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Afrocentric Schools Within a Multicultural Context: Exploring Different Attitudes Towards the TDSB Proposal Within The Black Community

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AFROCENTRIC SCHOOLS WITHIN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT:
EXPLORING DIFFERENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE TDSB PROPOSAL
WITHIN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

by

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research study examines the complex reactions within the Black community in Toronto, Canada towards the opening of the first public Africentric/Black-focused school. The study seeks to understand the various hopes, fears and reservations among the Black community towards this school and the social impact Black Community members perceive the school will have on Black youth, and on Black Canadians in general. As such, the study is situated within the broader context of racism and the social exclusion of racialized minorities in Canada, with a specific focus on the experiences of Black Canadians. Included are the results of qualitative interviews with Black Canadians alongside several theoretical frameworks that assist in explaining participants' reactions to the Africentric school in the context of the social inclusion of Blacks within mainstream Canadian society.

Key words: Africentric/Afrocentric schools; Black Canadians; Education; Social inclusion; Integration;

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Introduction

In January 2008, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted to open the first publicly funded Africentric/Black-focused school in Canada. This initiative emerged in response to demands among some advocates in the Black community to provide a solution to the persistent achievement gap within Ontario's public schools between Black students and their white counterparts.[1] Advocates for a separate Africentric school believe that the poor academic performance of many Black students is in large part the result of racism within mainstream schools. They see a separate school as a necessary step towards reducing the drop out rate, empowering Black youth, and combating their marginalized positions within mainstream society.

The public reaction to this decision has been heated. The main criticism seems to be that this school is a return to segregation and goes against Canada's efforts to promote ethno-cultural and racial integration. This criticism has come from both the mainstream population and within the Black community. Newspaper editorials, internet blogs and public forums all testify to the fact that opinion within the Black community on the subject is in no way unified.

This exploratory research study examines the different opinions within the Toronto Black community towards the opening of a public Africentric school. Through interviews with individuals from the Black community in Toronto, the study seeks to answer the following questions: Do Black Canadians believe an Africentric school is the solution to address the high drop-out rates of Black students? What are the hopes, fears

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[1] I use the term "Black" to refer to individuals who can trace their racial origins to continental Africa. The choice of whether to identify as Black-Canadian or African-Canadian is a personal choice influenced by factors such as one's history and political orientation. While I acknowledge the historical and emotional significance of the name/term by which one chooses to identify oneself, for the purpose of this report I use the terms African Canadian, Black-Canadian and Black interchangeably.

and reservations expressed by Black individuals about this school? What do individuals within the Black community believe will be the social impact of such a response? Will it help or hinder the marginalized position of Black youth and their integration in the mainstream?

This study comes at a very important time. First of all, there is a need to examine the differing opinions within the community for whom this school is being initiated; while consensus of opinion within such a diverse community is not likely, the success of this school will depend in large part on agreement between individuals in the Black community about the vision, goals and programming of the school. Many of the differing opinions are the result of misinformation and misunderstandings about the TDSB Africentric school. But just as significant, the differences also reflect a larger ideological division within the Black community concerning how best to overcome racism and achieve equal status with the dominant White group. It is this latter reason for the differences of opinion in particular that this study seeks to explore.

Despite an official policy of multiculturalism that espouses the values of integration and equality of all cultures, the reality is that many Black Canadians remain on the peripheries of society (Foster, 1996; Henry et al., 1995). In his book *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada*, Cecil Foster wrote that there is a hardening of opinion among some Black Canadians with regard to their marginalized positions within the mainstream society (Foster, 1996). According to Foster, young people in particular are questioning why they should try and integrate into the dominant culture if the end result is that they will remain marginalized. Some Black scholars such as Adrienne Shadd seem to offer an alternative to integration in their writing about the

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"supportive nature" of the "segregated"[2] communities in which they grew up (Shadd 2001). While Shadd does not advocate segregation, she nonetheless espouses the benefits that can accrue to individuals when they live among their own, such as in a separate Black community. In light of these attitudes, the question then arises: Is the proposed Africentric school in some way a move by some in the Black community towards a separate community? And if so, where does that factor into Canada's goals for an integrated, multicultural country?

The impetus for this Africentric school stems in part from the limits of our multicultural policies in addressing the marginalized positions of Black Canadians. By exploring the different reactions within the Black community towards the Africentric school, specifically what they think such a school represents and the social impact it will have, this study hopes to provide insight into how Black Canadians view their position within the mainstream society and their opinions on how best to achieve racial/cultural[3] integration and equality.

The following literature review offers an overview of the history of racism towards Black Canadians, their current marginalized positions, and the educational experiences of Black students. The review provides a context for the discussion on the decision to open an Africentric school in Toronto as well as a background against which to analyze the complex reactions within the Black community to the decision.

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[2] The town to which Shadd refers is North Buxton, Ontario. This was a small community of freed black slaves established in the early 1800s. While there was no official law segregating this community, societal norms and economic principles created unofficial segregation.
[3] Note that race and culture are used interchangeably both in Canada, in the discourse and in this paper.

Literature Review

1. Who are Black/ African Canadians?

Ali Abdi argues that Black Canadians were among the first non-indigenous residents of Canada (Abdi, 2005). Black Canadians can trace their presence in Canada as far back as the early 1600s (Henry et al., 1995). The first Blacks in Canada were primarily slaves and indentured labourers. In 1783, roughly three thousand Black Loyalists who were freed from slavery in exchange for fighting on the British side of the American Civil War entered Canada (Henry et al., 1995). Most of them settled in Nova Scotia. The next big wave of Black settlers entered Canada following the U.S Abolition Act of 1793; these Blacks were fugitives from slavery and entered Canada via the "Underground Railroad." This group settled primarily in southwestern Ontario, but also New Brunswick and Montreal (Henry et al., 1995).

Following changes to Canada's immigration policies in the 1950s through to the late 1960s, increasing numbers of Black immigrants came to Canada (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000). The majority migrated from the Anglophone and francophone Caribbean countries, but many came from continental Africa, the United States and England. Many of these immigrants came as manual and domestic labourers, students and economic immigrants (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000; Abdi, 2005). Most chose to settle in Toronto, Montreal and Nova Scotia. The 1990s saw another major migration of Blacks to Canada, this time primarily from continental Africa. Many of these Blacks came as refugees from the numerous violent conflicts in Africa. Blacks continue to migrate from all parts of the world, with increasingly more migrating from continental Africa. The majority settle in the gateway cities of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Black Canadians are thus a diverse group which includes members from a myriad of countries with multiple cultures, languages, religions and histories. The importance of recognizing this diversity when talking about the "Black community" cannot be emphasized enough. McCarthy argues that references to the "Black community," both in the media and in academic contexts, without addressing the diversity within reinforces the notion that the Black community is a homogenous group and erases "important variables of social difference" (as cited in Walcott, 1996, p.288). This practice is especially damaging from anti-racist and equity perspectives because the practice of "synchronizing" differences "will only result in piecemeal changes" (Walcott, 1996, p. 292).

Black/African Canadians are so culturally diverse and come from so many countries that some may argue that perhaps there is no "Black community" to speak of. Cecil Foster poses the question directly, asking, "Beyond, as some would say, the superficiality of skin colour, are we a community?" (Foster, 1996, p.21). His answer is "Yes." Foster argues that people do not need to act as a homogenous unit that thinks or acts alike, or even have a common language, religion or homeland to call themselves a community (Foster, 1996). Rather, Foster argues that what is more important is the way in which differences between Blacks/Africans are homogenized by the mainstream:

> Ironically, no matter how much these individuals strut their perceived differences, most Canadians see us as forming one homogeneous group. And how we are seen and treated by Canadians at large might, in the end, be the deciding factor. (p. 21).

Foster is referring to the fact that regardless of which Black/African community a person comes from, in Canada s/he is racialized as Black and is subject to the common experiences associated with Blackness—the most common of which is racial discrimination. He thus argues that although Blacks/Africans in Canada come from

various countries, "because they live in Canada, live on the North American continent with a history of discrimination and prejudice, they have to assert their Africanness as a collective weapon and shield" (Foster, 1996, p. 30).

2. Racism in Canada towards Blacks

The presence and practice of discrimination and unequal treatment towards racialized minorities throughout Canada's history has been well documented (Omidvar & Richmond 2003; Salojee 2003; Satzewich, 1998; Henry et al., 1995). With regard specifically to the experience of Blacks in Canada, numerous scholars have written extensively on this subject. One can divide the literature into two broad categories: early and present day experiences of racism. Racism towards Blacks did not start with the increased presence of Blacks following the changes to Canada's immigration policy in the 1950s to late 1960s. Rather, as documented by notable authors such as Cecil Foster, Frances Henry, Carol Tator, Carl E. James among many others, the legacy of racial prejudice and discrimination towards Blacks has been around since the first Black settlers arrived.

2.1 A history of Racism in Canada towards Blacks

Authors detailing the early presence of racism write primarily about the practice of slavery, legally enforced discrimination as well as the segregated lifestyles of the early Black settlers. In his book, *Blacks in Canada*, Winks (1971) writes about how the practice of Black slavery existed as far back as the early 1600s (a fact only recently acknowledged by the Canadian government). Furthermore, despite the official outlawing of slavery with the passing of the 1793 *Abolition Act*, Black slavery continued well into the nineteenth century (Abdi, 2005).

One of the first Black settlements in Canada was in Nova Scotia. The inhabitants were primarily Black Loyalists who were freed in exchange for fighting on the British side of the American Civil War. Henry et al. (1995) write of the blatant discrimination the Black Loyalists experienced: "While the British promised all Black and White Loyalists settling in Canada 100-acre lots, Blacks either received no land at all or were given barren 1-acre lots on the fringes of White Loyalist townships" (p.65). Many Black Loyalists found themselves in desperate situations and were forced to work as hired or indentured servants to White settlers at a quarter of the wages paid to White workers (Henry et al., 1995).

The experiences of Blacks in Ontario were no better. Following the passage in 1850 of the second Fugitive Slave Act in the United States, many Blacks choose to flee to Canada via the famous Underground Railroad. Abdi argues that while Blacks gained their physical freedom, they were still denied the "definable and reliable notions of equity, full socio-economic and political rights, and the support and open mechanisms required to earn a decent living" (Abdi, 2005, p. 51). Henry et al. (1995) detail how Blacks were restricted from owning property as well as educating their children because there was opposition among Whites to allowing Black children into White schools.

As increasingly more Blacks came to Canada, immigration officials implemented policies to limit or prohibit their entrance. Authors Kelley and Trebilcock (2000) outline the numerous racist policies designed to prohibit Blacks from entering Canada. These consisted primarily of refusing requests to immigrate based on medical grounds and false claims that Blacks were not suited to Canada's cold, harsh climate (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000). Canada's discriminatory treatment of Blacks was rooted in racist notions of White

supremacy, the eugenics movement, and social Darwinism ideology popular at the time (Satzewich, 1998). The following statement, written by J.S. Woodworth, Superintendent of the Peoples' Mission of Winnipeg, about Black Americans demonstrates the racist and derogatory opinion held by many Canadians towards Blacks at the time:

> All travelers speak of their impulsiveness, strong sexual passion, and lack of will power. The very qualities of intelligence and manliness which are essential for citizenship in a democracy were systematically expunged from the [N]egro race through two hundred years of slavery. (As cited in Abdi, 2005, p. 53).

2.2 *Present day Marginalization of Black Canadians*

The literature on the present day experiences of Black Canadians focuses on the continued discrimination and inequities faced by Blacks. Following the events of World War II, there was a change in the way the world thought about racial hierarchies, and a corresponding change in Canada's immigration policies (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000). The introduction of the point system in 1967 was meant to provide an unbiased and equitable way of determining who could immigrate to Canada (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2000). Numerous other changes, notably the introduction of Multiculturalism, anti-racism and equity policies, signaled to the world that Canada no longer viewed one race/culture as superior or preferable to another; Canada was a land of equal opportunity for all.

The reality, however, "is that racism is alive and well in multicultural and multiethnic Canada" (Abdi, 2005, p. 58). One indication is the persistent higher rates of poverty and unemployment experienced by racialized minorities. A report by Teelucksingh and Galabuzi (2005)—based on figures from the 1998-2001 Census— documents the consistent income gap between racialized and non-racialized workers: a 12.2% average income gap for racialized workers and a 38.7% gap for racialized male youth. The authors also found a higher unemployment rate among racialized groups

(12.6% compared to the total population rate of 6.7%). Higher unemployment rates and lower earnings among racialized groups have, in turn, contributed to higher poverty levels among this population: a report by Ornstein (2000) found that the family poverty rate is more than 40% for some groups such a Latin Americans, Black Africans and Caribbeans, Arabs and West Asians.

With regard specifically to the Black population, numerous authors have argued that this community is subject to "more" racial discrimination than other racial minority groups (Abdi, 2005; Kymlicka, 1998; Henry et al., 1995; Foster, 1996). The 1992 *Stephen Lewis Report on Racism* identified the existence of "anti-Black racism" as a phenomenon distinct from racism towards racial minorities in general:

> [W]hat we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of 'multiculturalism' cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target. (Lewis, 1992).

The report thus outlines specific challenges faced by Blacks as distinct from those faced by other racialized groups. These distinct challenges persist today and, some would argue, have gotten worse. In addition to the main issues facing the Black community identified above, we can also add: discrimination in both employment and housing markets, increased gang violence and confrontations with the police, racial profiling, poverty and residential segregation (ie. living in "ghettos") (Abdi, 2005; Foster, 1996; Henry et al.,1995; James, 1990). This situation leads Ali Abdi (2005) to conclude that while a history of "legal racism and/or socially sanctioned exclusion [of Blacks] from viable sectors of economic, political and educational development have been neutralized" (p.

