reconstruction of American history and have changed the American curriculum to focus equally on multiple world regions. Schlesinger contests the claim that literary advancement is simply not enough because systematic bias of European culture effects minority youth both academically and psychologically. He also challenges the claim that the inclusion of ethnic histories would allow for minority youth to gain higher self-esteem, self-respect and would encourage less homogeneous European perspectives.

In his address, Schlesinger argues that justification to change our history curriculum defeats any interest in history itself. “Its [Afrocentric] interest in history is not as an intellectual discipline but rather as social and psychological therapy whose primary function is to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups. Nor does the report regard the Constitution or the American Creed as means of improvement” (Schlesinger, 2001, p. 16). Speaking of social and psychological therapy, Schlesinger comments on the Afrocentric curriculum teachings of great African emperors, African enlightenment and brilliance by asserting:

Like other excluded groups before them, black Americans invoke supposed past glories to compensate for real past and present injustices. Because their exclusion has been more tragic and terrible than that of white immigrants, their quest for self-

affirmation is more intense and passionate. In seeking to impose Afrocentric curricula on public schools, for example, they go further than their white predecessors. And belated recognition by white American of the wrongs so viciously inflicted on black Americans has created the phenomenon of white guilt- not a bad thing in many respects, but still a vulnerability that invites cynical exploitation and manipulation (Schlesinger, p. 17).

Furthermore, Schlesinger asserts that Afrocentrists strive to teach black students about magnificent West African emperors, the land they ruled and the civilization they achieved but not the cruelty of their wars or about the tribal massacres and the captives sold into slavery. What frustrates him in particular is that Afrocentric accounts are being used as a therapy to build a sense of self-worth amongst minority youth while at the same time Eurocentric accounts are accused of causing poor performance in black youth. Schlesinger argues that self-esteem and respect are a result of achievement and personal bests as oppose to racial pride. Pride and inspiration is not only available for people through their racial group. For example, he says that Martin Luther King Jr. was inspired by other humanitarians such as Gandhi, Thoreau, and Reinhold, not just people of the black race.

Lastly, Schlesinger argues that movements such as Afrocentricity encourage other ethnic groups to veto anything that is taught in public schools. Problems arise when differences are exaggerated and wounds are deepened between races and nationalities. Schlesinger argues when problems arise, Afrocentricity amounts to alienation, paranoia and separatism. Instead of educational institutions bringing Americans together, Afrocentricity promotes institutionalized racial tensions and differences (Schlesinger, 2001).

In analyzing Schlesinger's arguments it can be argued that he fails to entirely recognize the influence of systemic barriers based on race, religion, gender and race in our education system. He often overlooks that there is a correlation between one's sense of self and systemic failure. Furthermore, Schlesinger ignores the principle of equity in educational ethics; *equal treatment does not always mean same treatment* (Keeping, 2008, p. 3). Differences need to be recognized to ensure equitable pedagogical practices. Alternative educational sites prevail in many forms in our education system whether they are rooted in culture, sex or religion. Afrocentric and Africentric schooling are no different. Moreover, it should be noted that Schlesinger's arguments, at times, demonstrate a lack of understanding of Afrocentrism in its totality.

Afrocentric education in America is not a new concept. Afrocentric educational institutions and black-focused schools are prevalent in the alternative educational landscape in America for many years now. African-centered liberation is influenced by the American civil rights era urging blacks to gain political consciousness and cultural pride. Ginwright (2004) critiques Afrocentric schooling in America arguing that for the most part, issues such as social class, gender and sexuality are not taken into account when educating black youth using this paradigm. He asserts:

Few Afrocentric approaches explore the relationship between racial marginalization and broader issues of economic oppression. The impact of urban problems such as poverty, safety, violence, and unemployment are rarely considered in the development and implementation of Afrocentric school reform, and as a result, many

Afrocentric projects simply do not connect with students' everyday lives (Ginwright, 2004, p. 4).

Specifically, Ginwright examines the failure of the 1992 established Afrocentric school, McClymonds High School, in an urban low socioeconomic status neighbourhood in Oakland, California. The school was supported and influenced by leading Afrocentric scholars, community members and renowned educators. McClymonds High School had a start up budget of \$420, 000 USD and was modeled after successful Afrocentric schools in Chicago, Detroit and Atlanta. With the implementation of the program there were minimal academic improvements and many disengaged students. For example, students had difficulty connecting the contributions of Kemet (Egypt) to their own social realities in Oakland. Ginwright asserted despite all its potential, the effort was ineffective because the schools only concern was racial identities and ignored the influence of other factors such as social class, sexuality, age and gender that contributed to youth self-concepts (Ginwright, 2004, p. 111).

In the example of McClymonds High School, the black middle class community members implementing the Afrocentric program did not take into account social class and extra support that would be needed for children to succeed. Inclusive pedagogical practices, professional development, consideration of social issues, and social supports such as homework and breakfast clubs, would have been beneficial for youth. Although McClymonds High School did not succeed in accomplishing its goals, it provided a great learning opportunity for Afrocentric reforms.

### **Africentric Schooling and the Canadian Educational Landscape**

Afrocentric education changes when applied to Canada. Africentric education adapts principles of Afrocentric education to fit the Canadian context. The discourse on race has a central place in the American constitution, whereas Canada's educational landscape has a strong focus on the diversity of its citizens, placing emphasis on ethnicities and cultures and not just race. The Canadian educational landscape is inclusive of progressive alternative methods of schooling, including Africentric schooling.

**Alternative schooling: making room for one more.**

Alternative methods of conventional education provide learner-driven, non-traditional educational opportunities for diverse groups of learners in Canada. Educational alternatives are rooted in various philosophies that differ from mainstream schools and curriculum. Equitable learning practices are often committed to the "one size does not fit all" approach in the realm of education. The Canadian government supports and publically funds numerous alternative schools, including almost 40 varieties in the TDSB alone (James, 2009, p. 2).

Alternative programs such as the Africentric school is an equitable approach to learning and is not a form of segregation, it is pro-choice. "Segregationists in the first half of the 20th century sought to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in society. By contrast, black-focused schools aim to address an educational crisis and help minority youth succeed" (Sarpong, 2008, p. 1). In support, we learn the fight for historical desegregation of schooling was not simply a symbolic fight for civil rights but was fundamentally a struggle for equal access to publically funded educational resources (Milton, 2008, p. 18). With equal access attained, "It [Africentric education] is a remedy for effective exclusion from education by the conditions that

obtain in the system today. What it implies is the need to substantiate the mission of the school system as articulated in the Education Act, to provide an education to all students” (Galabuzi, 2008, p. 1).

According to the Maclean’s article “Choice in Education,” we learn about many successful alternative schools that provide evidence that choice improves performance. For example, the province of Alberta exceeds its provincial academic standards with multiple publicly funded language based, alternative, charter, private and home schools that meet the needs of diverse families. Alternative schools in Alberta report that students consistently rank at or near the top of national and international academic tests (“Choice...” 2008). The evidence establishes that student-centered and holistic programs focused on meeting the academic needs of a specific group may be successful alternatives to mainstream education. An Africentric school provides alternative academic accommodations for some students as well. Africentric schooling can be understood as being similar to language-immersion schools, religious based schools, gender specific and homosexual and transgender schools. According to James (2009):

The existence of such schools and programs indicates to me, recognition that things such as religion, gender, sexuality, and students’ interests in arts, drama, technology, history and/or athletics play a role in their experiences and schooling needs, interests, aspirations, performance and outcomes. On the basis of similar principles, therefore, the establishment of a school that is responsive to the cultural values and schooling needs of black students does not seem illogical (pp. 2-3).

Similar to other alternative educational arrangements, Africentric schooling is a specialized program for some learners whose potential is best cultivated through a tailored more controlled environment.

### **Alternative schooling and Africentric education.**

Through his research, which parallels earlier findings reported in the section Black Youth and Africentric Education, Dei (1996b) demonstrates the need for Africentric schooling in the Canadian educational landscape. In the article, “The Role of Afrocentricity in the Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools,” we hear student voices expressing concern about their schooling experiences. Black youth expose discrepancies in treatment due to race, the lack of black teachers, and the lack of African-Canadian history within the classroom (Dei, 1996b, p. 175). Students were asked various questions surrounding how race, class, and gender have influenced their school experiences; what they thought about school; and why they think some people drop out of school (Dei, p. 172).

The study reports that students such as Jane, a high school dropout, felt that there was a lack of representation of black scholars in academic texts and in the school curriculum. She worried that “all those who have done something worth mentioning in the school books are White men” (Dei, 1996b, p. 173). Another student Michael expressed his frustrations about not learning about black peoples contributions in history. He states, “I only knew about Canadian history, which is White history...I did not learn anything about black people” (Dei, p. 173). Marlo, a participant in the summer jobs training program expressed that “the official school



curriculum can be very disempowering to the minority student, to the point where the student is disengaged from the classroom” (Dei, p. 173).

Lastly Jean-Brenda, a grade 12 student expressed “the difference it made to her if there were a black teacher on staff. She talked of understanding perspectives, sharing experiences, developing relationships, and seeing the black teacher as a source of inspiration and motivation” (Dei, 1996b, p. 174). Dei’s research exemplifies frustration amongst black high school youth regarding the lack of choice and cultural influence in mainstream curriculums. Illustrated student perspectives demonstrate the importance of having an alternative African Canadian educational option within our school system.

### **Africentric Education: Mixed Reactions**

Although Africentric education aims to bridge the absence of and need for a relevant curriculum, public responses documented within media reports, scholarly journal articles, editorials and magazines reveal both negative and positive reactions to the subject matter. In this section, I will discuss these perspectives and will demonstrate the lack of black youth perspectives on the subject matter.

Newspaper columnists Jonathan Kay (2007) reports that segregated schools [Africentric] based on race are of distasteful practice even though the motive behind them may be benign. In supporting his argument, Kay makes reference to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* human-rights case. The case determined that the “separate but equal” doctrine violated black equal rights and protection in education in America. The *Brown v. Board* case was the result of an 1896 Supreme Court ruling in America that determined black students would be given equal access to

educational resources, accommodations and facilities, however had to be housed in separate schools than white students.

In practice, this judgment resulted in black students traveling lengthy distances to attend school and having experiences that made them feel inferior to whites as the education they received was second class (Milner & Howard, 2004, p. 2). As a result, the Brown vs. Board of Education case permitted black youth to integrate into mainstream public schooling. Kay asserts that the Africentric program is creating divisions once again based on the premise of race and argues that the black focused school will likely intensify as oppose to bridge the social gaps between students.

In evaluating Kay's perspective, it should be noted that Africentric schooling is not based on the premise of race. Africentric schooling is open to all students who want to learn through a culturally-relevant Africentric approach. Furthermore, the Africentric paradigm is an inclusive endeavour that confronts social issues such as social class, gender and sexuality in educating marginalized youth.

However, Kay is not alone in expressing such fears and opinions. Milton (2008) reports that some people have compared Africentric schooling to racial segregation in the United States declaring, "Martin Luther King would turn over in his grave" (p. 18). Community voices are also heard in articles such as "Voices: Black-Focused School," where James Bannister of Niagara Falls, Ontario voices:

Excuse me, but isn't this 2007? Fifty-three years ago Brown vs. Board of Education held that separate education is not equal education. The nub of the argument was that

black students (in the USA) were being deprived of educational opportunities because they were being kept out of white schools. So the political orthodoxy became that schools must be integrated. Now the black power people say schools should be segregated because black students in "multicultural" schools can't seem to keep up. So have all the sociologists and educators and politicians been wrong all these years? ("Voices....," 2007)

Such responses indicate public confusion pertaining to issues confronting black youth. Many seem to not understand why students cannot "keep up" within integrated systems and are frustrated when past efforts towards inclusivity are questioned or criticized. The response also demonstrates how American legal precedent has shaped Canadian legal and teaching realities. Our Canadian constitution was altered in 1982 by the inclusion of individual civil liberties in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The alteration was influenced by the American Bill of Rights as American experience was referenced in creating Canadian laws. Milner and Howard note (2004), "We need to exercise caution whenever importing American legal concepts, given the significant differences between our two countries' constitutional frameworks" (p. 2).

For example, the pedagogical debate in special education brought forth legal action to have fully integrated placements for special needs students in regular classrooms. The *Brown v Board of Education* case was used as an analogy to fight for full inclusion. However, the court cited comparing the two cases was unconvincing because "skin colour has never been an educational variable, where as a disability may imply different kinds of teaching" (Milner & Howard, 2004, p. 3). Similarly, comparing the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and Africentric schooling can

be seen as a misapplication as Africentric education is pro-choice and is based on a culturally relevant pedagogy. When asked if the debate over Africentric schools is misplaced given that the TDSB has many other alternative schools, Tura Cousins-Wilson of Toronto states:

Though anyone can agree there is problem with underachievement and drop-out rates, particularly in Toronto's black community, introducing a separate "Africentric" school is completely the wrong approach and goes against our multicultural values. Children don't fail because they are black, white or purple, they fail due to lack of motivation, and broken families. An Africentric school is not only wrong but also racist. The belief that black children should be encouraged to have black teachers as role models is ridiculous. A black child can be motivated by Mats Sundin, just like someone white can be inspired by Oscar Peterson. As well, how can one define what is 'Africentric' when Africa is a diverse continent with many cultures and religions and beliefs? ("Voice...", 2008)

Public responses such as the latter signify public out roar that issues facing black youth surpass the education system and race. This newspaper claim illustrates some of the perspectives the common person may have about race and schooling. However, during development, Tatum (1997) states that although all teens become more self-conscious about their appearance, black youth begin to think about themselves in racial terms (p. 53). Tatum discussed identity development in adolescence and asserted that notions of "black" projected by popular culture and society are not all positive and may be influential in black youth identity formation. Youth interpret what it means to be black and act accordingly to belong and empathize with each other's lived realities.

