

**Afrocentric Education:
What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?**

by

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Abstract

The miseducation of Black students attending Toronto metropolitan secondary schools, as evinced by poor grades and high dropout rates among the highest in Canada, begs the question of whether responsibility for this phenomenon lies with a public school system informed by a Eurocentric ethos. Drawing on Afrocentric Theory, this critical qualitative study examines Black parents' perceptions of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education. Snowball sampling and ethnographic interviews, i.e., semi-structured interviews, were used to generate data. A total of 12 Black parents, three men and nine women, were interviewed over a 5-month period and data analyzed. It was found that while a majority of the respondents supported the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education, some were ambivalent and others viewed the school and the education it provides as divisive and unnecessary.

The research findings show that the majority of the participants were enamored with Afrocentricity, believing it to be a positive influence on Black lives. While they supported TAAS and AE, the minority, on the other hand, opposed the school and its educational model. The findings also revealed a Black community, divided between a majority seeking to preserve whatever remained of (their) African identity and a determined minority that viewed assimilation to be in the best interests of Black students.

It is recommended that the school adopt antiracist education; that it appoints a spokesperson to field public inquiries to counter adverse perceptions of the school and its programs; that it fosters an on-going dialogue between its supporters and critics; and, most importantly, that it takes steps aimed at rebuilding relations among the stakeholders, i.e., the school, Black parents, the Toronto District School Board and the community.

Lay Summary

The view that mainstream Canadian and multicultural education is superior vis-à-vis colonial education, and in particular far more inclusive in its orientation, has been challenged by Toronto's Black parents, community activists, and Afrocentric scholars, who blame the former, in part, for the underachievement of Black students. This study examined how these parents perceive the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education. It investigated, among other things, whether the latter could remedy the underperformance of Black students, as revealed in high dropout rates. In addition, it explored what role, if any, an African-centred education might play in addressing a crisis: the growing achievement gap in the public education system between White and Black students.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by Patrick Radebe. This study was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board on April 12, 2013. The ethics certificate is H13-00251.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Lay Summary.....	iii
Preface.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Acronyms.....	x
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Dedication.....	xiii
Epigraph.....	xiv
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. The Researcher’s Positionality and Dilemmas.....	1
1.2. Problem Statement.....	5
1.3. Statement of Purpose.....	9
1.4. Research Objectives.....	10
1.5. Significance of the Study.....	10
1.6. Organization of the Dissertation.....	11
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	14
2.1. The Historical and Contemporary Education of Blacks.....	14
2.2. Colonial and Eurocentric Education in the Context of Black Education.....	15
2.3. The School Curriculum as an Ideological Text.....	25
2.4. Black Canadian Education: A Historical Overview.....	31
2.5. Segregated Schools: Keeping Black Canadians “Uneducated”.....	33
2.6. The Separate School Act (1850) and Segregated Education.....	35
2.7. Multicultural Education: What Is It?.....	38
2.8. Multicultural Education in Practice: White Teachers and Black Students’ Alienation.....	41
2.9. Black Students and Streaming.....	47
2.10. The School Curriculum and Eurocentric Knowledge.....	50
2.11. Multicultural Curriculum: Whose History Passes for Knowledge? ...	52
2.12. Multicultural Education and Racist Representations.....	55
2.13. Black Students’ Underperformance: Looking Beyond the Public School System.....	58
2.14. Conclusion.....	60

Chapter 3. Afrocentric Theory: A Discursive Framework.....	62
3.1. A Working Definition of Afrocentric Theory	63
3.2. Du Bois, The “Concept of Race”: White Power and Separate Education	64
3.3. Du Bois, Separate Schools and Education: The History	68
3.4. Black Education: The Challenges	70
3.5. Marcus Garvey: The Relationship Between Continental and Diasporic African Black as One People.....	71
3.6. Kwame Nkrumah and Pan-Africanism	78
3.7. Afrocentric Theory: The Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights Period	83
3.8. Afrocentric Theory: The Criticisms	87
3.9. Afrocentric Education: What Does It Mean and Why Is It Necessary?	95
3.10. Afrocentricity and Afrocentric Education in the Context of Canadian Public Education	103
3.11. Criticism of Dei and Afrocentric Education in Canada	106
3.12. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: An Overview	109
3.13. The Afrocentric Curriculum: An Overview	111
3.14. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: Staff and Governance	112
3.15. Conclusion.....	113
Chapter 4. Research Methodology.....	115
4.1. Research Paradigm: An Overview	115
4.2. The Researcher’s Paradigm.....	116
4.3. Qualitative Methodologies: An Overview	120
4.4. Critical Ethnography: An Overview.....	122
4.5. Critical Ethnographic Research: Problematizing Power and Oppression	122
4.6. Research Methods	124
4.6.1. Data Collection	124
4.6.2. Participant Recruitment and Selection.....	125
4.7. In-Depth/Semi-Structured Interview	127
4.8. The Participants.....	130
4.8.1. Abena (Project Manager).....	130
4.8.2. Amma (Creative Artist–Educator).....	130
4.8.3. Ananse (Food Justice Manager).....	131
4.8.4. Goddess (Educator).....	132
4.8.5. Jennifer (Teacher–Curriculum Consultant)	133
4.8.6. Kombozi (Mortgage Broker)	133

4.8.7. Mary (Social Worker).....	134
4.8.8. Ouzy (Senior Manager–Banker).....	134
4.8.9. Rolonda (Social Services Worker).....	135
4.8.10. Shaka (Office Manager).....	136
4.8.11. Titina Silla (Lawyer–Student).....	136
4.8.12. Zindzi (Nurse).....	137
4.9. Researcher’s Assessment of Interviews and His Experience with Participants	138
4.10. Data Analysis and Interpretation.....	138
4.11. Research Trustworthiness, Validity and Reliability.....	140
4.12. The Emic/Etic Split	142
4.13. Researcher Reflexivity	144
4.14. Conclusion.....	145

Chapter 5. Afrocentric Education, Racism, Afrocentricity and Identity: The Contestations	147
5.1. Black Parents and Afrocentric Education	147
5.2. The Perennial Presence of Racism in the Educational System	147
5.3. Afrocentricity: Conceptual Interpretations.....	152
5.4. Afrocentric Education: A Contested Concept.....	154
5.5. The Toronto Alternative Afrocentric School as Viewed by Critics and Supporters	163
5.6. Identity Politics and African-Canadians.....	174
5.7. Race as a Social Construct	178

Chapter 6. Afrocentric School and Afrocentric Education: The Possibilities and Challenges	186
6.1. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School and the (Mis)Education of Black Students	186
6.2. Black Teachers: The Foundation of Afrocentric Education.....	196
6.3. Black Parents as Educators.....	203
6.4. Afrocentric Education: Instilling the Community’s Spirit in the African Child.....	206
6.5. Inclusive Curriculum: Making Education Relevant to the African Child.....	209
6.6. Afrocentric Education: The Optimisms and Possibilities	212
6.7. Afrocentric School and Afrocentric Education: The Challenges.....	215
6.8. TDSB Authority Over TAAS.....	215
6.9. Teacher Training, Professional Development and Budget Constraints	217
6.10. TAAS and AE Through the Lens of the Mainstream Media	220
6.11. The Black Community’s Negative Perception of TAAS and AE.....	224
6.12. Black Parents’ Cavalier Attitude Towards Education.....	227

Chapter 7. Conclusion: Implications and Recommendations for the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric Education.....	234
7.1. Overview/Findings	235
7.2. Conclusion.....	236
7.2.1. Research Implications.....	239
7.2.2. Research Limitations	243
7.3. Recommendations	243
7.3.1. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: The Need for Greater Transparency	244
7.3.2. Tension Between TAAS and Black Parents: Healing Old Wounds.....	245
7.3.3. Bridging TDSB-Black Parent Relationship Using Dialogue and Complementarity	246
References.....	249
Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Individual Interview	267
Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Focus Group	268
Appendix C. Advertisement to Recruit Research Participants	269
Appendix D. Initial Contact Letter	270
Appendix E. Subject Consent Form.....	271

List of Tables

Table 4.1. Profiles of Participants	129
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List of Acronyms

AE	Afrocentric Education
AT	Afrocentric Theory
BHM	Black History Month
BREB	Behavioural Research and Ethics Board
ME	Multicultural Education
RCOL	Royal Commission on Learning
TAAS	Toronto Africentric Alternative School
WCC	Winston Churchill Collegiate

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Lastly, I wish to thank my mother and late grandmother, women-philosophers who taught me one of life's great lessons: that humility, respect, hard work, and patience are the keys to success. It was they who cultivated within me both a spirit of humility, which in Western cultures is often mistaken for timidity, and an appreciation of the wisdom of elders. Their counsel has served me well.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this study to Toronto's Black students.

It is my profound hope that in times of trouble,
they will draw strength from an old African proverb:
“Those who drink from the fount of knowledge never cry thirst.”

The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. It was said that whereas other continents had shaped history and determined its course, Africa had stood still, held by inertia; that Africa was only propelled into history by European contact.

~ Kwame Nkrumah

Separate Negro school[s], where children are treated like human beings, trained by teachers of their own race, who know what it means to be Black in the year of salvation 1935, is infinitely better than making our boys and girls doormats to be spit on and trampled upon and lied to by ignorant social climbers, whose sole claim of superiority is ability to kick “niggers” when they are down.

~ W.E.B Du Bois

In a banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who considered themselves upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as process of inquiry. The students, alienated . . . accept their ignorance . . . but unlike the [Hegelian] slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.

~ Paulo Freire

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1. The Researcher's Positionality and Dilemmas

The underperformance of African-Canadian students in the Toronto public education system represents a major concern for Black parents, educators, social justice activists and community leaders. It also underscores both the failure of the Eurocentric and multicultural models of education to address the intellectual needs of Black students and lack of political will on the part of politicians and policymakers to solve one of the most persistent problems plaguing the public school system. Hailed as a corrective for Black academic underachievement, the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS) was officially opened in September 2009. The enthusiasm that greeted the new school was tempered, however, by an equal measure of cynicism. This study investigates how Black parents perceive TAAS and Afrocentric education (AE) 7 years after the school opened its doors.

According to Banks (1998), researchers are agents with “minds” and “hearts” (p. 4) of their own which they bring into research, a view that has been articulated in some detail by Reviere (2001). Conducting a study in a community of which I am a part and in which I have a vested interest makes it both a personal and political project. Thus, I readily confess to being no objective observer of the oppression that weighs down the Black community; I wear no “veil of neutrality” (Fine, 1994, p. 73), nor do I hide “behind the shield of scientific objectivity” (Reviere, 2001, p. 714) thereby assuming “a privileged non-position” (Pillow, 2003, p. 178) on TAAS and AE, both considered sensitive and divisive. As an Afrocentric scholar, I subscribe to the view that Blackness is a continuum that extends beyond the African continent to the (African) diaspora. It is also a transnational and Pan-African concept, made meaningful by past and present struggles. I believe, like Afrocentric scholars before me and those who may come after, that an African-oriented study such as this one can contribute to highlighting Black worldview(s) and to disrupting dominant discourses that

presume to speak for Africans without bothering to consult them. I am of the view that it is only through solidarity with the Trans-Atlantic African family that we, as a collective, can define who we are as a people and articulate our experience and our hopes and dreams, in ways that genuinely reflect the long struggle to throw off the yoke of White supremacy. I am a critical researcher and as Denzin (1994) asserts, conducting critical research requires the researcher to “reveal reflexively [the] structures of oppression as they operate in the worlds of [the] lived experience [of the oppressed]” (p. 509).

As a Canadian of African descent, I bring to this work a set of assumptions that informs my choice of research questions, of the research tradition and theoretical framework I employ, of the method for collecting and interpreting data, and of the data itself (Carspecken, 1996; Hawkins, 2010; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Reviere, 2001). One of these assumptions, indeed the principal one, is that ME, despite its modest contribution to facilitating inclusive education, of which the hallmark is equal representation of minorities in the curriculum, does not go far enough in educating Black children and hence is detrimental to their future prospects. This is borne out by the very real fear on the part of Black parents that their children might soon join the ranks of those labelled “dropouts” or “at-risk”—signifiers that underscore the struggles Black children undergo in the mainstream public education system. If it is to be relevant, ME must move beyond mere tokenism, as evinced by the symbolic infusion of Black history in the curriculum.

In addition to interrogating my personal assumptions, I grapple with what often seem to be intractable questions. How to conduct a study that is rigorous and fairly represents the data and thus avoid being viewed as a mouthpiece for disgruntled Black parents? How to pre-empt critics from taking the findings out of context and using them to indict both TAAS and AE? In critiquing TAAS and AE, might I be implicated in defending ME, an educational model held by critics to be dismissive of the Black Canadian contribution to Canada? Will my findings be perceived as inimical to the interests of Black students, their parents and the community at large?

Weis and Fine (2000) assert that when “looking for great stories, [researchers sometimes] walk into the field with constructions of the ‘other’ [in ways that] feed [into] the politics of representation [that creates] . . . [a] negative configuration” (pp. 48-49). Conducting a study on an issue the public considers divisive is fraught with risk (Weis & Fine, 2000); I am torn between criticizing a school whose goals and educational model I fully support and concealing “dirty laundry” (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 89), which, if revealed, would tarnish the school’s reputation, further undermining the confidence of stakeholders—parents, students, community activists and leaders, teachers and academics—who have fought so long and hard to bring the school to fruition.

My perception of public education has been shaped by my personal identity, my experience in a country whose dominant White majority dictates norms and values, my African culture, which teaches communalism and holds in reverence the injunction to be thy neighbour’s keeper, and by Toronto's Black neighbourhoods where the majority of marginalized Black students live and attend school.

My interest in how Black parents perceive TAAS and AE was born of my experience as a former student in the Toronto public school system. At the time I suspected that my classroom contributions, such as they were, were less than welcome. My homeroom teacher, for example, would occasionally reframe my questions in ways that altered their intent, making me feel unappreciated. Consequently, I stopped asking questions about subject content and instead began questioning the teacher’s motives. Apart from being left out of class activities, I and other racialized students formed the distinct impression that the teachers were condescending in their treatment of visible minority students. I can only assume this to be the reason some of my classmates left school to work at menial jobs. Not only did I come to view the school environment as a locus of oppression; the fear of inadvertently revealing to the school authorities my state of mind and thus incurring their wrath, led me to internalize my oppression and masking my displeasure with a smile. And despite the best efforts on my part and that of the other visible minority students to conceal our discomfort, the school authorities seemed to sense it and responded by relegating us to the status of very young children in need of babysitting; indeed, every day for the entire school day, we found

ourselves warehoused in classrooms where nothing more than the most rudimentary education was on offer. Later, as an educator, I was often besieged by Black parents with complaints about their children's academic performance and the failure on the part of schools to address their concerns and understand the difficulties they faced juggling work and child care while at the same time trying to oversee their children's schoolwork.

My experience with race and racism within the education system did not end with high school. As an undergraduate student, I often participated in class discussions that would degenerate into racist-flavoured indictments of Africa. I also recall a certain White professor who, much to the discomfort of his African students, would transform lectures in Sub-Saharan African history into a theatre of contempt for all things African. His views on the "dark continent" went beyond the merely uncomplimentary to signify African kings, e.g., Shaka, the great Zulu King, as personifications of evil and barbarity. To add insult to injury, he would encourage the class to consult my opinion should they harbour any doubt as to the veracity of his claims. Thus, I was pressed into the role of African expert and assigned to corroborate his racially-charged views on Africa. Powerless, I endured the weekly 3-hour class, in the company of two other African students, one of whom dropped the course when she could no longer bear the professor's determined assault on African dignity. These and like experiences, along with exposure to archival documentation relating to the history of Black settlement in the British Northwest, i.e., present-day British Columbia, stirred my interest in TAAS and AE and the educational narratives it purports to offer Black students.

More recently, I had the opportunity to read an essay written by the son of a friend, then a Grade 11 student, focusing on how rap and hip-hop music were impacting Black students. My first response was one of shock and alarm at the liberal use of expletives and misogynistic language. My disappointment, however, was neither with the boy nor the parents, whom, I assumed, viewed the school as an institution dedicated to educating their son to the best of its ability; rather, it was with the teacher, a certified professional—or so one would assume—who had assigned the paper an "A" in complete disregard for decorum as well as the rules of grammar. Dismayed, I helped the boy rewrite the paper, which he then resubmitted. In the margins of the text the teacher commented that this second effort marked

a major improvement over the first, which struck me as ironic given that the earlier version had received an “A”.

The intent in narrating this story is not to indict all teachers, but to highlight the ethical concerns raised by this teacher’s professional standards, or lack thereof—concerns that are presumably shared by the parents of marginalized Black students. Would the same grade have been assigned were the author White or his family middle-class, and thus sufficiently well-educated and motivated to challenge so undeserved a grade? Likely not. In this instance it is safe to assume, or so I believe, that race and class mediate academic experience. I further believe that this holds true for the Toronto public school system as a whole. What my friend’s son was subjected to during the course of 11 years in that system is what Shujaa (1994) describes as “too much schooling [with] too little education”—a not uncommon fate for the mass of Black students attending schools in the Toronto metropolitan area, students whose academic performance is either overrated or underrated by teachers with little regard for the immediate consequences of such pedagogic practices and little or no vested interest in securing their futures.

1.2. Problem Statement

The official opening of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS) on September 8, 2009 was not without controversy. For critics of TAAS, it represents nothing less than a racist project orchestrated by non-mainstream Black¹ scholars, parents, community leaders, and activists. Thus, news that the Toronto District School Board had approved the school was greeted with a storm of protest that rocked the public education system to its core. Indeed, TAAS, along with the principles of Afrocentric Education (AE)

¹ Like Annette Henry, I use the term “[Black] to signify people of African descent living in Canada, regardless of country of birth. In this way, I am emphasizing a common place of origin as well as a common experience and struggle under Anglo/European domination and exploitation” (Henry, 1993, p. 219). I use the term interchangeably with African-Canadian, Africa-American and African.

upon which it was predicated, “became a flashpoint for conflicting discourses on public education in [Ontario]” (Levine-Rasky, 2014, p. 202).

For TAAS proponents, the public school system had failed Black students as evinced by declining levels of academic performance, high suspension and dropout rates (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997), and violence involving Black male students disproportionately both as perpetrators and victims (Levine-Rasky, 2012). No longer willing to accept the endemic underperformance of Black students in the public school system, Black parents, scholars, and community leaders called for an alternative educational model, one that would focus on African representations and achievements.

Black parental disillusionment with the public education system was confirmed in a report issued by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in which it was noted that of those “students born in English-speaking Islands in the Caribbean who entered Grade 9 in 2000, 40 per cent had dropped out by 2005” (Brown, 2006, para. 17). The report further stated that this high dropout rate “applie[d] more to male second generation Caribbean students than their female peers” (James, 2011, p. 193). These findings corroborate the 1994 Royal Commission on Learning in Ontario (RCOL) report that used the term “education in crisis” to describe the state of the Toronto public school system (RCOL as cited in James, 2011, p. 199).

According to Brown and Sinay (2008), there exist significant disparities in the academic performance of Black students. Those born in Africa “achiev[ed] at or above the provincial standard in all four subjects [Reading, Writing, Mathematics and Science,” (p. 16) thereby outperforming their Caribbean counterparts. The authors attribute this phenomenon to the “parent's place of birth, parental presence at home, parent's education and family socio-economic status” (p. 17). It may be inferred then that the success or failure of Black students in the public education system is determined by geographical and environmental variables and by structural and class deficits.

Dei (2008) argues that TAAS and AE offer an optimum approach to locating an African heritage at the centre of the educational experience, thus enabling students to learn about themselves and their heritage in juxtaposition to other knowledge systems. Such an approach, Dei contends, will help students to cultivate confidence and interrogate hegemonic narratives that misrepresent Africa and its history and the role played by its various peoples in contributing to world civilization. Dei (2008) contends that TAAS can provide Black students with a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn, wherein their contributions are judged according to non-Western educational norms by teachers who understand their culture and have a vested interest in their academic success. Interacting daily with peers and appropriate role models and learning about their African heritage will, according to this perspective, instill in Black students a sense of self-worth.

According to those opposed to the mainstream public education system, multicultural education (ME) does not promote plurality of thought as its proponents claim. For the most part, ME content is grounded in an ideology² that privileges White supremacy and either downplays or disparages the contributions to nation building made by minority groups (Boykin, 1994; 1986; Gordon, 1993; Harper, 1997). In their view, moreover, the public school system policy of ‘see-no-evil, speak-no-evil’ with respect to racism, which is manifested in school curricula, hinders the pursuit by Black students of an inclusive education, vitiates their interest in learning and destroys their dreams of a better future. With ‘White’ Canadian history presented as historical truth and Black Canadian contributions to nation building discounted (Dei et al., 1997; Kong, 1996), it is hardly surprising that the confidence of Black students should remain at a low ebb, notwithstanding the counterargument advanced by its proponents that ME promotes “greater equity in education,” challenges “ethnocentric bias” in the curriculum, fosters intercultural dialogue among students (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996, p. 272) and is open to innovation and reform.

² Here “ideology” is employed in much the same way as Seliger, who asserts that “Sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social actions, and specifically political action, irrespective of whether such action aims to preserve, amend, uproot or rebuild a given social order” (Seliger, 1976, p. 11 cited in Gerring, 1997, p. 11).

For TAAS and AE proponents, the new school and its educational model offer Black parents the opportunity to enroll their children in a learning institution they view as capable of addressing the educational needs of Black students and instructing them using strategies and perspectives deemed crucial to reversing the "tide of underachievement, overrepresentation in special education and vocational programs, and the disproportionate number of suspensions and exclusions of Black students from the city's school" (Johnson, 2013, p. 3).

Despite the enthusiasm that greeted the opening of TAAS from some quarters, there has been no shortage of resistance and criticism. According to some of the critics, TAAS and AE limit the educational and employment prospects of Black students, especially in a knowledge-based economy where certain skill sets are essential (Lund, 1998). Thus, for these critics, admitting predominantly Black students, vis-à-vis those of all races and backgrounds, fosters the very inequality Afrocentric scholars purport to oppose. The optimum solution, the critics argue, lies in reforming the public school system, in particular its curricula and pedagogy, with a view to reflecting multicultural diversity, encouraging inter-racial tolerance and understanding among students, and fostering an appreciation of the contributions Canadians of every colour, creed and ethnicity—Black, White, Asian, First Nations—have made to Canadian society.

For the critics, to institutionalize AE would be to resurrect on Canadian soil the kind of segregated school system once commonplace in the United States, one wherein race was the chief criterion for admission. This kind of educational model would place Black students at a disadvantage in terms of acquiring cross-cultural knowledge and contesting racial and cultural stereotypes (James, 2011). Moreover, this kind of 'race-based' education, the critics contend, would do little to challenge the historical dominance of Eurocentrism in the public school system. TAAS and AE, they argue, would merely replace one hegemonic system with another (Lund, 1998).

Lund, a multicultural scholar, argues that TAAS represents a setback for race relations in Canada (Lund, 1998). Precisely whose history and knowledge, he asks, would

have primacy in an Afrocentric curriculum given the cultural divisions within Black Canadian communities. According to Lund, creating a 'race-based' education system will only encourage racial and cultural binaries, thereby hampering further collaborative efforts to rid Toronto public schools of the systemic barriers that privilege White students over visible minorities. Reforming public education, Lund argues, can be achieved by building on the modest successes achieved by the public school system and encouraging pluralism, rather than by establishing separate schools to cater exclusively to the academic and cultural needs of Black students (Lund, 1998). More recently, however, his enthusiasm for ME has waned; indeed, his current position is indistinguishable from that of Afrocentric scholars (Lund, 2008, 2009):

Th[e] denial of racism and reluctance to name specific instances of racism often creates barriers to addressing problems as they arise in schools and communities. . . . The pervasive power of White privilege in reinforcing the denial of a racist society and its horrific past also inhibits attempts to bring racism to the fore in educational research. (Lund, 2009, p. 39)

1.3. Statement of Purpose

This study examines Black parents' perceptions of AE generally and TAAS in particular. In doing so it aims to shed light on how parents perceive the role of race, culture and history in education, particularly with respect to academic performance. In this study Black parents were asked to share their perceptions of what AE and TAAS mean in terms of educating Black students, preparing them for the opportunities and challenges awaiting them upon graduating and addressing the achievement gap between them and their White peers. This study foregrounds the views of Black parents, thus positioning them as knowing "subjects" rather than objects of research (Asante, 1993, p. 3). To address these questions, I employed Afrocentric theory and qualitative methodology (including interviews and document analysis that followed a critical ethnographic approach).

1.4. Research Objectives

Four research objectives were identified: (i) develop an understanding of how Black parents perceive AE and TAAS; (ii) elicit parents' views on how AE has impacted the education of Black students; (iii) identify the benefits Black parents believe their children are deriving from TAAS and AE that would not, or could not, be provided by the mainstream public school system; and (iv) document the successes achieved by students and the challenges posed them as a result of attending TAAS and exposure to AE

The following six questions were formulated with a view to determining how Black parents perceive TAAS and AE:

1. How do TAAS and AE help Black students understand themselves, their heritage, and their place in the world?
2. What does the term 'Afrocentric education' mean to Black parents?
3. Should race take centre stage in the education of Black children or should it play a complementary role in this respect?
4. How do Black parents feel about Black children attending a school that is predominantly Black and taking courses focusing mainly on Black people and Black culture?
5. How does Afrocentric education differ from mainstream public education?
6. What opportunities and challenges await TAAS students following graduation and how are they being prepared to meet them?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons: First, it provides an opportunity for Black parents to talk openly about TAAS and AE from their situated standpoints. Second, it raises awareness and enhances the public's understanding of TAAS and AE. Third, it extends the use of Afrocentric Theory in the field of research and delineates the operational mechanics of TAAS, i.e., the various ways and means in which AE is enacted. Fourth, it provides education policymakers with knowledge and insights as to how best to help marginalized students. Fifth, it supplements the body of existing knowledge pertaining to

TAAS and AE. Sixth, it stimulates demand for equity in education. And lastly, it serves as a launching pad for action aimed at reforming the public education system, particularly in those areas where Black Canadians have been marginalized.

1.6. Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 has provided my positionality, the background and context of the study as well as the research objectives, questions and outline of the dissertation. It introduced the two chief reasons underlying the creation of TAAS: frustration on the part of Black parents with the achievement gap that has long existed in the public education system and their determination to create an alternative that speaks to the Black experience, in part through the use of African-centred teaching materials to which Black students can relate. I also discussed the disparate arguments proffered by advocates and critics alike of TAAS and AE.

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review of works pertaining to colonial and Eurocentric education,³ informed by an Afrocentric and anti-colonial perspective. Regarding the pedagogical philosophy underlying colonial and Eurocentric education, I argue that neither was designed for Africans and as such has never addressed the intellectual and developmental needs of people of African descent. Rather, both models aimed at managing the intellectual development and human aspirations of Africans in a way that would perpetuate White domination and exploitation. In this chapter, I also contend that while multicultural education has contributed to reducing the impact of colonial education on Black students, there remain two concerns: the preponderance of White representations in the curriculum and the token acknowledgement given Black heritage and knowledge systems.

³ I use Eurocentric education to signify “an [educational system] and practice[s] of domination and exclusion based on the assumption that all relevance and value are centered in European culture and peoples and that all other cultures and peoples are at best marginalized and at worst irrelevant” (Karenga 1993 cited in Schreiber, 2000, p. 654).

Chapter 3 focuses on Afrocentricity, the theoretical framework for the study. Afrocentricity is presented here as a continuum of work by some of the leading scholars of Africa and the African diaspora, such as W.E.B Du Bois, who argued that education is crucial to resisting White oppression, and political leaders like Marcus Garvey and Kwame Nkrumah who not only galvanized Africans into fighting for their freedom, but also expounded ideas that would set in motion the social and political development of Pan-African peoples, chief among which was the notion that development could only come about through indigenous initiatives, aimed at building African-centred institutions capable of promoting non-colonial models of development. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School, its governance, curriculum and staff.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology; Afrocentric theory, my research paradigm. Using Afrocentric paradigm, I delineate the worldviews of people of African descent vis-à-vis Europeans in the diverse world of knowledge production, particularly research; a world where the voices and views of the dominant takes primacy and African worldviews, consciousness, and contribution to humanity stifled to preserve White supremacy. Employing an Afrocentric paradigm (Dillard, 2006; Mazama, 2001; Oyebade, 1990), I argue that the objective of research; thus, ameliorating the human and material conditions of Africans, is met when those who live the experience define and articulate their experience in a manner that reflects their struggle rather than defer the expression and interpretation of their experience to foreign scholars removed from the theatre of their struggle. Also examined are my axiology, the value systems I bring to the study, my critical interrogation of the dominant knowledge systems and principles of social justice in relation to Black oppression. Other topics discussed include methods for collecting analyzing and interpreting data, in addition to background information on the participants.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I provide the findings of this inquiry. In Chapter 5, Black parent's conception of Afrocentricity, Afrocentric schooling and education are analyzed as well as the sense of identity they derived from their educational experience within the public school systems in Toronto or elsewhere in Canada.

In Chapter 6, I analyze Black parent's engagement with TAAS specifically and Afrocentric education in general and their views on the benefits and challenges of Afrocentric education and specific issues, e.g., identity and education, and what Afrocentric education has to offer vis-à-vis the mainstream public school system. In subsequent sections, I examine how the Canadian public views the Afrocentric School as revealed in newspapers and magazines op-eds.

In Chapter 7, I provide a *precis* of the main research findings; Black parents' perceptions of TAAS and AE; their general views, some of which the study confirms, others it challenges. Also discussed here is how the findings expand our knowledge of TAAS and AE; the successes TAAS has enjoyed and the challenges it faces; and parental proposals to improve the school and the educational model. I also argue the case for additional studies. While my research findings do have limitations, I believe they provide a sound basis for making recommendations pertaining to ways and means for improving TAAS and AE and making education worthy of Black students as well as a worthy investment for Black parents and the Black community.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. The Historical and Contemporary Education of Blacks

In this chapter, I discuss the impact of colonial and Eurocentric education on people of African descent. It is my contention that the impact of colonial education⁴ on these peoples is both profound and far-reaching. While I define colonialism broadly as the conquest of newly-discovered territories and their inhabitants by force of arms and/or less coercive methods, notably colonial education, it was the latter that eroded their cultural identity and led them to internalize their oppression and inferiority vis-à-vis their colonial masters, a phenomenon clearly in evidence today.

In pre-confederation Canada, and in particular Upper Canada, the colonial education system promoted segregated schools, which in turn reproduced White supremacy. And while multicultural education has changed Canadian education radically, and especially over the course of the 20th century, it continues to typecast those of African descent as essentially inferior to their White counterparts, thus perpetuating their marginalization and subordination. In the Canadian context, Black student disinterest in education has been attributed to Black culture, manifested in part by apathy on the part of African-Canadian communities (Lille, 2008). For its part, the mainstream public school system has played, and continues to play a role, however modest, in fostering an environment that many Black students find unfriendly and antithetical to their intellectual and emotional development. It is against this backdrop that critics of multicultural education argue that the intellectual atrophy afflicting Blacks in general, and Black Canadians in particular, can be corrected, through educational initiatives such as TAAS and AE, aimed at, among other things, identifying the

⁴ An education system premised on the claims and “old [White] habits . . . that Africans did not have civilization prior to contact with [Europeans], that Africans never invented or created anything and that [civilization] is solely a White project (Asante, 1998, p. 41).

underlying cause(s) of Black student underachievement in the Toronto public education system. Black students can, as the literature review reveals, excel, provided they receive the kind of education that liberates their minds and empowers them as opposed to denigrating their humanity.

2.2. Colonial and Eurocentric Education in the Context of Black Education

In examining colonial and Eurocentric education and its impact on students of African descent, I draw on the work of Nkrumah (Nkrumah, 1962, 1964), who studied in his native Ghana, then a British colony, and subsequently in the United States before returning home to lead an anticolonial movement, which succeeded in securing Ghanaian independence in 1957.

In his analysis of colonial education, Nkrumah argues that the system is not designed to uplift the colonized from their marginalized and subordinated position, but rather to contain and channel their intellectual and psychological development for the benefit of the colonizers (Nkrumah, 1964). Colonial education, according to Nkrumah, aims at reducing even the most educated of Africans to mere appendages of White supremacy from which position they might serve as a conduit for White-European values, thus contributing to their internalization among the indigenous population. The power of colonial education, Nkrumah contends, lies in its ability to pose as the font of universal knowledge against which all other forms of knowledge are measured. Seduced by Western philosophies and systems of thought, African students give themselves up entirely to colonial education even if this means working against the true interests of their own people. “By reason of their lack of contact with their own roots, [Africans] bec[o]me prone to accept some theory of universalism . . . expressed in vague, [and] mellifluous terms” (Nkrumah, 1964, p. 3).

In general, African students who had completed a colonial education and then went on to become the continent’s postcolonial leaders set about purging their respective countries of their traditions and replacing them with those of Europe, a first step along what they

believed to be the road to modernity. This constitutes, I would argue, one of the chief factors underlying Africa's underdevelopment. And even though Nkrumah's analysis focuses mainly on colonial education, his conclusions regarding the impact of European-centred education on African students hold true for African-Canadian students enrolled in the Toronto public education system. Currently in Canada, some African-Canadian parents, who are themselves the product of a colonial education and who continue to believe in the superiority of European education and in the opportunities it confers, would rather bury the debate over TAAS and AE, fearing the latter would only deny their children the 'quality' education the mainstream public education system purports to provide. The appeal of European education for this marginalized group lies in the conviction that change will come with time, and until it does, the status quo should prevail. For some African parents who are critics of TAAS and AE, quality education should be measured not by its colonial, Eurocentric or multicultural orientation, but by whether it provides Black students with the functional literacy and numeracy, along with the marketable skills, required to exploit job opportunities (Ouzy, 27/09/2013).

As Nkrumah (1964) points out, colonial education promotes White pre-eminence through its epistemic power. The latter, Nkrumah argues, provides the colonizer free rein to deny African students a sense of agency. Put another way, it programs the African student to internalize a non-entity status, one with no past or future, and it does so largely unopposed by the colonized. Writes Nkrumah:

The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. It was said that whereas other continents had shaped history, and determined its course, African had stood still, held down by inertia; that Africa was only propelled into history by European contact. African history was therefore presented as an extension of European history. Hegel's authority was lent to this a-historical hypothesis concerning Africa, which he himself unhappily helped to promote. . . . In presenting the history of Africa as the history of the collapse of our traditional societies in the presence of the European advent, colonialism and imperialism employed their account of African history and anthropology as an instrument of their oppressive ideology. (p. 62)

As stated earlier, African students have been taught to believe that the destiny of Africans is fixed and under the aegis of Europeans. Despite their long presence in Canada, one that predates Confederation, Black Canadians are treated in mainstream textbooks as a mere appendage to Canadian history. Whether in the classroom or in public for a Black Canadian history is presented as a minor footnote to White Canadian history; Black Canadian success is often attributed to the generosity of European Canadians in opening the doors of the British Dominion to freed slaves, Black Loyalists, Haitian refugees and victims of both the genocide in Rwanda and mass rapes in the Congo.

According to Nkrumah (1964), for Africans to free themselves from an oppressive colonial and neo-colonial legacy, nothing short of a paradigm shift in education is required, something that will only be realized when Black people muster sufficient courage and determination to deny colonial education the self-arrogated power to define Africans and shape their history. Assuming ownership of African history, Nkrumah argues, will position Africans to tell it from an African perspective. Such an undertaking, Nkrumah theorizes, is essential if Africans are to chart their own trajectory free of any European influence:

[African] history needs to be written as the history of [African] societ[ies], not as a story of European adventurers. . . . [African] history [must reflect] . . . that society, and the European contact must find its place in this history only as an African experience, even if it is a crucial one. (p. 63)

The views of Nyerere, one of Africa's leading anticolonial figures, complement those of Nkrumah. Writes Nyerere (1968):

[In all societies, the primary goal of education is to] transmit from one generation to the next the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of . . . society, and to prepare the young for their future membership [in] . . . society and for their active participation in its maintenance and development. . . . Wherever education fails in any of these fields, then society falters in its progress, or there is social unrest as people find [out] that their education has prepared them for a future which is not open to them. (pp. 268-269)

In the context of African education and interpersonal relations, the word “wisdom” is inextricably related to folklore, which is of central importance in African life—thus the

perception of village elders as depositories of knowledge and transmitters of long-held traditions deemed essential to survival. The status that folklore enjoys signifies that Africans place a premium on ways of perceiving and ordering the world that are at variance with their Europe counterparts.

Though Nyerere (1968) emphasizes the importance of science and the humanities in African education and the continent's development, he also argues that that they should be applied in a way that is sensitive to the local context; they should also equip young Africans with the knowledge and skills required to solve problems at the community level. Both, moreover, must be integrated into, and conform to, a people-based educational system lest false hopes be created. Not surprisingly, Nyerere rejects claims that colonial education holds the key to Africa's development:

[Africans] learn by living and doing. In the homes and on the farms they [are] taught the skills of society, and the behaviour expected of its members. They learn the kind of grasses which were suitable for which purposes, the work which had to be done on the crops, or the care which had to be given to animals, by joining with their elders in this work. They learned the[ir] tribal history, and the tribe's relationship with other tribes and with the spirits, by listening to the stories of the elders. Through these means, and by the customs of sharing to which young people were taught to conform, the values of society were transmitted. Education was thus 'informal'; every adult was a teacher to a greater or lesser degree. But this lack of formality did not mean that there was no education, nor did it affect its importance to society. Indeed, it may have made the education more directly relevant to the society in which the child was growing up. (p. 268)

According to Nyerere (1968), African education must take into consideration the interests of the Black community of which the individual is a part. Like Nkrumah, he was of the opinion that colonial education "was not designed [for Africa's intellectual and developmental needs]" (pp. 269); rather, it was intended to promote White supremacy by inculcating in students European values, attitudes, assumptions and norms, thus reconstituting them as agents of the "colonial state" (p. 269). Thus, for example, while the system of colonial education established in Tanganyika, present day Tanzania, was, according to Nyerere, geared to provide Africans with basic literacy, often under the auspices

of various Christian churches, it also served to perpetuate British hegemony by colonizing the minds of students. In the context of intra-national politics, it played a significant role in pitting ethnic groups against one another by “encourag[ing] attitudes of inequality, intellectual arrogance and intense individualism among young people who [passed] through [Tanzania’s colonial] schools” (p. 275). Owing to colonial education, Nyerere argues, Tanzania’s educated elite followed in the footsteps of their colonial masters and mentors in reinforcing inferiority-superiority binaries. For these elites, colonial education became an instrument, not of liberation but of oppression. The new oppressors often displayed White attitudes to make themselves feel unique and distinguish themselves from the ‘uneducated.’ Indoctrinated in European values, they perceived indigenous value systems as primeval and thus an obstacle to building a modern nation state. For them, being White was more important than being African, a condition connoting all that was backward. Colonial education, from Nyerere’s (1968) point of view, was a premeditated project aimed at turning educated Africans into “efficient adjunct[s] of the governing power” (pp. 269-270). It was, however, a project doomed to fail. Writes Nyerere:

[After independence] so little education had been provided that in December 1961, [Tanzania] had few[er] people with the necessary educational qualifications even to man the administration of government as it was then, much less to undertake big economic and social development work which was essential. (p. 270)

The colonialist, Eurocentric, and White supremacist traditions of education have been critiqued and rejected not only by continental African (Black) intellectuals, but also by Latino South American and US neo-Marxist scholars. Freire (1970), whose work would become the foundation of a critical pedagogy, contends that the oppressed can win their freedom by adopting a revolutionary and indigenous model of education that interrogates, challenges and replaces colonial education whatever particular form it may assume.

In step with Nkrumah and Nyerere, Paulo Freire (1970) argues that colonial education, whatever the context, aims at enslaving the minds of indigenous populations. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that this form of education, would prove to be no

passing phenomenon, indeed, an almost imperceptible blip, in the grand sweep of African history; rather, it would leave a legacy of unintended consequences, leading some critics to describe it as an intellectual virus that has destroyed, or at least compromised, the intellectual independence of Africans (Freire, 1997). In his introduction to the 2000 edition of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Macedo argues that what was intended to enlighten African students, turned them into "schizophrenic[s], who though present in the classroom were not "visible" (Macedo as cited in Freire, 2000, p. 11). In "Examining the case for 'African-centred' schools in Ontario," Dei (1995) sums up the predicament of Black students in the Toronto public education system in a single laconic sentence: "There are [Black] students at school who appear to be there in body but not in spirit" (Dei, 1995, p. 192). The emphasis on rote learning rather than critical thinking, reading and writing and on Euro-Canadian rather than Black history has compelled these students, as a condition for remaining in school, to detach themselves emotionally from a curriculum that renders them insignificant, unimportant, and powerless.

According to Macedo, colonial education works to both pre-empt African initiatives and prevent the colonized from accessing alternative knowledge systems that are antithetical to all forms of oppression. To prolong its longevity and Africans' intellectual dependence on Europe, colonial education "fostered subordination through imposed assimilation policy" (Macedo as cited in Freire 2000, p. 12). It gave the oppressed false hope, a tactic, which for most part worked against efforts to fight the colonial system and to keep the oppressed within the colonial orbit.

Freire (2000) describes colonial education as a "banking system" (p. 72):

The "banking" concept of education, [is one] in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. . . . [The system] lack[s] creativity, transformation and knowledge (At best) [it is a] misguided system In the banking system of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others . . . [it] negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (p. 72)

From the quote, one gathers that colonial education not only promotes disaffection among students; it perpetuates inequality. Faced with the threat of punishment, colonized students accept dominant narratives; fearful of their teachers, they become disaffected with learning. Freire writes: “Banking education . . . minimize[s] [and] annul[s] . . . students’ creative power and stimulate[s] their credulity to serve the interest of the oppressor, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (p. 73). Assuming a humanitarian face, colonial education forestalls “any call for radical change that might “stimulate critical faculties” (Freire, 2000, p. 73). The master-servant relation, moreover, denies students a “problem-posing education while mythologiz[ing]” White superiority (Freire, 2000, p. 83)

Regarding the impact of colonial education on the African mind, Woodson (1933) notes that Blacks that have graduated from colonial school systems are ‘miseducated’ and thus lack the knowledge and skills required to remedy problems afflicting their communities. For Woodson, there exists but one corrective: an alternative education system that incorporates Black history and culture and treats them as essential to the intellectual development of Black students. The poverty, marginalization and subordination of Black people, Woodson posits, stems from a reluctance on their part to alter the status quo in light of the uncertainty regarding the consequences. The chief impact of a colonial education on Black people, Woodson notes, is that it internalizes a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Whites (Woodson, 1933).

Ratteray (1994) contends that colonial education universalizes classical European history and culture, while marginalizing its African counterparts. Moreover, under a colonial education system, learning to read and write European languages and learn European knowledge systems is part of a strategy designed to internalize in Black students an antipathy to African systems of thought and education (Ratteray, 1994). Colonial education, Ratteray claims, compels these students to adopt dominant worldviews that alienate them from their uneducated fellows (Ratteray, 1993). The educated-uneducated dichotomy weakens Black solidarity, impeding the struggle for equal recognition, equal rights and respect.

Whereas colonial education afforded privileged White students the opportunity to develop their self-esteem and learn about their history and heritage, it denied Black students the same opportunity. Normalizing and universalizing colonial education compelled Black students to accept White domination and privilege as part of the natural order of things (Murrell, 1993; Woodson, 1933), setting in motion a mode of behaviour that would manifest itself in their rejecting all things African and validating all things European, and most especially knowledge systems and values.

Like colonial education, the Eurocentric education model that replaced it would, advocates of Afrocentric education argue, prove to be no less oppressive and exclusionary while continuing to highlight the progressive character of the West, thus privileging White supremacy. According to Asante (1987; 2005), the Afrocentric educational model affords Black students the opportunity to learn and to understand to far greater effect (Asante, 1987; 2005). Making available knowledge to which Black students can relate, Asante argues, allows them to cultivate a sense of agency, the first step in taking control of their destiny. Through AE Black students can reclaim their voice, articulate their lived experience and worldview and feel validated (Asante, 2003; Dei, 2006). AE, Asante posits, builds in Black students confidence, allowing them to challenge racist representations of peoples of African descent (Asante, 1987; 2003; 2005)—historical and contemporary misrepresentations, whether overt or subtle, that persist in school curricula and that work to fuel Black student disaffection.

From an Afrocentric perspective, Black students in mainstream schools are missing out on a transformative educational experience because they have been acculturated to interpret Black reality through the “artificial beams” of Europe (Asante, 2003, p. 3). Eurocentric education, Asante contends, inhibits Black students’ appreciation for Black education. It confines Black heroes largely to the world of entertainment and sport with the occasional nod given the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., whose views, because they are temperate, qualify him for inclusion in school curricula. In Canada, as in all educational systems, what passes for knowledge is determined by the dominant order; so it is hardly surprising that in contrast to peoples of European descent, Blacks appear in school syllabi as

second-rate citizens. While Asante's work focuses primarily on African-American education, it remains relevant to this enquiry in that it examines the same kind of barriers facing African-Canadian students in the mainstream public education system and more generally the disadvantages under which they labour in Eurocentric education systems. For him, the solution lies with AE, an educational model that encourages alternative perspectives and undermines a colonial mode of thought and its racist typecast of people of African descent as "objects" (Asante, 1993, p. 3) located on the fringe of Europe. AE, from an Afrocentric standpoint, allows Black students to see for themselves, to hear for themselves, to think for themselves, and to make informed decisions for themselves (Asante, 1993; Keto, 2001).

Keto's interpretation of Afrocentric education is similar in most respects to Asante's (Keto, 2001). According to Keto (2001), mainstream education limits Black students' access to liberatory knowledge (Keto, 2001). He further asserts that it is not only rife with abstract speculation regarding African knowledge systems; its allusions to and inferences regarding Africans and their respective cultures are almost always negative. It presupposes, moreover, that there is nothing meaningful to learn outside White culture. Given such racist assumptions and attitudes, it is hardly surprising that so many Black students should give up on education. One particularly insidious consequence of this mode of "Eurocentric diffusionsim" (Keto, 2001, p. 44) is the way it tarnishes the self-image of Black students who come to view themselves through the racist tropes so pervasive in school textbooks (Jean, 1991; Keto, 2001). Thus, for example, it is not unusual to hear a Black person refer to himself or a friend as a "Negro" or "nigger", a most pejorative epithet, whose source is traceable to plantation slavery (Keto, 2001).

Irvine (1990) challenges the claim that mainstream education treats White and Black alike. He points out that in the post-segregation mainstream public school system in the United States, White students and their Black peers may have the same academic opportunities, at least in theory, yet reap unequal educational benefits. The advantages the former enjoy vis-à-vis the latter, e.g., the greater attention provided by teachers, most of whom are White, all too often translate into superior academic performance. In academic

programs White students, who invariably make up the vast majority, are introduced to critical thinking, problem solving and research skills; Black students, who are over overrepresented in programs for low-achievers, are denied an equal opportunity to develop their creative and critical faculties (Irvine, 1990; Murrell, 1993). Seldom challenged, and often unable to meet standard requirements, students, mostly Black, are streamed into vocational programs—a tracking process Boykin (1986) equates with segregation in that it assigns students to one of two very different programs, i.e., academic and general, based on arbitrary evaluations that single out 'at-risk' students who are predominantly Black, for punishment.

According to Boykin (1994), Eurocentric education, of which mainstream education is a derivative, is blind to the power structures and ideologies that work to reproduce the dominant order, of which mainstream education is a crucial part. Eschewing anything like a critical examination of history, Eurocentric education naturalizes, and thereby perpetuates, dominant views that rationalize and normalize the oppression of racialized students. According to this scheme of thinking, calls for comprehensive educational reform, including adoption of a curriculum that gives equal prominence to alternative histories and knowledge, go unheeded. A true multicultural school system, one that embraces critical multicultural education (CME),⁵ Boykin argues, would perforce acknowledge Black culture and other cultures as fundamental to the education and general wellbeing of Black students. In other words, the school curriculum must incorporate alternative knowledge systems that embrace the Black history, culture and contributions so often ignored by the dominant school system to the detriment of Black students.

For public education to become an equalizer, Boykin asserts, it must get beyond the supposition that students become educated when they succeed in developing a certain facility in the areas of reading, writing, and thinking. According to Boykin (1994; 1986), education must be all-inclusive: it must cultivate in students, regardless of their race, what they deem to

⁵ Peter McLaren for example describes such an educational approach as one that “interrogates the construction of difference and identity in relation to a radical politics. It is positioned against the neoimperial romance with monoglot ethnicity grounded in a shared or ‘common’ experience of ‘America’ that is associated with conservative and liberal strands of multiculturalism” (McLaren, 1995, p. 99).

be important rather than merely focusing on teaching the skills and knowledge required to secure employment and make a decent living. Challenging the neoliberal concept of education, Freire (2000) argues that education must go beyond its traditional function of preparing illiterate students to “mee[t] [the] verbal [and written] requirements” (p.76) necessary to securing a job.

According to Freire (2000), education must live up to its true goal: to teach students not only how to read and write, but also discern the false hopes and oppression that both shape and blight their lives. In addition to teaching them abstract concepts, education must, he argues, teach the oppressed how to free themselves from oppression. Rather than turning students into functional literates, it must adopt a transformative pedagogy aimed at developing in students the ability to undermine structures of oppression and their status as “spectators” (p. 75). Education must, Freire theorizes, be framed around the ethos of liberation, turning students into curious adventurers on a quest to unveil “reality” and bring a new “consciousness” to bear in addressing social issues (p. 81).

2.3. The School Curriculum as an Ideological Text

If the Toronto Public School system curriculum were a text, then its content will have be said to have done little to educate Black students in ways that Black parents and critical educators and scholars might approve. From an Afrocentric perspective, the school curriculum/text can hardly be said to be neutral. Rather, in using Europe as frame of reference, it works to valorize White supremacy while either ignoring or mischaracterizing all things African, as, for example, by signifying African contributions as subjective or lacking a scientific basis or bereft of cutting-edge ideas. In keeping with this program, African history is dismissed as revisionist and esoteric (Boykin, 1986; Gordon, 1993). Celebrating individualism and competitiveness, the school curriculum and pedagogy disparage African communalism as an incentive for laziness, dependence, and lack of enterprise. At the same time, White values and norms are universalized and signified as essential to attaining success in school and beyond (Boykin, 1986). The ingrained belief that

the public school system promotes success works to silence calls for meaningful reform of the school curriculum, particularly among school administrators and policymakers whose job security depends on maintaining the status quo (Boykin, 1986).

Nkrumah (1964) likens colonial education to a vehicle for ideology. The work of ideological indoctrination it performs, he argues, involves, among other things, internalizing a European conception of how things are and how they ought to be, while concealing from the colonized how they come to be. Central to this program, Nkrumah posits, White supremacist ideology “characterize[s] society and remains a master instrument against which all things are defined and measured” (p. 56), and critics of the system are punished. Thus is a colonial worldview, along with the belief in White supremacy that underpins it, universalized and naturalized in yet another ideological operation. At the same time, the baseness and barbarity of the colonial project is minimized by, for example, signifying slavery as beneficial to all by virtue of its role in ‘civilizing’ and Christianizing the benighted African (Nkrumah, 1964; Woodson, 1933).

According to Nkrumah (1964), the psychological trauma inflicted on the African mind by the colonial curriculum is total. Dazzled, and at the same time puzzled, by Western thought, Black students, mechanically consume Western dogmas that degrade their personalities and characters (Nkrumah, 1964). Writes Nkrumah:

The colonized African student, whose roots in his society are systematically starved of sustenance, is introduced to Greek and Roman history, the cradle of modern Europe, and he is encouraged to treat this portion of the story of man together with the subsequent history of Europe as the only worthwhile portion. This history is anointed with universalist flavouring which titillates the palate of certain African intellectuals so agreeable that they become alienated from their own immediate society. (p. 5)

While I disagree with Nkrumah’s (1964) blanket claim that African students made no effort to challenge European education, his analysis can be applied to examining the experience of African-Canadian students. Under the Eurocentric model of education, these students come to learn that European knowledge systems are indispensable. Europe is

presented in the various curricula as the progenitor of civilization. Colonial education, Nkrumah argues, obliges Black students to believe that their success is contingent upon complying with European expectations for them and rejecting Africa's esotericism (Boykin, 1986; Carruthers, 1994; King & Wilson, 1994; Nkrumah, 1964). To cement its chokehold on Black students, the colonial education system adheres to a set of academic guidelines, informed by Eurocentric values and norms, against which student success is measured. At the same time, challenging dominant constructions is viewed as working outside civilized norms (Nkrumah, 1964). But perhaps the most damning condemnation of the colonial education system is that it shuns the very alternative knowledge systems that could be the Black student's salvation. From an anticolonial/Afrocentric perspective, colonial education promotes "Anglo-conformity" (Fleras & Elliott, 1992, p. 42), in the process "silenc[ing] multiple voices and perspectives [through omission] unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation" (Swartz as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). This effectively leaves no room in the education system for alternative knowledge systems, e.g., those of Blacks, First Nations or women, that might interrogate the history of the Canadian nation-state.

As Abdi (2012) points out, colonial education spins its web of oppression through a variety of strategies that are imperceptible. In "Eurocentric discourses and African philosophies and epistemologies of education: Counter-hegemonic analyses and responses" (2012), Abdi discusses the dialectical struggles postcolonial nations face in framing educational models that reveal their history and promote their ways of knowing. According to Abdi, one major barrier to reversing the impact of colonial education pertains to the way in which the system's episteme has rendered African knowledge systems "essentially useless" (p. 13). In a fashion that is cool and restrained, colonial and Eurocentric education systems signify Africans in ways that are variably uncomplimentary. Consistent with their negative view of Blacks, mainstream researchers continue to revere classical European philosophers, e.g., Georg Hegel, Immanuel Kant, notwithstanding their antipathy toward everything African. Despite accusations of racism, these philosophers enjoy institutional immunity, and calls for their work to be purged from university libraries are met with resistance from

advocates of academic freedom. Under the hegemonic colonial school systems, Black scholars and students received recognition only after demonstrating their ‘worthiness’ by regurgitating Western philosophical thought.

While Abdi’s writings (2012) are informed by African-centred politics, he does not subscribe to the specific discourse of Afrocentrism. Nevertheless, there is some degree of synergy between his work, challenging the homogenization of knowledge systems, and Asante’s interrogation of White philosophical models deemed to be universal. According to the latter (1998), so pervasive are dominant knowledge systems in Western academic discourse that “some African . . . writers, who have been . . . trained in Eurocentrism . . . assume that everyone else should . . . acquiesce [to the] expansive provincialism [of European-centred knowledge systems]” (p. 4). For Asante (1998), however, imposing European knowledge systems and worldviews in an African context serves only to perpetuate “Western triumphalism” (p. 21) and cultural neocolonialism.

Wright’s (2000) in-depth analysis of the marginalization of the contributions of Black authors by dominant scholars and institutions is crucial to understanding the politics that permeates knowledge production and dissemination. As he so lucidly points out, what is expounded as knowledge in the education system is, in fact, mediated by race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In “Why write back to the new missionaries? Addressing the exclusion of (Black) others from the discourses of empowerment,” Wright delineates the ways in which Black intellectuals are marginalized by the dominant group.

According to Winkler, Robin Kelly, an African-American professor of History and African Studies and a . . . prolific writer, . . . “has not had his work reviewed in *The New York Times*” (Winkler as cited in Wright, 2000, p. 123) despite his being the “youngest person to be promoted to full professor at NYU [New York University], [having earned] several prestigious awards for his books and [secured appointments to] the editorial boards of several journals” (p. 123). Kelly’s experience speaks to the barriers Black authors confront when seeking to have their work published. In the absence of Black-owned publishing houses, Black authors are at the mercy of White publishers, which handicaps them from

showcasing African-centred ideas and presenting “counter arguments to dispel misguided and inaccurate perceptions [of Blacks] in research and in society” (Gordon, 1990, p. 96).

While I am in not suggesting that Wright is correct in implying that Kelly’s race was a key factor in *The New York Times*’ decision not to review his work, his analysis of race as an unspoken impediment to Black intellectuals and Black voices in general underscores the power of the dominant order to dictate what passes for knowledge and whose views should have primacy in the marketplace of ideas. According to Wright (2000), even in universities where academic freedom is presumed to constitute the *sine qua non* for scholarship, Black academics often run up against a long-held tradition that obligates them to cite the work of the “great White fathers” (p. 26) and often obscure figures whose views they may not share. Reluctantly, these beleaguered scholars are obliged to comply so as not to “bit[e] the hand that (force) feeds [them]” (p. 124). As I understand Wright, despite all the talk of progress with respect to diversifying knowledge, European thought continues to dominate education at every level. The totality of European knowledge is extant in its ability to occlude African canons from contesting dominant narratives (Wright, 2000).