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49), there still remains institutional and systemic forms of racism that have yet to be overcome.

3. Racism in Education towards Blacks

There exists a substantial body of literature documenting the poor academic performance of Black students relative to their White counterparts in Canadian public schools (Smith et al., 2005; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Dei, 1996). In 1994, the Royal Commission on Learning in Ontario published their report, *For the Love of Learning*. The report presented an in-depth analysis of the problems experienced by Black students and referred to the situation as an "education crisis" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994). The problems identified included Black students being streamed into vocational and basic level classes, their underachievement in academic performance, and their high failure and drop out rates (Brathwaite & James, 1996).

A 1991 survey conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) revealed that 36 % of Black students were "at risk" of dropping out compared to 26 % for whites and 18% for Asians (as cited in Dei, 1996, p.33). A more recent report by CERIS, The Ontario Metropolis Centre, showed similar figures: a 42% drop out rate for Black students compared to 31% for White students and 18% for Asian students (Anisef et al., 2008). More specifically, the authors argue that "students from the Caribbean were found to be most likely to drop out of school, while students from Eastern Asia were the least likely to leave school early" (Anisef et al, 2008, p.20). Other issues identified in the report include Black students' underachievement and disengagement from schooling, "which implies the physical presence of Black bodies in schools but an absence in mind and soul" (Dei, 2008, p. 349).

In their chapter "Racism in Canadian Education," Henry et al. (1995) examine the various ways in which racism manifests itself in the educational system, thus "producing and reproducing racial bias and inequality" in society (p. 173). The authors detail the ways in which the formal and hidden curriculums marginalize racial minority students by excluding or minimizing their experiences, history and contributions to Canada. Henry et al. (1995) argue that this marginalization negatively influences the self-esteem and identities of racial minority students. The authors also examine the ways in which the attitudes and expectations of White educators influence and limit the learning of many racial minority students. Their account is an excellent overview of the main issues facing Black students in the public education system; these issues will be examined in greater detail in the following section of this paper. First, however, a brief overview of the history of discrimination towards Black students in Canadian schools is provided, with a specific focus on Ontario Public schools.

3.1 History of discrimination within Ontario's Public Schools

Blacks in Canada have historically faced discrimination within the public education system. In his chapter "Cultural Diversity and Education," Cornelius Janenen (1972) provides a brief account of the segregation of Blacks in the education system in Canada. With regard to Ontario, Blacks were denied admission to public schools as early as 1828 (Harper, 1997). Segregation was based on the racist belief that Blacks were inferior (intellectually, morally, culturally). Social Darwinism, the eugenics movement and formal tests, (eg. IQ tests) were used to justify such exclusion and discrimination (Smith et. al, 2005). Under the Negro Separate School Act of 1849, Blacks created their own schools (Harper, 1997). These schools were poorly funded, however, and students'

learning outcomes were constrained by poorly trained teachers and inferior educational materials.

The Black community's fight for admittance into public schools was ongoing until the early 1950s, at which time a shift towards a more inclusive approach towards all racial minorities, including Blacks, emerged in Canada. In the wake of World War II and the atrocities committed by the Nazis, the notion of racial hierarchies based on perceived biological differences were discredited; international consensus started to shift towards a more liberal attitude that regarded all individuals and cultures as equal and deserving of equal rights. With regard to the public school system in Canada, the practice was to "ignore or minimize differences among students and demand the same educational treatment for all" (Harper, 1997, p. 195). The outcome was that education (theoretically) became equally available to all: the last segregated school in Ontario closed down in 1965 (Harper, 1997). However, the educational outcomes of Blacks remained lower relative to their white counterparts: Black students consistently underperformed in academic tests and the drop-out rate was disproportionately high (Brathwaite & James, 1996).

In the 1960s and 1970s, a large number of Black immigrants (mostly from the Caribbean) immigrated to Canada. The dominant discourse at the time blamed Black students' lower test scores and relative underachievement on the fact that these students had to adjust to a new school system, and a new way of learning (Brathwaite & James, 1996). However, this argument could not account for those Canadian-born Blacks who were also experiencing the same educational outcomes. The Black community thus maintained that their low educational achievements were not the result of "cultural

adjustment" to the education system but rather were the result of the inherent racism in the education system "as manifested in discriminatory treatment by teachers, counselors and administrators, and in curriculum and school practices that excluded Black students" (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p. 18). Accordingly, the Black community lobbied for schools "to identify systemic racism as a barrier to the students' participation in school" (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p. 22) and develop policies and programs that would improve the educational environment for Black students.

In 1971, Canada adopted the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy. This policy was reflected in the school system with the introduction of multicultural education policies. These policies focused on "fostering sensitivity and relevance of school materials [and] respect for cultural difference" (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p.23) as well as encouraged the retention of heritage languages through heritage language programs. While efforts were made to hire minority teachers and provide teachers with "cultural sensitivity training," the overall focus was on introducing other cultures into the curriculum (Harper, 1997). Critics of multicultural education policies argued, however, that these changes were simply "an additive rather than integrative process, so that the curriculum was supplemented with information about food, festivals and folklore from various cultures, but the rest of the curriculum remained the same" (Harper, 1997, Inviting Difference section, para. 4). Minority cultures were exoticized and presented as different, further contributing to their position as "Other" in Canadian society. A major criticism of such policies was that simply "celebrating difference" without critiquing the power imbalances between the different cultures did nothing to address those imbalances (Masseman, 1984).

In response to these criticisms, an alternative educational model emerged. Anti-racism education appeared in Canada in the late 1980s to early 1990s as an alternative to multicultural and "colour-blind" approaches to differences (Shaikh, 2006). According to George Dei, anti-racism:

> acknowledges the reality of racism and other forms of social oppression (class, sex, gender oppression) in all aspects of mainstream schools, and also considers the potential for change. Anti-racism questions White power and privilege and the accompanying rationality for dominance in the schooling process. Anti-racism problematizes the marginalization and the delegitimization of subordinate groups, and their voices, knowledge and experience in the educational system. (Dei, 1996/1997 Winter, para. 4).

At its core, the goal of anti-racism education is to dismantle discriminatory institutional and organizational policies and practices and to "change individual attitudes and behaviours that reinforce racial bias and inequality" (Henry et al., 1995, p. 188). Anti-racism education has led to numerous positive changes including the development of anti-racism training for educators, the development of anti-racism curriculum resources and the introduction of anti-racist and equity policies in some school boards (Henry et al., 1995). In 1992, the New Democratic Party provincial government declared that all school boards in Ontario must establish equity and anti-racism policies "to ensure that all students achieve their potential and acquire knowledge and information, as well as confidence in their cultural and racial identities" (as cited in Shaikh, 2006, p. 8). Accordingly, in 1993 the Ontario Ministry of Education passed the *Policy/Program Memoranda 119*, an act enabling the Ministry to "require Ontario school boards to introduce policies on anti-racism and ethnocultural equity" (Shaikh, 2006, p. 59). The Ministry of Education set the guidelines, but it was (and remains) the responsibility of each School Board to implement the policies.

While anti-racism education has initiated numerous positive changes towards achieving equity for racial minorities, "anti-racism has not transformed the educational system, nor has it resulted in the dismantling of racist practices" (Henry et al., 1995, p. 189). Henry et al. (1995) identify some of the obstacles to anti-racist education as:

> lack of commitment; inadequate policies, programs, and practices; insufficient resources, monitoring and evaluation; lack of individual, organizational and public accountability. (p.307).

These obstacles were confirmed by Shaikh (2006) in his study, *Promoting Equitable Schools: The Role of Equity Policies in Toronto-Area Schools,* which reviewed the development and implementation of equity policies by the Toronto District School Board (Canada's largest school board). Shaikh's findings indicate that "adequate resources and leadership have not been provided for proper policy implementation, a lack of knowledge of the policy exists, and discomfort is present in implementing equity among the Board's stakeholders" (Shaikh, 2006, p. ii). Accordingly, Shaikh argues that:

> while most school boards publicly claim to be working to correct inequities in their systems…many students from marginalized backgrounds continue to have difficulty reaching high levels of achievement and acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to become responsible contributing members of society. (p. 137).

3.2 Current issues facing Black students

> Three primary concerns pervade student narratives about their school experiences: First, there is the problem of differential treatment by race. Second, is the inadequate curricular content, communicative and pedagogic practices that do not reflect the diversity of experiences, ideas and events that have shaped, and continue to shape, human growth and development. And third, is concern over issues of representation, that is, the absence of Black and minority teachers in the school system. (Dei, 1996, p.53).

This quote highlights the three main factors within the educational system commonly identified as contributing to the academic underachievement of Black students. The following section will examine these factors in greater detail.

<u>Differential treatment by race</u>

Differential treatment by race includes "overtly" racist practices, usually based on racist stereotypes held by teachers, administrators and other students, as well as "covert" racist acts as demonstrated through discriminatory practices and policies. Black students report experiencing both forms (Codjoe, 2001). Overt acts of racism include the racist belief that people of African origin "lack the values of scholarship and study" (Codjoe, 2001, p. 345). Codjoe (2001) argues that:

> this perception of Blacks as genetically inferior when it comes to academics is reinforced in the minds of some educators and the public at large, partly because of the achievement levels of young Blacks in the school systems and the overemphasis in the literature of school failure and underachievement among Black youth. (p. 346).

These racist beliefs form the basis for teachers' differential treatment of Black students. For example, such beliefs may influence a teacher, consciously or unconsciously, to have lower expectations for Black students. This could result in the case where, rather than encourage Black students to challenge themselves academically, teachers may encourage them to try out for an athletic team instead. Other "overtly" racist acts include not calling on a student in class or applying disciplinary measures disproportionate to the misdemeanor. The latter is exemplified in racist institutional practices such as the *Safe Schools Act*.

The *Safe Schools Act* was implemented by the government of Ontario in September 2001. Since then, numerous critics, including the Ontario Human Rights Commission, have voiced their concern that the *Act* is discriminatory towards racial minorities. The *Safe Schools Act*, which is part of the *Education Act*, takes a "zero tolerance approach" to dealing with behaviour, discipline and safety problems in schools. In his article, "Disproportionate impact" (2003), Gary Pieters reviews the *Safe Schools*

Act and argues that the regulations are excessively applied to racialized (Black) students. The regulations to which he refers include the granting of authority to teachers to suspend students for one school day and to school principals to expel students from their school for up to one school year.

Pieters argues that the *Safe Schools Act* has been "a catalyst that amplified the magnitude of school suspensions, expulsions and other punitive measures…on students of colour, particularly Black students" (Pieters, 2003). A report by the Ontario Commission of Human rights supports this claim: "Several school board trustees who adjudicate expulsion and suspension appeal hearings have reported that they see a disproportionate number of Black students at hearings" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2003, Disproportionate Impact in Ontario section, para. 8). The use of disciplinary measures such as suspension or expulsion on a student who is already "at risk" only serves to further their disengagement from school. While this argument applies to students from all racial backgrounds, directing these measures disproportionately towards Black students who already suffer higher levels of underachievement and drop-out rates serves only to exacerbate the problem and increase their "push factors" for leaving school.

Absence of Black teachers

Dei et al., (2000) argue that white teachers often resist acknowledging their privileged position as well as their negative assumptions and prejudices regarding minority cultures. This resistance prevents white teachers from acknowledging racism as part of the lived experiences of Black and other minority students which then limits the ability of white teachers to relate to Black students and make the learning materials

relevant to their lives (Dei, et al., 2000). Having Black teachers who can validate the experiences of Black students is a necessary step in reducing their experiences of alienation and exclusion from school.

Black students "feel it is important to have a teacher who has the interests of Black students at heart and who would encourage them to do well at school" (Dei, 1996, p.51). While there are, of course, White teachers who are not prejudiced and who encourage Black students to excel, this does not preclude the need for Black teachers. Black teachers serve as important role models for Black students and provide a social perspective that Black youth can identify with on the basis of common historical experiences and cultural experiences (Dei, 2008).

A recent survey conducted by the TDSB in 2006 revealed that in Toronto public high schools, about 12 percent of the student body is Black (down from 15 percent in elementary school), 54 percent are "other" minorities, and 33 percent are White (as cited in Brown & Rushowy, 2007). The racial makeup of teachers on the other hand is not so diverse: 77 percent of teachers are White, while only 5 percent are Black (ibid.). This raises an important question about the kind of message being sent to Black students about which members of society get to be in positions of power. It is important for Black students to see themselves and their cultural background reflected in the curriculum as well as in individuals in positions of power (such as teachers and principals) in order for them to develop positive views about their capabilities and that of their community.

Eurocentric curriculum

In Ontario, as well as across Canada, public schools reflect the educational philosophy, policies and practices of the dominant white group while excluding the

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histories and contributions of other groups (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). The following excerpt

from an interview conducted by Codjoe in an earlier study (1997) with Black students in

Alberta illustrates this point:

> [W]e heard so much about the French and English and stuff. Amazingly, they don't even talk very much about the Natives. You'd think there'd be a lot more on that. It is frustrating because I mean the Blacks here did contribute a lot. We (Blacks) were one of the first immigrants here in Canada. I do feel there should be a lot more mentioned about us, most definitely. (As cited in Codjoe, 2001, p. 356).