Schooling is correlated with race when behaviours that promote academic achievement are associated with white behaviour. Tatum (1997) points out, “If young people are exposed to images of African American academic achievement in their early years, they won’t have to define school achievement as something for whites only” (Tatum, p. 65). Given Tatum’s research, Africentric schooling may prove to be a positive and supportive environment for some black youth to affirm their sense of self.

In addition to these community voices, political leader Ontario Premier Dalton MaGuinty has criticised the Africentric program and has stated that no extra provincial funds will be provided for the school, although he will not prevent it from being opened. “I am disappointed with the board's decision,” MaGuinty said. “I don't support it [Africentric schooling] and we won't fund it. I continue to believe that the best way for us to educate our children is to bring them together so they can come together, learn together and grow together” (“MaGuinty...” 2008). MaGuinty has made it publically known that he is uncomfortable with the idea and argues that the core of the issue is the nature of our curriculum, which needs to include more minority voices. Furthermore, MaGuinty denied the Africentric programs request for an initial budget of \$820, 000 CAN for school funding and three pilot Africentric initiatives.

Lund’s (1998) article, “Social Justice and Public Education: A Response to George J. Sefa Dei” provides an analysis of Dei’s ideas surrounding inclusive education and educational reform. Lund notes that inclusive education generally implies diversity or acceptance that is broad in nature. Lund articulates that although Dei defines inclusive education using similar phrases, the model of schooling (Africentric) he advocates is based on exclusionary practices. Africentric schooling does not consider a diverse student body therefore Lund questions how

fairness and social justice principles are to be cultivated within such schools. Lund also analyses the concept of “centered” education. He describes centered education as focusing on a particular thing or group in relation to a specific interest. Lund argues that Africentric schooling is at odds with Dei’s concerns of hegemony. Africentric schooling also creates a hegemonic curriculum by focusing on a centered or favoured body of knowledge. Lund argues that attempts to combat Eurocentric education should not replace one centre for another.

Lund suggests a decentred, collaborative and unified approach to schooling that would support building strong learning communities in public schools. Diverse staff and cultural knowledge claims that represent the student body can be constructive changes for the whole system. Every student deserves a “culturally relevant pedagogy,” (Lund, 1998, p. 198) not just students attending Africentric schooling. Lund (1998) states:

Dei himself expresses the needs of schools most succinctly in a previous article in which he recommends "a genuinely inclusionary approach which emphasizes that although we come from different backgrounds and have different histories, and have relative privileges, we could still learn from each other in the struggle for social change (p. 198).

For social change to take place; individual educational endeavours may not be advantageous.

The Africentric program has been exposed to much criticism and confusion. Positive publicity is documented by advocates such as Dei. He asserted Africentric schooling is not a “black only school” (Dei, 2005, p. 1). Africentric schools address issues of black youth disengagement within the school system. Dei stated that when school achievement and postsecondary success of students remain below those of mainstream adolescents, youth feel

inferior and are disadvantaged materially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Exclusion often leads to students being “pushed out” or phased out from the school system (Dei, 2002).

To combat this issue, the Africentric program, geared by guiding principles of social responsibility, mutual interdependence, respect, clarity and accountability, helps address the needs and realities of black students (Dei, 2005, p. 1). The Africentric program will not remove all black youth from mainstream schooling. Africentric schooling is an educational alternative that is available for and recommended to some youth. The Africentric program aims to provide a holistic education through a supportive environment to empower students to make informed decisions. Furthermore, pressures of society, teachings about race and racism, gender, class and oppression will be confronted by students and teachers. Africentric alternative schooling aims to advance academic achievement and represents an expansion of choice as opposed to an absence of choice.

Addressing concerns and alternative points of view on Africentric schooling would be beneficial in educating society about Africentric social and cultural tenets. Media attention focusing on the relevance of the program as opposed to the controversial nature of the debate may be helpful. Some public responses indicate that citizens are ignorant to the academic and social lived realities of black youth who appear to not “keep up” in our education system. Underlying issues affecting black youth are not often discussed in the media.

Despite misrepresentation within the media, Brown (2008b), an education reporter, shared that the Africentric Alternative School will be an educational program held within an

established institution. The Africentric educational program is housed in a wing of Sheppard Public School. Public funding is not being used to build any African-centered free standing building to educate youth. Youth in both the alternative program and traditional public program will be together in the same playground, will eat together in the lunchroom, will have access to the same library and gym and are eligible to join the same school teams and after-school clubs. TDSB's executive officer of student and community equity, Lloyd McKell, claimed "We want there to be opportunities for collaboration between staff because in actual fact, we want it to be a place where we can develop some of the best practices [for engaging black students] so we can share them with all schools" (Brown, 2008b).

The Africentric school can be thought of as being similar to an educational program integrated within a public school setting. Faculty and staff have the opportunity to learn from each other and students have the opportunity to grow in different ways, yet grow together. The Africentric paradigm aims to help students by giving them the tools they need to develop and be integrated into society with prospects of success. This is similar to the way gendered schools have helped women to overcome educational obstacles. Africentrism is supported by the human rights principle that equal treatment does not always mean same treatment; we need to recognize differences to ensure equitable outcomes (Keeping, 2008, p. 3).

Within these debates however, black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling were not prominent although they did have mention in few media reports. Incorporating the voice of a young black female in her article, "Africentric Students Buoy School," Brown (2008a) reports "These courses aren't like segregation. An Africentric school wouldn't be like segregation," argues Arnelle Collison, a 13 year old black female. "Segregation was by force, this kind of



school wouldn't be by force. And it's not only interesting for blacks; it would help everyone be more open-minded" (Brown, 2008a). In opposition, Scarborough-Agincourt trustee, Soo Wong, quoted an inner city black youth in her public reflection, who declares that Africentric schooling is a:

Bandage solution that covers the wound temporarily but it does not address the root cause of this infected wound. The bandage will come off easily and the bleeding will start again. You have not provided the appropriate intervention to heal the wound and prevent further complications or future infection (Wong, 2008, p. 3).

It would be beneficial to have more literature addressing black youth perceptions of the Africentric program. Black youth perspectives may help improve the program and are imperative for further research.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Design And Methodology**

In this chapter, I describe the research approach and methods to be used. I detail the rationale for decisions made during the research process, explain how the study progressed and give information about the study area. The design and methodology section is organized under the following subheadings: 1) Overview of Methodology, 2) The Context of the Study, 3) The Researcher's Role, 4) Research Questions, 5) Research Participants, 6) Instruments and Protocols, and 7) Framework for Analysis

#### **Overview of Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, grounded theory, to investigate and explain black youth perceptions of Africentric schooling in Toronto. Qualitative research aims to answer questions based upon social settings and the way individuals act within them. It forces us to consider how individuals arrange themselves in locations and how they make sense of their surrounding through social roles, social structures, and rituals and symbols (Berg, 2007, p. 8). Creswell (2009) stated that qualitative research makes sense of social situations by contrasting, comparing and classifying the object of study. Qualitative procedures rely on the researcher for data collection and, as a result, are often interpretative and holistic in nature. This process may require the researcher to immerse herself in the everyday life of the setting chosen to better understand perspectives and meanings (Creswell, 2009, p. 194). During the course of this study, a variety of qualitative research methods were employed. Data is triangulated through open-ended interviews that use a grounded theory framework. The analysis of data is constructed through a critical race theoretical (CRT) perspective in conjunction with transcript

data that is cross referenced with the literature. For the purpose of this study, examining relevant research exclusive to the TDSB will frame the importance of Jane-Finch black youth perspectives.

### **The Context of the Study**

The intention of this research is to investigate the dynamics and complexities of black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling. This research reports on black youth perspectives of in the Jane-Finch community of Toronto. The data that has emerged is descriptive in nature and knowledge claims are based upon youth perspectives, experiences, and social lived realities. For the purpose of this study, participants are self-identified black individuals.

#### **The research site.**

The study was conducted at a local community centre, The Spot, within Toronto. It is located in Yorkgate Mall, in the heart of the urbanized Jane-Finch area. The Spot is a well respected and publically funded organization that provides a safe and positive environment for all local youth to congregate. Furthermore, The Spot offers programming for teens which helps keep them off the street. The centre has space for youth to use computers, engage in recreational activities and hosts group specific programs and seminars. Through the process of interviewing black Youth, their perceptions and the meanings they attach to their lived realities were explored and analyzed. This centre was selected for this study because of the support and prompt access they provided for this study and because this organization had the desired target population amongst its patrons.

#### **The research area.**

Jane and Finch is an urbanized suburb located in the northwest part of the City of Toronto, formerly known as North York. Jane and Finch is characterized by its affordable free market and government subsidized housing, hosting the highest density of subsidized housing in Ontario (Lovell, 2008, p. 58). The area was developed using an urban design model that aimed to develop affordable housing at a mass scale for industrial workers in what was to be an industrial area. The failure of industrial development, however, resulted in the clustering of blue collared workers, created a concentration of poverty and ultimately a ghettoized urban neighbourhood.

Today, the neighbourhood is represented in the media as a place of problems. It has high rates of poverty and carries social characteristics such as crime and drug activity that are associated with poverty. Furthermore, the social realities and stigmas attached to Jane-Finch are often associated with race (Lovell, 2008, p.63). Despite its reputation of a “black ghetto” the area is quite diverse (Appendix B). I chose the Jane and Finch area as the site for my data collection because of the high concentration of disengaged black youth and its proximity to the Africentric Alternative School (Appendix C).

### **The Researcher’s Role**

As the primary researcher and data collector, it is important to identify my personal values, biases and experiences associated with this study. I am 26 years old, middle-class, East Indian-Canadian woman born and raised in Canada. My interest in Africentric schooling has been shaped by my teaching and volunteering practices in Toronto’s urban neighbourhoods. Between 2006 to 2008, I completed my classroom placements and earned my urban education certification working in “at-risk” neighbourhoods and communities. I worked with articulate and talented youth however, I witnessed disconnects between student engagement and curricular

material. I was informed by some of my black students that they did not connect well with the course material and therefore lacked the desire to meet their academic potential.

My intellectual curiosity motivated me to pursue my master's in educational studies. Theoretically, a relevant curriculum that embodies a cultural perspective, such as the Africentric paradigm, is beneficial for black youth engagement, growth and success. With the opening of the Africentric Alternative School in Toronto, my research has enabled me to gather black youth perspectives on Africentric schooling and the desire for an Africentric high school.

In carrying out this research, I am compelled to acknowledge the politics of my identity. To investigate the complexities of these dynamics, I must address my subjectivity as a researcher in a meaningful way. According to Peshkin (1988), "The qualities have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement" (p. 17). As an Indo-Canadian minority studying a vulnerable marginalized population such as black youth, there are political and moral implications. Politically, during the height of the British colonial era, India has been the favoured child in respect to its counterparts including many Afro-Caribbean and African nations. Our ancestral history holds an unequal relationship founded on the premise of power and favouritism. Although our convictions vary in time and in scope, I acknowledge and am conscious of this relationship in understanding and accepting black lived social realities. However, I can relate to aspects of this cultural disposition as a subset of this group; as I, too, am of colonized ancestry.

In acknowledging my social background, however, it is apparent that my middle class status removes me from the social context in which I have conducted my research. During the interview process, I was aware of the correlation between social class and educational attainment

as factors that intersect and influence student academic success. I made it a point to value the realities of my participants as a way of knowing. Furthermore, the research site immersed me in a predominantly black community environment that projected a sense of racial solidarity. My subjectivity interjected as I too can relate to a similar sense of solidarity when I am amongst Indian community members. In valuing this behaviour, I may have ignored the perceptions of those youth who chose to immerse themselves in other less culturally specific settings.

### **Research Questions**

1) Broad question:

What are youth perspectives of Africentric schooling?

Specific questions to be answered:

- a. Do youth support Africentric schooling? Why or why not?
  - i. What specific activities/knowledge do black youth associate with Africentric schooling?
- b. What informs black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling?

2) Broad question:

Would students voluntarily attend an Africentric school?

Specific questions to be answered:

- a. If given the opportunity would black youth in Toronto attend an Africentric school? Why or why not?
- b. What do youth identify as the benefits/limits of Africentric schooling?

### **Research Participants**

**The population.**

The aim of this research was to enlist between 10-12 participants for the study.

According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), “The general rule when building theory is to gather data until each category [or area of interest] is saturated” (p. 212). Beyond the point of saturation, no new or relevant data will appear to emerge from the research. Ten black youths between the ages of 16 to 19 from the Jane-Finch community volunteered to participate in the study.