And what of the impact of colonial and Eurocentric education on Black students? Packaged and delivered as a necessary good, both work to diminish their ability to preserve their linguistic heritage. Barring indigenous languages from the classroom, colonial education acculturates African students to Western mores; it conditions them to speak, think, and act in ways that perpetuate European dominance. As to the importance of African languages, Ngugi contends that its function extends well beyond mere verbal expression:

In our native [African] language, we have learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language [for us is] not a mere string of words. It ha[s] a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and logical meanings. . . . [Our] language, through images and symbols, g[i]ve[s] us a [unique] view of the world. . . . [It serves as an earthwork against European] domination, [Black] alienation and disenfranchisement. (Ngugi as cited in Abdi, 2012, p. 21)

Ngugi's analysis provides insight into the importance of African languages; in particular, they provide Black students with a strong sense of self-assurance, the lack of which can only impede academic performance, a view held by virtually all Afrocentric scholars and their supporters (Dei, 1995; Dei et al., 1997).

According to Fanon (1967), European education, with its assimilative ethos, accompanied by an imperative to obliterate any sign of Africanity in the education system, has tarnished his self-image while at the same time alienating him from his people. So bleak an assessment is shared by Westerman who writes: "the Negro inferiority is particularly intensified among the most educated, who struggle with it unceasingly" (p. 25). To demonstrate to the kinfolk that he has succeeded in transcending the barbarity of African culture and practices and is on a par with the colonizer, the colonized must reject his culture and supplant his *patois* with foreign expressions and forced accents as his way of separating himself from his people, who, he has been taught, are uncivilized. In his desire to become European, which requires speaking and thinking accordingly, the educated African must eschew the collective if he is to rise in status.

Whites, on the other hand, fare very differently in the public education system as evinced in the way Canadian historiography chooses to frame their exploits and achievements vis-à-vis those of racialized Canadians. While barely referencing the nation-building role played by First Nations and Canadians of African, Chinese and Indian descent, the mainstream school curriculum has never shied away from celebrating the achievements of White Canadians, mostly male, in this regard. The latter are credited with discovering, exploring, settling and developing the huge Canadian landmass, notwithstanding its occupation by First Nations dating back 10,000 years or more (Neegan, 2005). According to Cooper (2006), Canadian history is, for the most part, "filled with . . . [narratives of] White explorers, pioneers, and heroic settlers," which, she contends, are "so one-sided, so monolithic, and so homogenous" (pp. 12-13) as to paper over an inglorious history, one that includes, most notably, the marginalization and subordination of the original Indigenous inhabitants.

Despite calls for reforms to school curricula, aimed at reflecting, at least in part, the manifold contributions made by Canadians of all races, little has changed in terms of what is being taught in public school systems. In most textbooks, the dominant version of how Canada came into being takes precedence over alternative views. This is a set piece with a Eurocentric curriculum that has no place for non-Western knowledge systems. According to Castenell and Pinar (1993), the nullification of Black contributions by the public school system is no oversight; rather, it is a conscious effort aimed at denying subordinate groups their rightful place in history. In their quest to promote dominant discourses, argue Castenell and Pinar (1993), school curricula have ignored alternatives. Though recent scholarship acknowledges Africa's contributions to world civilization (Bernal, 1987; Bernal & Moore, 2001; Diop, 1974), these narratives are often distorted or omitted altogether from the curriculum. Typically, Africa is represented as an impoverished hinterland (Boykin, 1994; King & Wilson, 1994; Woodson 1933), even though by some historical accounts its diverse peoples succeeded in building highly sophisticated civilizations, e.g., the Mali, Songhai, and Asante Empires. Moreover, while African cosmologies are written off as grounded in superstition, the European conception of the universe is held to be rational and scientific (Woodson, 1933). Could it be that the practice of disparaging the African heritage of Black students, or excluding it entirely from the school curriculum, is responsible, at least in part, for their disaffection with school and their high dropout rates?

2.4. Black Canadian Education: A Historical Overview

Today, few would go so far as to argue that Black students are a burden to society and recommend they be abandoned to their fate. Yet a good many believe Black Canadians to be at least antipathetic to education. This view has no basis in fact, however, as evinced by the notable achievements of some Black Canadians across a wide range of occupational fields; nonetheless, it does provide fuel for TAAS critics who oppose comprehensive educational reform on the grounds that no purpose is to be served by investing additional funds and resources in those who place little or no value on education (Winks, 1997).

Black student disaffection is as indisputable as its cause is clear: education has for them no utility; it provides neither employment opportunities nor a remedy for racism. Thus, education is seen as an unworthy investment, a view that would have been incomprehensible to Black pioneers who saw in it a pathway to self-improvement and to earning respect in a racist society. Indeed, it was for this reason Maria Alexander Chinn Gibbs, purportedly "the best educated woman" in the British Northwest (Kilian, 2009), would instill in her two daughters a strong work ethic and love of education. Ida Gibbs Hunt (born in 1862) graduated from Oberlin College and became a high school teacher in Washington, DC. Harriet Gibbs Marshall (born in 1867) graduated from the Conservatory Music School of Oberlin and was appointed professor of music at Eckstein-Norton University at Cave Springs, Kentucky. She would later accept a position as music director for the town's public school (Alexander, 2010; Kilian, 2008).

Since making Canada their new home, Black Canadians have always, according to some accounts, made education a priority despite poverty and the hostility of Whites. And while Reverend George Pigeon held Blacks to be "exceedingly importunate until they obtain[ed] the object of their wishes," [at which point] they become "equally negligent and indifferent" (Winks, 1997, p. 59), his views in this regard were hardly applicable to education, which the great majority of Black people saw as the path to freedom and fair treatment. In pre-confederation Ontario, the Black community, demonstrated a keen interest in educating their children and were prepared to go the extra mile to realize their ambitions in this respect. For example, when Black students were refused admission to an integrated school in Hamilton supported in part by taxes levied on the Black community, the city's "Negro residents . . . petitioned the Governor General" (Winks, 1997, p. 367) in October 1843 seeking redress.

The fervor for school building in Black communities, notwithstanding the meager resources at hand, attests to a high level of commitment to education. Hiram Wilson, a powerful advocate of Black education in Upper Canada is said to have borrowed \$10,000 in 1836 for the purpose of advancing vocational education. Together with other Black leaders, Wilson, acquired 200 acres in the Chatham area for the sum of \$800. There, he established a

school that specialized in vocational training, which Black leaders saw as crucial to securing employment and ultimately their economic emancipation (Winks, 1997).

In Preston, Nova Scotia in November 1787, the Black community braved severe weather conditions to build a school for 20 students. Though rough-hewn, the school was viewed as adequate to teaching Black students how "to read, write and do simple sums, and to sew" (Winks, 1997, p. 58). In Digby, Nova Scotia in 1811, 120 members of the local Black militia graduated from a community school (Winks, 1997); and in Vesuvius in the British Northwest, John Craven Jones, together with Frederick D. Lester, established, in 1864, a school for Black children. Though never remunerated for his services until 1869 or 1870, Jones would travel to remote settlements to instruct students, many of them too poor to afford an education.

The above examples, taken from Upper Canada, Nova Scotia and the British Northwest, illustrate one fact: even in difficult times, Black communities went the extra mile to provide their children with the best education possible given their means. But, whereas Black Canadians saw education, however segregated, as a way to empower themselves, their White counterparts viewed segregated education, which they imposed on Black communities, as a way to deny them the knowledge required to critique structures of power and demand fair treatment.

2.5. Segregated Schools: Keeping Black Canadians “Uneducated”

Canada’s education system has often been celebrated as inclusive, meritocratic, and color-blind (Mansfield & Kehoe, 1994), notwithstanding the fact that segregated education was once commonplace in some many parts of the country. Today, Canada is presented as something for which Black Canadians, often characterized as immigrants, ought to be grateful given that it promotes multiculturalism, tolerance of difference, and a cooperative ethos. Moreover, Canada's greatness, it is often argued, lies in the opportunities it affords its Black population. The latter is signified in the person of Michaelle Jean, a "descendant of

African slaves" (Clarke as cited in Cooper, 2006, p. xi) and the country's first Lieutenant Governor (2005 – 2010) to be both female and Black. While Ms. Jean's appointment is not without significance for the Black community, it masks the existence of hundreds of Black women with the potential to hold high office but who are denied the opportunity owing to the various forms of segregated education that have been imposed on Black communities.

The view held by mainstream media and critics, namely that the principal aim of AE lies in discouraging White children from attending TAAS is entirely at odds with the historical record, which clearly illustrates that integrated schools have been traditionally viewed by Whites as a threat to a pristine White culture and moral values. What follows places segregated schools in Upper Canada in historical context, the purpose being to show they were the brainchild of White Canadians (Winks, 1997).

In Upper Canada, White anxiety regarding integrated schools ran deep. In a letter to Egerton Ryerson, the Provincial Superintendent of Education, Isaac Rice, writing in January 1864, reports: the local school trustees have declared that rather than enroll their children in a "school with niggers, they will cut their children's heads off and throw them into the road side ditch" (Winks, 1997, p. 368). In Colchester, the Inspector of Schools summed up what he considered to be the White population's views on integrated schools: "Everyone is willing that the Blacks should have their children well taught if only it can be done without their [children] associating with [White children]" (Winks, 1997, p. 375). For their part, some Black leaders in Upper Canada chose to support separate schools, having despaired of ever "attain [ing] equal standards [in education]" (Winks, 1997, p. 366). This degree of resignation was, however, far from universal. Thus, for example, Blacks residing in Elgin, supported by the Black community in Niagara, counter-petitioned against separate schools (Winks, 1997). And Henry Bibbs' disavowal of separate schools would doubtless have found a sympathetic ear in Samuel Gridley Howe who criticized Ryerson for encouraging what he called "caste schools" (Winks, 1997, p. 372).

Ultimately, Black communities would opt for separate rather than integrated schools, primarily for two reasons: the first was the unmitigated hostility on the part of Whites to

integrating schools, something Whites feared would be a first step in closing the achievement gap between the races; the second was the opportunity presented Black communities to exert complete control over the education of their children.

2.6. The *Separate School Act* (1850) and Segregated Education

The *Separate School Act* of 1850 was an expression of White supremacy cloaked in religion and endorsed by the *British North America Act* of 1867 (McLaren, 1986), which made it impossible to repeal other than by Legislative Order or judicial intervention. Repeal would have been exceedingly unlikely, however, given the political imperative to pander to the White vote and the stigma attached to any politician or judge who dared act contrary to the wishes of the White majority. The rejection of court actions brought by Blacks—*Hill v. Camden*, *Simmons v. Chatham*, *Stewart v. Sandwich*, *Dunn v. Windsor*—seeking judicial redress to, and relief from, segregation in public schools testifies to the White opposition to racial integration existing at the time (as cited in Winks, 1997).

The *Separate School Act* was not without serious implications for racial relations. It hardened racist attitudes toward Black Canadians by confirming them as an inferior people with no concept of White values or appreciation for the importance of education. The *Act* served to naturalize even further a hierarchal order, the violation of which would, from the standpoint of the White Canadian public, have constituted a breach of the divinely ordained order wherein Whites occupied the highest position (Winks, 1997).

Even though certain public officials, most notably Egerton Ryerson, were thought “to be a genuine friend of the Negro” (Winks, 1997, p. 369), few were willing to advocate, at least openly, on behalf of integrated schools. Touted as a champion of the Black cause and progressive education reform, Ryerson privately promoted separate education. When Black communities complained that public schools were denying Black children admission and accused Reverend Robert Paden for doing little by way of redress, Ryerson supported Paden, demanding that the Black community offer proof that “[the] schools denied Black children

admission based on the color of [their] skin" (Winks, 1997, p. 368). And when he instructed the Black community to submit proof that Black children were being discriminated against on the basis of race, Ryerson knew full well that such action on their part would prove futile. Instead, he advised them to "prosecute for damages" (Winks, 1997, p. 369) and to have faith that "Christian and British feeling" (Winks, 1997, p. 369) would prevail over racial discrimination. Moreover, in requesting that separate schools receive "special privileges," without specifying their nature, Ryerson was engaging in what amounts to 'official speak,' the aim of which was to assuage Black discontent while doing nothing practical to remedy it.

The way Ryerson engaged the Black community mirrored the approach to deferring racial equality that White officialdom would adopt; both believed privately that the cause of Black freedom and dignity would have to await the pleasure of the Crown and Church, however long that might take. Yet even though he supported segregated schools, Ryerson was careful to avoid culpability by, among other things, assuring the Black community that he had "exerted all the power [he] possessed, and employed all the persuasion [he] could command" in its service, adding that "the prejudices and feelings of the people [White Canadians] are stronger than the law" (Winks, 1997, p. 369). Here, Ryerson saw an opportunity and used it to his advantage. To further thwart the educational aspirations of Black Canadians, Ryerson, in 1859, ordered school trustees to establish "any kind of schooling they deemed best adapted to the social conditions of their respective communities" (Winks, 1997, p. 370), in effect providing them a *carte blanche* to exclude Black children.

According to Axelrod (1997), one of the primary goals of nineteenth century Canadian education was to advance "the educational interests of Protestants and Catholics, . . . French and English Canadians. . . . Other groups reflecting the population's diversity—Native peoples, Blacks, and the new wave of European immigrants—were subject to education edicts that stressed the virtues and cultural uniformity over cultural accommodation" (p. 69).

This policy, Axelrod asserts, fostered a climate of "paternalism, prejudice, and policy expediency [where minorities were concerned]" (Axelrod, 1997, p. 69). According to

Axelrod, the principal aim of the *Separate School Act* lay in barring students hailing from these groups from common schools located in areas where alternative provisions did not exist (Axelrod, 1997). On the basis of Axelrod's analysis, it can be argued that racism was a distinctive feature of Canadian education during its formative years.

According to Houston and Prentice (1998), racism directed by Whites against Black students was not a manifestation of ignorance or rowdiness, but rather a standard practice tolerated and in some cases promoted and/or incited by White establishments. Houston and Prentice (1988) cite H.F. Douglass, editor of the *Provincial Freeman* to highlight the impact the *Separate School Act* had on Black students. Douglass describes Ontario's separate schools as "dark and hateful relics of Yankee Negrophobia" (as cited in p. 298), where ". . . Black students are taught by [the] least-qualified teachers" (p. 300). The position of Black students was summed up in an editorial that appeared in the *Toronto Leader*, "a respected conservative newspaper," on December 12, 1862:

There is no use in trying to turn a stream against its head. Black children could only feel uncomfortable in their existing circumstances: the teachers lacked sympathy ('to use no harsher term'), and their schoolmates called them names. . . ." (pp. 301-302)

White opposition to integrated schooling, according to Ontario's Chief Justice, Beverley Robinson, went beyond race:

The prejudices of the White population 'arise' . . . 'perhaps not so much from the mere fact of difference of colour, as from the apprehension that the children of the coloured people, many of whom have but lately escaped from a state of slavery, may be, in respect to morals and habits, unfortunately worse trained than White children are in general and that their children might suffer from the effects of bad example (as cited in Houston & Prentice, 1988, p. 302).

While some public records reveal that Toronto was less inimical toward Black students than other jurisdictions and that city officials, along with the Toronto Board of Common School Trustees, supported integrated schools, some even praising Black students for their achievements on "competitive examinations" (Houston & Prentice, 1988, p. 301),

such toleration as did exist in no way moderated the treatment meted out to Black students by teachers, sometimes with the approval of school administrators. Lucy Greaves, for example, a Black girl who attended a series of Toronto schools between the “spring and fall of 1859” (p. 301) was expelled from the “Victoria Street [School] before she could enroll in a school on Phoebe Street in the fall.” Her teacher, “Miss Round, cited Greaves’ “bad habits and . . . exceedingly bad [communication style]” (p. 301) as reasons for her expulsion. The school superintendent, though never officially informed on this matter, supported Miss Round’s decision. Following this incident, he would issue “Rule 13, (which provided [justifiable grounds] for the expulsion of students prone to habitual disobedience and ‘hopeless of reformation’)” (p. 301).

It is also worth noting that despite the many challenges facing Ontario’s Black communities and families, a small number of Black schools achieved an educational standard equal or superior to their well-resourced White counterparts. Archival records reveal that the “coloured school [in St Catharines] was the best furnished with maps and had the best [t]eacher in [t]own” (Houston & Prentice, 1988, p. 300). According to some accounts, some Black schools proved “so successful that White parents enrolled their children in them. Brantford was just such a case in the late 1830s; and the superiority of the Buxton school in the 1950s (part of William King’s Elgin settlement) drew students, [W]hite and Black, from across the province and from the United States” (Houston & Prentice, 1988, p. 300). What is noteworthy about these two accounts is that despite all the constraints, these Black communities, by virtue of their collective spirit and determination, made the unthinkable possible. More importantly, the success of these schools, signifies the importance Black parents attached to educating their children, something that today is often ignored.

2.7. Multicultural Education: What Is It?

The Multiculturalism Act of 1988 redefined Canada as a nation committed to promoting diversity in all its forms—religious, cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic and so on.

The country was to be transformed into a multicultural state where conflicts would be resolved through dialogue. Multicultural education (ME) would play a leading role in realizing this vision by offering curricula that reflected the experiences and contributions of minorities, including Blacks.

ME is predicated on the assumption that bringing together students of disparate race and culture will create an inclusive atmosphere, one that will foster an appreciation of Canada's history and diversity (Fleras & Elliott, 1992). As an educational policy, however, it lacks a clear conceptual definition and demarcation, leaving its definition and goals subject to varying interpretations "that often confound attempts to define a common purpose, or indeed, any meaningful expression of political solidarity among its avowed supporters toward social justice" (Lund, 2009, p. 35).

Fleras and Elliott (1992) defines ME thus:

An organized effort to accommodate and manage racial and ethnic diversity as an integral component of the school system ... [that] openly acknowledges ethnocultural variation, recognizes its validity within the educational environment, and reaffirms its role in the formulation of philosophy, objectives, content, and delivery of services to students. (p. 187)

What stands out here is the epithet "organized effort" and the purported aim to "manage racial and ethnic diversity." This kind of language suggests that ME is committed less to addressing the achievement gap in public education, which would require deep-seated reform, and more to creating a veneer of interracial, interethnic, and intercultural harmony (Lund, 2009). Critics view ME to be symbolic in its orientation rather than transformative. Thus, according to Lund, "it is characterized as consisting of short-term programs and supplemental curricular material designed to cause attitudinal change in individual students and teachers" (Lund, 2009, p. 39), leaving intact White values that suffuse the curriculum and pedagogy. ME, the critics contend, constitutes little more than "prejudice reduction strategies" (Lund, 2009, p. 40) targeted at reducing "ignorance of other cultures [for the purpose of promoting] greater cultural harmony" (Lynch as cited in Lund, 2009, p. 40).

Black discontent with Toronto's public education system would continue to simmer during the 1990s, a period of major demographic change, marked by rapid growth in the city's minority populations. Changing demographics had not, according to Dei et al. (1997), led to much needed educational reforms, however; and, in particular, the curriculum had not been overhauled with a view to reflecting the current racial and cultural composition of a school system wherein Black Canadians "ma[de] up 10% of the . . . population" (Johnson, 2013, p. 5). Despite calls from Black parents for greater representation—e.g., greater numbers of Black teachers/staff to match the growing numbers of Black students—little would be done then, or in the future, to address their demands (Dei et al., 1997).

Meanwhile, disaffected Black students would continue to underperform. For some educators and critics, the problem lay with Black families; for Black parents, a Eurocentric school curriculum was at fault (James & Brathwaite, 1996). The latter argued that ME offered little in the way of intercultural education and dialogue and that formulating and implementing equitable policies, e.g., the hiring of more Black teachers and staff to whom Black students could relate and who understand the challenges they faced both at school and at home, lay beyond its scope (Cummins, 1997; Dei et al., 1997; Goodall, 1996; James & Brathwaite, 1996). Black parents also called into question the commonly held perception that ME is predicated upon diversity—a view shared by Lund (1998) and Mansfield and Kehoe (1994). Whose version of events, they asked, gets to be presented as legitimate knowledge, and how does such knowledge impact Black students?

For critics, the high dropout rate among Black students speaks to the failure of ME. Rather than allocate scarce resources to addressing this central problem, the mainstream school system panders, they contend, to ethnic sensibilities by, among other things, promoting the singing of ethnic songs, the sharing of ethnic foods, and the performing of ethnic dances, meanwhile deferring the very reforms that could address the disaffection and underperformance of Black students, such as incorporating into the school curriculum African-centred courses that challenge the incongruities in Western thought (Dei et al., 1997).

2.8. Multicultural Education in Practice: White Teachers and Black Students' Alienation

By examining the attitudes of White teachers toward Black students, I wish, not to tar all with the same brush, but to single out those who, several studies have shown (Dei et al., 1997; Kong, 1996), harbour an animosity toward their charges that has no place in the classroom (Dei et al., 1997). The object here is to tease out a relationship that has been shaped by cross-cultural misunderstandings, which have resulted in negative learning outcomes for Black students. I begin this section with Mark's story, a narrative that reflects the experience of so many Black students who struggle daily in the mainstream public school system.

For the first month of classes, 'Mark,' (a pseudonym), a Grade 2 Black student, worked alone at his desk despite the teacher's injunction that all students were to work in pairs. By the second month, the teacher was growing increasingly concerned over this student's anti-social behaviour, which she attributed to an "adjustment problem" (Roberts-Fiati, 1996, p. 75), a term used arbitrarily by White teachers to describe any failure on the part of Black students to respond to classroom routines and learning in a positive way. The real problem, however, lay not with Mark but with his White classmates who refused to partner with him; and so it was that he continued to work alone, all the while expecting one of them would eventually join him. His was an experience all too familiar for Black students attending mainstream public schools (Roberts-Fiati, 1996).

The events described above highlight how in the mainstream public school system race and culture come to mediate the Black experience. This is, I would argue, no isolated instance of refractory White students willfully ignoring a teacher's instructions. Both students and teacher were in various ways complicit in perpetuating a standard racial representation; in their eyes Mark, like all Black children, was somehow tainted and thus undesirable. Raby (2004) asserts that "[White] teachers and students often downplay "the personal relevance of "race . . . through the erasure of race itself" (p. 371), even though their actions foster an atmosphere of racial intolerance. Rather than deal with the problem head-

on, the teacher chose instead to ignore it, owing to a reluctance to talk about race or perhaps a conviction that it was irrelevant in the classroom and that to address it would require interrogating her own dominant attitude and that of her White students.

Kong's experience as a Black student attending a predominantly White school speaks to the lack of empathy, and in some cases overt hostility, that often characterizes relations between White teachers and their Black charges (Kong, 1996). This student's self-esteem was shattered when her Grade 3 teacher announced before a group of her peers that she "would never amount to anything" (Kong, 1996, p. 60). This incident highlights the differential treatment in the school system. Perceiving the school environment to be detrimental to their sense of personhood and self-esteem, many Black students choose to drop out, others to detach themselves psychologically.

Dei et al., (1997) contest the wholesale use of the term "dropout" to describe Black students' experience in the public education system. In their view, the term "pushed out" more accurately captures that experience (p. 36). Students who get "pushed out" of school are not averse to education knowing the future that awaits the uneducated: fewer job opportunities and a life of crime. Dei et al., (1997) attribute the "pushed out" phenomenon to the lack of support afforded 'at risk' students by "school agents (teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators" (p. 70), who are less responsive, indeed indifferent, to the adverse experiences of students. According to disaffected students, their identity hinders their success; thus, they are denied adequate support by the school based on their race. In the words of one student, the high dropout rate in the public education system is due, in part, to a prevailing "network of disinterest" (p. 72) that leaves the disadvantaged to their own devices, which invariably leads to their dropping out of school.

Critics of the mainstream school system often target a racism that appears to be both endemic and pervasive, blighting the youngest and most innocent in particular (Roberts-Fiati, 1996). The defense put forward by the school authorities, i.e. that the experiences of the Marks and Kongs are anomalous and thus in no way reflect what is really going on in the classroom, serve only to reveal a discomfort with having to deal with racism and racialized

students. For Mark's teacher to attribute his behaviour to an "adjustment problem" (Roberts-Fiati, 1996, p. 75) stemming from some unspecified cultural deficiency is to shift the focus from race to culture, thus reproducing the illusion of a race-free classroom while reassuring Black parents who would rather believe that the teacher knows best and has the best interest of the student at heart.

The Toronto public school system continues unwittingly to accommodate ideologies that are racist in terms of their orientation or implications. For example, Social Darwinism, which places people of African descent at the lowest "point of the evolutionary scale" (Boykin, 1986, p. 59), is one of many race-based theories to inform, to varying degrees, school textbooks. Educated at dominant institutions of higher learning, where it is not unusual for treatises on race and intelligence (Rushton & Jensen, 2005; 2003) to inform, however tangentially, lectures, class discussions and debates, teachers may, to a greater or lesser degree, come to hold certain assumptions regarding the racialized 'other' that they bring to the classroom, e.g., the notion that Black students are low achievers (Dei et al., 1997).

On November 9, 2011, I spoke for 1 hour before a group of students in the Teacher Education program at a university in British Columbia, on the subject of social justice in education. I began by asking the audience, which was predominantly White, to record on a slip of paper, and in as few words as possible, what they thought of Africa and Africans. The goal of the exercise was to demonstrate that despite the best of intentions, teachers and students can inadvertently perpetuate racial stereotypes. The key descriptors randomly selected from the responses submitted by seven students are:

- Student 1: Continent, poverty, safari
- Student 2: Black, desert, and dependent on Christian help
- Student 3: Safaris, huge continent, extreme poverty in some areas, lots of people
- Student 4: Safari, animals, poverty, hunger, heat, AIDS, Black
- Student 5: Small, uneducated population, comprised mainly of Black people
- Student 6: Continent, underdeveloped part of the world with great poverty

- Student 7: Diversity, different cultural traditions, marginalized, sometimes discriminated against or treated differently, not a lot known because not taught.

Invariably, these key terms conjure up images of the ‘dark continent’ and of its inhabitants that work to reinforce racial stereotypes, which find their way into the classroom. Africa is signified as a basket case, its achievements of no account, its people devoid of agency. Consistent with mainstream myths, Africans are presented as uneducated, poverty-stricken and disease-ridden “Black” peoples, antipathetic to modernity and wholly dependent upon “Christian help,” presumably in the form of foreign aid provided by the West. Thus are Africa and Africans signified in ways that reinforce White exceptionalism and that would have been familiar to Europeans during what was the heyday of colonialism.

Neocolonial narratives, while for the most part false, valorize the West as the savior of Africa, signified as a vast expanse of

parched earth and starving famine victims, unsanitary hospitals [strewn with victims bleeding from their orifices from Ebola], . . . village huts . . . dying AIDS victims, ethnic conflicts, marauding rebels and civil war victims . . . and desperate refugees and economic migrants trying to get into Western countries . . . [and] open desert or jungle filled with exotic animals, a location for adventure, . . . an empty space . . . devoid of . . . people . . . or a *tabula rasa* with natives vaguely located [in the] background . . . filling out the picture or as local guides. (Wright, 2012, pp. 182-183)

Thus is Africa relegated to a position outside the realm of civilization, its contributions to science, education, commerce, governance, and world civilization ignored, and Africans denied a voice.

What I glean from the above is that Western discourses on Africa and Africans are wholly lacking in objectivity and rigor; rather, they serve to advance a neocolonial project that dismisses African ingenuity while underscoring Africa’s indebtedness to the colonial centre, the locus of White power and source of Black oppression. In its subtlest forms, according to Wright, neocolonialism is promoted with a missionary zeal worthy of its purported humanitarian project of rescuing Africans from a culture of fatalism and debauchery that underpins their wretched existence.

According to Smith, the power that the West possesses to take events and ideas out of their historical context, frame them in ways that advance Western interests and then present them as universal narratives “rule[s] out [any] consideration of alternative representations [that might explicate] . . . African conditions” (Smith as cited in Wright, 2012, p. 183). According to Kanneh, current Western discourses on Africa draw on a long colonial tradition of representation predicated on “. . . a firm pre-knowledge of the inferiority and savagery of the peoples of the empire and the harshness and the danger of their environment, both in need of naming and taming . . .” (Kanneh as cited in Wright, 2012, p. 184). What passes for knowledge of Africans and Africa in Western institutions in general, and primary and elementary education in particular, I would argue, is derived from the playbook of “nineteenth century colonial narratives that portray Africa as inhabited by barbarians or ‘natural slaves’ and as the White man’s burden” (Smith as cited in Wright, 2012, p. 184).

In "Transforming teacher education for an antiracism pedagogy" Solomon and Levine-Rasky (1996) criticize mainstream teachers for conceptualizing antiracist education in the narrowest terms. The following remarks convey a sense of what anti-racist education means to most teachers.

I haven’t learned much about the term, but antiracism to me would mean that someone tries not to be racist, but not necessarily becoming multicultural . . . You would not have to let your bias show, even though you may not necessarily believe in multiculturalism (p. 342).

I don’t have a real hook on what’s going on in Sri Lanka. I have travelled somewhat but I can’t really say, “Oh, I understand so and so from your background. This would be done this way,” because I don’t know (p. 342).

It is apparent from the above excerpts that for these two teachers, and likely many of their colleagues, antiracist education requires bringing to bear an “additive” pedagogy aimed at placating racialized students, rather than providing a “corrective” (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, p. 342) to reproducing racism both within and outside the school. Possessing little understanding of the substantive problems confronting Black students, most teachers, one can only assume, are “hardly [capable] of contribut[ing] to a significant learning

experience, ... [or inculcating] knowledge, skills or understanding,” (Tator & Henry as cited in Harper, 1997, p. 200) at least where Black students are concerned.

Acutely aware that their lived experience is viewed as inconsequential and their persons stereotyped, Black students become disaffected, estranged from a school system they view as offering little possibility for a better future (Dei, 1996b; Calliste, 1996; Kong, 1996). And even though some teachers are deeply committed to securing social justice for Black students, there are also many, who, with the tacit support of school authorities steeped in the politics of the school system, turn a blind eye to the way some teachers conduct themselves in the classroom. Rather than admit the prominent role of race in determining educational outcomes for Black students and join in the fight against differential treatment, dominant teachers remain passive and complacent, thus helping to perpetuate Black student disaffection (Brathwaite, 1996; Dei et al., 1997). It is all too often the case, moreover, that racism couched in free speech, along with the habit of making light of racist practices, projections and innuendo (Dei, 1996b; Kong, 1996; Niemonen, 2007), works to undermine student confidence and in the process fosters alienation (Roberts-Fiati, 1996).

According Dei et al., (1997), the majority of teachers draw a sharp distinction between the school environment and the home life of students, with the result that they come to view the problems confronting students in both these spheres to be unrelated in terms of both their causes and remedies. Embedded in this public-private dichotomy is the assumption that each space should function independently and not encroach on the other—a view at odds with one of the foundational beliefs upon which TAAS is predicated, namely, that it takes a village to raise a child. It is not surprising, then, that conservative White teachers often attribute underachievement on the part of Black students to the type of socialization and acculturation undergone in homes and communities where teenage pregnancy, households headed by "slovenly welfare mothers" (Henry, 1993, p. 209), and absentee fathers are the norm (Dei et al., 1997, Dei, 2008; Henry, 1993)—and all this despite a large body of evidence indicating that disaffected students can perform above expectations if given the requisite opportunities and support (Lewis, 2009).

According to Solomon (1995), student success or failure is contingent upon how teachers view the root causes of underperformance by Black students. Whereas conservative teachers attribute this phenomenon to a lack of individual effort (Dei et al. 1997; Solomon, 1995), for Dei et al., (1997), the true cause lies largely with indifference on their part to the lived reality of Black students. Dei et al., (1997) attribute this attitude to a lack of understanding of Black culture and/or a reluctance on the part of White teachers to involve themselves in matters they deem to lie outside their professional milieu and within the private sphere of the family. Moreover, for White teachers in the mainstream public school system, any discussion of student underachievement is seen as “extremist, divisive, strident, confrontational, ideological, radical, and antithetical to... multicultural [education]” (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1996, p. 338) and thus to be eschewed.

Research shows that conservative White teachers, who tend to have low expectations of Black students, very seldom offer them support; instead, they brand them as trouble-makers, as so many lost causes to be left to their own devices (Dei et al., 1997; Solomon, 1995). This kind of attitude leads these teachers to ignore the struggles Black students must endure daily, a recognition of which would represent the first step along the path to establishing a teacher-student dialogue—or for that matter a teacher-parent dialogue. Such is impossible, however, given the imperative “not to hear the voices of other races or [go beyond maintaining] a tepid cultural tolerance for hearing or acting on [other people’s] voices... [or to] suffer seriously from anything that darker-skinned people might say about [Whites]” (McIntosh, 1986, p. 7).

2.9. Black Students and Streaming

Notwithstanding the popular belief that the principle of racial equality informs every facet of the public school system, a number of studies show that racism permeates the school system, mediating the Black student experience (Dei et al., 1997; James & Brathwaite, 1996; James, 2011; James, 2005). According to Boykin (1994), attributing disaffection and underperformance on the part of Black students to some inherent defect or propensity is to

paint a false picture of their experiences in the classroom. For one thing, it ignores external factors (Dei, 1995; James & Brathwaite, 1996), e.g., a Eurocentric, i.e., dominant, educational model that promotes assimilation and a school system that enforces policies specifying what is to be taught and how in accordance with that model (Boykin, 1994). Inevitably, the goal of the school system, i.e., to teach students how to read, write, learn and think about prescribed concepts in preparation for life in a neo-liberal world, often conflicts with Black students' best interests (Boykin, 1994; Dei, 1995; Kong, 1996). This conflict, which often goes unresolved, is in some cases dealt with by funneling recalcitrant students into special education and/or sports programs—these being deemed most efficacious to preserving whatever remains of their much diminished “self-confidence” and “pride” (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 20).

In the mainstream public school system, race and class remain the principal determinants for streaming Black students into vocational, technical, English development skills or sports programs (Calliste, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; James & Brathwaite, 1996; James, 2005, 2011). With Black student underperformance foremost in mind, guardian counsellors often advise Black parents to enroll their children in vocational or technical programs—and at a far greater rate than is the case for White students—with no thought given the inequities pervading the school system and their impact on educational outcomes (Dei et al., 1997).

While the practice of streaming has a legitimate place in the school system, one must question its disproportionate application to Black students and its use to reduce their high dropout rates, not to mention the costs. Streamed away from their friends and placed in non-academic programs, students come to feel discriminated against, and as a result adopt behaviours—refusing to study, acting out, truancy and dropping out of school—that further jeopardize their already slim hopes for success (Dei et al., 1997).

As is the case with streaming, the TDSB 'catchment zone' provision denies Black students from low-income neighbourhoods equal access to quality education. Using area codes to determine in which school(s) a student can be enrolled, this provision effectively prevents Black students from poor communities from attending schools in wealthy areas of

the city, i.e., schools with the requisite resources—highly proficient teachers, up-to-date libraries and well-equipped science labs—to help them succeed. While the ‘catchment zone’ provision may be deemed essential to preempting logistical problems, such as over-enrolment in any given school, it could just as easily be viewed as promoting school segregation. It would appear that regardless of the lip-service paid the principle of racial equality in the context of the school system, racist educational policies—‘catchment zones,’ gifted programs and advance placement courses—however subtle, still exist.

Johnson (2013) writes of an invisible racial iron curtain that has descended upon the Toronto public school system, dividing the privileged and underprivileged:

Toronto comprises a high-income downtown core (20% of the population) with an array of public and private educational options; more diverse but shrinking middle-class neighborhoods in the surrounding ring (29% of the population); and low-income and working-class residents who live on the periphery of the city (53% of the population), [who] are disproportionately Black, Chinese, and South Asian, and [who] must contend with . . . little educational choice. (p. 16)

Johnson points to “differential housing costs” as the driver of demographic change that began in the 1970s:

[The] residential patterns [are] driven by differential housing costs [leading to] growing segregation by income and race in Toronto over the last 40 years. Central city neighborhoods have become increasingly White (82% and wealthier, and outlying neighborhoods in the northwestern and north[ern] parts of the city... have incorporated a larger percentage of “visible minorities (66%), immigrants (61%), and families in poverty (30%). (p. 5)

From Johnson’s (2013) analysis there emerges the spectre of urban ghettoization by race and income, a process with obvious implications for the provision of equal education. Thus, for example, while students in Rosedale, who are predominantly White, can access good public schools, which translates into positive learning outcomes, Black students in Toronto’s low income neighbourhoods, e.g., the Jane and Finch and REXdale areas, must do with outdated facilities and less-than-proficient teachers—a recipe for student underperformance and disaffection. The greater educational opportunities available to

students residing in middle-class neighbourhoods provides them with a ‘better shot’ in life vis-à-vis their less privileged peers.

The disparity in learning outcomes between Black and White students can also be explained by the Bourdieu cultural capital theory, which holds that the majority White students begin their educational odyssey with ample “cultural capital (i.e., home education . . .), social capital (i.e., social networks . . .), and economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) which can be acquired two ways, from one’s family and/or through formal schooling” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This capital is crucial to student performance and “social mobility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). Applying Bourdieu’s framework to examining the superior performance of White students reveals a key factor underlying their academic success: the standardization of White education and cultural values and their diffusion throughout the curriculum, providing White students a crucial edge in terms of acquiring “knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). This kind of advantage, Yosso (2005) argues, is either scarce or entirely absent in poor neighbourhoods where the cultural capital students do possess is deemed either irrelevant or counterproductive to acquiring a standard education.

2.10. The School Curriculum and Eurocentric Knowledge

This section opens with a discussion on how the school curriculum works to normalize White privilege and hold it up as a universal ideal. As Wihak (2004) points out “White privilege stems from [the] invisible systems of [White] dominance” (p. 110). The odiousness of White privilege is the heavy burden it places on “moving [any discussion on the term] beyond an intellectual and conceptual understanding of racial issues to an experiential and affective change” (p. 110). A White (privileged) curriculum allows White people, in the context of my research, to live in “comfortable obliviousness [cultivating] a dull indifference to the question of race . . .” (p. 110). Privileged by a colonial school system and an ideological curriculum, White students are unaware of the discrimination their privileged status; e.g. history, inflict on the learning outcome of Black students. Privileged,

“Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that allow “them” to be more like us (McIntosh, 1986, p. 3). Narrating her privileged experience as White person, McIntosh argues “through the curriculum, [and mass media]...[she] received daily signals and indications that [her heritage] counted and that others *either didn’t exist or must be trying, not very successfully, to be like people of [her] race* [emphasis in original]” (p. 7).

Fine (1994) hypothesizes that the mainstream curriculum bears the hallmark of cultural imperialism in that what passes for knowledge is filtered and framed to reflect a European *Weltanschauung*, thus excluding alternative worldviews. This is consistent with Dei’s (1994) view of teaching as a political act, the purpose of which lies in indoctrinating students with the dominant ideology and worldview. An important part of this program lies in denying racialized students agency by, among other things, either ignoring or denigrating the achievements and contributions of the civilizations from which they hail. This obverse process of internalizing the dominant worldview, along with the values, attitudes and assumptions that sustain it, i.e., ideology, while disparaging the ‘other’ is played out in the curriculum.

Henry (1993) supports Fine (1994) and Dei’s (1994) view of the school curriculum. "No knowledge," she writes, "is neutral. Rather all knowledge flows from ideological assumptions" (Henry, 1993, p. 209). This perspective is shared by Ladner, who argues that mainstream knowledge reflects the ideology of the larger society, which more often than not excludes the “lifestyles, values, behavior, attitudes and so forth from a body of data that is used to define, describe, conceptualize and theorize about the structure and functions of . . . society" (as cited in Henry, 1993, pp. 209-210).

Applying Ladner's analysis to knowledge production, I would argue that the absence of Black contributions from the curriculum is in no way inadvertent, but rather part of a project aimed at hierarchizing knowledge systems, while at the same time privileging and naturalizing official historical narratives—all with a view to sustaining the dominant, i.e., White, order. Notes Cooper:

Canadian history, insofar as its Black history is concerned, is a drama punctuated with disappearing acts . . . consistent with the general behaviour of the official chroniclers of the country's past. Black history is treated as a marginal subject. In truth, it has been bulldozed and ploughed over, slavery in particular . . . Slavery has disappeared from Canada's historical chronicles, erased from its memory and banished to the dungeons of its past (Cooper, 2006, p. 7).

2.11. Multicultural Curriculum: Whose History Passes for Knowledge?

Winks (1997) captures a sense of the selectivity that is a hallmark of the school curriculum. Most Canadian textbooks, according to this author, make no mention of pre-confederation Black history. The few that do acknowledge a Black presence during this period, however pithily, refer to Black pioneers incorrectly as "fugitive slave[s]" who journeyed to what is now Canada via the Underground Railroad. In an effort to rehabilitate Canadian history, most mainstream textbooks ignore White Canada's general disapproval of, and often hostility to, Black immigrants hailing from the United States—and this despite the plethora of published material giving voice to these attitudes. Writing in 1842, C.D. Owen, for example, describes Blacks as "perpetually begging and receiving charity . . . yet . . . neither prosperous nor useful" (as cited Winks, 1997, p. 363).

Describing the public education system as a battlefield, Fleras and Elliott (1992) posit that "powerful forces and entrenched interests are unlikely to tolerate significant changes [to Eurocentric education] without considerable resistance and foot-dragging. Changes, when they do occur [are likely to be] restricted to the cosmetic, and kept away from the key domains of decision-making, agenda-setting, and power" (pp. 188–189) leaving an ever-widening gap between dominant and racialized communities.

According to Fleras and Elliott (1992), the "[Canadian] education system reflects a basic and fundamental commitment to monoculturalism," (p. 183) with little consideration given alternative knowledge systems. Contrary to its original objective of promoting intercultural understanding, ME dispenses dominant knowledge and values (Dei et al., 1997;

Dei, 1995)—all the while celebrating Black History Month (BHM) in an effort to preempt calls for curriculum reform. And what precise purpose is a BHM that reduces the long history of Black Canadians to a few songs and dances supposed to perform apart from reinforcing racial and cultural stereotypes and reducing Black history to cultural artifacts, while ignoring substantive matters, such as the Black contribution to Canada?

For critics of ME, incorporating BHM into the curriculum cannot hope to transform the classroom from a locus of domination into a pluralistic arena where ideas compete with one another and diversity of thought is encouraged. Nor is it intended to, for its real purpose lies in creating a semblance of diversity within the public school system—all with a view to placating and pacifying Black students, parents, and their allies for whom the school system has failed in meeting the educational needs of Black students. So truncated and diluted a form of Black history cannot hope to address issues and concerns of real substance, such as the racism at large in the Canadian body politic (see Shadd in James, 1995). And so BHM will remain what it has always been: a tactical investment by the dominant order.

While proponents hail BHM as an exciting and innovative initiative, critics accuse it of reifying Black identity and culture and excluding certain Black heroes, e.g., Malcolm X. Why during BHM, they ask, are African-American male heroes, to take but one example, overrepresented while Black women of heroic stature, such as Rosa Parks, receive mention seemingly as an afterthought; and why are African heroes—Albert Luthuli, the Founding Father of the African National Congress, Jomo Kenyatta, a leading anti-colonialist, Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of the Asante Kingdom, who resisted the British occupation of her homeland—underrepresented? The achievements of Yaa Asantewaa, in particular, deserve to be celebrated at a time when African-Canadian students, and especially teenage mothers, need role models to provide the inspiration and sense of pride, without which it is impossible to resist the racism promoted in school textbooks.

Kaomea (2003) provides a lens through which the epistemic limits of BHM may be examined. On the basis of her theoretical framework, which was used to analyze the benefits to be derived from apprising indigenous Hawaiian students of their heritage, one may

surmise that discourses on Black History have often centred around African-American slaves and personalities and the Civil Rights Movement at the expense of African heroes and ‘sheroes’ and their Caribbean counterparts—the few exception include, most notably, Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela, Francois-Dominique Toussaint Louverture. The celebration of BHM, which, for the most part focuses on the African-American experience, tends to downplay the importance of African-Canadian history and contributions, and particularly those in the area of social justice, e.g. the Civil Rights initiative on the part of the Council on Group Relations in the 1940s and 1950s; The National Unity Association of Chatham-Dresden-North Buxton; and the Negro Citizens' Association of Toronto. What rights and freedoms Black Canadians enjoy today may be traced to the efforts of these and other like-minded groups who fought tirelessly against discrimination in the workplace and in the areas of housing and immigration policy. Ironically, however, many Blacks and Whites credit the US Civil Rights Movement for these advances (see Shadd in James, 1995)

Admiration for all things Black comes with a caveat, however. While it is appropriate that we should celebrate Black achievements, there lurks a danger in signifying Africa *ad infinitum* as an unqualified success. To capture a full sense of the continent’s history, we must not ignore the role of certain African kingdoms in facilitating and profiting from the slave trade, or the appalling cruelty inflicted on Africans by Africans often and routinely. It is essential that this sordid past be unearthed and exposed for what it is (Dei, 1993; Oyebade, 1990). BHM romanticizes an African past, by, among other things, playing down cultural practices best described as barbaric, e.g., child betrothal, female genital mutilation, etc.,. Using critical frameworks to de-romanticize African history will enable Black students to put into perspective their forebears’ achievements and assess them in a sober fashion; it will also help them to understand the challenges facing the continent and the obstacles to be overcome in addressing the problems. Thus will Black students be better prepared to counter the Eurocentric view of Africans as ‘primitives.’ Regrettably, BHM falls far short in showcasing Africa’s substantive contribution to civilization, a view shared by multiculturalism’s critics who argue it serves only to commodify African cultures by feeding the public’s appetite for "voyeuristic pleasure" (Bissoondath, 1994, p. 83). The capitalistic dimension of BHM

evinced in the sale of cultural artifacts to the curious and voyeuristic obscures the full sweep of African history, distorting what was and what is. The continent's disparate cultures come to resemble a homogenous coverlet. Essentializing Africa's rich cultures through the tropes of its architects and sponsors fosters an orientalist kind of reductionism and stereotyping. Thus do Africa's diverse cultures come to be seen as so much cultural art, albeit on an enormous scale (Bissoondath, 1994).

2.12. Multicultural Education and Racist Representations

According to Dei, understanding the politics of ME and the Black student experience requires interrogating the structures and administration of the public school system. In the mainstream curriculum, Africa has become synonymous with “poverty images” (James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 23)—images that portray the continent, and especially sub-Saharan Africa, as a blighted land frozen in time and in desperate need of ‘foreign intervention,’ a term associated with Western humanitarian aid and the messianic notion that Africa can be saved only by ridding itself of political leaders who are as corrupt as they are tyrannical and subscribing to Western democratic values. Despite its very real achievements, the continent continues to be perceived as a land plagued by HIV/AIDS, a disease viewed as responsible for a burgeoning population of orphans kept alive by Western-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These representations find their way into the curriculum and class discussions, not to mention social media, eroding the confidence of Black students and undermining their appreciation of their heritage.

According to Boykin (1986), what passes for a multicultural curriculum is nothing more than a compilation of dominant worldviews. The latter, Boykin writes, promote a culture of hierarchy that conditions Black students not only to accept White-domination but also to view a normalizing Whiteness as a universal model for personal development and success. With the promotion, however subtle, of supremacist values at its core, the multicultural curriculum provides little space for the interrogation of curricular typecasts of Black heritage. Rather, using a ‘kill-me-softly’ approach, it aims to win the consent of Black

students to their own subordination through the token inclusion of Black history and achievements. Moreover, by referencing only a very limited number of Black heroes, all of moderate political views, e.g. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, it serves to impede the formation of a Black identity (Dei, 1995; Dei et al., 1997).

In recalling her school experience, Annette Henry captures a sense of the dilemma facing Toronto's marginalized Black students and the concerns of many Black parents.

Throughout my childhood, my school lessons never enabled me to make sense of my Blackness in positive, affirming ways. My teachers never taught me in ways that helped me critically understand the larger Black community. . . . As a young girl growing up in England and Canada, my school lessons were often acts of violence (Henry as cited in James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 30)

Henry's narrative is instructive in that it references how the Black heritage has been nullified, minimized, dismembered and reconstituted to promote White supremacy in the area of knowledge production. Her biographical account highlights many of the reasons Black students leave school; it also helps to explicate Black calls for Afrocentric education after years of protestations that the public school system's credo of neutrality and inclusivity have done little to reform a curriculum and institutional practices that valorize White supremacy and shun racial equity (Harper, 1997; Solomon, 1995).

Allen (1996) examines the powerful hold textual representations can have over young minds. In "I don't want to read this": Students' responses to illustrations of Black characters in children's picture books," he argues that the picture illustrations featured in such texts are in no way empty signifiers. Rather, they carry positive and negative messages that reinforce the viewer's perception of himself and others. Allen reports that some Black students in his Grade 2 class were less than enthused with "angry, sad or pensive" (pp. 157) figures depicted in *The Orphan Boy*, a story about the Maasai of Kenya. When asked what they found to be so objectionable, the students replied:

Leo: My head (face) is not like that. I don't have anything Black here.

- Ralph: That looks like a moustache. . . . No, that doesn't look like me, I am brown Black, he's [Don] light Black and that's [the character] dark Black.
- Mike: Because I don't like his face. It is his head, it is covering here... on his moustache.
- Theodore: The face does not [look] good.
- Maggie: I can't see the eyes.

(p. 158)

Despite genuine efforts to expunge racist inferences from all texts in the public domain, books like *Little Black Sambo* that depict Black children as “dark skinned, plain, mischievous, comical, and poor” (Harris as cited in Allen, 1996, p. 152) may still be found on the shelves of public libraries. These negative representations can only serve to erode the self-confidence of African-Canadian students (Allen, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2011). Allen's work illustrates how the curriculum leads Black students to reject their race and heritage and internalize the ideology and worldview of the dominant order. This is all part of an assimilationist project that for Black students spells “[cultural and intellectual] genocide” (Jaenen as cited in James, 1995, p. 12), often manifested in disaffection, resistance to authority, underachievement, and high dropout rates.

Drawing on her experience as a student at a predominantly White school in North York, Ontario, Kong (1996) highlights how the curriculum works to nullify Black history. Scarcely was any reference made, notes Kong, to African-Canadian contributions to Canada; moreover, African-Canadians were represented exclusively as newly arrived immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, something she would discover to be false upon learning of the Black migration to Ontario in the early 1800s via the Underground Railroad. This erasure of the Black contribution to Canada has contributed in a major way to fostering racial stereotypes—in particular, Black Canadians have come to be viewed as living off the hard work and enterprise of Whites. This kind of representation, however false, makes Black students feel less Canadian and thus “undeserving of the benefits of Canada's future” (p. 61). As a consequence, these students live under the misconception that their ancestors were

“intruders, or at best hangers-on in the flow of history that ignores them” (Walker as cited in Kong, 1996, pp. 62-63), a view that is often internalized.

2.13. Black Students' Underperformance: Looking Beyond the Public School System

With a view to providing an alternative explanation for Black student underperformance, I shall draw on the seminal work of Ogbu. While Ogbu (1995a) focuses on the African-American student experience much of his analysis of the achievement gap existing in the US public education system holds true for its Canadian counterpart. Ogbu (1995a) posits a causal relation between Black culture and student underachievement. According to Ogbu, Black student underperformance can be explained by the "oppositional cultural frame of reference" (p. 196) they cultivate and nurture as part of their identity. Membership in this oppositional 'cultural frame of reference', Ogbu argues, requires Black students to foster a racial and cultural solidarity, an oppositional code of conduct, and “attitudes, behaviors, and speech styles” (p. 196) at variance and in opposition to mainstream educational norms and expectations. Operating from an oppositional position, Black students fight to hold on to what they believe makes them culturally unique and reject school practices and expectations they view to be part of an assimilationist project that takes many forms, e.g., demands that they renounce their "dialects" or "languages" in favour of "proper" English, the language of the colonizer (p. 201). Thus even though Black students see education as crucial to their success in life, they view the "foreign" knowledge systems that dominate the curriculum as essentially antithetical to their very being, and for this reason, they remain recalcitrantly disaffected.

According to Ogbu (1995a), Black students who form the vanguard of oppositional cultures seek every opportunity to recruit their peers. Typically, they coerce other students into joining their fraternity by accusing them of "acting White" (p. 282), a scornful signifier that carries with it guilt and punishment for abandoning one's roots, racial and/or cultural, to

embrace the values of the oppressor. Students who violate this unwritten cultural edict are isolated and denied protection (Fordham & Ogbu, p. 1986).

Ogbu (1995b) further posits the existence of a Black oppositional culture that often pervades whole communities and has even been adopted by some Black scholars—e.g., Afrocentrists at the forefront of a critical African-centred scholarship. Luster describes some of the more salient features of this culture:

There is a continual delineation and reinforcement of behaviors, practices, and attitudes that are "Black" [and appropriate] versus those that are "White" and [inappropriate]—Acting White is an acknowledged and identifiable practice within the community. The women who were . . . interviewed considered “speaking proper” or using standard English an attempt to dissociate oneself from the race; an attempt to demonstrate superiority; an act of betrayal. . . . The women [and most were parents] consciously resisted learning and using standard English because it would mean accepting what the White society defines as "right" or "White” to replace what the same White society defines as "wrong" or "Black". (as cited in Ogbu, 1995b, p. 282)

One may infer from Luster’s description that it is the subordination and marginalization of Black people that must be held largely responsible for Black student underperformance as well as resistance to the intrusive efforts on the part of Whites to coax or coerce them into assimilating to the dominant culture. The chief bulwark of this resistance is a broadly-based counterculture, the purpose of which lies in preserving a Black identity; its chief pillar is a Black *patois* whose very existence is an affront to standard English, the language of the oppressor.

According to Ogbu (1995b) the underperformance of Black students may be attributed to a common "feeling among some Blacks that learning to speak, read, and write standard English in the public school is more or less *an imposition on Black people by White people* [emphasis in original]" (p. 283). Operating from this oppositional cultural standpoint, Ogbu theorizes that Black students come to view learning "standard practices and standard English” as gravitating toward becoming White; a move they see as adversative to their cultural values and harmful to their Black identity (p. 284).

The contagion of "acting White" and "resist[ing] academic striving" is more pronounced in schools [where] Black students predominate. In these institutions, Black students build "fictive kinship" relations often through micro-coercion, which can take the form of name-calling— "pervert brainiac" and "homosexual" ranking among the most insulting (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 194)—the aim of which is to discourage "attitudes and standard practices that enhance academic success" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) reveal that Black students who fail in school are most likely those who adopt an oppositional culture and thus "spend very little time completing . . . homework assignments" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 188), opting instead to demonstrate an aversion for education—their own and/or that of their 'friends'—by engaging in non-academic activities such as athletics. In sum, while this oppositional culture has its benefits [in the form of] helping Black students to "develop...a force of cohesion [for their] survival..., [it also serves to] widen the cultural gap . . . expos[ing] them to even harder blows from a White nation that can neither understand their behavior nor respect its moral foundations" (Genovese as cited in Anderson, 1989, p. 257).

2.14. Conclusion

The literature review has delineated the impact of colonial and Eurocentric education on the minds and social development of Africans, both on the continent and in the North American diaspora. Presented as humane, a gift intended to civilize the African, colonial education, research reveals, brought about precisely the opposite effect, turning the colonized into intellectual automatons and vassals. The harm wrought by it, and the Eurocentric education that would follow, speaks to the rage and frustration that so many Black parents experience. It is this failure to change in ways capable of addressing the challenges in the public education system that accounts for the underperformance of Black Canadian students, and that has led to calls for Afrocentric education (Dei, 1996a, 1995; Dei et al., 1997).

For its part, multicultural education has not escaped the criticism of Black parents who see it as a mutated strain of colonial education that privileges, albeit in a far more subtle

fashion, the White student vis-à-vis his/her Black peer. The education reforms of the 1980s, carried out under the aegis of multiculturalism, critics argue, have not gone far enough in removing inequities, e.g., a curriculum that promotes White privilege, supremacy and a Eurocentric ethos.