The idea that only the history and knowledge of the European cultures (the British and

French in particular) are of value is an example of the ethnocentric attitudes which form

part of cultural/ideological racism. As a result of their exclusion from the curriculum,

Black students feel they cannot relate or identify with what is being taught (Codjoe,

2001).

A further criticism relates to the fact that if the histories of Blacks/Africans are

mentioned, it is mentioned only briefly, without context and almost always focuses on the

negative aspects:

> I really didn't feel as though I got any education from school as far as Black education was concerned…I didn't learn anything about Black history in high school. There was no subject (in Black studies) for you to take, and in regular social studies classes they didn't discuss anything Black or African. They might have said something about slavery once or twice but they didn't really say anything in depth and they didn't say anything positive. (As cited in Codjoe, 2001, p. 355).

Black students are thus left to conclude that the school "does not value the present and

past achievements of their race" (Dei, 1996/1997, Student Voices section, para.3). The

implications are severe: students do not feel like their contributions are valued, which

leads to their decreased sense of belonging within and their subsequent disengagement

from school:

> When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium as if you looked in a mirror and saw nothing (Rosaldo in Rich, 1989, p.ix). (As cited in Dei et al., 2000, p.179).

The above quote illustrates perhaps the most damaging aspect of a Eurocentric curriculum on Black students' achievement, both in school and in the "outside" world: the negative identity formation that arises from being excluded within the curriculum as well as not learning anything positive about their racial heritage. It is these damaging effects to Black students' sense of self that many educators, parents and others find most disturbing and seek to address.

3.3 Advocacy within the Black community

There is a long history of advocacy from within the Black community for changes to the Canadian educational system. We saw in Section 3.1 of this paper that Black Canadians have been fighting for a more inclusive curriculum in the schools "which would represent the lived experiences and contributions of people of African descent" (Calliste, 1996, p. 91) as far back as the 1940s. In "African Canadians' Organizing for Educational Change" (1996), Agnes Calliste analyzes the anti-racist education struggles of African Canadians between the late 1960s and mid-1990s. Calliste argues that the late 1960s saw a rise in the political activism of Black Canadians, a direct consequence of the rise of the Black Power movement in the United States (Calliste, 1996). Consequently, Black Canadians increasingly formed political associations and self-help organizations to lobby for change in Canadian society and the educational system (Calliste, 1996).

In Toronto, organizations such as the Black Heritage Association and the Black Liaison Committee were among the "most active in the area of education in the early 1970s" (Calliste, 1996, p. 93). These two bodies' key concerns included the placement of Black students into "vocational and remedial classes which were relegating them to economic and political oblivion; Eurocentric curricula; and the quality of social relations

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within the school" (Calliste, 1996, p.93). The 1980s saw the formation of new activist organizations such as the Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE) and the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC) which sought to achieve equity for Black students within the education system (Calliste, 1996). Both organizations are still in existence today and continue to advocate for the full inclusion and accommodation of Black students within mainstream schools (OPBC (n.d); CABE, 2007)

While CABE and OPBC act primarily in an advocacy capacity on behalf of Black educators, parents and students, organizations such as the African Canadian Heritage Association (ACHA) provide programs directly to Black students to "instill pride, self-worth and a commitment to excellence [and] encourage commitment to educational achievement" (ACHA About Us page, 2007). The ACHA (previously the Black Heritage Program) was founded in 1969 by a group of concerned Black parents and educators who believed it was necessary to provide the opportunity for Black students to learn about Black history (ACHA, 2007). The ACHA runs its program every Saturday from 12 noon till 4pm and includes African History and Creative arts classes as well as tutoring programs. The program is now in its 39th year and has been met with great success (ACHA, 2007).

The success of the ACHA's African/Black focused after school program, as well as the continued demands by Black educational organizations for genuine representation of Black Canadians' history and contributions within the curriculum and equity in all educational processes, are all part of the various efforts among Black Canadians to combat racism within mainstream public schools and provide Black students with positive learning environments. These organizations and programs have helped pave the

way for the emergence of an alternative response to the persistent racism towards Black students within mainstream schools: the proposal for a separate, publicly funded Africentric school.

Africentric schools as an alternative solution: The TDSB proposal

1. What is an Afrocentric[4] school?

An Afrocentric school is "an alternative educational environment that emphasizes Afrocentric epistemologies in the teachings of the youth" (Dei 1996/1997, Key Questions Section, para. 1). The term "Afrocentric" refers to a framework/ideological perspective that places Africa at the center of "political, economic, cultural, and spiritual life" (Ginwright, 2004, p.17). Afrocentrism thus rejects the dominant framework that places Europe as the "birthplace" of all modern knowledge. Afrocentric principles emerged in America during the 1960s and 1970s as part of the Civil Rights movement and alongside the rise of Black Nationalism. However, in 1980, Molefi Asante transformed the framework into a formal theory (Ginwright, 2004). At its most fundamental level, Afrocentrism argues that:

> many African Americans, particularly children and youth, suffer from an ethnic identity crisis and that rediscovering West African and Egyptian philosophies holds the promise of cultural transformation for Blacks. Building ethnic pride, strengthening knowledge about African history, and fostering a worldview that values community, balance, and harmony is one promising strategy to improve the quality of life for Blacks. (Ginwright, 2004, p.17).

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[4] Javeed (2008) argues that the terms Afrocentric and Africentric refer to the same philosophy and are often used interchangeably. Whereas the term Afrocentric came into use in the 1960s, Africentric has become popular in the past few years. Kakembo argues that the use of the term "Afri" as opposed to "Afro" emphasizes the connection to Africa (there is no "o" in Africa) and represents "a progressive evolution in terminology, education and consciousness among [Black] people in Canada (as cited in Javeed, 2008). In this paper, I use the term Afrocentric to refer to the general philosophy and Africentric to refer specifically to the TDSB pilot school.

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2. Towards the TDSB Alternative Africentric (Pilot) School

In January 2008, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted 11-9 in favour of a proposal to open the first public Africentric alternative school (Brown & Popplewell, 2008). The idea for an Africentric school was first articulated as public policy in the 1992 government report, *Towards a New Beginning*. The report was the work of a multi-level government/African-Canadian Community Working Group commissioned by the government of Ontario to examine issues facing the Black community in Toronto and to provide a strategic plan of action to improve the situation. Among the many recommendations of the report was the proposal to create "a new Community demonstration model called Focused Schools" (*Towards a New Beginning*, 1992, p. 83) in the areas in Toronto with the highest percentage of Black populations. The proposed schools would feature compulsory courses "in the history of African peoples and cultural heritage" (*Towards a New Beginning*, 1992, p. 84) and a proportional increase in the number of Black teachers, administrators and other school personnel. The schools would aim to create "a positive environment for the nurturing of African Canadian children in the Ontario school system" (*Towards a New Beginning*, 1992, p. 82). Brathwaite and James argue the hope was that, "by teaching about the Black experience and African-Canadian students' heritages, such a school would deal appropriately with the problems of isolation and frustration that many Black youth have in society" (Brathwaite & James, 1996, p. 33).

Two years later, the 1994 Royal Commission on Learning put out a report entitled *For the Love of Learning* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994). In response to data on the (relatively poor) academic performance of Black youth and to presentations from

parents, the Commission specifically called for experimentation with Black focused

schools (see Recommendation 141, *For the Love of Learning*, 1994). The issue came up

again at a public forum on Black achievement in February 2005 where Black parents and

educators called for Black-focused pilot schools. Since then, advocates in the Black

community began working towards getting the TDSB to accept this proposal, a victory

they achieved in January 2008.

       The following excerpt was taken from the TDSB website. It is their current

statement explaining what they understand to be an Africentric school:

> The model offers a learning environment that meets the expectations of the Ontario Curriculum while incorporating an Africentric perspective through a curriculum that will engage Black students more effectively in the learning process and help them to be more successful academically and socially. It provides an inclusive environment where students engage in positive learning and consistent and effective guidance by teachers and staff who are specially educated to understand the social and cultural context of Black students in their school communities. (TDSB, *Next Steps in the Alternative Africentric Schools Process,* n.d).

Much remains unclear. For example, the curriculum has yet to be determined and it is

uncertain how it will be decided, as well as who will oversee it. However, some decisions

have been made. On May 21, 2008, the TDSB finalized a site for the Africentric

Alternative school: Sheppard Public School. Thus, the Africentric school will not be in a

separate building of its own, but rather will share facilities with another school (although

it will still be run independently of the Sheppard Public School). As well, the TDSB

decided that the Africentric Alternative School be offered as a JK-Grade 5 program (with

growth for Grades 6, 7, and 8 in forthcoming years). The Africentric school will be open

to all students, regardless of race. Educators from any racial background are eligible to

teach at the school, as long as they are "sensitive" to Afrocentric principles.

3. Alternative schools policy

While some may view the decision by the TDSB to open a publicly funded

Africentric school as revolutionary, others argue it is a right that, according to the

TDSB's Alternative Schools Policy, the School Board could not refuse:

> Wilson and Harrow say Black parents don't have to beg and plead for such schools. They are available, as a right, if only the board follows its own alternative schools policy…The policy says parents can choose the type of program they believe is best for them. It permits parents, students and teachers to approach the board and ask for support in establishing alternatives, and in participating in all decisions, including such vital areas as budget and staffing… 'The policy is so powerful and clear-cut, they are bound by it,' Wilson maintains. "They cannot say 'no.' If they deny us, they know we can file a class-action suit.' (Coteau, M. as cited in R. James, 2007).

Alternative schools emerged in Ontario in the 1970s in response to the needs of "mostly

white, middle-class students who were bored in the mainstream" (Zwarenstein, 2002).

However, based on this model, different models of alternative schools soon emerged.

Alternative schools allow for a "closer working relationships among students, parents and

teachers at the elementary level, and between students and teachers in high schools"

(Zwarenstein, 2002), which is seen as conducive to successful academic outcomes.

Currently, the TDSB has 16 alternative elementary schools as well as 20 alternative

secondary schools (TDSB, Alternative Schools page, n.d). These range from schools for

students with disciplinary problems to schools that cater to a queer constituency. The

following is a brief overview of three types of alternative schools: All-girls schools, Gay

schools and Aboriginal- Controlled schools. The purpose of this brief overview is simply

to highlight the similarities in the respective purposes/objectives of each alternative

school model: they each seek to empower that specific student body and provide them

with a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn.

All-girls schools

        The presence of private all-girls schools and separate (religious) all-girls schools is well established in Canada. There are, however, only a small handful of public single-gender schools although their number is increasing as more and more parents and educators realize the benefits of sending girls to an all-girls school (NASSPE Home page, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that some girls learn better in a same sex environment (NASSPE, 2006). One reason cited is that girls and boys have fundamentally different learning styles (NASSPE, 2006). For example, Qing Li, an education professor at the University of Calgary argues that "[b]oys tend to thrive off competition, while girls enjoy learning by collaborating with each other" (McGinnis, 2007). Other reasons include social issues such as the stereotype that girls are bad at math and science. In an article written in 2007, Qing Li relays a story illustrating the role that society plays in perpetrating this stereotype: "Last year in a GAP store, I saw a pink (shirt) with a logo saying 'I'm too cute to do math.' How many public figures are almost proud of themselves saying 'I can't do math?'" (as cited in McGinnis, 2007).

        All-girls schools are seen as a positive environment in which to counter these negative stereotypes with positive role models and stories. One example is the "Go Grrls" curriculum at the Calgary Girls' School: "In studying early Prairie history, for example, rather than learning that men had all the power because they were elected to government, classes…focus on how mothers, wives and daughters influenced events" (Sokoloff, 2002). Testimonies from girls who have attended the school attest to the successful nature of the program (McGinnis, 2007), as does the increasing enrollment over the years: when

Calgary Girls' School opened in 2003, there were 188 students. Last year, enrollment was 550 students.

Triangle Program, Gay high school

One of three programs that make up the Oasis Alternative Secondary School in Toronto, Triangle Program is the only high school program in Canada that caters specifically to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual students (Triangle Program, n.d). The program, which began in September 1996, was initiated in response to the high drop-out rate among "lesbigay/trans" students from "traditional" high school. Having experienced varying degrees of homophobia in mainstream schools, most of the students found the mainstream schools a threatening environment in which they could not function. The Triangle Program is able to help these youth by providing:

> a classroom where Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth can learn and earn credits in a safe, harassment-free, equity-based environment, and developing and teaching curriculum which includes and celebrates LGBT literature, history, persons and issues" (Triangle Program, Mission Statement page, n.d)

To date, about 250 students have gone through the program (Mitchell, 2004).

Aboriginal Controlled Schools

The history for control over Aboriginal education is situated within the larger context of the Aboriginal fight for self-government. As such, it goes beyond the scope of simply being an alternative school. Nonetheless, I include Aboriginal controlled schools as an example because there is a similar philosophy behind them and Afrocentric schools. Although coming from different histories, both emphasize 1) the importance of learning about the history of one's people, culture and values, 2) that the particular group's cultural philosophies and values differ from those of the mainstream culture; and 3) that the curriculum in mainstream schools is not reflective of the history/values/experiences

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of the youth from that particular community. With regard to Aboriginal/First Nations

people, these principles were first articulated in *Indian Control of Indian Education*

(1972):

> Unless a child learns about the forces which shape him: the history of his people, their values and customs, their language, he will never really know himself or his potential as a human being. The present school system is culturally alien to native students. Where the Indian contribution is not entirely ignored, it is often cast in an unfavourable light. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 9).

> We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in the culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 2).