Exclusive to this study, black youth were defined as individuals who are between 16-19 years of age and are currently or have been members of Toronto’s public education system.

**The sample.**

Ultimately, ten participants were involved in this study. The breakdown included five black males and five black females between the ages of 16-19. The majority of participants had completed either grades 11 or 12. It was important that a fair number of participants had completed Grades 11 or 12 to account for enough background knowledge on Africentric schooling based upon their age and experiences in schooling. The sample consisted of youth with various cultural backgrounds identifying themselves as African-Canadian, Jamaican, Afro-Caribbean and black. Furthermore, youth belonged to both single parent and nuclear households and self identified as a mix of low to middle class members of society.

**Table 1.0 Participant Demographics**

| <i>Participant</i> | <i>Sex</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Grade Completed</i> | <i>Cultural Background</i> | <i>Family</i> | <i>Social Status</i> |
|--------------------|------------|------------|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Troy               | M          | 17         | 11                     | Jamaican, black            | Nuclear       | Low-middle           |
| Hilliard           | M          | 19         | 12                     | Jamaican, black            | Single        | Low class            |
| Frank              | M          | 17         | 11                     | African, black             | Single        | Middle class         |
| Jamie              | M          | 18         | 12                     | Jamaican, black            | Nuclear       | Low class            |

|        |   |    |    |                  |         |              |
|--------|---|----|----|------------------|---------|--------------|
| Smith  | M | 18 | 12 | Black            | Single  | N/A          |
| Lauren | F | 18 | 12 | African, black   | Nuclear | Middle class |
| Mya    | F | 18 | 12 | Jamaican, black  | Single  | Low class    |
| Latoya | F | 17 | 11 | Jamaican, black  | Nuclear | Low class    |
| Lisa   | F | 16 | 10 | Jamaican, black  | Single  | N/A          |
| Jane   | F | 19 | 12 | African-Canadian | Single  | Low-Middle   |

### **Recruitment process.**

The objective was to recruit black youth who attend or have attended a Toronto public high school in the Jane-Finch community. The first step was obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Windsor. During the approval process, contact was made with the manager at The Spot community centre. Details regarding the research and its purpose were provided, and once on board, a letter of permission for research purposes was obtained and submitted to the REB. Youth were recruited through advertisements posted in the centre (Appendix D). The researcher also spent time at the centre during drop in hours and participated in youth group seminars such as the young women's and leadership groups to recruit students. Time spent at The Spot allowed for youth to gain comfort and familiarize themselves with the researcher and permitted the researcher to immerse herself in the environment.

Youth were compensated for their participation with bookstore gift cards and had the option to withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind during the study. Once volunteers were recruited for the study, interviews appointments were scheduled at times that worked for both the participant and the researcher. The researcher respected the rights, needs,



values and desires of all participants as per the rules and regulations of the Research Ethics Board during the data collecting process. The researcher assured that all participants were voluntarily involved and informed them of any, if any, potential risks. Informed consent forms were maintained to keep written record of such procedures. Participants were also provided with anonymity and confidentiality disclaimers that detailed the goals of this study.

## **Instruments and Protocols**

### **Instrumentation.**

"Grounded Theory" refers to a methodology where we move inductively from a body of data to themes. Grounded refers to being rooted in the words, behaviour and actions of participants and theory refers to "a set of well-developed categories (e.g. themes, concepts) that are systemically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework" (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 22). Grounded theory offers rationalizations for the issue being considered during a study through data that is draw together and analyzed in the research process. It also allows for the researcher to compare findings by asking questions and making comparisons with research themes and current literature (Berge, 2007. p. 287). Furthermore, data that is collected and analyzed is created from the experiences of both the researcher and participants.

According to Corbin and Strauss, (1998) "Although grounding concepts in data is the main feature of this method, creativity of researchers also is an essential ingredient...qualitative evaluation inquiry draws on both critical and creative thinking" (pp. 12-13). Grounded theory methodology can also be applied in analyzing qualitative interviewing data. "Grounded theory methods shape qualitative interviewing in relation to personal narratives and guide analysis of interview data" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 311). Grounded theory was selected because it

sanctions researchers to begin with a research interest and form interview question to explore significant social processes in the area of study. During the process of investigation, questions are revised and expanded to develop a data set. Consequently, the interview data is focused and the researcher has control over the construction of data.

Furthermore, researchers are able to study the data collected and return to the field to fill in any gaps and questions. Researchers are also able to collect data, manage data analysis and develop an abstract theoretical construct during the research process. Thus, “these methods give researchers tools for analyzing data as well as for obtaining additional focused data that inform, extend, and refine emerging analytic themes” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 312). Qualitative interviewing fits in well with this approach because it entails hosting a conversation with a purpose to gather information (Berg, 2007, p. 89). Structurally, semi structured interviews were employed because of their flexible nature and loose guiding structure. “Interviewing is a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview, and the interviewer can immediately pursue these leads” (Gubrium & Holstein, p. 312).

### **Interviews.**

Individual interviews with local black youth at The Spot were conducted in order to better understand and gain insight into Jane-Finch black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling in Toronto. Interview data was collected by the researcher during the spring season of 2010. Research participants were guided to answer interview questions in an open-ended active dialogue (Appendix E). During this process, the researcher was able to answer questions and make clarifications for participants. Furthermore, the interviewer was able to add or delete probes during each interview. Every individual interview varied in length and time of day conducted as it was in accordance to the interviewer and interviewee schedule. Ten individual

interviews were conducted and all were used in the analysis. During the course of this research, the researcher was the primary researcher, data collector and analyzer.

### **Strategies for inquiry.**

To assist in the data collection phase, participant dialogue was audio recorded for transcription purposes. Consent forms were provided for participants to sign. Some field notes were also taken during the interview process. These notes documented the researcher's thoughts and kept a record of observations, reflections and questions throughout the process.

### **Data analysis.**

During the data analysis process the data was organized categorically and chronologically by themes, reviewed repeatedly and continually coded. According to Seidel (1998) "QDA [qualitative data analysis] is a symphony based on three notes: Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about interesting things" (p. 1). This process is a rotation that repeats itself and intersects repeatedly to make sense of data. Noticing data entails generating a record of the data that the researcher is collecting. This study produced records by audio recording interviews and transcribing the data. The process of reviewing involved coding to distinguish parts and ideas and flagged areas for further investigation. Collecting the data encompassed sorting these units into specific themes. The researcher identified main themes and subthemes as they emerged in data analysis. During the thinking process, the researcher aimed to make sense out of the data collected by looking for patterns, relationships and differences across and within themes. Effort was made to embed illustrations, interpretations and analytic claims to strengthen the emerging theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The combination of this process allowed for discoveries to be made and kept the researcher focused on the phenomena as a whole.

### **Framework for Analysis**

### **Critical race theory.**

Critical race theory (CRT) emerges from legal studies after the civil rights era in the United States of America slowed down on producing meaningful racial reform. The theory critically analyzes liberalism and “race-neutral” practices in society by putting race, racism and power at the centre of analysis. Racially-neutral concepts such as “equal opportunity,” “merit,” and “equal protection” are deconstructed and reconstructed (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 1). This allows for the many forms of racism that are embedded in our society to be confronted. Critical race theory acknowledges that perceptions of race are correlated with power and that “race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier” in society (Gillborn, Landson-Billings & Taylor, 2009, p. 18).

It is imperative to note, “In CRT scholarship, the terms “white” and “black” are not meant to signal individuals or even group identity” (Gillborn et al., 2009, p. 4). Instead, they refer to our political and legal constructs that are founded on the ideals of white European primacy and the global influence of colonialism. Critical race theory uses the strategy of storytelling to confront and “challenge the mind-set of society” by sharing experiences of those affected by racism. “Stories can both challenge the status quo and help build consensus by creating a shared, communal understanding” (Laurence, Deyhle & Villenas, 1999, p. 184). The voice component allows for one to name her own reality to influence self-examination for the oppressor. In support, Delpit (2006) advocates that voice needs to be given to people of colour as their experiences are unique and have been often silenced in society.

Prominent themes in critical race theory include racism and interest convergence. “Racism is a global white supremacy and is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, privilege, socioeconomic advantages, and wealth and power

opportunities” (Gillborn et al., 2009, p. 4). The theory views racism as a normal part of life in our society. Racism shapes our world and is often unrecognizable because it is embedded in the policies and practices of political, legal and educational fields.

Interest convergence deconstructs practices aimed at racial equality. Equitable practices for blacks are said to be carried out when they fulfill the interests of whites. For example, Taylor (2009) argued there was political motivation behind the Brown v. Board case (p. 6). During a period of widespread global media coverage and global concerns regarding the Cold War, the desegregation ruling was used as an attempt for America to position itself as a leading anti-communist model of democracy. In its implementation, Taylor (2009) asserted, “Despite the dramatic heralding of Brown’s triumph and the public relations benefit to the U.S. government, there was no end to segregation in education. There were no enforcement provisions in the ruling and many white schools simply closed for the year” (p. 6). Black schools were eventually closed, leaving many black teachers and staff unemployed. The Brown v. Board case not only aimed to advocate for blacks but had in its interests the privileged class.

### **Critical race theory and education.**

Although civil rights movements brought forth struggles for equal opportunity and emphasized equality in educational practices, it did not consider addressing past inequities in the educational context. Race inequity, racism and power are central features of the education system. According to Roithmayr (1999), “More centrally, the use of critical race theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education- knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and “good education”- are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of white supremacy and racism” (p. 4). CRT can be used in education to confront racism through recognizing institutional and structural domination.

Current teaching practices contribute to racial inequalities and the racialized achievement gap. CRT is used by educators to understand classroom dynamics, academic testing and curricular bias as a “construction of social and racial power” (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 5). Critical race theorists believe our methods of schooling are designed to accommodate only a certain privileged group of students. As a result, CRT promotes educational reform using social justice and equitable teaching practices.

Furthermore, CRT deconstructs “race-neutral” school curriculums and colour-blind teaching and educational practices to reconstruct a more equitable system of learning.

Roithmayr (1999) asserts:

Schools teach students of colour that what they learn in their homes is primitive, mythical, and backward but what they learn in their classrooms is objective, historically accurate, and universal. Students attend class in an atmosphere of professionalism, which as the measure of their enlightenment, devalues what they bring to the classroom from their homes and neighbourhoods as backward, deprived, and deficient (p. 4).

Critical race theory acknowledges the importance of culturally sensitive teaching methods and societal implications on education. CRT also values social difference and diverse cultural values as being important and relevant in educating youth.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

A summary and analysis of the main findings of this research will be provided in this chapter. Discussion sections will be found throughout the text, where the conformity and nonconformity of the findings with previous literature will be explored. This study sought to explore the following two main questions: first, what are black youth perceptions of Africentric schooling? And second, would black youth voluntarily attend a potential Africentric high school? These questions were explored by gaining youth insights into the social and cultural tenets of Africentric education and through discussing perceptions of the school itself. Two central themes emerged from the research: Africentric education: representation and inclusivity and Africentric schooling: social tensions. These two central themes are followed by a series of subthemes which will be discussed (Appendix F).

### **Key Findings**

- Youth desire a representative and inclusive school system
- All of the black youth interviewed supported and the social and cultural tenets of Africentric education
- There were mixed reactions regarding youth desire to attend a potential Africentric high school
- Stereotypes and racial stigmas associated with Africentric schooling were of concern for the youth interviewed

## **Africentric Education: Representation and Inclusivity**

Participants revealed their support for Africentric schooling by engaging in dialogue about the social and cultural tenets of Africentric education with the researcher. Africentric education emerged as a positive and beneficial paradigm representing values and schooling practices youth desired and claimed to need for their academic success. The subtheme ‘representation and inclusivity’ represents black youth perspectives of the social and cultural tenets of Africentric schooling through exploring a) curricular material, b) staff representation, c) school environment and community.

### **Representation and inclusivity.**

#### ***C) Curricular material.***

All ten of the participants indicated that they do not see their heritage and culture represented enough in school curricular material. The lack of representation and inclusivity within schools ignites feelings of disengagement. For example, according to participant Troy, “Thinking about how I feel most days in class, I go cuz I got to, but I don’t try hard or actually care about what I learn because I feel like it has nothing to do with me really. I’m not interested so that’s why I skip sometimes cuz it boring, it’s not about me or relevant in my life.”

As exemplified by Troy’s remarks, current non-relevant curriculums were said by participants to lead to youth disengagement encouraging behaviours such as skipping class due to a lack of interest. However some students, such as Mya, report that they do still attend the classes just to earn the grade, reducing curricular activity to an unpleasant task. For example,



Mya states, “She’s [the teacher] talking about white kids, that is why they are interested and that is why they do better than us. I would still go to class and do work cuz I got to pass but I don’t care about this shit you know.”

Four of the ten participants report feeling neglected by course materials. For example, Lauren states, “Yo straight up, they don’t give a fuck about us, they neglect us.” Lauren states that aspects of black history are not included across curricular subjects. There is a general consensus amongst participants that a multicultural school and global community should reflect its student body, a global majority, and not only Eurocentric British perspective in courses such as history and mathematics. For example, Smith stated, “Yo, we are a global majority. Like soon there’s gonna be more people from around the world than whites. So why do we only learn about their [Eurocentric] views?”