According to critics, far from promoting an inclusive and egalitarian ethos as claimed by proponents, ME aims merely at assuaging Black discontent, an imperative if the Black vote is to be captured. Devised for and by elites, ME gives short shrift to the principles of social justice and equality, while allowing dominant groups to focus on what really matters: politics and the economy. It was also noted that ME largely ignores cultural difference, which is reflected by a ‘one-knowledge-fits-all’ curriculum—one that pays lip service to the notion of inclusivity. What is hailed as an inclusive curriculum is in reality a White knowledge system that, at best, includes only passing references to Black history and knowledge systems. ME fails Black students in other ways, e.g., by perpetuating the practice of ‘streaming’ with a view to addressing achievement gaps in education (Dei et al., 1997; James, 2005). It was also noted that alternative studies attribute the average achievement of Black students in part to Black culture, which fosters the view that all things White, including education, are harmful to Black autonomy and must therefore be subverted. It is for the above reason that critics of ME demand that Afrocentric schools be established, hoping thereby to reverse the achievement gap in the public education system. The following chapter examines Afrocentricity, focusing on Afrocentric education and its representation of Black history in the school system.

Chapter 3.

Afrocentric Theory: A Discursive Framework

In the preceding chapter, I discussed colonial, Eurocentric and multicultural models of education and their respective impact on the education of Africans both in the Homeland and in the diaspora, models that would later give rise to Afrocentric education. To understand the history behind separate Black schools in the US and TAAS in Toronto, in particular, one must, first understand Afrocentricity as a theory and as an idea and its influence on Black education. This chapter presents a historical overview of Afrocentric Theory (AT), along with a synopsis of the various arguments, for and against. With a view to tracing the origins of AT, I begin by examining Du Bois' work on the concept of race and its impact on Black education and emancipation. Next, I review Garvey's views on a continental and diasporic African identity and expound Nkrumah's notion of Pan-Africanism. The work of these three figures are taken up here as closely related, indeed precursors to Afrocentrism and education. I then proceed to introduce Afrocentrism, drawing principally on the work of Asante.

For Asante Afrocentricity, a conceptual framework that is essential to reawakening among Blacks an awareness of their contributions to civilization, which he claims, have been denied, distorted, or trivialized by Whites, thereby contributing to the marginalization and subordination of Blacks, and particularly Black students, who, he argues, continue to internalize oppressive knowledge systems that degrade their humanity and call into question their intellectual capabilities. In the following section, I examine Afrocentric education. Also reviewed is the role of Canadian scholars, e.g., Dei, who are credited with promoting Afrocentric education in Canada, a process that culminated with the opening of the Toronto Afrocentric Alternative School (TAAS) in September 2009. Lastly, I provide a brief overview of TAAS, its mode of governance, curriculum and staff.

My exposition of AT is based on the work of American rather than Canadian scholars as the former are responsible for its genesis and early development. This presents no problem, however, as there exist no substantive differences between their respective interpretations of the Black experience across settler nations, a category which includes both the United States and Canada.

3.1. A Working Definition of Afrocentric Theory

The definition of AT used here is drawn from the work of Asante, its chief developer and proponent, as well as that of other scholars (Boykin, 1994; 1986; Dei, 1996b, 1995, 1994; Dei et al., 1997; Keto, 2001) whose definitions and interpretations are broadly consistent with his. In keeping with the spirit and intent of these sources, I view AT as a response to the need to foster Pan-African consciousness and unity as well as social justice. Moreover, my working definition of AT is highly circumscribed so as to preclude its misuse by scholars⁶ who have, I believe, strayed from its principal tenets. That said, my working definition is as follows:

AT represents a body of philosophical thought aimed at restoring Africa's place in the sphere of knowledge production, reconnecting Diasporic Africans to the African Homeland, and most importantly, empowering Africans, including those in the diaspora, to challenge efforts by White scholars to denigrate African values, the African personality and African abilities, while prescribing European knowledge systems as a therapy for curing the primitive 'Other' of their 'inadequacies,' which some go so far as to attribute to their genetic legacy (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Rushton, 1994).

⁶ Carol Barnes' melanin thesis, for example, presents a sensational and distorted view of Afrocentricity. Steeped in biological determinism, it celebrates a racial exceptionality and essentialism that play to a White supremacist agenda of pitting Blacks against Whites while fueling racist policies aimed at limiting opportunities for Blacks in the workplace and other White-dominated spheres. Carol Barnes' thesis "Melanin: The Chemical Key to Black Greatness," claims that "melanin is a civilizing chemical and acts as a sedative to help Black[s] [remain] calm, relaxed, caring and civilized" (Austin, 2006, pp. 119-120).

3.2. Du Bois, The “Concept of Race”: White Power and Separate Education

While Du Bois’ work preceded the advent of Afrocentric thought, his views on race vis-à-vis White oppression established him as a “superior combatant in th[e] arena [of Black emancipation and dignity]” (Asante, 1998, p. 136). Even though he would die before Afrocentricity emerged as a theory, Du Bois is credited for “prepar[ing] the world for [what would prove to be a source of inspiration for all Black people]” (Asante, 1998, p. 23). Even though critical of Du Bois on the grounds that his education at “Harvard and Berlin . . . [had] trapped him . . . in . . . a European outlook toward the world” (Asante, 1998, p. 136), Asante recognized his indispensability within academic circles where he demonstrated an acute grasp of social justice issues, issues he would grapple with despite threats to his personal safety at a time when the South was firmly in the grip of Jim Crow. In recognition of his seminal work and unparalleled leadership, Asante (1998) writes:

. . . Du Bois stands at the helm of intellectual and political advancement in the contemporary world. He [wa]s . . . brilliant, powerful, and humanistic. At no point in the present era and rarely in previous epochs has any one individual so completely dominated the intellectual landscape on matters [related to American] politic[s], soci[ety], and history. Every treatise on urban life is incomplete without reference to Du Bois, and no successful scholarly study of the economic, legal or historical implications of slavery can be achieved without homage to Du Bois. In sociology, history, and political science, he laid the basis for contemporary analysis. (p. 23)

Like the Afrocentrists who would come after him, Du Bois argued that race was at the core of the United States’ existence as a nation. Premising their superiority on race, White Americans oppressed Blacks whom they considered inferior. While race remains a social construct and an artificial designation, with no basis in science, Du Bois contended that it played into American politics by serving to justify the oppression of Blacks. Race, he argued, provided Whites with a justification to pigeonhole “groups of folk who belong naturally together through the heredity of physical traits and cultural affinity” (Du Bois, 1968, p. 100). Blacks were obligated, by Whites to view their lower station in life as natural and their “race [a]s constitutionally and permanently inferior to [W]hite people” (Du Bois,

1935, p. 330). Race, from Du Bois' perspective, helped Whites create an asymmetrical world that justified a racial hierarchy in which they occupied the lowest position. According to Du Bois, one way in which Whites exercised dominance over Blacks was through education. By imposing separate education on Blacks, White Americans denied them access to a basic human right essential to fighting racial injustice and oppression. Denying Blacks equal education proved tantamount to denying them emancipation. Instead of using education to foster positive race relations, mainstream American education, argued Du Bois, would do the very opposite (Du Bois, 1935, 1968).

While White mistreatment of Blacks could be characterized as disempowering, Du Bois (1968) also contended that it was a force for good: an incentive to spur Black students to excel:

I don't know how I came to form my theories of race. The process was probably largely unconscious. The difference [in] personal appearance between me and my fellows, I must have been conscious of when quite young. Whatever distinctions came because of that did not irritate me; they rather exalted me because, on the whole, while I was still a youth, they gave me exceptional position and a chance to excel rather than handicapping me. (pp. 100-101)

I gather from this autobiographical note is that the key to Black excellence, whatever the constraints attributable to race, lies not with biology, but with ecology. Thus, given equal opportunities and adequate support, Blacks in general, and Black students in particular, could "match [their] mettle against White folk to show them what Black folk could do" (Du Bois, 1968, p. 130). "From the days of [their] childhood", White students, Du Bois contends, are no different from Black students in terms of their "physical and mental processes" (Du Bois, 1968, p. 136). Thus it is to environmental factors, and particularly race, that we must look to explain their poor academic performance. Indeed, despite all the talk of race being inconsequential to educational outcomes, "it absolutely determine[s] [them]" (Du Bois, 1968, p. 136). While excellence in education is attributable to genetic exceptionalism, the "social status" into which privileged Whites are born confers on them "social power and class

domination” (Du Bois, 1968, p. 189), which they exploit to their advantage in all spheres, including that of education.

For Du Bois, a Black identity constitutes an artificial construct grounded in and shaped by history. Thus, one might infer that a certain subset of Blacks in the American South arrived at a sense of self-identity as Africans because of their officially sanctioned mistreatment and relegation to the status of a second-class citizen. White terror, racism and harsh socio-economic conditions, along with repressive laws and mob justice, e.g., lynchings that often attracted large White audiences, led these Blacks to envision Africa and lay claim to it as a Black homeland on the basis of their ancestry. For some Black Americans, especially modern-day Afrocentrists, Africa provides a sense of belonging, a feeling of acceptance. For Du Bois and other Black intellectuals, developing a collective Black identity was a prerequisite for achieving unity, self-determination and a sense of dignity.

According to Du Bois, it was critical that separate education aim at promoting Africa and all things African. By addressing the question of whether Africans are primitive, Du Bois argued, Black education, whatever its limitations, could serve as a counterweight to White prejudice and ignorance, providing Black children with an alternative worldview capable of challenging the stereotypical views of Africa and Africans held by White America. An African-centred education and experiential accounts of Africa, Du Bois (1968) posited, was crucial to awakening a sense of the superior quality, at least in some respects, of African life:

[African] folk have the leisure . . . for thought and courtesy . . . They have time for their children—such as well trained, beautiful children with perfect, unhidden bodies. . . . Come to Africa, and see well-bred and courteous children playing happily and never sniffing or whining. I have read everywhere that Africa means sexual license. . . . (p. 127)

[For the 2 months I spent] in West Africa . . . I saw children quite naked and women usually naked to the waist—with bare bosom and limbs. And in those sixty days I saw less of sex] dalliance and appeal than I see daily on Fifth Avenue. . . . The primitive Black man is courteous and dignified. If the platforms of Western cities had swarmed with humanity as I have seen the platforms swarm in Senegal, the police would have a busy time. I did not see

one respectable quarrel African life with its isolation has deeper knowledge of human souls. . . .(p. 128)

Africans know fewer folk, but know them infinitely better. Their intertwined communal souls, therefore, brook no poverty nor prostitution—these things are to them un-understandable. . . . It was in Africa that I came more clearly to see the close connection between race and wealth. (p. 129)

This quotation underpins one of the moral imperatives of Afrocentricity: that in a world comprising different races, ethnicities, and cultural practices, difference, regardless of the apprehension it may create within the White world, should be respected and myriad cultural practices validated. The sense of humanity implicit in this account, moreover, suggests that Africans at least be allowed to speak for themselves, which is not to imply Du Bois was opposed to White scholars taking on African issues from an antiracist and anticolonial perspective. While Africa's social conditions were precarious, Du Bois admitted, they could be ameliorated if Africans were only given a fair chance, a notion that is antithetical to White interventionism in Africa aimed at saving benighted peoples from themselves. Promoting all that is good in African societies, Du Bois argued, would serve the dual purpose of providing Whites—and particularly those “dogmatic supporters of race theories and believers in the inferiority of colored folk to White” (Du Bois, 1968, p. 129)—with a non-stereotypical view of the racial ‘other’ and of educating Blacks about their ancestral homeland. While encouraging the promotion of Africa's rich and diverse cultures, Du Bois cautioned against romanticizing the ‘dark’ continent, thereby obscuring its reality, e.g., presenting it as free from “preventable disease[s] . . . unnecessary hunger” (Du Bois, 1968, p. 129) and/or overemphasizing the “esthetic ability of the Negro race, [which] . . . naturally has been exaggerated” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 334).

According to Du Bois (1968), Black education should not aim at settling racial scores, notwithstanding the conviction, current among some Whites, that they are superior to Blacks and that African history is unworthy of study, a perception that allows them to ridicule African knowledge systems. Moreover, whereas Blacks were, contends Du Bois, eager to learn about Whites, the latter were unwilling to respond in kind:

[There] is something for Africa and Europe both to learn; and Africa is eager, breathless, to learn—while . . . Europe laughs with loud guffaws. Learn of Africa? Nonsense. . . . Europe proceeds to use Africa as a means and not as an end; as a hired tool and welter of raw materials and not as a land of human beings. (p. 129)

The asymmetry in power relations between Whites and Blacks is manifested in the former's domination of the later extending back centuries. Thus, for example, White domination of the media and education system ensures that knowledge and information promoting Black culture, or educational reform aimed at providing an objective perspective on African history and Black achievements are either censored or framed in a way that advances the interests of the dominant order. For the latter, it is imperative that the dissemination of counterrevolutionary knowledge be minimized lest it threatens to erode White domination of the public education system. White refusal to learn about Africa, I would argue, is a way of mitigating guilt while at the same time perpetuating an educational system that marginalizes and subordinates Black students. Providing these students with an education that would serve their interests would, some defenders of the status quo believe, hasten the “overthrow [of] White folk by [the] sheer weight of [Black] numbers . . .” (Du Bois, 1968, p. 160), a view though farfetched still remains popular among White racists.

3.3. Du Bois, Separate Schools and Education: The History

In addressing the issue of separate education, Du Bois (1935) argued that Blacks had no choice in the matter, given that perpetuating White domination depended very much on providing Blacks with an education that was consistent with their position as a marginalized and subordinated people. Especially in the South, no effort was spared to ensure Blacks would be privy to ideas above their station. It was for this reason that efforts on the part of Black parents to enroll their children in White schools were resisted by “White children, White teachers, and White parents [who] despised and resented the dark child, made mock of it . . . literally render[ing] its life a living hell” (p. 330). Separate education, Du Bois contended, was a way for Black parents to circumvent the barriers erected by racist education

laws, to educate Black children and to shield them from White racism. Separate schools and education, then as now, it is safe to argue, represented a way to provide Black students with a safe space “where they [felt] wanted, and where they [were] happy and inspired, . . . [as opposed to] thrusting them into hells where they [would be] ridiculed and hated” (p. 331).

Though a strong advocate of separate schools and education, Du Bois was of the view that neither was capable of addressing White domination in the broader context. At the same time, he believed that even admitting Black students to White schools with a relatively high level of racial tolerance would do little to boost their academic performance. A results-oriented education system must have at its core equality. The myth that a “mixed” school can provide the kind of learning environment wherein Black students can excel, Du Bois (1935) argued, is wholly without foundation:

If the public school of Atlanta . . . were thrown open to all races tomorrow, the education that colored children would get . . . would be worse than pitiable. It will not be education . . . There are many public school systems . . . where Negroes are admitted and tolerated, but they are not educated; they are crucified. There are certain [schools] where Negro students, no matter . . . their ability, desert, or accomplishment, cannot get fair recognition either in the classroom or on the campus, . . . Under such circumstances, there is no room for argument as to whether the Negro needs separate schools or not. The plain fact faces us, that either he will have separate schools or he will not be educated. (p. 329)

In Du Bois’ (1935) view, turning Black children into future leaders required Black educational initiatives rather than reliance on a public school system informed by the principle of White supremacy. Black-oriented education would expose students to the contributions made by Africans to world civilization, thereby inspiring them to excel. For example, while fully cognizant of the role Europeans played in advancing the science of astronomy, Du Bois (1968) contended that “vast conception of the solar system to the Africanized Egyptians” (p. 144) should be highlighted in science textbooks rather than being relegated to the status of a mere footnote as was the case in the public education system then, and, to a lesser extent, now. “Great works of Art . . . [such as] The Pyramids, Luxor, the Bronzes of Benin, and the Spears of the Bongo” are treated as mere artifacts, with no

consideration given their “spiritual value” to the “soul of the Negro” (p. 147). According to Du Bois, segregated education offered Blacks an in-depth understanding of two worlds, that of Blacks and that of the Whites, resulting in “double envisionment”, by which he meant a consciousness “conditioned by their structurally disadvantaged place in the world and their sense of the understanding White people have of them (p. 173). White world, on the other hand, offered Whites little understanding or appreciation of the Black world. Du Bois viewed the double-consciousness permeating Black America as crucial to the Negro’s struggle against White domination.

3.4. Black Education: The Challenges

While lack of access to quality education severely handicapped the development of Black America, Du Bois (1968) argued that the latter was further hampered by the poverty and social degradation that were a hallmark of most Black communities. Encumbered by racism and the legacy of slavery, Blacks would find that the economic autonomy for which they longed would be deferred indefinitely owing to “wage exploitation and crime peonage” (p. 182). Black economic progress would be further impeded by a combination of high unemployment rates, a segregated economy, and a workforce that was “largely untrained and ignorant . . . and sometimes anti-social” (p. 182).

According to Du Bois, a key challenge facing Blacks was that racial segregation conferred upon Whites rewards that they refused to share. Thus, for example, in a two-tiered America, Black schools would be chronically under-resourced and underfunded, which translated into “poor equipment . . . [and] poor teaching,” something that would not have been the case but for segregated education. Of critical importance, what the latter meant was that Black “contact with the better-trained part of the nation . . . is lessened and shortened” (pp. 200-201). Another constraint was the underfunding of Black schools—in part the result of the poverty plaguing Black communities—that made it impossible to “plan and organize . . . segregated schools so that they [would] become efficient, well-housed, well-equipped, with

the best teachers and the best results for [Black] children; so that the illiteracy and bad manners . . . of young Negroes [could] be quickly and effectively reduced” (p. 201). Despite all these challenges, Du Bois insisted that “most Negroes would prefer a good school with properly paid coloured teachers for educating their children, to forcing . . . [them] into White schools which met them with injustice and humiliation and discouraged their efforts to progress” (p. 201).

While recognizing that separate schools and education were under certain circumstances unavoidable, Du Bois advised Black America to reflect critically on the politics-and-personality-oriented propositions, advanced by “a minority of leaders, [bent on] forc[ing] their opinions on [the] majority [with a view] to induc[ing] communit[ies] to establish separate schools, when as a matter of fact, there is no general demand for it; there has been no friction in the schools; and Negro children have been decently treated” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 329). I assume that what Du Bois is alluding to here was the habit among certain Black elites to prescribe idealistic solutions for problems that did not exist, all in the name of ego. He was also concerned that separate schools would be used to romanticize the “Negro race” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 334). Transformative education, he argued, had to be based on an “honest evaluation of human effort and accomplishment, without color-blindness, and without transforming history into a record of dynasties and prodigies” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 334), thus reducing Black education to the constructed narratives of imaginary kings, queens, princes, and princesses who never existed or, if they did, were not of the grand stature their champions claimed.

3.5. Marcus Garvey: The Relationship Between Continental and Diasporic African Black as One People

I begin my analysis of Marcus Garvey’s role in promoting the cause of Black liberation and Pan-African unity by citing an old Afrocentric tradition; the paying of homage to ancestors and elders of high standing. Garvey was “born in St. Ann’s Bay, a northern

seaport town in Jamaica, on 17 August 1887” (Lewis, 2011, p. 474). He died “in London on 10 June, 1940, just two months short of his 53rd birthday” (Lewis, 2011, p. 474). In the history of Black anticolonial struggle and discourse, Garvey remains an iconic leader; a font of inspiration, a symbol of Black unity, resistance and dignity. In assessing Garvey’s contributions, Asante (1998) presents him as the godfather of Afrocentricity, a figure of towering strength and accomplishment who represents the essence of Black resistance as well as a leader who provided oppressed Africans with “the most perfect [and] consistent . . . ideology of [Black] liberation in the first half of the 20th century” (Asante, 1998, p. 16). A visionary, Garvey “saw clearly the relationship [between] Africans on the continent and [those] in the Diaspora as [one of] variations of one people . . . (Asante, 1998, p. 18). Understanding the challenges confronting Black freedom, “Garvey sought to produce a new Black man, mold him . . . and develop him. . . . [He sought to create a] “new people, organized in character . . . and [committed to] building nations for the future. His vision foreshadowed the Afrocentric road to self-respect and dignity” (Asante, 1998, p. 18). He was, according to Asante, a “genius . . . [at] a moment of crisis” (Asante, 1998, p. 19).

For his critics, Marcus Garvey’s name, is synonymous with controversy; for his supporters, he remains a larger-than-life Black leader, an anticolonial figure whose ideas fostered Trans-Atlantic unity and galvanized Black resistance movements across the globe against colonial domination. He would also inspire some of Africa’s leading anticolonial leaders, e.g., “Kwame Nkrumah [Ghana’s first prime minister and president], Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, among others” (Lewis, 2011, p. 481). Garvey’s political stance on colonial oppression crystallized during the course of his travels in South America, England, the US, and other countries (Lewis, (2011). The insights into the phenomenon of oppression gained during this period would later coalesce into a “global perspective on the future of Africa and people of African descent, [one that he would draw on] to build an organization that embodied the aspirations of millions of Africans for self-determination, justice and freedom” (Lewis, 2011, p. 474). In “A Talk with Afro-West Indians,” Garvey reflects on the status of the Black man:

For the last ten years I have given my time to the study of the condition of the Negro, here, there, and everywhere, and I have come to realise that he is still the object of degradation and pity the world over, in the sense that he has no status socially, nationally, or commercially. (as cited in Lewis, 2011, pp. 474-475)

In Costa Rica, where he worked as a “timekeeper on a banana plantation” (Edwards, 1967, p. 7), Garvey was dismayed at the appalling conditions under which Black labourers toiled, and particularly the contract workers from Jamaica (Lewis, 2011). He soon left this job to begin “lecturing [Black] workers [to be proud of] their race and to improve their conditions” (Edwards, 1967, p. 7). On a visit to England in 1912, Garvey again witnessed racism and human exploitation on an appalling scale. Britain’s efforts in 1914 to commission Black West Indians as officers in the British army marked the beginning of his political activism.

Garvey’s interest in Africa lay in its “colonial plunder and exploitation” (as cited in Edwards, 1967, p. 8) and the failure of its many and disparate peoples to achieve their respective goals, despite their undoubted ingenuity and capabilities. Asks Garvey:

Where is the Black man’s government? Where is his king and his kingdom? Where is his President, his country, and his ambassadors, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs? . . . I s[ee] before me . . . a new world of Black men, not peons, serfs, dogs, and slaves, but a nation of sturdy men making their impress upon civilization and causing a new light to dawn upon the human race. (p. 9)

While Garvey’s view of Africa sometimes bordered on the romantic and idealistic, for Blacks in the diaspora, it represented a lofty vision inspiring them to unite and mobilize in search of a better future. For those in both Africa and the diaspora, it marked the beginning of an awakening to the possibility of liberation. In establishing the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in “over 40 countries . . . in Africa, the Caribbean, [and] Latin America, [as well as in] Australia and the US, . . . [including] the apartheid southern states” (Lewis, 2011, p. 479), Garvey demonstrated an undying commitment to Black liberation and unity.

While passionately committed to the African cause, Garvey often failed to take into account the inherent complexity of a vast continent filled with disparate races, tribes, classes, cultures and religions of whom some—and this is especially true of an indigenous bourgeoisie—who preferred the status quo and were prepared to resist any political program that would jeopardize their relationship with their colonial masters and the benefits accruing from it. Moreover, by appointing himself president of UNIA, Garvey left himself open to charges of despotism.

During the UNIA's formative years, Garvey proved himself to be among the very few effective leaders in Black America; the rest he described as “opportunists who were living off their so-called leadership while the poor people were groping in the dark” (Garvey as cited in Edwards, 1967, p. 11). Of crucial importance, Garvey arrived in the US at a time when Black hopes were at their nadir; it was “a period when White-sheeted knights of the tragicomic Ku Klux Klan [KKK] reigned supreme in the Southern States, burning and lynching Negroes; when, to the White American, the Negro was still a fraction of a human being. . . .” (Edwards, 1967, p. 11).

At the first UNIA convention held at Madison Square Gardens in 1920, which drew Black delegates from across the diaspora, Garvey spoke of the Black plight. Addressing the conference, he said:

We are the descendants of a suffering people; we are the descendants of a people determined to suffer no longer. . . . We shall organize the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world into a vast organi[z]ation to plant the banner of freedom on the great continent of Africa . . . If Europe is for the Europeans, then Africa is for the Black peoples of the world. (as cited in Edwards, 1967, p. 15)

A populist leader, Garvey sought to rally the mass of Black people by conjuring up exotic African titles: “Knight of the Nile, Earl of the Congo, Viscount of Niger [and] Baron Zambe[z]i;” pompous titles at odds with the spirit of anti-colonialism. He was “elected [the] Provisional President of Africa and President General and Administrator of the UNIA—with the official title, ‘His Highness the Potentate’” (Edwards, 1967, p. 15). In a communiqué directed at Black America, the UNIA delineated its opposition to Black oppression and called

for “equality, complete racial self-determination and a free Africa, under a Negro Government” (p. 15).

Though Garvey’s critics dismissed the Madison Square Gardens convention as yet another exercise in wishful thinking, it did provide an impetus for one anticolonial African leader, by the name of Kwame Nkrumah, who envisioned liberating Africa through the political mobilization of the oppressed. Nkrumah, who was to succeed brilliantly in his native Ghana as well as on the world stage, was inspired by Garvey’s ‘Africa for Africans’ mantra, which would later help to spark liberation movements in the Congo, South West Africa (present-day Namibia), Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Nkrumah summed up his views on Garvey thus:

I read Hegel, Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mazzini. The writings of these men did much to influence me in my revolutionary ideas and activities, and Karl Marx and Lenin in particular impressed me as I felt sure that their philosophy was capable of solving these problems. But I think that of all the literature I studied, the book that did more than any other to fire my enthusiasm was *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*. (as cited in Edwards, 1967, p. 39)

In a later tribute to his mentor, Nkrumah, speaking at an All-African Peoples Conference held in Accra, Ghana in 1958, the year following Ghanaian independence, remarked: “Long before many of us were even conscious of our own degradation, Marcus Garvey fought for African national and racial equality” (Jacques-Garvey as cited in Lewis, 2011, p. 481).

An astute leader and “propagandist” (Fein, 1964, p. 448), Garvey understood the importance of the media in the fight for social justice. To disseminate his views more effectively, Garvey founded *The Negro World*, which would become his bully pulpit for reviling colonialism and preaching the gospel of respect for Black culture and aspirations. *The Negro World* listed no less than eight UNIA objectives: (i) “to champion a Negro nationhood by [the] redemption of Africa;” (ii) To make the Negro race conscious;” (iii) “To breathe ideas of manhood and womanhood into every Negro; “ (iv) To advocate racial self-

determination;” (v) To make the Negro world-conscious;” (vi) To point to all the news that will be interesting and instructive to the Negro;” (vii) To instill racial self-help;” (viii) “To inspire racial self-love and respect” (Fein, 1964, p. 448). In French Dahomey, present-day Benin, the paper was banned and violators punished. In the editorial section, Garvey surveyed “the past glories of the Negro race” (Edwards, 1967, p. 13), a tactic, the Black Panther and Afrocentric Movements, in addition to popular culture, e.g., James Brown’s *Say it Loud, I am Black and I am proud*, would, I argue, reprise in the 1960s. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the US, Garvey’s vision of reclaiming what was rightly Black and human inspired leaders such as Marcus X, Martin Luther King and hundreds of their followers, many of “whose parents were [or had been] themselves active . . . Garvey[ites]” (Lewis, 2011, p. 481). One especially prominent adherent of Garvey’s Pan-African Movement was Malcolm Nurse (George Padmore), who would later become one of Nkrumah’s closest advisors.

A clever tactician, Garvey used symbolism to promote Pan-African unity. Thus, for example, though his Black Star Shipping Line (BSSL), which he established in 1919 and which was owned exclusively by Blacks (Carter, 2002), would never dispatch a single vessel to the Negro homeland, the mere promise of “carry[ing] passengers and freight between America, Africa and the West Indies” (Carter, 2000, p. 3) held for Garveyites⁷ great symbolic value. BSSL also signified Garvey’s ingenuity in adopting a “capitalistic approach” (Carter, 2002, p. 1) to fostering Black economic emancipation. It also demonstrated that, even in racist America, Black leaders could tap into African mass movements for financial capital with which to promote Black “economic interests” (Carter, 2002, p. 2). Even though BSSL was poorly managed and would cease to exist in 1922, it represents “the first large scale business venture financed and managed by [people of African descent [and] . . . still remains one of the largest Africa-American owned companies in US history” (Carter, 2002, p. 3),

⁷ Garveyites are adherents of Garveyism, “a political ideology and socioeconomic philosophy associated with the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and its founder, Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887–1940). Considered to be a critical post–World War I response to the development of other movements centered upon the self-determination of people of African descent (the New Negro movement, the African Black Brotherhood, Black internationalism, Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, trade unionism, Communism, socialism)” (Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World, 2008).

which is in and of itself a significant feat considering the political and economic climate of the time. BSSL would later be absorbed by Ghana's national shipping line following that country's independence in 1957, and the Black Star incorporated into the Ghanaian national flag.

Despite BSSL's demise, Garvey did not abandon his dream to make Africa the homeland of all people of African descent. In 1920 and again in 1924, he dispatched a delegation to Liberia to sound out the country's leadership regarding a plan to resettle Africans of the Diaspora there. Despite the Liberian President's promise to Garvey "that the government would be glad to have his Association occupy certain settlements in Liberia" (Edwards, 1967, p. 23), the plan had to be scuttled in 1925 owing to Garvey's criticism of the Firestone Rubber Company, a major investor in the country. The failure of the resettlement plan evinced the extensive power Western nations and their corporate allies could exercise over African nations and called into question Garvey's supposition that Africa had the wherewithal to liberate itself and become a powerhouse in world affairs. For Garvey, true freedom and emancipation could be won only through "self-achievement and progress, . . . [Thus] the Negro will have to build his own government, industry, art, science, literature and culture, before the world will stop to consider him. Until then, [Africans will remain] . . . wards of the superior race and civilization, and the outcasts of a standard social system" (Jacques-Garvey as cited in Lewis, 2011, p. 480).

Garvey's worst fears of what Africa and Africans would become if they failed to unite and harness the continent's vast resources have been realized today, notwithstanding a few isolated success stories. After years of independence, African countries continue to struggle under the aegis of neocolonial institutions, e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and their stringent conditionalities attached to loans. The continent's development is encumbered by neoliberal prescriptions that require cuts to social programs and education among much else. To survive, African countries have been compelled to incorporate foreign prescriptions into domestic policies.

3.6. Kwame Nkrumah and Pan-Africanism

Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-African concept pertaining to restoring the humanity and innate capabilities of Africans, including those in the diaspora, had a major influence on Afrocentric thought. This is not to say that Afrocentricity was the brainchild of Nkrumah; it was not. Rather, the point to be made here is that even though the theory of Afrocentricity emerged after Nkrumah's death in 1972, its core imperative, i.e., the building of an African intellectual autonomy capable of speaking to Black oppression and the typecasting of Africans, was one that was intrinsic to his thought. Like present-day Afrocentric scholars, Nkrumah believed that Africans' servile relationship to Europe sustained their oppression and underwrote the exploitation of the continent's resources. Like Du Bois, Nkrumah believed that an African identity was in no way predicated on place of birth. From Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist perspective, an African, included all Blacks in the diaspora who could trace their origins to Africa (Nkrumah, 1962). By extending the concept of Pan-African identity thus, Nkrumah fostered an assurance among Blacks across the globe that Africa was their ancestral Homeland and that the African struggle was a struggle of Blacks "everywhere" (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xvii). To simplify Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist logic, Blacks in the US were Africans and their struggle a continuum of the African struggle against colonial oppression. It was the latter that would come to dominate Nkrumah's thought while a student in the US in the early 1940s:

I was revolted by the ruthless colonial exploitation and political oppression of the people of Africa [such] that I knew no peace. The matter exercised my mind to such a degree that I decided to put down my thoughts in writing and to dilate on the results of some of my research concerning the subject of colonialism and imperialism. (Nkrumah, 1962, p. ix)

One of Nkrumah's most enduring legacies was his uncompromising faith in the ability and determination of Africans to confront colonial oppression, in whatever guise, steadfastly and courageously, to raise Black consciousness, and to muster sufficient will to dislodge Africa from the colonial orbit. As a student and a political activist, he well

understood the magnitude of the task facing Africans, an understanding that would inform his political work.

Nkrumah rejected the proposition that because colonialism had laid down the foundation for a modern economy, established law and order and educated the colonized, it was therefore benign. For Nkrumah, imperialism and colonialism were predicated on the principle of divide and rule, of pitting Africans against one another, thus precluding any possibility of them uniting in opposition to White supremacy. Colonial ideologies and aims, Nkrumah argued, were at variance with Africa's interests. Embedded in the colonial ideology lies the imperative to deny Africans' their dignity and crush any hope of liberation or national development. Thus, for Nkrumah, the argument, that colonialism was somewhat benevolent appeared farfetched (Nkrumah, 1962).

According to Nkrumah, colonialism perpetuates itself in many disparate ways: by sowing discontent among rival ethnic groups, racial or religious groups; by co-opting those among the indigenous populations who can bring influence to bear on the masses, e.g., by offering them employment in the colonial administration or providing them economic incentives in return for their co-operation; by holding forth the promise of a better future to be realized by adopting European culture, technology and administrative methods. The promise of a brighter tomorrow, Nkrumah asserts, has its origin in White paternalism and its corollary: the incurable habit of infantilizing Africans, of relegating them to the status of children to be placated with promises that would never be honored for lack of political will and moral fortitude on the part of the colonial powers. For Nkrumah, Africa's problems would never be solved by colonial exploitation and domination; only Africans could take on such a task (Nkrumah, 1962). He also rejected categorically the Eurocentric view of colonialism as a missionary undertaking aimed at uplifting the benighted native, recognizing it as the subterfuge it was.

According to Nkrumah, colonialism is synonymous with "deception, hypocrisy, oppression and exploitation" (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xvi). It marginalized and subordinated Africans, thus depriving them of true liberty and independence while concealing its real aims

under the cover of empty phrases, such as “colonial charter,” “trusteeship,” “partnership,” “guardianship” . . . “constitutional reforms” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xvi), which, while meaning little to the masses of subjugated Blacks, helped preserve the illusion that colonialism represented a benign force acting in the world. Dispelling that illusion would require raising the political consciousness of Africans to the level where the bankruptcy and vacuity of the colonial system would at last be revealed, a *sine qua non* for mobilizing resistance.

To draw attention to the nefarious goals of colonialism, Nkrumah cited three particularly damning sentences from a speech by Albert Sarraut, France’s colonial secretary, delivered at the *Ecole Coloniale* in 1923: “What is the use of painting the truth? . . . Colonialism was not an act of civilization; [it] was not a desire to civilize. It was an act of force motivated by interests” (Sarraut as cited in Nkrumah, 1962, p. 3). These words reflect precisely the Afrocentrist view of European education. What I glean from Sarraut’s statement is that colonialism aims not at uplifting Africans but exploiting them for material gain. And what better way to serve this purpose than by ‘miseducating’ them so they might be more easily manipulated. What passed for education in a colonial context aimed at reproducing European dominance, not at producing intellectuals and leaders on a par with those of Europe. According to Nkrumah, colonial education fell short of providing Africans with the *savoir faire* required to win “political and economic independence” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. 2).

Nkrumah was not sparing in his criticism of African educated elites who echoed calls by colonial authorities for a gradual transition to self-government, along with the maintenance of strong ties to the mother country in perpetuity—in other words, neocolonialism. Here was a recipe for national development that combined what for Nkrumah were antithetical concepts: democracy and colonialism. While the former promoted freedom, independence, human dignity, and the building of institutions that fostered equality, the latter was predicated on a “policy by which the ‘Mother Country,’ . . . binds her colonies to herself by political ties with the primary objective of promoting her own economic advantage. Such a system [Nkrumah argued] depends on the opportunities offered by the natural resources of the colonies and uses for them suggested by the dominant economic objectives of the colonial power” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. 2).

Nkrumah was also of the view that Africans needed no tutelage from the colonial powers on how to govern themselves, given that prior to colonialism they had succeeded reasonably well in this respect. “Wasn’t the African now considered ‘unprepared’ to govern himself . . . by himself before the advent of Europeans [,] [he asked]?” Indeed, in his view, the “African way of living even today is more democratic than the much vaunted ‘democratic’ manner of life and government of the ‘West’” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. 3), a view wholeheartedly endorsed by Afrocentrists. European prescriptions for African governance, he asserted, were hypocritical; while offering the promise of respecting the political right of Africans to chart their own destiny, at least in principle, they did not aim at abrogating “the legislative power [vested] . . . [in] the [British] Parliament . . . [with a view to ceding colonies their independence] . . . Such an administrative system [is] not only the embodiment of colonial chaos and political confusion, [it] . . . nullif[ies] the idea[1]s of true democracy” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. 25).

According to Nkrumah, the solution to colonial domination lay in “political independence” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xv) achieved through African unity. The latter, Nkrumah asserted, was a precondition for mobilizing the continent’s collective strength, which would compel the colonial centre to grant independence. It was only through unity combined with action that Africa would be positioned to (re)gain her independence from the “minute minorities of alien stock” (Nkrumah, 1958, p. 47). This unity must, he warned, shun ethnic and other narrow interests and coalesce around a “national entity” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. 33). Above all else, unity, according to Nkrumah, required an “eager and earnest collaboration [among Africans]” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xvi). Africa’s independence can only be achieved by Africans at a place and time of their own choosing, Nkrumah argued (Nkrumah, 1962; 1968). No White nation, he opined, could free Africa, a thesis that later came to inform, I would argue, liberation struggles in Algeria, Rhodesia, South West Africa, and South Africa as well as those of Blacks in the United States. Writes Nkrumah:

The idea that Britain, France or any other colonial power is holding colonies under ‘trusteeship’ until, in their opinion, the colonies become ‘capable’ of self-government is erroneous and misconceived. . . . To imagine that these colonial powers will hand freedom and independence to their colonies on a

silver platter without compulsion is the height of folly. (Nkrumah, 1962, pp. xvi-xvii)

According to Nkrumah, Black freedom cannot be realized through the auspices or good graces of the colonial powers; no number of conferences or round-table discussions aimed at charting the destiny of colonial peoples could have any purchase in this regard. Thus, he cautioned against accepting “gifts” “charity,” [and] “grants” (Nkrumah, 1962, p. xvii) bestowed upon Africans as tokens of White benevolence.

Despite grave doubts concerning the merits of some African leaders, Nkrumah argued that Africa’s fate lay with its anticolonial intellectuals and leadership. The continent’s long-term interests could be advanced, he believed, only by elected public officials who understood the hypocritical and oppressive ethos of colonialism and were committed, albeit at a cost, to fighting it. To wage this battle, he claimed, would require a strong sense of agency on the part of Africans. Nkrumah also believed that Africa’s transformation could be achieved through an intellectual revolution, aimed at, among other things, formulating an educational model informed by a pride in Africa, in its disparate peoples and in their contributions to world civilization. Once independence had been won, the challenges confronting the newly-independent African nations would, he theorized, undermine, their independence unless anticolonial intellectuals and leaders formed a bulwark against neocolonialism, a variant of colonialism, using soft power and operating under the aegis of corrupt indigenous leaders. Only African intellectuals and leaders, Nkrumah argued, were capable of uniting the continent in opposition to the colonial metropolis bent upon exploiting the continent’s natural resources and low-wage labour. Abandoning their anticolonial position, Nkrumah believed, would amount to “welcom[ing] with open arms the very [enemy] which [Africans have] sought to destroy at [a] cost of terrible suffering” (Nkrumah, 1964, p. 103). Nkrumah presentiment, of what might befall Africa if she failed to draw upon her indigenous strengths and exercise ownership of her resources has sadly been vindicated; the continent remains divided, destitute and entirely dependent on Europe and China for investment.

3.7. Afrocentric Theory: The Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights Period

Afrocentricity, which is based on Afrocentric Theory (AT) draws its inspiration from the struggle against Black oppression, the latter a phenomenon that, while global in scope, was most deeply entrenched in the US. AT rose to prominence in the US at the time of the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements, i.e., during the 1960s. The sources of its inspiration were threefold: the African independence movement, which emerged following World War II; the decolonization of Africa and Asia beginning in the late 1940s with the withdrawal of Britain from the Indian subcontinent; and the writings of some of Africa's most prominent anti-colonial leaders, including Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Julius Nyerere, all of whom rejected European “myths of African inferiority” (Lynn, 2004, pp. 157-158) and called for Black unity and liberation across the Atlantic.

Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as:

A mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. . . . [It] is the centerpiece of [African] regeneration. It challenges and takes to task the perpetuation of White racial supremacist ideas in the imagination of the African world. . . . It has become revolutionary, [a]ttacking the falsification of truth and attitudes of self-hatred that have oppressed a great many [Africans]. Thus, Afrocentricity is purposeful, giving a true sense of identity [to Africans] based upon the facts of [their] history and experience. Afrocentricity is . . . associated with the discovery . . . of African agency within the context of history and culture. (pp. 2-3).

According to Asante (1998), Afrocentricity challenges and subverts dominant formulations, suppositions and typecasts that refute and/or falsify “African classical thought [and] . . . classical past . . . essentially [leaving Africans] with a discontinuous history and uncertain future” (Asante, 1998, p. 11). Afrocentricity seeks to salvage and promote African history and contributions to humankind by “reestablish[ing] the centrality of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization and the Nile Valley cultural complex as points of reference for an African perspective in much the same way that Greece and Rome serve as reference points for the European world” (Asante, 1998, p. 11). Afrocentricity is a model of thought

that, though routinely accused by its many critics of being blinkered, welcomes diversity of thought.

According to Mazama (2001), Afrocentricity is a theory of humanity in all of its aspects and conditions. It is therefore a theory of the oppressed, delineating the “disturbing conditions of African people [and prescribing a] remedy” (Mazama, 2001, p. 387). And it is also a theory of resistance that contests the validity of Eurocentric histories as well as the privileging of those histories in public education. As a pluralist theory, it rejects dominant narratives that celebrate Whites as the principal contributors to civilization, while “relegate[ing] [African knowledge systems] to . . . the margins” (Mazama, 2001, p. 387). One of the central tenets of Afrocentricity, Mazama argues, is that in the context of public education and schooling, Africans students are subordinated to Whites, by means of either compulsion or socialization. Addressing this inequity, Mazama argues, requires critiquing European models of thought and substituting in their place Afrocentric knowledge, which alone is capable of meeting the needs and advancing the interests of these students. According Mazama (2001), Africans can achieve their potential by interrogating what passes for universal knowledge and internalizing ways of thinking that reflect an African cultural ethos:

How many of us have really paused to seriously examine and challenge such ideas as development, planning, progress, the need for democracy, and the nation-state as the best form of political and social organization, to name only a few? Our failure to recognize the roots of such ideas in the European cultural ethos has led us, willingly or unwillingly, to agree to [our] footnote status in the White man’s book. . . . We do not exist on our own terms but on borrowed, European ones. We are dislocated, and having lost sight of ourselves in the midst of European decadence and madness . . . Our liberation . . . rests upon our ability to systematically displace European ways of thinking, being, feeling, being, . . . and replac[ing] them with ways that are germane to our African cultural experience. (pp. 387-388)

Afrocentric theorists believe that Black liberation across the globe is possible only if those of African descent can break free of the neo-colonial and racist ideas that demean them and naturalize their oppression and begin to affirm their freedom and autonomy. They also

held that achieving Black freedom could be accelerated by building a Pan-African alliance aimed at resisting racial oppression, promoting Black freedom, and showcasing Africa's contributions to civilization (Austin, 2006; Diop, 1974; Ginwright, 2004; Keto, 2001)—something the continent and its people had been denied by the architects of colonial education and knowledge systems.

As an oppositional paradigm, AT rejects European racist perceptions of Black people; it also rejects White supremacy and the Eurocentric scholarship underwriting it. According to Asante, Black freedom is attainable if Blacks can only free themselves from an “intellectual plantation” that valorizes European thought as universal (Asante, 2007, p. 7). According to Asante (2007), intellectual autonomy is possible only if Africans eschew Eurocentric constructs in favour of African-oriented paradigms that offer them the sense of agency and empowerment requisite for assuming control over their destiny.

The dominance of Eurocentric values in education and other areas, Asante and other Afrocentrists argue, stems from the resilience and adaptability of Eurocentric knowledge systems and their power to instill in the minds of people of African descent the belief that their future and that of Africa is contingent upon internalizing White values and worldviews (Asante, 2007; Keto, 2001). For its proponents, AT represents a milestone in the intellectual growth of Black people and in their opposition to dominant epistemologies that for the longest time have defined them as subjects to be worked upon and continue to do so today with little resistance. AT creates a space, proponents argue, wherein African knowledge systems are not only respected and legitimized and their producers acknowledged, but also perceived to possess analytical frameworks capable of explicating African history and culture from the standpoint of people of African descent—analytical frameworks on a par with their dominant counterparts in terms of theoretical value. Underlying AT is the view that Africans everywhere can and must take ownership of their destiny rather than allow themselves to become a footnote to European history (Asante, 2003; Keto, 2001). In sum, AT promotes a thought process that enables people of African descent to see for themselves, hear for themselves, think for themselves, and make decisions for themselves without second-guessing themselves or turning to colonial orthodoxies (Asante, 1993; Keto, 2001).

As a prerequisite for winning their freedom, Africans, Asante contends, must reject ideas that work to reproduce European domination, e.g., the proposition, taken from the playbook of biological determinism and colonial anthropology, and aimed at sowing divisions among the colonized, that the lighter the skin tone, the higher the position on the evolutionary ladder. Afrocentricity, Asante contends, equips Africans with the critical faculties to penetrate the veil of ideologies and practices that serve to perpetuate White domination. One particularly insidious practice indulged in by American slave owners involved bestowing Christian names upon Black slaves, thus undermining their African identity. Notes Asante (2003):

Defined collectively by Whites as “Negroes” and identified individually by White names, we are bodies without spirit [and] people without dignity . . . How we perceive ourselves influences how others perceive us. . . . A Muslim takes an Arabic name, a Christian takes a Christian name; [Africans] take African names . . . The ideology of liberation must find its existence in ourselves; it cannot be external to us, and it cannot be imposed by those other than ourselves; it must be derived from our particular historical and cultural experience. (p. 41)

According to Asante (2003), Afrocentricity provides Africans with the critical faculties to “uncover all falsehoods, expose fake issues, [and] demonstrate the overpowering effect of a committed will [to] chang[e] behaviors” (p. 111). Changing behaviours, however, requires first regaining a sense of the legitimacy of African culture and of an African worldview predicated upon it. Writes Asante (1998):

If we have lost anything [as Africans], it is our cultural centeredness; that is, we have been moved off our own platforms. This means that we cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space. . . . Our existential relationship to be the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at a given moment. By regaining our own cultural spaces, and believing that our ways of viewing the universe are just as valid as any, we will achieve the kind of transformation that we need to participate fully in a multicultural society. . . . Without this kind of centeredness, we bring nothing to the multicultural table, but a darker version of Whiteness. (p. 8)

Afrocentricity, according to Asante, functions as an earthwork, behind which African knowledge production can proceed relatively unimpeded by European knowledge systems. It denies Eurocentrists the freedom to define their “European line [of thinking] as “universal [thus further] hinder[ing the] cultural understanding [of Africans] and demean[ing their] humanity” (Asante, 1998, p. 11).

Abarry posits that AT is a philosophical proposition based on the assumption that “anything meaningful and authentic [with respect to] peoples of African descent must begin and proceed with Africa as the center, not [the] periphery” (as cited in Schiele, 1994, p. 152). An African-centred theory gives Africans due credit as repositories of African knowledge, a view shared by Bekerie. According to the latter, Afrocentricity interjects into modern-day scholarship a model of thought that examines “African cultures and history from [African] centres and locations . . . [with a view to] validat[ing], regenerat[ing] creat[ing], and perpetuat[ing] African life and living—whole and unhindered, [with an] . . . African . . . outlook” (Bekerie, 1994, p. 131). Bekerie defines Afrocentricity as a body of philosophical thought like no other. Sometimes described as a theory of confrontation, Afrocentricity challenges ignorance, particularly among dominant scholars, essayists, and pundits whose understanding of African history is informed by colonial anthropology and racist constructs (Bekerie, 1994).

3.8. Afrocentric Theory: The Criticisms

AT is not without its critics whose positions range from the antagonistic (Cobb, 1997; Dick, 1995) to the moderate (Gates, 1991) to the constructive (Walcott, 1997; Collins, 2006), depending on their respective views on African identity and history and their respective worldviews. These contestations foreground the notion that the African identity is not seamless or monolithic as rightwing Afrocentric scholars argue; rather, it is variable and thus determined by factors beyond skin colour or affiliation, real or imagined, with the African Homeland.

Prominent among these critics is Myers, who in “Changing Attitudes about Race” asserts:

Afrocentrism defies a single definition. Like pornography or obscenity, we know it when we see it. Sometimes I wish that Afrocentrism were a four-letter word and that we could just dispense with it as such. Afrocentrism, in my view is all three—fake, primitive, and anti-intellectual. I believe for scholars to get not just upset at Afrocentrism, but angry. Scholars will have to take on their fellow academicians—not just in academic journals and in their publications, but on their own campuses and on the campuses where Afrocentrists have their strongholds. We need to recognize that the marketplace of ideas requires not only debate, but debaters. We need to get busy. (Myers as cited in Bekerie, 1994, p. 140)

According to Verharen (2003), the brand of Afrocentricity espoused by Asante and like-minded Afrocentric scholars is premised on two fundamental tenets: “true self-knowledge must be grounded in one’s own historical context; and self-knowledge properly pursued yields personal agency moving toward a global community that preserves cultural differences” (pp. 73-74). Verharen argues that critics of Afrocentricity very often confuse the Afrocentric “movement with Afrocentrism” (p. 74):

[While] some proponents of Afrocentrism deserve criticism for their undocumented and contentious claims . . . Afrocentricity must be singled out as a unique version of Afrocentrism with a distinctive methodology . . . In its most neutral guise, [Afrocentricity] is simply a research methodology. (p. 74)

Verharen (2003) identifies three variants of Afrocentrism, which critics, he contends, often conflate, thereby failing to recognize Asante’s brand for what it really is: a philosophical body of thought as well as a methodological approach to studying people of African descent:

[The first variant of Afrocentrism] sympathize[s] with Africans on the African continent or in the diaspora. Proponents of this form of Afrocentrism see the world through Africana eyes and reinterpret world history by filtering it through the viewpoint of Africana experience. . . . The second kind of Afrocentrism expresses a philosophy of vindicationism that challenges the European tradition of denying the humanity of Africans. A popular variants of vindicationism called the “Nile Valley Afrocentrism” claims that the ancient

Egyptians were Black and that their traditions formed the basis of European civilization. . . . A third kind of Afrocentrism goes beyond vindicationism to a philosophy (perhaps an ideology) of Black supremacy. Citing environmental, cultural, or genetic reasons for Africana superiority, proponents of this form of Afrocentrism argue that not only were Africans the first civilized peoples but they have also proven themselves to be far more civilized than barbaric Europeans could ever hope to be. (pp. 74-75)

Verharen simplifies Afrocentricity with a view to reducing the confusion that has so confounded critics. The “Afro” in ‘Afrocentricity’ [Verharen points out] reflects a commitment to the idea that all humans are Africans in origin, the ‘centricity’ a commitment to the idea that people must center themselves in their own cultural experience” (Verharen, 2003, p. 79). According to Verharen, Afrocentricity is by no means exclusionary; indeed, it welcomes non-Blacks to imbibe the African “way of cultural self-knowledge” (Verharen, 2003, p. 75).

According to Verharen (2003), far from promoting racial superiority, Afrocentricity is premised on respect for all races, ethnicities, cultures and ways of knowing. What Afrocentricity contests is the passing off of Eurocentric knowledge as universal to the detriment of alternative knowledge systems. According to its principal luminaries, Afrocentricity embodies inclusivity, tolerance and harmony:

While all of Afrocentricity’s founders support close study of Africa’s tradition, none of them deny the importance of European cultures—for Whites and Blacks and other humans. In fact, most of them were strongly influenced by their exposure to European traditions in Europe itself. Du Bois’s ideas about global unity through cultural complementarity were current at the University of Berlin, where he was a student during the 1890s. Locke’s cosmopolitanism was nourished in the company of fellow Rhodes scholars from around the world at Oxford in the early 1900s. Though he was born and raised in the Caribbean, Fanon’s French education familiarized him with philosophers from Hegel to Sartre. While Diop was born and raised in West Africa, his explicit references to European classicists and Egyptologists who believed in the African origins of European civilization reflects his many years at the Sorbonne. (p. 78)

According to Verharen (2003), “no theory covers all possible experiences for all times and places” (p. 85), a view shared by Mazama (2001). Mazama states: “[t]he

Afrocentric Idea . . . means viewing the European voice as just one among many and not necessarily the wisest one” (p. 388). To underscore Afrocentricity’s inclusivity, Verharen (2003) cites the “Out of Africa” hypothesis that holds that regardless of race, there is more that unites than divides us. This hypothesis, Afrocentrists argue, entreats us to move beyond the artificial construct of race and find ways to live together in harmony, notwithstanding our differences. Asserts Verharen:

[Afrocentricity] offers a philosophy that brings all people together. Describing humanity’s African origins as an accident of geography, [Afrocentricity] does not privilege Africans over any other group of people. Rather, [it] suggests that we maintain our individual cultural differences yet use our common origins as a foundation for a new global civilization that can stand against [oppression]. In this new world community, [Afrocentricity] can enhance cross-cultural intimacy to unite the world. (p. 78)

From an Afrocentric perspective, peaceful coexistence is possible provided the dominant order accepts and respects African-based knowledge systems, history, cultures, and practices that Africans deem essential to their survival (Verharen, 2003).

Cobb (1997) dismisses Afrocentric scholarship as “cut-and-paste soundbites of . . . a hyperblack mosaic of ideas, rites, and practices” (p. 123) and AT as “chauvinist demagoguery” (p. 123). He has this to say about Asante:

Asante’s *Afrocentricity* (1980) [emphasis in original] became the text that reincarnated the movement. Though Asante jacked his predecessors for their ideas and his book is a mosaic of concepts espoused by other thinkers, it pushed Asante and the ill-defined “ism” into the forefront of the intellectual warfare of the 80s. (p. 128)

Cobb’s criticism of Afrocentricity is personal. He disregards a normative injunction that applies to all critical scholarship: focus on ideas and steer clear of *ad hominem* attacks. His indictment of Afrocentricity denies his audience the opportunity to form their own views. His critique of AT, moreover, lends credence to the claim made by proponents that White supremacists and their Black allies find its propositions pertaining to Black intellectual emancipation to be disconcerting, and for this reason, they seek to discredit it, along with its

principal supporters. In a critique of Collins' *Black Power and Hip Hop: Racism Nationalism and Feminism* (2006), Asante characterizes the author's understanding of Afrocentric thought as pedestrian and the author herself as a "vulgar careerist whose plan is to distance [herself] from African agency" (Asante, 2007 p. 18).

According to Dick (1995), AT promotes epistemic violence (Dick, 1995). He sees the theory as a "reactive" project aimed at subverting "Eurocentric values" and "hegemony" and Afrocentrists as a "coterie of Black scholars driven by a single goal: to discredit Eurocentric thought with a view to promoting the "self-affirmation . . . [of an] oppressed and marginalized peoples" (Dick, 1995, p. 196). Offering no supporting evidence of any substantive kind, he dismisses Afrocentrists as implacable revisionists keen to Africanize Black history by marshaling evidence purporting to show that, for example, ancient Egypt, not Greece, was the font of Western civilization. Afrocentricity has also been criticized for denigrating Black gay men (Austin, 2006; Cobb, 1997). Afrocentric psychologist Wade Noble, for instance, describes homosexuality as a "self-destructive disorder" (Austin, 2006, p. 159), a label that works to normalize violence directed against this already vulnerable minority. The danger here is that such views could be exploited by AT proponents to justify policing every moral space in the Black community and excluding those whose actions and practices they consider to be abnormal and unacceptable.

In a *Newsweek* article titled "Beware of the New Pharaoh", Gates (1991) dismisses Afrocentricity as little more than polemics while questioning its methodological rigor. He goes on to describe the theory as an ideology that internalizes conformity and fosters a contempt for alternative theoretical frameworks, particularly those viewed as mainstream and or in opposition to African-centred constructs and/or narratives. According to Gates, the aim of African-American Studies should be to inquire into the complexities of being of African descent, rather than promoting an ethnic fundamentalism that eschews critical inquiry.