The idea of an off-reserve, Aboriginal controlled separate school has been

suggested as a way to address the extremely high drop out rates of Aboriginal youth

within mainstream public schools (Richards & Vining, 2004). At present there are quite a

few Aboriginal controlled schools in Ontario, but these are mostly on-reserve schools.

There are mixed results with regard to whether the schools are a success. Many of the

"failures" can be attributed to the numerous issues associated with living on the

reservations; it is hard to disentangle academic performance issues related to schools

from the larger issues that youth face on reserves such as suicide, alcohol use, abuse and

poverty**.** Currently, the TDSB has one alternative school for First Nations/Aboriginal

youth, The First Nations School of Toronto. Founded in 1977, the elementary school was

designated as a "Cultural Survival School" in 1983 (TDSB, First Nations School of

Toronto, 2008).   While some would consider its 31 years in existence a testament to its

success, others argue that it has the lowest academic standing of all the elementary

schools in the school board and "unacceptable" levels of school violence (Kuntz, 2008).

3.1   Relevance to Afrocentric schools:

The mentality behind these three alternative models is similar to that for the proposed Africentric school: each group wants to provide its youth with the best possible environment in which to learn. They all want their students to reach their full potential, without being subjected to negative stereotypes and discrimination based on their gender, sexual orientation, culture or race. Accordingly, each seeks to provide a positive, encouraging and affirming school experience. In addition, there are some similarities in the criticisms these schools face. For example, an argument often cited against public all-girls schools is that the world is roughly 50% men, "get used to it" (Jenkinson, 1995). This argument is similar to the argument that Black youth will not know how to interact with non-Black people if they attend an Afrocentric school. A further criticism against all-girls schools is that by separating out genders, they are returning to the historically discriminatory public school system which kept boys and girls separate; this argument echoes the criticism which sees Afrocentric schools as a return to segregation.

With regard to this latter argument of "segregation" it is important to note that all three schools emphasize that they are transitional in nature and do not seek to segregate or insulate their students from the "real world." Each acknowledges that the youth will have to interact with the "mainstream" outside of the school walls. However, as articulated in the Triangle Program's Mission Statement, the objective for the students is to:

> develop the life-skills, confidence, pride and finesse they need to be successful when they transition back to their larger lives, be that mainstream schools, other alternative schools, work and/or post-secondary education. (Triangle Program, Mission Statement, n.d).

This parallels the arguments of many advocates of Afrocentric schools who say that the schools are a transitional tool, and not a permanent solution.

4. Arguments in favour of Afrocentric schools:

George Dei is one of foremost authorities on Black-focused/Afrocentric schools[5] in Canada. He has written extensively on what he believes to be the problems within the mainstream education system and the subsequent need for Black-focused schools (Dei 2008; Dei et al., 2000; Dei 1996/97; Dei 1996). In "Beware of False Dichotomies: Revisiting the idea of 'Black-focused' schools in Canadian contexts," Dei argues in favour of Black-focused schools as a way to address the problem of underachievement and disengagement of Black students, thereby leading to a decrease in the failure and drop-out rates (Dei, 1996/97). The hope is that by providing an environment in which the history and lived experiences of Black students is addressed at length and the positive contributions made by Black philosophers and writers (among others) are emphasized, Black students will be able to identify and engage with the curriculum (Dei, 1996/97). Furthermore, by having a mostly Black staff, students will see themselves represented in the schools, which would contribute to their sense of belonging within the school (Dei, 2008; Dei 1996/97).

Dei has conducted numerous interviews with Black youth about their educational experiences within mainstream schools and their views on Black-focused schools (Dei 2000; Dei 1996/97; Dei 1996). His findings confirm that Black youth are subjected to varying degrees of racism in the schools—from teachers and from students. Most students expressed a sense of alienation and marginalization within the schools, from the curriculum not being reflective of their experiences as Black individuals to not seeing themselves represented in the larger student body or the faculty (Dei 2000; Dei 1996/97).

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[5]The proponents of Afrocentric schools mentioned in this section use the terms "Black-focused" and Afrocentric/Africentric interchangeably.

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While most students expressed a desire to have more Black teachers, they agreed that simply having more Black teachers without making other fundamental changes to the school system would not make a major difference (Dei 1996/97). With regard to Black-focused schools, some youth thought it was a good idea, while others were hesitant, believing it would cause more problems (for example, lead to more fights) (Dei, 1996/97).

In defining his understanding/vision of an Afrocentric school, Dei refers to the idea of "African epistemological concepts" that would be reflected in the school's philosophy and principles as well as teaching practices and curriculum (Dei 1996/97). For example, he argues that African epistemological concepts "emphasize that knowledge stems from observing and experiencing the social and natural worlds through the self, family and communal interactions" (Dei, 1996/97, Key Questions section, para.1). According to Dei, these concepts would be reflected in an Afrocentric school in the form of an emphasis on community values, "social harmony, bonding and togetherness" (ibid). This belief, however, rests on the assumption that a common African philosophy/principle/way of living exists, a view that many do not agree with. Significantly, Dei emphasizes that Afrocentric schools are not only for Black students, but rather, for all those who seek a different approach or model of learning.

Carl E. James is another well known advocate of Black-focused/Afrocentric schools. James has written extensively on the experiences of Black youth in Canada, highlighting the racism they face in every day life and the resulting impact on their education, job opportunities, life outcomes, self-esteem and sense of belonging (James, 2003; James & Shadd, 2001; Brathwaite & James, 1996; James, 1990). With regard to racism in education, James argues that the racial slurs, racism on the part of white

teachers, stereotypes such as "Blacks are only good at sports" and lack of representation in the curriculum all contribute to Black students' sense of alienation and disengagement from the school, which in turn pushes them out of the school system (James & Brathwaite, 1996).

Since the early days of this initiative, James has been advocating for Black-focused schools as a possible solution for Black youth who would otherwise drop out from high school. In an article by Kalinowski and Brown (2005), James is quoted as arguing that an alternative Black-focused school may be the only way to prevent Black youth from being pushed out. Furthermore, in a recent panel debate on the subject, James argued that just as there exist other alternative schools tailored to meet the needs of children whose needs would otherwise not be met in a mainstream school, so too should there be an alternative school that caters to the needs of Black youth who do not do well in mainstream schools (Gionas, 2007). While James believes the school would cater to Black youth who have problems in the mainstream system, he emphasizes however that a Black-focused school is not just for Black youth who are doing poorly, but should include Black students from all academic levels.

In his seminal book *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (1998), Will Kymlicka examines the proposal for Black-focused schools "as a transitional step towards long-term integration" (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 84). Kymlicka acknowledges that the mainstream education system may be "inhospitable" to (some) Black youth and argues that a Black-focused school may have "the flexibility to come up with innovative solutions" (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 85) to various problems that Black youth face within the school system. For example, Kymlicka cites the problem of many

Caribbean students being insulted when placed into English as a Second Language courses because of their different dialect: according to Kymlicka, a Black-focused school, "which would be open to students of all races but designed with the education needs of Blacks in mind," (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 84) might be better suited to address this issue than a mainstream school. Interestingly, Kymlicka argues that contrary to the criticism that Black-focused schools are segregationist and might lead to Black separatism, Black-focused schools can be seen as a means of improving the educational opportunities for Black youth, thus helping the existing inequities and ultimately contributing to deeper integration of Blacks into the mainstream society:

> [Black-focused schools] can only be seen as a transitional step aimed at reducing drop-out rates and thereby enabling more Blacks to acquire the skills and credentials needed to succeed in mainstream educational, economic and political institutions in Canada…Far from promoting separatism, Black-focused schools may actually be the last, best chance for avoiding the creation of a separatist Black subculture. (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 84).

At the opposite extreme are those who view Afrocentric schools as a form of separatism, but view this as a positive step. One example is author Adrienne Shadd. In "Where are you Really from" Shadd talks about some of the positive experiences of growing up in a "segregated, rural Black community" (Shadd, 2001, p.14). She writes that the segregated nature of the town helped her develop a positive identity and "reinforced academic excellence" (Shadd, 2001, p.14). Relating that to the movement for Black-focused schools, Shadd writes:

> Relatives who received all of their education in Toronto have not fared well in the educational system, leading me to believe that my early 'segregated' educational experience was crucial. Many Black educators both here and in the United States are coming to the realization that chasing after the 'integrationist' dream was a dismal failure. This is why Black-focused schools have been proposed in Toronto, to great public outcry as a form of reverse racism. However, these educators are trying to address the tragedy of high dropout rates and streaming in creative ways that speak to the positive aspects of segregated Black schooling. (Shadd, 2001, p. 15).

Shadd reflects the views of those in the Black community who think that the purposes of Afrocentric schools are such that they should be only for Black students and should only have Black teachers.

Finally, a more popular argument in favour of Afrocentric/Black-focused schools is the one advocated by the Toronto District School Board and (positive) media reports. This approach emphasizes Afrocentric schools as an alternative school designed to "solve" the high drop out rate of Black students (while downplaying other aspects such as developing a positive Black identity). Two figures associated with this approach are Angela Wilson and Donna Harrow, the two women who have been the figure heads for this current initiative for an Afrocentric school. In media interviews and in public debates, it comes across that their view for an Afrocentric school is specifically to address the drop out rate and the corresponding social problems associated with dropping out. For example, they relate the high crime rate among young Black men to the high drop out rate and view an Afrocentric school as part of the solution to this problem (R. James, 2007).

5. Criticisms of Afrocentric schools:

There is comparatively less scholarly literature refuting the idea of Afrocentric schools than supporting it; most of the criticism comes from editorials or public responses in the newspaper. There are, however, two distinguished authors who have written on this topic, Cecil Foster and Neil Bissoondath. Cecil Foster has written extensively about Black Canadians and their experiences of racism. He argues that among Blacks, particularly among Black youth, there is an increasing sense of marginalization from the mainstream society, coupled by the belief that "integration" is

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not working for them (Foster, 1996). This was one of the reasons that Foster originally opposed the idea of Black-focused schools. In his 1993 article in the *Globe and Mail*, "All Black schools: more ghettoes?", Foster criticized Black-focused schools as "a backward move, as an attempt at segregation" (Foster, 1996, p. 131):

> I felt that Black-focused schools would not prepare students for the real world of living in a multicultural society and that, just as important, setting up such schools was putting too much of an onus on Blacks to adjust, rather than forcing society to make room for us in the schools, in the curriculum, in the teaching fraternity. (Foster, 1996, p. 131).

In his later writings however, Foster admits that his opinions have swayed, and continue to do so, depending on the current definition of a Black-focused school, as well as how optimistic he is about race relations in this country (Foster, 1996). In *A Place Called Heaven*, Foster talks about Black-focused schools as a place where discipline would be a big component: students would wear uniforms, spend their lunch hour in meaningful activity…it would be a place where strong teachers exercise discipline" (Foster, 1996, p. 133). He surmises that "I don't think too many people can be against this kind of school, especially if such schools help to keep more Black students in the classroom" (p.133). It would seem that Foster is open to a particular version of a Black-focused school, one that emphasizes discipline and academic pursuits. However, Foster also argues that while the school system needs fixing, he feels that the "the attitudes of many Black students also need overhauling" (p.134). This seems a softer version of the much heard criticism that schools are only part of the problem.

In his celebrated work, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994), Neil Bissoondath argues that multiculturalism encourages separatism/segregation among ethno-cultural groups, instead of its stated objective of integration. In his chapter, "Limits of Diversity," Bissoondath cites as an example the proposal for Black-focused

schools. Bissoondath argues that this initiative is "a sign of despair" among the Black

community; an indication of a desire among some in the Black community to "withdraw"

into what they perceive as a safer world (Bissoondath, 1994, p.141). Bissoondath argues,

however, that such a school is segregationist and will not solve the problems faced by

Black youth:

> An 'Afrocentric' or 'Black-focused' school system, racially segregated, racially staffed, would simply be a return to the past: to the racial separations of the American south; to the separate but (un)equal approaches of apartheid. It might produce higher grades-and even that is debatable-but would it prepare students for the wider world? It might facilitate the acquisition of knowledge, but would it facilitate the socialization necessary to life beyond the comforting confines of its walls? A separate education system is an illusory answer to the problems faced by Black youth in our society…It would merely provide a context for withdrawal from society, while the problems-racial and otherwise- can be solved only by engagement with it. (Bissoondath, 1994, p. 142).

Whereas Foster and Bissoondath provide a more general criticism towards the

idea of Black-focused schools, Darren Lund provides a more specific critique of George

Dei's vision of an Afrocentric school. In his article "Social justice and public education:

A response to George J Sefa Dei" (1998), Lund critiques Dei's argument that inclusivity

in public schools "requires spaces for alternative, and sometimes oppositional, paradigms

to flourish in the schools" (Lund, 1998). Lund also takes issue with what he understands

to be Dei's argument that Afrocentric principles are best suited to Black youth, and not

others.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine the complex reactions of Black

Canadians to the decision by the Toronto District School Board to open a public

Africentric school. The first part of my study involved researching the reasons for why

this initiative was proposed. In researching specific initiatives towards Afrocentric

schools, I focused exclusively on developments in the city of Toronto. The province of

Nova Scotia has a long history of advocacy for Afrocentric education as well and would

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have made an interesting case study. However, I chose Toronto because it is the site of the proposed Africentric school.