Furthermore, four black youth feel that a lack of representation of African culture drives low-self esteem and disengagement in school.

According to Lauren:

I would feel good [to learn about African experiences]. I would have a stronger sense of self. What’s that saying... You can’t go forward unless you know where you come from... After slavery, blacks got confused and many people think we came from slavery cuz that’s all schools talk about. We really came from kingdoms and had such big communities before that. That’s the pride I want to identify with, not just a lost and weak past.

Hilliard states:

Oh it would be like damn...see... I knew I can do stuff like this...like look at how much we've built upon...we just learn about slavery all fuckin year...like I mean...ya we get it...we were stolen ya whatever...there was history way before that having to do with the royalty, you know what I mean, lots of riches, lots of minerals, lots of trades, and stuff like that, lots of mathematics.

When Hilliard's black heritage was discussed in the classroom, he claimed that they repeatedly learn about slavery and oppression. These topics are exhausted and talked about year after year and instead of acknowledging historical tribulations it is leaving many of the black youth interviewed confused and disempowered.

According to three participants, and as exemplified by Lauren, the negative connotation associated with such repeated historical information can be internalized. These youth report that they want to learn more about black royalty and ancient kingdoms to have a positive frame of reference during troubled teen years. They claim it will help strengthen their sense of self and embody self pride to learn about the pre-slavery experiences of blacks. Furthermore, positive facts were said by two participants to be a form of encouragement that had the ability to overshadow popular culture influences such as music videos, the internet and television representations of blacks.

For example, Frank asserts:

It would make me feel good about myself because um not all the time like I wouldn't have like everything known about myself, like you'd basically get it off T.V, internet, but like when you have it coming from someone's mouth it's more like you learning about it and getting facts. You could be a proud black person instead of a gangster like the TV tells you to be.

All participants report that having a representative curriculum would illustrate that the school system and teachers care about them. Latoya states, "Ya man, including us would show that we are important people and they like actually care about us." Conversations regarding the daily inclusion of the roles and experiences of people of African descent in course material sparked positive reactions amongst all of the participants. For example, Troy states, "It [Learning about his African descent] would make me want to learn more...it would defiantly make me more interested because they're people that look like me. When you are not reflected in something you lose interest cuz you don't relate to it...you know what I mean?" There was a general consensus amongst participants that the daily inclusion of African histories and current realities in school practices would make participants attend class frequently, pay more attention in class, and be more motivated to learn.

However, two students also added that although African inclusion in the curriculum would be great, they would still want to have other cultures incorporated into their daily learning experiences.

According to Lauren:

I would feel better [to have African culture incorporated in classrooms] but I'd feel much better actually that it's in the curriculum. And not only like stuff from the African descent, like stuff from other cultures too like Latin, Asian and stuff like that. So you get to see all cultures, ya all cultures. So ya, much more better! And not only for me but would teach others to not be like ignorant and more understanding. There will be less discrimination, less racism and more understanding.

For these participants, a better understanding of all cultures is ideal to educate members of the school community, diminish racial tensions and create a pro-active learning environment.

Black history month is another issue for all the black youth interviewed. Six participants report it as being commercialized and obligatory on behalf of the school. All participants reported that their schools only acknowledge this important month through very few initiatives such as school wide announcements and perhaps one school assembly. This was deemed as problematic by the black youth interviewed because they report that the majority of teachers at their schools did not appear to take any interest. Teachers were accused of not carrying black history month themes into the classroom for further discussion or inquiry. Furthermore, teachers were reported to be uneducated on related topics. For example, according to Jane:

Yeah if anything the shortest month of the year- black history month- they make announcements or have people come in for a performance. Man, it's so commercialized- like they do it just to get it done.... But it's like awkward anyways when we have to learn black history from a white teacher. I wonder if they actually know, like really get and care about what happened or is it just repeating info

because they have to. Most of the time it's like they don't know what they are talking about. Oh and the worst is when everyone in the class turns to us [black youth] because we are black for validation- like if this stuff is true.

There was also a general consensus that black youth wanted to hear more about the experiences of real black people who were not coined as the great leaders in black history. Heroic figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriett Tubman and Malcolm X are exhausted during black history month every year. According to Jamie, "Like you hear about ya, who created Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and stuff like that year after year. But like day to day things is what I want to know- how was life [for black people]? What did [black] poets talk about? Why?"

Two students acknowledge that the absence of black-focused dialogue within classrooms represents a hidden form of curricular oppression. Experienced pedagogical practices only provided surface level recognition of black history; however, did not address other important experiences of black people during classroom time. When talking about black history month and the lack of black history in schools, Frank states:

Like you would think back then you know the oppression is like so much more and stuff like that, but if you really look at it now it's like still exists but its more hidden, you know what I mean? Back then, it [oppression] was just in your face you know what I mean. But like now it's like systemic kind of stuff... its hidden but you know it's there.

All participants said they would enjoy learning through cultural artefacts, clothing and music and about African world issues. Such activities would give life to their histories and current global social realities. For example, during the study, youth were asked to examine two math activities depicting graphing data in math class. One represented an African world issue, depicting the reality of mass murders in Rwanda and the other represented culturally-neutral values in its example of graphing data (Appendix G). Ninety percent of participants said the culturally relevant activity was engaging, meaningful and would encourage youth to learn math.

According to Jamie:

Ya, ya, this one definitely. Like as soon as I saw it I was like god damn...they never ever speak about this kinda shit in school...never! Like what they speak about is WWII...like umm everyone is sympathetic towards Jews...and that's cool, I think what happened to them is horrible. I'm learning about Hitler right now right...in one of my classes...and everyone thinks that's so relevant...but it's like bitch, look what happened to us. This [the Rwanda genocide] is over a span of what 100 days? And how many people got killed? And in 40 days I think it was over 800 000 that got killed especially. And it's like I'm black right... like I mean I think it's horrible what happened to the Jews I mean they got persecuted like black people do...and also by the Aryan white supremacists and stuff like that. But umm these numbers are more relative to people that look like me... we need a black holocaust unit.

Furthermore, students felt that the Rwanda genocide activity not only taught math, but was cross curricular because it touched on history, world issues and political consciousness.

*Discussion of a) curricular material.*

Disengagement and behaviour driven reactions symbolize black youth desires to be validated as an important cultural presence. In *Drop Out or Push Out?* Dei et al., (1995) articulate when minority cultures are marginalized, minority students become marginalized as well. Marginalization in this context is associated with behaviour such as skipping class and acting out (p. 21). This is exemplified by respondent Troy when he states, "...I'm not interested so that's why I skip sometimes cuz it boring, it's not about me or relevant in my life." Content that does not engage and relate to students may push them out.

Although educators have a short span of time to teach students required materials; one should not undermine the control educators have in how we deliver the course content. Good teaching practices on behalf of the educator allow for teachers to reach students through equitable educational strategies. However, as mentioned in the literature review, acknowledging cultural presences using multicultural "surface level" recognition is problematic because it does not address structural inequalities present in the multicultural curriculum. Black youth perceptions in this study exemplify the disempowerment associated with the multicultural curriculum. For example, Jane states, "Man, it's so commercialized [black history month]- like they do it just to get it done... I wonder if they actually know, like really get and care about what happened or is it just repeating info because they have to."

Through holistic accounts of worldly histories and a commitment to equitable teaching practices, the Africentric paradigm aims to engage and build a positive sense of self for youth. The dynamic nature of the Africentric approach fosters consciousness of systemic racism and allows for sensitivity and diversity in teaching practices. As noted in the findings, participants

positively identify with the Africentric approach and support the social and cultural tenet of the curriculum.

The analysis of our current curriculum and support for the Africentric cultural tenets by participants correspond with critical race theoretical approaches to education. “Critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as a culturally specific artefact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (Landson-Billings, 1999, p. 21). Roithmayr (1999) said, “The use of critical race theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education- knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and good education- are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of white supremacy and racism” (p. 4). Using this theoretical approach, we can understand how in fact the curriculum silences diverse voices and carries dominant white upper class ideals. For example, as noted by the participants, African history is selectively told and much of their rich glories are muted. Landson-Billings (1999) agrees by noting that Rosa Parks contribution to the empowerment of blacks included participating in numerous social justice endeavours and confrontation segregationist ideology. However, many school lessons reduce her to a fed up seamstress refusing to sit at the back of the bus. The mutation of such heroic figures is problematic because participants report feeling disempowered by such information.

Participants also noted that multicultural practices in education at times resemble a hidden curriculum. Alongside participant concerns, critical race theory sheds light on oppressive multicultural practices in education by recognizing the absence of acknowledging systemic racism and its effects on marginalized youth. Laurence et al., (1999) declared being color blind in our society closes our eyes to the whiteness and the privilege it holds. “Whiteness remains the



normative standard and blackness remains different, other, and marginal. Even worse, by insisting on a rhetoric that disallows reference to race, blacks can no longer name their reality or point out racism” (Laurence et al., 1999, p. 184).

***D) Staff representation.***

All of the participants report that they have had at least one black teacher during their schooling experiences. Findings reveal that eight of the ten participants characterize black teachers to be uniquely understanding, sensitive to black experience and relatable in comparison to other non-black educators.

According to Latoya:

A black teacher would stick up for you and understand you. They know the certain reasons why you do this and why you do that. Like oh say you got angry over something because someone called you something like a nigger, a white principle will say that’s a bad word, you can’t say it; there are consequences- a suspension and stuff. But a black teacher knows our past- they will sit down and talk about what happened [the situation] with you. They know how racism feels.

Jamie explains:

Like if I ever think say like I wasn’t hired for a job and I honestly think without reasonable doubt that the person didn’t hire me because I’m black and if I tell somebody... if it’s a white teacher, I usually get “take that chip off your shoulder” it’s nothing wrong with the world and with black teacher its more open. White teachers

don't recognize your experiences for what they are and don't get how you are feeling like black teachers do.

These same students point out that black teachers are also more inclusive of their ethnicities in teaching practices, accept as oppose to undermine student racialized experiences (in and out of school) and hold higher academic expectations for black youth.

Furthermore, two students express that seeing black teachers and other professionals such as doctors and lawyers are encouraging and motivational. These people are said to provide youth with positive role models. Some youth reported that today many of their peers, including themselves, are looking to glorified television and music stars for inspiration. This was said to be not always positive.

Troy asserts:

Um we like to see that the black youth are rising up, instead of other people putting us down, we like to see other black people become prime minister, or something, or teachers, doctors, lawyers, you know. This is motivation in real life. Stars in music and on TV are one in a million and are not always positive.

Eight of the ten youth interviewed feel that most teachers do not know enough about their culture and heritage to understand them. According to Lisa:

No [they don't know enough about black culture and heritage], but it's not their fault. To understand a culture you need to talk, share. If the curriculum made us talk more and learn from each other things would be better...I would like it [if some teachers

represented the school community] because they would know more about the area and how things go about. But it's not practical. I think teachers need to take an interest in the community they teaching then. Like you know, show your face sometime, shows us you think our neighbourhood doesn't define us.

Youth interviewed characterized black social and cultural experiences to be distinctive and therefore understand why some teachers find it difficult to relate to them. Regardless of racial boundaries, however, there is a general agreement that a teacher from their neighbourhood would also be able to relate to their social realities and would be sensitive to their experiences. For example when participants were asked if teachers (regardless of race) who come from their communities would have a better understanding of black youth Jamie shares:

Yeah because they live in the area. They see how we live, they know what people think of us and expect of us... not much. They could see that our parents are not around and the reason we may not finish our work is that we got to work too. They would get it. All I want is for a teacher to live one day in my life. They could not do it. Most teachers are rich, so they don't know how it feels to be not rich and on top of that to be black. If they came from here they would at least get it.

Furthermore, two students report that the majority of teachers they encounter at school have preconceived notions of them due to their race, socioeconomic status and neighbourhood affiliation. According to Smith:

It does make me feel ways [feel bothered], but it's like oh yeah she racists so who cares. That's what everyone [black students] thinks. She doesn't know about me so

what is she really going to think when I step into her classroom. Like we are all not going to be the same [gangsters, poor, unmotivated] like you expect us to when we come in the classroom.

Some participants feel pre judged before entering the classroom and discredit teachers for not addressing their personal biases by exploring teacher subjectivity.

*Discussion of b) staff representation.*

In this study, black youth support and want to see black teachers being represented amongst school staffing. Many participants reported feeling comfortable with and more connected to black educators in comparison to other teachers. However, staff members who are culturally sensitive were also held in high regard by participants. Regardless of race, Africentric education encourages all teachers to be active participants in the Africentric educational movement. Nevertheless, all Africentric educators are to have a thorough understanding and passion for the Africentric paradigm.

Good teaching practices and culturally sensitive training to better understand diverse youth should be of importance to all educators, despite the affiliated educational paradigm (Falconer et al., 2008). To critically explore disconnects between students and teachers in the data collected, we must recognize that race does not define who can and cannot be culturally sensitive. According to Zeus, if educators are viewed as agents that transmit aspects of the curriculum to students within the school system, we can understand how curricular conditioning may impact the relationship between students and teachers. According to Zeus (2004):

Oppression is material to the extent that it directs and controls the behaviour of student bodies, but it is discursive insofar as bodies in schools are culturally inscribed and normalized...in other words, the reality of oppression is part of the human condition and its structures inscribe our pedagogical or social interactions (p. 13).