Argues Gates:

We need to explore the hyphen in African-American on both sides of the Atlantic. We must chart the porous relations between an "American" culture that officially pretends that Anglo-American *regional* [emphasis in original]

culture is the true, universal culture and the Black cultures it so long stigmatized. We must also document both the continuities and discontinuities between African and African American cultures, rather than to reduce the astonishing diversity of African cultures to a few simple-minded shibboleths. (p. 47)

Gates (1991) dismisses the suggestion that Afrocentricity is, and ought to remain, an exclusive area of expertise for Black scholars. The aims of Afrocentric scholarship, he declares, are best served by promoting cross-racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural contributions. Gates further declares that ideas should be judged on their merits, not the race of their proponents. Spurning alternative ideas, he warns, is analogous to barring Black scholars from disciplines thought too mainstream or female scholars from writing on issues deemed outside their province simply because they are women. Writes Gates:

In short, [Afrocentricity] is not just for Blacks; [the] subject [should be] open[ed] to all—to study or teach. The fundamental premise of the academy is that all things ultimately are knowable; all are therefore teachable. . . . We do nothing to help our discipline by attempting to make of it a closed shop, where only Blacks need apply. . . . Nobody comes into the world as a "Black" person or a "White" person: these identities are conferred on us by a complex history, by patterns of social acculturation that are both surprisingly labile and persistent. Social identities are never as rigid as we like to pretend: they are constantly being contested and negotiated. For a scholar, "Afrocentrism" should mean more than wearing Kente cloth and celebrating Kwanza instead of Christmas. . . . [or supporting] bogus theories of "sun" and "ice" people and the invidious scapegoating of other ethnic groups . . . —which too many of the pharaohs of "Afrocentrism" have accepted without realizing. We must not . . . resurrect our own version of the thought police, who would determine who, and what, is "Black". (p. 47)

In situating Africa's greatness within the context of ancient Egyptian civilization, moreover, AT has laid itself open to charges of myth making; there exists not a shred of evidence to connect the history and culture of the entire African continent with that of ancient Egypt (Lefkowitz, 1996). Such a position, critics argue, can only encourage those already disposed to fantasizing about their cultural roots; it can offer no basis for a serious historical investigation of any facet of Black culture. Apart from forging spurious links between ancient Egypt and Black Africa, AT tends to focus on a past dominated by the

exploits of Kings and Queens, leaving it open to charges of sentimentalizing African history; there is, too, a fascination with the subjugation of Africa by the great European powers, which has the effect of signifying the continent as a victim of European avarice and barbarity, while at the same time attributing its underdevelopment solely to the imperatives of colonial metropolises, in the process denying Africa an independent place in history in the process formulating for Africa a history of dependency (Schreiber, 2000).

Lefkowitz views the Afrocentric project as part historical revisionism, part polemic and part anodyne. Lefkowitz dismisses the claim made by Afrocentric scholars that the great philosophers of classical Greece were heavily indebted to the ancient Egyptians. Moreover, she describes Afrocentric scholars as “living in sealed-off intellectual ghettos, impervious to information from the outside and paying no attention to the truth of their propositions; . . . [as] concerned purely with the ‘feel good’ factor and with boosting the low self-esteem of African Americans” (Lefkowitz as cited in Bernal, 1996, p. 86). The debates between Afrocentrists and Eurocentrists too often degenerate into name-calling. Whereas for Afrocentric scholars the prime objective lies in creating a space for African-centered knowledge systems, Eurocentric scholars are preoccupied with asserting White intellectual dominance.

Critics of Afrocentricity argue that in rejecting Western paradigms on the grounds that they are ill-equipped to speak to the Black experience, Afrocentricity is guilty of essentialism as well as a breach of “paradigmatic pluralism” (Schreiber, 2000, p. 656). Moreover, in labeling Western philosophical thought as Eurocentric without taking into consideration its many variations, Afrocentricity loses sight of “intellectual traditions [that arose] in response to hegemony and oppression” (Schreiber, 2000, p. 659) and whose principal advocates are White, e.g., Feminist Theory and Critical Theory.

Collins criticizes Afrocentric scholars for failing to give the experience of Black women the prominence it deserves. Collins argues that AT and Afrocentrists relegate Black women to the role of secondary actors, which is hardly surprising given that “neither Afrocentric intellectual production . . . nor Afrocentrism in the academy has shown a

sustained interest in gender” (Collins, 2006, p. 98). It is a mindset that views Black women’s experience as undeserving of intellectual exploration (Collins, 2006). In failing Black women in this regard, AT is partly responsible, Collins suggests, for their oppression. At the same time, in its emphasis on traditional gender roles in the African-American family, Afrocentricity naturalizes the role of Black women as “wives” and “mothers” (Collins, 2006, p. 107) and that of Black men as breadwinners. This kind of signification, she argues, restricts Black women to the private sphere of the family, limiting their role to child rearing and homemaking and thus severely limiting opportunities for employment outside the home—an arrangement whereby Black women remain financially dependent on Black men, a principal cause of poverty, or so it is argued, among Black families.

Afrocentricity, Collins asserts, imposes and enforces patriarchal canons that hinder Black women from exercising autonomy while investing Black men with unwarranted power in the sphere of gender relations. For their part, Black women, and particularly Black female scholars, who reject patriarchy are either ignored or condemned as “traitors to the [Black] race, too ‘White,’ or lesbians” (Collins, 2006, p. 111). She further asserts that a patriarchal mindset suffuses the views on gender relations held by some Afrocentrists, citing as an example a statement issued by Imamu Amiri Baraka, a prominent Black cultural nationalist: “We [Black men] don’t believe in the equality of men and women. . . . We could never be equals” (Collins, 2006, p. 107).

Even though crediting Asante for encouraging Afrocentric scholars to acknowledge the contributions made by Black women to Black history, Collins dismisses his overtures as nothing more than platitudes. By focusing primarily on race, she contends, AT ignores the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality and its impact on Black women. Overall, the Afrocentric approach to gender relations fails to capture in all of their richness and fullness the experiences and struggles of Black women. And apart from publicizing in a very circumscribed way those experiences and struggles through collaborative work with Black female scholars, Afrocentric male scholars have done little, Collins asserts, to interrogate the asymmetrical power relations existing between Black men and women (Collins, 2006). She further asserts that while Afrocentric scholars have come to recognize the achievements of

Black women over the years, they have done so in ways that avoid challenging the patriarchal order.

According to Collins (2006), the experiences and achievements of Black women are invariably referenced to those of men. In labeling Harriet Tubman the “Moses of Her People,” (p. 113) for example, Afrocentric scholars come to judge her deeds and accomplishments by “male standards of military leadership and warfare” (p. 113). Thus, the greatness of Black women can only be acknowledged in reference to patriarchal values and standards, their success celebrated only under conditions and terms dictated by Black men.

Despite these many and varied criticisms, Collins recognizes the importance of AT and the efforts of Afrocentric scholars to promote in Blacks a consciousness of themselves as a people and an awareness of the challenges that confront them across the globe. It should also be pointed out, and to the credit of Afrocentric scholars, that some of the issues and concerns Collins raises, and particularly gender inequality, are today less egregious. To their credit, Afrocentric scholars have come out publicly against gender inequality (Asante, 2007). In *Afrocentricity: The theory of social change*, Asante writes that Afrocentrists are “against all forms of oppression, including racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia and White racial domination” (Asante, 2003, p. 2). Despite assurances on the part of Asante that Afrocentricity is antithetical to all forms of oppression, some Black scholars remain unconvinced. According to Wright (2000), the uncompromising posturing of Afrocentrists against “tak[ing] up [European] discourses . . . could lead to extreme insularity, minute and ineffective communities, self-marginalization and the restriction of the development of [Afrocentric] discourse” (Wright, 2000, p. 129).

3.9. Afrocentric Education: What Does It Mean and Why Is It Necessary?

I begin this section with a quote from McWhorter. I do so to with a view to refuting his argument that we live in a post-racial world where race has no place in social discourse or education. According to McWhorter, race does not matter very much, notwithstanding the

stigma attached to those Caucasians so reckless as to criticize immigration policy on grounds entirely divorced from race, e.g., economic or environmental. McWhorter has this to say of Black students:

The sad and simple fact is that while there are some excellent Black students . . . on average, Black students do not try as hard as other students. The reason they do not try as hard is not because they are inherently lazy, nor is it because they are stupid . . . these students belong to a culture infected with an anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace schoolwork too whole-heartedly. (McWhorter as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2)

McWhorter's remarks which supposedly explain the poor performance of Black students highlight one thing: it is no longer acceptable to attribute academic failure to race; rather, if one is to avoid being branded a racist, a tactical shift is required: the "root [cause] of minority children's failure" (Philips as cited in Ogbu, 1995a, p. 189) is now to be explained in terms, not of race, but of Black culture and the Black family—so goes the argument advanced by those who still believe that Blacks are a lost cause and should be left to their own devices. Afrocentrists, it goes without saying, reject this view, pinning the blame instead on colonial education for which there exists, happily, an obvious corrective.

AE is an eclectic concept; it means different things to different people. Differing definitions and interpretations complicate the effort to formulate a precise definition. For Henry (1993), AE constitutes "an alternative, oppositional, and liberatory pedagogy for children of African descent [attending Canadian] schools" (p. 212), a definition that goes beyond a simplistic perception of it as exclusionary, revisionist, and anti-White. Citing Clark, Henry (1993) argues that AE is "not only as a pedagogy of Black self-representation, but . . . a form of "diaspora literacy . . . [and that it provides Black students with the] ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed [and] indigenous perspective" (p. 214). Citing Joseph, Henry (1993) contends: "The Afrocentric conceptual system is not exclusively Black or exclusively African. It is a journey toward wholeness that requires seeing the world not [as] Black or White, but in its full spectrum" (p. 214).

From Henry's definition, one may gather that the goal of a liberatory education, of which AE is a prime example, can be achieved, so its proponents claim, by making the school curriculum all-inclusive, by which they mean incorporating a comprehensive history of Black people. This gamut of ideas and perspectives, situated within and outside AE, positions this educational model to "challenge the foundations of the Western world and its legacy of colonialism" (Henry, 1993, p 214), the latter constituting one of the principal factors responsible for the disaffection and underachievement of Black students.

Dei and Kempf (2011) define Afrocentric education as "pedagogic initiatives, . . . built on a philosophy of education that integrates teachings of culture, identity and history. . . used as cornerstones for both social and academic excellence" (para. 10). They further contend that Afrocentric teachings are "rooted in a worldview that espouses social responsibility, community belonging, mutual interdependence, respect for self, group and community, authority and the duties of citizen responsibility" (para. 11).

Gordon (1993) defines AE as an alternative pedagogic framework that incorporates African-centred perspectives. This approach, she argues, allows Black students to gain the knowledge requisite for effecting change, to improve the self, and to confront societal barriers to social justice. In her view AE examines taken-for-granted experiences. Incorporating African history, achievement and heroes, Gordon claims, builds in Black students the confidence and knowledge base essential to interrogating topics often avoided in the public school system for fear of affronting racial sensibilities. AE, she argues, helps students gain the confidence necessary to deconstruct dominant canons, knowledge, traditions, and values passed off as natural and universal, the therefore legitimate. Thus, European knowledge systems presented as such may no longer be seen as applicable to defining the trajectory of Black history and the African experience (Gordon, 1993; James, 2011; Keto, 2001; King & Wilson, 1994).

Based on Gordon's definition, I view AE as an educational model possessing a critical orientation, that of interrogating hegemonic knowledge systems and encouraging Black students to resist dominant discourses that distort the Black experience. At the core of

the AE philosophy, moreover, lies a pedagogic imperative: the African reality must be included as part of the school curriculum if Black students are to reclaim their ‘voice.’ That is, only by pluralizing ‘truth,’ as opposed to pressing it into the service of advancing dominant agendas, will Black students be able at last to share their stories without fear of being judged or of their accounts being dismissed as inconsequential. For many Black students—and clearly from an Afrocentric educational standpoint, “truth” exists in the struggle of the oppressed.

In his most forceful indictment of colonial and Eurocentric education, Carruthers argues that the crisis facing the African intellectual, both young and old, was the result of the enduring legacy of colonial and Eurocentric education—a legacy that accounts for his/her rejecting the wisdom and erudition of African scholars in favour of that of their foreign counterparts (Carruthers, 1994). The primary goal of Afrocentric education, argues Carruthers, (1994) is to save Africans, especially the young, from the intellectual dislocation stemming from a European-oriented education. What Afrocentric education does, or seeks to do, Carruthers asserts, is to turn the African inward so as to appreciate African-oriented knowledge systems and to be part of an alternative knowledge-based revolution that centres African achievements and promotes Africa’s interests and Pan-African unity. Thus, it may be inferred that Afrocentric education represents a *sine qua non* for the struggle on the part of Africans to liberate their minds and win freedom from (neo)colonialism (Carruthers, 1994). Put another way Africanizing the mind is essential to transforming the African self.

Asante’s analysis of Afrocentric education is most instructive. Drawing on Woodson, Asante (1991) argues that “[Blacks who] have been educated away from their own culture” (p.170) face cultural dislocation. He contends that Blacks who were and are educated in European educational systems tend to worship at the altar of European episteme while rejecting their own culture and knowledge systems. According to Asante, if the traditional objective of education is to “prepare [students] to become part of a social group,” then it is not unreasonable to argue that societies founded on White supremacist values are likely to “develop a White supremacist educational system” (p. 170), promote White superiority and belittle African history and African capabilities. Taught in an environment that espouses

White exceptionalism, moreover, White students are more likely to excel vis-à-vis their Black peers.

According to Asante (1991), Afrocentric education focuses on the authentic experiences and histories of Africans. In the Afrocentric classroom, students are introduced to African histories, cultures, “heroes and heroines” (p. 171) from an African perspective free of White bias, as evinced by, to take but one example, the “commie” label with which some White Americans branded Dr. Martin Luther King (p. 175). Afrocentric education challenges this kind of misrepresentation; thus, for example, Dr. King is presented as the liberator of an oppressed people, wielding the Gandhian principle of non-violence, which remains, a hallmark of so many democratic revolutions.

Where the standard Eurocentric curriculum routinely portrays Black students as “objects” of ridicule, Afrocentric education transforms them into inquisitive subjects. It teaches and empowers Black students to resist the European notion of Africans as passive adjuncts of a White world, as men and women who were introduced to civilization by Europeans. Black students learn to see themselves and their forebears as agents whose contributions to humanity are of equal consequence to those made by Europeans (Asante, 1991). Afrocentric education provides Black students the strength of mind and the voice to contest the assumption that European knowledge is universal and a true reflection of history. It cultivates in them a voice with which to speak for themselves and on issues that affect Africans using an African lens.

hooks’ (1989) examination of the role of the voice in the context of Black education and liberation is edifying. According to this author, rather than silencing Black students, a practice frowned upon by Black families, schools should encourage them to speak out. Teaching Black students to cultivate a voice at an early age, argues hooks, affords them the opportunity and instills in them the courage to speak as equals to authority. What I gather from this author is that if encouraged, the oppressed can use their individual and collective voice to claim ownership of their ideas and project their own reality. If I understand hooks correctly, for Black students, the voice represents an ally in the battle against regulatory

frameworks that proscribe Black history, practices and knowledge systems. According to this author, silencing the voice of the individual or community, constitutes an “act of persecution, torture—the terrorism that breaks the spirit . . . [and] makes creativity impossible” (pp. 7-8).

Analyzing the political effects of the voice, hooks (1989) writes:

For [the oppressed, the voice] is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges the politics of domination that would render [the oppressed] nameless and voiceless. . . . It is a courageous act [that] represents a threat [to dominant discourses and actors]. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must . . . be wiped out, annihilated, [and] silenced [by an avalanche of voices issuing from the oppressed]. (p. 8)

I gather from the above quotation that for the oppressed in general, and Black students in particular, voice is weapon of liberation. In the context of the Toronto public education system, it enables Black students to take a stand in defence of their history, thus transforming them into something other than passive objects, “defined by others” (hooks, 1989, p. 12). Hearing one’s voice as it challenges Eurocentric distortions, the author surmises, is liberating.

While Walcott is not an Afrocentrist and his work does not focus on AE specifically, selected excerpts from his work offer useful insights regarding the situation in which Black Canadian students find themselves today. Walcott suggests, moreover, that one way to immortalize Black history and heroes is to restore “discredited” and “subjugated” (Walcott, 1997, p. 73) knowledge systems. According to Walcott, the revival and preservation of Black history can be achieved by foregrounding the writings of Black scholars, e.g., Franz Fanon, M. Nourbese Philip, Toni Morrison, Charles Johns and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, authors whose works chronicle the horrifying “history/memory of the Middle Passage” (Walcott, 1997, p. 73).

What I gather from Walcott’s (1997) work is that the Black past and present in Canada can be linked through “literatures of reconnection” (p. 73), which are crucial to understanding the “social and cultural formation of Black diasporic communities and what

those communities might share [or not share] beyond phenotype" (p. 73). I believe that in using the term 'literatures of reconnection' Walcott is alluding to an alternative approach to education that would raise Black consciousness and reclaim Black history, beginning with the arrival in British North America of Black pioneers. Such a project would require the production of oppositional narratives as a counterpoint to official accounts of Canada as anti-slavery and as a sanctuary for enslaved Black Africans fleeing White plantations and repressive slave laws. Reclaiming Black history in this fashion would enable Black students to see themselves as actors rather than a people acted upon, which is how they are signified in the colonial educational system.

In a 2006 survey of Black students conducted by the Toronto District School Board, "72% of [the respondents] said they want to learn about their culture; 69% of them said they would enjoy school more if they learned about their culture; and 50% said they would feel better about school if they could learn about their history in the classroom. Moreover, in the 2007 School and Community Safety Advisory Report, it was noted that [Toronto] schools where an [Afrocentric] curriculum was piloted . . . showed significant signs of increased students achievement and engagement" (Toronto District School Board, n.d.).

The above reports reveal a very real enthusiasm on the part of Black students for a culturally relevant education, i.e., another name for AE, as well as a desire to have it implemented. As both Woodson (1933) and modern-day Afrocentrists (Lee, 1994) have argued, Black students should learn the fundamentals of the English language by immersing themselves in African folklore, philosophy and proverbs. They further propose that AE feature African knowledge systems together with their European counterparts. Nor are Afrocentric scholars averse to teaching students about the patriotism of White Canadians; they merely insist that Black patriotism not be discounted, that histories like that of Victoria's Pioneer Rifle Company, aka the African Rifles, formed in 1861 (Kilian, 2008) to defend the British Northwest from an American invasion, to cite but one example, not be confined to dusty archives. If incorporated in school syllabi, histories of this kind would apprise Black students of the willingness on the part of Black men to defend the British Northwest even though they were being treated as second-class citizens; they would also

provide Black students with a sense of Canada's colonial history and an appreciation of the country's heritage, and particularly of the contribution of Black pioneers to nation building. Making the curriculum inclusive and reflective of Canada's true history would, for Black students, make class discussions more interesting by presenting an alternative perspective that highlighted the sacrifices made by their forbearers in building the Canadian nation—a perspective to which they could relate personally and which might motivate them to learn more.

Several studies have shown that tying learning to the lived experience of students helps them build self-confidence and participate to a greater degree in class discussions (Boykin, 1994; Dei et al., 1997; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988). Others (Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 1994) have revealed that presenting positive images of Black historical figures enhances the self-image of Black students. Thus, for example, Black girls will take pride in the fact that Maria Gibbs, the most educated woman in colonial Canada was Black; that Clarissa Richard, one of the foremost advocates of female suffrage and an inveterate opponent of patriarchy, was also Black; that Annie Norton, whose interracial marriage to John Norton, flew in the face of convention, at the same time demonstrating that such unions represented an arrangement between two human beings, not a contract between two unequal parties, that she too was black (Kilian, 2008). The achievements of these women, and untold others, exemplify the invaluable contributions of Black Canadians, and particularly women, to Canadian history.

According to Boykin (1986), Eurocentric education cannot incorporate in the curriculum historical narratives that challenge White supremacy or that would help address the chronic problems afflicting Black students, i.e., poor grades, disaffection, and high dropout rates (Boykin, 1986; Dei et al., 1997). AE, so its proponents claim, is the only way to deprogram and reprogram Black students such that they are disposed to accepting a model of knowledge that offers them positive perspectives on their heritage and inherent ability to succeed if given equal opportunities and resources (Dei, 2008).

3.10. Afrocentricity and Afrocentric Education in the Context of Canadian Public Education

As stated in the introduction, Afrocentricity, which had its beginnings in the US, has been taken up by African-Canadian scholars, among them George Sefa Dei, a professor with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. “As someone who has been at the forefront of debates and discussions about . . . Afrocentric schooling in the Canadian context” (Dei, 2013, p. 121), Dei would prove to be a pivotal player in establishing the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS), the first of its kind in the city. His motivation to promote TAAS and AE was driven by the racial inequality he believed to permeate the Toronto public school.

Of critical concern for Dei (2013), was the high dropout rate among Black students, which had persisted for decades, despite the “lip service” (p. 119) paid by school authorities to prioritizing educational reform. According to Dei, the chief barrier confronting Black students was the absence of anything resembling inclusivity. In his view the *sine qua non* for inclusive education was “equity, power, and knowledge. . . . [and a genuine willingness to] engag[e] [in] multiple knowledge systems . . . to develop a complete understanding of the history of ideas, events, practices, and experiences that have shaped and continue to shape our worlds” (p. 119).

A principal source of inequity in the mainstream public education system, Dei argues, is that it was designed to promote the heritage of a “certain class of people and uphold particular social class values” (Dei, 2013, p. 120). Thus, not surprisingly, initiatives aimed at reforming public education would be frustrated by efforts on the part of mainstream Whites to maintain their supremacy. Moreover, so long as the status quo held, White students would have a competitive advantage vis-à-vis their Black peers while the latter would become increasingly alienated. According to Lee-Ferdinand “Eurocentric [education] has been insidious in its universality, creating a common alienation among [Black students]” (as cited in Dei, 1996b, p. 178).

Dei's work changed the way some Canadians had traditionally perceived public schools, i.e., as culturally neutral sites where all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, were provided an equal opportunity to learn and develop. According to Dei, the public school system had failed to introduce the reforms required to place Black students on an equal footing with their White peers—equal representation in the school curriculum and pedagogy, the hiring of additional Black teachers, and addressing the differential treatment of Black students. What was required, in his view, was a rethinking of public education, with a view to creating an alternative educational model “that will assist Black youth particularly to re-invent their Africanness within a Diasporic context, and to create a way of being and thinking congruent with positive African traditions and values” (Dei, 1996b, p. 178).

According to Dei (1996b), Afrocentric education affords the Black student a safe environment in which to learn and think outside the limits imposed by a Eurocentric education; it allows the student to “see and interpret the world through his or her own eyes, rather than through those of the ‘other’” (p. 180). In this schema, the student is a co-producer of knowledge, rather than a *tabula rasa*, which is currently the case throughout the public school system. The Afrocentric model of education requires that the opinions and experiences of Black students, the source of which is the family and community, are incorporated into the curriculum, thus embedding them in the educational process where they will help build family-school-community partnerships, whose stakeholders support a common cause: the education and development of Black students. Once in place, such partnerships will foster a “pedagogy of the home,” thus making “specific cultural values, norms, social mores, and conduct in the delivery of education” (Dei, 1996b, p. 179). Bringing the “home culture” to school is essential to applying the “concepts, explanations, and interpretations of society that students derive from personal experiences in their homes, families, and out-of-school communities” (Banks as cited in Dei, 1996b, p. 179) and to “destabliz[ing] . . . the status quo . . . [and revealing] the contradictions inherent in . . . an education not appropriately grounded in students’ lived experiences and cultural knowledge” (Dei, 1996b, p. 179). Thus can the classroom serve as a setting where Black students see “themselves] . . . as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but

licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (Morrison as cited in Dei, 1994, p. 4). Rather than constituting a hostile battlefield where the unfit are left to their own devices, the classroom, under this stakeholder-driven regime, can be transformed into a marketplace of “fresh ideas . . . [in] search [of] ways to educate a complex, diverse student population” (Dei, 2013, p. 119). Another important function of TAAS and AE, Dei argues, lies in rehabilitating and reaffirming the identity of Black students, which is essential to their “intellectual and social growth” (Dei, 1996b, p. 170). This dual process of rehabilitation and reaffirmation is predicated on membership to a collective, wherein Black students can learn and socialize among their own kind, while being supported by the community both inside and outside the school (Dei, 2008, 2013). Writes Dei (1996b):

Afrocentric [education] and pedagogy encourage student-student, student-teacher, and student-teacher-parent interactions that lead to mutual learning. Students teach about their out-of-school cultures, and parents . . . and elders come to [the] school to teach about respect, authority, and communal responsibility . . . Students and parents also become part of a team running the school; they sit on school committees that make major decisions affecting students’ school lives (p. 181)

One of Dei’s most important contributions lies in reversing the public perception of TAAS and AE as a Black version of Eurocentric education (Dei, 1996b). According to Dei, nothing could be farther from the truth; what TAAS and AE really represent is a “counter-vision of schooling . . . to promote alternative educational outlets [for marginalized students]” (Dei, 2013, p. 119). Thus, they aim, firstly, at remapping the public education system to reduce the preponderance of European narratives and their racist representations of Black Canadians. Second, they provide “an alternative [setting] . . . to decolonize and reclaim . . . the myriad identi(ies), knowledge(s) and experience(s)” (Dei, 2013, p. 120). To combat centuries of colonization and its corollary, the erasure of an African identity, Afrocentric education, Dei argues, seeks to interrogate and replace a European-based curriculum, complemented, by a pedagogy aimed at “devaluing and de-privileging [Black] history and ancestral knowledge in Euro-[Canadian schools]” (Dei, 1996b, p. 171). According to Dei, only when Black knowledge systems are centered in an Afrocentric educational setting can

Black students come to appreciate their heritage, perceive themselves to be empowered, and be adequately equipped to apply what they have learned to the broader social context.

3.11. Criticism of Dei and Afrocentric Education in Canada

In the Canadian context, in “Social Justice and Public Education: A Response to George J. Sefa Dei,” Lund (1998) argues that AT “create[s] a synthetic universality” (p. 194). Thus, for example, in its oversimplification of race, AT dismisses the multiplicity of identities and ethnic categories that fall within the scope of an African-Canadian identity. Thus, while “individuals [Canadians] continue to form their self-identities throughout their lives [in multicultural Canada], [they are subject to] an ongoing, complex interweaving of such intangible social signifiers as culture, colour, ethnicity, language, and religion” (pp. 193-194) that preclude anything like a racial-cultural uniformity that might work to legitimize a Black authenticity.

Yet another criticism of AT is that it essentializes a Black identity, thus implying that Black people are indistinguishable from one another, at least in some, if not most, respects, and that the transgressions of the individual are attributable to the collective— notions that serve to reinforce deep racial prejudices. Walcott rejects the concept of Black essentialism, arguing that far from being monolithic, the Black Canadian identity extends beyond fixed “biological” and ethnic” categories (Walcott, 1997, p. xv).

In posing the question “Can African-Americans represent the locality of Black Canadian political concerns?” (Walcott, 1997, p. 26), Walcott argues that Black Canadian identity is an artificial construct. He goes on to problematize the Afrocentric view, usually only implied, that every Black person has a connection to Africa through slavery by pointing out that it fails to take into account how identity is invented and reinvented as well as the processes of hybridization through marriage and cultural appropriation. Thus, while it may be instrumental to project a racial sameness for political and strategic reasons, this does not

collapse the differences among Black Canadians however much some may wish to view themselves as part of a monolithic Black nation.

Wright's (1994a) criticism of Afrocentric education and Afrocentricity goes to the heart of and beyond some of the issues raised by some in the Toronto Black community. He writes:

Educational separation is not the solution [to the achievement gap in the public education system]. The changes need to be made within the existing education systems where they can benefit not only Black students but all Canadians. The solution to the dual problem of racism against Blacks and the inclusion of Black perspectives, cultures, and history in education is the construction and application of anti-racist and progressive Black consciousness approaches. (p. 29)

Wright also questions the caliber of the students TAAS and AE are expected to produce and whether White instructors should be employed to teach Afrocentric courses, given the Afrocentric philosophy from which school draws its inspiration (Wright, 1994).

One key reason underlying Wright's criticism of the school is that it could cultivate among the student body an Afrocentric zealotry, leading to confrontations between students and their White teachers, particularly if the views of the latter are perceived to deviate from Afrocentric teachings. Wright cites an incident in the United States involving "Black students leveling charges of racism against . . . White [teachers]" (Wright, 1994b, p. 14) as a warning that TAAS may not be immune to race-related controversy. He also points out that in Afrocentric schools "Black students [are encouraged] to question everything from the course content to . . . [the] pedagogy . . . [and] . . . [the] role [of] the teacher [in the] course" (Wright, 1994, p. 15)—a potential source of disruption. Some in the Afrocentrist camp, e.g., Asante, dismiss such fears, arguing that "given the proper orientation, mastery of facts, basic pedagogical skills, and a willingness to learn from gifted students, any teacher ought to be able to teach any subject" (Asante as cited in Wright 1994b, p. 15); others view such a notion to be untenable, citing Dei (1993), who argues that "Afrocentrism is an African-centred discourse open to both Africans and non-Africans" (Dei as cited in Wright, 1994b, p. 15).

The debate over what form AE should take and who is qualified to teach Afrocentric courses, Wright observes, provides ammunition to critics who argue that as a philosophy, Afrocentricity is eclectic and emergent and needs to sort itself out. The idea that “only Africans (broadly defined) can teach about and learn about Africa” (Wright, 1994a, p. 30) reinforces “polarizing binarisms” (Giroux as cited in Wright, 2000, p. 127). According to Wright (2000), Afrocentrists suffer from “blinker skepticism” (p. 128), a leeriness of the views of White academics and teachers. He contends that Afrocentric scholars, hardly, if at all, “take up the discourses of other (racial) groups” (Wright, 2000, p. 129), exposing them to charges of narrow-mindedness, which could be (mis)construed as racism.

Wright (2012; 2003) criticizes Afrocentrists for promoting a monolithic African identity. In an essay, “Is this an African I see before me?: Black/African identity and the politics of (Western, academic) knowledge” and in an editorial, “Editorial: Whose diaspora is this anyway? Continental Africans trying on and troubling diasporic identity,” he challenges its singularity. In his view, it is both a hybrid and acquired through cultural appropriation. It is this hybridity and multiplicity, Wright argues, that problematizes the Afrocentrist notion of a solid, unified, and unadulterated African identity. Referencing his Sierra Leonean identity and a life lived mostly in the West (Canada) where he currently teaches, he posits that identity evolves and is, shaped by life’s journeys. Calling oneself an African, without acknowledging one’s multiple identities “conceals the ambiguity and messiness [of identity]” (Wright, 2003, p. 6).

According to Wright (2003), an African identity is purely fictional, providing claimants a “singular and fixed identity,” one that conceals the “torrent of hybridity and multiplicity that drowns certainty and sweeps [the] ‘African’ up through the multiple, shifting, hybrid, and contested (re)conceptualisations into a floating signifier” (p. 7). The act of constructing an African identity creates tension: on the one hand, there are continental Africans and émigrés, who perceive themselves as (true) Africans by birth, on the other, the Pan-Africanist family that derives its African identity through slavery. The latter, Wright argues, citing Muteshi, constructs its identity by the “imagining of Africa” as a homeland (Muteshi as cited in Wright, 2003, p. 5), as a “resource, as place of origin, as history and

roots” (Wright, 2003, p. 9). As a way of connecting with the homeland, these Africans occupy themselves in acquiring African “artefacts and clothes . . . from the sidewalks of Harlem” (Wright, 2003, p. 9). They romanticize Africa as “an ancestral home to which one can return,” thus keeping alive the Afrocentric narrative of “diasporic Africans descend[ing] from kings and queens of ancient African civilisations” (Wright, 2003, p. 9).

According Levine-Rasky (2014), White fear of Afrocentricity has everything to do with race and the resurgence of a Black consciousness and aspirations to escape White oppression by any means possible, including African-centred education. White fear, Levine-Rasky argues, takes on a particular hue in the context of the controversy surrounding the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS). It is the fear of Blackness, not as an abstraction, but as a particularity, namely the spectre of an educated and politicized Black subject, imagined to have suddenly gained insight into racism and acquired the political power to oppose it. Thus there looms before Whites the prospect of African-Canadian children and youth acquiring dangerous knowledge of their contributions to society and of how those contributions have been denied by a European historiography. The White public imagines a revolutionary Blackness, such as that so vividly evoked by Fanon, emancipated from its oppressors. Writes Levine-Rasky:

It fears the possible outcome of an education sufficiently radical to produce a self-determining, Afrocentric subjectivity. White fear is immanent in the knowledge that who one is and what one has are not results of deserts or natural merit. Conversely, others did not underachieve for reasons of their lack of such qualities . . . Achievement and opportunity arise from systemic and cultural inequities. White fear parallels the anticipated retribution for the historical and ongoing forms of racism directed against racialized peoples. (p. 214)

3.12. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: An Overview

The Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS) is located in the North York region of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The school was established against a backdrop of

“poor educational achievement” on the part of African-Canadian students (James, 2011, p. 198). Other reasons cited for establishing the school include the high “dropout rate, . . . truancy rate, . . . failure rate, [and] basic streaming rate” among Black students (Working Group as cited in James, 2011, p. 198). Appointed by the Ontario provincial government to investigate the educational needs of the province’s students and provide recommendations aimed at “prepar[ing] [students] . . . for the challenges of the 21st century,” the Royal Commission on Learning (RCOL as cited in James, 2011, p. 199) submitted a report that included the following problem statement:

. . . They [we]re concerned about the future of young Blacks who, without a secondary school diploma (let alone a college diploma or university degree), face limited job prospects, social marginalization and personal defeat. [The Commission also] argued forcefully that the educational system is failing Black students, and that there is an educational crisis in [the Black] community. (p. 199)

In addition, the RCOL warned that the Ontario education system needed “innovative strategies” and “special programmes” to improve “the academic performance of Black students” (as cited in James, 2011, p. 199). At a Town-Hall meeting in February 2005, dubbed “Making the grade: Are we failing our Black youth?” (James, 2011, p. 199), the panelists and audience members agreed that the public education system was not serving the educational needs of Black students. At the meeting, a leading African-Canadian antiracist scholar, George Dei, argued that “an alternative school for Black students . . . [was] the only way to prevent them from being pushed out of the system” (as cited in James, 2011, p. 200). Working in partnership with the Black community and stakeholders, TDSB acknowledged that the achievement gap and high dropout rates among “students of African descent” were serious concerns that needed to be addressed (Toronto District School Board). At the forefront of the struggle for educational reform were African-Canadian mothers—the pillars of Black activism. In 2008, the Board of Trustees accepted the report’s recommendations, listed under the rubric “Improving Success for Black Students.” In September 2009, TAAS officially opened its doors.

3.13. The Afrocentric Curriculum: An Overview

In contrast to the mainstream public school system curriculum, which is preponderantly European-based, the TAAS curriculum is Afrocentric or African-centred. Its Afrocentricity is derived from the seven principles of *Nguzo Saba: Umoja, Kujichagulia, Ujima, Ujamaa, Nia, Kuumba* and *Imani*.

Umoja means unity: To strive and maintain unity in [the Black] family and community. *Kujichagulia* means “self-determination: To define oneself; peak for oneself and to create for oneself. *Ujima* means collective work and responsibility. *Ujamaa* means cooperative economics: To cooperatively build and maintain business. *Nia* means purpose: To develop community for purpose; *Kuumba* means creativity: To do as much as we can to leave our community more beautiful than when we inherited it. *Imani* means faith: To believe in our parents, teachers, leaders, and ourselves. (Toronto District School Board, n.d., p. 1)

The integration of *Nguzo Saba* into the TAAS curriculum is instructive in a number of ways: First, it helps Afrocentric students to build a sense of community as well as personal independence. Second, it instills in them an unlikely combination of entrepreneurial skills and spirituality. The latter teaches students to look beyond “Christian values and prayers” (Dei, 1996b, p. 181) and interrogate the kind of ecclesiastical indoctrination that works to internalize the view that only one race, the White race, is favoured by the Creator and that the only means to salvation lies in adopting Christianity. In addition to core subjects, which are reviewed and approved by TDSB, TAAS offers African-centred drama, experiential pedagogy, and drumming and dancing (Africentric Alternative School, n.d.; Toronto District School Board, n.d.). The students are also taught Swahili, French Creole and Twi. The “Boys to Men” program, designed to facilitate the rite of passage to adulthood to full membership in the community, is geared towards helping male students improve their “interpersonal communication, teamwork and problem-solving” skills (Africentric Alternative School, n.d.). The “Boys and Girls [program],” allows students to participate in a “variety of recreational activities, games and group challenges” (Africentric Alternative School, n.d.).

The TAAS “Boys to Men” program and the lack of any counterpart for female students raises serious gender issues. The very title suggests that Black male students are more prone to behavioural problems, e.g., truancy, and thus more likely to drop out, or be pushed out, of school. The remedy lies in the form of “strong” Black male teachers capable of guiding them into manhood. This gender-based program carries with it the implication that Black female teachers contribute less to the development of students and that Black male students are more important vis-à-vis their female counterparts, which bodes ill for their future relations with women. There is also the perception, particularly among the Black male student population, that Black male teachers are more capable than their female colleagues. In denying girls a similar program, TAAS, it can be argued, is failing to address the needs of students.

Cognizant of the difficulties some Black families face vis-à-vis their children’s education, e.g., with respect to supervising and/or helping with homework, TAAS offers parent workshops where basic pedagogic skills can be learned (Africentric Alternative School, n.d.). Herein lies a concerted effort to address a fundamental obstacle to educating Black children: the lack of support provided by parents, especially those with English as a Second Language (ESL). In striking contrast to the indifference shown by the mainstream schools, TAAS has demonstrated a willingness to support parents in their efforts to participate in all facets of school life, something that is essential if students are to achieve positive learning outcomes.

3.14. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: Staff and Governance

Established against the backdrop of an achievement gap in the public education system and parental concerns, TAAS has lived up to its promise of creating a safe and democratic learning environment where teachers, parents and stakeholders can work together to ensure that students will succeed. TAAS teachers are employees of TDSB, hired based on their commitment to enhance the learning experience of Black students and foster academic

excellence (Africentric Alternative School, n.d.). TAAS is administered by a principal, vice-principal, superintendent, and trustee, all employees of TDSB. A Parent Council Executive (PCE) ensures that parents remain abreast of all school matters of relevance; it also advises the school principal on all matters pertaining to the running of the school. Below are listed key PCE functions:

1. . . . To provide essential updates on developments at the [T]AAS;
2. Share information with [the] Africentric education community about the upcoming press conference to release critical data on 3 years of research on the [T]AAS (2011-2014);
3. To seek vital parent [and] community input on challenges at the [T]AAS;
4. To seek vital AAS parent and community input on strategic planning for the future of the [T]AAS to realize the original vision of achieving a stand-alone-JK-grade 12 school, among other things.

(Africentric Alternative School, n.d.)

3.15. Conclusion

Although the theory of Afrocentricity entered the popular imagination following the Civil Rights era, its origins lie in the ideas of Du Bois, Garvey and Nkrumah, Black leaders who understood the African experience, forged in both the homeland and in the diaspora, and who worked tirelessly to promote Black unity, freedom, and the will to uphold African values. Following in the footsteps of these luminaries, Afrocentrists challenge White supremacy and oppression. In the context of public education, Afrocentric scholars have created a space for Black students in which to interrogate how knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Proposing a new way of seeing and interpreting the world through the prism of education, Afrocentrists have inserted into the broader public debate on education a Black discourse, at the heart of which lie two propositions: Blacks exist and their history and ways of knowing are equally important in the domain of education and for this reason, should be respected as are Eurocentric knowledge systems. The latter has been rejected by mainstream scholars who view Afrocentricity and its advocates as divisive and as obsessed with

reenacting a history that has been buried. Now that the Toronto Africentric Alternative School is up and running, educators, indeed the public at large, are beginning to ponder the implications of an Afrocentric education. The following chapter describes the research methodology used in this study.

Chapter 4.

Research Methodology

In the previous chapter, I discussed the historiography of Afrocentrism, which would inspire Afrocentric scholars to examine, through an Afrocentric lens, the social, political, moral and cultural lives of Africans, and in particular educational reforms. Also discussed were various arguments presented by both proponents and critics of Afrocentric theory, the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education. Lastly, I outlined the Afrocentric curriculum and the management of the school.

In this chapter, I discuss the research paradigms upon which this enquiry is based, along with their epistemic assumptions. I also discuss the research strategies and methods, along with the approaches to data collection and analysis. In addition, the backgrounds of the research participants are described. Lastly, I touch upon the dilemmas that confronted me during the course of conducting research. My aim here is to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of how this study was conducted and the challenge encountered.

4.1. Research Paradigm: An Overview

As complexes of philosophical assumptions, paradigms play a critical role in informing the research process. Akin to roadmaps, paradigms delineate the researcher's position on the subject under study. Bateson (1972) defines a paradigm as a set of "abstract principles" [that guide research], . . . shap[ing] how the qualitative researcher sees the world and acts in it" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). For Guba (1990), a paradigm is a "basic set of beliefs that guide action (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). According to Richards (1980), it is simply "the way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and the universe" (as cited in Dillard, 2006, p. 61). I lean more towards

Richards' definition on account of the emphasis placed on how people ascribe meaning to their environments. As with all research paradigms, the one employed here is directed at revealing and understanding how Black parents view their social world and how that world shapes their lived experience. Three elements constitute a paradigm: ontology, which is concerned with the nature or essence of being/reality; epistemology, which deals with the grounds for and validity of knowledge; and axiology, which is concerned with the values the researcher brings to the research project.

4.2. The Researcher's Paradigm

This research is predicated on both an Afrocentric and a critical paradigm, and on the grounds that (a) the oppressed are worthy of study; (b) their oppression can be explicated by understanding their history and location on the power spectrum; and (c) their condition can be ameliorated by developing a knowledge of their history, interrogating oppressive power structures, fostering self-consciousness, and working to achieve agency—all essential steps to realizing their full human potential (Kershaw, 1992).

The choice of both an Afrocentric and a critical paradigm is intended to tap into an “epistemological diversity outside . . . [the] consensus model” (Lather, 2006, p. 36). These paradigms offer both the rigor and perspective essential to conducting research on a people that have been marginalized and subordinated and had their history relegated to the status of a footnote in Western historiography. Stepping outside the dominant paradigms and adopting both an Afrocentric and critical paradigm frees one from the diktats of a “resurgent positivism and [its] . . . impositions . . . as the gold standard in research” (Lather, 2006, 35); no longer need one be subject to the tyranny of an “imperial science . . . [and] methodological fundamentali[sm]” (Lather, 2006, pp. 35-36). According to Mazama (2001), “much of what passes for African-American studies is nothing but European studies of Africa” (p. 395). To accept Western paradigms as, in Lather's words, “the gold standard in research” (Lather, 2006, p. 35) is to be complicit in the practice of “apprehend[ing] [the African] reality through [the European] centre” (Mazama, 2001, p. 398).

I begin my discussion of the research paradigms informing this enquiry by referencing Seidman's critique of the universal validity of foundational paradigms, which is particularly relevant here given the enormous gulf existing between Western and African civilizations and their respective peoples. Writes Seidman (2005):

How can a knowing subject, who has particular interests and prejudices by virtue of living in a specific society at a particular historical juncture and occupying a specific social position defined by his or her class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnic and religious status, produce concepts, explanations, and standards of validity that are universally valid? How can we both assert that humans are constituted by their particular socio-historical circumstances and also claim that they can escape their embeddedness by creating nonlocal, universally valid concepts and standards? How can we escape the suspicion that every move by culturally bound agents to generalize their conceptual strategy is not simply an effort to impose particular, local prejudices on others? (p. 269)

Thus, research aiming to investigate any matter pertaining to Africa or Africans in their relation to dominant, i.e., colonial paradigms is to be viewed as highly problematic.

Regarding my ontological position, I hold reality to be relative. That "there are multiple realities" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 21), of which one is the African reality, I have no doubt. I would also argue that given the unique history, culture and *Weltanschauung* of Africans, the African reality can be understood only within the context of Africa's multiple worldviews that eschew the positivist benchmark of "rationality, [and] objectivity" (Asante, 1998, p. 179). From an Afrocentric ontological standpoint, the physical and the supernatural worlds are inseparable; thus, humans are in no way independent actors devoid of spiritual influence and/or lacking obligations. They are a part of the cosmology. Our membership in the physical and spiritual worlds, therefore, carries with it a "social [and a spiritual] responsibility" (Dei, 1996b, p. 180). As an Afrocentric researcher, I believe that "we are all spirit, connected by the Creator's energy of breath. [That] as spirit, we are engage[d] in a human journey for as long as we have the energy of breath: When it is no longer ours, the human journey ends" (Dillard, 2006, p. 68). One's place and success in the world depends not on personal attributes, e.g., talent, intelligence, physical strength, but on

the collective, i.e., the African community, and the Supreme Being. By virtue of membership in the community, one takes on the “social responsibility” (Dei, 1996b, p. 180) to conduct oneself in ways that promote the collective wellbeing of all humans and abstain from behaviours that could “destroy [any] one component of the web of cosmic elements [thereby] destroy[ing] the entire universe—even the creator” (Schiele, 1994, p. 152).

An African ontology could, I argue, play a key role in educating Black students. First, it would serve to broaden their intellectual horizons by virtue of viewing the world through an African lens. Second, it would facilitate an understanding of the world in which they live as well as an appreciation of the fact that there is more that binds than divides them, in particular their connection as humans to one another and to the Supreme Being. Incorporating spirituality into Afrocentric education would help Black students understand and appreciate the connection between “spirit, . . . mind, . . . soul, and . . . body” (Dei, 2013, p. 123). Spiritual practices, such as prayer, libations, drumming, singing and dancing, which Afrocentric education promotes, would cultivate in them a “sense of morality and justice” (Dei, 2013, p. 123). Incorporating an Afrocentric ontology into the research methodology, which consists exclusively of one-on-one and group interviews, infuses the interviewer, in this case me, with a sense of humility. From an Afrocentric ontological standpoint, knowledge can be expressed in various ways, including African spirituality, all of which are capable of articulating the African experience.

For epistemology, the central question has to do with the “the relationship between the inquirer and the known [i.e., knowledge]” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). I argue that knowledge of an African reality can be derived through dialogue stripped of the kind of “language [that] has historically served and continues to serve as a powerful tool in the mental, spiritual, and intellectual colonization of African[s]” (Dillard, 2006, p.70). By sharing their stories through dialogue, not only do the researcher and participants arrive at the ‘truth,’ however situated, they inspire and strengthen each other (Asante, 2003). If knowledge is situated and embedded in meanings, which the African knowledge system and culture are, then it is safe to assume that we can arrive at it by engaging in dialogue with community members of standing “who[se] [views] we perceive as legitimate and powerful

. . .” (Dillard, 2006, p. 63). Stripping African languages of their colonial legacy, the African can articulate his or her views without fear if they are being judged illegitimate or unworthy of attention on the basis of a European benchmark. Central to an Afrocentric epistemology are the emotions and feelings of researchers, which are crucial to determining reality.

During the interviews, I used dialogue to help “free [the] consciousness [of participants] from its dependence on hypostatized powers” (Habermas as cited in Talburt, 2004, p. 83). The participants were willing, even eager, to answer the interview questions to the best of their ability. By establishing an atmosphere of collegiality and demonstrating sensitivity to the participant’s situation, I succeeded in gaining their trust, which allowed for the co-creation of knowledge. It helped that I was willing to share my own experiences. As Dillard points out, “it seems almost inhumane to just sit and listen [to participants] without sharing [your] own experiences in dealing with similar issues” (Dillard, 2006, p. 66). When required, I inserted myself into the discussion, taking great care as always to privilege the voices of the participants.

Ladson-Billings (2003) argues that a key role for Critical and Afrocentric research lies in “challeng[ing] hegemonic symbols that keep injustice and inequality in place” (p. 421). According to Lincoln and Denzin (1994), critical “research or scholarship cannot be considered complete if it fails to capture the perspectives and “misery” of oppressed people vis-à-vis “dominant . . . interest[s]” (p. 581). As a proponent of social justice, I believe it is possible to conduct this study in ways that encourage participants to take an activist stance and to articulate their experience to the best of their ability, thus circumventing a problem that plagues academic research: the tendency of ‘distant experts’ to appropriate the voices of the subordinated and marginalized and stamp their *imprimatur* on their experiences and on what they hold to be true (Reviere, 2001).

Turning interviews into a "transformative intellectual [project]" (Giroux as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110) and demonstrating to participants that they can control their destiny, I have found emboldens them to interrogate historical and contemporary injustices and propose community initiatives aimed at helping those members of the Black community

who are disadvantaged. Assigning participants the role played by the "transformative intellectual" (Giroux as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115) may stir within them sufficient passion to challenge dominant discourses on Black Canadians and their place in Canada; this would be the first step to nurturing in participants a "critical empowerment" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139).

Like all researchers do, whether they acknowledge it or not, I bring to my work a set of personal values. As a visible minority, I value diversity in the field of research, which translates into foregrounding disparate views, voices and representations that would otherwise remain out of sight and out of mind. This in turn can serve to heighten public awareness of the lived-experience of the marginalized and oppressed, of their trials and tribulations. Diversifying research can, I believe, help to mitigate White oppression, reduce racial tensions, publicize the plight of the marginalized, and create a climate wherein non-mainstream voices, experiences and histories are respected. I also value diversity in the area of public education, believing it to be essential to realizing the full potential of all students, and particularly the marginalized. Thus, for example, AE promotes knowledge of the Black historical experience and cultural heritage, which in turn fosters in Black students self-respect and a willingness to learn. Moreover, the experience-based knowledge AE provides can be applied to understanding the root causes of oppression, the first step along the path leading to liberation.

4.3. Qualitative Methodologies: An Overview

Qualitative research are to be found in a number of research traditions, including, but not limited to, ethnography, phenomenology, case studies, discourse analysis, and grounded theory (Bradley 1993; Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. . . . They turn the

world into a series of representations, including field notes, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researcher study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Framed around the life world of people, qualitative research "allows the researcher . . . to record accurately his/her own observations while uncovering the meaning their subjects bring to their life experiences. This meaning relies on the subjective, verbal, and written expressions of meaning given by the individuals studied as windows into the inner lives of the persons" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 30). According to Merriam (1995), "qualitative research assumes that reality is constructed, multidimensional, and ever-changing; there is no such thing as a single, immutable reality waiting to be observed or measured. Thus, there are interpretations of reality; in a sense the researcher offers his or her interpretation of someone else's interpretation of reality" (p. 54). According to Denzin and Lincoln, (2000), qualitative research allows the researcher to capture the views of the research participants as opposed to turning them into an "object of [the] ethnograph[ic] gaze" (p. 2).

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because it allows me to probe the subject's perceptions and sense of reality, thereby revealing what Black parents really think about TAAS and AE and their children's underachievement. This methodological approach also allows for close researcher-participant interaction, thus fostering open and honest dialogue. Through the interview process, I was able not only to record the participants' views on a range of subjects—TAAS, AE, the experience of Black students, etc.—but also to observe them as they spoke. A qualitative research methodology provided the interpretive protocols and techniques, e.g., rephrasing questions, required to "secure an in-depth understanding" of Black parents' views and perceptions, thus "add[ing] rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth" to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5).

4.4. Critical Ethnography: An Overview

This study employs two principal ethnographic methods: in-depth interviews and document collection and analysis. Critical ethnography is an offshoot of traditional ethnography. According to Anderson (1989), it was born out “of dissatisfaction with social accounts of “structures” like class, patriarchy, and racism in which real human actors never appear” and social opposition to “cultural accounts of human actors in which structural constraints like class, patriarchy, and racism never appear” (p. 249). At the same time, critical ethnographers were coming to view the silence embedded in traditional ethnography as antithetical to the moral imperative on the part of the critical researcher to contribute to building a just and equitable society. Thus, in failing to provide an in-depth interrogation of behaviour and social structures, traditional ethnography fell short of challenging the status quo. In contrast, critical ethnographic work, e.g., Willis’ (1977) much acclaimed *Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*, highlights the impact of social structures, e.g., public schooling, the constraints they impose on the working poor, and the need to interrogate in great depth the structures of oppression.

While the following discussion may convey the impression that critical ethnography differs from its forebear in essential ways, both share the same goals, methods and foundational assumptions. According to Anderson (1989), both seek knowledge, and an understating of that knowledge, by drawing on the perceptions of the subject under study whose account of reality is assumed to be constructed. Thus, the subject’s version of reality is viewed as a personal construct of what he/she considers to be reality.

4.5. Critical Ethnographic Research: Problematizing Power and Oppression

Conducting a study informed by the imperative of ‘speaking truth to power’ requires interrogating the structures of power and oppression and how they impact individuals and communities. Critical ethnography is well-suited to this kind of project owing to its

investigative orientation, analytical rigor and commitment to “overcoming social injustices” (Madison, 2005, p. 512). It obliged me to take “on the ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice . . . [and to] challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge, and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning, and denigrate identities and communities” (p. 5). Madison contends that the critical ethnographer must “produce knowledge which guides and equips [society] to identify, name, question, and to act against the unjust; consequently [to] unsettle another layer of complicity” (p. 6).

Extending Madison’s conception of critical ethnography, Simon and Dippo, (1986) argue that “critical ethnographic work is not only “political” (p. 196), i.e., in that it interrogates structures of power and oppression; it also has a pedagogical dimension: the “assessment of . . . society as inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are and what must be done for things to be otherwise” (p. 196). With a view to educating the public the researcher must identify the social, political, economic and cultural constraints upon communities, in this case the Black community, and propose ways and means to relieve them—all based on research framed around the activist and political articulations of Black students and parents (Simon & Dippo, 1986).

According to Loutzenheiser (2007), “speaking to [Black parents] is only one piece of researching marginalized [communities]; listening to [them] requires an additional step of acknowledging that they have something to say and are able to build theories about their lives” (p. 112). The critical ethnographic approach to conducting research enabled the participants to articulate their perceptions of TAAS and AE and what they see as the way forward. Their views were crucial to raising social consciousness regarding Black education and addressing public ignorance and misperceptions of TAAS and AE.

At this juncture, the question arises as to why phenomenology was not used as a research method for this study. The answer is simple: like traditional ethnography, it forecloses critical commentary and/or analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994), eliminating the emancipatory fervor critical ethnography provides by, for example, allowing me to

condemn subordination and marginalization, to rework the participants' statements into a "text of resistance" (Giroux as cited in Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) and to lobby for the implementation of radical policy initiatives that would undermine the status quo (Carspecken, 1996). Like foundational paradigms, phenomenology and traditional ethnography verge on the "atheoretical", "neutral", "ahistorical" and "apolitical" (Anderson, 1989, p. 249), and, as such, obstruct rather than promote meaningful change. It fails to awaken passion or to stir and steer a collective commitment for change (Anderson, 1989); it shies away from demarcating a clear line between oppressor and oppressed, and pulls back from a frontal confrontation with social injustice.

4.6. Research Methods

4.6.1. Data Collection

In-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were used to generate data. In-depth interviews carry the risk that participants may express their views inaccurately or imprecisely unless the interviewer were to interrogate the data. Two pilot interviews were also conducted (Codjoe, 2006) to provide the feedback essential to modifying the individual interview protocol (Appendix A). Thus, for example, in response to the feedback the term "Afrocentric School" was substituted for "Africentric School," "ethnicity" for "ethno-nationality." Between July and November of 2013, 12 parents, three men and nine women, were interviewed. Two formal interviews, i.e., one individual and one focus group interview (see Appendices A and B), were conducted; the former requiring 45 minutes (average) to complete, the latter 1 hour and 26 minutes. Prior to the first interview, the participants were asked to choose a pseudonym.

The focus group met for the first time on 16 November 2013, in the Team Room of the North York Library. Four participants, Abena, Mary, Kombozi and Ouzy, attended this session. The reason for convening it was to allow the participants to exchange views and build on and/or challenge those expressed by individual participants. Because the second

focus group interview, held on 23 November 2013, was attended by only one participant, it was cancelled. All the interviews were audiotaped with the participants' consent, transcribed and then emailed to the participants so that they might be reviewed, which eliminated the need for follow-up interviews that would have conflicted with tight work schedules and personal commitments. During the interviews, I inconspicuously took notes, expanding upon them afterwards. This proved crucial to aiding my memory and preparing me mentally for the next interview.

Over the course of a 5-month period, beginning in late January and extending to the middle of May, I reviewed a total of 53 newspaper and magazine articles related to TAAS or AE, appearing in two major newspapers, *The National Post* and *The Toronto Star*, and *Maclean's Magazine*. I also reviewed 21 articles published in *Pride and Share*, two of Toronto's most widely read African-Canadian newspapers. The articles were selected based on the depth of their analysis and diversity of their views. For the most part, I relied on *The National Post*, *The Toronto Star* and *Maclean's* as their coverage was extensive, balanced and cut across class, racial and gender lines, albeit with a few exceptions that were racist and emotive. The data from the interviews and newspaper and magazine articles were supplemented with documents obtained from TDBS and TAAS websites.