My initial review of the scholarly literature revealed that numerous issues factor into the desire of some Black Canadians for Afrocentric schools. These include the history of racism towards Blacks in Canada, racism in Education, anti-racism education theory, theories of social inclusion, multiculturalism and integration. A review of the literature on Blacks, Racism, and Education in Canada, uncovered a long history of advocacy from Black parents, educators and other individuals who sought solutions to the persistent academic underachievement of Black youth relative to the white students. My literature review also revealed some criticisms towards the concept of Afrocentric schools. While this literature was sparse, it nonetheless indicated that opinions with regard to Afroentric schools are very much divided. A review of various media reports, newspaper articles and online discussions revealed the same differences of opinion. However, no academic research was found on these differing opinions, or the reasons for the differences. With regard specifically to the Black community, no one has examined the opinions of Black Canadians towards the proposed school to determine if this initiative is supported by the majority of the Black community, and if not, to ascertain what the various reservations, fears and objections to this school are. This study seeks to close this gap by examining the complex reactions within the Black community towards the proposed Africentric school.

Primary research was conducted in the form of interviews. An interview format was chosen because interviews allowed for a more in-depth engagement with the topic than a survey or focus group would have permitted (Neuman, 2000). Also, one-on-one

interviews allowed for an increased measure of confidentiality and allowed more flexibility in scheduling a convenient location and meeting time between participant and researcher. All interviews were conducted during the month of July 2008. The sample population consisted of Black Canadians living in the city of Toronto. As mentioned above, the city of Toronto was chosen as the location for the study because it is the designated cite of the proposed Africentric school. However, Toronto was also chosen because of its significant Black population.

According to the 2001 Census, Toronto has the largest Black community in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). In addition to first generation Blacks, Toronto is also home to second generation Blacks as well as those whose ancestors have lived here for several generations. Blacks in Toronto have immigrated from all over the world, represent numerous religions, languages, cultures and come from every socio-economic background (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). Thus, Toronto represents the diversity of Black Canadians in their entirety and was a good sample population for my primary research.

Research participants were obtained by a non-random sampling method. I chose specific participants to reflect the diversity within the Black/African-Canadian community. My only selection criterion was that participants had to self-identify as belonging to the Black/African Canadian community and were above the age of 18. All participants were selected using informal contacts. Participants were first contacted by a mutual acquaintance to determine if they would be interested in the study. If so, contact was made and a convenient interview time and location was selected. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. All

participants signed a consent form allowing for the audio-taping of the interviews. The consent form guaranteed participants' confidentiality. Participants were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire (see Appendix I for Questionnaire). The questionnaire asked participants to identify their gender, age range, ethnicity, whether they were immigrants to Canada or not, and if so, from what country they immigrated. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine whether any patterns emerged with regard to the above factors and participants' attitudes toward Africentric schools. Due to the time constraints of the study, however, analysis of the questionnaire data was not pursued.

The total sample consisted of eight individuals: four women and four men. Two individuals were born in Canada to parents of Jamaican descent (Participants Mk and Js). Two had immigrated to Canada at a young age; one from Jamaica (Participant L), the other from South Africa (Participant Y). The other four had immigrated to Canada from Somalia (Participant A), Kenya (Participant Jn), Zimbabwe (Participant Mt) and Jamaica (Participant Mq) between 3-10 years ago. My criteria for choosing participants did not include socio-economic status. However, during the interviews it was determined that five participants had completed a post-secondary degree (Participants Jn, Js, Mt, Mq, Mk). The educational status of the other three was not determined, but all three were employed. Thus, there may have been a lack of representation from the lower socio-economic classes. The participants' ages ranged between 25-55 years. Four of the participants were between the ages of 25-30 (Participants Mq, Mk, Js, Mt). The remaining four identified themselves as falling within the 40-55 years age category. While having a child or children was not a criteria for participation in the study, 5 of the participants had children

(Participants Y, L, A, Mt, Jn), 2 were expecting (Participants Mq, Mk), and one

participant had no child (Participant Js).

The interview format consisted of an open-ended approach in combination with

an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of four general questions (see

Appendix II for Interview Guide). The use of the guide allowed for some structure to the

interview. However, while I directed the nature of the interview to a certain extent, I

allowed interview participants to elaborate on certain topics. Thus, sometimes the

interview went onto a topic I had not considered. This open-ended approach proved to be

a very suitable method for the type of exploratory research I was conducting because the

purpose of the study was simply to discover different opinions and reactions to

Africentric schools and the larger issues involved. While the participants sometimes went

off topic, it was relatively easy to direct the conversation back to the main subject area.

One challenge with the exploratory nature of this study was that my research

questions sometimes changed during the process of researching. Based on my initial

review of the literature, I had formulated a particular set of research questions. However,

during the course of an interview, a new research question would emerge. Also, because

the purpose of the study is to explore the different reactions to Africentric schools,

potentially everything the participant said was important. This made it difficult in some

instances to know whether the participant was going off topic or if they were talking

about a potentially important subject matter. Neuman (2000) argues that this is a

challenge of exploratory research that must be met by the researcher with flexibility and

an open-mind, both of which I tried to employ in the interviews and in my analysis of the

findings. Before exploring the findings of the study, an overview of the theoretical

approaches employed in the analysis of the findings is necessary.

Theoretical Approach

My research is framed within a critical social science approach. As a critical

social scientist, I view research as a "moral-political activity" (Neuman, 2000, p. 81). I

approach my research with the objective of empowering those being researched, as well

as empowering myself. Thus, I do not distance myself from my research, but rather I

recognize that I am an active participant in the process. A critical approach requires

researchers to identify their value position. I situate my research within a social inclusion

perspective. The concept of social inclusion includes numerous dimensions. Omidvar and

Richmond (2003) state that social inclusion:

> involves the basic notions of belonging, acceptance and recognition. For immigrants and refugees, social inclusion would be represented by the realization of full and equal participation in the economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of life in their new country. In a simple but useful sense therefore, social inclusion for immigrants and refugees can be seen as the dismantling of barriers that lead to exclusion in all these domains. (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003, p. 1).

Although writing in reference to new immigrants to Canada, this realization of

social inclusion can be applied just as easily to Black Canadians (many of whom are new

immigrants or refugees anyway). We saw earlier in this paper the numerous ways in

which Black Canadians are excluded from "full and equal participation" in all aspects of

socio-economic and political life in Canada because of Racism. Racism is thus a form of

social exclusion and one dimension that a social inclusion perspective seeks to address

(Salojee, 2003). I employ a social inclusion perspective throughout the paper but

particularly in my analysis of participants' responses in an attempt to understand Black

Canadians' reactions to Africentric schools in the context of their social

inclusion/exclusion within mainstream Canadian society.

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In addition to a social inclusion framework, I also employ theories of multiculturalism in my analysis of participants' responses. Multiculturalism, as "a philosophy for engaging difference and a policy for cultural integration" (Ley, 2007, p.2), is central to Canada's immigrant integration project and hence is a necessary part of any discussion on social inclusion. According to the Department of Canadian Heritage, the official government department responsible for Multiculturalism:

> Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoization, hatred, discrimination and violence. (Government of Canada, 2004).

By encouraging equality, acceptance of diversity and harmony among different ethno-cultural groups, multiculturalism seeks to facilitate the integration of immigrants into Canadian society, while "discouraging social and spatial exclusion, bias and hatred" (Ley, 2007, p. 5).

According to the dominant narrative, multiculturalism "is working": despite racial bias in the labour market and other forms of racial discrimination, multiculturalism promotes integration, citizenship and attachment to Canada (Government of Canada, 2004). Support for this view comes from notable scholars such as Will Kymlicka (1998). In *Finding our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada*, Kymlicka deconstructs criticisms of multiculturalism. In response to the criticism that mainstream Canadians "are increasingly intolerant" of multiculturalism, Kymlicka argues that "Canadians are not averse to multiculturalism within limits, but they want to know that those limits exist" (Kymlicka, 1998, p.23). Kymlicka states that defenders of multiculturalism must explain the limits which he argues include 1) the acceptance of common Canadian institutions, and 2) the non-violation of basic human rights (Kymlicka,

1998). Ultimately Kymlicka concludes "[t]here is no evidence to support the claim that multiculturalism is promoting ethnic separateness or impeding immigrant integration" (p. 22).

One of the most notable critics of Multiculturalism is scholar Neil Bissoondath. In his book *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada (1994)*, Bissondath argues that multiculturalism is a discredited, outdated policy created out of opportunism and not an answer to the social accommodation of a culturally and ethnically "plural" society (Bissoondath, 1994). Bissoondath argues that multiculturalism was based on numerous unexamined assumptions, including "that people coming here from elsewhere, wish to remain what they have been" (Bissoondath, 1994, p. 43). While multiculturalism is presented as a policy for creating unity among diverse Canadians, Bissoondath comments that "the document is striking in its lack of any mention of unity or oneness of vision" (Bissoondath, 1994, p. 43). Rather:

> Its provisions seemed aimed instead at encouraging division, at ensuring that the various ethnic groups whose interest it espouses discover no compelling reason to blur the distinctions among them. (Bissondath, 1994, p. 43).

Bissoondath thus concludes that rather than promote integration, by encouraging new immigrants to hold onto their "cultures of origin", Multiculturalism encourages separatism between the various ethnic communities and limits their integration into Canadian society.

Scholar Himani Bannerji also argues that multiculturalism emphasizes differences, however her critique centers on the way in which multiculturalism, as an ideological apparatus, reinforces the differences between the dominant White population and the visible minority "Others" (Bannerji 2000; 2000a). In her essays "On the Dark Side of the Nation" (2000), and "The Paradox of Diversity" (2000a), Bannerji argues that

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multiculturalism was created as a mechanism to deal with "the multiple other cultural presences in Canada [that were] interpreted as a threat to national culture" (Bannerji, 2000a, p. 548). Bannerji argues that multiculturalism, and the related discourse of Diversity, has replaced the language of Race and Racism with vague concepts of "multi-cultural" and "ethnicity", obscuring deep, structural relations of power and reducing "the problem of social justice into questions of curry and turban" (Bannerji, 2000a, p. 549).

Bannerji's arguments are part of a wider critique that views the absence of the concepts of Race and Racism within the discourse of multiculturalism as contributing to the continued discrimination and marginalized positions of racialized minorities (Henry et al., 1995). The fact that multiculturalism has not led to the increased recognition, participation or equality of minority groups within the dominant society has brought about a new discourse of multiculturalism for members of minority communities; one that centers around "issues of power, access, equity, participation, removal of discriminatory barriers, institutional accommodation and anti-racism" (Saloojee, 2003, p.193). At the centre of the three aforementioned theories of multiculturalism are issues of inclusion and integration. Analyzing participants' responses through the lens of these theories of multiculturalism may provide insight into which of these theories holds true for the Black community. It is pertinent then to ask: Are Afrocentric schools one dimension of a multicultural policy that encourages ethno-racial groups to maintain their culture? Do they represent a rejection of multiculturalism? Are they an example of Bissoondath's arguments about separatism? Or are Afrocentric schools best understood as a reaction to the failures of multiculturalism to address issues or racism and discrimination?

Finally, as the central issue with respect to Afrocentric schools revolves around the continued presence of racism in the educational system, I also employ anti-racism theories in my analysis of participants' responses. We saw earlier how anti-racism has been applied to the educational context as a strategy to dismantle institutional and systemic forms of racism within the education system. However, anti-racist activists seek to apply anti-racism strategies to all aspects of society, thus "eradicating racism in all its forms" (Henry et al., 1995, p.325). I thus apply anti-racism theories to situate the appeal made by some Black Canadians that Afrocentric schools be seen as a response and/or solution to the persistent academic gap, high drop out rates and ensuing marginalization of Black youth, and also as a framework to examine participants' responses within the larger context of Racism in Canadian society.

Findings

Interview findings are organized according to general themes that emerged from participants' responses to the general research questions.

1. General knowledge about the TDSB Africentric pilot school initiative

All participants were aware of the discussions and initiatives geared towards opening an Africentric school. All except one participant (Participant Jn) were aware that the proposal to open an Africentric school had been approved and a pilot school would be opened in September 2009. Participants Jn, Js, and Mk knew nothing more beyond those details about the logistics of the school, while the remainder of the participants knew that a site had been chosen and that the school would be from junior kindergarten to grade 5. Four of the eight participants received all their knowledge about the school from the media. Two of the eight participants had sought more information by reading articles by

George Sefa Dei (Participant Ma) or going to the public discussion forums (Participant A). The remaining two participants (Participants Y and L) had extensive knowledge about Afrocentricity in general and had some involvement with the committee advocating for an Africentric school.

1. a) Reasons for this school

   All participants were aware that the pilot school was being established to address the high drop out rates of Black youth in Toronto's public schools. In addition, all participants were aware of the argument that racism in mainstream schools contributed to the high drop out rates of Black youth and that this school was seen as a possible solution to that problem. Participants were also aware of the argument that having more Black teachers and a curriculum geared towards Black youth was supposed to help Black students stay in school by increasing their level of interest in the curriculum and by improving their self-esteem.

1. b) Who is it for?

   All participants except Y and L expressed confusion about whom exactly the school was for, whether it was exclusively for "troubled" Black youth/those who were struggling academically,for all Black students (regardless of academic standing), for Black youth exclusively, or if it was open to everybody. Participants Y and L knew that the proposed TDSB Africentric school was open to students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds and expressed annoyance with the media for perpetuating the misperception that is was for Black students only.