Using this idea, we can conceptualize curricular values and ideals as factors that influence teaching practices. Teachers can be credited as hindering student learning potential because multicultural ideals do not recognize structural racism. Therefore, good teaching practices must embody inclusivity of all students.

Lewis, James, Hancock & Hill-Jackson (2008) refer to the Matrix of Achievement Paradigm (MAP) (Appendix H) to better understand teacher-student relationships in relation to the curriculum. The paradigm implies that schools are “born from, maintained by, and reproduced from racist philosophies, policies, and practices in education. The result is an educational system that lacks resource equity, thus perpetuating the achievement gap and other race- and class-based social inequalities” (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 136). In analyzing MAP, one can see how schooling agents such as teachers and administrators may influence the achievement gap plaguing black youth. Teachers, for example, contribute to this gap by often lacking cultural knowledge and not always being responsive to the social needs of the student body. This creates both knowledge based and cultural gaps between the students and the teacher during the learning process (Lewis et al., pp. 136-7). Urban Education, a type of diversity training offered in various teachers’ college faculties, may be an effective tool in combating this issue if implemented as a required training credit for pre-service teachers.

The Africentric paradigm uses its pedagogical approach to addresses student-teacher disconnects as well. Teachers who have something in common with students such as community, diverse cultural knowledge, language or similar ethnic backgrounds have unique skills and abilities on which to draw on when teaching. Chou et al. (2001) draws on Ladson-Billings who exemplifies how African American and Afro-Caribbean-Canadian teachers' may be able to better teach and manage youth using the Africentric curriculum. We learn that Africentric teachers are expected to not only focus on the child's cognitive growth, but on the child's moral, ethical and personal development as well. In doing so, teachers concentrate on the whole child, in both a social and educational context. Africentric teachers are to also use familiar cultural patterns such as life experiences, music, art, dance and history to establish a relationship between teachers and students.

### ***C) School environment and community.***

The public school environment was said to have minimal representations of minority youth on the walls, in posters and in school wide art by all participants. Students felt that elementary schools were more inclusive of their cultures in comparison to their high schools. It was suggested that high schools should make more efforts to represent the student body in the school environment. The teen years were said to be troubling and having positive reinforcements and cultural representation would be fulfilling for some of the youth interviewed. According to participant Smith, "No not in high school. In elementary school there's like a sense of community because teachers put students work on walls and it reflects who they are. In high school, when it's most important they forget that we still need that."

Furthermore, four participants reported that visual support provides silent motivation, support and words of encouragement to youth. For example Hilliard states “It would be meaningful. To look at the walls and see myself... see what I could be. We are a visual world, these posters and stuff would be silent support, words and motivation.” Students also communicate that they want to see all cultures being represented in the school environment, not just Eurocentric depictions of art produced in art class.

However, three students admit that their schools have either certain school hallways or classrooms dedicated to cultural art, but question why it is not seen throughout the school environment. Lisa feels, “There’s just this one area in our school- and I like it there but it’s like why only here? It would be nice to have it everywhere.”

Four of the ten participants indicate that they see few or no parents, community guest speakers and representatives in their classrooms. All youth participants state that they value real life experiences and stories drawn from their communities as insightful knowledge, a body of knowledge textbooks cannot teach. According to Jane:

It’s like another perspective people would have. Like teachers, they go to school; they learn whatever is taught to them. But for actual learning, I want firsthand experience. Someone coming in and like talking about their experiences ya know? And like the true facts like what they’ve been through you know. That would make me want to come to class you know what I mean?”

Students felt that this type of education would be good for educators as well as students because it would inform them about the community they work in. One student reported that having

parents come into schools would also create a stronger partnership between families and schools in the community. Jane states, “This will make them talk. They have parent council but that’s separate cuz its not community in the classroom. Parents will feel involved and teachers will show they are and think parents are smart so they will learn from each other.”

Community partners such as police, drug activist and motivational speakers have been reported as visiting school by seven participants. Some see these patrons as positive and motivated in voicing constructive messages while one participant sees black patrons specifically, as trying to act superior or “white” in spreading their “I made it out of the hood” message.

According to Troy:

Like black man [If a black man] made it in life you know they still look down on him like the white man [as they do on the white man]. Sometimes you know like my mom’s like oh...the white man as in like he made it somewhere [referring to the black man as white because he is successful]...now she considers him a part of them [part of white people] you know what I’m trying to say...they always forget where they came from when they turn into something else.

*Discussion of c) school environment and community.*

Community partnerships and positive school environments that reflect the student body are central values in Africentric education. The Africentric paradigm aims to value and engage students through community and environmental components. There is an emphasis on youth relations with the elderly community to bridge generational differences and discover



generational wealthy knowledge. The aim is for black youth to gain insight into real life experiences and embody real people as role models. Respectively, participants reveal that they value real life experiences and are interested to learn from community experience.

Troy's response to black social mobility and acting white correlates with Fordham-Ogbu's "acting white" thesis discussed in the literature review. As exemplified by Troy's account, there is a cultural frame of reference that relates social mobility with acting white and "selling out." Harrison (2009) states, "Ogbu and others have described how awareness of racism and the need for collective struggle against racism result in a sense of in-group policing of boundaries" (p. 2). When members of the group take part in "white" activities such as engaging in proactive educational behaviour, ones behaviour can be viewed as not black or threatening to the group. Africentric education deconstructs and reconstructs such knowledge claims to encourage pro-active learning behaviour.

### **Africentric Schooling: and Social Tensions**

There were mixed reactions amongst participants when discussing their desire to attend a potential Africentric high school. However, the majority agreed that they feared the stereotypes and preconceived notions that were attached to such an educational movement. Africentric schooling was considered by most to be a social distress and haven for ridicule and social stigmas. Africentric education emerged as a less than idealistic form of schooling for high school black youth as the social ramifications were seen as a high cost. The subtheme, 'Africentric mixed reactions' discusses the varied feelings regarding the desire of youth to attend an Africentric high school. The subtheme 'Stereotypes revealed' discusses the fears and concerns of

black youth through exploring a) stereotypes, b) intra group politics and c) media and community opinions.

### **Africentric mixed reactions.**

Black youth had mixed reactions regarding their desire to attend an Africentric high school. Three of the ten participants communicated their desire to attend a potential Africentric high school. An Africentric learning environment was perceived to be comfortable and familiar for black youth. According to Frank:

Oh yeah definitely I wouldn't mind it but that's only because I'm black. The building where I grew up the majority of the people were black, my family is black you know. So I'm comfortable around black people just because that's what I've grown up around.

Frank and his counterparts felt this alternative learning site would build a sense of pride and would help them pay attention in class. Furthermore, two of these three participants made it a point to state they would still want to learn about other cultures through heterogeneous teaching materials. For example, according to Lauren:

I'd try it out still. Like if it focused on the roles and experiences of African people of African descent. That would be beneficial because as I was saying before a lot of people like don't know themselves and they don't really know where they came from and stuff like that. If they had activities such as this one like the genocide one, that's how you'd learn math. But I want to learn about others too.

Three of the ten participants were unsure about their decision to attend. They felt their decision would be influenced by a combination of factors such as if their friends would attend and if the course materials were inclusive of other cultures as well. According to Jane, “I’m not sure, maybe if my friends went too and if it wasn’t only blacks’ cuz I like learning about other people. But I would have to talk to my mom about it first.” However, one of these students felt that if she was in elementary school she defiantly would attend. She felt that children need ample guidance in building a sense of self before popular cultural influences have an effect on self identity.

According to Mya:

Yes, I wouldn’t mind if I was young. I think a school like this is better for young kids. They need to build identity and self concepts at a younger age when they are soaking it in and before society tells them to be something else. At this age like mine we need to grow with others in the world so I think I would like to go to a mixed school, well maybe.

Four participants indicated that they most certainly would not attend. They predicted ample fights, intra group tensions and a lack of inclusivity in the school. According to Hilliard, “Honestly, this is like a stereotype but I think there will be a lot of fights still, dumb people, lost people, you know what I mean?”

Varied responses regarding attending an Africentric school was interesting to note. All participants supported the social and cultural tenets of Africentric schooling to some degree,

however all participants were not fond of attending. In understanding these findings, it is important to explore what factors influence youth decisions to attend. The findings reveal Africentric related stereotypes, intra-group politics and media and community opinions about Africentric schooling are all influential factors.

### **Stereotypes revealed.**

#### ***C) Stereotypes.***

To some degree, 90% of the participants feared and were concerned about the vast amount of stereotypes that would be associated with an Africentric high school. The three most repetitive stereotypes associated with Africentric schooling were that the school was for dumb and troubled black youth, it would be saturated with violence, drugs and gang activity and would be a breeding ground for teen mothers. According to Troy:

You know stuff like that school will be filled with kids who can't make it in regular school so we are less than other kids. People will think there will be a lot of violence and drugs in that school too. And they will think kids will have attitudes because that's what people believe about black youth. They forget we are kids you know.

The majority of students did not understand why these notions were preconceived when all they would be doing in reality is obtaining an education. According to Lauren:

Real talk- I don't want to be that black girl who needs Africentric schooling to do good but maybe I am that girl. People are gonna think blacks can't make it nowhere so we need this. They are gonna think we straight dumb and that why we need a

school you know. But I just think so what if we need this, our life is not like yours cuz I wake up wearing a black suit in the mornin ya know, this black suit on my body tells all people what they should already think of me before they even really know me you know. So if I go to this school people are still gonna have these bad ideas of blacks and the school will get the same cred [reputation] so cha, yeah.

Another fear that many of the participants disclosed was that universities and colleges would discredit their high school educational experience because of Africentric stereotypical reputations. According to Jane:

I think they [the general public] might think I'm dumb cuz I got to go to a black school. I think universities would not respect my high school education either if I went to a black school. They might think I'm weird or really messed up to get this sort of help. Again, it comes down to people stereotyping the school and its people.

However, one participant advocated for the school and said although there would be stereotypes, he did not fear them. He compared the school to other alternative forms of schooling and recognized Africentric schooling as a similar venture.

According to Frank:

What the fuck...it's my culture. People go to Catholic schools and they're all Catholics. People go to Muslim schools and they're all Muslims...you know and it goes around the spectrum... Lesbian, gay, bi, trans (LGBT) they receive publicly funded money for the triangle program for youth who feel like they're in danger

from being in regular schooling or feel that they can't learn cuz of their setting whatever, whatever. That's publicly funded...like my pastor like he has nothing against them either...he's like lets replace the word LGBT with black...and everything applies like it all still applies right? Especially...the same kind of discrimination they face like I mean black people face... I find like you know if you're willing to publicly fund that program and you're not willing to really fund this program then...there shouldn't really be an issue, there shouldn't.

There was a general consensus amongst all participants that they were nervous about the potential for the Africentric School to fail in its goals as an educational institution. Seven of the ten participants agreed that such a predicament would indicate that "even a black school can't help us" and would give life to the stereotypes and hostility already disseminated amongst the public. According to Latoya:

It makes us look like we're bigger failures...First they make an Africentric school for kids who are like failing and stuff, which is like 40% of the population...so why is it that they are failing? It's like, are they that dumb people are gonna be thinking. Like are they that dumb? They make the school and now they are failing? Like what can we do now?

Jamie stated:

Of course it does [makes participants nervous]. I don't think most people are on our side for this school anyways. So why would I want to go and just in case it doesn't do well be labelled as dumb for going or as a failure ya know. People don't see this

project as school they see it as black- I think people care about the fact that it has to do with blacks rather than real kids and real problems. As it is it's not easy facing shit and real life and now I got to be worried that everyone is going to see my fuckin problems and judge them.

One respondent indicated that if the school failed, it would be a learning opportunity for the school board and would help improve future programs. According to Lauren:

It wouldn't change anything because you don't' always able to pass everything so once you fail that just gives you another reason to learn something new, to improve on it. I think some people might be a little positive and some of them will be negative of course because not everyone likes the same values.

*Discussion of a) stereotypes.*

Critical race theory confronts the “dominant mind-set of society- the shared stereotypes, beliefs and understandings” by placing value on the voices of marginalized individuals (Laurence et al., 1999, p. 184). Marginalized voices are to be shared and aim to cultivate awareness and understanding of racial issues in society. Black youth voices in this study indicate clear fears and concerns pertaining to a potential Africentric high school. Affiliated racial stereotypes are discouraging and create an atmosphere of distress for youth. Steele (2009) argues that stereotypes can influence an individual's intellect and identity development. “Negative stereotypes about women and African Americans bear on important academic abilities. Thus, for members of these groups who are identified with domains in which these stereotypes apply, the threat of these stereotypes can be sharply felt and, in several ways, hampers their achievement”

(Steel, 2009, p. 164). Furthermore, we learn “The present definition stresses that for a negative stereotype to be threatening, it must be self-relevant. Then, the situational contingency it establishes- the possibility of conforming to the stereotype or of being treated and judged in terms of it- becomes self-threatening” (Steel, pp. 168-9).