4.6.2. Participant Recruitment and Selection

What began in November 2012 as a study of Black students and parental perceptions of TAAS and AE had to be changed after the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) rejected my application requesting access to public documents. The Board cited the following reasons for its decision: The study:

overlapped with an ongoing multi-year study already being conducted in partnership with York University, [and] there have been several recent requests for the participation of TAAS in external studies, and the Principal is unable to support or facilitate all of them. (S. Erling, Chair, External Research Review Committee, TDSB, personal communication, December 20, 2012)

Denied access to the school, i.e., to parents, students, and documentation, I had no choice but to refocus the study. I recruited Black parents with or without children attending the school. Even though the focus of the study had shifted, in-depth interviews and document collection and analysis remained the principal methods for data collection. I submitted an application to the Behavioural Research and Ethics Board (BREB), University of British Columbia. The application was approved in April 2013, and that same month recruitment began. Recruitment advertisements were posted at a community centre that was host to a Black student-parents' mentorship program, in shopping malls patronized by Black parents, and in bus shelters and grocery stores (Appendix C).

In addition, posters describing the study were emailed to African-Canadian community centres, professional groups, Black churches, teachers and community leaders, and a community newspaper, seeking assistance in recruiting Black parents. Participants who expressed interest were emailed an Initial Contact Letter (Appendix D) and a Subject Consent Form (Appendix E). To facilitate the recruitment process, snowball sampling was used to recruit Black parents with "direct knowledge relevant to the [study]" (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002, p. 726). 12 participants, three men and nine women, agreed to participate in the study and were later interviewed. Although a gender balance would have been preferred, the data generated was, nonetheless, rich and "gave sufficient depth of information . . . [to] fully describ[e] the phenomenon [under examination]" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 726). The participants were given the choice of venues for the initial interview: one interview took place in a participant's home located in Northwest Toronto and another in the downtown Toronto office.

The remaining interviews were held in a library and a coffee shop where a modicum of privacy was to be had. Conducting the interviews in these mutually agreed upon settings put the participants at ease, or so I assumed, and disposed them to respond to my questions at greater length. To minimize the sense of uneasiness that so often attends interview sessions, I arrived at the venue ahead of time to chat informally with the participants and address any concerns they might have about the study; I also took this opportunity to walk them through the Subject Consent Form and survey. The participants came from backgrounds that varied

across nationality, demography, class, gender, education and political orientation. Their ages ranged from 31 to 60.

Early on in the recruitment process, it became evident that some candidates distrusted my intentions—and in my view justifiably so. One emailed this comment:

Hi, Patrick. Who are you, and why should I accept \$20.00 [as an honorarium] from you to further your own cause? Chances are you will get your PhD, and no one will hear from you and your research again. It will be shelved as all your predecessors. This again is all part of the exploitation, and a waste of our valuable resources. Black education is essential to our survival. Unfortunately, too many of us use our Black eyes to see the White point of view, in the end. (Prospective participant, personal communication, August 19, 2013)

The above missive speaks to the frustration Black parents experience with research studies that in their view give little or nothing back to the community and with researchers bent on exploiting it. To give back to the community, I emailed the participants a copy of my dissertation. I presented my findings to them on July 23, 2016, at Toronto's Bloor-Gladstone public library. The reasons for presenting my findings in this fashion are manifold: to ensure transparency; allow the participants to question my interpretation of the data; obtain their permission to include the data in future publications; restore the confidence of the Black community, and particularly Black parents, in researchers perceived to be exploiting community-related problems to further their careers, in academe, never to be heard from again.

4.7. In-Depth/Semi-Structured Interview

For Gillham (2000), "the overpoweringly positive feature of . . . the [semi-structured] interview is the richness and vividness of the material it turns up" (p. 10). This format encouraged participants to share their views freely and allowed me to ask follow-up questions, the aim being to capture more fully the participants' views while keeping my preconceptions at bay (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). During focus group meetings, whenever

conversation grew disjointed, the semi-structure interview format provided participants with the opportunity to clarify or qualify “vague assertions” and interrogate each other’s views, occasionally, prompting more “detailed elicitations” than had occurred during the course of individual interviews (Morgan, 1996, p. 139). Despite the occasional digression, the focus group members were able to engage in an open and honest exchange of views. In total, the study generated 13.6 hours of audio-recorded interviews and 187 pages of single-spaced transcripts, in addition to 132 pages of newspaper articles not including documents obtained from the Toronto District School Boards and the Afrocentric School websites, of all which were analyzed.

The participants have much in common, particularly their self-identity as African-Canadians with ties to Africa that are, if nothing else, historical (Table 4.1). All, moreover, are parents with a vested interest in the education of their children and African-Canadian students, and as such harbour decided views about the Toronto public school system, TAAS and AE, and the benefits, or lack thereof, of all three for African-Canadian students. Some of their children attended TAAS, while others did not. While they come from different backgrounds, all view themselves as persons of African descent. Moreover, all share the same concern: the underperformance of Black students in the public school system.

While all the participants self-identify as Africans, how they perceive their African identity is informed by their respective worldviews. Those participants—Abena, Amma, Goddess and Titina Silla—who use the term “Afrikan” to indicate their ethno-nationality, tend to take a hyper-critical view of Canadian society, and particularly of the public school system; they also dismiss Eurocentric and colonial narratives on Africa as both racist and uniformed. Regarding her African-Caribbean identity and heritage, Ananse is both proud and reticent, owing, I suspect, to a reluctance to be pigeonholed. A Canadian by birth, Jennifer self-identifies as Black. Canadian born and of Jamaican heritage, Kombozi describes himself as African and Black, whereas Mary, Ouzy and Shaka identify their nationality by referencing their country of origin, respectively, Trinidad, Mali and Jamaica, as opposed to Canada. Though born in Canada, Rolonda describes herself as Canadian-Jamaican, a hyphenated identity she claims signifies a deep affinity for the cultural heritage of her

forebears. In contrast, Zindzi, who calls herself a Canadian-Ghanaian, feels at home in Canada and is more circumspect about privileging one identity over the other.

Table 4.1. Profiles of Participants

Name of participants	Ethno-nationality	Gender	Education	Occupation	Child(ren) at TAAS
Abena	St. Lucian-Afrikan	Female	Secondary	Project Manager	0
Amma	Canadian Afrikan	Female	Some university	Creative artist-educator	0
Ananse	N/A	Female	University (BA)	Food justice manager	0
Goddess	Afrikan	Female	University (MA)	Educator	1
Jennifer	Black	Female	University	Teacher-curriculum consultant	1
Kombozi	African (Black)	Male	University	Mortgage broker	1
Mary	Trinidadian	Female	Post-secondary-University	Social Worker	0
Ouzy	Mali	Male	MBA	Senior manager–banker	0
Rolonda	Jamaican-Canadian	Female	College	Social services worker	0
Shaka	Jamaican	Male	College	Office manager	0
Titina Silla	Afrikan	Female	MA	Lawyer-student	2
Zindzi	Ghanaian/Afrikan	Female	BA	Nurse	1

The discrepancies noted suggest that national identity is something that is fluid and that can be contested. While Zindzi and Mary, albeit to a lesser degree, subscribe to multiculturalism, Canada’s unofficial state religion/ ideology, for those participants who self-identify as “Afrikans,” national identity signifies their individuality as well as their politics, which are directed at creating an African identity with which to resist White oppression. For them, such an identity stirs the emotions, providing a counterweight to the racism and

injustice they see permeating Canadian society at all levels and in all spheres, and in particular public education.

4.8. The Participants

4.8.1. Abena (Project Manager)

The interview, held on 22 August 2013, took place in the program room of a public library located in downtown Toronto. Adjacent to this room is the children's section of the library, which can be viewed through large plate-glass windows. Although the interview was scheduled for 11:00 a.m., I arrived at 9:52 a.m. Abena, who has no children currently enrolled at TAAS, arrived at the appointed time, sporting a green batik dress, sandals, and sunglasses. Her views on TAAS and AE were entirely positive: both have made a significant difference in the day-to-day lives of Black students by connecting them to their African heritage and Pan-African family and are responsible for improving academic performance as evinced by the above-average scores obtained by TAAS students on provincial exams; AE is a corrective to a neocolonial education system because it presents positive images of Africans and teaches students about the achievements of African Empires and Kingdoms; AE offers Black students the courage to challenge racism. By contrast, Eurocentric education does not help Black students build a positive self-image. When it does it focus on African history, it employs racist typecasts. Throughout the interview, Abena was thoughtful and self-possessed and appeared comfortable with the interview questions; she maintained good eye contact and often smiled. And though none of her children are currently enrolled in TAAS, she was generous with her time; indeed, following the interview she passed a full 30 minutes sharing her views on life in general.

4.8.2. Amma (Creative Artist–Educator)

The interview, held on 13th August 2013, took place at the respondent's home, a townhouse located in North-West Toronto. Though a passionate supporter of TAAS and AE,

Amma is also a constructive critic. Though a passionate supporter and constructive critic of both TAAS and AE, Amma has no children currently enrolled in the school. Her knowledge of TAAS, AE, and Afrocentricity and their place in the struggle of the Pan-African family is remarkable. While responding to questions, she would often interject comments and stories pertaining to the Black experience in Canada. Amma views TAAS as the key to liberating Black students and AE as crucial to restoring to Black communities a sense of communalism and group solidarity, along with an understanding and appreciation for Black history, esthetics and art—the carriers of Black values. She rejects both the public perception of TAAS as a segregated school and a Eurocentric neoliberal education system based on White supremacist values—a system that may prepare students for entry into the workforce but at the cost of impairing their moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. Amma believes that incorporating Black history into the curriculum will help immunize Black students against racism by providing a deeper understanding of both who they are and the contributions Black people have made to Canada and the rest of the world. Despite her unalloyed support for TAAS and AE, she is aware, nonetheless, of the challenges awaiting graduates—in particular, the perception that all are angry young men and women unable or unwilling to accept the status quo or adopt mainstream perspectives.

4.8.3. Ananse (Food Justice Manager)

The interview, held on 5 September 2013, took place in a public library located in midtown Toronto, a middle-class neighbourhood where a small homeless population resides. The interview was held in the library's program room, which is spacious and well-lit and features large glass-paned doors and windows. The noise level was minimal, and there was no human traffic. Following the exchange of pleasantries, Ananse, who has no children currently attending TAAS, scrutinized and signed the consent form. She assured me she was comfortable with audiotaping the interview, and the process started. As one would expect of an Afrocentric educator, Ananse viewed AE as critically important to educating African-Canadian students, even though she remained coy when asked thrice to voice an opinion regarding TAAS. She also believes AE has played a crucial role in raising awareness of the

Pan-African family, notwithstanding its commodification and the misconceptions that have arisen, resulting from the various interpretations to which it has been subject. AE has, according to Ananse, contributed significantly to restoring a sense of pride in Africa and in an African heritage and identity, particularly in the younger generations, many of whose members possess only a middling understanding of who they are. It is these Black Canadians, more than any other, that need AE to ground them in an African identity and overcome the barriers extant in the classroom and elsewhere. For her, AE is also crucial to combatting the cult of an irresponsible individualism to which so many African-Canadian students have succumbed, and to cultivating in its place a sense of how the individual is tied to the destiny of the collective. Equally important, AE instills in Black students a pride in who they are, a *sine qua non* for presenting themselves in ways that are worthy of emulation and that reflect positively on the African-Canadian community. Ananse also contends that the "it takes a village to raise a child" model of education, upon which AE is predicated, brings to the classroom a humanistic element.

4.8.4. Goddess (Educator)

The interview, held on 5 September 2013, was conducted in a North York coffee shop. An African and a mother, Goddess, who has a 9-year-old son currently attending TAAS, is active within Toronto's African-Canadian community and TAAS as well as the school. The most striking feature of her attire was an African headscarf of brilliant colours. Goddess is a strong proponent of TAAS, where her son is enrolled. In her view, AE plays a crucial role in educating Black children and in preparing them in other ways to live useful and productive lives. In addition to instilling self-confidence and providing an environment conducive to excelling academically, TAAS and AE provide Black students with a sense of solidarity and an appreciation of their African heritage, while impressing upon them the need to give something back to the community. Goddess' views on society in general and injustice in particular are highly politicized; moreover, she spoke passionately regarding the inequities in the public school system and the challenges confronting Toronto's Black youth.

4.8.5. Jennifer (Teacher–Curriculum Consultant)

The interview, held on 6 August 2013, took place at a public library located in Toronto's West-End. Jennifer, an educator, historian, author, and independent curriculum consultant who has published books on African-Canadian history and conducted public workshops on the subject, spoke in support of TAAS and AE. Jennifer views TAAS, where her daughter is currently enrolled, as instrumental in addressing the harm colonial education has inflicted on African-Canadian students. For her, AE is both liberating and empowering in that it fosters self-awareness and confidence in Black students by, among other things, revealing who they are and what their place is in history—a history often taken out of context and reframed from the standpoint of the colonizer. Jennifer's views on TAAS and AE are informed by her heritage and personal experience as a member of a racialized minority as well as her interaction with African-Canadian students.

4.8.6. Kombozi (Mortgage Broker)

The interview, held on 8 August 2013, took place at an up-scale coffee shop/eatery, replete with wooden mocha floor, leather seats, chic lighting, and soft music droning in the background. The relatively quiet ambiance was punctuated by the occasional whir of a blending machine. Kombozi is a devoted supporter of TAAS and AE. This support is born of an in-depth and firsthand knowledge of what it means to be a Black student in a White-dominated public education system. He spoke passionately and at length about how race mediates the lives of Black students and the role of social stereotypes in fostering student disaffection—something that often leads to high dropout rates and even incarceration. Kombozi, whose son was about to enter Grade 1 at TAAS, views AE as a lifeline for Black students who would otherwise likely drop out of school and lead aimless lives. Kombozi believes Black parents must serve as role models for their children—a belief he lives by, and to which I can attest, having witnessed him, his partner, and his son participating in a Black student-parent mentorship program. Kombozi's views are highly politicized, his analysis of social justice issues rigorous.

4.8.7. Mary (Social Worker)

The interview, held on 31 July 2013, took place in an office of a public library located in Toronto's West-End. The interview room was furnished with a table and two chairs. Across from it was the library's main reading area where young children occupied themselves with video games. Adjacent them, a group of preschoolers were seated on the floor listening as a librarian read aloud from a children's book. Mary, who has no children currently attending TAAS, arrived 15 minutes late due to heavy traffic and the difficulty of finding the venue. Prior the interview, we exchanged greetings and chatted briefly. A Canadian of Trinidadian descent, Mary is a firm supporter of TAAS and AE. She sees TAAS as doing what the mainstream public school has failed to do, that is, provide Black students with an African-centred perspective. Mary believes that TAAS and AE offer Black parents who are dissatisfied with the status quo an alternative, namely a school that meets their educational goals—something to which every child and parent has a right. Yet, she still supports ME and has serious doubts as to whether race should play so important a role in educating children. She contends the mainstream public schools and TDSB must do more, particularly with regard to reforming the curriculum with a view to opening up space for alternative knowledge systems and histories. Mary believes that TAAS' popularity among students and parents is predicated upon its success in instilling hope and courage in Black students and an acceptance of their African heritage. And while fearing TAAS graduates are at risk of being stigmatized, she is convinced such a fate pales in comparison to the harm inflicted upon Black students by the status quo.

4.8.8. Ouzy (Senior Manager–Banker)

The interview, held on 27 September 2013, took place in a conference room of a financial institution located in downtown Toronto. A banker by profession, Ouzy, who has no children currently attending TAAS, supports neither the school nor AE; indeed, he views the former to be unnecessary. For him, the responsibility for Black student underperformance lies principally with the Black family, specifically absentee fathers and a Black culture that rewards laziness. While acknowledging the mainstream public school system and

Eurocentric education to be partly at fault, he believes that Black families have failed Black children. Although Ouzy admits to having limited knowledge of TAAS and AE, he contends that the school cannot possibly prepare students to succeed in a labour market where success depends on specialized knowledge and skill sets rather than awareness of one's heritage. And while TAAS may boost student confidence, it cannot address the problem of student disaffection or gang membership. He dismisses TAAS as a segregated school that should be ineligible for government funding. In his view TAAS is doing what Black parents should be doing at home. Nor does he believe TAAS and AE provide an objective view of African history; African-Canadians have a habit of romanticizing the continent's history, seldom, if ever, acknowledging the fact that Africa is the cause of its problems, all of which are man-made. Ouzy contends that TAAS is no place to educate Black students, especially if the goal is to produce skilled workers, professionals and community leaders. Ouzy holds strong views about the Black community, and particularly its youth. He believes that, however imperfect the education system, the problem lies not with its imperfections but with a culture that disposes Blacks to criticize the system rather than take advantage of it.

4.8.9. Rolonda (Social Services Worker)

The interview, held on 27 August 2013, took place in a Toronto West-End coffee shop. An unequivocal and ardent supporter of TAAS and AE, Rolonda, who has no children currently enrolled in the school, believes the former to be long overdue. Her support for TAAS and AE is informed by her personal experience as a student in the public school system. For her, the TAAS curriculum stands as a corrective to the habitual misrepresentations of the Black contribution to civilization. AE is crucial, she believes, to rolling back the mental slavery that continues to oppress Black Canadians, revealing itself in the habit of rejecting or belittling oneself and accepting as natural the racist projections that are a staple feature of school curricula and corporate media. AE teaches Black students to stand up for themselves. In highlighting Africa's humanity, moreover, it provides Black students with the knowledge, awareness and strength to resist racial stereotypes.

Incorporating race in education as TAAS has done, is one way, Rolonda believes, to situate Africa as one of civilization's great architects.

4.8.10. Shaka (Office Manager)

The interview, held on 20 August 2013, took place in a coffee shop located in midtown Toronto. Shaka, who has no children currently attending TAAS, appeared on the scene resplendent in African batik garb. Owing to the large, vociferous crowd milling about the coffee shop, we relocated to a nearby pizzeria that was relatively quiet. Well-known as an activist in the Black community, Shaka is a strong supporter of both TAAS and AE, which, he believes, provide a space wherein students can learn about the Pan-African family and Africa's contribution to civilization. He dismisses the claim that AE is a substitute for a Eurocentric education. Rather, in his view its principal objectives lie in correcting misrepresentations regarding both the place of Africa in the domain of knowledge production and the potential and abilities of its people, and in drawing attention to the implications of European colonial atrocities for modern-day Africa and the African Diaspora. By predicating its pedagogy on the proposition that 'it takes a village to raise a child,' TAAS, Shaka believes, has succeeded in developing a system of learning wherein the success of Black children is regarded as a collective investment. He further believes that ultimately TAAS' survival depends on securing the goodwill of the public—something that should be made a top priority. The knowledge and passion Shaka brings to the defense of Africa is remarkable. His responses to questions focused mainly on Black Canada often referenced colonial and postcolonial African struggles and how they tie in to the current plight of Black Canadians and the Pan-African family. Shaka believes that embedding Africa in the consciousness of every Black person is crucial to reclaiming its greatness.

4.8.11. Titina Silla (Lawyer–Student)

The interview, held on 5 September 2013, took place in a North York coffee shop. A tall Black cheerful woman exuding friendliness, Titina Silla traces her activism to her family's involvement in Africa's anti-colonial movement. As a strong supporter of TAAS and

AE, and mother of two, all of whom attended the school until June 2014, she dismisses the public perception that either is intended to rival Eurocentric education. Titina Silla believes the core aim of AE lies in reclaiming Africa's collective identity and its rightful place in history while providing Black students with revolutionary knowledge systems capable of contesting the colonial epistemic construction of Africa. Thus, AE is all about incorporating an alternative knowledge system, a learning and pedagogic approach both to raising awareness on the part of Black students regarding their collective identity and to helping them resist the ongoing war being waged on the Black mind, the purpose of which is to naturalize Black subordination and marginalization. Titina Silla believes that TAAS provides Black students with a safe space in which to nurture African-oriented ideas. Titina Silla's worldview is highly politicized, though tempered by a profound sense of humility. Moreover, prior to responding to each question, she paused to think before answering, resulting in responses that were rich and exhaustive. She also proved to be highly knowledgeable about all facets of Afrocentricity and virtually anything related to it.

4.8.12. Zindzi (Nurse)

The interview, held on 26 August 2013, took place at a university where Zindzi was enrolled. She arrived at the appointed time. Her mood was upbeat and she was well-dressed for the occasion, wearing Black pants, a tank-top and trendy leather jacket. Using her contacts at the school, Zindzi had secured a private room for the interview, which though small proved to be quiet and cozy—ideal for an interview. Zindzi, whose son is enrolled in TAAS, supports the school, albeit with reservations. While recognizing its contribution to educating Black students, particularly with regard to their heritage, she subscribes to the notion that curriculum reform throughout the public school system represents a better alternative. And while she believes that Black students should learn about their history and heritage, she is unsure as how TAAS can avoid being perceived by the public as a race-based school. She also worries that in giving race such prominence, TAAS might be inadvertently fostering racism. Zindzi recommends TAAS look beyond race and incorporate educational

models where the emphasis is on acquiring the knowledge and skill sets required to secure employment in those areas of the economy currently dominated by Whites.

4.9. Researcher's Assessment of Interviews and His Experience with Participants

Overall, the interviews proved to be positive experiences. All the participants were prepared to be interviewed, and at no time did I feel awkward or sense any awkwardness on the part of the participants. For the most part, the latter were generous with their time. Some stayed on after the interview to discuss general issues at length and/or clarify their views. It was readily apparent they were acutely aware of the problems facing Black youth; they were also prepared to participate in discussion groups or programs aimed at addressing the challenges confronting Black students.

I was also humbled by the participants' generosity. Some enquired whether additional participants were required and expressed a readiness to help if this were the case. I interpret this overture as a sign that Black parents are, notwithstanding the public perception to the contrary, genuinely interested in the education of their children and wish to have their voices heard. What the participants really wanted, in my view, were new policies directed at changing the status quo by, among other things, creating in schools a student-and-parent-friendly atmosphere, partly in recognition of the role Black parents play in educating their children. The informal, post-interview discussions helped establish a rapport with the participants that facilitated an understanding of their views on my part.

4.10. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Having no prescribed standard with which to analyze data, ethnographic researchers must rely, for the most, on "analytical procedures" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 728; see also Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Merriam, 1995) to convert data into coherent texts capable of providing an accurate account of the phenomenon under study. Data analysis

began following the first interview and continued until all the fieldwork had been completed. Possessing extensive background knowledge of the subject matter allowed some of the answers to the research questions to be anticipated, which did affect the data analysis, albeit minimally. Following each interview, field notes were taken for the purpose of recording my experience, my views regarding the interviews, and my impressions of the participant, i.e., of his/her personality and views. Themes believed to be relevant to the study were recorded. Memos describing difficulties and challenges encountered in the field, along with ways and means of resolving or circumventing them, were also recorded.

The interviews were manually transcribed. While transcribing 12 interviews by hand proved time consuming and overwhelming, it has the advantage of bringing the researcher closer to the data, something not possible with software, which “does not, and cannot, analyze qualitative data for the researcher” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 729). The data was analyzed by repeatedly reviewing what the participants said, noting their tone of voice and taking into account context (Barbour, 2008; Bradley, 1993; Creswell, 2007; Grbich, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Weis & Fine, 2000). Listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts repeatedly made it possible to reduce the amount of data to a manageable size, i.e., for in-depth analysis, by eliminating whatever was superfluous, e.g., redundant descriptors and digressions. This process was undertaken with great care so as not to alter in any substantive way the import of what the participants said. Coding was used to identify common patterns, themes, similarities and dissimilarities and to select quotes and salient themes for comparative and thematic analysis (Anfara et al., 2002; Barbour, 2008; Basit, 2003; Creswell, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; O’Reilly, 2009; Richards & Richards, 1994; Sipe & Ghiso, 2004; Weis & Fine, 2000). During the initial stage of the analysis, codes were developed which were subsequently sorted, organized and grouped into “meaningful unit[s]” (Bradley, 1993, p. 445). As a result of sorting and organizing the codes, I was able to develop broad themes. I then compared these emerging themes with a view to lending meaning and depth to the participants’ perceptions of TAAS and AE (Bradley, 1993).

4.11. Research Trustworthiness, Validity and Reliability

While the terms ‘validity’ and ‘reliability,’ which are most often associated with the discovery of ‘truth’, have their origins in positivism, they are nonetheless useful in signifying the credibility of research, and particularly that of “[in-depth] interpretations of findings” (Anfara et al., 2002, p. 33). They are routinely used by qualitative researchers to fend off accusations that their work amounts to nothing more than “story telling” (Anderson, 1989, p. 252).

As a critical theorist, I draw on what in qualitative research is understood to be the truth. The latter, indeed one’s notion of what constitutes reality, is shaped by one’s subjective interpretation of his/her lived experience, a view that is at variance with the positivist notion of truth as absolute and unchanging. By engaging the participants in discussing their stories, however situated, I created a space where, together, they and I arrived at the truth as both they and I saw it. Treating their stories as credible, and humanizing their experiences outside the constraints of positivist prescriptions, I succeeded in capturing their perceptions of TAAS and AE (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Dillard, 2006).

According to Walcott (1990), finding certainty in the area of qualitative research is problematic. The principal goal of the qualitative researcher is to “understand [the] social world [he or she] is . . . constructing” (Walcott as cited Talburt, 2004, p. 80). Walcott presupposes that human phenomena cannot be understood on the basis of “a predetermined level of verifiable facts (as cited in Talburt, 2004, p. 80), a view shared by Merriam (1995), who asserts that “[in conducting research,] qualitative researchers are not seeking to establish “laws” with respect to which reliability of observations and measurements is essential; rather, [they] seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those in it” (p. 56). The trustworthiness of the research was addressed by triangulating the data, a process that involves cross-verifying and comparing interviews and using newspaper articles to “identify corroborating and dissenting accounts” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 728). This method helped to minimize the bias inherent in using a single data source (Anfara et al., 2002; Fossey et al., 2002; Talburt, 2004).

Transcripts were edited to provide greater clarity and precision and copies emailed to the participants for “clarification, explanation or extension of . . . ideas” (Talburt, 2004, p. 88) prior to analyzing and interpreting the data, the rationale being that the “respondents were in a better position to interpret the data and correct any oversights, misinterpretations or misrepresentations (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Talburt, 2004, p. 87). Member check was utilized in the sense that all participants were invited to provide input on the accuracy of transcripts. Ten of the 12 participants took up the opportunity and edited the transcripts and returned them via email. It does not follow from this approach that my authorial authority was in any way compromised or that “the knowledge and expertise of participants [was privileged] over [my] ability to analyze and interpret [the data]” (Hoskin & Stoltz, 2005, p. 97); rather, it was more a case of working in partnership with a view to ensuring that the participants’ authentic voices were heard (Talburt, 2004). While the data was being collected, the participants were able to contact me at any time. One participant took the opportunity to invite me to attend a workshop, entitled “Parent Forum and Workshop: Building Parent Unity to Empower our School and Community.”

Thick description was used to provide an extensive account of my experience (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner & Pugach, 2005). Multiple statements, replete with dissenting views, were obtained from the participants, the purpose being to “reflect their reality” (Talburt, 2004, p. 95). Embedded in these statements were their “views, experiences, and emotions” (Talburt, 2004, p. 95). Descriptors deemed offensive, e.g., those that stereotype Black women, and thus likely to hinder fruitful discussion by shifting the focus away from the principal objective of the study were deleted. Below is one of the few generalizations made regarding the question of Black parental responsibility:

Ouzy (Senior manager–banker): I am a Black man, and I am a father. If my wife [and I] do not get along, I am not going to abandon my kids . . . [to] join gangs. Bad things start with Black parents like myself. . . . [Absentee-fathers] are responsible for more than half of our problems. . . . If you look at the shootings happening in Toronto, 99% of the time, it is the woman who comes on TV to cry. Where are the fathers? . . . Let’s start with [taking responsibility for our actions] instead of creating an Afrocentric School. [Now], let’s talk about Black moms, wear condoms . . . Why . . . bring somebody [into the world] when [you] need help [yourself]? . . . Don’t start having kids when you know you cannot afford [them] . . . This is what I mean [by] we need

to be accountable for our own actions before blaming the system. We are our own problem; we create these problems to start with.

4.12. The Emic/Etic Split

The emic/etic split poses a challenge in research. Proponents of the former position contend that transformative, people-centered, and “responsive” research is only possible provided the researchers are “cultural insiders” (Bishop, 2005, p. 111). This view stems from the belief that only the researcher who is at one with the subject by virtue of his/her race, ethnicity, gender, sex, class, etc., can have “easy access, the ability to ask meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues and most importantly be able to project a more truthful understanding of the culture under study” (Merriam et al., as cited in Bishop, 2005, p. 111). Conversely, notwithstanding their qualifications, training, and interest, outsiders, who necessarily lack all or most of these attributes, face insurmountable obstacles to conducting research in cultural settings outside their race and culture. As a counterpoint to this view, Tillman (2002) asserts that a researcher’s eligibility to conduct studies should not be judged primarily on the grounds of race but rather on “whether the researcher has the cultural knowledge to accurately interpret and validate the experiences of the [subjects] within the context of the phenomenon under study” (as cited in Bishop, 2005, p. 113).

Taking into account the ethnographic maxim that ethnographers “make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” I need to assert that even though my race provided me with situated knowledge and the knack for asking probative research questions, it also limited my ability to problematize the familiar (Banks, 1998; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Loutzenheiser, 2007; Kaomea, 2003).

As a privileged graduate student, I live a life far removed from the daily experiences of the research participants who are mostly members of the working class and reside in working-class communities. From my privileged location, I can only claim to understand what Black parents are willing and able to reveal regarding TAAS and AE. To claim, moreover, that being educated, I am better situated to speak for the participants would be

false as well as presumptuous. I can only speak on the basis of what they tell me, always cognizant of the fact that despite my affinity for the Black community and our common struggle—a struggle of which I am less a part given my social location—I will always remain an outsider within (Banks, 1998; Lawless, 1992; Loutzenheiser, 2007; McCorkel & Myers, 2003).

Regarding this point, Alcoff (1991) argues that a researcher's race, ethnicity, gender, class, or culture do not confer on him/her the authority to speak for the research participants or for the population they presumably represent; nor does the researcher's race eliminate barriers in the field. My personal experience attests to the existence of such barriers; despite the commonality of race, I sometimes found myself kept at arms-length by the Black parents of TAAS students. I can only assume they were skeptical, and justifiably so, about the aims of the study, perceiving it to be just another self-serving exercise on the part of a student desperate to compete a doctorate degree and largely indifferent, if not oblivious, to its negative implications, such as tarnishing the image of a school which the Black community had fought so long and hard to establish and which is viewed as a corrective to Black students' underachievement in the mainstream public school system. While in the field, I was made very much aware by parents who chose to spurn my invitation to participate in the study that race was not a free pass for conducting research in their community. Rather than viewing the insider-outsider duality as an obstacle, however, I used it to my advantage: I entered the field both as an 'insider,' possessing knowledge of the phenomenon under study, and as an 'outsider' with an outsider's perspective, which alone rendered the "familiar . . . strange" (Kaomea, 2003, p. 4).

According to Hammersley and Atkinson, a good ethnographer "needs to be intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness" (as cited in Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 165). While I conducted this study in a community of which I am a part and could lay claim to being better situated to understand the issues at stake, I cannot claim 'objectivity' on the basis of race. To do so could very well hamper my efforts to understand these issues, distort my conversations with participants, and pose ethical problems, e.g., reporting findings not supported by the data (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Banks, 1998).

After acknowledging my biases and subjecting them to reflexive and recursive analysis, I came to realize that my research methodology and questions were value-laden, that my knowledge of the subject under study was ‘coloured’ by my history, ideology and idiosyncrasies as well as by my relation to the Toronto Black community (Simon & Dippo, 1986). I also became aware that using Afrocentric Theory as an interpretive lens precluded other theoretical frameworks, e.g., Critical Race Theory and Conflict Theory, that are equally capable of elucidating the power structures that reproduce oppression in all of its myriad forms.

To ensure that I understood the participants’ responses to the interview questions, I conducted a member check. I emailed them the interview transcripts with minor edits and requested that they either affirm or modify those statements that did not reflect their views. (Lawless, 1992). I also emailed them the study’s preliminary findings. In conferring upon them ownership of the data in the best traditions of a “reciprocal ethnography” (Lawless, 1992, p. 311), an iterative dialogue was established between the participant and researcher. Subjecting my interpretations to reinterpretation contributed to reducing the influence my biases would likely have on the findings. What I hope has emerged from this study, is an objective and balanced view of parental perception of TAAS and AE. It should be admitted, however, that despite all these efforts, my values have, as is the case with all research, informed this study.

4.13. Researcher Reflexivity

According to Anderson, “the most pressing issue facing critical ethnographers today with respect to the validity or trustworthiness of their accounts is . . . reflexivity, that is, self-reflective processes that keep their critical framework from becoming a container into which the data is poured” (Anderson, 1989, p. 254). The preoccupation with reflexivity is evinced in the attention it commands, as Britzman has pointed out, “in almost every qualitative research book or article . . . and . . . [its general acceptance] as a method qualitative

researchers [use to confer] . . . ethnographic authority [on research]” (as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 176).

As stated earlier, research is a political act, and for this reason susceptible to bias. As an African-Canadian and former educator with close ties to Toronto’s Black community, I bring to the study personal biases that I hope to address by reflecting upon them repeatedly. While my personal views on TAAS and AE clearly inform this study, they are far eclipsed in this regard by those of the participants.

Reflexivity, as I understand it, involves subjecting my preconceptions of the phenomenon under study to “self-scrutiny” (Strater as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 177). This is very different from the positivist notion of “bracketing” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p. 579), that carries the implication that the researcher must in no way impinge upon the phenomenon under study, an imperative I must, owing to my race, culture, affinity with the Black community and ‘situatedness’ in the study, categorically reject.

I succeeded in creating a reflexive account of the phenomenon under study by routinely ruminating upon how my race, class, ethnicity, nationality, social experience, etc., contributed to informing the analysis. To maintain reflexivity, I discussed the data and the study, on a few occasions, with a colleague; I also kept a personal journal. This awareness, borne constantly in mind, made it possible to keep my biases at arms-length and resist those impulses that would have jeopardized the accuracy and rigor of the above account. In addition, by repeatedly reviewing transcripts and field notes, I was able to capture the voices of the participants, thus “let[ting] them speak for themselves” (Trinh as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 184).

4.14. Conclusion

This chapter has delineated how a qualitative research methodology allowed the participants in this study to speak to the reality of their lived experience. Drawing upon Afrocentric and critical paradigms, I have shown that research should not be viewed as a

neutral undertaking; rather it constitutes a political activity with activist undercurrents and nuances and revolutionary objectives, in which the researcher and participants collaborate in interrogating social phenomena—in this case inequities in the public education system and society at large—and in ‘speaking truth to power,’ thus problematizing the structures of power and domination and the culture and ethos that work to sustain them. The following chapter discusses the research findings.

Chapter 5.

Afrocentric Education, Racism, Afrocentricity and Identity: The Contestations

5.1. Black Parents and Afrocentric Education

In the chapter on methodology, I discussed the various means and/or methods, all drawn from critical ethnography, used to recruit participants, gather, data and collect and analyze documents. This chapter reports on the findings from the study, namely Black parents' experience of mainstream education and its effects on their children; their understanding of Afrocentricity, TAAS and AE; the experiences and factors that have contributed to shaping their personal identity; their own educational experiences; and their views on issues concerning race and education. It should be noted that the interviews ranged far and wide, touching on, among other things, the formation of a Black identity and the part race plays in this process and the role of Black parents in home education. A total of 12 participants were interviewed, nine women and three men, all belonging to Toronto's Black community. The findings and themes that emerged reflected those in the literature.

5.2. The Perennial Presence of Racism in the Educational System

Not only does experience of a phenomenon guide human actions; it contributes to shaping them. To convey an understanding of African-Canadian parents' perceptions of TAAS and AE, and what informs those perceptions, the participants shared their experience of racism gained while attending Toronto primary and/or secondary schools. In revealing what they think of the public school system, the narratives provide insight regarding their reasons for supporting or rejecting TAAS and AE. From the accounts presented below, one gathers that racism, rather than changing to any significant extent, has instead mutated while continuing to be denied (Raby, 2004), claims of reform notwithstanding. Those narratives

covering the participants' experiences as students reveal the pervasiveness of racism throughout the education system.

Amma (Creative artist-educator): I know what it's like to go to schools with White teachers . . . I remember going to school . . . I was in Grade 1, and came Christmas, we had to make pictures of the Nativity. The teacher had given us pictures . . . and we had to colour them . . . My grandfather, a Christian Minister, had told me that in the area where the stories in the Bible took place, . . . there were no White people. So, you're talking about Black people . . . Over the years, different people moved in and out of the region and populations shifted around . . . When it came time to draw a picture of Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, I made them Black. My teacher went berserk. She lost her mind . . . This was all a new experience [to me]. This is what happens when you're a kid and you encounter things you've never encountered before. . . . In . . . Grade 1, I had no idea what was normal and what was not. I drew a picture of Mary, Jesus, and Joseph. I made them Black. The teacher went crazy. She took my picture and tore it up. As she tore it up, she said 'you made them dirty, you made them dirty, how dare you!' . . . She slammed down another blank picture on the table and said, "Do it again." This time, I carefully made sure I coloured [the picture] within the lines. I made sure that my hands were clean so I didn't smudge anything. [Again] I made them Black. The teacher lost her mind again. This went on and each time she kept saying you made them dirty, you made them filthy, and finally she said, "You made them Black!" And I said, "Aren't they?" [laughter]. It still didn't click that she was talking about race and that she was talking about Black people in a negative way. Of course, they're Black. I knew this because in my house, we didn't have pictures of the effeminate Jesus with the long limp, blond hair. . . . I only knew that they [Joseph, Mary and Jesus] were Black. She lost her mind . . . I don't know if you are familiar with the book *Little Black Sambo*. She used to . . . put me on a stool in front of the class. This happened about once every week. She'd pull out *Little Black Sambo*. The book had really negative stereotypical pictures of a Black child. Some of the pictures had *Sambo's* lips so swollen; they looked grotesque, inhuman. [His] hair . . . had bones in them and bits of flotsam and jetsam . . . She would walk across the classroom reading the book with me sitting at the front [of the class] on the stool. She would come back to the stool once awhile . . . and she would show the class the pictures and would say, "You see the hair in this picture? That is what her hair [looks] like." . . . She it said in a tone, which made clear that something was bad about *Little Black Sambo's* hair, and my hair. I did not understand what was going on because I would look at the picture she pointed to and it didn't look anything like me. My hair was always neatly braided . . . I did not [understand] what she was doing. She would then go on to highlight every single physical feature of *Little Black Sambo*. . . . She would point to the pictures and tell the kids that, ". . . Make sure you stay away from that skin colour because it's dirty." . . . I stopped liking school . . . because of this incident. I didn't still really understand what was going on. For the longest time, I thought that it hadn't impacted on me. . . . Because I did not fully understand what was going on at the time, it did not have any impact on me. In Grade 5, I ran into

overt racism again. My stomach started to knot up on a constant basis; I started having some physical symptoms similar to the same feelings I had always felt when I was in Grade 1, which I didn't understand. But, as I said earlier, my grandfather had immunized me to a great extent against racism so that I didn't lose my mind entirely, which I actually should have, considering some of the things that I experienced in school.

Amma's account reveals that a Eurocentric educational system is unable to accommodate alternative knowledge systems; moreover, in its zeal to preserve White supremacy, it punishes Black students whose attitudes it finds quarrelsome and subversive of institutional authority. It does so and often by shaming them, e.g., by caricaturizing them and/or their heritage. Amma's story also points to the stressful relations between White teachers and Black students, the former viewed by the latter as insensitive to their cultural and educational needs. She also draws attention to the conflict between home and public education and the latter's project of assimilating Black students into Euro-Canadian culture. Amma's recollection of the way her teacher repeatedly used her as a model to illustrate a particularly grotesque Black caricature helps us understand the ways in which schools foster a sense of White superiority by demeaning Black students in often not-so-subtle ways. Clearly, there exists no space in public education for oppositional constructions of beauty, for facial features and hairstyles that signify "counter-hegemonic creation . . . and creativity" (Patton, 2006, p. 40). Moreover, what this particular teacher—and for that matter, many of their White counterparts—fail to understand is that Black hair represents, for some Black parents, the very essence of a Black identity, culture and spirituality (Patton, 2006).

Ananse (Food justice manager): I was born in Canada. I attended a French Immersion School for the first 8 years of my life . . . I remember going swimming for the first time . . . I jumped in the pool and my hair shrunk into an 'afro' [laughter]. My teachers were the most critical of me. They asked: 'what happened to your hair?' They weren't sensitive. They did not take into consideration how their response did affect me as a child. Also, they had no understanding of my genetic makeup; what happens to Black children's hair when they go into a pool [laughter]. Whereas this may sound like a very little thing, it's a huge thing to a child. When you look at this incident from a child's eye, they start to hate themselves. . . . It's important that we create safe spaces where children [can] benefit from having people who look like them, who understand them culturally and who won't [disrespect them because] they're different.

While Ananse's experience in the swimming pool may appear trivial to dominant Canadians, the impact on her confidence and self-esteem cannot be easily dismissed. Even though the teachers' response to the state of her hair was in no way intended to be disparaging, it underscores, nonetheless, how cross-cultural misunderstandings can demean students. And while there is no way of knowing for certain how a Black teacher would have reacted in the same situation, it is not unreasonable to assume that by virtue of his/her race, culture, and knowledge of Black students, he or she would have avoided embarrassing young Ananse.

Abena (Project manager): I received my elementary and secondary education in North America. Everything I learned about Africa was negative. . . . African history was presented as a history of the savages. Africa was measured against North American standards. I quit university because I found it too Eurocentric. The North American Eurocentric culture literally drove me mad; I tried to commit suicide. I went through culture shock. I did not see representations of my people in anything, not even religion.

Abena's experience highlights the way in which public education homogenizes Africa's many cultures, while signifying Africans as 'savages' and 'primitives,' labels that can traumatize African-Canadian students emotionally and spiritually, compelling some to drop out of school, a factor linked to rising poverty rates in African-Canadian communities and increasing violence among African-Canadian youth. Abena's brush with "suicide" focuses attention on the ultimate cost racism imposes on some Black students. With their heritage devalued by a dominant educational establishment working assiduously to promote "Anglo-conformity" (Fleras & Elliott, 1992, p. 42), and with little hope of redress, Black students, such as Abena, often contemplate suicide as a means to end their internalized oppression. A sense of her experience with the public education system is captured by Asante (1991):

[Colonial and Eurocentric education] was truly a living death. While [its] ontological onslaught caused some Africans to opt for suicide, the most widespread results were dislocation, disorientation, and misorientation—all of which were the consequences of the African person being actively de-centered. (pp. 176-177)

It is apparent from the above narratives that the participants' experience of the public school system played a significant role in forming their perceptions of what passes for mainstream education. They also challenge the liberal notion that the public school is a neutral site where students of all races, ethnicities, genders, and classes can learn about themselves and others with a view to building the kind of interracial and intercultural understanding so essential to living in harmony in, and contributing to, a multicultural society. The participants' accounts of their experience constitute narratives of institutionalized racism, self-doubt, erasure and distortion of African-Canadian heritage and internalized oppression; they also reveal a feeling of powerlessness on the part of Black students in particular, and Black parents in general, to remedy racist attitudes endemic in the school system. Thus, though created to impart knowledge as part of a collective project aimed at building a society founded on the principles of equality and social justice, one where race, class, ethnicity and gender do not determine life opportunities, the school system works to perpetuate White privilege. The above narratives help us understand the Black community's dissatisfaction with the educational status quo and why it invests so much hope in an alternative form of education as the only means of addressing racism and academic underperformance.

While the relationship between Black students and their White teachers is often dysfunctional, or at best poses major challenges, there are exceptions; most notably, those White teachers who are Afrocentric in their outlook and understand the intersectionality of oppression are dependable allies of, and resources for, Black students. To take but one example, Angela Wilson, a Jamaican immigrant to Canada, praises her "very white" ... principal at Lord Roberts Public School in London [Ontario]" (as cited in Diebel, 2008, para. 9). Wilson attributes her courage and determination to challenge racism to her principal, Douglas McAndles, "the former president of the Ontario Teachers' Federation" (para. 10). Wilson writes: "He's a wonderful man, [and he was] very Afrocentric.' . . . 'He has a love for education and such a great spirit. He's a part of my village'" (para. 10-11).

According to Wilson, McAndles cultivated in her a love of reading, which would lead her to discover John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, an:

autobiography of a White Texan who [dyed] his skin Black and travelled through the American South for six months in the ugly days of segregation in order to understand what it was like to walk in the shoes of a Black man. (Wilson as cited in Diebel, 2008, para. 13)

Wilson's account challenges the posturing of Afrocentrists like Leonard Jeffries and Carol Barnes, who, in their quest to educate Black students, ignore or marginalize all that is European, including Western knowledge systems (Cobb, 1997; Barnes, 2001; Gates, 1991; Ortiz de Montellano, 1993; Schlesinger, 1992). Her experience challenges the notion that race can function as the foundation of Afrocentric education, e.g., as the chief criterion for hiring teachers. According to Wright (1994), such a supposition, however popular, would only work to constrain the intellectual growth and outlook of Black students (Wright, 1994b).

5.3. Afrocentricity: Conceptual Interpretations

To be able to speak on an issue, Codjoe (2001) argues, one must demonstrate knowledge of it and be able to "articulate th[e] feelings, experiences and thoughts" (p. 346) of those most affected. I began each interview by asking the participants to explain what Afrocentrism was and what they thought of it.

Patrick: Have you heard of Afrocentrism? What do you understand it to mean, and what do you think of it?

Amma (Creative artist-educator): Afrocentrism is a . . . belief system . . . that positions Africa and what is in the best interest of Africans at the centre of whatever people activity is taking place . . . It is actually normative for people to be raised in a culture that looks after what is best for them. . . . People who have congruence between themselves and the culture . . . don't even think twice about it. But for those of us who have had other cultures imposed on us . . . there is constant conflict. . . . I think the concept is absolutely crucial to our true liberation. . . . As we went from being Afrocentric to being somewhat Eurocentric, some more than others, there's been a shift in our thinking that we actually put other people first [before us]; we don't do things that are in our best interest. We continue to do things from a servile perspective. . . . I think it is necessary for us to go through these stages to become fully self-determined again. This is absolutely crucial.

Amma describes Afrocentricity as a constellation of African-centred ideas aimed at raising awareness regarding Africa and Africans as numbering among the principal architects of civilization. She presents Afrocentricity as an oppositional theory that challenges racist perceptions of Africa, Africans and the Pan-African family. As a theory, Afrocentricity seeks to undermine Africa and its peoples' servile relationship with Europe and European systems of thought, which are antithetical to the interests of both, and to chart a new destiny, one free of the blight that is neocolonialism.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): Afrocentricity is the way of life of African people; people who are reclaiming their collective African identity, their history, their cultural values, and their dignity in a White supremacist world that has constantly devalued their history, their culture, and their values. . . . It is reclamation of the essence of the African personality, the African identity, and our dignity as a people. Afrocentricity is, in essence, centering people of African descent within the history of Africa . . . It is a way of life that helps us to navigate the daily challenges of living in a very racist society like Canada. Also, it empowers us to teach our children about the history, culture, spiritual systems, and other contributions of people from the African continent. I think Afrocentrism is an essential part of the daily living of people of African descent because it helps us to stay grounded in terms of who we are, mentally, physically, and spiritually. . . . It nourishes our minds, our bodies, and our spirits to know who we are as African people, to understand that being African is something to be extremely proud of, to be valued, and to be loved. It helps us to deal with the daily challenges of living in a White supremacist society.

For Titina Silla, Afrocentricity serves the vital function of promoting both the collective self-awareness of Africans and Pan-African solidarity through the rediscovery and preservation of African culture, traditions, and practices that have sustained its peoples. Afrocentricity seeks to authenticate what is genuinely African, and deemed African by Africans, vis-à-vis foreign typecasts often used to deny Africans ownership of their own destiny. Thus, it is only through self-knowledge that Africa's unity and resurgence can be realized and guaranteed.

Ananse (Food justice manager): Afrocentrism is the daily cultivation and integration of African culture into your day-to-day routine, be it education, work, your family or home life. I feel that as Africans living in the diaspora, it's important for us to maintain our identity and connect our [inaudible] the future generations . . . I don't think Afrocentricity is specifically for the Afrocentric community but for indigenous cultures trying to connect with their heritage . . . It's critical that we have this framework through which Black people can identify themselves.

Ananse describes Afrocentricity as the assimilation or internalization of African values and their expression in everyday life. She views knowledge of Afrocentric theory as critical to valorizing and realizing Pan-African unity. For her, it is a theory of consciousness aimed at motivating Africans to 'live' African values. And while acknowledging that it is open to a wide range of interpretations and is far from seamless, she recognizes its utility as a philosophy of empowerment.

The participants' interpretations of Afrocentricity, despite definitional variations, are remarkably similar. All view Afrocentricity as a system of thought that works to promote Black consciousness, heritage and culture, Pan-African unity and intellectual autonomy. All perceive the theory to be conducive to grounding Africans in African values and fostering in them the courage to challenge Eurocentric constructions of what Africa is, who Africans are, and what each may become. Though none of the participants were authorities on Afrocentric education, their responses were nonetheless eloquent, i.e., highly descriptive, definitive and reflective of an assured familiarity. The participants' definitions of Afrocentricity demonstrate one thing: people, their education notwithstanding, are more likely to adopt a theory that speaks to their history, struggles and desire for physical and intellectual liberation.

5.4. Afrocentric Education: A Contested Concept

An embryonic educational initiative charting a course littered with obstacles, AE remains the object of intense scrutiny and debate. For its proponents, it constitutes a vehicle for empowering Blacks and raising Black consciousness in a White-dominated Canada; critics view AE as reminiscent of the "bad old days," i.e., as a segregationist project with grave implications for Toronto's African-Canadian community as well as a threat to Canadian multiculturalism. The view of TAAS as a segregationist project has its historical roots in colonial Canada's education system. In Upper Canada, for example, race was the principal criterion for admission into the public school system. The *Separate School Act* of

1850 was used to deny Black students equal educational opportunities (Winks, 1997).

Writing on TAAS, James (2011) rejects the argument that TAAS represents a return to a racialized educational system:

The call to reject “[TAAS] by “skin colour” is rooted in a multicultural discourse which advocates color-blindness, promotes integration of “cultural groups,” and understands “difference”—in terms of identity and/or culture—to be reflective of “foreignness,” which is seen as something schools should not validate, for to do so would be to undermine the national cultural integration project. As socializing institutions, schools, as they exist, are thought to be well able to accommodate the differences among their racially and ethnically diverse students population, and in so doing facilitate exchanges among them in order for them [to] live and contribute to Canadian society. (pp. 202-203)

The divisiveness surrounding TAAS is reflected in the lack of consensus regarding an appropriate name for this educational model—Afrocentric education and African-centred education have been suggested. Further division exists with regard to what AE means to Black parents. Views on the Afrocentric educational model range from categorical support to unconditional rejection.

Patrick: What is your understanding of AE, and what do you think of it?

Amma (Creative artist-educator): Afrocentric education is an educational model that [helps] Black children [rise above an education system] . . . marked [by] pass and fail. [It fosters] an atmosphere where they are tuned toward their community and feel a connection and a responsibility in terms of what is best for their group . . . I think Black students should be conversant with some fundamentals; . . . I think Afrocentric education is crucial. Black parents need to make sure that it is deeply as Afrocentric as it needs to be. It can't be just simply a fluff and superficial. Some people are under the mistaken idea that Afrocentric education means you're going to pull out the names of famous heroes and 'sheroes' and that's sufficient. . . Afrocentric education has to be more than just talking about Viola Desmond, Harriet Tubman, and Nanny of the Maroons. We need to get certainly into our history. [However] we have to deal with all different aspects of people activity, e.g., art, culture, economics, education, entertainment, labour, law, health, historical perspective, sex, politics, religion, war. . . We need to not just simply copy what the mainstream society is doing or substitute all the White children for Black ones and all the White teachers for Black ones. We need to fundamentally change what goes on in the schools, as well as the general approach to education. In addition, the entire community should be more involved. Of course, the parents absolutely need to be active, but the general community should be involved as well. . . . Lastly, there should be a certain, not necessarily religious,

but, certainly, a spiritual component in Afrocentric education because essentially, we are a spiritual people. [A brief silence].

Amma's concept of AE is clearly in opposition to a Eurocentric model of education that measures student success on the basis of individual academic standing, i.e., by rewarding the individual for standing out from the rest, with no consideration given the contribution to that success made by the collective— 'the village effect.' For Amma, there is, or should be, more to AE than committing to memory the names of Black heroes. AE seeks, or ought to seek, to inculcate in African-Canadian students an appreciation of their membership in the African-Canadian community and inspire them to reach out to those who follow in their footsteps, for only thus can African values be preserved.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): Afrocentric education is designed . . . to help Black children, parents and the community learn more about the historical and current contributions of African people . . . to world civilization. [The aim of] Afrocentric education is to help Black people transform their thinking from one which is Eurocentric to one that is centred on our own experience, value systems and worldviews. It has a healing component to it; it has helped me to look back at what I was taught in school and to understand that I was taught lies about Black . . . history. It has brought truth to my life by teaching me about Black contribution; it has taught me that because the African value system is a communal, I have a responsibility to the Black community; to educate my two children within an African-centred context so that they can grow up to be great African leaders to continue the process of liberation. It has also taught me that the individual, in the context of the collective, can only reach his or her highest potential with the support of the collective. Thus, if their goals are nurtured by the collective, the individual has a reciprocal responsibility to give back to the collective . . . Another important aspect of Afrocentric education is the sense of community it provides parents of the children who go to the [Toronto Africentric Alternative] school, many of whom like myself, who were not taught positive things about Black people, are now learning through the school and their children and can see the change in their children's level of confidence . . . Afrocentric education nourishes our minds, our bodies and, most importantly, our spirits as African people.

Titina Silla's comments underscore AE's role as a vehicle for holistic education. AE inculcates in students a love of community and a responsibility to give back to the community; moreover, they come to see themselves as its representatives. Thus, do they begin to perceive themselves, not as individual actors, but as part of a collective, i.e., the African-Canadian community, to which they are duty-bound to act in ways that foster a

positive image of that community. Titina Silla's comments also foreground the cascading effect of AE; not only does it educate Black students, it also educates Black parents and the community at large. Returning home with knowledge acquired in the classroom, Afrocentric students are in a position to instruct the African family, and beyond the domestic sphere the proverbial 'African village,' in the process renewing the Black community's interest in an alternative form of education, based on an Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy.

Afrocentric students thus help Black families and the Black community to interrogate colonial assumptions about Africans and their heritage, and in so doing provide a corrective to colonial miseducation.

Ananse (Food justice manager): My personal understanding of Afrocentric education is . . . developing from an early educational age knowledge of the self, a love of the self . . . and a love the collective self. The collective self is very important, because in the regular school system most of the academic materials Black children are exposed to do not reflect them As a part of the educational experience, it's very important that children identify with characters in books. Afrocentric education creates an environment where Black children are nurtured to understand who they are, their place in the universe, and to understand their history . . . and learn step-by-step African traditions, which, unfortunately, for the Black community is slowly disintegrating. We're an oral community; we share traditions through storytelling, through poetry. Unfortunately, we live in a society that doesn't nurture that oral tradition enough let alone value it. So a lot of our African traditions have [been lost] . . . An African-centred learning space provides that which has been lost. . . [Also, it] optimizes the potential of [Black] child[ren].

Ananse's comments foreground the importance of the African community to the individual African who, sees him/herself as an extension of the collective and whose welfare depends on the support of the community of which he or she is a member. In the context of AE, Ananse seems to imply that Black students learn better among their own kind because they can relate better to those who look like them, i.e., their co-racialists, whether their fellow students or the Black heroes and 'sheroes' in their textbooks. Ananse credits AE for cultivating pride in African-Canadian children during their most formative year through the use of educational materials to which they can relate, e.g., those that present positive images of Black people and narratives celebrating African heroes. Ananse's comments underscore the importance of self-awareness in children, something that can translate into positive learning outcomes. Her view of AE is in agreement with Amma's; both believe AE must

oppose Eurocentric education and cultivate in African-Canadian students an appreciation of and respect for the African-centred values at its core. From what I can gather from Ananse's comments, including orature, i.e., storytelling, as part of the curriculum, as prescribed by AE, would allow Black students, especially those who have difficulty expressing their thoughts in writing, to share their experiences and reclaim a part of their history that has "been lost," a view shared by hooks (1989).

The participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of membership in a community, not only for Black students but for all those of African descent. In the case of the individual African, achievement is contingent upon community effort and investment; it follows then that for communities to be sustainable the individual must reciprocate. Nyerere (1968) argues that for education to be meaningful, the successful, educated Africans must give back to the community by, for example, working within it to help solve its problems. Given Africa's dismal condition, it is imperative, he contends that educated Africans help identify problems within their communities and propose solutions that are relevant to an African context, rather than rely on foreigners or adopt foreign models and prescriptions, which, for the most part, tend to be at odds with Africa's problems.

The view of the participants that AE is central to the education of the younger generation of African-Canadians is shared by Gary Pieters. A member of the *Toronto Star* Editorial Board as well as the vice-principal of a TDSB school and former principal of a summer Afrocentric school, Pieters (2011) has nothing but praise for his school's Afrocentric program and AE in general. He states:

As the summer school principal, I interacted with the students and witnessed its positive impact. Students told me they liked school better and were eager to come to class, were more interested in learning about their cultural roots and excited to share what they learned with others.

Staff, parents and the community also were enthusiastic and engaged. With all the activities and events, the school looked like a community centre, [replete with] parent engagement workshops, a parent information evening, a parent breakfast, a bi-weekly newsletter to the community, professional

development workshops for staff, a community potluck luncheon and a closing celebration for the community.

Plus there was real academic progress. Students in the D-minus-to-C-plus range improved by one level, while students in the B-minus-to-A range maintained their levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy. (para. 4-6)

In his testimonial Pieters (2011) focuses as much on the sense of community fostered among the stakeholders as on the AE curriculum and academic achievement. As well as catering to the educational needs of Black students, the Afrocentric summer programs caught the interest of African-Canadian parents who proved eager to participate in school functions, events and workshops. And while the events he chronicles occurred in 2005, 4 years prior to the official opening of TAAS, the high provincial test scores obtained by TAAS students would appear to confirm his reports of academic progress achieved by incorporating culturally-relevant materials in the curriculum. It would appear that this kind of approach offers the best hope for "reducing the racial achievement/opportunity gap for Blacks and other racialized student populations" (para. 10). Notes Pieters:

In the 2009-10 academic year, 81% of Grade 3 students performed at or above the provincial average in mathematics, compared with 71 per cent for the TDSB at large, according to the Education Quality and Accountability Office. Similarly, 81 per cent scored at or above the TDSB average in writing and 69 per cent scored above the TDSB average in reading. (para. 14)

As stated earlier, AE is not without its critics. One participant went so far as to question its utility.

Ouzy (Senior manager-banker): My understanding of Afrocentric education is that . . . the public education system was not serving Black students very well . . . [The goal of] Afrocentric education . . . is to close the achievement gap . . . I don't support the Afrocentric School. I think . . . it segregates our children. I believe that when you see a problem in the school system, you don't create an alternative school . . . , but rather you work within the system to fix the problem. I do not think creating an alternative school will fix the [achievement gap] . . . , integrated education would.

Ouzy's position on AE conflicts with that of the other participants; yet, he is not alone among members of the Toronto African-Canadian community who believe AE places Black students at a disadvantage by narrowing the scope of their knowledge and skills, thereby

limiting their career options. He contends that the best way to address the achievement gap in schools lies in reforming the educational system, and particularly in adopting an inclusive curriculum—something African-Canadian parents have lobbied the TDSB to do for many years without success. More importantly, his view that all children, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, etc., should "receive the same education . . . [and] grow up in the same culture" (Ouzy, 27/09/2013) implies assimilating African-Canadian students into a White Canadian culture, which the proponents of AE equate with giving up their African-Canadian identity—everything that makes them African.

The participants' positions on AE are informed largely by their views on racism in the public education system, whether predicated on personal experience, as in the case of Amma, and Ananse or on what they perceive to be a distortion of African history and the valorization of everything European, as in the case of Titina Silla. That AE is understood in different ways by the participants and that they differ in their views on the form it should take going forward—e.g., some argue the case for a strictly academic focus, others favour combining academic with community education—shows that AE is an emerging model, at least in Canada, and for this very reason, is much in need of public debate that would include those outside the African-Canadian community.

What my analysis of the participants' comments reveals is that their acceptance or rejection of AE is a function of their place of birth, culture, perception of society and experience with racism in Canada. While the participants whose birthplace was outside Africa (all but Ouzy) supported AE, albeit with serious reservations, those of African birth (Ouzy) rejected this educational model. Africans (Ouzy) who immigrated to Canada with the hope of improving their "economic well-being" and accessing "better . . . opportunities and/or greater . . . freedom" (Ogbu, 1990, p. 46) reject AE. Their perception of what constitutes a better life is derived, I would argue, from a colonial, i.e., Eurocentric, education, rendering them less mindful of the impact of racism vis-à-vis their counterparts of the African Diaspora. Secure in their traditional African values, African-born Canadians view AE as unimportant. For them, teaching African children African values is the responsibility

of the African family, not the school system; the purpose of the latter is viewed to lie solely providing young Africans with the requisite learning and skills to gain employment.

The perception of African-born Canadians as the guardians of African values in relation to their Pan-African siblings is crudely conveyed in a provocative op-ed piece entitled "Black Children need better parents, not schools" by Ike Agwu (2014). The author blames the underperformance of Black students on "the collapse of the Black family within a segment of the Black community (mostly concentrated amongst the descendants of slaves)" (para. 7). He singles out single-parent households as the principal cause of poor academic performance and a blighted future, ignoring altogether the oppressive and racist culture fostered within in the public education system and the broader public in general. Asserts Agwu (2014):

The real solution [to the Black problem] lies in telling our children the truth—that the best way to ensure their children succeed is to ensure they are raised by two parents in a committed relationship—in other words, two people who are married. Single parenthood has been a disaster for [the Black]. . . . No parent can be a father and a mother. The very notion that a single mother can be a mother and a father (a vacuous idea I hear often) is as obtuse as it is demeaning to the role of father in the lives of their children. [With] many black children are . . . raised in these homes, no amount of 'specialty schools' will save them. (para. 9). . . . Let's take a long, hard and honest look at that 'school' before blaming teachers, society, prattling on about specialty ones. (para. 10)

Agwu's *ad hominem* censure of African-Canadian families highlights the new ways in which coloniality, a relic of colonialism and colonial narratives, operates in public discourses and within social structures. While the primary goal of colonialism was to destroy the African capacity for independent thought and undermine Africa's place in the world, coloniality, in its current guise, affords African elites the luxury of examining the African experience in White settler societies through a European lens, thereby ignoring altogether its complexity.

The true insidiousness of coloniality lies in its ability to pre-empt calls for the spectrum liberation of the African mind. Entranced by its depreciatory language and self-assurance in slandering the African family, and especially Black mothers, educated Africans have assumed the role of a fifth column surreptitiously advancing the neocolonial project

from within their own communities. They facilitate the oppression of Africans by absolving the colonizer from moral responsibility, enabling the latter to shift blame onto African-Canadians for their plight, citing the work of fellow Africans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Africans of the diaspora, on the other hand, support AE primarily because they view Canada in a way fundamentally different vis-à-vis their African-born counterparts. According to Ogbu (1990), they "interpret the social, political, and economic barriers erected against them as undeserved oppression. . . . while believ[ing] improved economic well-being, better . . . opportunities, and political freedom will result only through collective struggle against the dominant group" (p. 47). Africans of the diaspora lay claim to an African identity discovered during the course of a journey of self-discovery, which they then pass on to their children, a luxury afforded their continental siblings by virtue of their birth in the homeland.

I further attribute African-Canadian support for TAAS and AE to firsthand experience with racism in Canada, combined with a healthy skepticism regarding the gospel of "[equality] warmth, friendliness and [compassion]" preached by the dominant order and celebrated by White multiculturalists (Delpit, 1988, p. 296). Obversely, those (Ouzy) who migrated to Canada as adults see nothing wrong with colonial education, to which they owe their success, a stance that Fanon (1967) contests. In his view, European education has stripped African elites of their African identity and alienated them from the collective life that distinguishes the common African from his European counterpart. In their quest to rise above their fellow Africans, many among the continent's elites have elected to throw in their lot with the former colonizers, even going so far as to deny European complicity in the underdevelopment of Africa—all with a view to securing preferment.

Judging by newspaper articles, there appears to be little in the way of consensus among Black parents as to what AE is. Even for advocates, it remains a nebulous concept, which explains the debates that swirl around it, the majority centering on questions regarding its existential nature: What exactly is AE? What does it look like? What constitutes the best pedagogical approach? And while some parents argue that the curriculum should be weighted heavily in favour of Africa's distant past, others believe it should focus on the continent's

colonial and post-colonial history, thus preempting criticism that AE dwells far too much on a romantic past that likely never was, in effect relegating Africa to the status of a Black homeland stuck in time and space and consigning its disparate peoples to the bottom rung of civilization. It is unlikely these issues will be resolved any time soon.

In Brown's 2010 article that appeared in the *Toronto Star*, parents like Rebeckah Price reject the idea of framing AE around Africa's ancient past if this means ignoring its more recent achievements:

Some parents want the kids to be learning Kiswahili and doing libations every day. They want to talk about living in huts and eating with your hands—yet in some parts of Africa, like Ghana, people live in beautiful homes like you'd see here in the suburbs. Everyone's understanding of Africa is different. (Price as cited in Brown, 2010, para. 5)

Afua Marcus, whose son attends TAAS, attributes the lack of consensus among parents “to every parent having a different definition” (cited in Brown, 2010). Yet, one thing is beyond doubt: in the absence of a unified and coherent vision of what AE is, it will prove impossible to formulate policies that move the school forward, i.e., that advance the interests of students. Meanwhile, within the walls of academe, debates on AE often degenerate into wars of scholarly attrition (Dei, 1998; Lund, 1998). What is unique about them is the passion Afrocentricity arouses, particularly when the focus shifts to educational reform.

5.5. The Toronto Alternative Afrocentric School as Viewed by Critics and Supporters

Since its inception and establishment, TAAS has generated public controversy and doubtless will continue to do so (Johnson, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2014). This section examines what African-Canadian parents think of the school. The participants' evident passion for TAAS is clearly articulated in their respective assessments of the school. And where the latter are critical, the reason lies, not with any lack of support for the school per se, but with the conviction that it is departing from some its founding principles and goals.

Those supporting the school fall into three camps: ardent proponents, the mildly discontented albeit still hopeful, and the wait-and-see pragmatists.

Patrick: What do you think of TAAS?

Amma (Creative artist-educator): [A brief silence and a sigh]. If you had asked me this question a couple of years ago, I would have given a different answer. I think that the school is departing from its high standards; it's waning and to a certain extent losing itself. . . . I felt the school was on the ascendency a couple of years ago. That they were working toward a strong future; that year-by-year, they would produce students who were grounded in Afrocentric approach to education and were driven to achieve academically and are connected to the community. . . . I saw kids . . . blossom at different events. I saw kids come to the school broken from the anti-African abuse in the regular school system who I almost couldn't recognize by the end of the year. . . . I watched kids who wouldn't speak at one point become . . . self-possessed and articulate. The students were definitely on the ascendency and I could see that. Not anymore. I am concerned about the school . . . because if it becomes diluted in terms of the things it used to do, which were crucial to being an Afrocentric school. . . . It's not honouring its original promise. For many of us who have longed for an Afrocentric school, it was never about simply producing academically sound Eurocentric Black students. The promise of the TAAS was to produce children of character . . . who are deeply knowledgeable about their collective cultural heritage; children who are comfortable around their elders and are protective of their young ones. The school was established to produce students who are cognizant of the global African family and are guided by sound moral values and not just physical and intellectual maturity. The aim of the school was to produce students who would be curious, confident and who are eager to stay connected to the Black community after their education was completed. . . . If the TAAS didn't reach those soaring heights, it still would be of value because I know what it's like to go to a school where you're not in the majority. . . . Nonetheless, it would be far removed from its potential . . . , it could become diluted in its orientation; a desire to try and make it more like the other school. And the high school program, and this has to be stressed, it's a program. . . . I am concerned because it's possible it wouldn't last. It's under attack. People who were opposed to the school being militantly Black are under the bamboozlement of integration. They don't understand that integration only works if we . . . give up all things that are essential to us; being able to do what we do and I am not for that.

Reflecting upon TAAS and AE, Amma gives voice to the fear that TAAS is regressing into a White-oriented school with a Black face. Thus, while at present the school offers parents a sense of hope, uncertainty remains as to its future, assuming there is one. As with so many ardent supporters of TAAS, she would like to see it preserve its original goal of making the Black community part of the educational process. Her fear is that the school is

slowly and ineluctably falling within the orbit of the very mainstream education that Afrocentric parents fault for having failed their children. Amma believes that any tinkering with TAAS aimed at conforming to the educational status quo will mean giving up some of the fundamental values that make Black Canadians unique.

Amma's comments also represent a critique of integrated education. For her, integration means Black parents relinquish control of their children to the neocolonial educational establishment, thus reinforcing the status quo, i.e., of an educational system that downplays the historical legacy of White oppression, marginalizes Black heritage, and reproduces White supremacy. Her critique of integration accords with that of Du Bois (1935). In his writings on segregated education, Du Bois rejected the view that integrated education was essential if Black students were to excel academically. According to Du Bois (1935), separate education was the better option as it would preclude Black students being treated as second-class citizens and their heritage marginalized. Alternative education, i.e., segregated schools, would, he believed, bring Black students the peace of mind afforded by the absence of the judgmental gaze. Only then would they be positioned to learn about and value their heritage.

Recent studies conducted in the US show that integrated education remains very much a one-way street (Colby, 2014) in that its implementation requires Black communities to submit to the demands of Whites, e.g., busing Black students to schools located in White communities rather than the converse. In an era of budget cutbacks, one can argue that this model is unsustainable. According to Colby (2014), integrated education does not go far enough. Part of the problem lies with a penchant for “statistical proof of significant progress” (p. 8), with little consideration given unrestricted access to public schools, something that zoning laws and the use of area codes to determine eligibility, to take but two examples, precludes. Too often, in integrated schools “Black students stay on their own side of the cafeteria and then bused home at 3 p.m.” (p. 9). This kind of *de facto* segregation existing within integrated school systems explains why some Black parents, along with critics of the mainstream public school system, have lobbied for Afrocentric schools where they can “exercise control over the lives [and the education of their children]” (p. 10).

While admitting to only a "general knowledge" of TAAS, Ouzy insists that its learning goals and objectives can be met by the existing public education system.

Ouzy (Senior manager-banker): To be honest . . . I have [a] general knowledge of the school. I have met supporters of the school who have told me I need to learn more about the school. What I do know about the school is that it is . . . funded by the Toronto District School Board. [At the school] Black kids learn drumming, Black inventors and Black contribution to society. . . . The Afrocentric School it is not representative of . . . Toronto. . . We are segregating our kids.

Ouzy takes a more conservative position on TAAS. While admitting his knowledge of the school to be limited, he believes that the solutions to the problems facing Black students are to be found within the existing public school system—a view not borne out by past efforts to reform the education system, the failure of which would lead to the creation of TAAS. He also equates TAAS with "segregation," the term its critics apply to US school systems of the pre-Civil Rights era, in the process ignoring the difference between separation of the races *de jure* and separation by choice, respectively. Ouzy's comments underscore the perils to be encountered when presenting popular and plausible narratives as truths. In exercising his right of free speech, albeit with the caveat that his knowledge of TAAS is limited, Ouzy, like other critics of TAAS, only adds to the confusion surrounding the school. Thus, for example, while admitting TAAS to be under TDSB jurisdiction, a fact, he goes on to describe the school as separatist, which is highly problematic given the TDSB commitment to inclusive education in a multicultural environment.

Ouzy is not alone in criticizing TAAS on the basis of limited knowledge. Dick Field, a Second World War veteran, expressed his frustration with the Afrocentric School in an email to *Maclean's*. According to him, the notion of a "Eurocentric" curriculum working against Black youth is absurd. It is this very 'Eurocentric' history and culture, so maligned by these racial advocates that has allowed all our freedoms to flourish" (as cited in *Maclean's*, 2008, para. 9).

Field's understanding of a Eurocentric curriculum and its impact on non-White students is wholly uninformed; moreover, as is the case with so many critics of TAAS, his

criticism of the school and AE borders on “White defensiveness” (Roman cited in Raby, 2004, p. 377). In promoting White supremacy, a Eurocentric curriculum not only impedes the intellectual development of Black students, it also nurtures in them a deep disaffection for learning, resulting in high dropout rates (Dei, 2008). Field's assumption that the collective freedoms Canadians enjoy are the fruits of "Eurocentric history and culture" carries with it an undercurrent of White paternalism and generosity of spirit, which pervades social and academic discourses, often distorting or erasing the contributions to the war effort made by people of African descent.

In a letter-to-the editor, Alvin Stuffels asserts that the decision by the TDSB to establish the Afrocentric school is racist (as cited in *Maclean's*, 2008). ““If a White person suggests an all-White school, that person would be called a racist and a Nazi.’ . . . ‘Our society is becoming more and more prejudiced against White males, and nobody is questioning it’” (para. 16). In a subsequent email, he apologizes for this earlier outburst, adding that while still opposed to TAAS and AE, he believes that the solution to closing the educational gap in the public school system lies with curricular reforms aimed at promoting inclusivity (as cited in *Maclean's*, 2008).

While not alone in labeling TAAS racist, Stuffels ignores the fact that the school, unlike its faith and gender-based counterparts, is open to students of all races, cultures and religions who are interested in moving beyond the confines of Eurocentric education to embrace alternative knowledge systems that validate the histories and contributions made by non-White Canadians both to Canada and to world civilization. Stuffels fails to take into account that the majority residing in Toronto's middle and upper-class neighbourhoods are White and that the school curricula are mainly Eurocentric. As is the case with most critics, his animus against TAAS is directed not at what the school purports to teach, but at its insistence on calling itself Afrocentric and on celebrating ‘Blackness,’ which works to stir up memories of Canada’s unsavory racist past, along with fear of a racialized ‘other’ about to set forth along the path of resistance.

Despite one negative evaluation, the majority of the participants supported TAAS.

Goddess (Educator): The school . . . demonstrates the commitment of activists, elders, organizers and educators who fought hard to bring it to fruition. There were similar schools to the Afrocentric School that have not been formally acknowledged . . . Maybe, they were educational programs as opposed to a school. . . . We need more Afrocentric schools around the GTA [Greater Toronto Area] and the province to be able to fully address the academic, socio-economic, cultural, spiritual and political needs of Black people.

In addition to educating Black students, TAAS, in Goddess view, represents a symbolic victory for the entire African-Canadian community, one made possible by the dedication of its members; it also provides the impetus for community-based initiatives aimed at achieving social justice and equity. Her reference to earlier Afrocentric initiatives⁸ underscores the commitment to Afrocentric programs existing within a subset of Toronto's African-Canadian community.

Shaka (Office manager): The Afrocentric School is a step in the right direction. It's an opportunity to interrogate the curriculum and to introduce concepts that allow young students to see themselves as important It's an opportunity . . . to change how we think and teach. . . . The school allows us to re-interrogate history from a critical standpoint with the aim of giving our children a better understanding of who they are and Black contribution to civilization, which the regular school system does not provide them.

From Shaka's perspective, TAAS' objectives are two-fold: to provide African-Canadian students with an education that is relevant to their day-to-day lives and to supplant Eurocentric knowledge with African-centred knowledge, something that requires 'unlearning' the former. Thus, rather than passively acquiesce to narratives predicated on a European perspective, African-Canadian students are taught to deconstruct them with a view to revealing how they work as vehicles of White supremacy, e.g., by devaluing Afrocentric knowledge.

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): The [Afrocentric] model is a great idea. It's a great alternative to regular schools in that it . . . seeks to address . . . some of the concerns with the wide achievement gap between Black students and students of other ethnic groups. It is a great idea. . . . For me, it's something that would need a lot of support and a lot of professional development to execute so that it replicates as

⁸ Some of the earlier Afrocentric initiatives are: The Harambee School, the Umoja Learning Circle and the Heritage program

little as possible mainstream classes. . . . The question for me is, how can it co-exist in the same system that it seeks to challenge and be successful? There has to be a formula for that because, as I said, you don't want it to end up being just another school.

As with so many of the other respondents, Jennifer sees TAAS as a corrective to the public school system, which in her view bears a large measure of responsibility for the underperformance of Black students. She also acknowledges the many challenges inherent in applying AE in a real-world situation, not the least of which involves finding the requisite resources for the training and professional development of teachers. In her view, if TAAS is to succeed in providing an alternative to mainstream education, it is essential to develop a strategy capable of avoiding the many pitfalls that will be encountered along the way.

Rolonda (Social services worker): I think it's one of a kind and I really hope it's embraced by the Black community. . . . I wish there were Afrocentric schools available when I was growing up. I wanted to get my kids into the school, but I couldn't because I live outside the zone. . . . [At the moment,] Black people know their history and can no longer be fooled by a White society. We didn't need to be saved [by Europeans] or taught about the Creator; they [Europeans] came in and took us captives; they beat us till we stopped speaking our language . . . TV commercials on Africa depict Africans as hungry and in need of water. Black children in North America and Europe do not want to be associated with [continental Africans]. . . . It is good to teach Black children that . . . there's more to Africa.

Rolonda's comments reveal both TAAS' popularity among a certain subset within the Toronto African-Canadian community and its success in contesting Eurocentric narratives of Africa and people of African descent. Moreover, in addition to educating Black students, TAAS serves as a flagship for African-Canadian achievement. Her comments also highlight the role of the mainstream media in presenting Africa in a negative light by disseminating racist constructs and discourses that in concert with the mainstream public education system shape the public perception of Africa and Africans. What I gather from Rolonda's comments is that alternative education, by virtue of the awareness it fosters, is crucial to educating Black students to see the Africa that lies beyond the media stereotypes.

Zindzi qualifies her support for TAAS and AE, on the grounds that, in certain respects, the school represents a throwback to the pre-Civil Rights era. Their perception of the school and AE underscores the power of mainstream media with respect to informing public opinion.

Zindzi (Nurse): When I first heard about the school, my reaction was we did not need a special school to empower Black students. I believe Afrocentric education can be made part of the public school system so that students from different cultures can learn about Black heritage. Teaching Black students about their heritage does not promote awareness in the education system. [However], if every student is introduced to Afrocentric curriculum, White students [and other students of colour] would learn about Afrocentrism and be open-minded. I do not see the point in limiting Afrocentric education to one particular group of students [Black students] . . . I think that every student should be introduced to Afrocentric education. This will empower them and not just Black students.

Zindzi's initial skepticism toward TAAS is predicated on the belief that the regular school system can be reformed, particularly in regard to creating an inclusive curriculum. Her comments also reflect the belief held by some African-Canadians that raising public consciousness of African-Canadian history and contributions to Canada might best be achieved in a multiracial and intercultural school setting where Black and non-Black students have the opportunity to learn about each other's cultures as opposed to Black students learning only about theirs to the exclusion of other Canadians, which is something TAAS and AE critics view to be limiting.

Patrick: Responding to the question, you mentioned that people's perceptions of the school affected your view of the school. Can you describe these perceptions?

Zindzi (Nurse): When I told a family member of mine about the school and that I was thinking of enrolling my son, she said, why would you do that? We've come from that [racial segregation]. I think the issue was that people didn't understand the purpose of the school. . . . When the message went out that there was going to be an 'All-Black' school, . . . people were like, . . . we're going back; we've [already] come from that; why should we have our own school? Also, I think the media portrayed the school in a negative way, which made people criticize the school at the beginning.

Zindzi's comments reveal an understandable reluctance on the part of the Black community to revisit an educational concept that had failed them in the past; what is also

revealed is the failure of TAAS and AE proponents to educate the community as to the school's what?

While associated exclusively with the US, segregated schools were also to be found in Upper Canada. The educational model upon which they were predicated was premised on the notion that race, class, gender, etc., “w[ere] natural, predetermined, and unassailable” (Harper, 1997, p. 194). In Upper Canada, the Negro *Separate School Act* of 1849 (Harper, 1997), denied Black students admission to Common Schools; it also ensured that Black schools “were . . . poorly financed and their teachers poorly trained” (Harper, 1997, p. 195) and that students were “separat[ed] between racial and ethnic groups so that . . . British . . . cultural superiority would not be “weakened” by mixing . . . culturally with other groups” (Harper, 1997, p. 196). TAAS is based on “segregation by choice” (Dei, 1994, p. 186). Admission is open to all students, race notwithstanding, a policy Dei holds to be crucial to “counter[ing] racism and interlocking systems of discrimination” (Dei, 1994, p. 187). The role of the mainstream media in spinning narratives signifying the school as a segregationist project that would impede African-Canadian students in attaining their educational goals is also underscored here. Such narratives, it should be pointed, often play on White fears of Black autonomy, i.e., of the unknown ‘other’ whose empowerment through education poses a threat to the status quo.

Zindzi’s view that every student ought to be introduced to AE and that all students would benefit thereby is supported by evidence. The unqualified success of the Black history course offered by the Cardinal Ambrozic Catholic Secondary School demonstrates that AE is compatible with multicultural education—that the latter can accommodate disparate knowledge systems under the umbrella of one broad knowledge system, the aim being to promote the development of an inclusive society. What the Cardinal Ambrozic case suggests is that education should be predicated less on the public perception of what should or should not be taught in the public school system, and more on an empirically-determined assessment of the educational needs of students, especially as these relate to the broader aim of building an inclusive society and producing responsible citizens. Alas, too often the polemical debates

that have raged among critics, school authorities, parents of school children and the public have succeeded only in obscuring the main issue, i.e., of how best to educate children.

Even though the AE model aims at, among other things, closing the achievement gap between White and Black students, the recent adoption of an Afrocentric history course by Brampton's Cardinal Ambrozic Catholic Secondary School and the positive feedback generated among the predominantly White student body suggests that systemic educational reform may not be such a wild-eyed notion. The unqualified success of the course in so unlikely a milieu raises the question of whether anything is to be gained by rejecting AE out of hand. Let us turn to examining this success story and the enthusiasm it stirred among students and teachers.

When students arrived at the Cardinal Ambrozic Catholic Secondary School on the opening day of the 2013-2014 school year, they discovered something new and unexpected in the curriculum: a course examining the history of Africa and the contributions of its disparate peoples to world civilization. This course, along with the responses it elicited from the teaching staff and the 13 students, 12 Whites and one Black, who choose to enroll in it would prove to be the single biggest surprise encountered during the research phase of this paper. According to Lidia Petrone, an English teacher at the school "the course [has] left a lasting impression on her as well [her] students" (as cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 6). According to Joanna Newton, an African-Canadian curriculum consultant, who helped design the course and would subsequently teach it at St. Edmund Campion Secondary School, "[it] was based on [the] curriculum being taught at the Toronto District School Board's Afrocentric Alternative School" (para. 8). She goes on to add that "this (course) gave students a chance to see themselves in the curriculum" (para. 9). Moreover, she "describes teaching the course "as one of the most amazing experiences [she has] ever had as a teacher" (para. 9). She also admits to having known little of what it is that AE purports to teach students, but now realizes that "it's important that all students . . . tak[e] this course" (para. 11).

According Lidia Petrone, the Afrocentric history course examines the Black experience and heritage beyond the perfunctory prominence they receive in Canadian, American or world history classes, which cover the American civil rights movement and/or the period of slavery. Doubtless, she would concur with Belgrave's view that "[it] puts African history under a much more powerful microscope and even gets students rethinking and discussing their ideas about the cradle of civilization" (as cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 13). As a corrective to the plethora of discourses on, and images of, "poverty, homelessness, drought, and pain and suffering going on in Africa" (as cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 16), AE offers students interested in learning about its contributions to world civilization a radically different perspective, one that is inclusive and non-hegemonic and as such enables African-Canadian students to feel connected to the land of their forebears. In addition to providing exposure to alternative knowledge systems and interpretations of history, AE changes attitudes and motivates students to take an uncompromising stance against racism in all its forms, while encouraging respect for one another other and cultivating the sense of agency required to at least try to make a difference, however modest. The following comments provided by the Cardinal Ambrozic students who completed the course reveal the extent to which it has transformed their views on Africa and African-Canadians.

For Lucia Okeh, the course provided fresh insight regarding Africa's contributions to civilization. "I used to think Africa didn't produce anything; only the negatives are shown. Now, I have a much greater appreciation for the contributions the continent has made to humankind" (as cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 14). Ryan Griffith, who was no stranger to the "N" word had this to say about the Afrocentric course. "Before I didn't think it was a big deal, but now (he can't help think) that was what some Black slave[s] heard before they died. I just don't participate in that behaviour [anymore]. . . . It's just good to be enlightened" (as cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 22).

After gaining a new sense of, and appreciation for, who she is, Melinda Edowen, a 16-year old student, rejects being defined by others and instead contemplates educating those who are ignorant concerning the African experience and the continent's history. "I should educate (them) because they don't know the stuff I know" (cited in Belgrave, 2013, para. 24).

While TAAS remains popular among Toronto's Black community, it is not without its critics, some of whom number among its most ardent supporters. The first of its kind, and the first to be incorporated in the TDSB, TAAS is, arguably, a work in progress, and one without precedent. Under the supervisory authority of the TDSB, TAAS has no real independence, which proved to be an emotive issue for some participants; others, however, hailed the school as a possible corrective to the achievement gap in the education of Black students. Though their views on the school varied, none, apart from Ouzy, questioned its utility. And despite their differences, all were keenly interested in the education of African-Canadian students. Moreover, each provided penetrating insights that could form the basis for future discussions aimed at making education more meaningful for African-Canadian children.

5.6. Identity Politics and African-Canadians

Personal identity, i.e., how one sees oneself, plays a critical role in shaping one's self development, and Black students are no exception to this rule. Their disagreements notwithstanding, both supporters and critics of TAAS and AE agree that identity plays an important role in education. The participants were asked to share their views on this phenomenon and on how it informs their social lives. Their responses are crucial to understanding the importance of personal identity in the education of African-Canadian students.

Patrick: As a Black Canadian, how important is Blackness in the formation of your identity and in your daily life?

Shaka (Office manager): First of all, I find it offensive when people call me a Black Canadian. I am not a Black Canadian, I am an African-Canadian. Black is a colour used to divide and [rule] people based on their skin colour. . . . When a child grows up and sees himself . . . as a footnote in someone else's history, it will reflect in the way he acts as he grows up. . . . Identity is crucial in terms of repairing the damage caused by 400 years of human bondage. . . . This is why the Afrocentric School is . . . a step in the right direction; to repair the damage and give our children [the] opportunity to fulfil their true objective in life.

Abena (Project manager): I don't call myself Black . . . When you call yourself Black, you do not attach yourself to a geographical location . . . I call myself an African. When I am pressed, I'd say I am a person of African descent. . . . Being an African

has helped me redefine myself; it has helped me find my life purpose; it has helped me discover my spiritual foundation; it has put me completely on a different path.

Shaka's response underscores the importance that some African-Canadians attach to their personal identity, which is often defined in opposition to colonial constructs. It appears that for Shaka, cultivating an identity in the formative stages of a child's life is crucial to later success. Being comfortable with one's identity and with one's heritage helps build self-confidence and with it the ability to cope with the psychological trauma stemming from attacks on one's heritage. Like Shaka, identity is important to Abena—an identity defined not by colour but by the geographical location of one's ancestors. For Abena, identity ties one to one's homeland and grounds one in its values and practices. Inseparable from identity is a sense of belonging to a community in which one can develop to one's full potential.

Ananse (Food justice manager): The term, 'Black', was given to people of African descent in the early 1800s. It's one of the most derogatory words in the dictionary. I think we identify with our African heritage because through enslavement, we ended up in different places as a people. My cultural heritage is one from Africa to the Caribbean and to Canada . . . I think it's critical that as a people, we embrace who we are . . . and make sure [it is] in alignment with our heritage and not one that we have assimilated just to get by in a foreign environment.

In challenging the term "Black," Ananse foregrounds the importance of an African-Canadian identity. A healthy self-awareness is possible, she believes, provided one accepts who one is. For her, identity is inseparable from place, in this case Africa. Permitting others to define one's identity can lead, Ananse asserts, to the loss of one's heritage, and accepting negative definitions amounts to internalizing oppression. Ananse's comments underscore TAAS' original purpose, which was to serve as a bulwark against efforts on the part of the mainstream school system to devalue African heritage and the African contribution to civilization.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): First of all, . . . I define myself as an African who lives in Canada. . . . My Africanness is life-sustaining; it is the essence of who I am. I was born African and I am proud to be African. From a very young age, I have sought to learn more about my culture, about my people and about the African continent. Being an African in Canada fills me with a great sense of pride.

Titina Silla's comments foreground the problematic nature of African identity. Her view of the latter as something fixed has been challenged by critics of Afrocentricity (Austin, 2006; Gates, 1991; Ginwright, 2004; Lund, 1998). According to Wright (1994b), the African identity is pliable, and any suggestion that it is undifferentiated smacks of essentialism, of a wilful determination to romanticize Africa and the African fraternity by signifying both as seamless, devoid of peculiarities, tensions and divisions. In "Is this an African I see before me? Black/African identity and the politics of (Western, academic) knowledge" Wright outlines how African identity is constructed in Western academic discourses. In his view, the construction and depiction of Africans is born of European prejudice (Wright, 2012). African identity is complex; reifying Africans of different ethnicities, cultures, etc., requires "sweeping generalizations . . . of Africa and Africans" (p. 182).

"Black Africans" are not particularly Black in Africa; in fact [they] are not particularly African. . . . Blackness is not an important form of identity. . . . Blackness as a phenotype, or more simply as skin color, is not a particularly meaningful form of identity to the average person in Africa and Blackness as singular ethnicity (the idea of making race and ethnicity synonymous being problematic aside) is almost meaningless in the context of the great multiplicity of African ethnicities. . . . Identity in the "Black" African context is rather about ethnicity, social class, language, village or city of birth, religion, gender, etc. (p. 185)

Du Bois (1935) illuminates the social construction of identity (race). Despite a willingness to mine race for its essentialism, which could then serve as the basis for organizing Blacks politically, Du Bois challenged the notion of race as monolithic. In his view, "race lines [were] not fixed. Within the Negro group . . . were people of all colors" (Du Bois, 1968, p. 101). For Du Bois, being Black involved more than a geographical location or place of birth. Self-identifying as Black or as African constituted a state of mind, a sense of ancestral connection, real or imaginary, to the African homeland. For Du Bois, a Black identity constitutes an artificial construct grounded in and shaped by history. Thus, one might infer that a certain subset of Blacks in the American South arrived at a sense of self-identity as Africans because of their officially sanctioned mistreatment and relegation to the status of a second-class citizen. White terror, racism and harsh socio-economic conditions, along with repressive laws and mob justice, e.g., lynchings that often attracted large White audiences,

led these Blacks to envision Africa and lay claim to it as a Black homeland on the basis of their ancestry. For some Black Americans, especially modern-day Afrocentrists, Africa provides a sense of belonging, a feeling of acceptance. For Du Bois and other Black intellectuals, developing a collective Black identity was a prerequisite for achieving unity, self-determination and a sense of dignity. Jennifer has this to say regarding her own personal identity:

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): As a young person, I have always sought to understand the history of Black Canadians. . . . As a Black person, I was made to feel as though I didn't belong here because my parents came from somewhere; that I don't have close ties to Canada and therefore not necessarily Canadian . . . I always wanted to get an understanding of Black Canadian history. Doing so, it empowered me as a young person. I became more knowledgeable and self-assured. Also, I became more equipped to challenge things that the Black community was facing at a particular time. I got a better understanding the things that are not necessarily new.

Jennifer's comments underscore the struggles young African-Canadians face in coming to grips with their identity. The notion of citizenship, of who belongs here and who does not, is often framed around race rather than where one was born or from where one's forebears hailed. Jennifer's account sheds light on how an interest in Black history has enabled her to deal with a sense of not belonging, of lacking roots, that afflicts so many African-Canadian students. The participants' comments bring to the fore the unresolved question of identity, i.e., of Blackness. Some view identity as inherent, as part of one's genetic makeup and therefore unchanging; others see it as a colonial construct, rife with negative connotations. Vacillating between the two extremes, many African-Canadians struggle to find their true identity. The participants' responses reveal that preserving their Black identity constitutes a *sine qua non* for emotional stability and success in coping with the vicissitudes of life. Knowing who one is and being comfortable with that knowledge are crucial not only to charting a life-course, but also to overcoming societal barriers—something to be achieved by refusing to accept definitions and limitations imposed by others. In the context of educating African-Canadian students, the only guarantee of attaining academic success lies in fostering a strong positive sense of identity, which can only be

achieved by embracing and living African values—the one true antidote to racist images and discourses that promote self-loathing.

5.7. Race as a Social Construct

In neoliberal discourse, race is deemed unimportant, its presence in the classroom a source of needless tension and conflict. And, yet, while having no basis in science, it continues to inform policy in the areas of education, immigration, and labour (Meekosha, 2006) wherein it determines the distribution of power and resources. In the context of public education, multicultural scholars have sought to play down the role race plays in education—and with some success—in order to divert attention from discourses framed around “socially constructed [mis]representations of subjective identities” that signify White students as “intelligent, diligent, and deserving people” vis-à-vis Black students as “simple, lazy, and undeserving” (Tate, 1997, p. 200). Despite all the talk of racial equality, an “inferiority paradigm” (Tate, 1997, p. 199) still informs debates on education, sometimes presenting Black Canadians, either intentionally or inadvertently, as a burden on mainstream society and Whiteness as a package of desirable attributes to be emulated (Allen, 1996; Calliste, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; James, 2011; Kong, 1996; Roberts-Fiati, 1996).

According to Raby (2004), White denial that race is not a salient issue within the public education system works to signify the deniers “as non-racist, yet with the consequence of producing a White centre in which the dominant group becomes universal, and making the current effects of race invisible: if we do not see race, then how can we see racism?” (p. 372). According to Dei and Kempf (2011), not only does race matter, it remains a key factor in determining to what school one is admitted and the resources made available for academic enhancement. To determine to what degree race is important in the education of their children, I posed the following questions to the participants:

Patrick: Should race take center stage, or become a component in the education of Black children? If so, why?

Amma (Creative artist-educator): It's has to be central, otherwise, how could the school be Afrocentric? If race is made a component, then it's no different to sending our children to a regular school with a course on Black history. I have heard people say Afrocentric education is race-based. This statement infers that all other education are not race-based; that the regular public school system isn't race-based. Of course, they are and it is. They just don't say it out loud. The regular public school system is designed by White people for White children; it came out of a White culture and their area of the planet and it has stayed with them regardless of where they go! . . . The public education system is race-based. . . . White people don't come out and say the public education is race-based because it's very important to them to have other folks come into their system and try to adopt it as their own because they—White people collectively—have always had the advantage in a school system designed by and for them. This confuses the global majority who buy into the hype and try to assimilate. . . . White supremacy is all about controlling. If you can control the way people think, then you don't even have to worry about putting chains on them. After folks of colour attend White schools without oppositional education, the majority come out thinking in a way that does not look after their best interest. They seek approval from White society and cater to the collective needs of White people because that's what they're taught in the White school system, which presents itself as race-neutral leaving the structures of White hegemony intact. This is why Afrocentric schools are dangerous. Of course, [laughter] it's race-based. Of course, it is, and I don't have a problem saying so.

For Amma, race is a salient feature of the Afrocentric canon, and appropriately so given its importance to the education of African-Canadian students. By privileging race, instead of relegating it to a peripheral position, educators can teach Black students about themselves and their heritage as a people with a long history in Canada whose forebears contributed to building this country. I gather from Amma's comments that, far from being race-neutral, mainstream education, which purports to be universal, inclusive and colourblind, works to preserve White power and privilege even as it conceals them—in effect dominating others through the medium of education. To subvert White domination in the sphere of education requires, or so Amma believes, highlighting race as a means both of grounding Black students in their identity and heritage and making education meaningful. This approach would open up a space in which to teach students about the Black Canadian experience and Africa's place in the world by featuring people of African descent in African-centred narratives that showcase their contributions to world civilization. Thus will Black students no longer view themselves as a people on the periphery, a people to whom civilization was bestowed as an “honorary gift.”

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): Yes [it should take centre stage] . . . Race is something [Black students] deal with; sometimes, they can name it, and sometimes they can't. . . . I think we would be doing a disservice to our young people if we disregard that race exists . . . [Racism] affects them in a number of ways; it marginalizes and excludes Black narratives in the curriculum thereby impacting on educational outcomes. Also, there's a disproportionate number of Black students in special education who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities with some informally labeled.

Teaching young African-Canadian students about race in education is akin to bearing witness to the African-Canadian experience. Denying that race exists or plays no role in mediating the experience of African-Canadians, as some allege, is to erase African-Canadians and the Pan-African family from the country's history—in effect, denying Black people the right to know their history and all that has sustained, and continues to sustain, them in their struggles. In the context of the public education system, racism informs policies that work to the disadvantage of Black students, e.g., streaming and suspension, and that are partly responsible for their negative perceptions of school and education. It is precisely these perceptions that account to no small extent for the grinding poverty and youth violence plaguing African-Canadian communities.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): Race has taken centre stage in the education system. The people who control the education system and the politics behind it have pushed race to the centre stage. They frame the narratives around race because we live in a White supremacist society organized by Caucasians to suit their political and economic [interests]. As marginalized people, we are forced to deal with the issue of race and racism against our community by creating institutions and safe zones where African children can be educated . . . The Africentric Alternative School is an important example of decades of struggles . . . to ensure that our children have a safe space . . . to learn about their history . . . because the mainstream school system is racist; it glorifies European history, values and contribution.

Titina Silla historicizes race by explicating how it was constructed and imposed upon Blacks with a view to promoting European superiority. She appears to suggest that race can be turned to the advantage of the Black community by using it to spur collective action aimed at building institutions capable of confronting White supremacy. I also infer from her comments that in the context of education race can be used in a positive way to inculcate in Black students an appreciation of who they are and where they come from and to contest

Eurocentric narratives of Black Canadians and the Pan-African family. This in turn will enhance their self-esteem, a first step along the path to empowerment.

The suggestion by some of the participants that race take centre stage in the education of Black students, ignoring Africa's multiple identities, histories and cultures, shifts the focus onto how TAAS strikes a balance between race-based and culturally responsive education.

Gay (2002) defines "cultural responsive [education]" as:

[an educational model that uses] the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. (p. 107)

In light of Africa's many disparate cultures and identities, one is compelled to question whether Afrocentric teachers possess the requisite training and resources to take into account students' diverse experiences, cultures and histories, beyond the(ir) constricted notion of what it means to be African or African-Canadian. Focusing preponderantly on race, or on a handful of Africa's cultures, poses a pedagogical dilemma, with respect to deciding *whose* histories and cultures are to be foregrounded and how best to placate those students whose histories and cultures are sidetracked or ignored altogether. Failure to adopt a culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, both of which are central to the intellectual development of Afrocentric students, could very well lead, I would argue, to dissipating even further any interest students might have in education, which is ironic on two accounts: first, TAAS was founded with a view to engaging students in the learning process; second, the school's supporters routinely criticize mainstream public education for failing in this respect.

In "Speaking up" and "speaking out": Examining "voice" in a reading/writing program with adolescent African Caribbean girls" Henry (1998) cites an important issue that has bedeviled Afrocentric scholarship: the all-pervasive silence on social class, gender and sexuality. Despite ample evidence that Black girls "naturally do well" academically (Hale as cited in Henry, 1998, p. 238), Henry notes that "a range of research shows that Black girls are

expected to adopt . . . roles of passivity . . . ; they are invisible to teachers as serious learners; they receive less encouragement and rewards; they are assessed for their social skills rather than academic achievement; they are evaluated by their physical characteristics such as hair texture and skin color; [and] . . . are considered sex objects as they mature” (Henry, 1998, p. 238). Elaborating on the failure of TAAS and AE in this regard, Allen (2010) asserts that efforts to correct inequity in education:

has drawn our attention away from looking at issues that will help to move the discussion forward. . . . We have fallen asleep or become distracted [such] that we have lost sight of some of the key anti-racism principles that should be used to continue to support the development and evaluate the effectiveness of an Afrocentric program. . . . (p. 328)

. . . [Anti-racism] is more complex than just focusing on discourses of race alone. . . . (p. 330)

. . . Unless we consider the interrelated effects of race, gender, social class and sexuality, the well-intentioned model of the Afrocentric curriculum within the Africentric Alternative School may at times still be in conflict with the needs and concerns of students, teachers, administrators and parents/communities. . . . (p. 331)

It should be pointed out that while some of the teachers at TAAS self-identify as Black, their privileged backgrounds preclude their understanding the struggles that the school's largely marginalized students undergo daily. Instructing students about race, while ignoring other sites of oppression—social class, gender and sexuality—falls short of addressing problem areas that critics of the public school system view as responsible, at least in part, for the underperformance of African-Canadian students.

Some participants balked at the notion of making race AE’s principal focus.

Shaka (Office manager): Race does not have to take centre stage in Afrocentric education. What needs to take centre stage is the fullness of history. [Afrocentric] education must foster inclusion, not exclusion; it's should about capturing the [missing] pages, chapters and volumes of history . . . Afrocentric education . . . should not focus solely on race.

While not dismissing its importance, Shaka believes race should not take centre stage in the education of Black students. His comments underscore a sensitivity on the part of Black parents about making race the primary focus of AE owing to, I assume, the fear that this approach would mean ignoring other educational goals, e.g., acquiring the knowledge and skills to compete in the job market. The reality is that as a holistic educational model, AE holds knowledge of race to be on an equal footing with other forms of knowledge.

Mary (Social worker): Given the fact that Canada is a multicultural country, making race a central part of Afrocentric education would raise concerns. Personally, I think race should be a big part of Afrocentric education. However, it should be done in a way to placate the public. The curriculum should be to broaden to make it inclusive. . . . Making race the primary focus of Afrocentric education would conjure negative connotations.

Mary was ambivalent and guarded in her view that race should take centre stage in the education of Black students. Her cautious response points to the trepidation with which the Black community regards race, particularly when it is perceived as pitting Blacks against Whites. In light of Canada's dogged persistence in presenting itself as a multicultural and inclusive country, Blacks appear to be wary of defending Blackness. Mary's suggestion that AE frames race to "appease the masses" speaks to the power of this image—some might call it a myth. To the extent that they internalize such 'myths', Blacks will conform to dominant expectations and keep the peace. Like Mary, Zindzi has mixed feelings about race taking centre stage in the education of African-Canadian students.

Zindzi (Nurse): I think race should be a component [and not take centre stage] of Afrocentric education. We don't want everything about Afrocentric education to focus on race because that's when the problem arises. . . . If we make race and Black history mandatory in schools, it will bring awareness to everyone and not just Black students. Even though we have Toronto's first Afrocentric School, not all Black children will be attending the school . . . Canada is a multicultural country and I don't think race should take centre stage in the education of Black children . . . How would Black students be able to work with their White counterparts or mingle with the other races? . . . They are also going to feel superior . . . because they [will] feel their race is dominant than the other race . . . How're we going to move forward, as a society and as a people, if all we hear is . . . that White people dominate us [Black people]; they bring us down . . . and therefore let's stand our ground. Yes, we can stand our ground and educate them too.

While supporting TAAS and AE, Zindzi finds both limiting in that no effort has been made to reach out to students of other races who may find the latter of interest. Zindzi's major concern, one that is reflected in the literature, is that there are no plans afoot to make African-centred courses available in the regular school system, a prerequisite for raising public awareness. Only the Cardinal Ambrozic Catholic Secondary School offers a course on African history which focuses on Africa's contribution to world civilization (Belgrave, 2013). Her comments are also consistent with the argument advanced by critics of the school that enrolling students on the basis of race and instilling in them a sense of African pride could morph into cultural nationalism and Black sectarianism, along with the rejection of everything White as a threat to African-Canadian autonomy and development. While AE is important, Zindzi opines that it should open up to non-Black students and ideas in light of the fact that the graduates of AE schools will, at some point in their lives, have to work with Whites in a multicultural setting where White values are dominant. Like Mary's, Zindzi's comments are predicated on multiculturalism and grounded in the belief that those who reject multicultural values, however problematic they may be, will miss out on the opportunities Canada has to offer.

Notwithstanding the supposition that race has no significance in the context of Canadian education, it continues to mediate the lived experience of Black parents and their school-age children. Whereas some participants emphasize the importance of race in education and reject the notion of ignoring it in order to placate the dominant public, others view it as divisive and unnecessary. Zindzi argues that placing race centre stage could foster racial prejudice, along with a wholesale rejection of anything critical of African history and knowledge systems. This would almost certainly result in the failure of Black students to acquire the requisite knowledge and skills for building careers. Though disparate, these views highlight the participants' uncompromising commitment to the success of African-Canadian students; what is lacking is a comprehensive approach to addressing their underperformance in the classroom. What emerges from these interviews is a sense that TAAS and AE are very much works in progress that will only succeed with the full support of the Black community and other stakeholders. Chapter 6 discusses the research findings,

specifically those pertaining to the parents' involvement with TAAS and their views on AE as well as the perceived benefits accruing from, and challenges posed by, both, in terms of opportunities and barriers, respectively.

Chapter 6.

Afrocentric School and Afrocentric Education: The Possibilities and Challenges

This chapter is the second of two that report and discuss the findings from the empirical study. It examines the participants' engagement with the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS) in particular and Afrocentric education (AE) in general. Also examined are the benefits and challenges posed by AE vis-à-vis public education. While some participants support AE and TAAS unequivocally, they are fully cognizant of the constraints imposed by AE and the challenges confronting the school. Their disparate perceptions of AE and TAAS, moreover, underscore the divisions existing among African-Canadian parents and the Black community as a whole, pointing to the need for further studies and public debate on educational reform aimed at addressing the underperformance of Black students. The research participants' views were also supplemented with articles, op-ed pieces and excerpts from reports prepared by the TDSB that appeared in 53 major Canadian newspapers and magazine articles.

6.1. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School and the (Mis)Education of Black Students

TAAS has been described by critics as a segregationist project that is antithetical to Canadian values as well as an obstacle to building an inclusive society (Lund, 1998). For proponents, the school and its educational model stand as a testament to the commitment on the part of Toronto's African-Canadian community to making education meaningful for marginalized African-Canadian students and to achieving equity in the classroom. With both sides deeply divided, perhaps the best qualified to address these issues are African-Canadian parents themselves.

Patrick: How do you feel about Black children attending a school that is predominantly Black and taking courses focusing predominantly on Black people and Black culture?

Amma (Creative artist-educator): [Laughter]. I don't have a problem with it because I am just a little farther along in my healing. There's a high level of self-hatred amongst Black people. Most of us don't even recognize it; most of us haven't even started asking ourselves the deep questions. We run away from them. We've had a White mind put into our heads and so we look at things from a White perspective. . . . A lot of people who're against Afrocentric education are woefully ignorant of the breadth of Black involvement in civilization. When you say to them, we're going to make sure that the focus of Black education should be on Black contribution to civilization, all they can think of is slavery and, maybe, the Underground Railroad . . . They do not know that mathematics came from the Nile Valley civilization; they have no idea that nascent European philosophers sat at the feet of African scholars; they do not know about African kingdoms and nations. . . . I still run into Black people who do not know that the ancient Egyptians were Africans and . . . Afrocentric education is actually restoring us. A lot of people think that it's either rewriting history or is just making things up, and consequently, Black kids are going to be at a disadvantage from an Afrocentric education . . . Up until the enslavement industry started, European scholars didn't have a problem admitting that civilization started with Black people and that all these people who they elevated to great heights (e.g., Herodotus, Pythagoras) learned at the feet of African scholars. But you can see where, as a justification for continuing enslavement, our contributions were either omitted from subsequent editions of different books, or, if they could not actually get rid of our presence, as for example they can't get rid of the pyramids, what they did is, they made the appearance of the ancient Egyptians no longer Black to get rid of Black contribution to civilization. . . . And so, Afrocentric education which returns this knowledge to us is actually aiding in our restoration to our proper place. It's not something made up, it's not something twisted, it's not a revisionist approach. But, again, their own ignorance stops them from really understanding that.

Amma's comments make no reference to TAAS as a segregated project. It may be inferred that she views the school and the education it provides in a positive light. Indeed, she sees the school as a necessity, as a firewall against the harm Eurocentric education inflicts upon young African minds. TAAS helps African-Canadian students to deal with the past in an honest and forthright fashion and to broach topics often considered uncomfortable by the mainstream public, e.g., the past mistreatment of African-Canadians, the revision and/or omission of the African-Canadian presence in Canada. Amma views TAAS as nothing less than a crusade to reclaim what has been lost or denied African-Canadians and particularly Black students.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): I think it is an absolute necessity. It will help heal the trauma in the African community; a trauma from living in a White supremacist

society that has indoctrinated us with White values and an education system that has taught us a lot of lies. . . . I remember growing up in this society. What I was taught in school about African people is that they were slaves. The truth of the matter is that long before the period of enslavement, which lasted about 500 years, Africans had built civilizations that go back thousands of years . . . There is this whole world of information that we have not been taught. So, I think a school that focuses on Black history, Black culture and Black people is an absolute necessity to help us heal from the lies about who we really are . . . I am an extremely proud of the school . . . It has some very good teachers and it's had some challenges like other schools do

Like Amma, Titina Silla views TAAS and the education it provides as a corrective to the 'miseducation' of Black students and to European narratives that have erased or distorted African history to the point where accounts of the genius and contributions of its disparate peoples have been lost or, at best, buried in dusty archives. Once apprised of this knowledge, African-Canadian students will then be in a position to cultivate confidence and to learn about their heritage.

Ananse (Food justice manger): I feel great about it. I think the Black community has been oppressed for too long by the educational system. If public education wants to take a step in the direction of having culturally-focused schools or racially focused schools, then these schools should be allowed to teach curricula that focus on these communities. It is critical for the Afrocentric School to have curricula that are particular to the African culture; . . . it's not just the child going to school, their parents come to school with them. These children go home and share knowledge with their parents; parents who probably have been educated in the colonial school system . . . and who look up to their children for new information. I've seen it, time and time again, when grandparents will come [to my school] and want to know more about the materials that the child is learning at school.

An enthusiastic supporter of TAAS, Ananse views the school as a corrective to a system of colonial education that has proved to be instrumental in oppressing Black people. An Afrocentric curriculum, she believes, holds the key to creating an educational experience that meets the needs of Black students and their communities. She is also aware that AE has the potential to educate and empower not only students but also other family members as the latter come to imbibe the former's new-found knowledge, which in turn stimulates their intellectual curiosity. The participants' perception of AE as a remedy for the achievement gap in the public education system is consistent with the literature.

In the local news media, there is further evidence of how TAAS enjoys strong support among some Black parents comprising Toronto's Black community. Michelle Frances whose 6-year-old daughter Ella attends TAAS counts herself as an enthusiastic supporter of the school: "Ella is getting a strong foundation [in her African heritage]" (as cited in Ferenc, 2013, para. 15). Frances rejects the notion that TAAS is a vehicle for segregation. She sees the school as an opportunity for students to learn about themselves and their heritage; and she believes her daughter shares this view. "Everybody wants that for their children" (para. 16). For Maryann Scott, another parent of a child enrolled at TAAS, an Afrocentric education is crucial to the intellectual development of Black children, particularly during the early formative years, as it provides them, and especially boys, with appropriate role models. She believes that the 40% dropout rate among African-Canadian students could be significantly lowered were they to learn under the tutelage of authority figures who are capable of building trust and who understand their culture, their sensibilities and their travails. According to Scott:

It's important for children to see positive role models who look like them, but unfortunately at the TDSB they don't have enough. If you look at the 40% dropout rate among Blacks, especially males, . . . it's important to have these role models before high school (as cited in Brown, 2008, para. 12).

Tiffany Shelton, a Toronto high school teacher, who is presumably aware of the problems attending the regular school system—low teacher expectations for African-Canadians, high suspension and dropout rates—expressed an interest in enrolling her daughter Nala in the Afrocentric kindergarten so that she might learn about her Caribbean heritage. Notwithstanding the considerable distance separating her home in Malton in the Peel Region and the school, which is located in Toronto, she is willing to make the commute, thus demonstrating the commitment of at least some African-Canadian parents to addressing the educational needs of their children. In her view: "[M]any schools don't set high expectations for Black students in terms of behaviour and achievement, and I think that it's important [to enroll my daughter in a school] that values her culture and affirms her heritage" (Shelton as cited in Brown, 2008, para. 20).