1. c) Definition/understanding of an Africentric school

Participants had different interpretations/understanding of what was meant by an Africentric school. All participants understood the school to be one that would incorporate Black culture into different aspects of the curriculum, with a focus on Black history, Black literature, and the contributions made by Black individuals. Participants Y and L went further to describe the school as being more than simply having an expanded curriculum (more focus on Black history, literature, etc.)from mainstream schools, but rather, that it would incorporate an entirely different approach to learning:

> I think for me, African centered education is really life education. I think its basic principles are based on ensuring that we become enlightened beings to our fullest capacity to ensure that 1) we have the most enlightened human relationships with one another, 2) that we have the most enlightened relationship with our creator, 3) that we have the most enlightened relationship to the universe and that if we have that kind of understanding, we also know that we are custodians of this universe and its therefore incumbent upon us to leave it in better condition than we found it. And so, I think African centered education is about everybody's world view. It's not about saying that Africans are better, or we were first. (Participant Y, 2008).

Participant Y also spoke about Africentric schools as being about self-determination:

> I think Afrocentric education should be and is, about self-determination. At a time when we see that jobs are drying up, people are getting laid off en masse…teaching our children to be workers is really not enlightening at all. We have to teach our children to become business owners, and start community based economic initiatives…these are the directions in which we need to move because no one is going to give us a job. (Participant Y, 2008).

2. Reasons in favour or against the TDSB pilot Africentric school

Two participants strongly supported the initiative (Participants L and Y). Two strongly opposed it (Participants A and Mq). Two participants (Mk and Js) began the interview opposed to the idea but stated at the end of the interview that they saw some positive aspects of the school. Participants Mt and Jn were undecided at the beginning of the interview and remained so at its completion.

2. a) Strong support for an Africentric school (Participants L and Y)

When asked why they supported the establishment of the TDSB Africentric school, both participants stated that they have always been advocates of Africentric schooling. For participant L, this advocacy came from years of being involved with an Africentric after-school program for Black youth:

> I've been with the organization for about 15 years. My son went through it, and we see the difference in the students that come out of the program, and we see how important it is to do this work. Not on a part-time volunteer basis, but as part of the education process. So I have the unique advantage of seeing it actually work here in Toronto on a very minute scale. So for me the issue of Afrocentric schooling is not an issue for me. It's a must; it must happen. But it must be done in such a way that it adds value- not only to these kids lives, but also to the texture of our society. We can't have kids running around seeing themselves in a negative way all the time. Because that manifests itself in other things. (Participant L, 2008).

Participant Y traced her advocacy to her political consciousness and upbringing:

> I think that because of my political upbringing and my own political consciousness, I've always believed that African people needed to have their own schools. It's something that I saw every other group of people had and so I used to wonder why don't we have our own schools and then came to understand that there were always these forces working against us having these types of schools. (Participant Y, 2008).

Both participants emphasized what they believed to be the destructive nature of mainstream schools on the psyche, self-esteem and identity of Black youth. Participant Y further stated that this school was our right as a Black community:

> Well, if we go back to the beginning of this conversation where I spoke of the historical experiences and presence of Africans here, then yes we do have a right to expect an Afrocentric education because we've been here, we've been here almost as long as, and in many cases longer than many Europeans. They, based on their own racism and white supremacist upbringings have systematically denied us the right to self-realization and self-definition, etc. And so, absolutely, within the framework of reparations, and that's how we should be framing it, and unfortunately we're not, but within that framework, it's something that should have been realized a long, long time ago. (Participant Y, 2008).

2. b) Strongly against an Africentric school (Participants Mq and A)

Participants Mq and A both strongly opposed the initiative based on the fact that they felt racism in schools was not the reason behind high drop out rates among Black

students. In particular, Participant Mq felt that what caused many Black students to drop out was a lack of parental involvement as well as a lack of motivation on the part of the students:

> Based on what I've observed from being here, even in families where kids do well in school, a lot of Black parents I noticed don't put that emphasis on education. Like my parents- my siblings went to high school here- I don't think they ever went to my siblings' high school until it was graduation day. So they weren't really following up with what's going on in school, what grades are you getting, why are you getting these grades, contacting the school finding out what's going on so that if there was a problem with the school system they could address the problems early. A lot of the motivation is left on the child to know that this is what they want out of school and they have to go and get it. That external motivation that they would get from families and parents, based on what I've observed, isn't there. (Participant Mq, 2008).

Participant A strongly felt that schools were not to blame, but rather that not enough effort was being made in the Black community or "at home". Specifically, he blamed the high rate of single mothers within the Black community as the reason for why some Black male youth were not doing well. Participant A emphasized that Black female students were doing well, which he attributed to having their mothers as role models, whereas he believed the majority of young Black males did not have positive father-figure role models. Both participants felt that opening an Africentric school was not a good idea because the school was not addressing the real problem: "If those issues aren't addressed, it doesn't matter where you put them- put them together, separate them, the issues are still there" (Participant Mq, 2008).

2. c) Mixed feelings

The remaining four participants had mixed feelings as to whether they supported the Africentric school or not. Participants Mt and Jn both felt that having the school available as an *option* was a good idea:

> I think it's a good idea to have the schools and parents can take advantage of the existence of such schools. And if they feel that it's going to help their children then they should take them there- and they can always withdraw them. Especially for parents who feel that their child needs such a school then it is a good opportunity for

them. So, if this is something someone feels that they need, let them go and try it out. (Participant Jn, 2008).

Participant Mt stated that there were already so many divisions among schools: "Jewish schools, catholic schools, private schools that only cater to a certain class of people-what's the big deal about this one?" (Participant Mt, 2008). Participants Js and Mk understood the purported benefits of the Africentric school yet felt a strong resistance to the idea. The following section expands on the specific concerns, fears and reservations held by participants A, Mq, Mt, Mk, Js and Jn towards the proposed Africentric school. The concerns of participants L and Y will be addressed at the end of the section.

3. Concerns, Fears and Reservations about an Africentric school

3. a) Create a distorted reality for students

Participants Js, Jn, Mk and Mt all expressed concern that an Africentric school would be an insular community and not a reflection of the "real world." Participants referred to the fact that Blacks are a minority population in Canada and that going to an Africentric school would not prepare the children for this reality:

> Are we setting up the kids for some sort of ideal world that doesn't exist, then they go [out into the real world] and they're shocked? Are we going to prepare them enough to be able to exist in the world that is not homogenous and is very hostile to a lot of Black folks? (Participant Mt, 2008).

Participant Js echoed the above concern that children attending this school may have unrealistic perceptions about race relations:

> [I'm concerned that] the kids will come out and be in their own little world, and think that this is how the world is, too optimistic about, 'oh people don't see colour out there.' (Participant Js, 2008).

Participant Jn compared graduating from an Africentric school to the experience of immigrating:

> It will be like immigrating again when they go to the work place and for the first time they are mixed, they're finally meeting White people, just like when I came to

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Canada from Kenya, almost everyone is Black, and I come here and I'm Black and
everyone else is White. So I don't want them to grow up pretending that they're in a
Black world when everyone else is not. (Participant Jn, 2008).

3. b) Develop Pro-Black mentalities

A related concern centered on what the students would learn at the school.

Participant Mk worried that the teachers and curriculum would instill in the children a

"pro-Black mentality":

> I don't want my child to grow up thinking that, thinking that Blacks made the world.
> Blacks made the world but were suppressed-you know the pro-Black thinking?
> Blacks were superiour, Blacks made all these inventions but they didn't get the credit
> for it. Which could be true but it's so aggressive towards other nations- I wouldn't
> want my child growing up in that way, not being open minded, not seeing everyone
> as equal, as we want them to be treated- I wouldn't want them to grow up off balance.
> (Participant Mk, 2008).

Participant Js spoke about what she felt was a "cliquishness" of some Blacks that results

from wanting to "protect" their culture. She feared that this "cliquishness", when placed

in what she perceived to be an insular community (Africentric schools), would develop

into radicalism on the part of the students:

> Anytime you end up confining yourself, it does, I'm gonna say it, it could lead to
> radical notions. (Participant Js, 2008).

3. c) Too much riding on school/students' performance

All participants felt that students who attended this school would be under

scrutiny and increased pressure to "perform":

> When I think of the students who will attend that school, when they leave, I think
> there will be a certain expectation on them, that students who are not in an
> Africentric school will not be subject to. Everyone is expecting 'okay, this is what
> you say will make you perform better, so where's your performance?' (Participant
> Mq, 2008).

In addition, all participants felt that a lot was riding on the performance of the students

and ultimately the success of the school. Participants Mq, Mk and A all questioned how

far this experiment would "set us back" if this school "failed":

Everyone's going to say, 'You said it was a Eurocentric curriculum that made you fail, well, now it's an Africentric curriculum, there should be a better performance, higher average than kids in mainstream schools,' which may prove negative for the students if that's not the case. If the academic performance isn't improved, then how will that appear? That it's a failure! And then it will be one continuous debate as to why they're not performing well. (Participant Mq, 2008).

What if this [school] is a complete failure? Have we set ourselves back another 10-20 years? If it doesn't work, it's gonna be another conversation at the dinner table with European families- they'll say 'they [Blacks] tried, now statistics have proven that when they come together it doesn't work.' And they'll be saying it with some sort of proof or evidence. (Participant Mk, 2008).

When they set up Black schools, if we don't succeed, that is gonna take another 100 years to fix that. Because we will be labeled as failures. Now there's a myth [about Black people not doing well] but if this school doesn't work then this will become a "reality." (Participant A, 2008).

3. d) Will detract from push for changes in mainstream schools

All participants agreed that all students (not only Black students) would benefit from learning about Black history, Black scholars, Black achievements and expressed concern that these changes would not be implemented in mainstream schools if there was an Africentric school. Participant Mt emphasized that the challenge is trying to educate the white students and that we must keep pushing for changes in mainstream education:

I think there is a need for a push to educate other kids. Because those are the perpetrators. I mean why should the "victims" do the work? Why can't the perpetrators be educated so they don't inflict pain on other people? I think there has to be a push in the TDSB for an anti-oppression, pro-Black syllabus. The system that needs to change is the system that is permanent. (Participant Mt, 2008).

In addition, Participant Mq articulated the fear that this school will be the "solution" to every Black student or parent that complains about the regular school system: parents and students will be told to "go into your own system if you think there are problems with our system, maybe then you'll be more successful" (Participant Mq, 2008).

3. e) Vision is not what is being translated into practice

Having a deeper knowledge of Afrocentricity and the vision behind Afrocentric schooling, Participants L and Y were in the position to speak in greater detail about the

specifics of the TDSB pilot school. The main concern expressed by both participants was that the original vision for an Afrocentric school was being compromised by those in charge of the project:

> It's very problematic already because we, as an African community have tried so hard to make it acceptable, that it has moved so far radically from what an afrocentric school philosophically should be. And what I mean by that is this. For example, to say that anybody can teach at this school, doesn't matter what race or cultural group they come from, it's open to everybody…I think that's problematic. Because the essence of an Afrocentric school is that you're teaching African history, African knowledge, African philosophy, African ways of being and living and how do you teach something that you aren't? That you don't even know? (Participant Y, 2008).

Participants L and Y both worried that this school would be created simply as a "token gesture" without the proper funding, resources and commitment to a truly Africentric program.

3. f) A Step Backwards (away from integration)

The explicit concern that the TDSB Africentric school reflected a "step backwards" to the days of segregation was voiced by Participants Js, Mk, and A. Participant Js stated:

> When I heard about [Africentric] schools on the news, my instinctive reaction was negative because, I mean it just seemed like a step backwards in terms of segregation. I'm all for educating not just the Black community, but the greater community in Toronto on Black/Africentric studies, but the idea of having a whole school separate-it seems a little counterintuitive to the way, what society should be heading towards. Like I was thinking, wouldn't it make more sense to have an after school program, or to have a course, or a term within the school, but not a whole school separate? That to me seems a slippery slope towards segregation-in the negative sense. (Participant Js, 2008).

Participant Mk shared a similar opinion:

> It's not a good thing. Being Black is hard enough. So if we're trying to survive on our own here, by building our own schools or whatever, I think it's only going to make it harder. To me, I don't know if it's too early to say, but it looks like we're going backwards. People are going to view us different again; we're not learning how to deal with the past; we are creating the past again. (Participant Mk, 2008).

Participant Mk further stated that Canada should serve as an example to other countries that still have narrow views about integrating different religions, ethnicities and cultures in one school. He also commented on the precedent that this will set:

> If it works, then perhaps the East Indians will want the same thing. And the Orientals, and everyone…so what do we have then? If this works, over time, are we still going back to square one? (Participant Mk, 2008)

Participant A believed public schools "forced" students from all walks of life together, but that the Africentric school would make it easier for those who did not want an "integrated" school to say "go to your own schools". Participant A thought this Africentric school would create problems rather than fix any because "now we are segregated" (Participant A, 2008). Finally, all participants felt that even though the school is expected to be open to students from all ethno-racial backgrounds, in reality the school would be at least 95% Black.

4. Discussion of Racism

Inevitably, every conversation included a discussion of Racism, both in the context of schools and in the wider society. Participants all acknowledged that the pilot Africentric school faced a huge challenge: the factors contributing to high drop out rates of Black youth went beyond racism in the educational system. How then could one Africentric school possibly attempt to address them all? As Participant Mt stated:

> What is happening here is that we are coming up with a solution for a problem that is very complex. There are many things. Kids experience racism outside of schools- in the playgrounds etc. Is this a comprehensive solution to these problems? (Participant Mt, 2008).