In analyzing youth responses it was alarming note that some students may have internalized these stereotypes and are reporting low self confidence. Statements such as “dumber than we already are...,” “it will make us a bigger failure...” and “stooping down to our level...” speculate such an internalization. In relation to Steel’s argument, some black youth voices come across as self-threatening and therefore may be influenced by societal stereotypes of black youth.

An Africentric education aims to deconstruct and reconstruct stereotypical knowledge claims to build a positive sense of self. This process explores and recognizes the social construction of such claims and uses positive cultural frameworks to build ones sense of self. For example, Harrison (2009) notes “In fact, having a positive ethnic or racial identity has been related to feelings of competence and well-being and to feeling connected to the black community” (p. 1).

#### ***D) Intra-group politics.***

Intra-group politics were a concern for the many of the participants. Participants predicted fights between black youth based on territorial and gang divides (out of school issues), tensions due to the possibility of varied socio economic statuses and issues surrounding the perception of beauty and skin colour.



According to Mya:

I don't think I can handle it. There are some black people who think too highly of themselves. There's some black girls who just carry on- they think that are hot stuff cuz they live here and live there [upper class neighbourhoods] and you are just looking at them like okay...are we any different? We are the same colour. People get into more fights cuz of black mix up like money.

Mya and her peers saw socio-economic statuses as an issue that could divide students in an all black school. They were concerned that such differences would create great divides and tensions between students if social rank caused cliques or clustering of groups of students within the school.

Jamie feels, "We grew up looking up to gangsters and live in a place where you don't go somewhere to hang if you are not suppose to be there- nahhh mean? If you say the wrong thing to a next group of blacks, only one thing left- fights!!!!!" This response represents a concern for the majority of the participants. Fights based on gang affiliations and territorial divides within community were predicted by youth.

Two female participants also commented on the dynamics that may exist between females within a predominantly black school. The conceptualization of beauty (light v. dark black skin) was a concern for these young ladies. Lisa stated, "Even though we are black we still have different types of groups you know. Guys will still like the light skin girls better and if in an all black school there are more light skin girls, they will get the guys and think they better than

others.” The conceptualization of beauty was a real big issue for these two females. They felt that this is something that would create much tension between females in the school.

*Discussion of b) intra-group politics.*

Intra-group politics exists within all social groups and relationships. Conflicts may be based on gender, social class, ethnicities and even race. Black youth report intra-group conflicts to be of concern. Africentricity aims to mediate socioeconomic and intra-cultural conflicts by being a vehicle of unity and harmony. It aims to provide black youth with appropriate experiences to facilitate feelings of interconnections between youth. For example, youth may learn the common struggle against oppression and suppression they share and that they in fact need to unite to overcome the odds. However, it must be noted, issues based on gang affiliations and territorial divides need to be given much attention. Such realities are rooted deep into the communities and lived realities of participants. An Africentric high school, in addition to community partners such as youth centres and social workers, would need to handle these issues with great sensitivity in attempting to deconstruct and reconstruct social relations.

*c) Media and community opinions.*

The majority of participants indicated that family, friends and media portrayals of Africentric schooling helped shaped their perceptions of the program. It was noted that family and friends also had mixed reactions pertaining to the subject matter. Parents often referred to the Africentric endeavour as reminiscent of civil rights struggles and were not supporting of isolated teaching strategies.

According to Lisa:

Um a lot of my people were opposed to it. Like in high schools, like students there opposed to it. It's kind of just making black people look bad like in the eyes of like a white person or somebody who's not black. It's like oh ya these people need their own school because their uncivilized and whatever like they need to be isolated. That's kind of the main thing I'm getting from the community and stuff like that that, black people need to be isolated.

One participant pointed out however, that he felt parents would not understand the need for an Africentric program because many of them experienced education in an already black environment outside of Canada.

Hilliard states:

My parents weren't about it. I was like what the fuck do you mean you are not about it, then I realized it's because they did not go to school here. So they don't get it, they don't understand what goes on in school here. And I think the fact that they have seen and been around black teachers like they don't really see a problem when you don't have one.

Hilliard felt that Canada's school system and its society is very different from the one where most black immigrant parents in the community grew up. This is the reason why he thinks some parents do not understand why some black youth are disengaged or why they do not understand the importance and need for Africentric schooling.

Furthermore, all of the youth agreed that there have been consistent representations of the program as a negative initiative founded on the premise of segregation and racist practices. Troy stated:

Umm I read this article from the sun and it was an angry rant on oh why Africentric schools shouldn't be around...and it was mainly like...oh we don't make white-centric schools..and it's like bitch..the whole fucken curriculum is European..you know they think we are racist and want to separate..I heard that and then when I actually started seeing it [the Africentric school] start up its like yeah now there is a waiting list, so there's that and I was like see that's fucking great, like you know people are supporting it. But yo there's nothing really to do about it cuz it's not a negative thing, its schooling! Its school! If you can see that, a specific group is failing, and you're not going to do anything about it? Like come on!

The majority of participants also acknowledged that media misconceptions of the program have proved to be ignorant, stereotypical and sometimes even racist. For example, participants were shown a political cartoon (Appendix I), published in a popular Toronto newspaper, depicting a goofy looking black male teacher teaching math in the Africentric program. When asked about their opinions of such media representations, the majority of youth were appalled. "Ignorant!" "Racist!" "Rude!" "Stupid!" were some words used to describe the image.

According to Hilliard:

I think they're um being ignorant because not all black people say 'sup dog' and stuff like that. And that's a teacher. Um I think they're like trying to make fun of people in a way. I'm offended...just the way um the teachers drawn. He looks like he's not like smart or intelligent. I think it reflects black people as people talking like they don't have no sense and stuff like that. Ya cuz if they see a guy saying sup dog they're gonna be like the teachers not serious about the kids so they're not going to want to send their kids to an Africentric school.

Students felt such images were tarnishing the school's reputation and were responsible for generating misinformation. They were upset that the black teacher looked uneducated, were certain that it said Africentric algebra to undermine African intelligence and even questioned if the math equation on the board was calculated correctly. Furthermore, four of the ten participants were quick to say that a white person must be responsible for this depiction. According to Lauren, "Wow, this is rude ya know. I bet someone who made this is white. They just trying to tell everyone not to respect the school and showing people again we are ghetto and not educated."

However, two students thought the political cartoon was "cool" and interpreted it to be the teacher's way to connect to them. According to Smith, "It would be cool cause like you don't hear a lot of teachers talking in the same slang we use so like it would be funny still. I think this shows that teachers in this school are gonna be like us to connect to us. It's a message saying yo the teacher will get us, so come to the school here." Smith's interpretation may signify a lack of political consciousness or a desire to connect with teachers. As exemplified by Smith and his peer, misrepresentations of the program in the media may be adverse effects on youth.

*Discussion of c) media and community responses.*

Media representations and community conversations about Africentric schooling have been controversial. As exemplified by two participants, media interpretations of the program are powerful and have the ability to miscommunicate information to the public and families. It is troubling that a school that simply aims to educate youth is further marginalized by the reinforcement of stigmas in the media. In certain cases, special equitable schools are necessary to provide adequately for youth who have been failed by conventional institutions. Community members are constantly bombarded with the controversial nature of the school and often do not learn about the Africentric program's values and benefits. Critical race theory recognizes that misconceptions need to be confronted to bring forth change and educate the community. Racism exists in the media and black youth voices shed light to the stereotypes associated with such racial and cultural biases. Consequently, many students express a range of feelings from sadness to anger over the issue.

## CHAPTER V

### Conclusion, Recommendations And Future Research

#### Conclusion

The objective of this research was to explore black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling in Toronto. The lack of black youth voices pertaining to Africentric schooling presented a gap in the current educational literature. Black youth perceptions of Africentric education were important to research because they have added to the existing Canadian literature on Africentric schooling and indicate areas for future research on innovative educational practices.

The investigation has indicated that the majority of black youth interviewed desired an educational program that is reflective of Africentric social and cultural values. Students valued a culturally representative curriculum, diverse staff, and inclusive school environment. However, stereotypes and racial stigmas associated with Africentric schooling were of great concern to black youth. Stereotypes, intra-group politics and community and family opinions were factors influencing black youth desire to attend a potential Africentric high school. Social consequences associated with attending an Africentric high school were feared by participants and overshadowed, in some respects, the value black youth placed on the program.

Educators and educational reports such as Molefi Asante (1991; 1992), George Dei (1995; 1996b) and the Royal Commission of Learning (1994) support the idea of establishing Africentric schools for black youth. Aims to close the educational gap between black youth and the broader community are sought by challenging Eurocentric assumptions about history, providing positive black role models, and embracing black history using the Africentric

paradigm. “In order for there to be true [educational] freedom for people of Africentric descent they must free themselves from a Eurocentric perspective and construct their own identity based at least in part on African philosophical thought” (Lukens & Traore, 2006, pp. 117-118).

It is the opinion of the researcher that although social tensions exist between participants and the broader community, Africentric education is a tool that can be useful for exploring black youth educational issues and for increasing learning outcomes. Investigating culturally relevant schooling may contribute to the future success of black youth. However if we, as a society, do not give the Africentric program full support, it may not have the necessary social acceptance to be realized.

## **Recommendations**

There are both opportunities and challenges for Africentric reform in the Canadian educational landscape. The opportunities for Africentric reform to assist at risk black youth through education have been given life through the newly established elementary Africentric Alternative School. Although it is too early to assess the outcomes of Africentric education at this point in time, the Africentric paradigm and initiated pilot programs indicate promising results. However, I think that Africentric efforts may have greater potential for positive outcomes if provided with adequate funding and social support. Sufficient funding and social support for the Africentric program would allow for the Africentric vision to be actualized with a greater chance of success. An alternative educational program of this nature requires a strong core foundation to meet its goals and flourish. Funding can provide for adequate resources and the necessary staff to carry out the school’s initiatives.



Africentric reform faces many challenges due to much misinformation and a lack of awareness in media representations. We need to educate members of society about the Africentric goals and initiatives to address many concerns brought forth in the literature reviewed. Society may embrace Africentricity with a more positive attitude in Canada if they have a greater grasp of the paradigm. Perhaps the Africentric Alternative School and other supporting organizations could produce pamphlets or even host short seminars for youth and community members to create awareness.

As articulated by this study's participants, the social consequences associated with Africentric schooling are a great challenge for Africentric reform. Black youth were concerned about the social ramifications of Africentric schooling. Social stigmas associated with Africentric schooling may have an impact on potential enrolment and support for the program. Racial stereotypes and stigmas should be of priority to deconstruct in classroom practices. Deconstructing stereotypes may assist black youth in assessing the value and nature of social constructions and may help build youth self-concepts and self-esteem. Furthermore, educating youth, parents and members of the community about the Africentric paradigm would be beneficial to mediate the social consequences predicted by youth.

### **Future Research**

The nature of the social tensions reported requires further exploration. Based on the information obtained, the researcher questions, to what degree do stereotypes and social stigmas influence youth desire to attend Africentric schooling? Would deconstructing stereotypes help black youth be more comfortable with Africentric schooling? Furthermore, would the Africentric

principles of unity and harmony be able to lessen intra-group tensions predicted by participants? Continued research could allow for an investigation of these issues.

A next step would also be to conduct a longitudinal study on the outcome of Africentric elementary schooling in Toronto. This study could follow youth currently enrolled in the Africentric program and track their progress as the program develops. The research could assess whether or not black children do better in the program in comparison to their black peers in traditional school settings. Researchers could assess the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy and the effectiveness of representative staffing as role models. With the elementary Africentric Alternative School in operation, there are ample opportunities for research to be conducted on site. Furthermore, future research on Africentric schooling is necessary in Canada due to the limited literature available.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge that *knowing* is a matter of participation and *knowledge* is a matter of competence. In analyzing my findings in relation to the works of noted authors (Asante, 1992; Dei et al., 1995; Delpit, 2006; Ogbu, 2008; Tatum 1997), this work confirms and affirms the need for black youth's social place to be recognized in education. In doing so, it may help other groups (Appendix B) to find their social place as well.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Timeline of initiatives to help black youth academic success

- In 1986 the former North York Board of Education approved a proposal for a Special Program Initiative for Black Students as part of a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at improved outcomes for Black students. The proposal selected Flemington Elementary School as the location of this initiative. The school had an environment which was 65% Black students.
- 1991- Bob Rae's NDP government sets up Black Secretariat and education ministry implements measures to push race relations and equity training for teachers and board officials
- 1992- Stephen Lewis's public probe in the wake of the Yonge St. Riots supports of the idea of black-focused schools
- 1994- Royal Commission on Learning, concerned about the high dropout rates among Black students, recommends Black-Focused schools in Toronto
- 1997- Mike Harris Conservatives cut Black Secretariat
- 2003- Africentric Advisory Committee struck to develop Africentric curriculum to meet the educational and social needs of Black Canadian students
- 2003- Parent Angela Wilson learns of alternative school policy while attending education forum in Etobicoke. It would be a year before she gets a copy. She was surprised to find the school board encouraged parents to set up such schools
- May 2004- Wilson and another activist parent Donna Harrow meet then TSDB director Dave Reed to discuss setting up a special school to address underachieving Black kids
- Feb 2, 2005- Black parents hold forum on Black-Focused schools at St. Lawrence theatre
- Feb 8, 2005- Harrow and Wilson meet with Gerry Connelly, then TDSB Associate Director, along with Trevor Ludski, area superintendent, to present their ideas for an alternative Africentric school
- 2005- Harrow, Wilson meets with other advocates Beunah Livingston and Suad Aimad to draft first stages of school plan. They meet at the Fish Shack on Baldwin St. It would take more than a year to finalize
- In the summer of 2005, an Africentric Summer Institute was established at Shoreham P.S. in the North West 2 Family of Schools. This program was designed to provide and enabling learning environment for African Canadian students in Grades 1-5, who were performing at levels 2 or below in literacy and numeracy. The goal- to create a learning environment where students were motivated to improve their school achievement,

enhance their self-identity and see themselves as successful learners in a African-based curriculum, There was a strong parental involvement component;