Given the educational benefits TAAS has to offer Black children, Kevin Erskine believes "it will be worth the drive from Brampton if his son, Jabari, gets an education that includes learning about his heritage" (as cited in DeMara, 2009, para. 1). Observes Erskine:

[AE] is very important. Jabari is a young African boy right now and he's going to grow up to be a young African man, and it's important that he knows his roots and history. As it's been said before, you don't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been. I want him to know things [about] Black inventors throughout history . . . and all the achievements of our people. (para. 2-3)

Like Kevin Erskine, Kristen McKinnon is "consider[ing] the extra-long commute for her son. I'm a single mother of a biracial son, and he doesn't have a lot of strong Black role models. This might be a perfect environment" (as cited in DeMara, 2009, para. 9). Like the supporters of TAAS, most of whom have first-hand experience of a highly flawed public education system, Kristen understands how crucial appropriate role models are to the healthy development of Black children, and especially boys, growing up in a racist society whose expectations for them are so low.

Few TAAS students report anything other than positive results stemming from their educational experiences. Following his first day at the school, Jahbril, a Grade 5 student, was evidently pleased with the curriculum: "We learned the seven principles of Kwanza, which is an African holiday that's almost a version of Christmas" (as cited in Brown, 2009, para. 12). His experience appears to support one of AE's principal hypotheses: that of a positive relation existing between culturally relevant learning materials and academic achievement.

Notwithstanding the support it enjoys, TAAS is not short of critics.

Ouzy (Senior manager-banker): I don't like [the idea] . . . When you are . . . trying to build a company, you need confidence. You do not have to always think of 'oh! this is who I am, this is where I come from, [or] I am an African. . . . I think the students should go to [integrated] schools. They should . . . learn to connect with other students their age. Canada is not a Black country. We should not teach our children how to rule Black kids only; we should teach them to rule Canada. They should be taught at a young age to socialize with other Canadian kids . . . How can they achieve

this by attending a school with only their own kind? I think Black children should focus more on self-confidence and focus less on [their heritage]. You can be among White people and learn what they know. If you look at the CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of Facebook, [Mark Zuckerberg], for example, he is a White guy. I don't believe for a moment he thought of his race when he built Facebook. . . . You can be among White people, and [learn]. If I am among White people talking about hockey, which is not an African sport, I can join in the conversation to prove to them [that] I am better informed about what they are discussing. I think this would make me look confident [in their eyes] . . . While I believe in my culture and in my African values, . . . what we need to teach our children, besides Afrocentric education, are skills and not their ancestral connections.

Ouzy seems to be inferring that TAAS and AE cannot provide the type of education Black students require if they are to play a meaningful role in the broader society. He appears to be suggesting that multicultural education, by default, offers Black students unhindered access to cultural capital, an assumption Lewis (2009) rejects utterly.

Ouzy dismisses the link between an awareness of race and one's heritage and the ability to seize economic opportunities. He believes building a career depends on merit, not on how one views such matters. From his comments one can infer that he believes that for Black people to succeed, they 'must pull themselves up by their boot straps.' His view of how one goes about becoming successful discounts the challenges Black families and students face on a daily basis. Ouzy's comments highlight a key misconception, namely that TAAS neglects to teach students how to be "business [smart]," in other words that the school fails to provide students with the "academic credentials, professional skills, and appropriate language to participate in the technological and [corporate] domains" of society (Ogbu, 1995a, p. 191). While Ouzy proposes an alternative to TAAS and AE, specifically an academic program that prioritizes learning business skills and inculcating self-confidence over fostering racial pride, his prescription ignores the reality of being Black in a White-dominated society, where, albeit every Canadian possesses the same economic rights by law, securing a job is often subject to the politics, however subtle, of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

As McIntosh (1986) notes, “her skin colour [i.e., White] was an asset for any move [she] was educated to [pursue]” (p. 7). And though Ouzy plays down the importance of race, his commentary suggests Black people are under a constant burden to prove themselves to Whites. It is for this reason, he asserts, that Black parents enjoin their children to work “twice as [hard in school] to go half [as] far” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177), which suggests that race does, indeed, pose a constraint on Black people seeking to compete with Whites in the job market and in the economy as a whole. Ouzy’s comment that a Black person must prove himself or herself to a White person, has its origin, according to Fanon (1967), in the “inferiority complex that has been created by the death and burial of [Africa’s] cultural originality” (p. 18). The oppressed, in his bid to become White, at least on the inside, and to feel desired and accepted by the dominant other, assimilates and exhibits White values, in the process “renounce[ing] his Blackness” (p. 18).

Ouzy fails to acknowledge the normativity of Whiteness and the privileges and power it accords Whites vis-à-vis Blacks. From his comments, one gathers that Whiteness, given its supremacy in all areas of life, places little or no burden on Whites whose institutions and policies are crafted to perpetuate their dominance. McIntosh (1986) speaks to White privilege, which she describes as an “invisible package of unearned assets that [she] can count on cashing . . . each day” (p. 1). She writes that from birth to adulthood, Whites who are privileged are taught by society and the public education system “to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (p. 3), something her Black “co-workers, friends, and acquaintances . . . cannot count on” (p. 3). According to McIntosh, “many doors open for [most Whites] through no virtue of their own” (p. 6).

Critiques of TAAS and AE cut across the board. Many politicians, school pundits and Black parents, along with large segments of the public, question both the practicality and the need for educational initiatives of this kind. For the skeptical, the thought of creating a school predominantly for African-Canadian students smacks of racism and segregation;

Asked in February 2008 whether the province of Ontario should fund the Afrocentric School, former premier Dalton McGuinty had this to say:

We believe it's a matter of principle, that the single most important thing we can do for our kids is bring them together so they have an opportunity to come to know one another, to understand one another and to learn together and grow together. We think that's the foundation for a caring, cohesive society. . . . There have been some changes made to the curriculum in the past, and if we need to strengthen that further to ensure that it is truly inclusive, then let's have that dialogue. And let's do it in a way that ensures kids continue to come together and share the same classrooms. (as cited in Leslie, 2008, para 1-5)

While implying that TAAS would segregate students along racial and cultural lines, Premier McGuinty ignores the inconvenient fact that its admissions policy is far more inclusive than those pertaining at Catholic or Jewish or gender-based schools. That one of the “primary objectives of a Catholic education lies in “. . . teach[ing] children to think, judge, and act consistently in accordance with the example and teaching of [Jesus] Christ” (McLaren, 1986, p. 50) is also ignored. In implicitly denigrating TAAS on the basis a sectarianism, while turning a blind eye to its existence in denominational schools, the premier is, one might argue, playing to his constituency and support base by inferring that he will in no way countenance any educational initiative that might contest the dominant order’s hegemonic position.

John Tory, the Progressive Conservative opposition leader, sought to pre-empt TAAS and AE by “changing the curriculum to make it more inclusive” (as cited in Leslie, 2008, para. 11). According to Tory:

The best solution for all students with special needs, including in particular Black students, would be changes that took place and would be available in every school for all kids. . . . What we should be doing here is really looking at the best tools we can use most effectively and fast to help all students with special needs, including students in the Black community, to do better and to stay in school longer. (para. 12-14)

What Tory's remarks reveal is a tendency on the part of critics of TAAS and AE to conflate problems that are unique to African-Canadian students and “students with special needs.” The term “special needs,” moreover, signifies a clinical disability, thus diverting attention from the marginalized and subordinated position Black students occupy, which accounts in large measure for their poor academic performance. And like so many critics of TAAS and

AE, Tory offers a “solution” that falls short of a comprehensive strategy for realizing the goal of making underperforming students "do better and . . . stay in school longer" (Leslie, 2008, para. 14).

The parallels between Catholic schools and TAAS, though striking, go largely ignored. Those who advocate on behalf of the former, as McLaren (1986) points out, “do not feel that a religion lesson at the end or the beginning of the day in non-Catholic schools would be sufficient to ensure that Catholic children are properly prepared in their religion” (p. 50). This explains why candidates for teaching positions at Catholic schools are required to be “Christians, academically and professionally qualified . . . with a Christian consciousness about themselves, a Christian sense of community, a Christian purpose and a common Christian life, [a set of criteria that] give the Catholic School [a] distinctively Christian character” (McLaren, 1986, p. 50). If it is acceptable for Catholic and other denominational schools to have in place hiring policies aimed at facilitating their goals, educational and otherwise, then surely the same holds for TAAS. For proponents, the educational needs of Black students are better served by a school that privileges an African knowledge system that connects them to their heritage and employs teachers who share the Black experience, understand the specific challenges confronting their charges, and are “academically and professionally qualified” (McLaren, 1986, p. 50) to help them succeed using an alternative model of learning.

In an article appearing in the December 15, 2008 edition of the *Toronto Star*, under the headline "Integration not isolation needed," Robert Hollingsworth of Peterborough stated:

I was very relieved when reading of the apparent lack of enthusiasm for the Afrocentric school. . . . The establishment of such a school will do nothing to enhance human relationships within the city. It will serve to intensify the isolation that is already in existence. Studies of such centres have found that, rather than being centres for education, they become centres of indoctrination. We, the people from visible minorities, have immigrated to Canada and desire to be part of the melting pot in order to be part of the whole. We do not need encouragement for isolation. Parents who have emigrated from their homeland of Africa have the opportunity to discuss with their children their ethnic progression. Our responsibility as citizens of this "glorious and free" country

of Canada is to seek to make a contribution, not seek to isolate behind walls of ethnicity. Canada is our home and we should be seeking to know more about our new home, so we can make a contribution based on knowledge. We are Canadians, eh! I would be very disappointed if this school does in fact become a reality. (as cited in Wallace, 2008, para. 1-5)

While reflecting mainstream opinion, Hollingsworth's views can hardly be said to be fact-based. First, TAAS is not a centre; it is a school. Second, Hollingsworth presents no evidence to support the claim that TAAS is a "centr[e] of indoctrination." Third, his description of Canada as a "melting pot" belies its true nature, which is that of a *cultural mosaic*. His contention that "visible minorities . . . migrated to be part of the melting pot" ignores the historical fact that visible minorities, African-Canadians in particular, have a long history and presence in Canada and have contributed significantly to making it "glorious and free."

In a December 15, 2008 op-ed piece Elka Ruth Enola of Oakville rebutted *Toronto Star* columnist Royson James' assertion that "it is Black folks who will wear the stigma of failure" should the Afrocentric School fail to meet its enrolment quota. Enola states:

Black parents have shown good sense and clear insight into how our society works. Isolating their children from the greater society will not help the children learn how to survive successfully socially and economically. An Afrocentric school does not help the non-Black segments of society understand the Black experience. What is really needed are integrated secular schools where all cultures are shared and valued. "Valued" is the key word. What is needed are honest demographics of the student populations in each school and a staff that reflects that. If every school were committed to the best integration of students in the mainstream of Canadian society, we would not need culturally defined schools. On our way to the perfect society, nothing precludes the Black community from offering support programs for Black students. An after-school program held three times a week during the lunch period, after school, in the evening or on the weekend would provide a place for students to bring their concerns and get appropriate constructive advice. I have no problem with such a program being funded by the Black community, the school board or the province. I would consider that an excellent use of my taxes. Not that it should matter, but for the record, I am a retired White, female teacher. (as cited in Wallace, 2008, para 6-12)

Enola seems to suggest integrative education as a solution calls for alternative education. Enola's notion that an "after-school program held three times a week during the lunch period,

after school, in the evening or on the weekend would provide a place for [African-Canadian] students to bring their concerns and get appropriate constructive advice" (para. 10) smacks of White paternalism, of White teachers advising Black students on how to deal with problems of which they have no understanding. What her comments reveal is more than a modicum of White comfort with the status quo and a lack of will and interest in calling for comprehensive educational reforms that could pose a challenge to the dominant order.

As to their respective positions on TAAS and AE, the participants fall into two camps, one consisting of staunch allies, the other of unremitting foes. The former view TAAS, and by implication AE, as essential to educating African-Canadian students in that it provides a learning environment free of racism and a curriculum to which they can relate, while the latter regard both to be unnecessary and even harmful to the extent that they are likely to fail to prepare Black students to live and work in a predominantly White society. There exists among the majority of the participants a palpable fear that failure to increase public awareness of TAAS and AE, and, more importantly, to make it accessible to non-White students, will over the long term limit the life opportunities of TAAS graduates, thereby defeating the primary object of the school, which is to train African-Canadian students to become useful and forthright citizens of a multicultural nation. Among the general public, support for TAAS is equally divided. While some, especially Afrocentric parents, support the school, others see it as divisive and inconsistent with Canadian values, such as inclusiveness. It should also be noted that the critics' perception of TAAS is often informed by their privileged location as well as their apprehension of what the school might one day become.

6.2. Black Teachers: The Foundation of Afrocentric Education

Beset by major challenges and pressure groups on all sides, Black teachers are, for the most part, steadfastly committed to educating Black students (Winks, 1997). The majority of the participants appear either to share this view or believe that by virtue of their

understanding of African culture and societal racism, Black teachers are better equipped to educate Black students. Black parents' perception of Black teachers as allies in the cause of educating Black students, moreover, is often conditioned by their experience with those White teachers who have low expectations of Black students, often manifested in subtle forms of racism (Dei et al; 1997; Raby, 2004; Roberts-Fiati, 1996). Amma and Abena share their experience of racism in the classroom while citing TAAS and AE as a remedy.

Amma (Creative artist-educator): I had to pull my son out of Grade 4 from a French Immersion . . . because of racism. . . . I found out that his teacher was not properly correcting my son's Mathematics and Science homework; she was giving him marks that he did not deserve. . . . I spoke with her and made it clear that she mark my son's papers properly. She told me to my face, quite firmly, that the expectations I was placing on him to do his homework was putting "undue pressure on him." She told me "Black people don't do well in Math and Science." . . . This kind of situation is unlikely to occur when students are in an environment where they are in the majority; where the teachers [look] like them; where they want them to excel and encourage them. The fact of the matter is, it's crazy for us to send our children to White schools where White teachers are expected to raise them to compete with their own children [laughter].

Amma appears to be suggesting that TAAS and AE eliminate, or at least minimize, student marginalization. Given its African-Canadian culture and teaching staff, the school would, one might expect, be more sensitive and attentive to the needs of students and treat them with the respect they warrant. In addition, the presence of African-Canadian teachers provides parents whose experience of White teachers has been less than satisfying the assurance that they will be given an opportunity to discuss the needs of their children and that these teachers view a collaborative partnership with parents to be crucial to a student's success. It is noteworthy that her son's teacher attributed his poor performance to "undue pressure" applied in the home and that she believed "Black people don't do well in Math and Science," thus illustrating the low expectations White teachers have for Black students. As Ng (1993) asserts, based on her personal experience with racism and sexism in institutions of higher learning, the dominant order's racist and sexist narratives of racialized Canadians are "normalized [and] embedded in language. . . . These normalized ways of thinking (frequently referred to as "stereotyping") [she further argues,] have real and profound consequences for people's lives" (194).

Abena (Project manager): I recall trying to help my son with his homework. When I told him his spelling was wrong. He replied, “my teacher says I don’t need to focus on spelling right now. Instead, I should focus on content.” . . . As a parent, when . . . your education is considered inadequate in Canada, you feel demoralized. Not only is the public education system failing Black students, it is also failing them given the kind of the education it provides them. . . . I visited the Afrocentric School out of interest . . . I asked the parents what they thought of the school. They told me they have never participated so much in any of the regular schools their children attended than they have at the Afrocentric school. . . . [They said,] their primary reason for not participating at the regular school was because they did not feel supported.

Abena’s experience speaks to the glaring deficiencies endemic to the public school system and particularly to the lack of support provided Black parents, especially those with ESL, who are doing their best to help their children with schoolwork. In striking contrast to the indifference shown by the mainstream schools, TAAS, according to the Black parents to whom she spoke, goes out of its way to support parents with regard to their participating in all facets of school life, something that is essential if students are to achieve positive learning outcomes.

Amma and Abena’s comments speak to the low expectations White teacher’s set for Black students. As a number of studies have found (Dei et al., 1997; Lewis, 2009) conservative, i.e., White, teachers are less inclined to help Black students with schoolwork, which explains why the poorer students among them have such an alarming dropout rate. While sharing their perceptions of Black teachers, the participants speculated that, given their understanding of African culture, they are more likely to invest time and effort in educating Black students whom they view as an extension of the Black family and/or the ‘African Village.’

Amma (Creative artist-educator): I used to go by the school [TAAS], sometimes, 7:30 to 8 o'clock [in the evening], and the teachers were still there. They were committed to help kids who had come from other schools where the staff had basically washed their hands off them, told them that they were useless, and that they would never amount to anything. The teachers took extra steps and extra time to work with them because they believe that no child was refuse. . . . This non-Western approach takes a lot more work. It requires a lot more of a commitment than the usual approach of just siphoning so-called problem kids over into a special education classroom for the

rejects even though a lot of these kids were in that precarious position because of the way they have been treated by the staff at schools they had formerly attended.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): I think the school . . . is very unique; the teachers go over and beyond what is necessary from your typical 9-to-5 day at other public schools. The level of engagement of many of the teachers is very high when it comes to the children's education. They often would make themselves available after school hours to discuss concerns on a regular basis; they are accessible through email and, in some cases, texting because they truly care about the education of the children and their wellbeing. The calibre of teachers at the school is outstanding, and even those who have moved on to other schools still enquire about how the children are doing; . . . e.g., my son had a teacher, 2 years ago, who still enquires about his progress.

Goddess (Educator): . . . One thing I value about the school is seeing a teacher showing affection to the children; she hugs and comforts them and this is vital to me as a parent. At the school, I can also approach a teacher knowing he or she is sensitive to the needs of, and is aware of challenges, our children face. The teachers go over and above the call of duty for the school and the children and that speaks volumes. The students will ultimately become great contributors to society and not feel any less Canadian because they have been empowered and . . . have as much right as anyone else to become the prime minister or anything they aspire to become.

Amma, Titina Silla and Goddess' comments underscore the traditional role of the African teacher as part surrogate parent, part guide to learning. For Titina Silla what is unique about TAAS is the personal care, informed by compassion, lavished upon students, as exemplified by the interest shown by a former TAAS teacher in her son's progress. A close and personal teacher-student relationship, Delpit (1988) argues, is critical to a student's success.

Amma, Titina Silla and Goddess' enthusiasm for casting Black teachers in the role of surrogate parents rests on the assumption that Black students are part of the proverbial 'African village' and that Black adults in general, and Black teachers in particular, have a moral and "social responsibility" (Dei, 2008, p. 234) to ensure they succeed. In accord with an Afrocentric ontology, Amma and Titina Silla view the success of the individual African student to be contingent upon the support of the collective, i.e., the Black community (Dei, 1996b). Thus, their success will be impeded if the community, and in particular Black teachers, withhold their support. Ouzy rejects this view. According to him, the responsibilities of parenthood should fall directly on Black parents, not the community

and/or the school. He believes it is difficult to help Black youth bent on self-destructive behaviour, i.e., “smok[ing] [marijuana]” and have little or no respect for adults or their counsel. Ouzy attributes this dysfunctional behaviour, in part, to poor parenting skills.

A number of studies have found the surrogate parenting role for teachers to be highly problematic (Brockenborough, 2014; Sachs, 1985). For many critics, it smacks of a missionary project, an unsolicited effort to save other people’s children. Moreover, along with “restoring [students’] self-esteem and feelings of self-worth,” some teachers could also be advancing their careers by, for example, earning the respect of “colleagues and supervisors” as someone who students “[can] . . . trust . . . and thus [are] more likely to talk to . . . in a way in which they might not [be] able to talk with other adults” (Sachs, 1985, p. 3). Nor can playing the role of surrogate parent to Black students solve the profound problems besetting Black families, e.g., spousal conflict, divorce, single-parenthood, poor housing, substandard education, unemployment, etc., none of which can be addressed by school teachers.

Brockenbrough (2012) challenges the perception that “Black male teachers [are] ready-made father figures for Black youth” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 366), a view that has a decidedly sexist undertone in that it ignores the crucial role Black female teachers play in the lives of Black students, especially with regard to mothering disadvantaged female students. Brockenbrough challenges the assumption that by virtue of their race, and cultural affiliations, Black male teachers are prone to take Black students, particularly boys, under their wing.

In “‘You ain’t my daddy!’: Black male teachers and the politics of surrogate fatherhood,” Brockenbrough (2012) contends that Black male teachers are less than enthusiastic about playing the role of a surrogate parent, owing in large part to the challenges and stereotypes that accompany it, e.g., having to assert one’s “hegemonic masculinity” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 358) and “patriarchal power” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 359) when dealing with recalcitrant Black students.

For most Black male teachers, surrogate parenting can be emotionally exhausting; and this is especially the case given that so many Black students bear “emotional scars,” the result of being raised in matriarchal households devoid of fathers. There is also the burden of “extra-pedagogical responsibilities” to be borne. While, according to the majority of Black male teachers, it is part of the “job description to raise [Black] children” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 364), most would rather keep “their distance from students [than build] . . . personal connections . . . associated with [a] father figure role” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 363) that could lead to “discipline-related confrontations” with male students, who play the “you’re not my father” card, occasionally backed up by the “threat to subject [the teacher] to the wrath of . . . the student’s actual father” (Brockenbrough, 2012, p. 367).

Brockenbrough (2012) views the role Black female teachers play in disciplining Black students to be minimal. Of the 11 male participants, one, referred to here as ‘Bill,’ cited two female colleagues, a “teacher coach” and a “mentor teacher,” who urged him to “adopt a firmer style of classroom management” (p. 364), in effect affirming the antediluvian tradition wherein women perform at best a supporting role in enforcing discipline, whether in the public or private sphere. By differentiating in this way, the role Black male teachers play vis-à-vis their female counterparts, Bill and his two female colleagues work to naturalize gender politics, in this case by casting Black male teachers in the role of indispensable disciplinarian, a position to which no female teacher could hope to aspire.

The participants’ understanding of the benefits to be gained from the Black teacher-student relationship was affirmed by Asante (Asante, 1991; Asante & Ravitch, 1991). According to Asante (1991), placing Black students under the tutelage of Afrocentric teachers precludes any possibility of their being taught to embrace Eurocentric ideas, which would distort the African experience and devalue African achievements. Indeed, aware of their pedagogical role and the need to commit fully to their students, Afrocentric teachers, can be relied upon to ensure that their charges are capable intellectually of rejecting the “badge of inferiority,” along with every insidious stereotype associated with “Blackness” (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Writes Asante:

In Afrocentric educational settings, . . . teachers do not marginalize African . . . children by causing them to question their own self-worth because their people's story is seldom told. By seeing themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of education—be the discipline biology, medicine, literature, or social studies—African . . . students come to see themselves not merely as seekers of knowledge but as integral participants in it. Because all content areas are adaptable to an Afrocentric approach, African . . . students can be made to see themselves as centered in the reality of any discipline. (p. 171)

According to Delpit (1988), the mainstream education system reflects the values of the dominant order. This claim imparts a sinister implication to the old cliché that “[we] want the same thing for everyone else’s children as [we] want for [ours]” (Delpit, 1988, p. 285), for surely here lies a rationale for postponing indefinitely educational reform. Yet, as Delpit argues, Black students can only prosper within the context of a pedagogy that is innovative and humanitarian, fosters respect for diverse views, and is sensitive to the learning needs of minority students (Delpit, 1988). This is the kind of pedagogical model endorsed by Nadia Hohn, a TAAS teacher, who “in the first year of the school, . . . spent \$600 of her own money to put books in her classroom to support the program that she wanted to teach” (Armstrong, 2015, para. 25).

The participants’ comments also speak to the benefits accruing from the school-parent partnership. All the participants believe, or at least seem to imply, that the presence of Black teachers not only precludes, or at least minimizes, racism, but also helps to restore Black parents’ confidence in the public education system. Responsibility for instructing Black students fosters among some Black teachers a spirit of care that translates into their investing their own time and resources in educating their charges. In this, they are motivated by the knowledge that such investment is crucial to augmenting the human capital of the extended ‘African Village’ and the Pan-African family, and in particular to ensuring that their future leaders are prepared to take on challenges that are likely to be as formidable as they are unprecedented.

6.3. Black Parents as Educators

Among scholars, the underlying cause(s) of underperformance on the part of Black students remains a controversial issue. While Dei et al., (1997) view the regular school system and its Eurocentric educational model to be partly responsible, other scholars disagree. Andrew Grogan-Kaylor of the University of Michigan writes:

So much of what goes into a student's grades [originates] outside the schoolhouse. . . . Unless we deal with fundamental inequities, [we should] not terrifically be confident that interventions targeted at a particular school are going to be very helpful. (as cited in Lunau, 2008, para. 12)

While investigating factors pertaining to the academic success of Black students in Alberta, Codjoe (2007) notes that “parental encouragement and a supportive home environment” (p.142) play important roles in achieving student success. He also notes that Black cultural identity and heritage is critical to attaining academic success (Codjoe, 2006). The question below is framed around parental involvement in the education of children in both the home and school and parents’ perception of the utility to be derived from sharing with their children stories relating to their identity.

Patrick: How often do you share with your children stories relating to your identity, and why is this important?

Ananse (Food justice manager): Every single day. I share stories of our heritage with my children not necessarily through storytelling, but through our daily practices. In the morning, my children pour a libation to our ancestors and the energies that guide our everyday function. . . . It's important for me to make sure that they have a conversation about how beautiful they are, who they are so that they are able to manage their day-to-day activities. My children are in public school and they're starting to get a lot of feedback about their hair, nose and lips. As a parent, I can step back with pride because they know how to respond. They are confident and proud of who they are. I make my culture part of . . . their day-to-day practice and not just stories about who they are. We live in a culture that wants us to assimilate us, so it's essential to share stories with your children all the time.

Ananse’s comments underscore the role Black families have come to play in their children’s education. For her, that role is crucial to sustaining positive learning outcomes and fostering positive self-images of Black children. Ananse appears to be suggesting that far

from being passive spectators where their children's education is concerned, Black parents actively engage in the education process, e.g., through storytelling and rituals aimed at teaching their children about their heritage and about the challenges they are likely to face later in life. Her views are at variance with the public perception of Black parents as indifferent to the educational needs of their children and, for this reason, less involved in educating them. According to Ananse, home education can complement formal education by inspiring Black students and arming them against internalized oppression.

Goddess (Educator): Yes, I story-tell and, probably, would need to do a whole lot more [laughter]. Right now, my little one [boy] is too small for these stories. He has a short attention span. My older one knows some of these stories. What's interesting is that not long ago, my [older] son told me that he had a horrifying experience at school, which is one of the reasons why we fought so hard for the [Afrocentric] school. We're literally losing our children; our children were being pushed out of the school system to prison . . . ; they're being denied their right to education and we know this is part of a historical legacy. Our children internalize these conditions [oppression] and start hating themselves, their parents and all things African. . . . What Black children's experience in the school system, for the most part, has been profoundly destructive and is nothing short of terror. The education my eldest son was subjected to has everything to do with his current circumstance in the 'injustice' system. What I've seen is that many of us who made it through the educational system ended up becoming Eurocentric and, as a result, became completely disconnected from the aspirations of our community and its cultural values.

Goddess highlights one of the principal fears haunting African-Canadian parents: losing a child to the system for want of an African-centred education. Deprived of the latter, many African-Canadian children become alienated from their African roots. Her comments underscore the importance of grounding children in African-centred philosophy through, among other things, story-telling. The latter, in her view, offers a corrective to a public education system that all too often turns African-Canadian children into 'breakers of mainstream laws' and 'suitable candidates for prosecution,' as evinced by the overrepresentation of African-Canadian youth in the juvenile penal system (Wortley, 2003; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011).

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): Because of my level of awareness, . . . I am very collective in my thinking. I share stories with my children about our African identity on a day-to-day basis and they come in different forms. . . . At home, we have books that reflect the African culture. . . . When my children step into our home, they see an

‘African village’ around them. In our home, there are portraits of African women, Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey and Amy Garvey. We have an ancestral table with images of African heroes and 'sheroes' who have crossed over. There are many levels to the issue of identity. [First,] I share my cultural identity with our children and my children. [Second,] I also share with them the spiritual side of our identity as African people; the way we worship the Creator and show reverence for our ancestors. So, in answering your question, I share stories of our identity as African people with my children every single day. They nourish their minds, empower them, increase their self-esteem and their level of self-love not only for themselves, but for others who are connected to the community. I constantly emphasize to my children that they are individuals in the context of the African community not only in Canada, but globally. That they are part of the Pan-African family so they have a clear understanding of their identity.

Titina Silla views knowledge of Pan-Africanism to be crucial to maintaining the emotional stability and fostering the intellectual autonomy of African-Canadian children. Thinking in collective terms and educating her children about African heroes and ‘sheroes’ are for her ways to counter the individualism that lies at the heart of neoliberal-Eurocentric education. Titina Silla, like many African-Canadian parents, seeks to situate her children in the African struggle and experience and prepare them to follow in the footsteps of those who have sought justice for an oppressed people and who have worked tirelessly to liberate the African mind and the continent from the yoke of neocolonialism.

The participants challenge the popular perception that Black parents invest little time and effort in their children’s education vis-à-vis “middle-and-upper-class families” (Davies & Guppy, 2014, p. 46). Admittedly, this is often the case owing to their lack of education, low socioeconomic status, and/or shiftwork, that for many preclude being available to supervise or help with homework (Thompson, 1998). Despite these obstacles, not all Black parents, according to the participants, are willing to relinquish responsibility for their children’s education. Indeed, some assume the role of educators, imparting what knowledge they possess as best they can.

A common theme running through all the responses is the importance to child development of a home education that inculcates knowledge of the identity and formative experiences of parents. While their approach to this kind of informal education may vary

depending on what is deemed important to the future success of their children, the participants all view it to be crucial to preparing them for a formal education and society that assaults the history and dignity of African-Canadians. Contrary to the neoconservative argument that African-Canadian parents put little or no effort into educating their children, and should thus bear the blame for their underperformance in the classroom, it is apparent from these responses that at least some Black parents, despite the constraints they are under, are, in fact, devoted to educating their children. For them, home education is no casual undertaking, but a commitment to fill in the gaps created by the public school system. Using creative approaches to disseminating knowledge, and most notably storytelling, African-Canadian parents seek to make school materials more meaningful and less offensive to their children and to preserve the continuity of an African-Canadian identity and culture, which they believe is crucial to preserving their dignity.

6.4. Afrocentric Education: Instilling the Community's Spirit in the African Child

The African sense of identity is derived from membership in a collective; it is the values of the latter, moreover, that shape how the individual goes about perceiving and ordering his or her world. Not surprisingly, Dei (2008) argues that “education must cultivate a sense of community and social responsibility” (p. 349) in Black students. According to Delpit (1988), there exists a correlation between a strong and cohesive community and educational outcomes. Removing the community from participating in the education of Black students, Delpit contends, poses serious problems, not the least of which is academic underachievement.

It may be inferred from the participants' comments that TAAS and AE continue to play a decisive role in bringing the Black community together for the purpose of deliberating upon ways and means to help Afrocentric students succeed. This relationship between community and school has important benefits: first, it provides the school and students with the assurance that they have the community's support, which is manifested by, among things,

work placements, the purpose of which is to provide TAAS students with the kind of experience essential to competing in the job market following graduation. Second, having members of the Black community speak at school assemblies offers students new perspectives on the Black experience and on ways to move forward. The presence of the Black community in the school, combined with the phenomenon of Black parents participating in the decision-making process, is in itself empowering; it also creates a sense of unity, along with a can-do spirit. What follows are the participants' views on some of the benefits accruing from the school's community-oriented approach to education.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): AE instills a sense of pride in our identity as African people. It raises the self-esteem of our students so that they can achieve whatever they set their minds to as long as they work hard. From a psychological point of view, it is extremely important. AE creates a sense of unity in our community, for example, various African organizations and individuals have come to the school to offer their support, to check on the progress of the children, to play with them, to offer extracurricular activities. . . . This is not just a theoretical unity, but a practical unity, because our people can see the supportive mechanism we are providing the school through individuals and organizations coming from the African community to help the community. Afrocentric education is important to Black students because it elevates their status in the eyes . . . of other communities who see the school doing well. . . . AE fosters a connection with other communities, whether it is the Chinese, the Indian community, the European community. It builds a certain level of cohesion and mutual respect.

Titina Silla regards AE as crucial to fostering consciousness among not only African-Canadian students but the community at large. Success in implementing educational reforms represents a signal achievement for the Black community as well as a sign of its cohesion; it also provides inspiration as well as a model for other racialized groups. In the immediate future, it may even promote inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation aimed at bringing about meaningful changes to public education.

Goddess (Educator): [AE] teaches Black students their role and purpose in the African community. Self-knowledge [through Afrocentric education] connects them to the greater African struggles we face as a people. We can count on them as warriors in the struggle to create a better future for all Africans

According to Goddess, TAAS instills in students a sense of purpose as well as an understanding of their role in the Black community. She contends that teaching Black

students about their heritage is a way of enlisting them in the struggle to improve the lot of all people of African descent. Goddess sees the individual African as a soldier fighting for justice, not just for him or herself, but for the entire community.

Shaka (Office manager): The [Afrocentric] school provides community, parental engagement and an ongoing dialogue on the education of Black children. The policies and the curriculum are not crafted in a backroom somewhere, they are crafted in the community

From Shaka's perspective, TAAS is predicated upon a holistic educational model, one that is appropriate for educating all students, regardless of race or ethnicity. As a community-based learning institution, it engages African-Canadian parents by seeking their views on how best to tailor education with a view to meeting a single overarching goal: the education of young minds and bodies. This approach also serves to increase community cohesion while building student confidence.

Kombozi (Mortgage broker): The Afrocentric School is a positive thing to me. I have gone there many times and have met both principals. On both times, they encouraged parents to come out and get involved. It is the one thing you always hear, time and time again talked about, by the staff at the school. That they need parents to come to the school and get involved, which is quite the opposite from what you hear at the Eurocentric School.

Kombozi's comments underscore a feature that is perhaps unique to TAAS: the encouragement provided to Black parents to visit the school and become involved in the educational process. Unlike the case in some mainstream schools where the school-parent relationship is minimal, TAAS seeks to engage parents as well as the community in the life of the school and vice versa. In other words, the school's success and that of its students are seen to be contingent upon the collective efforts of the proverbial 'African Village.' Herein lies a vibrant example of how community action can uplift the oppressed.

The participants see TAAS and AE as a magnet drawing the Black community together, with the school as the epicenter of Black fellowship. In contrast to the mainstream public school system where input from disadvantaged parents is dismissed as unwarranted interference (Dei et al., 1997), TAAS encourages Black parents and the community as a

whole to make their views known. The participants envision AE as a means of promoting social cohesion, harmony and a sense of moral responsibility (Dei, 2008). In this schema, competitiveness and individualism are to be eschewed, giving back to the community made an imperative.

It has also been observed that TAAS has succeeded in fostering activism among Black parents, whose experience of predominantly White schools has bolstered their resolve to see it succeed. To cite but one of many examples, Rebeckah Price, a community worker whose son attends the school, has been instrumental in organizing a "bus service to families at a cost of about \$275 per month" (as cited in Brown, 2009, para. 15).

6.5. Inclusive Curriculum: Making Education Relevant to the African Child

One of the perennial complaints leveled against the mainstream public education system is the lack of diversity in the curriculum, as evinced by the absence of Black representations, in particular Black heroes and heroines. For critics of public education, this constitutes one of the principal factors driving the achievement gap (Dei et al., 1997). Apropos to this critique, I asked the participants what they thought of the Afrocentric curriculum.

Shaka (Office Manager): Every chapter in the Afrocentric [curriculum] does not begin with Africa; Europeans and the Chinese played a part in world history. The [Afrocentric] education system will not work if it doesn't prepare our children to survive in the broader society. An Afrocentric curriculum must teach students in . . . a meaningful way to compete.

Although a TAAS supporter, Shaka takes a more centrist approach to incorporating race into education. Rather than privileging Black history and people, AE should be, in his view, an inclusive and non-hegemonic form of education that acknowledges non-African contributions to civilization. For Shaka, I assume, incorporating different perspectives into the learning process does not mean abandoning one's Black heritage or undermining its centrality to the education of Afrocentric students; rather, what incorporating alternative

knowledge systems and perspectives promises to achieve is a broadening of the intellectual horizons of Black students, a *sine qua non* for identifying and evaluating the contributions of every Canadian, regardless of race, ethnicity and culture. Shaka's response speaks to the popular perception of TAAS and AE as anti-White and/or anti-mainstream. In his view, or so I gather, AE is neither a vehicle for a reconstituted Black supremacy nor a substitute for Eurocentric education, which certain Black parents allege nullifies African knowledge systems and Black contribution to civilization. Rather, AE, as opposed to Eurocentric educational models, tolerates different perspectives, including those that are Eurocentric. As Asante (1993) points out “Afrocentric [education] is one among many [formats of educational models] and . . . seeks no advantage, no self-aggrandizement, and no hegemony [over other knowledge systems]” (as cited in Schreiber, 2004, p. 657). Furthermore, “[it] is *not* a Black version of Eurocentricity [emphasis in original]” (Asante, 1991, p. 171).

Jennifer (Teacher–curriculum consultant): [Inclusive curriculum] is important in terms of [the intellectual] development of the students. A young person told me that in one particular class where they were covering Loyalist settlers in Canada, he asked if the teacher could cover the one Black Loyalist in the textbook, because it was something that he connected with and wanted to learn more about. The teacher responded there wasn't enough time to cover it. The teacher covered the profiles of the other Loyalists with the exception of the profile of the Black Loyalist the student was interested in Could you imagine how this young person felt? This happens in the public school system and I think it happens too often with [Black students]. As a consequence, they become disengaged feeling that they are not learning anything about their people and themselves in the curriculum. This [particular episode] could have far-reaching consequences, for example, the student won't care about doing an assignment on Loyalist settlers. He'll do a poor job and get poor grades. . . . He would be put in the applied stream versus the academic stream eliminating the possibility of attending university.

Jennifer's account is revealing in that it speaks to the implications of the Black student disaffection that is so pervasive in the public school system. In her view, AE provides a remedy in the form of course materials specifically tailored to engage the interest and meet the educational needs of African-Canadian students, especially those most marginalized. Thus will students be motivated to work harder and more diligently as well as participate more fully in classroom activities, particularly discussion groups. According to Jennifer,

framing education around the interests of Black students is crucial to stimulating an interest in learning, without which positive educational outcomes cannot be attained.

Ananse (Food justice manager): Because the current education system is disconnected from who we are as a people, Black youth come into the education system with little interest. . . . Stimulating pride in the youth can create a complete turnaround in terms of how they perform. Afrocentric education helps [Black students] develop a knowledge of the self, . . . it bridges them with pre-enslaved Africa. If you ask a lot of Black children in the public school system who they are and where they come from, they think they come from slavery. The slavery narrative in North America is the most common thing taught about African history. The schools don't teach about *Imhotep* and all different African leaders, warriors, and founding fathers. . . . If Black children can associate inventions with Black inventors, they will become passionate about education because it becomes achievable. . . . When they . . . see that there are success stories in their community and not just a one-off; when they see that there are endless resources of talents of successful African people living in North America, or globally, then success becomes achievable for them; they start connecting with one of their African ancestors on an idea they had when they were their age; they begin to see themselves in Black heroes and “sheroes” they know in their sphere of awareness. If they see that astronauts are all White, I don't think that they would want to become astronauts. . . . I work with youth from elementary age up until young adults. One of the most disheartening experiences is hearing what these children think of themselves. They won't consider a lot of [mainstream] careers because they consider them White careers. However, when you start telling these children that George Washington-Carver did . . . outstanding work; that there is over 200 patents that we use today, it inspires them. When you help them make these associations, they develop an interest and a passion.

From Ananse's response, I infer that TAAS and AE address those gaps in the mainstream school system that leave Black students disaffected, which explains their lack of interest in education and consequent academic underperformance and high dropout rate. In contrast to the regular school system, TAAS provides a learning model and environment that reflect the lived experiences of Black students and engage their interest in education. Ananse's comments underscore the importance of learning materials to which Black students can relate and of an inclusive curriculum. Providing appropriate role models, moreover, serves to motivate students to succeed both in school and later in life.

For the participants, much of the appeal of an Afrocentric curriculum lies in its readiness to challenge White interests. Inclusive and non-hegemonic, it embraces diverse

histories and disparate, often conflicting, perspectives; it also offers a wealth of Black representations and is capable of supporting alternative pedagogies. The participants' views beg the question: Of what possible use is, say, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to, an African-Canadian student educated primarily in Nigeria and conversant with the work of Wole Soyinka or Chenua Achebe, two of Africa's leading scholars (Dei, 1996b)? Of greater import than utility, the kind of enforced acculturation required in the mainstream public education system is likely to result in poor grades or even dropping out altogether.

According to Abdi (2012), Eurocentric education constitutes a vital cog in the neocolonial project. To pass examinations, Black students are required to demonstrate a familiarity with foreign concepts, some of which have little bearing on their intellectual development. A corrective, Asante (1991) argues, lies in teaching African students that, to take but one example, "mathematics was developed in Egypt, Babylon, Mesopotamia and India long before it came to Europe" (Asante & Ravitch, 1991, p. 271). This is not to dismiss the European contribution to mathematics, but, rather, acknowledge that "mathematics in its modern form owes [a] debt to Africans and Asians" (Asante & Ravitch, 1991, p. 271). An inclusive Afrocentric curriculum, according to this author, would underscore African and European achievements in the domain of knowledge production. Such a holistic approach can foster learning and ultimately bridge the achievement gap (Dei, 1996b), a view shared by Shaka, Jennifer and Ananse.

6.6. Afrocentric Education: The Optimisms and Possibilities

In light of the absence of anything resembling a consensus as to what TAAS represents or the benefits to be derived from AE, I asked the participants to express their views on these matters. Thus may be elucidated their reasons for entrusting their children's education to a school seen by many within and outside Toronto's African-Canadian community as well as the general public as controversial.

Patrick: What are some of the benefits that you anticipate would come with enrolling Black children in an Afrocentric School?

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): I see them occupying outstanding leadership positions in different sectors of the society whether it is law, medicine, teaching, engineering, etc., Whatever they set their minds to do, they will be outstanding professionals; ethical African men and women who proudly represent the African community. . . . I see them reconnecting with African community . . . I see them as a force to be reckoned with.

Rolonda (Social services worker): I see them in the workforce as nurses, engineers. . . . I see some of them becoming lawyers. There aren't enough Black lawyers [in the Black community] [laughter].

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): Ideally, I would like to see them graduate, . . . continue on to whatever career goals that they have whether it's post-secondary education, starting their own business . . . and becoming productive citizens.

Amma (Creative artist-educator): In 10 years, I think that they are going to be quite active in our community even though some are still going to probably be in school. I can see a number of them becoming entrepreneurs. I think they will do well and I am referring to the first batch of students. I don't know about the ones who will come after. Overall, I think they will still do well. They'll certainly grow up without a lot of the trauma, a typical rite of passage that happens in the regular school.

The majority of the participants were highly optimistic regarding both the prospects awaiting TAAS graduates and the ability of the school and its educational model to produce young African-Canadian leaders imbued with a sense of commitment toward, and responsibility for, the African-Canadian community. They see TAAS graduates as the Black community's next generation of leaders and role models. Though they may prove unfounded, these lofty expectations go a long way to explaining the African-Canadian community's willingness to invest in TAAS.

Despite the overwhelming support for Afrocentric education predicated on the opportunities afforded Blacks, the response of two participants was guarded.

Shaka (Office manager): Time will tell.

Ouzy (Senior manager-banker): In 10 years, I expect to see them a little bit more confident about themselves; I expect to see folks who know a little bit more about their heritage. I am not sure if I would see the kinds of leaders that I am idealizing.

While crediting TAAS with imbuing students with a modicum of self-confidence derived from a knowledge of Black history, Ouzy has little faith that some of the lofty expectations of Black parents and educators can ever be realized.

While the participants' optimism stems from the high-test scores obtained during the first year of TAAS's existence, a new study, entitled "The Africentric Alternative School Research Project: Year 3 (2013-2014) Report" revealed that "in Grade Three math, the percentage of students meeting the provincial standards fell from 83 to 33" (Fanfair, 2015, p. 3; see Armstrong, 2015). The report also noted a considerable drop in student enrolment: "after four years (2009-2012), of the students who started at [T]AAS, 43% were still attending the school and 57% had transferred to another school inside or outside the TDSB" (Armstrong, 2015, para. 20), raising the question of whether TAAS is sustainable.

James, the study's chief investigator, assigns blame for the precipitous drop in enrolment to parents interested only in "trying [TAAS] out . . . to see if it works . . . or [having to relocate outside the school's jurisdiction or tiring of the] long commute" (Armstrong, 2015, para. 22). James's conclusions are at odds with the initial enthusiasm that greeted TAAS. Kevin Erskine, a Black parent, opines that "it [would] be worth the drive from Brampton if his son, Jabari, [could] get an education that includes learning about his [African] heritage" (as cited in DeMara, 2009, para. 3).

According to the report, some parents attributed declining enrolment to the departure of TAAS's first principal, Thando Hyman (Armstrong, 2015). They claim that losing Hyman, in addition to "some outstanding teachers" (para. 53), lowered academic standards, causing some parents to withdraw their children from the school. According to Yolisa Dalamba, "chair[woman] of the school's Parent Council" (para. 11), the crisis at TAAS stems from "political and cultural alienation, [the lack] of a shared vision, decisive leadership . . . [and certain] teachers lacking "[the] experience, theoretical framework, or pedagogical practice in Africentricity" (Dalamba cited in Armstrong, 2015, para. 54). Her view is consistent with that of Amma's.

Amma (Creative artist-educator): [TAAS] is departing from the highest standards . . . [and was] kind of losing itself . . . [with the departure of] . . . the original principal.

What the literature reveals is that the kind of internecine infighting plaguing TAAS has historical antecedents. Himself a proponent of separate education, Du Bois (1935) warned that personality politics and efforts by a vociferous minority to impose its vision on the majority could derail a noble experiment. Following Du Bois, it is not unreasonable to argue that some of the problems afflicting TAAS, as Dalamba points out, is the result of an intra-community dialectical struggle over whose vision of TAAS and AE will prevail.

6.7. Afrocentric School and Afrocentric Education: The Challenges

In this section, I discuss the challenges TAAS has had to face since its official opening. While optimistic regarding the achievements and future prospects of the school, the participants were inclined to take a sober view of the challenges confronting the school and its students. These will be discussed under five rubrics: TDSB authority over TAAS; teacher training, professional development and budget constraints; TAAS and AE as viewed through the lens of the mainstream media; the Black community's adverse perception of TAAS and AE; and the cavalier attitude of Black parents towards education.

6.8. TDSB Authority Over TAAS

Despite the perception among some participants that TAAS represents a symbol of African-Canadian achievement, like all public schools in the Toronto metropolitan area, it operates under the authority of the TDSB, which is responsible for its funding and for hiring staff. This has led some participants to suspect that TAAS was set up to fail, thus providing the TDSB with an excuse to close it down.

Amma (Creative artist-educator): When the school first opened, the staff was dumped on. The opponents, some of them in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and others in politics wanted the school to fail. . . . Students who were labelled problem

students elsewhere got dumped on the school. The TDSB did not give the school the [required] number of teacher aides it needed. TDSB increased the student-teacher ratio . . . the last minute. The influx of traumatized students . . . and the lack of [teacher] assistants in the classrooms required the teachers to put in an incredible number of hours after school. . . . I don't think that the school was ever wanted by most of the members of the School Board . . . They did everything they could not to be supportive. The Board and [a segment of] the Canadian public were surprised when the school didn't collapse before opening, which actually angered a lot of them. . . . When the first assessment test scores were released, the opponents were angered. That wasn't something they wanted. I have no illusions that they've been converted; they still don't want TAAS to succeed. We had asked for a high school, and rather than grant our request, the TDSB talked about starting this high school program last year, at the last minute again, within a White school with a White principal. Also, they seem to be bending over backward stressing that "other people can come here too, you know", that other kids are welcome to go through this program, that it's open to other kids, etc., That tells me how much the TDSB disapproves of, and is uncomfortable with, effective education targeting African students that could potentially produce non-Eurocentric graduates. And, frankly, TDSB's desperate approach in recruiting non-African students, to me, is a heads-up alert that this program will not be doing what it's supposed to be doing for our kids, which is not to say that White kids couldn't go to an Afrocentric program. They could, and I don't know for what reason they would want to, though. . . . If they're approaching this supposedly Afrocentric high school program with this view of selling it to White people, then they have to make it weak in its Afrocentricity, such that it is going to be acceptable to White people because quite frankly, they don't like Afrocentricity. They are not comfortable with anything that does not support White supremacy and this is the nature of European and neo-European-based cultural thought and behaviour. And so, they'd have to make the program very weak in that regard, to the point that it just nullifies the whole purpose of having an Afrocentric high school as far as I am concerned.

Amma's comments underscore the dominance TDSB exercises over TAAS, even though for reasons of public relations, it presents the school and what it teaches as a community initiative with minimal input from the school board. What is also revealed is a lack of trust toward the TDSB for its historical rejection of educational reform, abrupt changes in policy direction, excessive control over the curriculum and the hiring of teachers, the use of funding to control dissent, and the habit of increasing teacher workloads without providing adequate resources. While the TDSB works assiduously to preserve its public image, e.g., by appearing to acquiesce to the demands of the African-Canadian community, its counter-proposal to provide a high school program that offers the appearance of an

Afrocentric education but not the content, attests both to its power and duplicity when it comes to serving the needs of Black students. Amma's principal fear is that the TDSB will, over time, undermine TAAS through reforms aimed at mollifying the mainstream public that may at some point wish White students to enroll at TAAS.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): The school has been constrained by the bureaucracy and politics at the Toronto District School Board. While the Board has obviously provided some level of support to the school, it has failed to step up to the plate to provide the level of support that the school needs to show that after 4 long years of struggle, we have a standing school and enough space. At the moment, we share the space with the Sheppard public school, which has the majority of the space while we occupy a small space. As the [Afrocentric] school grows, we are crammed into the same space. So, I think there are strengths in terms of the academic performance of our children. . . . On the other hand, the School Board has not done enough to support the progress of the school . . . As a community, what we need to do is to organize ourselves to create independent African-centred schools that are fully funded and supported by our community.

Titina Silla's comments underscore the many challenges facing TAAS, including having to share space with another school. The TDSB denies the school autonomy while at the same time seeking to constrain its growth, high provincial test scores notwithstanding. Her comments highlight the inequitable distribution of resources within the public education system.

6.9. Teacher Training, Professional Development and Budget Constraints

Although in the US separate Black schools have always had their supporters, many, even among the most ardent, have often expressed reservations. Du Bois (1968), for example, questioned their sustainability over the long-term, in light of the economic and material conditions prevailing in Black America (Du Bois, 1968). Lacking sufficient resources, the Black community, Du Bois contended, was constrained in terms of the support it could provide Black schools.

As with any new school, the success of TAAS is dependent on teacher training and development and familiarity with the Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy. Owing to cutbacks in funding, there exists the likelihood that, moving forward, the school will not have the resources required to train teachers adequately, which could impact learning outcomes as well as the viability of the school over the long-term. The participants shared their views on TAAS' fate in the event that funding should prove inadequate.

Ananse (Food justice manager): We've already seen the [challenges] . . . e.g., having the appropriate staff. Just because you are a person of colour or you are an African educator doesn't necessarily mean you are the right educator for an Afrocentric environment. Having qualified, a trained staff and training opportunities for the staff and volunteers on the appropriateness of dealing with everything is essential.

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): TAAS is the first of its kind [in Toronto]. What do we want the school to look like and what do we want it to achieve? How do we want it to be as different from the public school system? . . . To achieve these goals would require training the staff, especially the administrators responsible for overseeing the school. How do they look at the best practices in the regular school system and take away ideas that [will help improve] the Afrocentric School. When I talk about professional development, I am also referring to training and lectures from scholars who have researched Afrocentric [schools and education]. We can take away from some of their ideas to help develop the school and its educational model.

Ananse and Jennifer's comments draw attention to a key component of student success: highly trained teachers and administrators with the knowledge and cultural sensitivity requisite for educating African-Canadian students in accordance with both TDSB standards and the vision put forward by TAAS. Attracting and training these professionals will require adequate funding from the TDSB, which, if insufficient, will impede the school's ability to realize all its objectives. Indeed, increasing, or at least maintaining, funding levels is especially critical in light of a growing student body and the need to conduct research and engage expert lecturers. Failure in this regard could translate into student underperformance, which critics would seize upon as a justification for closing the school and abandoning the alternative school model.

Cuts to the TDSB budget are cause for concern. In 2008, a \$41 million deficit was projected for the TDSB. In his report and recommendations, Julian Falconer, a human rights

lawyer, stated that the Board was “nowhere near sufficiently funded to manage” (as cited in Lunau, 2008, para. 6) the growing needs of its student population, let alone fund the programs already in place. In 2012–2013, in a move to make up a budget shortfall that had grown to \$110 million, the Board cut “200 secondary school teaching jobs and 134 staff . . . resulting in \$46-million in cuts to . . . programs” (Kauri, 2012, para. 7). At the same time, it reduced the “PD [professional development] budget by \$4.9 million” (para. 4) [and the transportation budget by] \$300,000” (para. 13). As of 2014-2015, the Board’s fiscal deficit stood between “\$12-14 million” (Rushowy, 2014, para. 7), which could mean further cuts to various sectors of the public school system, TAAS not excepted.

Afrocentric parents worry about shortfalls in the school’s budget. Yolisa Dalamba, chairwoman of the “School’s Parent Council,” provides a grim account of the impact recent budget cuts have had on the school:

[The lack of adequate funding] has significantly impacted on the growth and development of the school, and [it] puts a great deal of pressure on individual teachers to be innovative, to be willing to go beyond the call of duty. . . . Some succeed and some don’t. . . . We cannot [go on educating our kids this way]. Our school [is] not . . . an experiment or a lab[oratory] to test our children. (Armstrong, 2015, para. 28)

Perennial budget deficits pose a manifold threat to TAAS. First, the TDSB could cite any sign of underperformance on the part of the school as grounds for closing it, thus eliminating the only Afrocentric educational institution in Toronto. Second, the deficits make it unlikely that student transportation will be subsidized, leaving it up to already financially-strapped parents to come up with “transportation alternatives . . . including . . . car-pooling and sharing the cost of a privately hired bus” (Hammer, 2009, para. 8), “which . . . take[s] hours” (Ferenc, 2013, para. 12) to drive the students to-and-from school. Third, budget cuts could very well undermine the initial enthusiasm that greeted TAAS’ establishment, thus eroding community support. Should the school falter in meeting its primary goal of enhancing the academic performance of Black students, the stakeholders, and especially the parents, would likely question the additional burden, financial and otherwise, imposed by a TAAS education. With increasing workloads and little or no incentives, i.e., training and

professional development, teachers are likely to succumb to fatigue and low morale, which would translate into high turnover rates and less time to cater to the needs of individual students, thus returning to the very conditions TAAS was intended to address.

6.10. TAAS and AE Through the Lens of the Mainstream Media

As with most alternative projects that challenge White domination, TAAS and AE have come under intense scrutiny by the mainstream media. Ignoring the school's primary goal of re-educating African-Canadian students, the latter have raised the spectre of a segregationist project, a throwback to the past not to be tolerated in a multicultural country. The participants shared their views on how the media has represented, or more accurately misrepresented, TAAS and AE.

Titina Silla (Lawyer-student): [Since] the inception [of the] Afrocentric Alternative School, the media [has been] a major culprit in . . . fanning the flames of division by spreading information that basically said this is a step backwards in time and that having an African-centred school is segregationist. So, you had people in the community who were against it and, then, you had the media spreading its propaganda about the school being segregationist and it being a step back in time.

Kombozi condemns the media for failing to distinguish between segregation and separation.

Kombozi (Mortgage broker): Even before the school was established, you had [the media] saying it is segregation all over again when, in fact, they had not done their homework. . . . Segregation is completely different from separation. Segregation is a mandate imposed upon people against their will. Some defining characteristics of segregation is that one group of people has the power to oppress the other and that one group of people is above the other. It is an unequal relationship. This is not what the Afrocentric School is about. Nobody is being oppressed at the school; there is no class of people above the other. The school has nothing to do with segregation whatsoever. . . . Segregated schools in the '50s and '60s have no similarities to the Afrocentric School where parents send their children on their own volition and where the standards of education are higher. Afrocentric students are outperforming their non-Afrocentric peers. The misconception of the school has no basis in fact.