Participants Mk and Jn spoke about the pervasiveness of racism in society and wondered how Africentric schools would combat that. Participant Jn spoke extensively about her children's experiences with racism in school. One of children was told her skin looks like pooh, while another was told that all Black people do is carry buckets of dirty water on

their head. Participant L relayed how one child came to him and said he did not want to be Black: he wanted to be Spider-man and his friends told him a Black person could not be Spider-man. In the face of such strong negative stereotypes and images from the media, participants questioned what one school could really do. Participant Jn spoke further about how she went into her child's school to do some anti-racism training herself, but the racist comments persisted. She concluded that the parents were responsible and that racism was a hard thing to "erase":

> People are racist. Don't kid yourself that they're not. They are. And because it's not happening to them they always think its not a big deal. It's like 'What's your problem? Why are you so upset? I'm sorry, ok, ok, I'm sorry.' That's what they think. So if they still have that mentality in their minds it's going to be very hard to change them. It's going to be a generation, maybe another 50 years for people to not be just nice, to actually mean it and stop being racist and be good to people who are not of their race. (Participant Jn, 2008).

Participants Y and L emphasized that it was precisely because of the pervasiveness of racism, and the fact that the consequences of racism had not been addressed that we needed this school (and many more):

> I think a specifically Afrocentric school is so necessary because we see that as a people, we've never been given the space to be ourselves, to define ourselves, to heal ourselves. (Particpant Y, 2008).

> Let's recognize that we have a problem and let's deal with it instead of just expelling the students because they don't behave in class. Let's give them a fighting chance. Let's deal with self-confidence, self- awareness, self-esteem so that they can pull up their pants, literally, to get back into society so they can become meaningful contributing members. (Participant L, 2008).

Participants were asked to reflect on the impact of this school in the wider context of race relations in Canada. With regard to relations with the mainstream society, Participant Mq felt that an Africentric school would further racialize the Black youth who went there. Participants Mt and Js felt that in order to improve race relations, we (as a society) should be focusing on commonalities between Blacks and other ethno-racial groups:

> I think the objective should be to have everybody respect each other for who they are, and also to have people understand different cultures. Understanding and respect are key to tolerance. We should dedicate a proportional amount of time to our differences, but also allocate the same amount of time emphasizing what we have in common. (Participant Js, 2008).

Participant Js voiced her support for integrated schools. She herself had a diverse group of friends which she felt she would not have met if she had gone to a "Black-only" school. She spoke at length about how sharing her experiences with her friends and hearing their experiences enriched her life. Participant Js strongly felt that most youth who attend an Africentric school would not develop friendships outside of their (predominantly Black) school. Participant Mt brought up the concept of "white allies" arguing that we needed them to support Black people in their fight for racial equality. He worried that the dominant White group would perceive the creation of an Africentric school as an oppositional stance by Black Canadians.

All participants (except A) expressed that racism was part of the Black experience. Participants Mq and Js commented that their experiences with racism pushed them to succeed. Specifically, Participant Js spoke of how her guidance counselor in high school advised her against becoming a lawyer (because she was Black). Participant Js said that this experience made her want to become a lawyer even more:

> I'm actually glad that the person tried to discourage me because that made me want to do it even more. And I think that's what makes Black people, and I think that's what defines a lot of Black peoples' character. It's a trend that you see among Black people who are minorities in a community, or in any minority community- they have this underlying drive, and it comes from overcoming barriers. It's like, it can be scarring, but it's also a badge of honour. (Participant Js, 2008)

Participant Mq echoed this sentiment and felt that being in an Africentric school would not have pushed her to succeed as much:

> When I'm in the school with all Black people, I guess the desire to challenge myself and do better in comparison to the rest won't be there. Like when I was in university, I was usually the only one of two or three Black people there. And it was to me to say well, these kids are not going to do better than I am and then the challenge was

on me to do well! But if I am in a setting with all Black students, I don't know, for me I don't think that challenge would be there. (Participant MQ, 2008).

Participant A said that he did not like to think about Racism and how it affects

Black people:

> Racism exists for everybody. But when you acknowledge [racism], you actually agree with racism. If I don't agree, then the racism is just yours, as soon as I acknowledge it, then it comes to me, and it affects me. So I don't see racism. Anytime I see racism, I say that's their opinion. (Participant A, 2008).

All participants (except participant A) stated that if the school could improve

Black youth's self-esteem and create a positive sense of identity, this was a good thing:

> If they have self-esteem it will help [deal with the discrimination). And I think Black children may lack self –esteem because they are put down all the time. So if going to an Africentric school is going to give them self-esteem they will be able to survive when they go on to college or university. A lot of it is self-esteem. And lack of belonging. Feeling like I don't belong here. So if they have self-esteem they'll come to a Ryerson lecture hall and say you know what, I worked hard and I belong to Ryerson and I'm going to do my thing. And also if they have Black teachers encouraging them, and showing them we have been to college, maybe that will help- it will show them they are doing it, I can do it too. That all Black people aren't doing drugs. So if they see something different, it can change their minds…but self-esteem is important because it doesn't matter what they see, if they believe they can do it, even if they know its going to be hard, they will do it. (Participant Jn, 2008).

Participant A felt that Black male youth had high self-esteem and told me of a study he

read that argued there was no correlation between self-esteem and academic performance.

Participant Y spoke about her positive experiences as a child at an Afrocentric camp that

she would like to see replicated in this school:

> We'd talk about why it was important when we left camp to always align ourselves with things that would help us develop our community, whatever that was, that community was important and that in order to ensure that our community was strong, healthy and vibrant, we all had a role to play in the community, even as children or young people. (Participant Y, 2008).

The following comment by Participant Jn about her vision for an Africentric school came

towards the end of our conversation. Participant Jn argued for and against Africentric

schools throughout the interview and came to the conclusion that if an Africentric school

were to resemble the following description, it may have a positive impact on the students'

lives:

> I see that an Africentric school would be a place where children come and maybe
> talk about the issues that they're having, and the teachers will have to tell them that
> it's not always going to be a Black community your whole life. When you leave this
> place, everyone else is going to be different so you have to be prepared for it. So
> teach them the right way to deal with it just like I do with my children. When you go,
> just be nice, don't hit, don't be violent, be civil, but don't let them walk over you any
> more. So go meet with them, know they're going to be there, and expect this, expect
> that, and what can you do when certain things happens to you. If they prepare them
> that way, they're going to be fine. I see it as a place to come and learn, learn
> differently to get their diploma, but also to prepare them for the real world whereby
> they are a minority. But they're not going to fight the majority. They're just going to
> live with them, and understand them but also going to tell them 'by the way we are
> here too, we exist and we're important'. (Participant Jn, 2008).

Discussion

The following section discusses participants' responses with respect to the

literature and theories previously mentioned.

1. General knowledge about the TDSB Africentric pilot school initiative

What stood out with regard to participants' general knowledge about the TDSB

Africentric pilot school initiative was the lack of information about the details of the

school as well as confusion about the definition of what an Africentric school is. For

example, some participants were confused about whether it is for failing students or all

students. The key misunderstanding, and what I believe to be the source of so many

heated debates within the Black community and mainstream society in general, revolves

around the misrepresentation of an Africentric school as a school for Blacks versus its

depiction as an alternative model of learning. I attribute the misperception primarily to

the way in which the media reported the initiative and the failure of the TDSB to mount a

proper informational campaign educating people about what this school is really about.

Rather than focusing on the fact that this school was being piloted as an alternative way

of learning, open to everybody, the focus was on the fact that this school was geared

towards helping failing Black students do better academically; hence the use of the term "Black-focused school" instead of "Africentric" when this school first hit the media spot light.

The different focus and terminology created an entirely different meaning. Imagine if the media had compared this initiative to the Waldorf approach to education instead? Waldorf education is also an alternative educational model, based on the educational philosophy of the Austrian philosopher/educator Rudolf Steiner. Waldorf education emphasizes imagination and a strong connection to humanity and the environment (Toronto Waldorf School, Home page, 2008). These principles are very similar to those espoused by Africentric education. Yet, the Waldorf educational approach is heralded as an innovative, forward thinking approach to education while an Africentric alternative school is presented as a backward, insular approach to education. Whereas both the TDSB and the media could have presented the proposed school in a favourable light, as simply another way of teaching, the focus was instead on the fact that it was the Black community advocating for this school, turning it into an issue of race.

The failure by the media to provide contextual, thoughtful analysis on the issue rather than simply "reporting the facts" in a one sided manner illustrates what Henry et al. view as:

> the power of the media to produce and transmit the message that people of colour, especially Blacks, create social problems and jeopardize the harmony and unity of Canadian society. (Henry et al., 1995, p. 231).

Based on studies of the media, Henry et al. (1995) argue that the media present biased, racist and stereotyped depictions of people of colour. In particular, the authors argue that one of the most pervasive themes in the news media is the portrayal of racial minorities and Blacks as "creating problems" or "having problems" "that require a disproportionate

amount of political attention or public resources to solve" (Henry et al., 1995, p. 235).

Such is the case with the media coverage of Africentric schools which focuses on

shouting matches between Black individuals at public forums, and the fact that "tax-

payers dollars" are going towards supporting a race-based, Black school (CityNews

Blogs, 2008; Alcoba, 2008).

In his chapter titled "Media Turkey Shoot" Cecil Foster (1996) analyzes the

depiction of Blacks in mainstream Canadian media. Foster relays a story about the failure

of the Canadian mainstream media to document the Million Man March in the fall of

1995 both from a general perspective and from the perspective of Black Canadians: "This

episode…provided a striking example of how the mass media in Canada cover (or don't

cover) Black people and culture" (Foster, 1996, p.181). Foster's analysis of the media

coverage in 1995 can be applied to the media coverage of the Africentric school in 2008:

> [T]he news media needed only to inform Whites of what Blacks were doing. But this news was
> only important if it fitted in with the Whites' perception of their world; that is, only if the news
> alerted them to any threats to their way of life posed by Blacks who tend to show up in
> mainstream news mainly as dangerous stereotypes…Instead of building bridges among
> communities, the news media are often responsible for widening the gulf. (Foster, 1996, p.182).

Both Henry et al.'s and Foster's depiction of the media's representation of Black

Canadians serve to illustrate Bannerji's critique of multiculturalism as reinforcing the

status of racialized minorities as "Other": the issues facing the Black community are

presented as separate from those facing the dominant society, something to be viewed

with suspicion as a possible threat to the dominant values, dominant institutions, and to

national unity. Hence the limited, topical media coverage of the Africentric school as a

means to address the high drop out rate without an analytical exploration of the wider

contextual issues that have created the need and desire for this school.

2. Reasons in favour or against the TDSB pilot Africentric school

With regard to whether participants supported or opposed the Africentric school, two issues emerged. The first was whether racism in schools was the reason Black students did relatively worse academically. The second was, if racism was in fact the reason, was having a separate school the solution? Participants Mq and A strongly felt that issues other than racism were behind Black students' relatively poor academic performance- specifically, lack of parental and community involvement as well as issues of personal motivation were felt to be the problem. In his article, "Schooling As Community: Race, Schooling and the Education of African Youth" (2008), George Dei argues that while no one can discount the important role of parents and communities in schools, one cannot "slip into pathologizing or blaming…families and communities for larger systemic problems" (Dei, 2008, p. 350). Of course issues such as personal motivation factor into whether a student does well, regardless of race. But when one racial group consistently underperforms, we have to look beyond issues such as "lack of personal motivation."[6] As Dei argues, "the issue of race and the stigmatization of students arising from their differential treatment by race…cannot be underestimated" (Dei, 2008, p. 350).

The tendency to minimize the existence and consequences of racism towards Blacks is what Henry et al. view as one manifestation of "democratic racism": "an ideology that permits and sustains the ability to justify the maintaining of two apparently conflicting values" (Henry et al., 1995, p.326). Participant Y referred to this concept

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[6] Studies associating intelligence with biological race factors have been discredited (Satzewich, 1998), forcing those reluctant to admit racism exists to otherwise account for the consistent poor academic outcomes.

when she spoke about the fact that the Black experience has not been properly

acknowledged:

> We as a people have never been given the time or the space or the acknowledgment from this society, as a slave owning and oppressive colonial society, capitalist driven, that we have endured one of the most brutal life experiences of any group of people on this planet. So as a result we've never had time to heal. It's never been acknowledged that we need to heal, that we've been traumatized over several generations; and that in and of itself has created so many daily challenges for us as a people. (Participant Y, 2008).

The connection between the acknowledgment for past wrongdoings by society and the

process of healing for the "victimized" group is something that is also mentioned in the

report *Towards a New Beginning* (1992) as a necessary step towards resolving the issues

within the Toronto Black community:

> The wider society might prefer to doubt the validity of these perceptions [of discrimination by Black Canadians]…Nevertheless, the perception and realities of unfair treatment persist in all areas of Black society…The inescapable conclusion is this: unless these perception and realities are addressed in some meaningful way, unless African Canadians can be made to feel that they play a vital role in today's society and are not outcasts as a result of the colour of their skin…Metropolitan Toronto [and indeed, Canada] may find itself headed for major social unrest.
> The first step to healing and rehabilitation is acknowledgment.
> To this end the Working Group's first Action Step is that of a joint declaration to be delivered in the political meeting places of all four levels of government (*Towards a New Beginning*, 1992, p. 136).

To date, no such declaration has been issued. The continued resistance towards

acknowledging the past and current implications of racism result in "collective denial,

defensiveness, and a determination to maintain the status quo" (Henry et. al, 1995, p.308)

on the part of the dominant group. It is this view that anti-racists seeks to dismantle in

their quest to eradicate racism.