- The Nighana Program, formerly situated at Eastdale C.I. was relocated to Lester B Person C.I. Fall of 2005. This program identifies Black students coming into Lester B. Person from feeder schools who have the potential to do academic level work, but need support to be successful at that level. It features smaller classes in Academic English and Math in Grades 9 and 10 as well as the use of Black history and culture instructional references
- 2005- Toronto Star quotes the school board's new Executive Officer, Student and Community Equity Lloyd Mckell as saying he is in favour of Black-Focused schools. Public outcry follows
- The Director establishes a Strategic Intervention Strategy
- Nov.21, 2005- Africentric Advisory Committee meets to discuss and approve program model for consultation
- Dec.7, 2005- Family of Schools principals meet to discuss the program model and to get principals' "buy in" to the concept
- Dec.13, 2005- Jane-Finch community meeting to discuss the program model and to achieve community support for the concept
- Jan.18, 2006- Program model is fine tuned and presented again to FOS principals for review and input; principals share with their respective school staffs and school councils
- Feb.17, 2006- Deadline for interested schools to indicate their interest in implementing the program model
- Feb.24, 2006- The Selection Committee selects the school (s)
- March 1, 2006- The school(s) is confirmed for implementation of the Africentric model in September 2008
- March-June 2006- Transfers in and out if required; staff allocation decisions; implementation planning
- Sept.1, 2006- Implementation begins
- June 12, 2007- Final meeting (Harrow and Wilson) held with Connelly. The next day, the proposal is presented to the board's programs and school services committee. It's accepted, in principle, and sent to the board.
- June 27, 2007- TDSB directs staff to prepare a feasibility report on pilot of alternative Africentric School and report in November
- September 20, 2007- Africentric advisory committee of the board endorses proposal
- Nov 8 and 12, 2007- Board holds public meeting. Opinion at the first is overwhelmingly in favour. Views at the second are split among the 300 attendees.
- Dec 1 and 8, 2007- Community forms meetings on Black Focused Schools
- January 2008- Staff expected to file feasibility report.

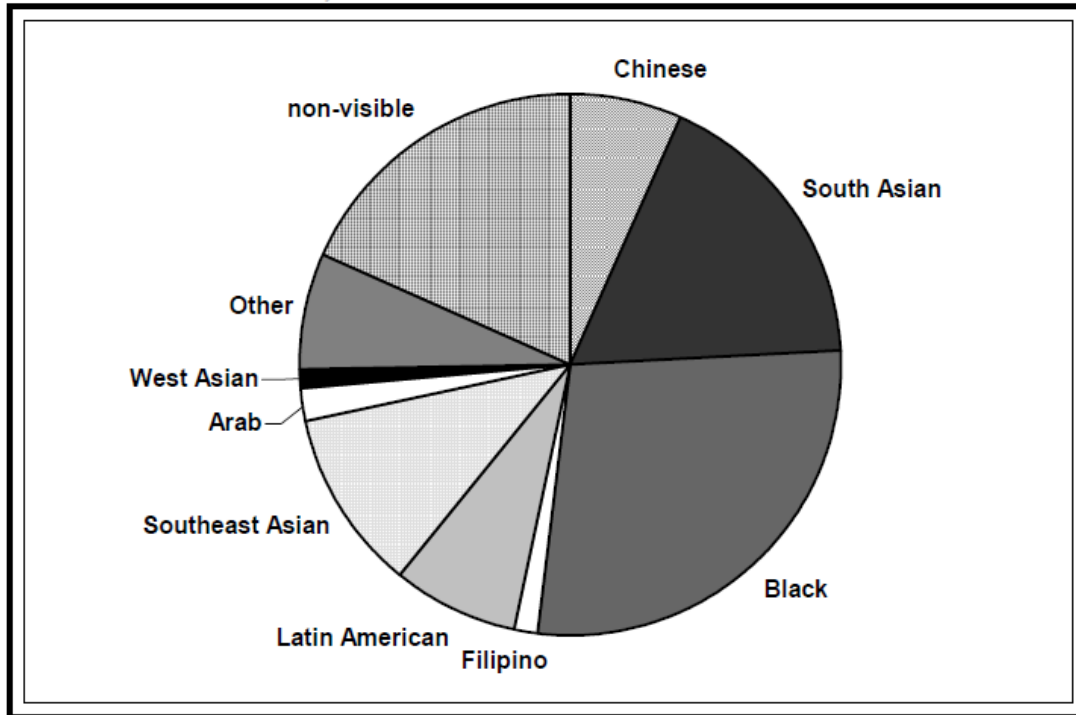
- January 29, 2008- The Board of Trustees carried 4 recommendations for Improving Success for Black students.
- March 18, 2008- staff convened a Strategic Vision Group (SVG) representing community and educational partners to advise staff on the key components of the program and operational model of the school before commencement of the PART process. The SVG formed two subcommittees: one sub-committee to discuss issues around program and operations, the other subcommittee to discuss a strategy for communication and public information
- May 7, 2008- Staff proposal for an Africentric alternative school to be brought to Program Schools Services Committee. Sheppard P.S. named as the site for a JK-5 configuration of school within a school
- May 21, 2008- Board to vote on adopting or rejecting the staff proposal for an Africentric alternative school
- September 2009- projected date for the opening of the first Africentric alternative school in the TDSB

(McIntosh, 2008)

## Appendix B

**Figure 4.28: Composition of 'Visible Minorities<sup>oz</sup>' in Jane-Finch, 2001**

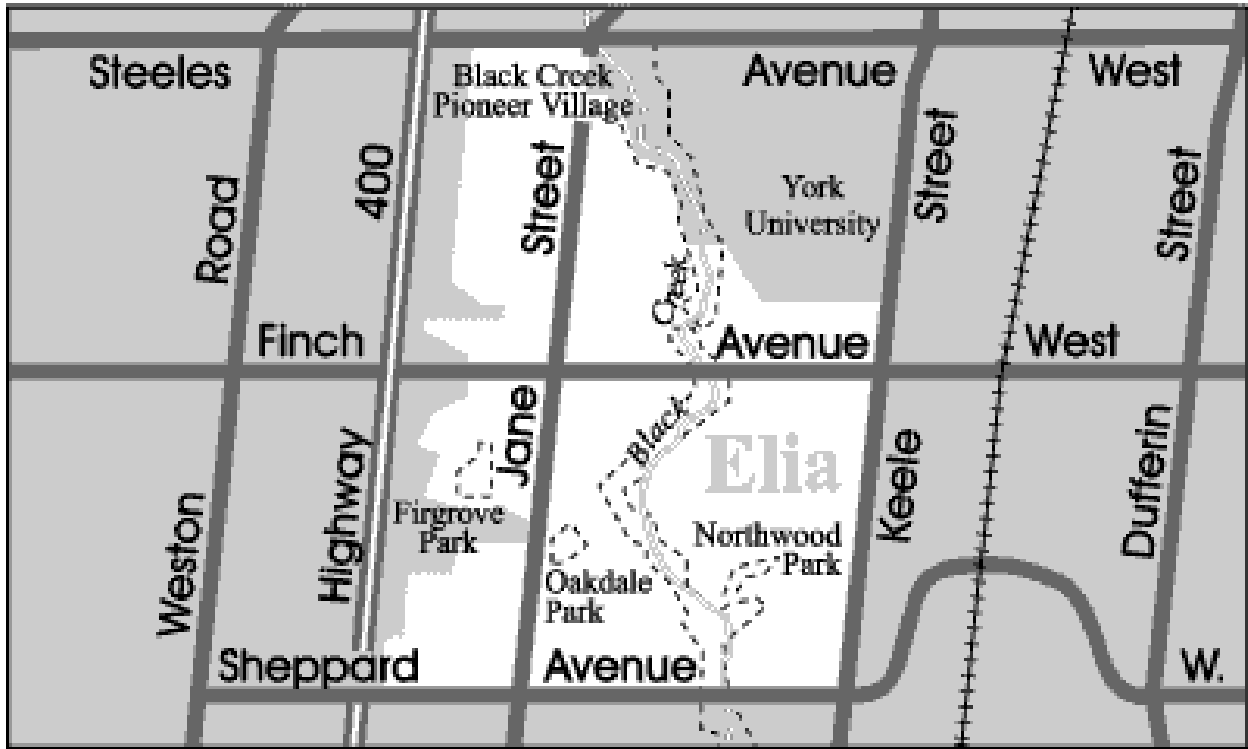
Source: Census of Canada, 2001.



(Lovelley, 2008, p.110)

Appendix C

Community neighbourhood map



## Appendix D



This study has received University of Windsor REB ethics clearance

### **Jane-Finch Youth Perceptions of Africentric Schooling in Toronto**

- **Are you a black youth between the ages of 16-19?**
  - **Do you want an opportunity to voice your educational experiences, concerns and needs and wants?**
- Looking for volunteers to be interviewed for the thesis research project entitled "Jane-Finch Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto"

**Please contact Tina Sharma (B.A, B.Ed.), graduate student with the University of Windsor at [sharma1k@uwindsor.ca](mailto:sharma1k@uwindsor.ca) or**

**519 566-2016 for more details!**

**Thank You!!**

**Volunteers will be thanked with a token of appreciation!**



## Appendix E

### Interview Guideline:

**The following open questions are meant as a *guideline* only. The purpose of the interview(s) is to learn of the young adult opinions on ‘Africentric schooling’ in ‘The Spot’ area of Toronto.**

What kinds of things have you heard about the African focused school from...?

- a. Media
- b. Community/School
- c. Family/Friends

I want to show you a cartoon about black focused schooling that was published in a popular newspaper in Toronto. What is this image is saying to you? How does it make you feel about Africentric schooling? Does media attention such as this influence your decision to attend a potential black focused school?

### **Africentric Schooling**

When you are in school did the teacher include your culture in class lessons?

(If yes,) tell me about a time when you learned about your [African] heritage in school. How was the lesson taught? What did you learn? When would you do an activity focusing on your culture?

Did you have [African] teachers or principals in your school? Describe how that teacher taught. Was your learning experience different with this teacher?

What did your physical classroom environment look like? For e.g., were there posters and art that reflected [your] culture on the walls?

Do you think your teachers knew enough about your culture to understand you? What would it have been like to have a teacher that came from your neighbourhood?

Did your parents or guests from the community ever come to your classroom to be a guest speaker?

### **Knowledge/Activities Associated with Africentric Schooling**

I am going to show you two different math activity work sheets. Both are teaching the same math concept of graphing data. Which activity do you prefer? Why? What are you learning from activity #1? Activity #2? Which one is more interesting and meaningful to you?

How would you feel if your everyday school lessons in history, geography and music class had been taught from the perspective of your ancestors/culture?

How would you feel if everyone in your school was of African descent? Would you want to attend a school like this?

### **Benefits/limits of Africentric schooling**

If money and time was not a problem, what kind of school would you create for students in this area?

If the Africentric School failed in its goal, how do you think it would make the community look? What if it was successful?

Do you have anything else to add?