Kombozi's response delineates the public confusion regarding segregation and separation and the use of the former to recall a sad chapter in African-American history.

Invoking the spectre of segregation, a strategy commonly used by critics of TAAS and AE, is to ignore the fact that African-Canadian parents have a right of choice with regard to what school their children attend vis-à-vis being legally compelled to enroll their children in segregated schools as was the case in the United States during the pre-Civil Rights era. Ironically, the same public that describes TAAS as segregationist fails to apply the same label to those private schools, many of them denominational, where the principal criterion for admission is either religious affiliation or gender.

In addition to demonizing TAAS as a segregationist project, the mainstream media provides a platform for critics of all persuasions to belittle Black parents and the Black community as a whole. Barry Lillie, a retired secondary school teacher and basketball coach's (Lillie, 2008), poses a number of questions that highlight White fear of the implications for the public educational system of the kind of radical change TAAS represents. In his view, the cause(s) of student underperformance lies, not with the school system, but with Black communities that are dysfunctional. Overall, the tone here is one of frustration.

So what are parents to make of this debate [on the Toronto Africentric Alternative School]? Is it simply a Toronto thing, or does it have implications for our community in Waterloo Region? Will local school boards or various community leaders petition for similar choices? And what is a Black-focused school? Is it for students with a Jamaican family tree or a Somalian family tree or a Kenyan family tree? Does a student need to have two Black parents to qualify? Tiger Woods or Barack Obama are of multicultural heritages, but viewed as Black Americans. (para. 5-6)

Lillie (2008) attributes the problems and challenges facing marginalized students to:

communities where children are being raised by children; . . . communities where 70 per cent of children are without a father; [communities plagued by] gangs and youth violence, . . . poverty and job loss that cripples families; . . . and communities where positive role models have disappeared and been replaced by leaders driven by anger . . . Every year I get the joyful experience to participate at my granddaughter's school for a Christmas assembly or a cross-country run. The different family roots are immediately apparent at a glance. It is one of those quiet moments where it is inspiring to see young children of many origins singing in joyful unison to our red-nosed Rudolph or

urging their schoolmate[s] to cross the finish line with a "Yes, you can."
(para. 8-10)

Lillie's (2008) lack of knowledge regarding TAAS and particularly its admissions policy—the school is open to all children, regardless of race, gender, class, and ability—speaks to a reflexive practice, common among critics and the public alike, of indicting TAAS in the absence of even the most basic knowledge of its goals and policies. Bringing up the subject of his granddaughter's school Christmas party, he recalls his joy at "see[ing] young children of many origins singing in joyful unison our red-nosed Rudolph" (para. 10) presumably "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer". Lillie went on to note that "as a . . . basketball coach for close to 30 years, I've had the close-up experience of watching Black students flourish . . ." (para. 11) so long as their numbers were low relative to those of White students:

When our school had a sprinkling of Black students, those students were more likely to thrive and be part of the school life. When the number of students reached a certain threshold, the Black students tended to become more isolated, less involved in the school life, and more captured by the American Black experience of the media and music world. (para. 12)

Lillie's (2008) supposition that there exist resources adequate to addressing the problems plaguing racialized communities has no basis in fact. Indeed, successive neoliberal governments have made significant cutbacks to social programs, including education (Johnson, 2013). And while absentee fatherhood remains a problem in the African-Canadian community, there is little evidence to suggest that these fathers have been replaced by "leaders driven by anger." Lillie's (2008) suppositions, like those of most critics of TAAS and AE, are predicated on racial stereotypes and misinformation. His use of the term "our red-nosed Rudolph" connotes that the "young children of many origins," as he characterizes them, are not 'Canadians', a title tacitly reserved for White-Canadians of European origin. Turning to his experience as a basketball coach, Lillie recalls "watching Black students [but not White students] flourish [in sports but not academics]," drawing attention to the policy of streaming African-Canadian students, particularly boys, into sports, the one area where, it is assumed, they can excel. Lillie's supposition that keeping Black student numbers low in

relation to those of White students helps them thrive is not supported by the evidence, e.g., the high provincial test scores obtained by TAAS students.

Of the many weapons the corporate media deploys to signify the intellectual inferiority of Black Canadians, none is more insidious than the comic illustration. Draping racism in levity and excusing it on the grounds of free speech allow the media to escape the stigma that would ordinarily attach to racist attacks on visible minority groups, thus leaving Black communities with no defenders beyond their own borders.

“Afrocentric Algebra”, which appeared in the February 18, 2008 edition of *The Globe and Mail* belies the notion that Canadian society is free of racism. The fat-lipped, cone-headed Black teacher wearing oversized eyeglasses and enunciating the phrase “sup dog” is intended as a caricature. The Blackboard in the background is inscribed with an ‘algebraic’ formula. Above the Blackboard is the caption “AFROCENTRIC ALGEBRA.” This cartoon raises questions about institutional racism and about how the dominant order uses images to signify the inferiority of an entire race. Perhaps the best way to analyze or deconstruct this kind of text is by referencing it to five questions posed by Banks (1998): “Why are [Black Canadians] described as intellectually inferior?” “Why are questions still being raised about the intelligence of [Black Canadians] as we enter a new century?” “Whose questions are these?” “Whom do they benefit?” and “Whose values and beliefs do they reflect?” (p. 4).

This cartoon raises a numbers of questions. The first point of interest is the cartoon’s pedagogical implications; specifically, it presents White knowledge systems as the most appropriate for educating children and youth and alternatives as hopelessly inadequate if not insidious. What is being questioned here is the ability of Afrocentric teachers to instruct students in *basic* algebra. The implication is clear: Black students left in the hands of Black teachers at TAAS are at risk of being *misinformed* and *miseducated*. The slang expression “S’up Dog,” scrawled on the blackboard, insinuates that Black teachers are inarticulate and incapable of formulating a simple sentence like “What’s up.” The humour arises from the certainty that nothing so preposterous as ‘Afrocentric Algebra’, or for that matter a pedagogical approach to teaching it, could possibly exist. The single difference between the

so-called "Afrocentric Algebra" and its mainstream counterpart—note that both have been vetted and approved by the TDSB—is that the former provides historical perspective on the development of mathematics, one that highlights the contributions of African peoples of those other than Europeans.

As Dei et al., (1997) point out, one of the principal causes of Black student estrangement from education is that they very seldom see themselves in the media, and when they do, it is most often as caricatures. Beset by these negative representations, their history and contributions denied, Black students come to school feeling empty and mentally beaten down, only to be confronted by a curriculum that “render[s] Black Canadians insignificant, unimportant and powerless” (Kong, 1996, p. 64). Thus do media and curricular representations of Blacks serve to reinforce one another.

6.11. The Black Community’s Negative Perception of TAAS and AE

Not surprisingly given their radical aims, TAAS and AE are the subject of contention within the Black community. Some participants expressed frustration with certain of its members for expressing views that are ill-informed, and for this reason jeopardize support for the school; they also lend weight to the conviction, popular among certain segments of the Black community, that ‘we are our own worst enemies.’

Jennifer (Teacher-curriculum consultant): [One] misconception that I've heard is, somehow, people think the standards at the school are lower and that students would not be able to function normally. . . . This is a negative subtext . . . that could pose a challenge to some of our young people. I cannot recall which media it was that questioned how the university or college applications of Afrocentric students would be considered.

Mary (Social worker): The main challenge for the students is to prove to society that they were awarded diplomas not just because they attended the Afrocentric School, but because they received the same education as everyone else. Another challenge is the perception of the school within the [wider] community; the idea that Afrocentric students are not receiving [quality] education; that the school has lowered the bar, so to speak, to pass students. This is misinformation.

Jennifer and Mary's comments reveal that much remains to be done to educate the public and the Black community regarding the real objectives of Afrocentric education, leaving many to form views that have no basis in reality, e.g., the notion that Afrocentric diplomas will be inferior to those issued by the mainstream public school system. Such fears are, in fact, groundless, as both educational models offer students the same core courses, yet they continue to plague many, especially Black parents concerned about their children's career prospects.

Titina Silla (Lawyer/student): Some in the Black community feel [the school] is segregationist. These people did not take the necessary steps to investigate for themselves what it was that we were trying to build; they did not come to any of the meetings; they never spoke to any of the parents; they did not attend any of TDSB's meetings or spoke to the teachers about the school. They only read what was in the media unaware that the media is a tool of the White supremacist society to influence the way we think. The differing opinions about the school and, a lot of it, is based on misinformation . . . designed to miseducate us and move us away from our Africanness. . . . The differing conceptions of the Afrocentric School in the Black community are a reflection of the extent to which we have been brainwashed by the White supremacist society not to make inquiries about the school and just follow what the media says is the truth and to our detriment.

Ananse (Food justice manager): People's objections to the school are rooted in racism and self-hate. You have people from the Black community who say the school is segregated and is unnecessary; that we live in times where we're all equal and everybody gets along. There's also the education piece. People aren't fully educated on the different statistics on the educational journeys of Black youth in Toronto. . . . People don't understand fully what's really happening. They just have this snapshot of what the media provides them. What they think about the school is usually shaped by what they have heard. They don't really understand what's going on [in the school]. While this phenomenon is a shame, it presents an opportunity for people to educate themselves around what is happening in the school system. People don't take the time to research, they don't take the time to get into why things are the way they are and this is why there is always a pushback. . . . [They] don't take the time to understand the dynamics that shape institutions.

Titina Silla and Ananse cite a major challenge facing the school: a public that is misinformed and a media intent on disseminating misinformation. On the other hand, according to these respondents, the challenges confronting TAAS and AE in the African-Canadian community stem from a lack of both intra-racial solidarity and interest on the part of some in educating themselves about what the school really stands for. Media narratives

questioning the necessity for TAAS succeeded all too well, both before and after its establishment, in indoctrinating the general public as well as the African-Canadian community with the view that TAAS and AE were being driven by a segregationist agenda, an evocative term that works to paper over the unequal distribution of resources in the public school system, resulting in poor neighbourhood schools with large class sizes, outdated libraries and students treated differentially on the basis of race and class. Titina Silla and Ananse's comments also highlight a fundamental mistrust between TAAS and AE supporters and the dominant media.

Shaka (Office manager): There are still people in the African Diaspora who say 'let bygones be bygones; let's just move on. . . . So, when your own people are so consumed trying to fit into a system that's not accepting of them, . . . how do you de-programme and re-programme them? When the Afrocentric School came up for discussion, the biggest fight was not with other communities, but the African-Canadian community [whether the school was necessary]. Something we heard quite often [from certain Black parents] was 'my son is doing perfectly well in the regular school system, so why do we have to change the school system?'. . . . The biggest fight was not with other communities because we expected them to oppose the school. However, when Black children are suffering from a toxic education system and some of us are happy with it, then, you realize how difficult the fight ahead will be.

Shaka's comments reveal ambivalence among the African-Canadian community as to how best to move forward in educating its youth. Some, buoyed by isolated instances of success in the mainstream public school system, see no need for change while worrying that bold initiatives of the likes of TAAS and AE would only offend White Canada and open old wounds. They are content to walk in the shadow of the dominant order, to make decisions informed by the dominant agenda, despite the public school system having failed African-Canadian students—to which a 40% dropout rate so amply attests. It may be inferred from Shaka's comments that a large subset of the African-Canadian population labours under the spell of the dominant order such that it prefers the existing colonial education system to TAAS and AE, pointing to the success of some African-Canadian students as an indicator that all can succeed, in which case there is no need for an alternative.

Asante attributes the lack of resolve on the part of Africans to the tendency to appease Europeans: "[There has been] a considerable number of . . . Blacks [who] have paraded in a

single file and sometimes in concert [with Whites] to take aim at [Afrocentricity and Afrocentric education]” (Asante & Ravitch, 1991, p. 269). According to Asante (2003), the suggestion by some Africans that Black history be fossilized fails to account for the fact that Eurocentric education teaches Black students to uphold European values and reject all that is African. Asante calls this phenomenon “the slave mentality” (p. 5). The majority of those comprising African elites who, on the basis of their social status and wealth, believe themselves to be the equal of Europeans, are loathe to reject the status quo. In their view any alternative would be suicidal, as it would deny them the benefits to be had from maintaining their slavish relationship with the dominant order. For them, reproducing the status quo is preferable to addressing historical wrongs.

6.12. Black Parents’ Cavalier Attitude Towards Education

While TAAS has succeeded beyond the expectations of many, including those among the Black community, it continues to face serious challenges, not the least of which stems from the lofty, often unreasonable, expectations harboured by Black parents. Some view the school as a surrogate parent; others as an agent for socializing unruly children; still others as unnecessary and divisive. Some of the participants were highly critical of the cavalier attitudes of Black parents with regard to educating and disciplining their children—attitudes that revealed deep-seated problems afflicting Black families and, by implication, the courage required on the part of some Black parents to take personal responsibility for failing to rise to the challenges facing their children and the Black community as a whole. Ananse’s account of her personal experience of working with parents of children attending her school serves to elucidate these challenges.

Ananse (Food justice manager): From my experience [as a proprietor of an Afrocentric school], my biggest challenge was working with parents with varying levels of expectations, consciousness, education and involvement with their child. Some parents were going through social crises at home. They thought putting their children in an Afrocentric environment could create opportunities for growth at home. Unfortunately, it doesn't. In a case like this, how does the teacher work with these families to make sure that the child is receiving the optimal experience in his or her educational journey?

According to Ananse, many Black parents believe that the knowledge acquired at an Afrocentric school can be put to addressing problems arising within the home and even to revitalizing home life. Faced with such expectations, however unrealistic, teachers and staff feel obligated to redouble their efforts at raising academic levels; they are further obliged to work harder at liaising between school and parents. Ananse's comments bring to the fore the often nebulous relations existing between TAAS and the Black families whose children it serves; in particular they serve to highlight the perception held by some parents that educating their children is the school's responsibility, not theirs. This parental disengagement from the learning process often translates into poor grades, truancy and, ultimately, dropping out of school.

Ouzy (Senior manager/banker): In the life of a child, the home [environment] is far more important than the school and I am not minimizing the role schools play. As parents, we should put the burden of raising our children on ourselves; . . . The issues are real and we need to clean up our act first. When we look at the public school system, the Chinese and Indian students are doing extremely well and I do not think that the public school system promotes their culture [over others]. As Black parents, we need to ask ourselves, what is that Chinese and Indian parents are doing that we are not doing? Why do Chinese and Indian students have the highest marks in Reading and Math [vis-à-vis] White kids? Is it because the Black culture is sidelined at school and other cultures promoted? What exactly is the issue? I send my kids to KUMON every Sunday and every time I go there, it is full of Chinese and Indian students. I don't see Black parents there. Why?

While Ouzy in no way devalues the importance of education—despite having serious reservations regarding TAAS and AE—he believes that no school can be a substitute for the home environment and that it is high time parents reclaim from teachers the responsibility for nurturing their children. Committing to parental responsibility and letting TAAS play its part in educating children will go a long way to helping the school and the community realize their mutual goal of educating children.

In the course of interrogating the correlation between race and academic performance, Ouzy appears to imply that culture rather than race may be the chief dynamic at play. It may be, he seems to suggest, that Chinese and East Indian students excel in the classroom owing

to superior motivation and discipline and a stronger work ethic vis-à-vis their Black counterparts.

Abena (Project manager): As parents, we have failed our children. We no longer parent them. We want the school or somebody to do it for us. Somehow, our focus has moved to material things instead of parenting [our children]. . . . We think looking good is the most important thing; we think giving our children the most expensive running shoes; the Air Jordans, make them look good. . . . As a people, we have been taught to . . . invest on our body to look good. We invest our money on the wrong things . . . than investing [in our children's education].

Abena indicts Black families for having failed to discipline their children, thus placing their educational prospects in jeopardy. She believes that having abandoned their parenting rights, the parents now look to the schools to discipline their children with the result that truancy, delinquency, disobedience and dropping out are, and have been for some time, endemic.

Abena speaks to the power of the consumptive syndrome endemic in Black communities. At its core lies a delusional notion that economic deprivation can be concealed beneath an ostentatious display of wealth, however transitory. In pursuing the image of wealth, Black parents, Abena seems to imply, lose sight of what is of real importance: the education of their children. For her, this acquisitive imperative is rooted in impression management, directed at expressing personal beauty through the wearing of upscale clothing and accoutrements and at signifying standing in the community through the display of iconographic goods, e.g., luxury automobiles. As evidence of the importance the Black community places on appearance, a 1997 American Health and Beauty Aids Institute (AHBAI) survey reported that "African Americans spend \$225 million annually on hair weaving services and products" (Byrd & Tharps cited in Patton, 2006, p. 36). According to Wilson and Russell (1996), "Black women spent three times as much as White women on their hair care" (as cited in Patton, 2006, p. 37). This amounts to nothing less than a compulsion to allocate enormous resources to managing impressions on the part of a community plagued by unemployment, poverty, youth crime and violence, along with high dropout rates among students.

While the participants agreed that some Black parents were investing too little time and resources in their children's education, some sought to attribute their indifference to negative media images of Blacks and/or colonial education. Such reasoning in the service of excusing parental culpability in their children's poor academic performance is borne, I would argue, of racial solidarity.

Mary (Social worker): In the past, when programs were created for at-risk kids, Black kids stopped coming. The Indians and Chinese saw it as an opportunity to tutor their kids. . . . They took over the program. The time has to come for Black [parents] to reinforce who we are. The Japanese, the Chinese, the East Indians are not being bombarded that they are inferior. When you hear of a drug bust, . . . 99.9 percent of the time, you would think it is a Black person.

While concurring with Ouzy that Black parents are partly to blame for the education gap, Mary falls back on the race argument, i.e., that Black children would do well in school but for the stereotypical images and racist policies and practices that have so long served to marginalize and subordinate them and the Black community as a whole. However much this claim may be supported by abundant and compelling evidence, it fails to explain why Chinese and East Indian students succeed where Black students fail. It would appear that for Mary, agency takes a back seat to external factors.

Kombozi (Mortgage broker): It is very difficult to change people's attitudes once they get stuck in their ways. It could be that these parents from a young age were taught that Black kids are not good at school anyway, so why waste their time on these extra programs? Black people belong in the bottom, anyhow. . . . Believe it or not, there is still a lot of Black people who, at least subconsciously, think that way. These parents are not going to get behind their kids and push them to get straight "As" or go to visit the teachers and the principal. They are not going to do that.

Kombozi historicizes what Ouzy calls Black apathy regarding education. He attributes this deepening disaffection with education to the internalization of racial inferiority. For Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the reason Black students so readily abandon their academic dreams can be traced, at least to some degree, to the refusal on the part of White Canadians "to acknowledge that Black [Canadians] are capable of intellectual achievement.

. . . [Under this baleful influence,] [m]any Black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school” (p. 177). Black resignation is passed on to Black children who come to believe that “regardless of their individual ability and training or education, and regardless of their . . . individual economic status . . . they [will never] be treated like White [Canadians]: their fellow citizens” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 181). There is in Kombozi’s remarks no scope for human agency. He also neglects to explain why some Black students from working class families do succeed despite the odds stacked against them.

The press routinely blames Black parents, at least in part, for the underperformance of Black students. In an op-ed piece appearing in the *Toronto Star*, Ian Allen lays the blame for the academic underperformance of Black students squarely on the shoulders of Black families.

As a 21-year-old Black male student at the University of Toronto, I find it both destructive and insulting to suggest that a separate school is required to achieve educational success in the Black community. This idea concedes the false notion that Black students can't "cut it" in the current system for institutional reasons. The system is not the problem and the system can never be the cure. If the home is not the hub of educational and self-promoting values within the Black community, an Afrocentric school will see a continuation of the problems of truancy, apathy and poor results. The buck must stop at the doorstep of the Black family (in whatever form that may exist). Every moment we spend applying unproven patchwork solutions to the Black community problem is a moment we spend not addressing the more important personal and family responsibility component to fixing things. Every moment we spend holding the two in tandem diverts attention away from the fact that Black parents are failing to want success for their children and Black youth appear to not be wanting it for ourselves (Allen, 2008, para. 1-4).

Writing prior to TAAS’ official opening, Allen sees nothing remiss in prejudging the school. His views are predicated on self-doubt and on a defeatist attitude born of oppression that assumes African-Canadians to be incapable of developing initiatives, such as educational reforms, aimed at promoting the collective interests of their communities. Contrary to Allen's views, TAAS was created to be, not a repository for underperforming Black students, but a learning environment where children of African-Canadian descent can learn about themselves and their heritage, in addition to all the subjects in the curriculum. In singling out

the home environment as the chief determinant of academic underperformance, Allen ignores the importance some Black parents place on education and the resources and time they invest in ensuring their children excel in school (Codjoe, 2006; Johnson, 2013).

What the critics fail to understand is that for stakeholders, TAAS represents a significant improvement over the status quo as well as a beacon of hope, lighting the way to a brighter future for African-Canadian students and the Black community as a whole—and this despite its shortcomings. The school is the product of decades of frustration with a public education system that has failed to address the underperformance of African-Canadian students. And whereas in the past segregated schools in both Canada and the US severely limited the educational options available to Black parents, the latter now have a choice, and many are opting for TAAS for all the reasons discussed above. These same parents can withdraw their children should they decide that TAAS is not serving their educational and developmental needs. That so many have worked so long and tirelessly to make TAAS a reality speaks to its perceived superiority vis-à-vis mainstream schools. As Dei and Kempf (2011) note, “it cannot be forgotten that the Afrocentric alternative idea in Toronto was fought for and won by concerned parents and community members who refused to continue to sit idly by and wait for others to find and implement solutions to a system that had failed them in large numbers” (para. 8). Better to try and fail than do nothing.

Thus, for all its persistent ills, some self-inflicted, others the product of outside forces, TAAS at least affords Black parents an alternative to an educational status quo that has so demonstrably failed their children. This is not to dismiss the school’s many critics, who point to a host of problems, including inequitable budget allocation and a tendency to foster segregation along “religious, ethnic, [and] socioeconomic lines” (Davies & Aurini, 2011, p. 460). As Davies and Aurini (2011) points, some parents choose schools based on their “exclusivity rather than [their] pedagogical quality” (p. 461). School choice, critics argue, for the most part, benefits “White middle-class families and students,” (Gulson & Webb, 2013, p. 168) who enjoy “choice by mortgage . . . [and do] . . . exercise a degree of school choice by selecting their residence with local school quality in mind” (Davies & Aurini, 2011, p. 462). This privileged group are well-informed, better educated, and have the

social and cultural capital and, most importantly, the finances to fund their children's education vis-à-vis their working-class counterparts (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Gulson & Webb, 2013). School choice, research shows treats the symptoms of inequality, i.e., achievement gap, in the public education system and not the causes (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Gulson & Webb, 2013). According to Gulson and Webb (2013), while school choice is held up as success story of democratic education in multicultural Canada, it commodifies race, ethnicity, gender, etc., Citing TAAS, Gulson and Webb (2013) argue that school choice “does not . . . address the educational needs of all Black students in Toronto; . . . [Thus,] within a choice framework, [lies] an intervention into the discourses of educational equality” (Gulson & Webb, 2013, p. 177). In the context of TAAS, school choice is an atonement by policymakers after many of years of dismissing calls for educational reform.

The next and concluding chapter summaries the key research findings and enumerates TAAS' achievements, along with barriers to further progress; it also provides recommendations for overhauling the school's operations and its educational model, all with a view to enhancing the learning process.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion: Implications and Recommendations for the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric Education

This dissertation has examined Black parents' perceptions of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS) and Afrocentric education (AE). Salient to this enquiry is what the participants, 12 Black parents, five with children attending TAAS, think about the school, about the educational model informing it, and about race, racism, differential treatment, Blackness, and student underachievement, in addition to the opportunities available to graduates, or lack thereof. The history of TAAS and AE, along with the crucial importance attributed to a Black identity in the context of public education, was investigated. The study also broached Black parents' views on the mainstream public school system, which critics largely blame for the underperformance of Black students. Lastly, it sought to derive meaning from the Black student experience of public schooling as understood by Black parents and, on this basis, prescribe remedies for eliminating or mitigating those factors responsible for the high drop-out rate among Black students, which sometimes translates into unemployment, crime and/or substance abuse.

The interviews revealed that participants believe that a primary cause of Black student underperformance in the public school system lies in a Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy that dismisses, negates and/or distorts Black contributions to world civilization in general and to Canada in particular. Most participants were of the view that the remedy lies in adopting an Afrocentric system of schooling and educational model, a prescription supported by the literature.

The literature also revealed AE to be a highly contentious issue both in the US where the concept originated and in Canada where it was taken up. Canadian advocates, among them the participants in this study, see AE as a corrective to the status quo, as a way to wean

Black students off Eurocentric education and a White-oriented curriculum that stereotypes Africans and Africa. For critics, AE is separatist in orientation and antithetical to the long-term goals of Black students. The solution lies, in their view, in reforming the existing system.

In this study, I have sought to derive meaning from the views Black parents have of TAAS and AE. Towards that end, no effort was spared in treating the research participants not as people on the fringe of society, but as co-producers of knowledge.

What follows is an overview of the participants' perceptions of TAAS and AE; findings drawn from the responses to the interview questions, along with conclusions derived from those findings; a discussion of the implications and limitations of the research; recommendations targeted at improving TAAS and AE; and identification of directions for future research.

7.1. Overview/Findings

The participants, 12 Black parents (3 men and 9 women), identified racism in the Toronto public school system and the exclusion of an African-centred knowledge system from the curriculum as the overriding causes of underperformance on the part of Black students. By ignoring and/or trivializing African-Canadian history and the contributions to Canada and world civilization made by Africans and those of African descent, and by privileging a Eurocentric knowledge systems, mainstream education works to promote White supremacy, while at the same time undermining the confidence and self-esteem of Black students. The result is a Black student population that is alienated from the learning process as evinced by high truancy and dropout rates and academic failure far above the norm.

With a single exception, the participants viewed TAAS and AE as a corrective to student disaffection and underachievement. They were convinced that by investing time and resources in learning Black history—both the experience with colonialism and contributions to world civilization—from an Afrocentric perspective, the school was succeeding in

restoring Black students' confidence and self-esteem, along with an interest in learning that the public school system had all but destroyed. They were further convinced that once apprised of this knowledge, the students would in turn communicate it to their families and through them the entire Black community, thereby promoting resistance to racism both within and outside the public education system.

Despite the participants' considerable knowledge about and high approval of AE, the concept remains a nebulous one for many in the Black community who equate the AE model solely with learning about Black culture and heritage. This misconception is at variance with Asante's (1991) concept of Afrocentricity as:

[A] frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person . . . [from] every aspect of the dislocation of African people; culture, economics, psychology, health and religion . . . [with] Africa asserting itself intellectually and psychologically, breaking the bonds of Western domination in the mind as an analogue for breaking those bonds in every other field. (as cited in Mazama, 2001, p. 388)

For the lone dissenting participant, Ouzy, teaching Black children about their heritage should fall within the purview of the Black family. And while all viewed AE as essential to educating Black students, there was no consensus about whether race should be featured as the centrepiece of a TAAS curriculum and pedagogy. Two participants, Mary and Zindzi, expressed deep reservations about making race the focal point of an educational approach catering to Black children, fearing it might simply promote a Black version of racial superiority. Such disparate views suggest that as a concept AE remains very much a work in progress, and as such requires frequent modification.

7.2. Conclusion

Parental support for AE may be attributed, in large part, to TAAS' inclusive approach to education, in particular the practice of making parents the cornerstone of their children's education—one predicated on fostering a school-family partnership based on respect, collegiality and the ethics of care. Those participants who support AE unconditionally

possess an extensive knowledge of Afrocentricity, seeing it as the key to enhancing Black self-esteem and pride and restoring Africa's rightful place in the global sphere of knowledge production. In addition, those conversant with historical and contemporary international developments and history, e.g., the slave trade, African countries' struggle for independence from colonial rule, Western hegemony vis-à-vis post-colonial Africa, modern-day racism, particularly in Canada—expressed unqualified support for TAAS and AE. This revelation supports Asante's assertion that benefits often accrue from Black initiatives (Asante, 2003).

On the other hand, those ambivalent or opposed, tended to view the school and its educational model through the prism of multiculturalism, which led them to harbour doubts as to how TAAS graduates might fare in a White-dominated society should AE fail to deliver the goods. Thus unqualified support from some participants was tempered by serious reservations by others.

It was further concluded that those participants who supported TAAS and AE were sensitive to the nuances and centrality of race and identity as these play out in the education of Black students. From their standpoint, AE serves to counter a Eurocentric construction of Black identity, which works to conflate Blackness and primitiveness. It does this, the majority of the participants claim, by valorizing Black history and heritage, which in turn serves to enhance students' self-esteem, making them impervious to racial typecasting aimed at trivializing Black contributions to world civilization and undermining the collective and individual self-image of Black people.

It also appears that the participants in no way favour scrapping the regular public school system; nor do they advocate establishing alternative schools based on educational models that work to indoctrinate Black students with racist, i.e., anti-Canadian or anti-White, views, a concern expressed by a large section of the Canadian public. Rather, their advocacy of AE represents—and this is especially true for the most fervent supporters—a response to the persistent minimization in the curriculum of the Black contribution to Canada and to the world. What the majority of the participants wish to see implemented in the school system, of which TAAS is a part, are policies aimed at incorporating disparate knowledge systems that

challenge the basic assumptions of their Eurocentric counterparts. Thus, for example, Shaka and Zindzi, both strong proponents of TAAS and AE, reject any attempt, overt or latent, to use either as a vehicle to impose a Black version of racial superiority. For them, as with the rest of the participants, AE is seen as a corrective to the mainstream education system, a concerted effort by Black parents to introduce African knowledge systems capable of foregrounding the signal achievements of Africa and the African diaspora.

Eleven of the 12 participants believed TAAS and AE to be a corrective for the poor academic performance of Black students, a view supported by the literature. The one dissenter was of the opinion that the school and its educational model were unnecessary in a multicultural Canada. Both the weight of the literature and the findings of the study provide grounds for establishing additional Afrocentric schools, an initiative the Ontario Ministry of Education would do well to consider.

In light of the setbacks the school has suffered, including declining enrolments, high levels of teacher turnover, and failure to meet academic expectations as measured by test scores (Armstrong, 2015), it is the view of this writer that if TAAS is to reclaim its early success, it will require adequate funding, in addition to specialized teacher training, professional development and research. More importantly, going forward, the Black community must be engaged in all phases of the decision-making process, and especially with regard to the creation of new Afrocentric schools.

In addition, critics must reconcile themselves to the fact that, if it is to succeed, TAAS requires their support, along with time. For their part, supporters need not interpret every criticism of the school as an attack on African-Canadians or on the Black community, notwithstanding that terms like "Black [matriarchal] family, absentee fathers and a culture of criminality" (Walker, 2008, para. 12) used by critics to explicate student underperformance could be characterized as such. It is essential to view at least some of these criticisms as valid and seek out ways of applying them in a constructive fashion with a view to building an educational system that works for African-Canadian students (Walker, 2008). For their part, White Canadians must exercise a modicum of understanding, and in particular cease seeing

in the Black community's interrogation of White privilege, institutional racism and their impact on educational outcomes as an excuse to absolve Black parents of responsibility. To reject Black parents' perception of what social justice and education should entail is to reject the moral imperative that as a society, we are morally bound to help the disadvantaged. What I also gather from the majority of the participants is that TAAS and AE are in no way substitutes for multicultural schools and multicultural education; rather, they are expressions of multicultural education with Africa and Africans as the foci. This understanding can help bridge the achievement gap by helping turn critics of the school into allies in the fight to incorporate the principle of justice in the public education system. By critics, I am referring to individuals, Black and White, who are constructive in their criticism of TAAS and AE, and with whom progressive members of the Black community, and beyond, can build friendship and solidarity with a view to improving education for Black students. This definition excludes, let me emphasize, *agent provocateurs*, Black or White, whose views of the school and AE are informed by a White supremacist ideology and the imperative to condemn anything Black as wholly lacking in merit.

7.2.1. Research Implications

This study involved conversations with a number of Black Torontonians focusing on the role TAAS and AE have played, and may play in the future, in promoting equity-based education. In doing so it has exposed the power relations and colonial ethos that inform the public education system in general, with a special focus on the schools in the Toronto School Board. Moreover, in common with earlier Afrocentric-based studies, it has challenged the way the mainstream education system signifies Africans and their contribution to civilization.

This study underscores Africa's numerous and sundry contributions to civilization, with a view to empowering Africans to speak in ways that reflect and legitimize their experience. Conversely, this study reveals one major encumbrance of Afrocentric theory; its imprecise definition of African identity. Addressing the African identity; who is an African and what it means to be African, considering the pliability of the African identity will abate its rigid appropriation to exacerbate racial, cultural and epistemic tensions, which are

inconsistent with the tenets of Afrocentricity; a philosophical thought with Africa and Africans as its foci and rejects the unempirical valorization of Africans.

This study has major implications for public education. It problematizes the perception of TAAS and AE as anti-White and opposed to Canadian values of inclusion and tolerance. All the participants were adamant that neither the school nor its educational model represent a rejection of Canadian values. To the contrary, they embrace multiculturalism and a curriculum that reflects values like diversity and inclusiveness. To build an education system capable of promoting such values would involve, according to the majority of the participants, nothing short of the herculean task of identifying and adopting a set of knowledge systems that highlight the contributions of Indigenous, White, African, and Asian-Canadians to Canada and to world civilization. This approach goes beyond those approaches to multiculturalism where the valorization Eurocentric knowledge remains dominant while other knowledge systems added remain on the margins. With inclusive education one of its recommendations, this study will help educate policymakers with a deep-seated bias regarding, and/or limited understanding of, AE. Publishing my findings in academic journals and presenting them at conferences will soften the attitudes of policymakers toward AE.

To give back to the community, especially Black parents unable to attend conferences or access academic publications, I shall make use of local media, e.g., community newspapers, magazines and radio stations, along with social media, in particular Facebook and blogs, to demystify research and theory and allay the community's suspicion of research and researchers. Involving the community will help bridge the gap between it and the higher institutions of learning wherein research is conducted. All these strategies aim at dispelling the misperception that Black parents invest little time and resources in their children's education. In a more modest sense, this study has contributed to a growing body of literature on Afrocentric schools and AE by using the voices of Black parents to examine the successes and failures of one such school, while laying bare the concerns of its many critics.

On the policy front, the study elucidates the principal factors responsible for the achievement gap in public education. This may galvanize policymakers into scrutinizing more closely the public school curriculum and pedagogy, in particular focusing on whose knowledge and whose history are privileged and the consequences for Black students. It may also lead them to include in their policy considerations the concerns of Black parents, the first all-important step to formulating policies aimed at bridging the achievement gap. Such policies would necessarily include measures directed at altering a teaching culture that all too often tolerates racial stereotypes, while ignoring their impact on visible minority students, and formulating teaching strategies capable of accommodating the diverse interests of students from disparate backgrounds.

With regard to teacher education and professional training, the findings provide grounds for redesigning teacher training programs with a view to inculcating a pedagogic philosophy that values diversity in all its forms—racial, ethnic, gender, religious. Curricular diversity, vis-à-vis the curricular homogeneity that is the rule in the public school system, must translate into something more than a token chapter on African-Canadian history, replete with accounts of the Underground Railroad, Black Loyalists and historical celebrities like Marie-Joséphé Angélique, if it is to be taken seriously as a driver of multicultural education. Despite all the high-minded rhetoric celebrating the latter, the Ontario Grade 7 and 8 History curriculum, to take but one example, is suffused with incidents and figures taken from White Canadian history—the Battle of Saint Eustache, the Upper Canada Rebellion, Louis-Joseph Papineau, John Graves Simcoe, Alexander Mackenzie—with Black Canadian history referenced only for pedagogical convenience and to placate critics of multicultural education. These passing references to Black heroes and to exotic dancing and drumming, along with other facets of African culture, do not address, however, what is seemingly a complex problem in the public education system, namely skewed historical accounts and their impact on the education of Black students.

Input on the part of the TDSB is clearly needed to help design an African-centred curriculum. In addition, courses providing an Afrocentric narrative on history, which are essential to educating African-Canadian students, must go beyond celebratory anecdotes,

some of which smack of revisionism. These accounts, moreover, must in no way conceal or excuse African culpability in the most appalling practices, including the enslavement of fellow Africans and, after the arrival of first Muslim then European slave traders, bartering them in exchange for trade goods; and the oppression of African women and marginalization of children with severe physical disabilities—often justified on the basis of prehistoric tradition. An African history told from a critical standpoint will provide a fair and accurate representation of African virtues and flaws, thus guiding the way forward in the 21st century and beyond. Not only is such a valuation intrinsic to the Canadian sense of exceptionalism; it is also essential to ensuring the success of Afrocentric students.

Entreating teachers to be “responsible [and] use appropriate and effective instructional strategies to help students to achieve . . . curriculum expectations” (Service Ontario, 2013, p. 15) does not go far enough, nor does the TDSB directive stating that “teachers may wish to seek out current research, resources on instructional approaches, mentors and/or professional development and training opportunities, *as necessary* [my emphasis]” (p. 17). While good intentions are to be commended, they are no substitute for policy. Directives that are contingent on the volition of the teacher, and that take no account of his/her politics and values, ensure that White supremacy will never be interrogated and counter-hegemonic narratives scrutinized.

The findings also suggest it is imperative that teachers possess a knowledge of African history so that they might communicate to students’ positive images of Africa and elucidate the contributions of African heroes and “sheroes,” while still acknowledging those of Canada’s multi-ethnic groups—Whites, Asian Canadians and First Nations. Awareness of such images and contributions would, in turn, promote, in the context of the classroom the cause of social justice, thereby helping bridge the achievement gap in the public education system.

7.2.2. Research Limitations

For me, the study proved both a rewarding and humbling experience. It afforded an opportunity to meet and interview Black parents willing to share with me their perceptions of TAAS and AE and their views on the structural barriers in the education system that work to impede learning. It was a privilege to converse face-to-face with Black parents who understand the public education system better than anyone and whom I consider to be repositories of invaluable knowledge. The insights thus gained allowed me to negotiate the sometimes impenetrable terrain where theory and reality converge. However, a caveat is warranted here; the participants' views regarding TAAS and AE in no way represent a totality; rather, they constitute personal narratives aimed at presenting a 'picture,' however incomplete, of their social world. As such they remain stories, which, speak to the lived experience of these specific individuals.

While the participants were at one in viewing themselves as Blacks or Africans or both, they differed widely in terms of class, sex, age, and occupation, which worked to inform their perceptions of TAAS and AE in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways. In addition, it is not necessarily the case that their views reflect those of the majority of Black parents with children attending the school. Developing a fuller, more comprehensive (and undoubtedly more nuanced) understanding of Black parents' perceptions of TAAS and AE will require additional studies, including quantitative surveys of large numbers of parents and qualitative studies that sample specific sub-populations, e.g., upper-middle class Black parents who recently immigrated from Africa and Black parents who have withdrawn their children from the school. Moreover, a study focusing on former TAAS teachers would likely yield rich results. It would also be useful to investigate ways and means of building alliances, which I consider essential to ensuring the long-term success of the TAAS and AE.

7.3. Recommendations

The following three recommendations specify ways and means to improve TAAS and AE, with a view to narrowing the achievement gap in the public education system.

7.3.1. The Toronto Africentric Alternative School: The Need for Greater Transparency

As revealed in this study, negative public perceptions of TAAS and AE cannot be attributed solely to media misinformation campaigns. Even though the school provides Black students with the best education available, as evidenced by their high scores on provincial tests, it needs to do much more to increase transparency, for example, by updating the school's website and organizing workshops within both the school and the community.

TAAS should be encouraged to re-evaluate its approach to dealing with matters relating to students, Black parents and the community, especially those matters that the latter believe warrant their involvement, e.g., special education (Armstrong, 2015). For example, Amma, an unapologetic supporter of TAAS, appeared highly distraught when sharing her thoughts on the school, particularly those regarding the new administration. In her view the school's new management was sidelining voices it deemed militant; it was also not opposed to modifying AE in order to placate the public. Both she and Dalamba believe the school is less forthcoming with Black parents: Dalamba asserts the School Council has not been consulted enough on certain issues related to students (as cited in Armstrong, 2015). My own experience with the school administration, which was limited to a series of unanswered requests for general information pertaining to school policy and operations and a final note of acknowledgement advising that I contact the school board, did little to dissuade me that its critics were correct in claiming that the school was not as open and forthcoming as it might be.

The school was unable to provide access to school documents because of other studies already taking place at TAAS (see p. 124) and their limited capacity to respond to my request. While this is understandable and is likely a reflection of their policy with respect to requests from researchers, it can be interpreted as a lack of openness. This, along with a steady stream of negative media reports, only feeds the public perception of TAAS as reclusive and secretive. If the school decided to adopt an open-door policy, it would stand to gain from better public relations and constructive feedback, which would improve the

school's public image and enable it to operate more efficiently. It would also provide critics the opportunity to learn more about the school and its educational model. The cost of not doing so was brought home by the discovery that the participant who held the most negative views on TAAS and AE knew the least about them; indeed, all his information was based on what others had told him. This problem might be addressed at minimal or no cost by recruiting volunteer communications officers from among parents with extensive knowledge of the school and good communication skills; indeed, some of participants in the study would easily qualify for such a position. Implementing this recommendation would help counter public criticism of the school fanned by mainstream media—for the majority of Canadians the principal source of information or more accurately 'misinformation.'

7.3.2. Tension Between TAAS and Black Parents: Healing Old Wounds

Despite the great progress the school has made over the course of 7 years, particularly with respect to promoting academic excellence, there exists growing tension between, on one hand, the school administration and the majority of the parents and, on the other, a vocal minority of parents who are advocates for a fundamentalist brand of Afrocentric education which is antithetical to the kind of mainstream educational narratives that the former wish to see incorporated in AE. The minority group assign blame for what they view to be the slow decline of TAAS, at least in part, to its departure from its Afrocentric roots. They see themselves as marginalized by the moderate majority that support incorporating at least some elements of ME into AE.

Even though both camps mean well, their rivalry is hardly in the best interests of the school, and particularly the students. Resolving this problem requires 'healing.' However, healing cannot be achieved, by bringing the two sides together under the aegis of some powerful authority charged with arbitrating an agreement, which while acceptable to some, would possibly leave others alienated. Healing requires a *Mandelaesque*-type of reconciliation, a process whereby all the stakeholders—the school, parents and community—would assemble under the aegis of Black elders for a frank discussion informed by the

reconciliatory principle. This process and model was applied to very good effect in South Africa following the demise of Apartheid. Making this principle operative requires that all parties recognize that their common interests outweigh whatever gains may accrue through recourse to a zero-sum game: As a people, we exercise our right to disagree with each other not because we hate each other, but because we care about our collective wellbeing and, more importantly, survival of our children and our community. It also requires forgiveness, for only by forgiving those who have harmed us can we heal old wounds and progress be made toward achieving unity. It is imperative, I believe, for TAAS to consider taking the reconciliation route to resolving a debacle that threatens to jeopardize all that it has so painstakingly achieved.

7.3.3. Bridging TDSB-Black Parent Relationship Using Dialogue and Complementarity

One frequent note sounded during the interviews was that the TDSB was willing to acquiesce to the establishment of TAAS only because it was assumed that the school would fail. The perception that this is the attitude of the Board continues to bedevil its relations with Black parents. Another widely held view is that the Board has not done enough to support TAAS and other Afrocentric initiatives. Some participants even suggested that the TDSB could not be trusted. This attitude is born of its indifference, or so the participants claim, toward the perennial underperformance of Black students attending the regular school system. Some participants described the Board as patronizing, pointing to its supercilious attitude toward TAAS and AE, as revealed, for example, by the short shrift given to announce the opening of a new Afrocentric high school: Winston Churchill Collegiate (WCC). As TDSB spokesperson Shari-Schwartz-Maltz later admitted, the low enrolment of Afrocentric students at WCC was due to a belated news release stating that “no one knew much about it” (as cited in Brown, 2013, para. 2).

Another area where support appears to be lacking is transportation. According to Ferenc (2013), “the Toronto School Board doesn't provide transportation to students attending either Afrocentric school” (para. 12), leaving parents, many of whom are low-

income, to provide what for many students is an essential service. By funding transportation costs, TDBS would help alleviate the ever-increasing financial burdens on Black parents and allow them to apply the monies thus saved to other educational needs, e.g., books and fieldtrips.

If these problems are to be addressed, the Board would do well to consider working with Black parents and the Black community. This would require shedding a colonial mentality that recognizes but one sovereign authority on educational matters while regarding other stakeholders as obstacles to be circumvented or manipulated.

TDSB might also consider treating parents as full partners rather than uninformed critics with no understanding of its policies. In addition, it is recommended the Board make available to Afrocentric teachers, administrators and staff adequate resources and professional training. Funding these initiatives, I would argue, is in the long-term interest of both the Board and the province. For one thing, it would have an immediate effect on reducing the high dropout rates endemic among Black students, which in turn would lower the incidence of juvenile crime, resulting in huge savings for the criminal justice system.

In addition, the Board might consider working in partnership with parents and the Black community to educate the public about TAAS, rather than leave the latter to defend the school against its many critics, most especially the mainstream media. The Board would also do well to keep Black parents, the community and the public informed regarding its plans for Afrocentric education, particularly with respect to expanding TAAS. Consulting with all stakeholders well in advance of policy announcements would provide invaluable feedback, eliminate unpleasant surprises, and preclude media feeding frenzies, which invariably portray Black parents in pejorative terms. Lastly, and most importantly, it is recommended the Board provide separate schools for all students wishing to have an Afrocentric education.

One important point made by all the participants pertained to the effort and resources they had invested in educating their children. Though from diverse backgrounds, all reported helping their children with homework and cultivating in them a sense of their African

heritage, an investment in time and effort they believed to be crucial to achieving a high level of academic performance. Because these parents see their families as extensions of TAAS, they view working collaboratively with the school to be in the best interests of their children, the school, the Black community and ultimately Canada. It is recommended, therefore, that TBSB consider funding TAAS workshops aimed at building partnerships between the school and Black parents. The workshops would provide a locus where the parents could meet the wards, teachers and school administrators; discuss the challenges facing the school and their children as well as remedial strategies; and network and build social relationships that would be particularly beneficial for those parents who are disadvantaged. In an environment conducive to building solidarity and trust, both critical to student success, Black parents, students and teachers would be empowered to develop strategies aimed at achieving positive educational outcomes.

Despite being hailed as a singular achievement in the domain of educational reform, TAAS remains a work in progress. Realizing its goals will require an understanding on the part of all the stakeholders that racism still exists in the public education system and that combatting it will require building a partnership among the TDSB, Black parents, the Black community and their respective allies, one founded on mutual consideration, respect and support. And while dissension among the various actors remains rife, it can be resolved through dialogue and research and by fostering the understanding that, albeit their different stances, Black parents are united in wishing their children to succeed. In reaching out to others both within the Black community and beyond, they can, moreover, enlist the support of new allies on behalf of a generation whose academic needs are not being met in the mainstream public education system.

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Appendix A.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Individual Interview

Research Title: Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?

Name: _____ Date: _____
Ethno- Education: _____ Age: _____
Nationality: _____
Family Type: _____ Occupation: _____ Gender: _____
Number of children enrolled in the Toronto public School system: _____
Number of children enrolled in the Toronto Africentric Alternative School: _____

1. Have you heard of Afrocentrism? What do you understand it to be and what do you think of it?
2. What is your understanding of Afrocentric education and what do you think of it?
3. What do you think of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School?
4. Being a Black Canadian, how important is "Blackness", in the formation of your identity and in your daily life?
5. How often do you share stories of your identity with your children and why is that important?
6. Should race take centre stage, or become a component, in the education of Black children? If so, why?
7. How do you feel about Black children attending a school that is predominantly Black and taking courses focusing predominantly on Black people and Black culture?
8. Why do you view Afrocentric education to be important, or not important, to Black students?
9. What does the Africentric School offer in terms of education that other public schools do not provide?
10. Where do you see graduates from the Toronto Africentric Alternative School in 10 years?
11. What are some of the benefits and challenges that you anticipate will come with enrolling Black children in an Africentric School?
12. Is there anything you wish to add that will help me in learning more about the Africentric School?

Appendix B.

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Focus Group

Research Title: Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?

1. What are the key characteristics of Afrocentric education and how they are different from the mainstream public education system?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages with addressing Blackness as an aspect of African-Canadian identity in the education of Black students?
3. How does Afrocentric education/ the Toronto Africentric Alternative School prepare Black children for the Canadian job market in ways that mainstream public education/the public school system does not?
4. How useful is the infusion of race and Black history in the education of Black children in a receding job market where a specific set of skills; e.g. proficiency in technology and mainstream corporate values and skills are arguably critical to one's success?
5. What are some of the short-term and long-terms impact of the public's positive and negative perception of Afrocentric education on Black students?
6. What do you think is the relationship between Afrocentric and multicultural education?
7. Do you think Afrocentric education affirms or contradicts the goals and approaches of multicultural education?
8. How does Afrocentric education address intra- ethnic differences, class, gender, disability in education and at the Toronto Africentric Alternative School?
9. How does Afrocentric education/the Toronto Africentric Alternative School address structural barriers such as high unemployment, poverty, etc., in Black families?
10. Why do you think that Afrocentric education is more inviting or encouraging to Black parents vis-à-vis public education?

Appendix C.

Advertisement to Recruit Research Participants

Research Title: Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?

Are you a Black parent or Black parents and do you claim Africa as your ancestral homeland and as part of your identity? If you are and do, I invite you to participate in a study I am conducting that examines Black parent's/ parents' perceptions of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education. The study is entitled "Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?"

Your participation in this study will help me answer a wide range of questions, including race and ethnicity in education, Black parent's perception of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education, particularly as regards their role in addressing student underperformance.

Being part of this study will require you to share with me your perceptions of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education, and what they mean in terms of addressing the struggles of Black students and, more importantly, preparing them for the opportunities and challenges awaiting them upon graduating.

Your participation in this project will be on a strictly voluntary basis, and your anonymity will be protected. By participating, you will help to enhance public awareness of Afrocentric education and its impact on Black students, while providing valuable insights into alternative approaches to education. If you are interested in participating, please contact Patrick Radebe at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.com.

Appendix D.

Initial Contact Letter

PhD Candidate:

Patrick Radebe
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Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.com

Thesis Supervisor:

Professor Handel K. Wright
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia
Phone: (000) 000-0000
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Research Title: Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?

Dear _____:

My name is Patrick Radebe, and I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. I am currently conducting a study focusing on Black parents' (i.e., single parent, two-parents, foster parent and parents) perceptions of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School and Afrocentric education. The study is titled "Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?"

In focusing on the Toronto Africentric Alternative School (TAAS), this study will address a wide range of issues, including race and ethnicity in education, Black parents' perception of Afrocentric education and its role in addressing student underperformance.

As part of the study, participants would be required to share with me their perceptions of the TAS race-based education, and what it means in terms of addressing the struggles of Black students and, more importantly, preparing them for the opportunities and challenges awaiting them upon graduating.

The study will take the following format: one individual interview that will last approximately 1 hour 30 minutes and two focus group interviews, each session lasting 1 hour, with 6 participants per session following the completion of individual interviews. In total, 6 males and 6 females will be interviewed.

To ensure the success of this study, I am writing you to enquire whether you would be willing to assist me in locating Black parent(s) who may be interested in participating in this project by forwarding to them the attached invitation to participate which outlines how potential participants could contact me. By disseminating this invitation, you agree that you will not be told who did/did not participate.

Such participation would be on a strictly voluntary basis and anonymity would be assured. I also wish to enquire whether I might be permitted to post on your organization's bulletin board and/or website an advertisement aimed at recruiting participants. Please find attached my recruitment advertisement, participant invitation, and subject consent form. Your assistance in this matter would be very much appreciated. I may be contacted at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.com.

Sincerely yours,
Patrick Radebe

Appendix E.

Subject Consent Form

Research Title: Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?

PhD Candidate:

Patrick Radebe
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

Thesis Supervisor:

Professor Handel K. Wright
Department of Educational Studies
University of British Columbia
Phone: (000) 000-0000
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com

Dear Participant:

My name is Patrick Radebe. I am a PhD student in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. My supervisor is Dr. Handel Wright (the principal investigator for this project). I would like to ask you to participate in a research study, which I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of this document is to inform you about your rights and responsibilities if/when you decide to participate in this research project. Please keep this document, which contains my contact information for your records, and for future reference if/when your participation in this project changes. What follows is an explanation of my research project and a detailed description of what it means to participate in this project. Please read this document to decide if you are interested and willing to participate. If you have further questions/concerns regarding this document or the project itself, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.com. You can also reach Dr. Wright at (000) 000-0000 or via email at xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxxx.ca. Thank you for your time and consideration.

1. Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research project currently titled "Afrocentric Education: What does it mean to Toronto's Black parents?" The term "Black parents," includes single parent, two-parents, foster parent and parents. The aim of this study is to examine Toronto's Black parents' perception of the Toronto Africentric School and Afrocentric education. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a Black parent/parents, who currently live(s) in Toronto. Your insights will be extremely important to this project. Your involvement would be approximately 2 hours 30 minutes over an 8-month period.

2. Research Procedures

Interview, focus group and document analysis: You are being asked to participate in one individual interview that will last approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. During the interviews you will be asked to share your perception of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School/race-based education. I will also conduct focus groups interviews, following the completion of the individual interviews which will bring together all (or most) of the study participants giving them the opportunity to address or elaborate upon emerging issues during

the course of individual interviews. I will conduct two focus group interviews, each session lasting 1 hour, with seven participants per session following the completion of individual interviews. Two groups will allow me more flexibility to accommodate the needs of parents (e.g., work schedule, childcare, etc.).

In order to facilitate the transcription of the interviews, I will tape record them. Should there be a need for a follow-up interview, we will meet a second time for approximately 1 hour. You are also requested to participate in two focus group discussions with other research participants where we will discuss similar themes which may have arisen during the individual interviews.

By signing this document you automatically give permission for your interviews to be taped. However, if there are reasons that you would prefer not to be recorded, please notify me at any time either before or during the interview and I will turn the recorder off. You will have access to all the interview transcripts if you so desire. Finally, with your consent, I will take ethnographic field notes during the course of our interviews.

3. Benefits to Participation

For your participation, you will receive an honorarium in the amount of \$20 prior to the first interview. If you stop the interview before it is finished, you will still receive the honorarium.

4. Potential Risks or Discomforts

If at any time during the research you wish to withdraw, please let me know. You are under no obligation to participate and you can terminate your participation at any time. If you decide to take part in this project, you can decide on the terms of your participation and renegotiate them at any time. Prior to the interview, you will be given a list of free counseling services in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

5. Confidentiality

All of the information that you share with me will be kept strictly confidential, and will not be shared with anyone. No names or identifying information whatsoever will be used on copies of individual files and tapes. My notes will have only your pseudonym (or false name) for the purpose of identification. If you choose to participate in focus group interviews, you will meet some of the other participants in this study.

You will be asked to keep discussions from the focus group confidential. Information gathered from our individual interview(s) or your pseudonym will not be disclosed to other participants. Information will be kept at for, at least, 5 years, as per UBC policy, in a locked filing cabinet as well as in computer files protected by passwords known only to the researcher. The only other person who may have access to the data will be my supervisor, Dr. Handel Wright, who is subject to the same terms and conditions of confidentiality outlined in this document. All researchers have a legal obligation to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants, unless the participant reports any of the following: (1) The desire to harm himself/herself, (2) the intent to harm others, or (3) in the case of minors, a disclosure that physical, psychological, or sexual harm is being done to him/her. If any allegations of inappropriate and/or illegal conduct are made, I will report these allegations to a designated social worker at the Ministry of Children and Family Development. All other information will remain confidential.

6. Dissemination of Information

Possible uses for the data received in this study include: scholarly publications, academic conferences as well as presentations to the general public. All materials pertaining to the dissertation, as well as the dissertation itself will be available for you if you wish to see them. You will be given an informal written and verbal report, including a public presentation by the co-investigator on the research findings once data analysis is completed around December 2013.

7. Contact for information about the study

If you have any questions or desire further information with regard to this project, you may contact Patrick Radebe or her supervisor Dr. Handel Wright at the number(s) above.

8. Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.

9. Consent

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I have read this subject consent form and understand what it says. I am participating freely without any pressure from the researcher, Patrick Radebe. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form. The researcher has further reviewed this informed consent form with me, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions concerning all aspects of my participation in this project.

By signing this form I agree to participate in this research project, and to give the researcher, Patrick Radebe, permission to record information as outlined in this consent form.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Please Print Your Name _____