The second issue with regard to whether participants supported or opposed the

Africentric school was, if racism *is* a factor contributing to the poor academic outcomes

of Black students, is a separate school the best way to resolve this problem? All

participants except Y and L seemed to think this was not the best way to do so. They

were most concerned about how this school might make race relations worse and further marginalize Black youth and Blacks in general. It is these concerns that the remainder of this section will address.

3. Concerns, Fears and Reservations about an Africentric school

Participants' concerns, fears, and reservations about the proposed Africentric school were very revealing with regard to their perceptions of race relations and their inclusion into society. Two concerns stood out in particular. In the first case, I noticed that the majority of the participants spoke about the increased attention and scrutiny the school and the children attending this school would be under. While the increased pressure to perform under such circumstances can be nerve-racking, this was not the participants' main concern. The concern was that the performance of this one pilot school would somehow translate into judgments about the intellectual capacities of the entire Black community. Thus, participants feared that if this school "failed", all the racist stereotypes and assumptions about Black people's intellectual inferiority would be confirmed, "setting us back" to the days when such stereotypes went unchallenged.

Again, I use the Waldorf school model as a comparative example: if this model were to not be considered a success or if a child attending the school was to not do well academically, would people assume that all Austrians, or all White people for that matter, are intellectually inferior? The answer is an obvious "No." So why should an Africentric experimental model be held to such ridiculous standards? Perhaps that is because the Black community is homogenized to such an extent that whatever one unique individual does is considered representative of the whole entire community. Thus, as Participant Jn said (with reference to her Black daughters):

> They are different and they're always going to be different. And they have to work

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extra hard to even seem normal in the eyes of other people- meaning the mainstream. As my (older) daughter says (to my younger daughters), 'You're not like them. You have to make sure you're doing the right thing all the time because you're so extremely visible.' Which is true. (Participant Jn, 2008).

The second concern was that this school would be "a step backward" away from integration, either towards segregation, or towards some form of separatism. In the first instance, all participants felt that this school would in reality be predominantly Black. The majority of the participants (except Participants L and Y) spoke to some extent about the fact that this seemed to go against Canada's goals of integration and multiculturalism. In addition, Participants Jn, Mk and Mt all said that they would not send their child to this school because a) they did not want their child to go to a school that did not reflect the demographic reality of Canada (Blacks as a minority) and b) they saw a benefit in sending their child to an integrated/mixed-race school, ie., a multicultural environment. In the second instance, Participant Js and Mk both worried that an Africentric school would preach a pro-Black mentality, causing Black students in turn to feel racially superiour. Participant Mt also spoke about this, only with reference to how he thought other racial groups would perceive the school:

I've heard people, friends of mine, talk about Black people together. And a fear that this might be a source of militancy. Blacks who are already killing each other, what if they get together and are educated? What if it leads to militancy. This is what I've heard from some honest white people. (Participant Mt, 2008).

In both instances, participants expressed an aversion towards segregation/separatism, preferring integrated/mixed race schools instead. This would seem to contradict Bissoondath's argument that multiculturalism promotes ethnic-segregation (Bissoondath, 1994). On the face of it, the desire for an Africentric school by Black advocates seems to confirm Bissoondath's argument: Blacks want their own school. How much more segregated can you get? However, if we take the participants from this study to be a reflective sample, the majority of Blacks do not support this initiative

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exactly *because* they fear it is a form of segregation, or that the dominant group will view it as a form of separatism. If, as Bissoondath argues, our multicultural policies encourage ethnic groups to stick to their own, then there would be less resistance to this school from the Black community. This is not the case.

Instead, what becomes apparent is that the majority of Black Canadians are resisting this school for fear that it will further marginalize them and exclude them from equal participation within mainstream society. This apprehension is reflected in two dimensions. The first is the concern that this school will disadvantage the students. This is illustrated by Participant Jn's comment that she wants her child to learn what other children are learning; or in other words, she does not want her child to *not* learn what other children are learning. The second dimension is the concern that by opening this school, White students in mainstream schools will not learn about Black history or about Black accomplishments thus leading to increased ignorance, intolerance and racism among white students:

> I think there is a need for a push to educate other kids because those are the perpetrators. I mean why should the "victims" do the work? Why can't the perpetrators be educated so they don't inflict pain on other people? (Participant Mt, 2008).

All participants (except L and Y) preferred to advocate for real changes in the mainstream schools rather than have a separate Africentric school. Participants Mk and Js spoke of their diverse group of friends that they met through school and how having this diversity of experience enriched their lives. In particular, Participant Js spoke of a negative experience in high school where her Black friends tried to separate her from her multicultural group of friends:

> On the one hand, I liked being with only the Black girls…but on the other hand, I felt like I was missing the mainstream, and the idea of going through the rest of grade 10, 11 only in this bubble really scared me. I eventually pulled away and I went back to

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my "United Colours of Benetton" which was nice. (Participant Js, 2008).

Participants Mt, Js and Mk spoke of the importance of focusing on what we all have in common if we are to create a tolerant society. Furthermore, Participants Mt and Js both commented on the usefulness and the need to have "white allies" who can empathize with the discrimination experienced by Blacks and thus help fight against this discrimination.

Overall, participants seemed to be advocating in favour of the dominant narrative of multiculturalism and multicultural education policies. This lends support to Kymlicka's argument that Canadians are supportive of multiculturalism, as long as certain limits are acknowledged; one limit being the acceptance of common institutions such as public, racially-mixed schools. Thus, participants had a strong aversion towards the idea of separating children based on race, because they felt this went against Canada's multicultural principles. Instead, most subscribed to the opinion that grouping children from different racial backgrounds together will lead to increased tolerance and decreased racism. However, is this really the case? Studies show that "mixed classrooms" do not necessarily increase tolerance (Cooper & Slavin, 2001). Participant Jn's children's repeated exposure to racist comments from their white classmates demonstrates that simply putting children together in a classroom does not lead to tolerance. This experience is exactly what critics of multiculturalism are referring to when they argue that multicultural policies are unable to address issues of racism, discrimination and inequity towards racial minorities.

4. Discussion of Racism

Sadly, participants' comments about their experiences with racism only confirmed what studies and scholars have argued: that racism in Canada towards Blacks is alive and well and continues to have destructive effects on Black people's socio-economic

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opportunities as well as their psyches. Participant L's story of the three children who came to him and told him they did not want to be Black illustrates the extent to which racism is ingrained in the minds of people and perpetuated by the media and other institutions. In the face of such deeply entrenched structures of racism, participants questioned the impact of this Africentric school: How could one school possibly counter the pervasive and damaging effects of racism? Yet it is precisely *because* racism is so pervasive and damaging in our society that advocates are demanding this school. As Participant L stated, there is a lot of risk involved in this school, but to do nothing is worse: "We can't afford for our kids to be failing at this rate" (Participant L, 2008).

The desire for this school can thus be interpreted as a reaction to the failure of multiculturalism to address the issues of discrimination and racism faced by Blacks. But is it an inclination towards separatism? Despite his view that multiculturalism encourages integration, Kymlicka writes that:

> [W]here immigrants are subject to severe prejudice and legal discrimination- and hence where full equality within the mainstream society is unachievable- it is possible that some may come to question the goal of integration" (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 33).

Comments by Participant Y about the value of this school as a means for self-determination of Black people and her resistance to the idea that educators from all racial backgrounds can teach at the school could be interpreted as resistance towards integration. Yet Participant Y does not want Blacks to go off on their own and create their separate communities. She, along with the rest of the participants in the study, wants Blacks to claim their rightful place alongside the dominant White group in society. Participants in this study seek the full integration of Blacks into Canadian society and their ability to participate without any barriers in all dimensions of society. While the majority sought to work together with the dominant group to achieve this, Participant Y, and to a certain

extent Participant L, felt that the dominant society's efforts were not enough, and Black Canadians had to take their own measures to achieve their rightful status.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This exploratory research study sought to examine the different opinions within the Toronto Black community towards the opening of a public Africentric school. Through interviews with eight Black Canadians, the study sought to answer the following questions: Do Black Canadians believe an Africentric school is the solution to address the high drop out rates of Black students? What are the hopes, fears and reservations held by Black individuals towards this school? What do individuals within the Black community believe will be the social impact of this school? Will it help or hinder the marginalized position of Black youth and their integration in the mainstream? It is important to recognize that this study was very limited in scope and the number of participants included is too small to be a statistically representative sample. Nonetheless, some general conclusions can be drawn.

Based on participants' responses, we can speculate that the majority of Black Canadians do not believe that creating a separate Africentric school is the appropriate response to address the high drop out rates of Black students. All participants recognized that issues other than racism factor into the high drop out rate of Black students, and the majority felt that this school was only one part of a solution to a more complex problem. The chief concern expressed by the majority of participants was the possibility that this school could fail: while Participants Y and L were concerned about how poor implementation of this model would affect the vision, and hence the ultimate goal of the

school, the rest of the participants feared that "failure" of this school would solidify in the minds of the dominant society the racist stereotype that Blacks are intellectually inferior.

With regard to whether this school will help or hinder the marginalized position of Black youth and Blacks in general and their integration into the mainstream society, the response was mixed. Some viewed this school as a necessary step towards empowering Black youth, both as a means to provide them with a quality education, and as a way to heal the destructive effects of racism experienced in their daily lives. Others agreed that addressing the damaging effects of racism on Black youth's self-esteem and identity was a positive and beneficial step, but pointed out that Black youth would still have to face racism and discrimination in the "outside world" and this school might not prepare them for this reality. The general consensus, with the exception of Participants L and Y, however, was that this school was not a positive step towards healing race relations, and that this school would serve to further marginalize those who attend it. The concerns expressed by participants that this school would further racialize those attending it, place them under intense scrutiny and label them as "pro-Black radicals" reflected participants' apprehension towards being made "more visible". As Participant Jn commented in relation to her children: "They are already visible enough" (2008). This intense aversion towards being made more "visible" can be interpreted as an unwillingness to being further positioned as different and "Other."

Overall, the general consensus among participants was that Black Canadians experience racism, discrimination and marginalization within mainstream Canadian society. The major point of contention however was whether an Africentric school was the most appropriate method to address this marginalization. At issue was whether this

school would help or hinder the integration/social inclusion of Blacks into mainstream society in the long run. The outcome of this school will depend on how this school is implemented, as well as how this school is presented to the Black community and to mainstream society. Accordingly, I recommend the following actions:

➢ The media, the TDSB and those advocating for the Africentric school must present accurate information about the objectives and nature of this school, as well as provide contextual analysis about the reasons for this school.

➢ The TDSB should make the process open to community members and do aggressive outreach to involve Black parents and members of the Black community in the planning process.

➢ Finally, careful attention must be used when defining and setting out the variables by which "success" of the school will be measured. Measures of success can not be limited to quantitative numbers measuring a decline in drop out rates, but must also include qualitative measures that examine the psychological and social benefits of this school.

Appendix I

Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

1. Please state your age:

2. Please state your gender: Male/Female

3. Where you born in Canada?
    Yes_____ (if yes, please answer questions 4a-4c below then go to question 6)
    No _____ (if no, please answer the questions 5a-5c below then go to question 6)

4a. Where were your parents born?
4b. For how many generations has your family lived in Canada?
4c. Where did your family originally immigrate from?

5a. In what year did you immigrate to Canada?
5b. What country did you immigrate from?
5c. In what country were you born?

6. With regards to your "ethno-cultural" background, please describe how you choose to identify yourself
(eg. Black, Canadian, African-Canadian, etc):

7. Do you have any children?
    Yes_____ (if yes, please answer questions below)
    No_____

Please state how many and their age(s):

Where they born in Canada?
Yes_____
No _____

If no, how old were they when they immigrated to Canada?
If no, do they speak English?

Do they speak any other languages? If yes, please list:

If in school, does he/she have any problems in school?

If so, please tell us about them:
Language
Academic
Disciplinary
Has your child ever been suspended or expelled from school?

8. Do you support the Toronto District School Board Proposal to open an Afrocentric school?
Yes_____
No_____
If yes, will you send your child to this school?
Yes_____
No_____ (if no, please explain why)
               Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey

Appendix II

Interview Guide
Interviews were open-ended and focused on the following four key questions (with prompts):

To establish general knowledge about the proposed Africentric school
1. Have you heard about the recent decision by the Toronto District School Board to open an Africentric school?

   Prompts:
   - What have you heard about this school?
   - What is your understanding of what an Africentric school is?

To determine what the participants' arguments are, for and against
2. What are your fears, hopes and reservations about this school?

   Prompts:
   - Do you think an Africentric school will lead to improved academic performance and decreased drop out rates among Black youth?
   - Do you think Africentric schools will be able to develop a positive Black identity in a way that mainstream schools cannot?
   - What other problems, within the schools, might be a factor contributing to the underachievement of Black youth (eg. language)? Do you think Africentric schools can provide a solution to these problems?

To explore where Africentric schools fit in with Canada's multicultural policies
3. Where do Africentric schools fit in with Canada's multicultural policies?

   Prompts:
   - Do you think an Africentric school is a step forward or backwards towards a truly integrated society?
   - How would you describe a truly equal/integrated society?
   - What are the benefits of an integrated/mixed- race classroom?

To determine the impact of an Africentric school within the wider context of race relations in Canada
4. What do you think the social impact of this school will be?

   Prompts:
   - How do you think this school has been, or will be received by the mainstream society?
   - Will this school help or hinder the social integration of Black youth, and Black Canadians in general?
   - How will this school influence/affect the students attending it?

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