## Appendix F

## Appendix G

### Graphing Data Activity #1

Apples, bananas, strawberries and oranges are fresh and healthy fruits. Fruits are important to eat because they have a lot of vitamins and nutrients that your body needs. According to Canada's food guide, you should be eating 2-4 servings a fruit a day. Jim was asked to record the amount of fruits he eats each day. This is what he reported:

Monday: 3

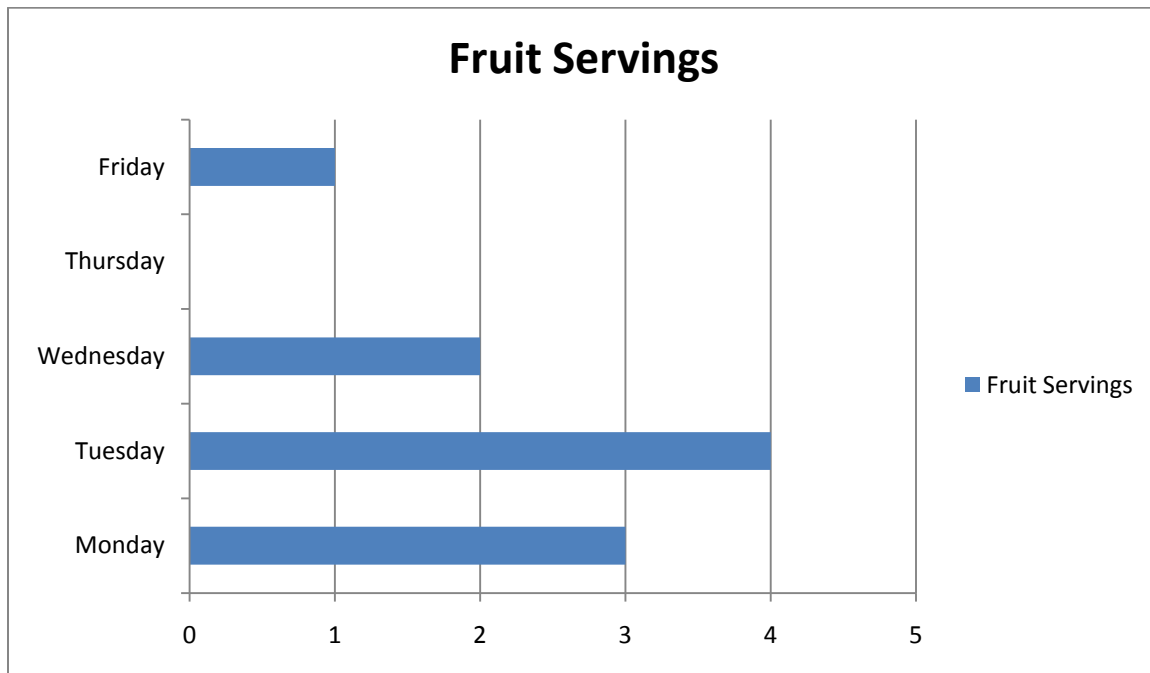
Tuesday: 4

Wednesday: 2

Thursday: 0

Friday: 1

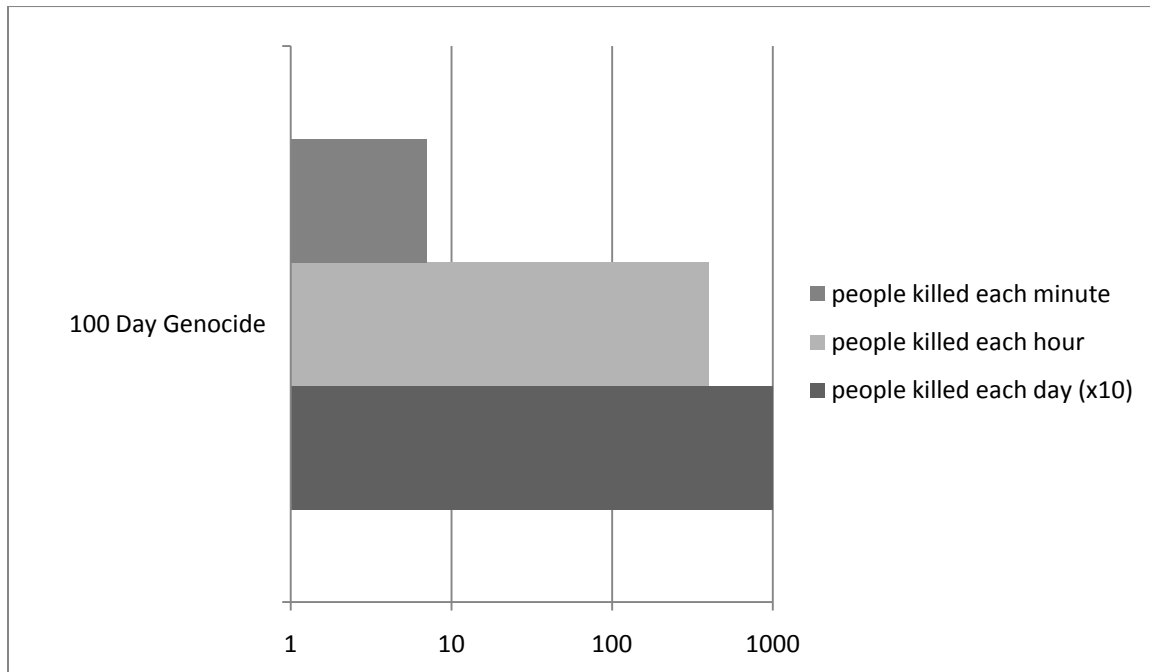
Graph this data.



## Graphing Data Activity #2

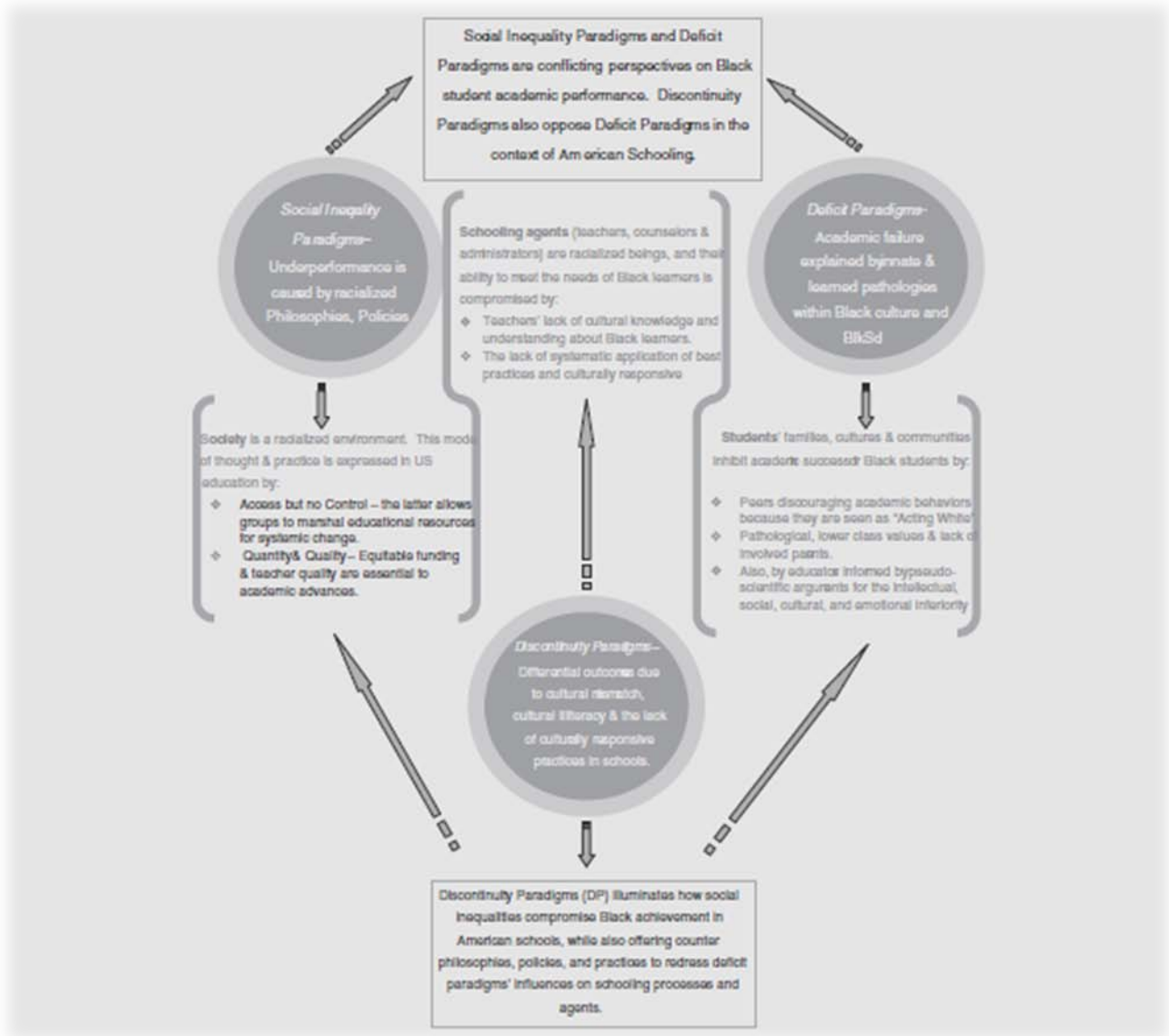
The Rwandan Genocide was the organized mass murder of thousands of people because of political struggles between different ethnic groups in Rwanda. Over the time span of about 100 days, it was reported by the government that 1,174,000 people were killed using weapons like AK-47 rifles, grenades and machetes. These murders account for about 20% of Rwanda's population. This means that 10,000 people were killed every day, 400 people were killed every hour and 7 people were killed every minute. Graph this data.

### Rwanda Genocide



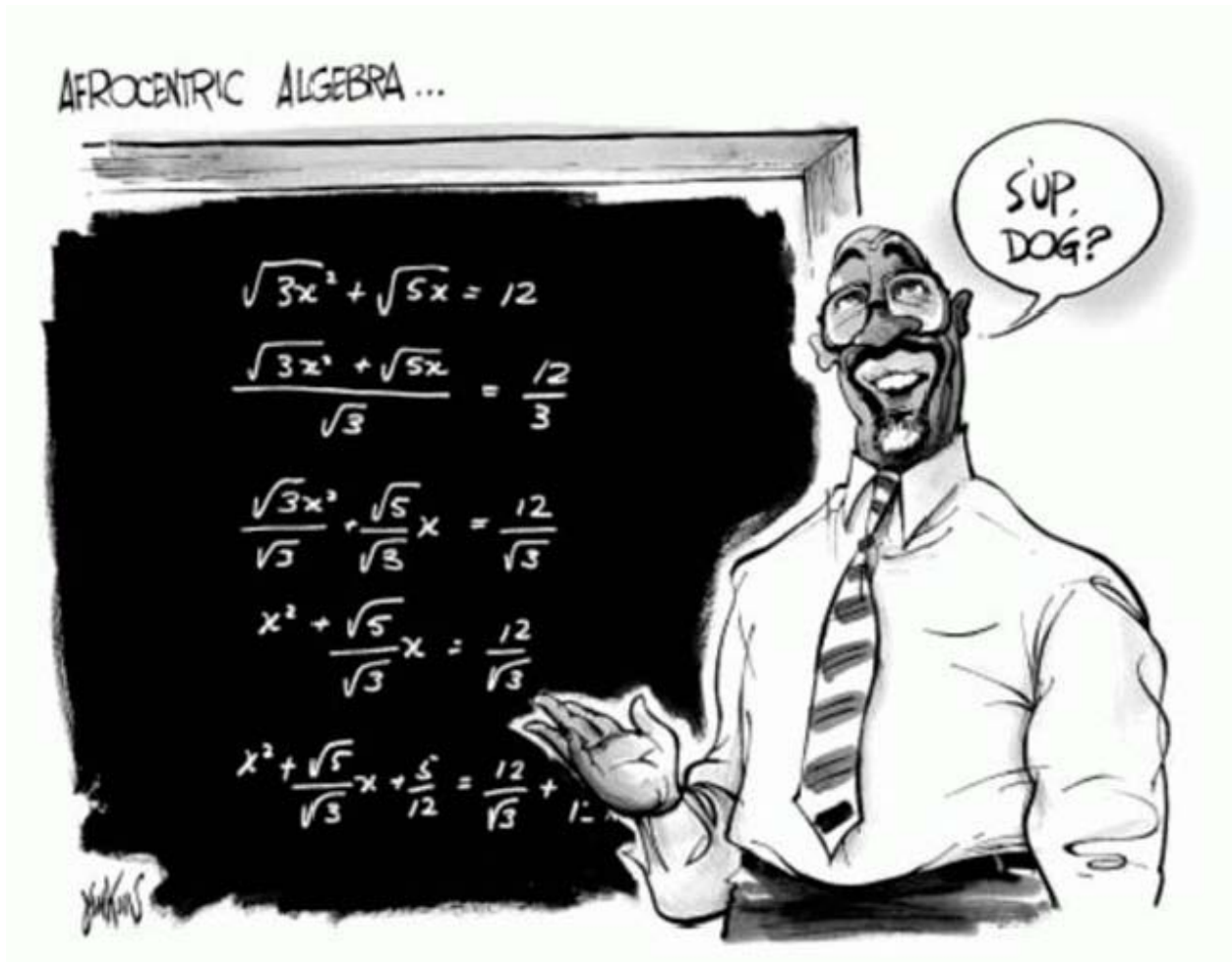
## Appendix H

### Matrix of Achievement Paradigm (MAP)



(Lewis et al., 2008, p. 138)

## Appendix I



(Afrocentric Algebra, 2008)

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## DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purposes of this document, definitions in this section should be considered

‘working’ descriptions in that they are not exhaustive of the literature on Africentric education.

**African-centered education:** African-centered education strives to put Africa at the centre of one’s being and includes interpretations of the world from an African historical perspective

**Africentric education:** Canadian African-centered pedagogical approach

**Afrocentric education:** American African-centered educational paradigm which inspired the Canadian African-centered discourse

**Black:** refers to a collective black identity associated with descendents of the African Diaspora. It includes but is not limited to Jamaicans, African-Americans, African-Canadians, and Afro-Caribbean’s.

**Black youth:** Self identified participants in this study between the ages of 16-19



## VITA AUCTORIS

Tina Sharma was born in 1984 in Toronto, Ontario. She graduated from Martingrove Collegiate Institute in 2003. From there she went on to York University where she obtained her B.A. and B. Ed. in 2008. She is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in Education at the University of Windsor and graduates in Fall 2010.